

Hidden Images

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

It's a very nice estate up in the hills, secluded and private. My understanding was that the current owner was forced into allowing the grounds to be open to the public on weekends as part of the historic designation of the property. Supposedly the owner was a very wealthy young woman who only visited occasionally.

The grounds are beautiful, with some exquisite collections. I enjoy walking the estate. It's never crowded, most likely because so few know about the place. Even though they don't allow photography, I find myself there almost every free weekend. Photography is more than a hobby with me, it's a passion. Possibly in a few years it can even support me.

Their collection of cacti is amazing, especially for Northern California. I knew quite a few would be blooming in a few weeks. I spoke to one of the horticulturists, a young beauty named Suzanne. I'd been talking to her for almost a year; she'd given me access to some normally off-limits portions of the grounds.

When Tina left me, I'd tried to get better access to Suzanne, with no luck. This time though, she gave me the estate director's business card.

It was a "don't know until you've tried" thing. I put together a letter requesting permission to photograph the grounds. I included a list of my shows and photo placements, copies of my last two spreads in *Sunset Magazine*, and some 8 x 10 prints. Okay, I've asked. It's up to them to respond.

Interview

While photography is my passion, it doesn't pay all the bills --not yet. I was at work when the phone rang.

"Good morning, Banister and Crun," I said.

"Mister Flynn?" asked a pleasant female voice.

"Yes, this is Rob Flynn. How can I help you?"

Ellen was the estate director. They'd reviewed my request, the information I'd supplied, and wanted to talk to me further. Would I be available for lunch at the estate tomorrow, and could I bring more of my portfolio? Of course! What aspects of my work were they particularly interested in? Oh, horticultural, but also those that you feel show your spirit, or are important to you. Ah, a challenge... What time, then? Promptly at eleven forty-five, ring at the gate. Fine.

As I picked out images that night, something told me this could be a Big Deal. I picked some interesting ones. The timing was great -- Banister would be out of the office all day on a client call. I imagined quite a few folks would be taking long lunches.

I arrived at the gate a few minutes early, display easel and large portfolio case in the back of the car. I was wearing my office-mandated sport coat and tie. A curt female voice instructed me to proceed through the gate, around to the right, and park in staff parking space number twelve. Someone would come out to meet me.

As I drove on to the property, I knew that it would be quicker to go left to get to the staff parking area -- the visitor parking spots were near there. But, I'd been told to go right, so that's what I did, taking the somewhat scenic route around the back of the main building. The designated parking spot was in full sun -- other empty spots, including visitor spots, were shaded. Hmmm... I parked in the suggested spot, leaving the windows open a bit.

A young woman in business attire walked out to greet me.

"Mister Flynn?" she asked, extending a hand and a warm smile.

"Please call me Rob," I responded.

She reached for my easel. "I'm Kathryn. Let me help you." I followed her in.

The main house had been built in the 1880's, and redone in the 1920's. The woodwork was superb, the rooms spacious. We went to the dining room. A number of easels were set up along one wall, evidently awaiting my pictures. The table had been set for a very formal meal.

"If you'd like to display your work, the others will be down momentarily," she suggested.

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I nodded and started to unzip my case. She smiled and stepped out of the room.

Six easels, including mine -- I put up five horticultural shots, and an architectural montage of Mission La Purisima.

Kathryn returned with five other women. I recognized the horticulturist I usually spoke to, Suzanne. Surprise -- Vivian, the editor I usually worked with at *Sunset* was with them. I was introduced to the others, including Ellen, the woman I'd spoken to on the phone. All the women with the estate seemed to be in their early to mid thirties, and all beautiful. Vivian looked to be the oldest and plainest of the lot, which was surprising in itself -- Vivian is quite attractive.

Ellen stepped to one of my pictures. We all followed. As we discussed the images I'd selected, a younger woman came in with a tray of wine glasses. Ellen took one, followed by the other ladies. One was offered to me.

"No thanks," I replied.

"Sure you won't join us?" one of the ladies asked.

I smiled. "At dinner, yes, but I have things I need to complete this afternoon."

"What would you like?" the server asked.

"Iced tea would be very nice, if it's not a bother. Otherwise water will do fine."

She nodded and left the room.

By the time we'd moved down the line of pictures, I had a glass of iced tea.

Ellen moved to the table. I saw a space where the wine glass had been removed, and stepped to it. Ellen was about directly across from me, Suzanne on my right. The ladies waited for Ellen to be seated. I seated the two next to me, Linda and Suzanne, then took my seat.

What a wild lunch! Multiple small courses, superb presentation, and I felt as if I was under a microscope. They'd evidently talked quite a bit to Vivian and the folks I work with at *Sunset*, and a few others besides. They might not know about the scar on my right heel and how I got it, but I wasn't sure.

We went through the usual things -- why I was interested in shooting at the estate, my interests in photography, why I'd picked these particular images.

Linda was on my left. Her perfume, smile, and the cut of her clothes dazzled me.

"Do you have other works which show more of your spirit?" she asked.

I nodded. "If I may?" I said, folding my napkin and looking to Ellen.

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Ellen nodded, so I stood and moved my easel over closer to the table where everyone would have a reasonable view without having to stand.

“As I said earlier, I mainly use a view camera, which is large and somewhat cumbersome, but produces high quality results,” I told them as I placed one print in my case and pulled out another. “This was taken by a friend of mine; we were shooting wildflowers in the high desert.”

In the picture I was on my stomach on the ground, head alongside the bellows of the view camera, everything very close to the ground. One of the ladies gasped, others laughed.

I pointed to my mid-back in the photo, where the lizard was sitting. “I wanted a certain combination of sun angle and wind, and as I was waiting, a lizard decided I’d be a good place to collect some sun. I didn’t notice at all.”

I put up another, taken on the same trip. I was shooting a small group of flowers growing out of the side of a rock face. One of the camera tripod legs was on the side wall, up about five feet off the ground, the other tripod legs on the ground. One of my feet was just below the tripod leg on the wall, my other foot on the ground as I mimicked the tripod. I liked the two desert pictures, even if they did send a pang through me; Tina had taken them.

“Nice legs,” Suzanne said. I was wearing shorts in that picture. The ladies laughed.

“Portraiture?” someone asked.

I took a large print out of my case. It was of a young woman in an Empire setting. The look of poise and authority on her face reminded me of most of the women in the room.

“A friend of mine is an author. I did this for one of his [stories](#).”

That got murmurs of approval. I showed two more from that series, the one of her standing in her plain dress, and the one of her standing wearing the fur coat, arms outstretched, a book in one hand, a rose in the other. While there’s very little skin visible in that image, it’s still filled with erotic power. My gaze locked with Linda’s for an instant; I saw her nostrils flare.

I turned back to my portfolio and pulled out one of the last of the images I’d brought. It was a large print, showing a gray cat poised most attentively a few inches from a hole in the ground. To me at least, the image radiates power, focus, tenacity, and so much more. Vivian had seen it before. She smiled and nodded, approving of my choice.

One of the ladies whispered, “Oh my!”

I smiled and nodded. “Yes -- right there along the edge of the hole. See it?”

I pointed to an area of the image. Whiskers were barely visible poking out of the hole.

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“This was taken at the Huntington Estate in Southern California. I’d finished my work for Vivian on their begonias, and as I was walking out, I saw her. I got my 35mm camera, and dropped down to the ground. She was totally focused on her prey. Every so often the whiskers poking out of the hole would move, a bit further out, then in, a brief glimpse of a small nose, then vanish. She didn’t move. I didn’t move. Such patience! Such tenacity and focus! At one point I moved my left arm a bit; my elbow was on something sharp. Her prey zipped out of sight. She didn’t move, mocking me with her resolve. And I resolved to learn from her.”

I looked to Linda. She was smiling, nodding her head. She gave me a look of focus, tenacity, power...

“And?” she said.

I took out the next image. It was of the gray cat in midstride going away from the camera, hindquarters and tail of her prey hanging out of her mouth.

“Focus on what you want,” I said. That got murmurs of approval.

I went through the remaining prints I’d brought. At the end, Ellen asked if I’d mind leaving some with them for a few days. I raised an eyebrow, but agreed. I’d brought my best; a substantial amount of effort and expense had gone into each.

She wanted one of the flowers, a hummingbird shot, the mission one, the lady in the chair, and the two of the cat. The tone of the conversation turned to pleasantries bringing our time to an end. Ellen thanked me for coming. I thanked her and her staff for their hospitality, and the devotion they showed. Somehow that brought murmurs and some chuckles.

Suzanne and Linda walked me out to my car. Surprisingly, both gave me warm hugs. Linda left me dazzled once more.

I drove back to the office bewildered. I’d left \$900 or so in prints with them, and still had no idea if I’d get to shoot the grounds.

I laughed. What else could I do? It had certainly been entertaining. And I wouldn’t need much dinner tonight; it had been quite the lunch. Then I sighed -- almost two in the afternoon. Old man Banister would be pissed if he found out.

Follow Up

I spent Saturday in the office, making up for my long lunch earlier in the week. Sunday afternoon was cool and overcast. I thought about going in to work, but couldn't see doing it. Besides, Banister frowns on us working Sundays. I decided to go walk at the estate once again.

They seemed to have a crowd -- three other cars in the visitor lot.

I walked to one of my favorite spots, pretty much at the other end of the property, an old wooden bench underneath a very large, very old tree. I sat down, looking out over part of the grounds. I took off my watch -- time doesn't matter when I sit here.

"May I join you?" I heard some time later.

I looked up to see Linda standing a few feet away. I smiled, stood, and said, "Please do!"

Today she was wearing slacks, a silky looking top, and a light sweater. The slacks put a nice emphasis on her waist; she filled and curved her top and sweater quite well.

"I hope you're not working today," I offered.

She laughed, freely and easily. The breeze filled me with her perfume.

"Oh no -- a number of us live here. Do you like this spot?"

I leaned back, closing my eyes and enjoying her scent. I could feel her warmth nearby as well.

"Yes; I like to sit here."

"And?"

I sighed. I was tired after the long week. "That's the nice part. I don't have to *do* anything, *be* anything. I just sit. That's all."

I heard her sigh, and felt her move a little closer.

"That's important, so important," she said softly, touching me on the arm.

I could feel her warmth, and took a deep, slow breath of her scent.

"It's so important to take time out to relax and let go; so many people don't know that. We need time to relax and let go, yes, breathing slowly and deeply, relaxing with each breath, with my touch, letting go..."

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She was right -- and it had been a while since I'd come here to just sit. Her voice was so soothing, her scent and warmth enveloping me. It was nice to relax, let go, relax a bit more with each breath...

I opened my eyes slowly. The breeze had picked up, cooled and sharpened. I felt the warmth of her arm on my back, her hand at the back of my neck. Her touch filled me with warmth and comfort. I turned to her.

She smiled slightly. "I think we're in for rain. We should head in."

I shook my head a little; I felt lost. It smelled like imminent rain. I looked at her again -- I wanted to let go and lose myself in her warmth and perfume...

I shook my head again. I saw droplets in the dirt out away from the cover of the tree. I stood up, taking her arm. "Yes. We're going to get wet."

We started out walking quickly, and ended up running, holding hands and laughing like a pair of kids. We weren't too wet as we ran up under the shelter of the porch and collapsed into a porch swing, still laughing and trying to catch our breaths.

She slid over next to me, a big smile on her face. I felt her hand go up the back of my neck again, and I closed my eyes. Somehow I felt as if I was flying, floating, and dropping all at the same time.

When I opened my eyes again, the rain had stopped. Linda was sitting next to me still. It was so nice to be next to her, rocking gently.

It was getting dark! I sat up. I looked at her. She smiled, looking at me intently.

"Thank you for a very nice afternoon," she said.

I took a breath. "Thank you, Linda." I think.

She put her arm in mine and walked me to my car. The air was fresh from the short shower. She gave me a hug, and walked to the house.

It was almost six! Where had the afternoon gone? Normal visitor's hours ended at five! I laughed again. Pizza for dinner tonight, or take-out Chinese?

I missed Tina, and almost called her. I hoped she was doing well in Seattle. It rained again as I sat in my study, a window slightly open. I started rocking gently in the chair, and closed my eyes. The cool damp smell of the rain, the sound, filled me. I could almost feel a hand at the back of my head and hear a soft voice as I rocked.

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I don't nap like that very often; maybe I should change that. I woke up refreshed, but still feeling empty. Empty with a tingle -- something was just over the horizon, just out of reach, but it was there; I knew it.

As I got ready for bed, stripping off my sweatshirt, I noticed a bump on the inside of my right elbow. Hmm -- a little mark, and a bump, like when I give blood. I slept well, dreaming of rocking with Linda, her warmth, her scent.

I got into work early Monday morning, feeling rested, and almost resigned somehow, a curious feeling.

Mister Banister came into my office about ten, wearing his usual strict face. "Weaned on a pickle" shot through my mind. He was holding the report I'd completed Saturday.

"Mister Flynn," he started out.

"Yes, sir?"

He nodded, gesturing with the report. "This is very good work, Mister Flynn. It shows what you are capable of when you aren't wasting time on frivolities."

I was happily surprised and yet shocked at the same time. Praise from the old man himself -- yet he still considered my photography a "frivolity."

"Thank you, sir. I hope the client finds it useful."

"Oh, they will, Mister Flynn -- that's what they hire us for. Carry on." He stepped from my office.

I turned to the window. As a senior staffer, I had an office with a window, not a cube in the middle of the floor.

"Frivolities..." That stung. I knew the work I did as a CPA and an analyst was important, and useful, but it didn't have a soul. The detective work which had gone into that report had been hard, and the report was good, but it was devoid of feeling. I felt the tears forming as I remembered the joy in capturing an image on film, and the satisfaction of seeing one of my images on a magazine cover. The looks on those women's faces at the image of the cat -- through the images I made, I touched people's hearts and souls.

I closed my eyes and tried to go back to that bench under the tree. I breathed slowly, imagining Linda next to me again, her scent, her touch.

And I was rocking, rocking gently, feeling her caress, almost hearing her voice.

My phone rang. I wiped the tears from my eyes and turned back to my desk.

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Later that afternoon, I got another call.

“Rob, this is Linda. How are you doing today?”

I sighed, relaxing at her voice. “Much better, hearing your voice,” I said.

She chuckled. “I’m glad to hear it. I enjoyed sitting with you yesterday.”

“So did I. What can I do for you?”

“Rob, would you be able to drop by this evening? We have some questions about the prints you left with us.”

“Certainly. Should I bring any more of my work?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. When could you be here?”

I thought rapidly. “Six fifteen or six twenty.” It was closer than my apartment.

“That would be fine. Ring at the gate. We’re looking forward to seeing you again.”

Her voice filled me with hope, especially as I glanced at yet another spreadsheet on the computer screen. “I’m looking forward to it as well. I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

Driving up to the estate again was curious. I’d talked about this problem before with Vivian, my internal split between the analytical and the artistic. What had she said? The analytical feeds my body and the artistic feeds my soul? The analytical work couldn’t feed the hunger I felt in my thighs, in my chest, and in my throat.

“Park anywhere you like in the staff section,” was a welcome change. I grabbed my sport coat, but left my collar unbuttoned and my tie a little loose. I laughed -- open rebellion in Banister’s eyes.

But those thoughts faded as I saw Linda walking toward me from the house. I felt almost a tingle go through me as I sighed.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” she said smiling, offering me her hand.

Touching her was electric, exciting and yet soothing, relaxing, yet peaking the hunger. “My pleasure,” I said, taking in her gaze.

She put her arm in mine as we walked back to the house, going in a side door this time and walking to a small comfortable parlor. Ellen was waiting for us, with another woman I hadn’t met. She was a tall, dark-skinned beauty with a full figure.

“Rob, I’m Bernadette,” she said, extending a hand.

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“Pleased to meet you,” I said, shaking her warm hand.

My mission picture was on an easel, two different images on the floor. As we sat down, I almost laughed -- I knew what the three images had in common.

To my surprise and delight, I was seated on a loveseat with Linda beside me. I took a cautious breath, expecting/wanting/needing that scent I associated with her. It was faint or not present at all.

“Rob,” Ellen started out, “We like your work very much. We visited Vivian today, and she showed us more of your work, including your next two layouts. You have quite a talent.”

I smiled, but the tears were forming again as “frivolities” stabbed at me again. “Thank you,” I said, my voice not too surprisingly choked up somewhat. Linda put a hand on my arm.

I glanced to her, but couldn’t say anything.

“We especially like some of the details in your images,” Ellen said, almost laughing. She moved over to the Mission picture and gestured to one area. It was a doorway, seen almost from the side. If you looked carefully, you could see a sandal-clad foot just about to disappear into the doorway, as if catching the last glimpse of someone walking in.

Linda’s hand moved to my back. I sighed.

“You have similar elements in many pictures. Where do they come from?” Linda asked.

I closed my eyes to enjoy her touch more.

“Henri Cartier-Bresson,” I said softly as her hand stroked my neck. “He’s a famous French photographer. At an exhibition of his work, I was drawn to one image, and I wasn’t sure why. Then I saw it -- just like in the mission picture, that last glimpse of a foot going into a doorway.”

“What does it say to you? What does it mean?” Linda asked, caressing my neck more.

I sighed again, letting go. “It’s an invitation -- to mystery, to explore, inviting those who notice to explore more.” I was smiling; I hadn’t understood it that way until now. “It says there’s more here, if you open yourself up to it, if you let yourself see it.”

Her hand moved away. Slowly, I opened my eyes. I looked at the others in the room as I sighed and shook my head, wiping moisture from my face.

“Sorry about that,” I muttered.

Bernadette was leaning forward and looked at me intently. “No, that’s quite all right.”

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“Yes, it is,” added Ellen. She exchanged glances with the others. I sat back, relaxing again, feeling my shoulders let go.

“It’s hard to explain,” I told them. I felt tired.

Ellen nodded. “We’d like to purchase larger prints of these, and look at more of your portfolio. Vivian says you have quite a series on people’s hands?”

I took a breath and nodded. “Yes, it’s more a multimedia show now.”

“We’re interested in 36-inch prints of these, archival quality. We can have the framing done, with your approval, of course.”

I took a breath. “Okay, I have to order them, as they take some time.”

Ellen smiled. “We understand. Would a thousand per print be acceptable?”

I took another breath. “Ah, quite.”

Gentle laughter filled the room. Linda’s hand returned to my shoulder.

“I’m still waiting for confirmation, but I think we are interested in commissioning other work as well; if you’re interested, of course.”

I wanted her hand to go up the back of my neck again, squeeze me, fill me again. My head arched back a bit on its own, my eyes closing a bit. I blinked and straightened up a bit. “I would be very interested,” I replied.

Bernadette asked, “Would you be interested in joining us for dinner?”

I sighed once more, smiling. “How could I refuse?”

I got home late. I looked at myself in the mirror as I was getting ready for bed. I looked and felt tired, bewildered, yet relaxed. Dinner had been very good, simpler and less formal than the lunch I’d attended. After dinner I ended up in another parlor with Linda and Bernadette, sitting between them on a couch in front of a fire. About all I could remember was their warmth and the warmth of the fire, being held, the empty feeling in my chest, hunger and tears. How the hell had I managed to get home? I didn’t know. It could wait -- it was late, and I had a meeting with Banister at a client’s place early in the morning.

That meeting went on through a working lunch at the client site. Dave and I were there supporting the old man. Dave and I exchanged glances occasionally, knowing we were in for a lot of work.

Vivian called late that afternoon.

“Have you talked to them?” she asked right away.

“Who?”

“The people at the Palsgraf estate.”

I sighed, something I’d been doing quite often lately. “Yes -- I was there last night for dinner. They ordered some prints.”

“And?”

I shrugged. “They mentioned there might be more.”

“That’s all?”

“Why don’t you call me at home tonight. I can’t really talk about it now.”

“Okay, I think I understand. This is an exciting opportunity for you, I hope.”

“So do I.”

I heard Banister’s voice out in the hallway, telling off an associate.

“Talk to you later,” I said softly.

Vivian sighed. “Take care, Rob.”

I hung up the phone and returned my nose to the grindstone. I glanced up as Banister walked by my open door, pausing to toss in a frown.

I was confused as I drove home that night. Yes, the work I did was challenging, at least intellectually. Vivian and I talked on the phone for over an hour. She became more upbeat as I became more depressed. The one thing that helped was putting together the print order, and packaging it up with my negatives. The weekend arts and crafts shows wouldn’t start for another two months; this was a nice order to tide me over.

I was nearly at the end of my rope Tuesday as I drove home late -- work had appeared out of nowhere, and I hadn’t been able to take the time at lunch to take my order to the post office. I was so frustrated. I finally got off the freeway and got back on going the other direction, driving to the post office at the San Francisco International Airport -- I knew they were open late. Traffic was hell at that time of day, but when I finally made it home, I felt better.

Wednesday morning, I was deep into a project when something made me tear my gaze from the screen. Had I heard Ellen’s voice? A few minutes later I took a walk to the men’s room, passing Banister’s office. His door was closed. I could hear him droning away inside.

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I asked Nancy, his latest secretary, “Who’s in with the boss?”

She looked to be at the end of her rope as well. She shook her head. “Don’t know. Potential clients, I guess. The only time he tells me anything is when I’ve screwed up.”

I nodded and gave her a grim smile. “Hang in there... Thanks.”

I headed back to my office. Average life-span for one of his secretaries was seven months. That gave her two or three to go before she got fed up and quit.

I was on the phone with a client, and didn’t see who he was walking out a while later.

I thought I’d find out when he called me into his office shortly thereafter.

“Yes sir?” I said, walking into his office.

As usual, he didn’t invite me to sit down.

“Who were you on the phone with this time?” he demanded.

“Keller at Peabody Sherman,” I told him.

His frown deepened. “Did I authorize you to speak to them?”

I nodded. “You told me to return his call.”

That didn’t placate him. He picked up a stack of paper on his desk and thrust it my way. “Here,” he said.

I took it. Simple audit stuff, it seemed.

“Take care of that right away.”

I nodded. “And Peabody Sherman?” They were supposed to be my top priority.

“That too.”

I glanced at the paperwork again, delving into it a little.

“This would be a good opportunity for Pat Anderson, or ...”

“I told you to handle it, Mister Flynn,” he barked.

“Yes, sir.”

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I walked out, knowing I'd been dismissed. Why was he shoveling this junior-level stuff on me suddenly? Anderson could handle it, and should.

I looked at it again sitting at my desk -- oh shit -- he's pulled in the delivery date as well. That meant more long hours.

It meant long hours for the rest of the week, as more chickenshit got added to my pile. Something had the old goat riled, and he was making life miserable for us all. I saw Nancy running to the ladies' room crying one afternoon. I worked all day Saturday, and as it was raining on Sunday, worked at home the whole day.

I went home early Tuesday night -- nine in the evening. I'd just dropped my bag and opened a dreadfully sparse refrigerator when the phone rang.

"Hello?" I said, probably sounding half dead.

"Rob? This is Linda. Why haven't you returned our calls?"

I sighed and pulled up a chair, sitting down. "What calls?"

"We've called your office, but always ended up leaving messages. Is something wrong?"

I closed my eyes and rested my head on a hand.

"Evidently. I haven't seen any messages from you."

"You haven't?"

"No, really. Not a one."

Banister decries voicemail as "impersonal," so the phones are answered centrally, with messages taken on little slips of paper if we're busy. I guess I've been busy.

"Ellen and I have been calling, practically every day."

"I think that helps me understand why the receptionist has been avoiding me..." It also explained the amount of chickenshit I'd been dealing with.

"Rob, what's the matter? Are you interested in doing some work for us?"

"Yes, very much so," I sighed. "It's just... Right now I'm being drowned in petty assignments at work. I think there may be a connection."

"So getting together at lunch is pretty much out of the question."

"During the week, yes."

“Could you meet with us Saturday morning then?”

I shook my head. I’d expected to work Saturday.

“I’d like to see you,” she said softly.

That hurt, and almost brought me to tears. “I’m not sure.”

“Sunday then?”

I sighed. Banister decried “working on the Sabbath.”

“Yes, I can make it for sure Sunday.”

“Rob, are you okay?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“I wish I could see you sooner than that -- I want to help.”

Oh, how being with her helped! I wanted to feel her touch again. “I know,” I said softly.

I heard her sigh over the phone.

“Okay then, we’ll see you Sunday morning. If you can come over earlier, please do. I’ll let Ellen know we shouldn’t call you at work. Please take care, Rob.”

“I’ll try; thanks for your concern. I’m interested, very interested. See you Sunday.”

“Okay Rob. Good night.”

“Good night, Linda.”

I put down the phone and rested my head in my arms. College, MBA, CPA, all those hours, for this? Was it worth it? I glanced up. I’d left the fridge door open. Didn’t matter, there wasn’t much to eat. Why had I let Tina go? I got up, kicking myself a little more. I let her go because I was more devoted to the damn job than I was to her.

I picked up my keys. And that’s why I’ll be dining alone, at McDonald’s, again.

Rubicon

I thought things evened out, possibly lightened a little at the salt mines. Dave mentioned in passing that all incoming phone calls were being screened by Banister, and even client calls were vanishing. Dave had talked to a client that morning, and the client wanted to know why his earlier calls hadn't been returned.

I made courtesy calls to three people shortly after that, getting the same story, and getting back in synch with them.

I was called in Friday morning.

"Yes, sir?" I asked.

"Who were you talking to on the phone just now?"

"Tax counsel for Ponsby Britt."

"Did they call you?"

"I called them. I'd called earlier in the week and had expected a reply by now. I needed the information."

"They could have faxed it."

I thought about mentioning that this was a matter which the attorneys didn't want in writing, but he should know that.

"Here," he said unceremoniously, handing me another pile.

I looked it over. More chickenshit.

"I won't be able to get to this until next Wednesday at the earliest," I told him.

"It has to be done before then."

"Pat Anderson is fully capable of handling this matter."

"I'm assigning it to you."

This had gone far enough. "Mister Banister, you expect us to exercise sound business and professional judgment in our work. Assigning this to me is not cost-effective, for the client or the firm. This should be handled by an associate."

"Are you questioning my judgment?" He was practically fuming.

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I dropped the folder back on his desk. “In assigning this to me, yes.”

His right hand was trembling. His voice quavered as he spoke. “And you should carefully consider your future at *my* firm, Mister Flynn. That will be all!”

I turned and walked out of his office.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him walk by my door around a quarter to seven that night. I left around eight, a bit early for the last few weeks.

Even though I didn’t set the alarm, I woke early Saturday morning. I flopped around, getting up after conceding I wasn’t going to get back to sleep. I cleaned up and had breakfast.

Now what?

I went into the office, arriving before eight.

Dave wandered into my office about nine thirty, a big cup of Starbucks in his hand. He’s one of the other senior analysts, and a friend.

“Do you know what the hell is going on?” he asked, parking his lanky frame in a chair.

“Not a clue,” I told him.

He shook his head, then nodded down the hall. “He’s piling crap on us that should go to associates. I’ve told him so.”

I smiled. “So did I.”

“And?” Dave asked.

“He told me I should seriously consider my future with *his* firm.”

Dave smiled and nodded. “Thought so. I’m interviewing. I figure anything better than associate wages and I’m gone. Want me to see if they’re interested in a package deal?”

I paused and considered. The job market was tough, but not that tough. “Yeah, I’d appreciate it.”

He smiled. “Will do. I’m trying to take Nancy with me as well. She deserves better.”

I chuckled. “We all do, I think. When’s your interview? Who?”

“One this afternoon. Los Gusanos Country Club with PwC. Wanna tag along?”

I smiled, making up my mind. “I’ll pass. I’ve got another appointment.”

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Dave stood up. "Okay. Just wanted to warn you -- the way he's been acting, who knows what's going to happen when I bail out."

I shook his hand. "Oh we know; we've seen it before. Thanks for the warning."

I worked until noon, tidied up, and left.

I arrived at the estate about a quarter to one. I parked in the visitor section, and walked back to the tree. I needed time to unwind.

I heard people approaching on the gravel path. I glanced at my watch -- I'd been sitting for about twenty minutes. I hadn't solved the world's problems yet, or my own.

Bernadette and Linda came into view. I smiled and moved more to the middle of the bench, but didn't get up -- what the hell.

"We saw you drive in," Bernadette said.

"And wondered why you didn't ring at the house," Linda added.

I looked up, then let my head drop back down, elbows on my knees. "Needed time to unwind," I sighed.

"Can we sit with you?" Bernadette asked.

I sat back. "Please..." Oh, please -- I felt that hunger pang in my chest again.

They sat down, squeezing me deliciously between them. I caught the strong scent of that perfume, or it caught me -- I may have moaned.

"What's wrong, Rob?" Linda asked, as they held me gently.

My eyes closed and I relaxed back, floating for a while.

I told them about the weirdness at work, the split it was causing in me.

The scent got stronger, they held me tighter, and I drifted off. I felt the pangs again, and cried. I felt a hand on my chest, soothing, calming. I floated in warmth, soft embraces, and soft voices.

The three of us were walking back to the house. I felt wiped out, yet relaxed.

"Wait for us for a few minutes?" Linda said as we stood outside Ellen's office.

I nodded. "Of course." I looked to the small parlor behind me. "In here okay?"

Bernadette said, "That would be fine."

I shook my head. "Good time for a bathroom break."

I visited the loo, then sat in the parlor, where I'd been some time ago, one of them on either side of me. I closed my eyes again. What was happening? I didn't know. I felt so hungry, so needy, and so fucking tired. I could be tired here. I could rest here.

"Rob?"

I forced my eyes open. Bernadette was standing a few feet from me. Her smile turned quickly to a concerned frown. She sat down next to me.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

The feeling came back in my chest and in my arms -- that empty, hungry feeling. I sighed and shook my head. I wanted to drown myself in her somehow, give myself to her.

She reached into a pocket with one hand as she moved her other hand to the back of my neck and said, "Close your eyes."

My eyes closed and I sighed again at her touch. I thought I heard a hissing or spraying sound, but it didn't matter as I was filled with that scent again. I started to slip down, and felt myself being pulled into Bernadette's embrace. She held me and rocked me, speaking softly.

She helped me sit up. I wiped my face. I'd been crying again. I saw a damp spot on her blouse, above her full breasts. I let my eyes close as part of me remembered.

"No, awake and alert for now, Rob," she said, tapping me on the forehead.

I lifted my head and forced a smile, my head surprisingly clear all of a sudden.

"Sorry to be such a pain," I managed to say.

She smiled and stood up, pulling me up. I wanted to fall into her arms, into her...

"Let's go talk to the others," she said.

I followed her to Ellen's office.

Ellen and Linda had hard looks on their faces. My stomach tightened as I flashed back to being called to the principal's office as a child, and realized that's what Banister did to me, filling me with that same feeling.

Ellen nodded. "Rob, have a seat, please."

Things didn't seem to match her expression -- I was confused as I sat in the office chair in front of her desk.

She started out by questioning me about my education and work background -- BA, Masters, MBA, CPA, working as a financial analyst for Whitehall & Marx, then joining Banister. Banister's firm worked as a troubleshooter for larger firms, going in as a SWAT team to handle tricky areas or do intensely focused inquiries -- interesting, challenging, but soulless. We moved on to my photography work, getting the attention of Vivian and others, working with them, doing the art show circuit.

Something happened, I'm not sure what, and I got into Banister and his "frivolities" remark. Linda's hands were on my arm and neck; that helped.

Ellen's scowl increased. "Rob, after meeting that man, I have to say he's one of the most Calvinistic, Chauvinistic, repressed individuals..."

I nodded. "The business does attract a certain anal-retentive, detail orientation."

Ellen shook her head. "Have you ever seen that man smile?"

"Once -- at his partner's funeral," I answered quickly.

Linda gasped.

Ellen said, "He's a real piece of work, Doctor -- from a pathological point of view, you might be interested in what makes him tick."

"Not worth the effort," I said. Softly I added, "Some people make their own hell."

I felt warm hands on me, pressing gently, squeezing.

"All too true," Ellen said, the tone of her voice changing.

I looked up to her. She was smiling now, confusing me a little more.

She stood up, walked around her desk and sat on the corner.

"Rob, I'm going to take a chance. I haven't gotten the full go-ahead from our owner, but she said she trusts me, us, on this one."

I looked over to Bernadette, and tried to look up to Linda.

"Rob," Ellen continued, smiling a little more, "Our owner, our Mistress, has this estate, one near Sedona, one outside Toronto, and one near Lucerne. We are held through trusts and a foundation. Could you handle the financial aspects of the U.S. parts of the organization?"

I concentrated a bit. "I think I understand what you mean structurally. I'd have to look at how things were established, and would need to work with local experts, but yes."

I thought I heard Linda sigh behind me.

"I'd need to look things over, and expect that what I'd be doing would mainly involve coordinating the efforts of others." Was I volunteering for a job? "What's going on?" I asked out loud.

Bernadette chuckled, and Linda moved up closer to me, her hands on my shoulders, her fingers going down on to my chest.

Ellen nodded, smiling. "That's good. We don't expect that it would be a full-time job."

I was getting more confused by the moment.

Ellen chuckled. "Rob, the other part... She wants you, we, I want you, to put your artistic skills to use, starting with our estate here. I'm close to getting an editor, but publication is already lined up."

I took a deep breath. "That's wonderful!"

Ellen got a more somber smile. "Rob, it means becoming part of our Family."

I nodded.

"Rob, it means giving yourself to Her, to us. Once you start on the path with us, there's no turning back."

"When do I start?"

She smiled and nodded. "Would you believe I can be worse than Banister?"

"No. Never," I answered instantly. Bernadette and Linda laughed.

Ellen tried to recover. "Our Mistress can be very demanding..."

"And very rewarding," Bernadette added with a sigh.

"Are you ready for that, Rob? Ready to give yourself to us?"

I almost cried, the feeling in my chest was so strong and sudden. "Yes," I whispered.

"Pay," Bernadette said.

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Ellen nodded, straightening a little. "Linda," she said.

Linda did something, and my mind cleared. Her hands held my shoulders.

"Rob, if you join us, we'll start by matching your current salary..."

"I'll take it," I interrupted.

Ellen smiled. "But there are some important catches..."

"Such as?"

"You have to live with us," she told me.

"The place I'm in is leased -- no problem."

"We expect you to continue and to build your photography business."

"So what's the catch?" I asked.

"Physical," Bernadette said.

"You'll have to complete a very thorough physical exam -- our Mistress insists on only the healthiest of specimens."

I started to say I hadn't been sick in years, but Linda broke in.

"That's not fair," she said, surprisingly emotional, squeezing my shoulders.

Ellen almost laughed. "It's all right; I agreed that his training would be shared."

"Training?" Had I said that out loud?

"We could complete the physical this afternoon," Bernadette said.

"Shouldn't we wait for the full genetic screening results?" asked Linda.

Ellen took a step back. "Doctors, please... Rob, when could you start?"

I thought a moment. "My lease was up two months ago -- I suppose that could be quick. I've a real-estate person I could check with. I'd need two weeks notice at work."

Ellen sighed and shook her head, her smile disappearing. "Rob, what's going to happen when you give two weeks notice?"

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I nodded. "The bastard will throw me out instantly." I could almost hear him screaming. I chuckled. "But that's the good news."

"So we could..." Bernadette started in, only to be interrupted by Linda.

Ellen held up her hands, almost laughing.

"Rob, why don't you wait in the drawing room for a bit?" she suggested.

I stood up. I looked at Linda, and Bernadette. Those feelings came back -- the hunger, and the peace I found in their embrace.

"I want to be part of the family," I whispered. I gave Linda a hug. I think we were both reluctant to let go of each other. I turned to Bernadette. "I do," I whispered.

When we hugged, I was lost in her embrace. I didn't know what to do -- moan, cry, let go...

Ellen's hands on our shoulders separated us. I hugged Ellen as well.

"I want you in our Family as well," she whispered. "Go... Now..."

I walked out, closing the door behind me, and walked back to the drawing room.

I was trying to figure out what was going on when Suzanne walked in. She had something in her right hand and was slipping it into a pocket as she entered the room.

"Rob, let's take a walk," she said with a smile.

"Ellen said..."

She nodded. "Ellen asked me to talk to you. We can walk by her office, okay?"

I sighed and stood up.

We walked back down the hall. I could hear loud voices inside. Suzanne practically leapt ahead and knocked loudly on the door. The voices inside went silent.

"Yes?" came Ellen's voice.

Suzanne hooked my arm and pulled me to the doorway. It looked as if Ellen, Bernadette, and Linda were having quite the "discussion."

"We'll be in the private gardens," Suzanne said.

"That's fine, dear. I'll call you on your radio. Rob, don't worry," Ellen told us.

Suzanne took my arm, closed the door, and led us out of the building.

We walked in silence, back to my favorite tree, and sat on the bench.

Suzanne took both my hands, looking in my eyes.

“I feel so hungry, so empty again,” I whispered.

“I know. Do you want to join us?”

“I think so.”

“Do you know what that means?”

I shook my head. “No.”

She sighed. “I’ve only been a member of the Family for a year or so.”

“But I’ve seen you here, and talked to you for more than a year, it seems.”

She nodded. “And they, we’ve watched you for almost as long as well.”

“What?” I started to ask.

“This is one of your favorite spots, isn’t it?”

“Yes. You showed it to me.”

“I’ve seen you here lately, with them.”

“Them?” She placed such a strange emphasis on that word.

“Yes, Linda and Bernadette. What do you know about them?”

I squeezed her hands. I wanted to be in her arms. “I know how I feel when they’re next to me, holding me...”

She sighed. “I’ve seen you with them... Do they fill you with desire?”

I shook my head. “No, they soothe the pain, the pain I feel...”

That seemed to surprise her. She smiled. “I know I should have believed them,” she whispered, “But it’s hard some times... Oh Rob, you are so lucky -- we are all so lucky...”

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She threw her arms around me, holding me tight. I held her, trying to fill the emptiness I felt with her warmth.

“Tell me what you need,” she whispered.

“Hold me,” was all I could say.

She pulled away, leaving me with that empty feeling again.

“You don’t know, do you?” she asked.

“Know what?”

She smiled, shaking her head. “How they... How we do it.”

“Do what?”

She moved closer, sliding an arm around me, sliding a hand up the back of my neck. My eyes closed and I sighed, relaxing into her.

“Oh, so deep already... Hold you like this and you’re helpless. Do you like that?”

“Oh yes,” I moaned.

She pulled away quickly and slapped my face.

I was stunned, and backed away. She reached for me and I moved back a little more.

“Rob, I’m sorry. Is your head clear now?”

I frowned. “I think so. What’s going on? Why did you do that? Did I do something wrong?”

She sighed. “Ellen told me to explain things to you. I don’t know what I’m supposed to explain, and what I’m not. Rob, they train us using hypnosis and drugs. The hand at the back of the neck and head...” She fumbled in a pocket and pulled out what looked to be a small perfume sprayer. “Even now, so early on, one whiff of this, and you’re putty...”

I moved closer to her. “And I love it... I want it... Oh, I’m so hungry for it...”

I slid a hand up her shoulder and up her neck, cradling the back of her head. She sighed and started to wilt in my arms, her head going back, a relaxed and dreamy smile forming on her face. I leaned her back, supporting her, protecting her, rocking her slightly.

“Do you like it, Suzanne?”

“Oh yes,” she said huskily.

“Why are you so concerned about me?”

Her breath caught; I squeezed the back of her neck slightly and she sighed. “I want you to be sure... Don’t want you taken against your will... I want you...”

I held her, rocking her head gently, knowing somehow what was right.

“Suzanne, I think I want this... Help me be sure... What do you need? What can I do?”

She gave me a moan that didn’t need much explanation.

I sighed, and said, “Suzanne, awake and alert again.”

Her head lifted and she blinked. So that’s how I looked -- I understood a bit better.

She frowned a little, then smiled. I took her hands.

“Suzanne, hold me, use the spray, help me find out if this is right, what I need, please...”

She smiled more, and nodded. She slid both hands up my back to my neck. I moaned and my head dropped back. Her hands lifted my head, and we kissed. My arms were weak going around her.

She moved me to my back, my head in her lap.

“Close your eyes, darling,” she said, running her fingers down my forehead to my eyes.

My eyes closed as I sighed, relaxing more.

I felt coolness of the spray, and breathed deep, taking that fragrance into me. I felt one hand on my forehead, and the other touched my chest. “Let go and relax,” she said, and I dropped into softness.

She held me and talked to me. I tried to explain the pain, the tension I felt, how much “frivolities” still hurt me. She pushed me, digging into me, questioning. I couldn’t answer a lot of her questions. Finally she asked me what I needed. That I could answer.

A warm nipple filled my mouth, a hand rested on my chest. I was safe. I could relax.

“Waking up slowly, safe and comforted...”

I slid my arms around a warm body, enjoying the nipple in my mouth, so fulfilling.

“Open your eyes now, so safe and relaxed...”

I opened my eyes as the nipple pulled away. Bernadette pulled away from me, putting a hand on my shoulder. I was back in the house, on a couch in a different room.

She was sitting beside me. She let her top down again, covering her breasts.

“Thank you. I need to be held like that, a lot,” I whispered.

She looked to me and smiled. “Oh, you don’t have anything to worry about there...”

She helped me sit up. She straightened out her clothes a bit more. I saw Linda sitting a few feet away.

“Will you hold me too?” I asked, with surprising hunger in my voice.

She smiled. “Oh, I will; I will.”

Bernadette chuckled. She tapped me in the middle of the forehead. My head cleared instantly; I was amazingly alert. I was also amazingly confused.

“Wow...” I said.

Linda moved closer. “Suzanne explained things to you? How we’ve used hypnosis and drugs on you?”

I nodded. “I don’t know how much she explained, but that’s what she said.”

Bernadette jumped in. “When you held her -- did you know you had her hypnotized?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“And did you know she would do *anything* you wanted?” Linda asked.

I looked to her and said, “Yes.”

“But you didn’t take advantage of her, do anything,” Linda said, tilting her head a little to the side.

“I couldn’t,” I said, shaking my head.

A hand snuck up the back of my neck. I sighed, giving myself to the feeling, letting it take me again.

“Why?” Linda asked.

“I couldn’t hurt her,” I said.

That hand moved, squeezing the back of my head and neck. I let go, drifting.

I was back at the bench with Suzanne. I had her deeply hypnotized. I wanted her so much, and she looked so luscious. We were alone, nobody would bother us; I could do anything I liked. She'd said she wanted me... I could... No! I wouldn't do that. Look at her breasts, so full, so firm, so inviting. So nice to hold, to squeeze gently...

"No!" I called out, shaking my head. I was in the house, Linda beside me, holding me. What was going on? I started to move, but something happened, and I sank back to that floating place.

I was safe. I didn't have to do anything I didn't want to do. I could rest and relax again, rocking gently. No -- I needed to get back to Suzanne; I'd left her at the bench. I couldn't leave her alone like that. A voice told me she was safe. I had to see for myself; I was responsible.

She's not there anymore, the voice told me. That only made me more agitated -- I *had* to find her, to make sure she was safe. I tried to get up and walk away, back to the house, but my arms and legs wouldn't work right. I had to be sure she was safe; I *had* to.

"Where is she?" I asked, opening my eyes and sitting up. I was in the house again, with Linda and Bernadette.

"Rob, she's okay," Linda said. I shook off her hands and started to stand. "I have to be sure she's safe," I told them.

I was having trouble with my balance; I felt confused, disoriented. I looked up to see Bernadette in front of me.

"Help me find Suzanne, please!" I appealed to her.

She put her arms around me and held me to her chest, pulling my head between her breasts. I started to struggle, but that perfume filled me again. I didn't want to go there again; I didn't -- I needed to make sure Suzanne was safe. Hands held me; I was pressed between soft, warm bodies. I had to find Suzanne, to make sure she was safe.

"I'm here, Rob -- I'm okay. I'm right here with you."

It was hard for me to open my eyes. Suzanne was there, in front of me. Someone was still holding me, preventing me from getting up.

Suzanne reached out and touched my face. "Relax, Rob -- I'm here, and I'm safe."

I tried to reach out to her, to wipe the tears I saw on her face. "I'm sorry I left you," I cried.

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“You didn’t leave me. We’re both safe here. Relax, Rob; let go and relax for me. We’re both safe.” She sat next to me and moved to hold me. I smelled something like rubbing alcohol. Suzanne looked to someone behind me and said, “No, please; not yet.”

I tried to turn but she held me. Bernadette was still holding me as well. I got my arms around Suzanne. “I’m glad you’re safe,” I told her.

I was being held again. She told me we were both safe. More hands held me. Someone asked me if I could let go and relax again. I told them I wasn’t sure.

It was hard to do, but I was helped by soft voices and soft, warm hands.

They were sorry. They were testing me. I didn’t leave Suzanne alone; she had been safe all the time. It was a dream, and we were safe. I held on.

I woke again, relaxed this time, to Suzanne holding me. She squeezed me to her, then helped me sit up.

I was confused still. We were alone in the same room, but the lights were lowered.

“What?” I started to ask.

She scooted over next to me on the couch.

“Rob, you didn’t leave me. Oh, you are such a catch! You held me and protected me. Back here in the house, they wanted to test you, to see what you’d do. They insisted -- they didn’t believe what I told them, that you had been so gentle, so protective.”

“But I needed to find you... I had to make sure you were safe...”

She nodded. “Things seem so real, deep in hypnosis. Your response was very strong, and very positive. It surprised them. I was upstairs when I got a panic call to come down here. They were getting ready to sedate you, and would have if you hadn’t settled down.”

I shook my head. “Then it was you who saved me... Thank you...”

She laughed and hugged me. “Thank you, Rob.”

After a few moments she sat back though, and gave me a serious look.

“Rob, do you find me attractive?”

“You’re getting me confused again,” I told her.

“Would you like to make love with me?”

I held her hands. “Yes, I would.”

She smiled. “Good. I was beginning to worry.”

I was still confused, but not too confused to laugh. “And I want to hold you, and be held.”

She hugged me again. “Oh, I’m so glad to hear that.”

“Ready to talk to the others again?” she said after a not long enough hug.

“Sure,” I said.

We went back to Ellen’s office. Linda and Bernadette were there. The three of them gave me slight smiles.

Linda stood up. “Rob, I’m sorry for what we put you through.”

I hugged her. Bernadette got up and I hugged her as well. She held me and I sighed. “Thank you for holding me,” I whispered to her. “Please hold me.”

We managed to sit down. Once again I was between Linda and Bernadette. Suzanne started walking to the office door.

“Suzanne, stay, please,” Ellen requested.

With a surprised smile, Suzanne turned back to us and pulled up a chair.

“Rob, you continue to surprise us,” Ellen said, sitting in a comfy looking leather chair next to the couch Linda, Bernadette, and I were sitting on.

“Oh?” was the most intelligent thing I could say.

Ellen nodded. “You took Suzanne into trance. Why? How did you know what to do?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know why. I guessed the same cues would be used.”

Ellen nodded and smiled. “And you didn’t take advantage of the situation.”

I sighed and shrugged my shoulders. “I couldn’t.”

Bernadette moved a hand across my shoulders, holding me gently. “That’s what we explored here at the house. The strength of your reaction surprised us. It’s a test many men...”

“And many women,” Linda interjected.

“...Don’t pass,” Bernadette continued, rubbing my back.

I sighed and chuckled, letting my head go back again.

“What is it?” Ellen asked.

“Chris at our office -- I think that’s one of the reasons why I reacted so strongly.” I opened my eyes and looked at the lovely ladies around me. “He would not have passed up such an opportunity. You wouldn’t have been safe with him,” I told Suzanne.

Ellen sighed and shook her head. “We’re very lucky...”

“What now?” I asked.

“What are you going to do about your job?” Ellen asked, smiling once more.

I sighed, leaning back. I liked the way Bernadette slid closer to me. “Prepare the customary letter and see what happens this week.”

“You won’t give notice Monday?” Ellen asked.

I shook my head. “No. One of my colleagues is interviewing. Whoever announces first, the rest of us will be called on the carpet within the following half-hour. I’d just as soon let him start things.”

“Have a lot to clean out of your office?” Linda asked.

I shook my head. “Our desks must be clean at the end of the day. Only ‘approved’ items may be displayed in our offices. I have some clean clothes in a file drawer, and that’s it.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. You won’t have any such restrictions here. Seriously though, when would you be able to start?” Ellen asked

“I’ll talk to Dave on Monday. I’ll give him until the end of the week, and give notice Friday if he hasn’t done anything. I have some things I should finish up. I guess I need to schedule a physical, too. I haven’t seen a doctor in years.”

“Yes you have,” Bernadette said, rubbing my back again.

The ladies laughed, probably at the look on my face.

Bernadette said, “Both Linda and I are medical doctors -- I do bodies; she does minds.”

I looked to Linda with more respect. “I’m in very good hands, then.”

“What a practical individual you are!” Ellen said. That got us all laughing.

A half-hour later I was following Bernadette to her office, which was in one of the newer buildings. Next to her office she had a quite thorough looking infirmary.

“Rob, get undressed and we’ll get started. Your preliminary blood tests look very good, and I expect the others to be fine. Now, let’s start with family history...”

I answered her questions as I got undressed, then sat up on the exam table. It was so weird, looking over at her as she wrote down information, watching her breasts jiggle under her blouse. Oh, that had been so nice...

“Rob?”

I shook my head, trying to clear out the wool. “Sorry, brain fart,” I said softly. “Where were we?”

She put her pad down and moved next to me, putting her hands on my shoulders.

“What’s the matter, Rob?” she asked softly.

I sighed, closing my eyes. “I don’t know,” I whispered.

She held me closer, sliding a hand up the back of my neck.

“Does that help?” she said.

“Oh yes,” I sighed in response.

She held me closer. “I’ve got you, Rob,” she said, holding and rocking me.

We spoke for a while. I went through the rest of the exam in a dreamworld.

A tap on my forehead with a finger, and the world snapped into crystal clarity. I was still naked, sitting on the edge of a bed in the infirmary. Bernadette was sitting next to me.

“Rob?”

I turned to her. “Yes?”

“Rob, would you like to make love with me?”

“Yes...” I whispered.

We joined in a kiss and slipped back on to the bed. As we rolled around, she rolled partially on top of me. I moaned and pulled her more on to me.

“What is it? What do you need?” she whispered, moving more on top of me.

“You feel so good on top of me...” I told her.

She pulled off her top and moved up on me, offering me a nipple again. I took it, and soon her hand held me to her, taking me back to that cloud.

We made love on that cloud, with her riding me, holding me. Afterwards she held me again, and we started talking. I don't know what I said, but parts hurt and were full of tears.

I woke slowly on my stomach, feeling a hand rubbing my back through the sheet covering me. I sighed and turned.

“What is it?” Linda asked.

I blinked and closed my eyes as I relaxed on my back. A hand rested on my chest.

“You looked surprised,” Linda said, her hand moving on my chest a bit. “What was it?”

I sighed. “The transitions -- one moment Suzanne is holding me out by the tree, the next moment I'm in the house with Bernadette. Then it's Bernadette, and I open my eyes to see you... It's a little confusing, that's all.”

“Open your eyes, Rob -- calm and relaxed still,” Linda said.

I opened my eyes, slowly.

She was smiling. “You told Bernadette some things which worried her; that's why I'm here. I'd like to explore those with you.”

I was afraid. “Will it keep me out of the family?”

She smiled, shaking her head, and pressed a little more with her hand on my chest. “No, Rob -- it won't. If you're hurt, we want you to get better, to heal. As Bernadette said, she takes care of bodies, and I take care of minds.”

I was less afraid, but felt strange -- like I was ten years old. “Will you hold me?”

She nodded. “Yes, Rob -- I'll hold you. Would you like to explore with me? Parts of it won't be a lot of fun, but I'll be right here with you.”

I put a hand on her pants leg. “Hold me afterwards?”

“I'll hold you afterwards, as well as before, and during. I promise.”

“Okay,” I said.

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She leaned over me a little, her face filling my vision. Her hands moved up my body to my neck. I moaned as my eyes closed and I started falling back. I didn't feel ten anymore, more like fourteen...

She was right -- we went to some difficult places. But she was with me, and I knew they couldn't hurt me now. The memories still hurt though, but she held me and rocked me afterwards. Then she let me float in her embrace while she talked to someone about things I didn't need to remember.

I woke up on my side, my knees pulled up toward my chest. I felt a hand on my side. I straightened my legs and rolled to my back once more. Linda was still there.

"How are you doing?" she asked, a hand going back to my chest.

"I don't understand," I said.

"Understand what?"

"Why your hand on my chest, why being held feels so good."

She smiled and nodded. "We're meant to be held, and hold others."

I sighed. "I know." Something prodded me. "What happened? I'm not supposed to remember something."

She leaned forward again, her hands sliding up to my neck. She squeezed me lightly as she said, "You don't have to right now. You'll remember when it's time. It's better for you now this way. You need time to heal. Close your eyes now..."

I closed my eyes and drifted again, with her holding me.

I woke up alert, and sat up. Linda was sitting in a chair next to me.

"What now?" I asked.

She smiled. "Get dressed and walk around with me? We've a while before dinner."

I got dressed. As I was putting on my shoes, Linda moved over and sat next to me, putting an arm around me.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

I turned and hugged her. "Now I do. I feel like... I was little and took a bad fall from a swing -- that instant after the sudden whole-body impact, before the pain and panic set in, like I'm suspended in time somehow. Does that make sense?"

She held me. “Yes, it makes sense. We’ll protect you. I’m not letting you out of my sight for a while.”

“That bad?”

She laughed and sat back. “No, that good -- you’re an amazingly resilient person, Rob.”

I shook my head. “I still feel like I’ve been in a car wreck.”

She nodded with a grim smile. “You have been -- it’s called growing up.”

With that I sighed and stood up. I helped her to her feet and we hugged again.

We headed back to the main house.

“Did Bernadette mention anything about your office?”

I liked having my arm in hers, or was it hers in mine?

“Just that it would be in the new building, where I’d have good air-conditioning for my prints and negatives.”

“Yes, that’s it. We can do a darkroom if you need it.”

“We’ll see. The services I use do a very good job, and save me a lot of time. Don’t know that it’s cost-effective to do it myself.”

We paused at the rear stairway.

“I can see that. Would you like to see your room?”

She was smiling again. “I like to see you smile,” I told her, then frowned.

“What is it?” she said, stepping closer, an arm around my back now.

“Confused again -- I’m blurting things out, and I feel weird.”

“Weird how?”

“I’m not sure how old I am, if that makes sense.”

She nodded, rubbing my back, stepping closer. “Does that help?”

Her touch, her body against mine was comforting. “Yes, very much.”

“How old do you feel?”

I closed my eyes. “Six, sometimes ten, sometimes fourteen or so, but I’m almost thirty.”

“Inside, you’re all of those ages, and more. We’ll have plenty of time to explore them. Rob, when you and I are alone together, you’re open with me; it’s important. Is that still all right with you?”

Part of me remembered her asking about that, and I’d agreed. “Yes, it is,” I told her.

Then it was the tap on the forehead again. I laughed this time. She gave me a pixy smile.

“I like the way that works. Could have used it studying for the damn CPA exams.”

She chuckled and said, “Let’s go upstairs.”

“We have seven bedrooms upstairs, including Ellen’s suite, which is the only one with its own bathroom. The rest of us share two bathrooms.”

“That could be a problem in the morning...”

She laughed, holding my arm. “It hasn’t been so far. With you, there will only be five of us up here.”

She must have seen my puzzled look.

“When our owner visits, Ellen moves out, and we keep one room spare. So, you get your choice of two rooms. This one, and the one on the other side of the house.”

We went into the first room. It was spacious, with a high ceiling. It had a large and high four-poster bed. An old desk was in one corner. The furnishings, and the bed, were in dark, old wood. I liked it. I walked over to an old, mirrored door. The door and the mirror were both old. I opened it to reveal a quite large closet.

“This is nice,” I said. I could feel the smile on my face. “I’m turned around -- is this a morning sun room?”

Linda smiled. “No, the other one is. Shall we look?”

I nodded and we went down the hall, around the corner to the other hall, going in to the other room.

It was probably evident on my face. This one didn’t have the feeling of the other one.

“You like the other one better,” she said.

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“Yes -- can’t put my finger on it, but I do. The other one has more detail, more history -- in the plaster, the coving, the trim work.”

I checked out the closet. It was a little smaller. “This room must have been done later -- the construction, while good, is newer.”

“You’re right. The three on this side were redone in the forties.”

A thought crossed my mind. “I suppose I should be practical and ask which is closer to a bathroom.”

Linda laughed, and I moved closer to her.

“Actually,” she told me, holding out her arms, “The other one is.”

We hugged again.

“Oh, I like hugs.”

“Mmmmm... Good -- so do I.”

She moved back a bit. The look on her face was curious. A slight smile, but serious, and something else.

“Rob, I want you to spend tonight and tomorrow night here...”

I was confused again. I looked at the room, then nodded towards the other room.

She smiled more. “No, with me,” she whispered. We hugged again. “I don’t want you sleeping alone the next few nights.”

That sudden impact feeling loomed up again, but disappeared just as quickly as it had approached. “Please,” I told her, whispering in her ear and taking a deep breath at her neck.

She sighed, giving me a little squeeze, then stepping back. “I’ll show you the bathrooms. We can clean up a bit, then head downstairs. I need to talk to Ellen for a few minutes.”

I nodded. The bathrooms were quite nice, with modern plumbing, separate showers and tubs, and two sinks. I had funny feelings again. Being in the bathroom with Linda brought back memories of when Tina and I lived together.

We walked downstairs, taking the front stairway. Linda showed me the kitchen area, and I was introduced to the staff. I was surprised to see a man in the kitchen -- Eduardo. He was married to Janice; they did the cooking. I complimented them on the meals I’d enjoyed so far.

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As they started asking me about my likes and dislikes, Linda touched me on the shoulder and told me she'd meet me in the parlor later.

I don't like broccoli, unless it's well disguised. Feed me Brussels sprouts, cabbage, and the like, and people won't like to be around me. Janice thought I'd do just fine.

Another woman came into the room, a redhead with a clipboard, looking relaxed and harried at the same time.

"I'm Rob -- I don't think we've met, although I'm not sure," I told her extending a hand.

She smiled and swept me into a hug. "I'm Deb. Welcome to the family, Rob."

"Oh, I'm going to like it here," I said, holding her.

I turned a little red. So did Deb, as she, Janice, and Eduardo laughed.

"Let me show you around the house a bit more," Deb said, taking my arm.

"Oh, we will be having champagne tonight," she told Eduardo as we left the kitchen.

"I'm sorry," I started to say as we walked down the hall.

"That's okay, Rob. I think I understand. I'm part of the family as well, and have been for about four years. It takes a while to get used to. Oh, I'm responsible for running the house. Did you see the bedrooms yet? Make a choice?"

We were at the back stairs again. "Yes, Linda showed me. I like the one on this side, with the coved ceiling."

Deb nodded. "I like that one as well. I'm right down the hall," she said, bumping me with her hips as she walked, and a gleam in her eye when I looked at her. Then she raised her eyebrows momentarily and added, "of course, Linda is next door to you."

I sighed. "This will take some getting used to."

She laughed and gave me more of the tour. We talked about getting me moved. When I mentioned taking a bunch of small loads, probably bringing some things over tomorrow, she told me she would take care of it all -- I was family after all. She understood I had some things which had to be handled carefully, such as film, prints, and cameras; we could go over those tomorrow.

We walked over to the newer building, the one with Bernadette's office. It also had Deb's office, full of modern equipment. She showed me the one she proposed for me.

I nodded, looking at the room. "I'm in a two bedroom apartment, with one bedroom used as the office. This is bigger than that room, plus my office at work combined. It will be great."

She nodded. "Oh, you haven't met Annette yet -- she handles bookkeeping for us. She sits with me. She's family as well, and lives upstairs in this building. If you'd rather the two of you shared an office, we can do that, but from what I understand, you're going to be busy with other things."

I raised my eyebrows. "Okay, I guess. It's going to take me a while to get up and running, understanding how things work. I won't suggest changing things unless I can explain why I think they're broken, or need changing."

Deb nodded, leaning back against an old wooden desk. She had a full figure, long legs, a cute nose, and freckles. "I like that. Just as long as you understand Ellen thinks she runs things, but I'm the one who gets things done..."

"Unless *She* is here," Linda added from the doorway.

Now it was my turn to laugh as Deb turned red.

"Of course, Doctor," Deb said, somewhat chagrined.

"Shall we go?" Linda suggested with a smile, holding out an arm.

I put an arm around Deb and pulled her along. We walked back to the main house.

It's a Welcome

We walked into the large parlor. We had quite a crowd present, and everyone seemed quite happy. Kathryn approached, holding a tray with filled champagne glasses. I let the ladies take one, then took one myself. I was the only man there.

The room quieted down as Ellen spoke a bit louder.

"Ladies..." she said in a clear voice, then added, "and Gentlemen," to a chuckle in the room.

"Our Mistress is currently in Toronto; I spoke with her earlier in the day. She regrets not being able to visit us, but she needs to return to Lucerne. She will be out in about six weeks."

That news seemed to brighten people up.

Then Ellen walked over to me, raising her glass, her smile increasing.

"She has given me the privilege, and the pleasure, of making an announcement for her. It is with great pleasure we welcome Rob Flynn to our Family."

If I was so happy, why was I on the verge of tears, with that sudden impact feeling again? I raised my glass to toast with her. I couldn't say a thing.

But I heard the others saying, "Welcome." Each toasted me, looking me in the eye.

When it was Bernadette's turn, she took my champagne flute and put it down. Then she hugged me. "Welcome to the family," she told me.

Now it seemed everyone needed to hug me. I didn't mind a bit. When I finally got my glass back, it had been refilled. I wiped tears from my eyes. I squeezed Suzanne's hand, and managed to whisper, "Thank you for making this possible." I saw Ellen and Linda huddling in one corner of the room.

I was asked when I'd be starting full time, when I'd be moving in. I started to tell them I didn't know, when Ellen walked up and took my arm.

"Rob, I need to talk to you in my office for a bit, before dinner."

"Of course," I said, holding on to my glass as she led me down the hall.

She was all smiles as we went into her office. She went to her desk and picked up a folder of papers.

"Rob, one more surprise to spring on you -- an employment contract. If you'd look it over, we can discuss details."

An ugly but practical thought crossed my mind. "Ellen, I'll ask straight out -- how subject to negotiation is this? Is this a take it or leave it deal?"

She nodded, her smile fading a bit. "Rob, thank you for asking. I don't really know. If you have questions I can't answer, we'll call Her."

I nodded. "Thank you. Where should I put this?"

"Why don't we take it over to your office?"

I held out my arm. She actually sighed as she took it.

I mentioned on the walk to the office that I'd met Deb. Ellen filled me in a little more on how the house ran. With a chuckle she told me that while she was nominally in charge, Deb ran the day-to-day show. We had "family" and "staff." Some times staff got recruited into the family -- Suzanne being the latest. After I put the folder on my desk, Ellen gave me a hug, and told me I was quite a catch.

When we walked back to the main house, the parlor was emptying out, people heading to the dining room. I entered with Ellen on my arm. The table was set for just family; that's the way dinners usually were, I was informed. Staff were present at weekday breakfasts and lunches, and some dinners.

While everyone was still happy, it seemed they kept more distance from me. I sat between Linda and Deb. Deb was all business -- we agreed to go over to my place after lunch tomorrow. She'd bring someone along to help pack.

I saw Linda give her a cross look. I gave Linda a questioning look, and Bernadette, who was sitting on the other side of Deb, asked me a question about my prints.

Quite a few were interested in seeing more of them. Deb suggested we could display them along the halls, and in the front parlor.

I was looking forward to photographing the place, especially the grounds. A number of the architectural details intrigued me as well, and I started talking about the Greene and Greene houses I'd visited.

Dinner was superb. I enjoyed it, and the wine, and especially the company. Annette wanted to know if I played Bridge. Nope, never learned it, but I did play cribbage. Someone laughed and said Suzanne would beat my pants off. That got interesting laughter; Suzanne blushed.

After dinner, I was at somewhat of a loss, especially as the table was cleared. When I mentioned I was used to doing my own cooking and cleaning up, someone told me I was welcome to help on Tuesdays, as that was the staff's usual night off.

Then the crowd dissipated, leaving Linda, Ellen, and I. It was so quiet again.

"I think I'll go to my office and look over the paperwork," I told Ellen.

She nodded as she stood up. "That's fine. Stop by my office when you're through."

I stood up, and helped Linda. She started to walk out, but turned.

"What is it, Rob?" she asked.

I could feel the questioning look on my face. I felt so young again, six or seven. "Hug?" I asked.

She gave me a hug. "It's okay, Rob," she whispered.

I walked over to the office, looking around. It was dark out. The walkway was covered, and only about twenty feet between buildings. What would it be like in the winter, a few months from now?

I sat in an old, comfortable, leather chair. I thought momentarily of Banister and the chair he had. I wish him well, I thought. I opened the folder and started reading.

I read through the agreements, twice. I slipped off my shoes and leaned the chair back. Could I get a real light table, and a real storage cabinet for negatives? I closed my eyes. Even though I was tired, I had that buzz that comes from a turbulent day.

A knock on the door -- "Yes? Come in, please," I said, swinging my chair around.

Linda and Ellen came in. Linda had three glasses in her hand. Ellen had a bottle.

"Cognac?" Ellen asked.

"Please," I replied.

She poured. I closed my eyes and stuck my nose in the glass. It was good. I swirled it and warmed it with my hands.

"Have you had a chance to look at things?" Ellen said after a few minutes.

I nodded, swirling and sniffing again.

"Ellen -- some times I feel I should call you Mistress -- I've had the opportunity to review a lot of contracts over the years. Other than the confidentiality provisions, which are tough but I've seen far worse, this agreement is entirely, amazingly, fair and equitable."

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Ellen and Linda exchanged smiles. "You'll sign, then?" Ellen asked.

I nodded. "Would have, but for two reasons," I said, taking another sip of fine cognac.

"And those are?" Ellen asked.

"It calls for witnesses to the signature, and I couldn't find a damn pen." I raised my glass in a toast. They chuckled.

"I think we can deal with that," Ellen said. She stood up. "My office?"

Linda stood up. I slipped my shoes back on. "Give me a minute to get the crowd together," I muttered as I stood.

"Crowd?" Linda asked, putting a hand on my back as we walked to the main house.

I chuckled a little, shaking my head. "It's weird. It's like I've got all these pieces, these parts of me -- but they're me, at different ages. Like I just thought about that leather chair again, and when I did, I had this flash of my grandfather's office and his leather chair. For an instant I could smell the stale cigar smoke, hear the way the chair and the wooden floor squeaked, see the clutter on his desk, all from the perspective of a four or five-year-old. That's weird."

She rubbed my back as we walked along, stepping out briefly into the cool night air. "It's nothing to worry about, Rob. As you said earlier, things have been stirred up. We're getting your crowd together again."

After a pause, she said, "And does that four or five-year-old need something? Can you ask him? What does he need?"

I stopped. The pang in my chest was back. "I don't know. To be held."

She held me. I closed my eyes and the world wobbled.

We made it to Ellen's office. I signed, with Ellen and Linda signing as witnesses. After signing, we had more hugs, and a little more cognac.

"This is grand," I told them, "But I still don't know what my schedule is."

Ellen swirled the cognac in her glass. "Don't worry about that, Rob -- at worst, you're three weeks from working here full time. I take it you're interested in moving before that?"

"Oh yeah," I told them. "Even if it's another three weeks, it's a five or ten minute commute rather than half an hour or more in stop-and-go traffic -- a lot easier on me."

Ellen nodded. "Do you have a passport?"

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I glanced up, trying to recall details. “Yes, but is it still valid?” I looked at her again. “Am I going somewhere soon?”

She smiled. “Our Mistress is interested in meeting the newest member of our Family. And, you said yourself, you need to talk to people about the overall structure.”

I nodded. “When would this be happening?”

“Not for a month or so. We discussed it very briefly. She thought you could go to Her in Lucerne, then fly back here with Her after a week or so.”

Linda said, “He’d be ready by then.”

I gave Linda a questioning look.

She smiled. “It will be an incredible experience for you. I envy you.”

Ellen sighed and rumbled, “Yes... But now...”

Linda smiled. “Yes... It’s been along day.”

I nodded, setting my empty glass on Ellen’s desk. “A long and interesting day. Don’t know how many more like this I could stand,” I muttered.

Linda and I walked out. I headed over to the kitchen. It was a reasonable size, with a regular commercial range, and assortment of ovens, separate huge refrigerator and freezer. I walked over to a bowl of fruit and picked up a banana.

“What’s the flow around here? I don’t have a feel for it,” I asked Linda as I peeled my snack. “I haven’t seen any television sets. Do we get newspapers? What do I do about mail?”

Linda smiled, standing a few feet away. “We have a lounge area upstairs from the offices in the next building. That has TV sets, VCR, the usual. It also has a wall which would be nice for some of your prints. We also have a room in another building for exercise, with treadmills and such. We get the New York Times, the San Jose Mercury, and the Wall Street Journal. If you have your own Journal subscription, we’ll get it moved over here, and you can figure out later if you want your own copy or just go with the one Ellen and Deb look at. Actually, I’d be surprised if Ellen has looked at it more than twice in the last month.”

I seemed to be filled with questions. As they boiled out of me, Linda answered them as best she could.

With a smile, she stepped over to me, putting a hand on my back again, nudging her hip against mine as she leaned back on the counter next to me.

“What’s wrong, Rob?” she asked softly.

“What? Is something wrong?” I replied.

She nodded. “Hold out your hands.”

I held out my hands. They were trembling slightly. I looked them and said, “I... I’m scared...”

Her hand moved on my back, now pressing a little firmer. “Why? Of what?”

“I... I’ve got that feeling in my chest again, and in my legs...” I looked at her, turning to face her. “You’re going to... Do it to me again, aren’t you?”

“Hypnotize you?” she said, facing me, putting both hands on my shoulders, moving her hips closer to mine.

“Y... Yes... I guess that scares me. I don’t understand.”

She nodded and smiled. “It scares you because we’ve seen some things which are very troubling to you. And you know we need to visit them again, and clean them up. Don’t we?”

“Do we?” I said, putting my hands on her waist, more to keep them from trembling than anything else. “I can’t believe how frightened I am. I don’t know what to do. I... I’m feeling young and frightened again...”

She hugged me, tight. “I’ve got you -- I’ve got you. Hold me and feel me holding you.”

I held her, my arms around her waist. “I still feel weird, like I should be shorter, my head on your tummy...”

“It’s okay, Rob -- hold me, run your hands over me. Stay with me, right here, right now.”

I held her. She felt good. I closed my eyes and ran my hands over her body. She turned us so she was pressing me into the counter. I ran my hands up her back, my arms by her sides, pulling her to me, squeezing her breasts into me. She moaned a little. I tilted my head and found her lips with mine. We kissed as we ran our hands over each other. I had one hand pressing her sacrum, pressing her hips into mine, and the other lost in the hair at the back of her head. I opened my legs a bit and she wiggled in. I held her hips with both hands, sliding them down over her soft but trim rear.

She wiggled, then took my hands and moved them to her breasts as she leaned back. She put her arms around my waist.

She looked so alive, her eyes bright and twinkling, the look of lust on her face, the way her nostrils flared, feeling her chest expand as she breathed.

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“How are you feeling now?” she asked.

In response I felt for her nipples, teasing them gently. “Much better.”

She let her head go back. I leaned over to kiss and nibble her neck, sliding my hands and arms around her again.

We kissed again, with more of our bodies now.

“Oops!” a voice said from the doorway.

We paused for air. She leaned back and we both laughed.

“Feel like going upstairs with me now?”

I held her hips closer. “Yes.”

“Rob, those first sessions -- out by the tree, in the porch swing, on the couch with Bernadette -- did you like those?”

I sighed. “God, yes...”

She nodded. “We’re going upstairs, and I’m going to hypnotize you again. Yes, we’ve done some things that are unsettling. But I’m going to show you again how sensual and pleasurable it can be -- I’m going to hypnotize you and we’re going to make passionate love. How does that sound?”

I held her to me again. “Hold me afterwards...”

“Oh I will... You’ll go to sleep in my arms...”

“Let’s go.”

We snuck peeked out into the hallway like a pair of teenagers, then ran across to the stairwell. She held a finger to her lips, and we were quiet going up the stairs.

I looked into “my” room. On the bed was a terrycloth bathrobe, and a first-class airline kit. “Lufthansa -- never flew ‘em,” I muttered.

The hand on my back again, feeling her body behind mine leaning into me. “Oh, you’ll get to; they have great service. Would you rather be in here?”

I turned to her again, picking up the robe. “Not tonight.”

“Good answer,” she said, forehead against mine.

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I chuckled. "What's bathroom protocol? Knock? Open the door and listen for the shriek?"

She sighed. "Let's see if one is open."

We went out into the hall again, closing "my" door.

"Dark in there -- looks good," she said, pointing to the nearby bathroom. She knocked lightly, then opened the door. Empty. She smiled to me. "Go ahead, then come to my room -- right next to yours."

I turned on the light as she closed the door. I sat on the can, then stripped off my dress shirt. The travel kit had a toothbrush and toothpaste. Hmmm -- I'm used to an electric shaver. Haven't used a blade in many years. Let it ride for tonight, I think, and shave in the morning.

I sat on the can once more. I gathered my goodies and headed to "her" room. I knocked lightly on the door.

She opened it. She was wearing a smile and a dark silky robe.

Her room -- feminine, a desk in one corner with papers on it. Telephone and clock radio on one nightstand, another large, old, high four-poster bed. Some clothes strewn about, semi-heaped.

"Not expecting company?" I asked her.

She swirled over to me, standing on tiptoes, an astonished look on her face. I laughed and hugged her. She laughed and hugged me. "Just you wait..." she growled in my ear.

I slid down her, catching the opening in her robe with my face, nuzzling towards a breast.

"I'll be right back -- why don't you get into bed?"

I raised my head a bit and kissed her throat. "Be glad to..."

She turned on the small lamp on her nightstand, and turned out the room light as she left.

The sheets, the pillows smelled like her. While the bed frame may have been old, the mattress felt pretty good, even if I was on the "wrong" side.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out all at once. God, what a day! It was so quiet here -- I could feel the buzzing in my head again. How noisy are the floors, the bedsprings? I wasn't quite sure what room we were over. One of the parlors?

I was relaxed, drifting, until I heard the door open again -- suddenly I was alert, eyes wide open. I could feel my heart and breath accelerating.

I looked over to see her approaching. She took off her robe. She was naked and beautiful, yet I was still frightened. She slid into bed next to me. Her touch was electric.

She sighed as she moved closer. "Rob, it's okay. Hold me for a while. Just hold me."

I felt a tension in my throat, strange apprehension in my arms and legs, and that hunger in my chest. I moved closer to her, holding her.

"You're so warm," she purred, putting an arm around me.

I slid down a little further, my lips on the side of a breast. I put my arms around her, and a leg over her, holding her close.

"Oh, please hold me -- I need to be held too," she whispered.

We held each other like that for I don't know how long. Slowly I seemed to unwind. For a while I anticipated the delirious shock of her hand squeezing the back of my head, but her hand stayed on my shoulder.

I was more relaxed. I pulled her to her near side a bit more, and without opening my eyes, took a nipple in my mouth. I sighed and held her, relaxing in the sensation. I sucked gently, relaxing more and more, barely feeling her hand move to the back of my head.

We made love gently. I begged her to use me for her pleasure; she used us both. I was on top of her when I came, my hands under her shoulders, gripping her, pulling us closer together. Her eyes were closed and her head back, moaning through a smile as I pumped my gift into her. I kissed her neck and she held me.

She turned out the light and held me again a little later as I curled up to her side once more. My lips found the firm yet soft flesh of a breast, my arms found their way around her waist. She sighed and held me.

I woke early, on my side and facing the window. It felt like it should be getting light out. I turned over carefully. There was just enough light so I could see a clock on the dresser -- quarter after six, or three thirty. Felt more like a quarter after six.

She was beside me, on her side. I leaned over to her, taking a breath near her hair and kissing her shoulder. I slid out of bed, grabbed my robe and the travel kit, and tried to be as quiet as possible as I went across the hall to the bathroom.

As I sat on the toilet, I had more silly protocol questions. Should I have turned on the light to let someone know I was in here? To flush or not to flush? I chuckled and flushed as I stood up.

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I froze halfway up as the door opened. Linda stepped in, naked. She grabbed me and pulled me into a kiss, feeling me.

After a dizzying kiss, she took her turn on the toilet.

“Thanks for leaving the seat down,” she told me.

“Thanks for leaving the lid up,” I replied. We both laughed. I rinsed my mouth with about half of the little bottle of mouthwash from the travel kit; Linda used the rest.

We hurried back to bed. We kissed for a bit, then I started to slide down her. She pulled me to her left breast as I got my arms around her.

“Oh, I hope you like that as much as I do,” she growled.

I sighed and squeezed her in reply.

The more I sucked, the more relaxed I became, and the harder it was to hold on to her.

She rolled me to my back with ease, then moved to straddle me. I sighed as we slid together, my eyes closing and my head arching back.

We rocked together, gently at first. She started sliding her hands over my chest, exciting me. She felt so good on top of me. I started moaning as I got closer. Her hands moved to my neck, her forearms on my shoulders.

She did something and my eyes popped open and locked on hers. I couldn't look away from her. I saw her lips moving -- I wanted them. I was so close, so close, but I couldn't...

She squeezed me and I was hit by a lightning bolt, coming deep inside her. Still I couldn't look away, even though it was so hard to keep my eyes open. She let go of my neck and my eyes dropped closed. I eagerly took the nipple she offered me, and dropped into that dreamworld again.

We were together there. We visited some scary places -- I was young, I was old, I was scared and hurt, but she was there with me. She wanted to go to one more place, but as we started walking down a long corridor towards it, I got really scared again. Even though it was so hard to move, it felt like we were getting closer to that door so quickly. I tried to turn and go the other way -- not yet, please...

We stopped and she held me. We moved away from that door; we moved very quickly, as if flying away from that murky dark place. We were in front of another door, one that was somehow familiar. We went into a bedroom and crawled into bed. She held me again, and I latched on to her, filling my soul.

I was on my back. Linda was next to me, propped up on an elbow, a hand on my chest.

She gave me a wistful smile. "Good morning..."

I held her hand, bringing it to my lips and kissing it. "That was intense..."

She nodded. "We're through the worst -- it's easy from here."

I sighed in relief at that. A pang of doubt hit, though -- was she telling me that because she wanted me to believe it, or because she believed it?

"Really?" I whispered.

She nodded, then pulled my head between her breasts. "Yes, really. We're through the worst, but it's still going to take you a while to heal. It's like setting a broken bone."

I tightened up at those words, that sudden impact feeling rushing at me again. But she squeezed me, rolling over on top of me, and the feeling went away.

"Breakfast?"

I sighed. "That means I'd have to open my eyes, let go of you, and get up," I told her.

She laughed. "I'm afraid so. But I'll hold you later; don't worry."

I kissed her. "Okay."

We got up and dressed. I helped her make the bed.

"This isn't a hotel -- you're expected to make your own bed in the morning. Your sheets will be changed, and the room vacuumed once a week."

"Yes, dear," I told her with a smile. She gave me a smirk.

We dressed and made our way downstairs to the kitchen. We got coffee, and one of the staff helped us to scrambled eggs, sausage, and toast. As we were eating, Suzanne came down and joined us.

"Walk the grounds with me?" she asked.

Linda shook her head. "He's busy this morning."

I sighed. "I'm busy..."

Suzanne nodded. "Okay..."

I wasn't sure whether it was okay or not.

We finished breakfast. I helped clear plates, but the staff wouldn't let me do anything more than putting them on the counter.

"Let's take the tour," Linda said, taking my arm in hers.

We walked through the main building again, bottom floor and top. There was also a full basement, mostly used for storage. We did a quick tour of the next building, the one with my office, Bernadette's, Suzanne's, and some others. Upstairs had four bedrooms, and a lounge area with TV, stereo system, couches, chairs, card table, magazines and that kind of thing.

"This next building used to be the carriage house," Linda said, taking my arm once more. This one was a slightly longer walk. "Since it was rebuilt in the 1940's after a fire, we weren't under any preservation restrictions, at least as far as the interior is concerned."

"Suzanne has another building for her staff, with its own showers. We've renovated the interior of this one..."

I'll say -- the large room we entered looked like a health club. The large central area had a padded floor. Around two outer edges were exercise bikes and treadmills, with mirrors and a bar along the interior wall. Ellen waved to us from a treadmill. We waved and walked over to her.

"Good morning you two," Ellen said, panting a bit as she ran.

"Good morning," I said.

"We're doing the extended tour," Linda told her.

Ellen nodded. "Don't let me keep you!"

Linda pulled me off to the door at the back of the room. "We have exercise classes for family on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. You're expected to attend."

"Oh? What kind of thing?" That explained why everyone was in such good shape.

"Pilates, yoga, some aerobics," she said. With a grin she added. "You'll enjoy it..."

She pushed the door open. We looked in. "We've a shower area here as well."

"Just one?" I asked with more than a slight frown.

She laughed. "Oh just one -- you'll do fine."

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I shook my head. She led me out of the building, down another gravel path. We were in a portion of the estate I'd never seen before. We walked by a fairly modern building, half garage, half offices.

"This is Suzanne's domain," Linda mentioned as we walked along the path to a gate in an old fence.

She opened the gate and we stepped inside.

I gasped. We were standing at the edge of a very formal, meticulously maintained Japanese garden.

"This is gorgeous," I whispered, not wanting to disturb the peace of the place.

"Yes... Family only, and one of the reasons Mistress bought the property."

We walked along another path, past a small pond and a rock garden, toward a small ceremonial building.

"Suzanne does this as well?" I asked. My respect for her had increased a hundredfold.

Linda chuckled. "Yes, with help from descendants of the people who designed and built this garden originally."

As we walked up the wooden steps to one sliding door of the building, Linda slipped off her shoes. I took the hint and did the same. She slid a door open, and we stepped inside.

The room was small, but beautiful. A traditional low table was off to one side. A futon had been pulled out. I could hear running water coming from the other side of the room, past the closed shoji-style doors. Linda walked to them and slid them open, revealing another pond, complete with waterfall and koi swimming about.

I walked over to have a better look. "Beautiful," I said softly.

Linda looked at me with a smile. "You can spend the night out here if you like."

I smiled, almost laughing, but then a cold feeling hit the pit of my stomach. It must have been apparent.

Linda nodded. "Yes, I want to do some more work with you. There's a bathroom through that door," she pointed to the side, another sliding screen. "Then we'll get to work."

I sighed and nodded. I used the bathroom; compact but adequate, with a very small stall shower -- couldn't fit two in there, even if you were good friends. I washed my hands -- they were feeling clammy again.

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I returned to the other room. Linda was sitting on the futon. I sat next to her, sighing mightily.

She shook her head. "Rob, it's not that bad! You are incredibly resilient. We're going to start out easy today. Rob, do you trust me?"

I looked at her. "Yes, I trust you. I... I don't know how to explain it. I know this is good for me, and it is helping, yet it's as if there's a part that is very frightened."

She smiled and nodded. "That's a very good summary. We want to go to those frightened parts, and help them."

I nodded with her. Then I sighed, yet again. "I don't know when I've sighed so much. What now?"

She patted a small pillow on the futon. "Relax on your back."

As I lowered myself I saw her unbuttoning her blouse. She smiled and said, "I told you we'd start out easy."

I held her and she held me, my head between her breasts. She talked to me about the tranquil place we were in, how peaceful and safe it was, how she would hold me, promising not to let go. After some time I moved to a nipple. She held me, a hand going to the back of my head, and I was filled with that delicious scent once more.

We may have started out easy, but things got tough. It was hard work. She let me pull back a couple of times, but I realized that the only way out was through. I held her hand, squeezing it so hard, feeling so small again, as we walked to that murky, dark place, my heart beating fast, my legs wanting so much to turn and run.

It wasn't bright sunshine on the other side, but it was clearer, and she held me.

When I opened my eyes, I felt sweaty, sticky. I'd been crying. As I looked up at Linda, sitting up and arranging her blouse, I could tell she had been crying as well.

I pushed myself to sitting. "I hope this is worth it for you," I told her, putting my hands on her shoulders.

She turned and hugged me. "Oh it is, don't worry about that. How do you feel now?"

I looked out on the pond again, seeing the koi swimming. "Like I've survived another car wreck. I'm alive, but battered and bruised." I moved a little, feeling my sticky clothes. "I also need another shower, and a change of clothes. I need to go over to the apartment -- Deb was going to go as well."

"I know," Linda said, standing and helping me get up. "We'll have lunch, and then go."

I glanced at my watch -- it was lunch time! And, I was hungry. "Wow -- I worked up an appetite!"

She put a hand on my back again. "Yes, it's hard work, for both of us. Early to bed tonight, that's for sure."

"I'm looking forward to that," I told her, giving her another hug.

She chuckled and pulled me to the door. We retrieved our shoes and walked back.

"I'd like to spend the night there," I told her.

She put an arm around my waist. "It's especially nice when we have a light rain, the way it sounds, the way it smells."

I took a breath. "I'd like to hear the rain on that roof, mixed in with your moans..."

She hugged my waist. "You would, would you?"

I stopped and hugged her. "Yes, I would. The question is," I kissed her on the neck, "would you?"

She ran her hands over my back. "Very much," she whispered hotly in my ear.

After a brief kiss we resumed our walk back to the main house.

Lunch was set out more-or-less buffet style in the kitchen. I filled a plate, and followed Linda into the dining room. A few of the ladies were there. They wanted to know how I was doing. I gave Linda a questioning look. She laughed and told everyone I was making very good progress. One of them mentioned something about a bicycle, and Linda gave them a very nasty look.

Deb joined us. We agreed to head to the apartment after we finished lunch.

I visited the plumbing after eating. When I stepped out on to the front porch, I saw Linda sitting in the porch swing. I sat beside her.

"What is it?" she asked, holding my hand, rocking us gently.

"This swing -- rocking with you. I don't know why, but I can't think of anything better than being held, rocking..."

"Mmm... I'll keep that in mind. It is nice. Deb and Suzanne should be around any moment now with one of the vans. I'll take us in my car."

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"I can drive," I told her.

"I'd rather do it," she said, patting me on the leg.

I frowned. "Not good enough," I told her. "I'll drive."

She raised an eyebrow, then smiled. "Okay..."

"I'm not checking my brains at the door," I told her.

She smiled more, and hugged me. "We certainly hope not!"

I heard a car on gravel, and turned a bit. "Suzanne and Deb are here..."

She kissed me on the neck. "Let's go, then."

I stood up and helped her. We walked over to the van. Suzanne was driving. I gave her directions, then walked Linda over to my car, opening the passenger door for her.

We didn't talk much on the way over. When we parked, I helped carry up some empty boxes. As I showed Deb the things in the office that needed special care, prints, negatives, the small refrigerator with film, Suzanne and Linda were madly packing my clothes. I watched a pair of boxes walk past as we were going over the camera stuff in the closet.

I helped pack bathroom stuff. It was surprising how quickly all my clothes and all the bathroom stuff got packed.

Deb asked if I had anything down where I parked my car.

"Nothing stored down there, and I don't have a bicycle -- I don't know why you seemed to think I did."

Suzanne turned beet red, and Linda cleared her throat. I looked at them -- bunch of sphinxes. I shook my head.

We were soon on our way again.

"Tell me," Linda said as we headed back to the freeway.

"Oh, Tina again -- realizing how much of the closet, the dresser, the bathroom, was filled with her things. Oh, she had a bicycle, but she took it with her."

She smiled and put a hand on my shoulder. Not much else you could say.

Things were quickly unloaded at the house, with one of the staff gals taking a couple of boxes to my office. We took clothes and stuff upstairs.

“Wait!” I said as Deb started putting things into drawers.

“I’m not sure how I want things just yet. Suzanne, if you’re hanging things in the closet, I like shirts hanging so the fronts are to the right.”

Linda chuckled. Deb sighed and shook her head.

I looked at the contents of the boxes of clothes, and the dresser. It was a fine old piece of furniture, much older than I was. “Let’s do it this way,” I said, putting a pair of socks, underwear, t-shirts, and a sweater in representative drawers. I gave Deb a look. She shrugged her shoulders and started putting stuff in drawers. “Let’s save these drawers for bathroom stuff - they’re close to the door.”

“No -- suits, coats, pants, then shirts,” I told Suzanne as she put things in the closet. She gave me a surprised look. “I’m sorry, just a little picky, that’s all,” I said, offering her a hug. She hung up the shirt she was holding, then hugged me.

We made quick work of the unpacking. My pillow went on the bed.

It started to sink in. This was going to be home. This room, this house -- I could feel the age of the cool plaster in the walls and ceiling, the age of the furniture in the room.

I felt an arm on mine -- Linda. I hugged her. “Thank you,” I told her. I turned to Suzanne, and hugged her again, then Deb.

Linda asked, “What now?”

I looked at the ladies. “I’m taking a shower, shaving, and changing clothes. After that, who knows -- probably walk around a bit.”

Suzanne had an interesting look on her face.

“Anyone want to scrub my back?” I asked, looking at her.

She blushed as the others laughed. “I’ll wait downstairs. I’d like to walk with you.”

I nodded. “I’d like that too. Oh -- I need a clue -- dirty clothes?”

Deb nodded. “I’ll get two hampers for you -- one for whites, one for everything else. Need something dry-cleaned, set it on the bed.” She gave me a quick hug and headed out the door. Linda and Suzanne followed.

The shower was nice, more spacious than the one at the apartment. It felt good to be clean, and shaved. I decided on a pair of Dockers and a sweatshirt. I spent a while rearranging things. Gee, in a few weeks, I’d be able to walk to work! What a concept!

I headed down the back stairs. As I was rounding a corner, I almost bumped into Deb.

“Ooh!” she cried.

I stepped to the side to let her pass.

She moved closer in front of me, held out her hand and asked, “Apartment key?”

“Upstairs,” I told her. “Want me to get it now?”

She gave me a smirk and growled, “Any time before you leave in the morning...”

“Oh?” said Linda, walking around the corner.

Deb squeaked, “Oops!” and headed off.

Linda shook her head. She smiled at me and asked, “Feeling better?”

“Much, thanks.”

“Good -- Suzanne is pining for you in the parlor.”

“Thanks -- see you later.”

Suzanne was in the small parlor, sitting on the couch. I sat down beside her. She looked at me and smiled.

“Hi there. Someone told me you were pining in the parlor...”

She laughed. “I guess I was...”

“Walk?” I asked.

She stood up. “Sure.”

We walked out the door. I took her hand in mine. “The tree?”

“Okay,” she said.

We walked back to the tree. We sat down, and I held both her hands. “Tell me,” I said.

She sighed. “She... She took you to the tea house.”

I nodded. “It’s beautiful. I’m even more impressed by your talents and skills.”

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“But I wanted to be the first...”

“You’ll be the first ... to spend the night there with me...”

She brightened up. “Really?”

I nodded. “I promise. Please.”

She sighed and put her arms around me. I hugged her tight.

“What else haven’t I seen of the grounds?” I whispered to her, kissing her neck.

She sighed, kissing my head. We sat back.

“The Japanese garden is my favorite. Well, so is this spot -- with you, at least.”

“Thank you. Sit with me in the rock garden?”

She nodded. She took me a different way through the grounds, in a different gate.

“What an incredible world you have here,” I whispered.

We sat together on a bench, looking out over the rock garden, the sounds of running water in the background, mingling with wind going through the trees. Holding hands, touching, sitting close. Words would have gotten in the way.

The wind chilled and got damper. I started feeling drops hit me.

She sighed, squeezing my hand. I stood up, pulled her to me, and hugged.

“Time to head back,” I whispered.

We didn’t talk until we we’d closed the gate behind us.

“What now?” I asked.

“I need to shower and change. You should change, too -- a better shirt at least.”

“Oh?”

“I’m sorry -- we often have live music on Sunday afternoons. We do today, and she’s very good. Dress comfy but nice.”

“Sounds like fun. Need anyone to scrub your back?”

She laughed out loud. That made me feel better.

“Not tonight, thanks...”

“Okay. The offer stands, though...”

“Oh, I’ll keep it in mind.”

We came to the junction between the old house and her wing.

“See you later,” she said, giving me a peck on the cheek.

I watched her walk into the building, then turned to mine.

Mine -- well, no possessory interest, but this is where I live now. I walked along the hall. The walls were nice and clear, but the lighting was the shits -- not good for displaying photographs. The piano had been pulled out in the large parlor -- guess that’s for our musician.

I ascended the front staircase, enjoying the look and the feel of the dark wood.

Walking back to “my” room, I noticed something hanging on Deb’s door. As I got closer, I could see it was a hotel “Privacy Please” sign. Okay, that’s the protocol. As I walked past, though, I was startled to hear a woman’s moaning cry come from her room -- and it didn’t sound like Deb! Ah well, two happy people...

I put on a dress shirt, cashmere vest, and dress shoes; I’d been wearing an old comfortable pair of running shoes. It was a little after four -- might as well see what’s happening in the kitchen.

I stuck my head in, and was immediately shooed away. As I backed up, I bumped into someone in the narrow hall.

“Hi there!” I said.

“Hi Rob -- I don’t think we’ve been introduced, other than last night. I’m Kendra.”

I started holding out a hand to shake, but we hugged instead. “Glad to meet you.”

“Do you have time to talk?” she asked.

She was a little shorter than me, dusty brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, freckles, and an athletic build under a simple but fashionable dress.

“Sure. I don’t know what time things start.”

“Oh, not for an hour or so. If we sit in the small parlor, someone might come around offering us wine, though.”

“Sounds good to me!”

We moved to the small parlor. I figured it was about underneath my room. I listened for noises from upstairs, but the only thing I could hear was the sound of light rain pelting the windows.

“What’s your role here?” I asked as we sat down.

She glanced out at the rain. “I’m in charge of security, and also fitness. Have you heard about the morning classes?”

I shook my head. “Just that they exist. Everyone here seems in such good shape; I’m learning why. I was told I’m expected to attend.”

She smiled. “You’re expected to keep in good physical condition. Attending the morning sessions two or three times a week really helps. Do you still run?”

I sat back a bit. I’d done cross-country track in high school and college. I didn’t think I’d mentioned it to anyone here. Shouldn’t surprise me though, I guess. “In good weather, yes. I walk a lot year-round. Working for Scrooge helps me control my diet.”

She laughed a bit. “Well, we’ll help here. Bernadette gave you a glowing report. Monday - Wednesday - Friday mornings we do aerobics, Pilates, yoga. Tuesday and Thursday mornings are more laid back, Pilates and yoga. Do you know when you’ll be starting?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “All depends on when I get thrown out. Monday next is the most likely. Could be earlier, longest would be three weeks.”

She nodded. “If we don’t get a chance earlier, I need to spend some time with you next Saturday, then, evaluating you in terms of strength and flexibility.”

“Let’s not forget endurance,” said Bernadette, walking into the room with Linda.

I laughed along with the rest of them.

“Seriously though, when was the last time you took a vacation -- as in time off to rest?” Linda asked.

I took a breath, shaking my head. “Not for years.”

Linda and Bernadette exchanged glances.

“You’re going to be taking some vacations. You need a break,” Bernadette told me.

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"I'm not going to argue," I said, leaning back. "What is it about bicycles I keep hearing? I don't have one, and haven't seen any around here."

Linda and Bernadette exchanged poker faces. Kendra got up, saying, "I'll see if I can get us something to drink."

"When was your last vacation?" Bernadette asked.

"Took off a week last year," I said.

"And?" Linda asked.

"Took a class of photography students to Yosemite."

"I thought so. Not sure if that's a vacation or not."

I chuckled. "It was a lot of work, but also a lot of fun." Then I frowned. "And Banister gave me shit for it when I got back."

Kendra stuck her head in the room. "I think it's time to move."

I stood up, helped the ladies, and followed them into the large parlor.

I took a seat off the low end of the piano, looking along the keyboard. I glanced up to see Bernadette step in front of Linda and sit down next to me. I glanced up to see Suzanne coming into the room. She shook her head, smiling.

Deb came in, looking, well, refreshed. She sat down with a very contented sigh.

A minute or so later, Ellen came in with a young woman on her arm. Ellen stepped to the side, and took a seat. The young woman walked to the piano bench.

She was about five foot four or so, thin. Her thin face bore wire-rimmed spectacles, and was framed by shoulder-length black curly hair.

The expression on her face -- I recognized her expression. I knew how it felt; I'd had that expression. She was still partially in that blissful cloud.

She sat down at the piano. She took a breath, deep and slow, letting her head go back, a smile forming as a flush spread over her face. I had a vision of her, her head arched back, eyes closed, moaning...

She exhaled, lifting her head. She poised her fingers over the keyboard, an image that burned itself into my mind.

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She played. No, she didn't play, she made love to the piano. At times she caressed it, her fingers enticing, coaxing. Other times she pummeled it in a near sexual frenzy, her face flushed, her nostrils flaring, taut nipples visible through the top of her dress, and the piano cried out under her in response.

Much of what she played I didn't recognize. She played a series of short pieces, lyric and hauntingly beautiful. I recognized Chopin Preludes, and Mendelssohn.

One piece, a short one, touched me. It was light, full of hope, yet with a touch of sadness. At the end, as I sighed, she turned her head and looked at me. I saw her face, framed in those black curls, a slightly lopsided smile.

She ended softly, with Debussy, bringing tears to us all. At the end of one piece, she let her head rest forward, her hands in her lap. We applauded softly but enthusiastically.

She stood up and bowed, then walked to Deb, the two embracing.

I sighed at the sight, and felt Bernadette put an arm around me.

After a few minutes, and after glasses of champagne were distributed, I was introduced to our artist, Miriam. I'd already heard her voice, and with the first sounds out of her, I knew it was she I'd heard upstairs with Deb.

What an amazing creature! Her hands looked so small and dainty, yet she'd performed Mendelssohn's *Rondo Capriccioso* with ease and flair.

As I stepped up to her, Bernadette to my side, Miriam gave me a quirky lopsided smile.

"Ah, you're the artist, the photographer," she said, holding out her hand.

I took her hand gently, raised it, and kissed it.

"A photographer, yes, but not an artist -- you are the artist here."

She laughed, looking over her shoulder to Deb.

I hadn't let go of her hand. "The images of you ... will burn in my mind until I've photographed you at the piano. When will you return here?"

Her smile grew. "Oh, in another few weeks. You enjoyed?"

"God yes -- such passion -- you were making love with the piano..."

She nodded, her eyes twinkling. "I've seen some of your pictures. I'd like to work with you."

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"I'd be honored," I told her, kissing her hand once more.

I looked forward to speaking with her during dinner, but it was not to be; the dining room was set with a smaller table for four off to one side. Miriam sat there, with Deb, Ellen, and Kendra.

Linda whispered in my ear, "You'll live," and squeezed my waist as we sat down together.

I laughed and returned her squeeze.

I did learn more about Miriam; Deb and Ellen were providing sponsorship to her career as a professional pianist. She'd performed in Seattle Friday and Saturday, and would be performing in Los Angeles Monday, Phoenix Tuesday. This was a rest stop for her.

I watched intimate games out of the corner of my eye. At one point Miriam leaned over and whispered something in Deb's ear. Deb chuckled. I watched as Deb's hand moved up Miriam's back, sliding under her curly mane. I could almost feel her hand at the back of my head as I saw Miriam's head drop back. I thought I heard her moaning sigh.

A hand squeezed the back of my head and neck. I sighed as my eyes closed, falling into the void. After some time, a tap on my forehead brought me back all too quickly.

To gentle laughter around our table, I turned to Linda at my side. I leaned over to her and whispered, "Thank you -- who's going to be noisier tonight, them, or us?"

She smiled and nodded, patting me on the leg.

We had the usual milling around after dinner. Our artist friend seemed to have disappeared, as had Deb. I checked the large parlor; the piano had been moved back to its more customary position, and the furniture reset. No encores, at least piano ones...

"Looking for someone?" Linda asked, coming into the room.

I put my arms around her. "Found someone is more like it."

She sighed. "I like that answer."

I sat down; she sat next to me.

"If you're looking for Miriam, she and Deb headed to the tea house early..."

I nodded, almost sighing. "Then I guess it won't be much of a competition tonight..."

"Oh?"

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“When I went up to change after dropping you off this afternoon, I heard very interesting sounds coming from Deb’s room -- and not from Deb.”

Linda nodded and smiled. “I saw you watching them during dinner. Oh, I wanted to pounce on you! I still do!”

“I know...”

“What will happen at your office tomorrow?”

I shook my head. “Don’t know. Not sure how I’m going to hold myself together. Dave, one of my buddies, is interviewing. If he doesn’t give notice by the end of the week, I’ll do it on Friday. Banister will almost certainly throw me out immediately; that’s what he’s done to everyone else who has left the firm.”

“Sounds like a fun place? What’s kept you there?”

“Oh, the work is challenging, interesting, on some levels at least. And it’s better than being in a big firm. We’re paid well.”

“Not well enough to work for such a repressed individual,” Linda said, putting a hand on my back.

“As I said, the business attracts such types.” I heard rain pelting the windows again. “Hope they made it to the tea house...”

“Oh, I think they’re doing fine,” Linda said softly. She pulled her hand away.

“Are you jealous? Envious?” Linda asked.

“Some, yes,” I answered softly. “The way she looked when she walked into the room with Ellen... The way she sounded in Deb’s room...”

Linda raised an eyebrow. “You heard them?”

“Couldn’t help it! I was going up to change -- you could hear her out in the hall.”

Linda smiled, moving closer.

“And that’s what you’re going to sound like, tonight,” I told her, sliding my hands to her waist.

“Then we should get an early start -- you’ve had quite the day.”

I laughed.

“What?” she asked.

“I’ve run out of sighs, at least for today.”

“Oh, I think I can coax a few out of you... One good one as you snuggle in my arms before you drift off to sleep...”

“I’m looking forward to that...”

“Let’s go, then -- beat the bathroom rush.”

“Do you mind if I take a quick shower?” she asked as we headed upstairs.

“Not at all. Would you like the bathroom to yourself?”

“Not at all!” she replied quickly.

We hugged a bit in the bathroom, especially as she slipped out of her robe.

“I’ll be waiting,” I told her as she got into the shower.

Back in her room, I checked the alarm clock. I needed to get up in the morning. I smiled as I set the alarm a bit earlier -- let’s be optimistic, I thought...

I turned down the bed on her side, but rather than get in, I sat in the chair and waited.

It had been one hell of a day. I felt more relaxed now, not as battered, but still bruised.

“I expected you’d be in bed already,” Linda said as she closed the door behind her.

I got up and went to her side. When she started to speak, I put a finger to her lips. “Shhh...” I told her, then took her to the bed, easing her on to her back, her legs hanging over the side. I took off my terry robe and folded it up, putting it on the floor as a cushion, kneeling on it.

The bed was just the right height. I kissed the inside of a smooth thigh.

“Oh my...” she said.

“Move closer to the edge, please,” I asked.

She scooted her bottom closer to the edge. I helped put her legs over my shoulders as I kissed up closer. She helped by crossing her legs on my back.

She was so delicious, fresh from the shower. After warming her up, I did one of the things Tina liked so much, teasing and pulling back, then sliding a finger deep into her, hooking it back and pleasing her from the inside and the outside at the same time.

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That seemed to work much better than it had with Tina -- I was rewarded with strong thighs gripping me, only partially muffling her cries.

Another few minutes and she started pushing me away. I kissed my way back down the inside of her thigh. As I stood, meaning to help her into bed, she sat up.

"I'm sorry I wasn't that good," I whispered to her as she slipped out of her robe.

She grabbed me and pulled me on top of her. "What makes you think you weren't fantastic?"

"You can still move," I told her, kissing her neck.

She laughed. "Barely... Oh thank you! Now hold me, please..."

I held her as we turned on the bed. She started moving me lower as she slid up. I moved to her side, as if to take a breast, but moved a bit further down, sliding a leg between hers, lifting her leg closest to me. She was on her back, and I was on my side. I slid into her, both of us moaning. She rolled to her stomach as I rode her. I tried to push her hair aside with my nose so I could kiss and bite the back of her neck. She pulled her knees up a bit, rocking her hips. I held on, and soon was coming, pushing against her, trying to push in deeper as I filled her. We collapsed to one side. I held on to her, kissing her back, feeling and smelling her hair in my face. She held my arms around her. I did have one sigh left before I went to sleep.

END of Part 2

Monday

We woke Monday morning to the alarm. As I started moving, she pulled me to her.

“That was a very nice surprise last night,” she rumbled as I settled in on her breast.

I held her in response. I felt her hands going around my head. She squeezed me and started speaking softly. My world became very relaxing.

I felt calm going into work later. Sunday night, I didn’t know how I was going to do it, hold myself together. Linda provided an amazing solution. Under my dress shirt and slacks I was wearing a white leotard. Linda had taken me deep into trance and helped me put it on in the morning, and I knew the way it held me, snug against my body, reminded me of the way they held me. It was quite comforting.

I didn’t see Dave until nearly lunch time; I was headed into the men’s room as he was coming out. He held the door open for me, inviting me in.

I needed to pee, but realized I needed to undo a different layer of clothing.

“How did it go?” I asked him, pausing outside the toilet stall.

“Really well,” he said with a smile. He took out his wallet and pulled out a card. “I greased things for you -- you need to give ‘em a call though.”

I took the card from him. “When will you know?”

“They said offers on Wednesday. Running the usual checks.”

“When will you give notice?”

He smiled, but shook his head, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I hate to do this to you. I’ll turn in my two-week notice about a minute after I hang up the phone.”

“And be out the door three minutes later,” I said.

“Ain’t that the truth. Oh, Nancy is going with me, possibly some others.”

“So that’s why she’s all smiles this morning?”

“I don’t think she won the lottery.”

I shook his hand. “Walk by my office on your way to the old man, that’s all I ask.”

“You got it.”

He left and I took care of business.

Deb was at my old place when I got there after work; I left quite early, just about six. I hadn't picked up any more chickenshit assignments during the day, but then again, I had plenty.

"Wow, this place has never been so clean!" I called out as I stepped in the doorway.

Deb came out of the back, and gave me a strong hug. "Just finishing up. Everything has been moved to the house. The building management people were by an hour ago and were happy -- you'll get your deposit back."

"I should hope so! The place was a mess when I moved in!"

She laughed, putting an arm around me. "Oh, I wish we had the time..."

I squeezed her waist, resisting the urge to run my hand up to her neck and head. "We will. I thought you were a runner, not a cyclist..."

She turned red and laughed a bit, a low laugh. "Where did you hear that?"

"Project Bicycle?" I said.

She nodded, moving in front of me, pressing her hips against mine.

"I asked Linda. She must have explained it to me, because I know about it now."

"You're not upset?"

"About being Project Bicycle? Not at all. I'm supposed to tell you that Linda says I'm high maintenance for a while, and you need to talk with her before taking me for a ride."

Deb sighed, rocking her hips against me. "She told us all, Mister Bicycle, in no uncertain terms Saturday evening. I'll check with her, but I'm looking forward to riding you."

I held her to me. "So am I, dear."

"Get going or you'll miss dinner, and Ellen doesn't like that," she whispered in my ear.

"You're right. I'll see you later."

I headed back to the house, parking in "my" spot. I took the clean clothes and miscellany I'd brought from the office and put them away in "my" room. I had time to clean up before heading down to dinner.

They'd had their eyes on a "bicycle" for a while, and when the opportunity presented itself...

After a very nice staff-prepared and served dinner, Ellen, Annette, and I moved to the large parlor. We were joined by two outsiders, finance people I'd worked with before. They were happy to hear I'd be handling things, and they told Ellen that having me around would make things a lot smoother. I thanked them, and made sure they understood my presence here was still confidential. I looked to Annette and told them I'd be relying a lot on Annette. We spent a couple of hours going over the structure of the agreements holding our family together.

Ellen and I sat together for a while after they left, and Annette excused herself.

"Rob, how did that go?"

"Very well. I've got the basics. I'll need time with the actual documents, and another session or two with them. Annette has done a superb job."

She smiled, sipping the last of her tea. "That's the impression I got. It's going to be great to have more visibility into things. I'm going to be taking up a good deal of your time."

"But for now, you're mine," Bernadette said from the doorway.

I sighed and Ellen laughed.

"Good night, Mistress Ellen," I told her. "Thank you for bringing me into the family."

She stood and hugged me. "Oh Rob, you're quite welcome." With a squeeze, she growled, "and we're not going to spend all our time on books."

I walked over to Bernadette. She put an arm around me and we headed for the stairs.

"You've talked to Linda?" I asked her.

She chuckled. "Oh yes -- you're mine tonight, and I'll take very good care of you."

I entered her bedroom a while later. She met me at the door, wearing a silky robe. I put my arms around her; she held me and I started melting into her.

She held me so well. We made gentle love, and she held me again, rocking me to sleep on a nipple.

Another Step

I got in Tuesday morning about the normal time, even though the drive was less than a third of what it had been from my old place. Bernadette had held me to her, helping to heal those empty and hurt places within me with her warmth. She'd helped me into the leotard again, and then held me, taking me back to the bed for a bit, letting me know I was still being held.

Then after a quick breakfast it was back to the salt mines and piles of work.

About ten thirty I heard the old man bellow. Everyone in the office heard him bellow.

"Patterson, in my office, now!" he yelled.

My heart started racing. I slipped a hand inside my shirt, touching the leotard. That calmed me.

"Patterson, I said now!" Banister yelled out.

Dave smiled, sticking his head into my office, setting down his briefcase and then straightening his tie. He had his coat on.

"Do me a favor and place this outside the front door, would you old friend?" he said.

"This is it?"

"Must be -- someone must have screwed up," Dave told me. He gave me two thumbs up and started to walk out.

"Wait!" I said, pulling the letter out of my coat pocket where I'd been carrying it. I showed it to him. He laughed and clapped me on the back.

"Patterson!" came another bellow.

He smiled and walked to the lion's den.

I took his briefcase and put it outside the front door as he'd asked. I didn't have anything personal left in my office. They could keep the extra ink cartridges for my fountain pen.

I went back to my office and closed up files on my computer. I put the extra ink cartridges in my coat pocket -- I'd paid for them, after all.

I was surprised to see Nancy standing in my doorway. She was smiling.

I got up quickly and gave her a hug.

"It's been nice working with you, Rob," she said. "Sorry to do this to you."

I sighed as I held her. I was a lot more comfortable holding women now. "Wait in the parking lot for a few minutes. I'll be right behind you."

She pulled away a bit. "You will? Are you joining us? Dave said you might."

I shook my head. "Nope. Took another offer."

"Oh, that's great! We're trying to pick up some associates as well, from what Dave told me. Oh, the volume is dropping -- I need to get out of here. Dave is telling him for me."

The momentary lull was pierced by Banister's unintelligible rage once more.

"I think he just found out," I said, giving her one more hug. "Thanks for all your help, and for putting up with it for so long. Are you Catholic?"

She stepped back with a puzzled look on her face. "No, why?"

I smiled. "If you were Catholic, then you could count this as time you wouldn't have to spend in Purgatory."

She laughed, shook her head, and said, "We'll wait a little while, then meet you at Fontana's on Stevens Creek for lunch."

"A deal," I said, waving to her.

Let's see -- Gibson was out with a client today. Poor kid's going to catch it. Of course, he has done nothing but suck up to the old goat. Certainly going to reap what he's planted.

A few minutes later I heard Banister shouting, "Your final check will be in the mail, Mister Patterson, along with those of your co-conspirators. Now get out!"

Well, that sounded like the customary amicable parting. I was just putting my coat on when he yelled out, "Gibson! Get in here... Oh hell, he's not here. Flynn! In my office, now! Flynn? Do you hear me? In my office, now!"

I touched the smooth fabric under my shirt again. Something seemed to click -- Linda had prepared me for this. I had my dictation machine in one pocket of the coat. I started it recording, dropping it back in my pocket.

I walked into his office, leaving the door open. His face was red as a beet and veins were standing out on his neck and forehead. He looked more beady-eyed than normal. His hands were shaking, poor bastard.

"You wanted to see me, Mister Banister?" I said.

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He took a couple of rapid breaths -- must be building up steam.

“Flynn, are you going with those other two traitors?”

He must mean my colleagues, Dave and Nancy. “No, I’m not.”

His hands were still shaking as he tried to steady them on the top of his desk as he stood next to his chair. What if he has a coronary on me?

“You’re lying, Flynn, and I know it -- they’re doing checks on you as well. That’s how I found out about your little plot! I..”

“Sir!” I said quite loudly, reaching in my pocket and pulling out the letter again. I dropped it on the desk in front of him. “I am not going with Dave and Nancy. I’ve accepted a different position. I’m giving you two weeks notice.”

His hands went to his balding head as sounds of great anguish erupted from him.

His cry settled into a stream of threats as to what he was going to do to all of us for betraying him. It took a few minutes, but he ran out of steam again, standing there shaking, red, sweat on his head and foam in one corner of his mouth.

“Will that be all for now, sir?” I asked.

I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head. “Get out of here! Out, now! I want you out of my office!”

“Then you don’t want me to stay for...”

“Get out! Get out now or I’ll call the police!”

“Mister Banister,” I said. I waited for him to catch his breath.

“What is it, Flynn!”

“I’ve learned a great deal working for the firm. Thank you, sir.”

He stood there doing fish imitations, his mouth moving but no sounds coming out.

I turned and left his office. I walked by our receptionist. “Good luck -- you’re going to need it,” I told her. She nodded, looking shocked.

Dave and Nancy were still in the parking lot. Dave smirked and looked at his watch. “What kept you?”

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I walked over and hugged them both. “Wanted to thank him. Had to wait for him to run out of steam.”

Dave laughed and pounded me on the back. “Damn, I feel good. Nancy? Rob? May I buy you lunch?”

“Certainly.”

I walked to my car, turning off the recorder in my pocket. Dave led the procession out of the parking lot. I saw him using his cell phone as we drove the three or so miles to the restaurant.

Dave started to get out of his car at the restaurant parking lot, but his cell phone rang. He sat down in his car again. I walked to Nancy’s car, opening her door for her.

“Why thank you!” she said.

“My pleasure,” I told her. “Shall we go in? Dave may be a while.”

We were seated, Dave joining us about five minutes later.

After putting his napkin in his lap and taking a gulp of ice water, he sighed.

“Nancy, we can pick up our offer letters this afternoon. Someone screwed up as they were doing background checks. They’re very apologetic. I spent the last few calls on the phone with their legal folks, letting them know about the threats Banister made. They’ll take care of anything that pops up.”

“I had my dictation machine in my pocket the whole time. Got him on tape,” I added.

Dave smiled and lifted his water glass, saluting me. “Great. Don’t think he’ll go through with it. He went through the same hysterics when Peter and Karen left for KPMG.”

We settled in a bit, ordering lunch.

“Rob, where are you going?” Nancy asked.

“Local office of a private foundation.”

Dave broke off a piece of bread. “I’d have thought you’d go into photography full-time.”

I smiled. “Oh, I’ll be doing that as well -- I’m a shutterbug as well as pencil pusher.”

Dave laughed. “Well, congratulations! Pay? Fringes?”

I nodded. “Yup, it’s got those. Oh, mind if I make a call?”

Nancy scowled. "Rob, go ahead."

I laughed a little as I dialed Ellen's number. One of the staff tracked her down for me.

"Ellen, I thought I'd let you know I gave two weeks notice this morning, and was summarily thrown out of the office."

"That's wonderful news! When will we see you?"

"I'm at lunch with my colleagues who also departed the firm. I'll be home by two or so."

"Wonderful! We'll celebrate when you get here!"

After putting my phone back in my pocket, I loosened my tie. Then it hit me. I'd called it "home." That's the way it felt.

I arrived "home" shortly before two. Without asking, I knew the code to punch in to open the side gate. I parked my car. Do I need to lock it here? Couldn't think of a reason why. I picked my tie up from the seat -- Dave had insisted I take mine off after he'd removed his. It did feel better, symbolizing our freedom from Banister.

I walked over to Ellen's office. Her door was open. I knocked on the doorframe.

She looked up and smiled. "Please come in!"

I walked in and sat down.

She picked up her phone and punched a button. "He's here. ... Okay, good."

"Things moved faster than you'd expected, then?"

"Yes -- somehow Banister found out that Dave was looking. I guess the same folks were doing background checks on me. Anyway, I'm no longer a member of the firm."

"And how does that feel?" Linda asked from the doorway.

I stood up and gave her a hug. "Thank you for whatever you did to help prepare me," I whispered in her ear.

I sat down again, and she pulled up a chair next to me. I looked at her, then Ellen.

"I'm not sure how I feel. It went as you'd expect -- Banister screaming at Dave, then me, howling at how we'd betrayed him after all he'd done for us."

"He doesn't want you for two weeks?"

“He threatened to call the cops if I didn’t leave immediately. We’ve heard it before.”

“And?” Linda asked.

“I don’t know. It’s over. I’m still kind of numb, I guess. When I left Whitehall & Marx, I felt the same kind of relief. I thought I knew what I was getting into when I joined Banister. I was wrong. I still don’t know what I’m getting into here...”

Linda moved closer. “It’s emotionally unsettling, making a change like that. We’re here to help. Why don’t you change into comfortable clothes and come back down so we can talk about it.”

I looked to Ellen. She nodded and smiled. “Yes, Rob -- that sounds like the thing to do.”

I stood up. “I feel tired all of a sudden,” I told them, “or like a big weight is gone.”

“That’s a good sign,” Linda told me.

I put a hand on her shoulder as I walked by.

I hung up my clothes. I left the leotard on the bed. Needed to talk to Deb to see if I could put my tie rack up on the inside of the closet. No ties! I put on my weekend Dockers, a sweatshirt, and my old running shoes. I dropped my keys on the desk. I still had the office key - should drop that off, even though the old goat probably had the locks changed already. He’d done that with every departing group of employees.

I left my room, closing the door.

“You’re here!” Deb cried, coming up the staircase.

I smiled. I started to speak, but found myself in an embrace, and a kiss. Soon I found myself backing into her room, then backing onto her bed. I pulled her on top of me, her weight pressing down on me filling some deep need.

She pushed up on her elbows. “You’re here to stay now?”

I tried for her breasts. She was somewhere between Linda and Bernadette in size. “I think so.”

She held me, holding my head between her breasts. “Oh, I’m so glad...”

I squeezed her. “So are Ellen and Linda -- they’re waiting for me downstairs...”

She sighed and started moving off me.

“They can wait a minute more. Please hold me.”

She moved back on top, letting me nuzzle her through her blouse. After a bit she sat up on top of me.

“Oh, that feels nice,” I told her.

She moved her knees closer to my chest and gave me a squeeze with her legs. “I agree... I want you, and when Linda gives us the all-clear...”

I put my hands on her legs. “I’m going to spend a night in the tea house with Suzanne.”

She sighed, then smiled. “I think I understand.”

“Thank you. I owe her a lot.”

“More than you know... Still, I’m disappointed. I guess I can wait a little longer...”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

She smiled and moved off me. “That’s what I wanted to hear!”

She helped me stand. We hugged again.

She looked me over as I started for the door. “You’ll need a dress shirt for dinner.”

I nodded. “I thought so -- I expect Linda is going to be taking me on another trip, and wanted to be comfy just in case.”

“Probably correct. Now why the hell did I come up here? You’ve completely ruined my concentration!”

I stepped closer, putting one hand around her back, caressing a breast with the other. “I’ll make it up to you,” I told her again.

She gave me a sighing moan, then said, “Get out of here while you can!”

“Yes, dear!”

Bernadette had joined Linda in Ellen’s office. I had a seat.

“You look more relaxed,” Linda said.

“Bumped into Deb on the way.”

Bernadette muttered, "Surprised you made it down here so soon! Did she help you change?"

"No -- you're helping with that," I said, looking at Linda.

"Well," Ellen said, trying to regain control. "Rob, we're glad things have happened so soon. Your office is ready to be unpacked. Suzanne suggested you might want to get better storage for your negatives and prints. Your little refrigerator with the film is all set up."

"That's great. I'm ready to get started."

"And that brings us to the next topic," she said.

Bernadette stepped closer. "We want you to take the rest of the week off. If you want to do some photographic work, that's fine, but no business work until Monday at the earliest."

I nodded. "Okay. Can I unpack?"

She sat down next to me. "Yes -- Suzanne wants to help, actually."

"Rob," Linda said from the other side, "we also want you to spend some time with Kendra, getting a fitness program established. You and I also have some other things to continue."

It was Bernadette's turn. "I'm going to update your vaccinations, starting today."

I chuckled and looked to Ellen. "And you?"

Ellen laughed and sat back in her chair. "I'll wait my turn..."

I turned to Linda. "When can I spend a night in the tea house with Suzanne?"

Linda smiled. "Tomorrow night, if you'd like."

I took one of her hands and kissed it. "Thank you. I owe it to her."

Ellen said, "Yes, you do."

"So, what's next?" I asked.

"Rob, are there things you'd like to do?" Linda asked.

I glanced back at Bernadette, then to Ellen, and said, "Silly question..."

They laughed. I liked that.

“No, other than that,” Linda said with a chuckle.

“I need to get a smog check on my car and renew the registration, address changes ...”

“Deb or one of the staff will take care of that,” Ellen told me.

I nodded. “Then let’s go play pincushion, and chase demons.”

Ellen looked to Bernadette and Linda. She said, “See you for dinner -- if you want to help make pizzas, you’re welcome to.”

Outside Ellen’s office, we ran into Kendra. After a brief but intense hug, Linda decided Kendra could have me for a while after Bernadette was through with me.

That left Kendra, Bernadette, and I walking over to Bernadette’s office. Bernadette waved me to the next room over, the one with the cot. “Go in and strip to your underwear while I get things together.”

As I undressed, Kendra looked me over carefully.

“On the scale for me,” she said.

I got on the scale. She checked my height as well. She had me sit on the floor. We did some flexibility tests.

Bernadette came in, rescuing me from doing leg-lifts.

“Oh shit,” I said, getting up and seeing three loaded syringes on the tray she was carrying. “And I thought I was being rescued...”

“Problems with needles, Rob?” Bernadette asked.

I sat on the edge of the cot. “Not serious ones, I guess -- I don’t have problems donating blood, but I do tend to tense up.”

She smiled. “We can take care of that. We don’t want you tensing up -- that’s what tears muscles. On your back and close your eyes.”

I spread out on my back, closed my eyes and took a breath. As I exhaled, hands held my head, squeezing oh so nicely. I gasped, and inhaled that scent again. “Relax, Rob -- let go and relax,” came Bernadette’s voice.

A hand was rubbing my back. I rolled over, opening my eyes. Kendra helped me sit up.

“How was that?” Bernadette asked.

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I sighed. "Should have had that kind of attention as a kid. What did you give me?"

She handed me a cup with some pills, and another cup with some water.

In response to my inquisitive look, she said, "The pills are anti-inflammatories and fever reducers. You got a number of boosters, and the first of the hepatitis series. You'll get more next week."

I moved my arms and wiggled a little. "Can't feel much. Where did they go in?"

Bernadette smiled. "Both glutes and your left bicep. I'll have to remember that technique."

"What do I watch for in terms of bad reactions?"

"I'll check you in the morning -- I want to do a blood sample before Kendra's class to get fasting levels. That means nothing to eat or drink except water after nine tonight."

"I can do that," I told her. "Done here?"

"For now. Fever, headache, dizziness, anything unusual, let me know right away."

"That means you're all mine!" Kendra exclaimed, rubbing her hands together with glee.

I frowned and sat back a bit.

The glee dropped from Kendra's face. Bernadette took on a look of concern. She came over to me. "What is it, Rob?"

"I need help understanding what I've gotten into. Am I the family bicycle, to be taken at whim? Can the bicycle have headaches and decide where it's heading?"

Kendra nodded and pulled up a chair. Bernadette sat on the cot, a few feet away from me.

"Closer," I said to her, "please."

With a slight smile she scooted closer.

I looked at both of them. "Maybe I should be having this conversation with Linda. Let me know if you think so." I paused, but they didn't say anything.

"I'm confused. A lot of things are up in the air. Where do I fit in? I feel such strong attractions to some of you -- Linda, Suzanne, you Bernadette, Kendra, Deb, Ellen... I know you can hold me, squeeze me, and I'll melt in your arms -- I want that so much, and it scares me. I'm not used to feeling so vulnerable, I guess."

Kendra spoke, a firm look on her face. "Rob, we expect people and their wishes to be respected. I was very impressed with what I was told about your test with Suzanne, and with what you're telling us now. You can say, 'no.' People can say, 'no' to you. And, there is a firm dividing line between family and staff. That line cannot be crossed, will not be crossed."

Bernadette put a hand on my back. "Rob, I asked you -- Linda asked you. Did Suzanne ask you?"

"Yes, she did. So did Deb."

"And I expect everyone else interested in you will ask as well. There are some who won't. 'No,' and 'not tonight' are pretty easy to understand. Let me ask you another question. Once you've said, 'yes' to someone -- to Linda or to me, or Kendra for example, do you want to be asked every time, or can we ambush you, take you quickly?"

I shuddered at that thought. "God... I'd like that, a lot... But I know that before I could do that to someone, I'd have to know them, and after I did it, I'd want to talk to them to make sure what we did was okay..."

Kendra said, "That's a very good response. You keep exceeding our expectations!"

I looked to her. "That's because I hadn't done very many leg lifts when Bernadette came in..."

Kendra laughed. She turned to Bernadette and asked, "Ten pounds, fifteen?"

Bernadette nodded. "Something around there."

"What?" I cried. "Lose weight?"

Kendra laughed. "No, silly -- put it on. After a month or so, I may want you to go to an outside gym for weight work. We'll see. Right now, I want to get a better idea of how flexible you are."

"Here?" I asked.

Kendra stood up. "Nope -- let's go to the mat room. I think that's where Linda expects to find us, anyway."

I got dressed. Bernadette gave me a hug.

"One thing I'd like to do," I told her, "is spend a lot of time being held."

She smiled and hugged me again. "You'll draw a crowd saying that."

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Kendra patted me on the back. "I'll say. Let's go. I was going to call you tiger -- but for now I'll make that snuggles..."

"Let me take a peek," I told her as we walked by my office. A lot of boxes -- I checked the camera equipment quickly. The film looked fine in its refrigerator. Prints were placed carefully, with the corners protected.

"A lot of us are really looking forward to seeing more of your pictures," Kendra said.

"I'm looking forward to being able to display them," I told her, closing the door.

We walked over to the carriage house. It smelled as if we might have more rain tonight, a little unusual for this time of year.

In the exercise room, Kendra said, "I'll get my clipboard. Why don't you strip down to your briefs again?"

I nodded and started undressing. She came back quickly.

"You know," I told her, "we could put prints up along that wall, under non-glare plastic. Would sunlight hit them?"

She smiled. "No, not over there. That would be really nice! Give us something more to look at! I like that!" Then she dropped the towel she was carrying on to the mat and said, "On you back -- let's see what kind of shape you're in."

I tried to groan, but it turned into a chuckle.

I was groaning a while later, after being pushed, pulled, twisted, and stretched. Then it was leg-lifts, sit-ups, and push-ups.

I was on my back trying to catch my breath. Kendra was sitting on the floor next to me. She patted my stomach and said, "Not too bad for a bean counter. Want to get on the treadmill for me?"

"Why not -- I've had everything but the finger up the ass."

She laughed. "I'm sure Bernadette has already done that..."

I sighed as I put my socks and shoes on -- I couldn't say for sure she hadn't.

I ran on the treadmill for a while. It wasn't bad, actually, being able to look out over the estate. She took my pulse periodically. We stopped, and she checked my pulse after a minute.

"Well, am I going to live?" I asked her.

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She laughed and sat on the floor, motioning me to do the same.

“Rob, considering your occupation, you’re doing fine. In terms of what we want and expect, you’ve got a ways to go, though. We’ll take it easy, though, and help you build up both strength and flexibility.”

“There were some calls for endurance, I seem to remember.”

She laughed again. “Yes -- well as far as aerobic endurance, that I can help with. Wouldn’t mind helping with the other, either... Actually, you’d be good running or doing aerobic work with a number of the others. When’s the last time you attended an exercise class?”

I shook my head. “A few years, at least. Why?”

“I’ll take it easy tomorrow morning then. You’ll be able to keep up, but you’ll undoubtedly feel it afterwards.”

“I’d kind of expect that.”

“Would you like to go through some of the floor sequences? You’re warmed up, and it would help you keep up tomorrow. You’d have some familiarity at least.”

“Sure -- let’s do it.”

I remembered why I didn’t like a lot of aerobics classes -- I have no dance talent. But Kendra was persistent, and I caught on.

Linda walked in as we were doing a yoga sequence, trying to flow from one position to the other.

“Starting him early?” she asked.

“That’s good, Rob -- relax on your back for me, on the towel.”

“With pleasure,” I told her.

I relaxed with a sigh.

“Some familiarization,” Kendra said. Then to me she said, “Palms up, arms out a little more, eyes closed, and relax...”

I felt her pulling my feet, then she moved my head, pulling it a little. It felt delicious.

I felt a hand on my chest -- must have been Linda, as Kendra was still holding my head.

Hidden Images

Linda said softly, "Let go for me, Rob -- nothing to do in this moment but relax. Relax and let go..."

She stroked my chest softly. I did what she asked.

When I opened my eyes, I knew that only a few minutes had passed. Still, I felt relaxed.

Linda was sitting on the mat next to me. "You look surprised," she said.

I started to sit up, but she put a hand on my chest.

"We didn't take another trip through hell..." I told her.

She sighed. "We've made it past the hard parts... No, you need a vacation from that. And frankly, so do I."

"So what's next?"

With a smile she moved over and sat on me, putting her hands on my shoulders and pressing down. I sighed and my eyes closed.

"I thought so," she said, and moved off.

"Why did you do that?"

"What?"

"Move off. That feels so good -- what is it about weight on top of me? You, Bernadette..."

She smiled. "It's special... Get dressed and let's walk. I talked to Bernadette -- you asked some tough questions, and from what I heard, came up with some good answers."

"We could talk here -- I liked where you were..."

She laughed and moved to stand up. "So did I, believe me -- but people will be coming in here to exercise in a short while."

I rolled to my side and sat up. "Okay. I'll get dressed. I've really been working up appetites lately!"

"Then you can help build pizzas -- you won't have to change clothes if you do, and if you help cook, you don't have to help clean."

"Sounds like a deal to me," I said. She tossed my pants at me.

“Tree?” I asked as we left the building.

She nodded, putting an arm around my waist.

“So, Doctor,” I asked as we were walking back to the tree. “What do you think of men who go around having unprotected sex, two women in two days?”

She chuckled. “Normally, that indicates quite risky behavior... But Bernadette and I are in favor of it -- and I think I may know some others who would agree as well... Seriously, Rob, none of us are at risk -- of pregnancy or disease. Does that help? I realize this has been sudden.”

“Sudden and intense,” I added, hugging her as we walked.

We sat on the bench under the tree once more. She sighed louder than I did.

I scooted over closer, putting an arm around her. “What do you need? What can I do for you?”

She smiled. “This is nice. As you said, some times it’s nice to just *be...*”

“And being in your arms, being held is so nice,” I told her.

“Oh, you don’t know how nice it is, the way you hold me, the way it feels when you suck on me, what you did for me last night,” she said, closing her eyes, letting her head go back as I held her.

Some things fell into place. I moved my hand up her back to her neck, stroking gently.

“I understand more now,” I said softly. “I curl up at your side, holding you and you holding me, and both of us have a chance to unwind and start to relax. Then when I’m ready, I move to a nipple, start sucking, sucking myself into trance, relaxing and going deeper and deeper, so safe in your arms...”

I moved my other hand to her left breast and stroked it gently through her blouse and bra. She sighed.

“Sucking and going deeper and deeper, more and more relaxed. Feel me sucking, so nice, relaxing more and more...”

I eased her back and moved a little as I had to support more of her weight.

“I’ve got you, holding you so well, sucking on you... I’m so hungry for you, I need to go down on you, kiss you and tease you... Feel my lips and tongue on you, oh so good...”

She moaned as I stroked her breasts.

“Enjoy it and come if you want to -- come for me, come for me as I hold you and please you...”

I moved my hand slowly down her front, and as I slid it between her legs she moaned and shook, her thighs squeezing my hand in waves. “Oh thank you -- enjoy, enjoy, tell me what you need...”

“Kiss me,” she moaned.

I pulled my hand from between her legs and held her, pulling her into a kiss. Our lips met, and she shook again, moaning into my mouth. I held her with one hand behind her head, the other going around her shoulders. Her arms went around me and she hugged me.

When we finally sat back, she still had a dreamy look on her face. I reached over and tapped her on the forehead. She blinked and looked at me, then laughed.

She reached over and pulled me into an embrace. “Oh, that was grand,” she murmured in my ear.”

“Glad you liked it,” I told her. “Hope I did okay...”

She gave me another squeeze, then sat back. “You did very well. Are you remembering things, or what?”

I took her hands. “Remembering, feeling... It’s hard to say. At times it’s like listening... If I want I can hear your voice, or Bernadette’s, or someone else’s... I hope you didn’t mind...”

She shook her head. “Not at all -- I needed it. You’ll learn to recognize it; you drop so fast when you’re really hungry for it...”

I must have still been hungry for it -- she stroked the side of my face with her fingers and I dropped like a rock. Soon I was in her arms, rocking with her, my head resting on her bare bosom, feeling the softness and warmth of skin, and hearing the beating of her heart.

But when I opened my eyes, my head was in her lap, and we were still under the tree.

”That was so amazing,” I sighed.

She helped me sit up. “Tell me,” she asked.

“We were rocking -- I could feel it. Holding each other, my head on your chest -- I could feel, smell, your skin and hear your heart beating in my ear. So real...”

She nodded. “That’s what you needed.” With a smile she held my hands again. “Need some dinner?”

“Oh yeah -- let’s go help out.”

We walked back, hand in hand. “What would it be like,” I mused, “to spend an afternoon wrapped up in your arms, holding you, being held...”

She laughed. “We’ll just have to find out, won’t we?”

I was put to work slicing pepperoni, bell peppers, and onions. I skinned garlic cloves for a garlic and chicken pizza that looked really good.

Penny, one of the staff, an assistant to Deb, also had me opening jars and cans. She was a kick to work with. She’s short, with straight brownish hair, a quick wit, and a sharp tongue.

We’d put the last of the pies into the oven and finished the salad when Suzanne popped into the kitchen. She must have just showered -- her hair was still wet. She gave us a look of disappointment.

“You can clean up, love,” Ellen told her. Some of the others chuckled.

“One more thing for you to open,” Penny told me, handing me a large and cold jug of white wine.

I took it, looking at Suzanne and saying, “Stick around.”

She smiled a bit. “If you’re going to pour, sure...”

“If someone finds me an opener first, I’ll be happy to!”

We set the big table for ten. Usually it was the nine “family” members. Sunday had been somewhat special, so we’d had twelve, Miriam and the two staff folks, Penny and Kathryn joining us. Tonight Penny was dining with us.

Dinner was good. Suzanne sat to my right, Bernadette on my left. I was more at ease now, and started noticing things -- the way Annette behaved around Deb for instance. Hmmm, she had looked a bit out-of-sorts Sunday night.

We sat around talking for a while. Suzanne was getting the grounds ready for winter; that was almost done. Deb was concerned about a painting contractor and getting one of the ancillary buildings repainted before rains started in earnest. Ellen was pleased with the way Deb and Suzanne had taken care of some grounds work, evidently getting it done well under budget.

Deb stood up with a sigh and said, “Ladies, it’s our turn...” She picked up her plate, and Annette’s.

Suzanne looked at me with a sigh. I stood up, got my plate, then walked around to Deb. “I’ll take those. I’ll help clean up -- you take it easy tonight.”

She handed me the plates. "You don't have to offer twice!" The others laughed.

The cleanup was actually fun. I stood next to Suzanne -- she washed, and I rinsed and dried. Her spirits picked up immensely, and at times, so did her nipples.

As we finished wiping down countertops, I asked Suzanne, "Like to help me unpack and look at some pictures?"

Her beaming smile was her answer.

"Need some help?" Bernadette asked. Then she looked at Suzanne, giving her a questioning look.

Suzanne said, "I don't mind." She turned to me and said, "I'm helping you tomorrow morning as well, to help you get settled."

Kendra said, "Yeah, settled..."

Bernadette chuckled and said, "You can come along and move boxes, you know..."

Kendra gave her a haughty look, then replied, "Okay, I'll do that."

I ended up with the four of us in the office. It held us all, even with the boxes. Bernadette did borrow two chairs from her office, though. Some things had been unpacked already. When I mentioned something about that, Suzanne blushed a little.

"I wanted to get started. I hope you didn't mind. I just did desk-type things, and catalogs. Oh -- this one," she picked up a photo supply catalog and opened it to a marked page. She pointed to a nice storage system for negatives and prints -- much nicer than the file folders in cardboard boxes I used currently. "This is what Vivian says you should be using for storage. Is that okay?"

"Ah, yes, they're about the best."

"Okay, Deb has seen this. I'll have Penny order it tomorrow."

"Really?"

Suzanne gave me a strange look. "Yes, really -- Vivian was very upset that you're still storing things in cardboard boxes."

"What do I say?"

Behind me, Bernadette said, "You say, 'Yes dear,' and give her a hug."

To some chuckling, that's what I did.

As much as we could, we got things straightened away. I did need better storage for negatives and prints, and for my camera equipment.

Linda came in as we were talking about photographing parts of the estate.

"It's getting late -- you've got a full day tomorrow," she told me.

"Yes, dear," I sighed, to laughter from the others.

"I must have missed something," Linda mused to nobody in particular.

"And you need to stop by my office on the way to class tomorrow morning so I can get a blood sample," Bernadette reminded me.

I nodded and stood up. "And what time does your class start?" I asked Kendra.

"Seven on the nose," she told me, standing up and stretching. "I'll help you with the chairs," she told Bernadette.

We said our goodnights. Suzanne tried to get out the door, but I held her back. I gave her a gentle hug and whispered, "Thank you for everything," in her ear. Then I bit her neck. She left quite upbeat.

Linda and I walked back to the house. "How are you feeling tonight?" she asked.

I had one hand around her waist. I groped at her side with that hand, and moved the other to a sensuous breast, caressing.

She wiggled in my embrace, laughing. "Better, I'd say!"

"Much better, thank you."

"That was sweet of you after dinner -- just don't make a habit of it, or people will walk all over you."

"I figured. There seems to be something between Deb and Annette -- or am I imagining?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, the way Annette seemed bummed out Sunday afternoon and evening -- didn't make sense to me at the time, but then the way she looked at Deb tonight... It was kind of the same way Miriam looked at Deb."

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“You’re catching on... I’d call Annette Deb’s pet -- and I think Annette likes thinking of herself that way as well. Be careful -- Deb can be voracious.”

“As opposed to you and Bernadette? Or Kendra? Suzanne?”

She laughed. “Point well taken. Told Suzanne yet?”

“Told her what?”

“About spending the night in the tea house tomorrow?”

“Not yet -- didn’t have the chance. Figure I’ll have the opportunity tomorrow.”

We were at the top of the stairs. “Spend the night with me, please,” Linda whispered.

I held her gently. “Oh yes...”

As we cleaned up in the bathroom, she asked me, “What did you think of Miriam?”

I shook my head. “I need to photograph her, and her hands... The way she looked, the way she played -- of course Deb just might have had some influence there...”

“How about as part of the family?”

I paused for a moment. “Please don’t repeat this -- and tell me if I’m off base. Talent, oh yes, but she’s eugenically flawed.”

Linda paused and looked at me. She nodded her head slightly. “That’s pretty cold... But absolutely correct.”

I sighed. “Same with Penny -- I felt a lot of envy in her, jealousy.”

Linda nodded more. “I don’t think she’s picked up on the pattern yet. I’m working with her, in subtle ways. You need to be careful around her -- she’s been around here long enough to see most of our tricks.”

I nodded. “And if she caught me at the right moment, I don’t know if I could resist... I know with you and Bernadette especially, but also with Suzanne, Deb, Kendra, Ellen -- I wouldn’t want to.”

She smiled, moving closer. “And how do you feel about that?”

I put my arms around her waist. “Mixed -- scared, but also hungry for it. It’s... I don’t know, liberating in some sense. Why?”

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She put her hands on my shoulders. "I want to know -- men are so different; I've never had the opportunity to work at those depths before. I want to know how you feel..."

I moved my hands along her back, one going to her neck, the other to her bottom. "Like this..." I pulled her into a kiss.

When we came up for air, she said, "You are such a practical person!"

I laughed. "What in the world is practical about this? I've left a promising career to become the sole knight at Castle Anthrax?"

She laughed. "We're all significantly over the age of twenty one..."

"I should hope so... This is happening so fast -- you've shown me so much, changed me so much. I feel I belong here..."

"But?" she said, raising an eyebrow.

"But this afternoon I felt as if I was rocking in that porch swing with you. 'Real' has suddenly become a surprisingly flexible concept."

"Do you trust me, Rob?"

"I have to, Linda..."

"Why do you have to?"

"Because the alternative is madness."

She nodded. "Do you still want to spend the night with me?"

"Yes," I whispered, and hugged her again.

"Rob, I will not hurt you," she told me.

We finished up in the bathroom and returned to her room. I put my things down, took off my robe, and turned to her. She'd just finished turning down the bed, and looked to me with a smile.

"Tell me what you need," I whispered, sliding my hands inside her robe. She sighed as my hands slid across her skin.

I kissed her neck and shoulder as I slid my hands up her back, holding her to me. "I want you," I rumbled, kneading her shoulder blades and pressing her breasts against me. She moaned and shuddered, moving her hands to my arms. I backed her to the bed and pushed her to her back, lifting her legs up on the bed.

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I settled beside her, putting one hand behind her head. I leaned over to kiss her, my other hand roaming over her body. I squeezed the back of her head and neck gently when she started to move, and she moaned in my mouth. My free hand moved between her legs. I started teasing her.

I let my mouth slide off hers as she gasped for air. I kissed along her neck as her head arched back. "Let go and enjoy, Linda -- let go and enjoy," I whispered in her ear.

When the motion of her hips had become insistent, I moved my hand away, to her quite audible dismay. I moved on top of her, spreading her legs, and slid into her. She moaned and I sighed.

After a few glorious strokes, she pulled her knees up. I spread my knees, sliding up closer, pushing in deeper. I put my hands on her shoulders and gasped to her, "Linda, Linda, please..."

That set off a series of moans and tremors through her. I felt myself getting close, and looked down at her breasts, so far away. She shifted her hips, and I moved my hands from her shoulders to her thighs, pulling myself in more. As I held her thighs, her heels slid behind my back, and she squeezed me as I pulled and pushed, trying to fill her more. She squeezed me again, pushing me over the edge. "Squeeze me," I cried as I momentarily lost control of my muscles. She squeezed me and rocked me with her legs and I held on, filling her.

She let her legs spread, and I collapsed on top of her. As we slid apart, I moved to her side. I found a nipple, her hand found the back of my head, and that's all that mattered.

END of part 3

Wednesday

The alarm went off and I reached for Linda, pulling us together.

“Oh no you don’t, not this morning,” she sighed, pushing me away and sliding out of bed.

“Meanie...” I muttered.

She came to my side of the bed and put a hand on my shoulder, turning me to my back.

She looked at me and smiled. “There’s nothing mean about it. We need to get moving, or Kendra will be upset with both of us! Quick, before someone else hogs the bathroom!”

That got me up -- I needed to go. We crossed the hallway naked, taking over the bathroom.

“How did you sleep?” I asked her as she sat on the toilet.

She shook her head. “Great -- I needed that!” She wiped and stood up. “Next!”

As I sat down, we heard, “Hurry up in there!” from the hallway.

“Yes, dear,” I answered.

As I got up and flushed the toilet, Linda said, “You can join us if you want.”

I looked at her in surprise. She grinned.

“Ah, we can wait,” came Deb’s response from the hallway.

I brushed my teeth and combed my hair. I picked up my bag and started to the door.

“Going to shave?” Linda asked.

I nodded. “I can do that in my room as I dress. Shorts, T-shirt, running shoes?”

She smiled and gave me a kiss. “That’s fine. See you at Bernadette’s office.”

She opened the door. Deb and Annette were there, wearing robes.

“Good morning,” Linda said cheerily as she walked by them. I decided to do the same. “Good morning, ladies...”

Linda was chuckling as she went into her room. I was doing about the same.

I almost literally ran into Bernadette at the back door of the house.

“Good morning! Sleep well?” she asked.

I nodded. “Very well. You?”

She gave me a lusty look. “Could have been better...”

“Come on!” Linda said, bounding down the stairs.

I sat in a chair while Bernadette set up for the blood sample. I turned my head as she picked up the needle. When I turned my head, Linda surprised me by holding me to her chest.

“All done...” Bernadette said.

“Mmmm... That didn’t hurt now, did it?” Linda asked.

Bernadette laughed. “Let’s get moving!”

We headed out the door. I was wearing shorts, a T-shirt, socks, and my running shoes. Bernadette was wearing sweats. Linda was wearing a tank-top leotard.

We weren’t the first to get to the exercise room, but we weren’t the last, either. As Bernadette was peeling off her sweats, Deb and Annette came in, followed closely by Kendra.

I was in trouble, in more ways than one... I was surrounded by women who were not only gorgeous, but looked to be in great physical condition. And me, a bean-counter in their midst...

Kendra walked over to me, something black looking like a belt in her hand.

“Pull up your shirt,” she said, “so I can put this on.”

It wasn’t quite a belt -- it was a chest strap. She licked a thumb and moistened two areas on the thicker area of the thing, and put that around my chest just below my nipples.

“Now ladies,” she said to the catcalls the others were making. The elastic part of the thing went around my back and fastened to the thick part.

“Okay, let’s see if it’s working.” She pressed a button on the watch she was wearing. After a few seconds the watch started beeping. She pressed another button and the beeping stopped. With a smile she told me, “That will let me monitor your heart rate.” Then she leaned over closer and whispered, “Don’t worry Rob -- you’ll do just fine.”

Right. I sighed again, watching her walk away from me. Wonder what my heart rate was doing? Still, I was surprised I wasn’t freaking out. Did Linda have something to do with that?

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Ellen came in the room last. Kendra gave her a frown. Ellen responded by sticking her tongue out. That got laughter.

“Good -- let’s begin,” Kendra said in an overly-enthusiastic voice.

I was about in the middle of the group. Whichever direction we turned, or more like it, they turned one way and most of the time I turned another way at least initially, one of them was in front of me. All were wearing unitards, leotards, of varying lengths and designs.

We did standing aerobics first. I didn’t die; I didn’t come close. But I did get pretty winded. I figured out that when Kendra’s watch started beeping, it was because my heart rate had exceeded some threshold she’d set. At one point it beeped, she eased off, and someone behind me (I think it was Bernadette) said, “Oh, poor boy...”

Damn, there wasn’t even a clock I could look at to see how long we’d been at it.

But eventually Kendra called out, “That’s great -- rest for a moment while our late-comer gets us towels.”

There was mild laughter to that, and Ellen stuck out her tongue again as she went back to the shower area. I put my hands on my knees and bent over a bit, catching my breath.

When Ellen returned with large towels, I thought I’d be able to rest more. Not a chance - on our backs for leg lifts, abdominal crunches, and forms of torture I didn’t have names for.

After that, it was shoes and socks off, and we were on our feet again for yoga. Thanks to Kendra’s help the day before, I had a little better idea of what I was supposed to do. I was amazed at how flexible most of the ladies were -- Suzanne and I seemed to be the stiff ones.

“Linda, work with Rob for the two-person poses,” Kendra said. That got boos, moans, and hisses. Kendra chuckled and said, “Don’t worry, ladies -- you’ll all get your chance.”

Pretty quickly Kendra came over, and when I was doing a pose, it was Kendra and Linda helping me. I’d never seen two-person stuff for yoga; it’s a lot of fun.

But one pose, swan or something similar, with one foot back, the other bent in front of you, and you’re supposed to relax and let your hips go to the ground? Kendra was in front of me, with Linda behind. We’d done it first with Linda -- she did it with ease, and when I held her shoulders from behind, she let go and relaxed, making me hold her up.

I had a lot more trouble. I could feel it stretching so many things -- my hip, my stomach, legs, all at once.

“I’ve got an idea,” Linda said behind me. “Hold him,” she told Kendra.

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Kendra was still in front of me. She put her hands up on my shoulders. I started to say something to her, but Linda did something and I slipped into that fog again. I melted into their arms as Linda whispered, "Relax," in my ear. I heard Kendra say, "Much better!" as they positioned me again.

I drifted in and out of a fog -- my awareness heightened and curtailed at the same time. We ended on our backs, doing a twisting pose. Linda held my shoulders down to the mat while Kendra positioned my legs. I looked into Linda's eyes, she said something with a lusty smile, and I sighed as my eyes drifted closed.

There was another voice later -- a woman's voice, one I'd heard before. I wanted to give myself to her. I followed her voice down, down, down...

In the shower, rubbing my face -- the bathroom across from my room. I laughed; what a morning! I finished showering and dried off. My robe was hanging on the back of the door. I put it on and went back to my room.

A little after eight thirty -- time for something to eat. I needed to return the office key this morning. I put on slacks and a dress shirt, then thumbed my nose at the coats and ties. I got a pair of slip-on loafers -- another anathema to Banister.

I got a toasted bagel and coffee downstairs, sitting in the kitchen. Suzanne came in, all smiles. I stood up and hugged her.

"I thought you did really well this morning," she told me.

I shrugged. "I guess so. I'll know more tomorrow." I remembered something, and frowned. "I'm supposed to be back at three this afternoon for something."

Suzanne got cinnamon-raisin toast and coffee. She sat next to me.

"Help me in the office this morning?" I asked. "It will be just you..."

She smiled. "I have about an hour's worth of work to do first, but then I'm all yours."

"It's a deal -- I need to go back to my old office and drop off a key anyway, that's about forty minutes this time of day. Did Kendra really go easy today?"

Suzanne shook her head and chuckled. "Not at all. Oh, she paused a couple of more times than usual. If anything, we did more upper-body and abs work. I think you can tell -- the others have been doing this for quite some time."

"I noticed. I'll catch up, just as you have."

"Thanks," she said. "Got a crew to manage -- see you in an hour."

“Okay -- have fun.”

I rinsed my empty cup and set it on the counter. Since I had my car keys in my pocket, I headed to the door, waving to folks as I went by.

Driving out the gate I felt as if I was crossing a boundary. I’d gone through it in my mind -- I really didn’t have to go back; the bastard had undoubtedly changed the locks, just as he’d done the last time someone left the firm. And he’d have the keys stamped “Do Not Duplicate,” just as he’d done last time. When was the last time he’d taken a vacation? What would he do on one?

I parked in a Visitor spot on the side of the building. I’d put the key in a plain envelope, addressed to Banister. I went in the front door and walked up to the receptionist. Besides looking surprised, she also looked like she’d been through hell.

“Good morning. Would you see that Mister Banister gets this, please?”

She managed a smile. Did I see the I-want-out look in her eyes? She did have very pretty brown eyes.

“Thank you, Rob -- I’ll do that.”

“Take care, then, and thanks,” I told her, and headed out the door again.

I took a deep breath and sighed as I walked down the three steps. I could imagine all too well how ugly it must be in there, especially if Dave managed to take some associates with him.

“Mister Flynn -- what a surprise to see you here!”

Coming around the corner was Paul Keller from Peabody Sherman. He used to be a client. I extended a hand and shook his. “Just dropping something off. How are you, Paul?”

He nodded his head to the building. “The important thing is how are you doing? It must have been pretty ugly yesterday.”

I shook my head. “It depends on who you talked to.”

He smiled. “True -- what’s your side of the story?”

I smiled as well. “You knew Dave Patterson -- he’s joining PricewaterhouseCoopers. Dave had tossed my name around with them as well. Banister found out Dave was looking, and called him on the carpet. Dave gave him two weeks notice, and was summarily thrown out. Then Banister called me in. He accused me of plotting with Dave. I gave him two weeks notice on the spot. I’ve accepted a job with a private foundation nearby. He threw me out. Pat Anderson should be able to handle the rest of your work quite easily.”

Hidden Images

“You gave him two weeks notice?”

“In writing.”

Paul nodded grimly. “Would you be willing to work with us directly, for a few days, to clean things up?”

“I’d have to check with my present employer, but that wouldn’t be the issue. Banister would have to allow me access to the files. Even though I put them together, I don’t think it’s likely he’d go for that.”

Paul nodded again. “No, I think hell will freeze over first. Rob, we’re going to miss working with you. Your work was first rate, and you made up for having to deal with Banister.”

I shook his hand again. “Sorry to do this to you, Paul.”

“No, not your problem. He did the same thing when those folks went to KPMG, right?”

I nodded. “Yup. I imagine it’s the same story again.” I could imagine the stories he was telling about us.

“How can I get in touch with you?”

I got out one of my old cards and wrote down the main phone number for the house. “Here -- ask for me and they’ll track me down.”

“Thanks again -- and good luck.”

I actually laughed. “You’re the one who needs the good luck!”

He gave me a sardonic smile. “Ain’t that the truth. I don’t expect this will be a very lengthy meeting -- but he’ll make up for it in volume.”

I was still chuckling when I got into my car. Damn -- didn’t have my checkbook, or the registration stuff, or I could have taken care of the car. I headed back to the house.

I parked and went to the office. I dumped my keys in the desk drawer. I’d just moved a box when the phone rang.

“This is Rob.”

“Rob, Ellen wants you in her office right away.” It was Kathryn.

“Okay -- be right over,” I told her, and hung up.

I walked over to Ellen’s office. I knocked at her open door and went in.

She looked pissed.

“You left the estate without telling anyone,” she said.

I nodded. “I didn’t tell you -- I told Suzanne, and told her I’d be back within forty five minutes.”

She still had a grim look on her face, but she nodded. “Rob -- you simply have to check with Deb or I before you leave the grounds. It’s that important. Understood?”

“Ellen, I understand, and I apologize. It won’t happen again. If there are similar rules, I’d like to know about them, so I don’t disappoint you in the future.”

She managed a smile. “That’s fair. Leaving the grounds without clearing it with us is the biggie. Bringing in drugs or alcohol, not following Bernadette or Linda’s instructions on diet, exercise, or medication... You’ve already been told about the line between family and staff.”

I nodded. “Yes -- and I’ve spoken to Linda about that. Especially after class this morning, I’m feeling somewhat vulnerable to you. If Penny caught me off-guard...”

“I understand. We simply must not allow that to happen. We’ve had these kinds of problems before. Talking to Linda, to me, to Deb, is the right thing to do.”

“Thanks -- tell me, tell me beforehand. I don’t want to disappoint you, any of you.”

She looked more relaxed. Then she chuckled. “See -- I told you I could be as bad as Banister.”

I shook my head. “Nowhere close dear -- he’d have screamed at me for ten or fifteen minutes, after which time I still wouldn’t be sure exactly why he’d started screaming in the first place.”

She managed to laugh, shaking her head. “Okay, Rob. Consider yourself yelled at, and forgiven. Check in with Deb.”

“Will do -- thanks.”

I headed back to the other building and Deb’s office. Her door was closed, had been closed when I’d gone by it. I knocked.

“Come in,” Annette said.

I went in. The fax machine and a printer was going, and a radio was playing softly. Guess that’s why the door had been closed.

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Annette and Deb both looked at me, Deb raising an eyebrow.

I walked over and stood in front of her desk. "I've been properly chastised, and promised never to do it again."

She smiled. "Okay -- just so you understand."

I nodded. "And I asked Ellen to let me know if there are any other rules like that I should be aware of. I'm asking you the same thing."

Annette called out, "Don't leave the toilet seat up!"

Deb and I laughed.

"Don't worry," I told them. "I've been properly trained -- two older sisters. I'm very careful, and at night I sit on the pot, so please don't put the lid down -- that can be cold and very surprising!"

"That sounds acceptable to me," Deb said. "But actually, we wanted to check with you on a couple of things."

Annette piped up again. "Where's your car registration? And I've got the order for your storage cabinet ready, if you want to check it over."

I sighed and went over to her desk. "The car stuff is in my office -- I can bring it by. Oh, this looks great. It will be nice to have all those negatives and prints stored properly."

Annette gave me quite the smile. "I'll walk over with you for the registration."

"Can we do something about business cards?" I asked her.

She glanced to Deb, who nodded. "I'll check with Ellen to see what we'll do for a title. Tomorrow or the next day be okay?"

I raised my eyebrows. "A week is fine; there's no hurry."

"I'm going to go get the paperwork for his car," she told Deb.

Deb nodded.

I opened the door for Annette, and closed it again after her.

As we walked down the hall past Bernadette's office to mine, Annette said, "I thought you did really well this morning."

I chuckled. "I'll know better tomorrow..."

She put an arm around me. "Will you be going to tomorrow morning's class as well?"

I shrugged my shoulders and put an arm around her. "Don't know; probably."

In the office, I found the folder for my car stuff, and handed it to her. With a smile and a twinkle in her eye, she said, "I'll have it taken care of."

"Thank you very much -- that's a big help."

"Any time," she said as she started out the door, looking slightly back over her shoulder at me.

I sighed and sat down. "Shit!" -- I'd left my water pitcher at Bannister's office. I was used to having water on my desk all the time.

"What's the matter?" Bernadette said, sticking her head in the door.

"Good morning, beautiful," I told her.

She smiled more and sat down in the chair by the side of the desk.

"I had a cheap clear plastic water pitcher on my desk at work -- left it and my plastic cup. I'm going to miss it."

Bernadette said, "I think we can replace it. Give Kathryn a call; I'm sure she can set you up. How are you feeling?"

I shrugged again. "Other than thirsty, pretty good. It's tomorrow morning I'm worried about."

"No fever, dizziness, headache?"

Looking at her was relaxing -- and arousing. "Just one thing," I said softly.

"Oh?" she said, becoming concerned.

I smiled. "I have this incredible urge to be naked with you, curled up holding you, with you holding me, for hours..."

"Ah," she said, standing up. "That sounds serious..." She looked around. "Wasn't Suzanne going to be, ah, helping you again today?"

"Yup, she had some things to take care of. Should be here any time."

"You haven't told her about tonight in the tea house, have you?"

I shook my head. "Haven't had the opportunity. I want to do that as soon as I can."

She smiled. "Do that, and soon. See you later."

I nodded. "See you later, neighbor."

She paused a moment. "I guess we are!"

I started moving files from boxes into the file drawers of the desk. I started looking at the camera equipment. I really needed something better to store that stuff in. My "go" bags worked well for that stuff, but the other lenses, film holders, flash stuff...

"Hi there -- sorry I ran over a bit," Suzanne said, walking into the office.

I stood up and walked to her, sweeping her into a hug.

"Oh, it's so good to see you," I told her.

She returned my hug, with interest.

"Before we do anything else," I asked her, stepping back a bit, "I have a question."

She nodded.

"Will you spend the night with me at the tea house tonight?"

Oh the expressions that cascaded over her face! I only saw the first few, as she hugged me close again.

"Oh yes!" she exhaled into my ear, kissing and biting my neck.

I held her, feeling the muscles in her back, holding her to me.

We kissed briefly, or maybe not so briefly. When we pulled up for air, she burst into laughter.

I closed the office door and pulled her to a chair, sitting next to her.

"Tell me, please," I asked.

She smiled, beamed, as she took my hands.

"This morning after class... I don't suppose you remember that, though..."

I shook my head. "Not a thing... It was nice, though."

She laughed a little. "Yes, it was... Linda told us all that... How do I put it delicately? You'd be available tomorrow..."

"That sounds okay..."

She sighed. "Yes... Great news... Deb was a little miffed, though, when Linda said that she expected us to, how did she say it, 'play fair,' I think is what she said..."

"And Deb didn't like that?"

"She grumbled until Annette leaned over and whispered something in her ear."

I chuckled. "Too bad I missed that... But it makes me happier that I'd already decided to spend tonight with you -- if you want to, of course."

She growled and squeezed my hand. "Me too..."

"So, what does one need to do to make the arrangements?"

She sighed and smiled. "They're already made -- when I dropped off the storage cabinet info earlier, I saw a note on Annette's desk saying you'd be there tonight. I recognized Linda's writing. I almost cried."

I held her hands, raising and kissing them. "I promised you... You'd be first."

"I know," she whispered. After a big sigh, she looked around. "Where do we start?"

"Well, I've got the closet to store some things. I need more shelves. I don't know -- I feel like I need something better for the view camera stuff, the 35mm, lenses, all that."

She brightened up. "I know just the thing. Let's go for a walk."

"As long as it isn't outside the gate," I muttered.

"Ooh, you didn't know about that?"

"I do now!"

"I'm sorry -- I thought you knew this morning when we talked, or I'd have said something. I think everyone catches it on that one -- about a week after I'd moved in, I took off for most of a day to shop for clothes. I really caught hell when I got back..."

We were walking along the back to the newer buildings. One looked like a garage, or a largish metal storage building. We went inside and Suzanne turned on the few lights available.

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It was definitely storage, with boxes, doors, wood trim, and old furniture.

“There’s a piece over here; I hope it’s still here,” she said, walking to one corner. “Oh good -- here it is.”

We walked over to a low cabinet, probably the bottom of a china cabinet. It was dark oak, large, and sturdy.

“When I first saw this,” she said, running a hand over the dark wood top, “I thought about my father. Have you heard of a group called f/64?”

I nodded. “Cunningham, Weston, Adams? That group? Beautiful work. I have a copy of their manifesto somewhere.”

She smiled. “My father was invited to join. He kept a lot of his equipment in a cabinet like this. I thought you could put prints and small things in the drawers here, and larger pieces, lenses, that kind of thing down below.”

“Do you have any of his work?” I asked.

She shook her head sadly. “No... Some of his prints are scattered about in museums and private collections across the country. There are some in Sedona -- that’s the area he loved.”

“I’ve never been there, but want to go -- people talk about the quality of the light.”

She nodded. “I spent summers there. It’s gorgeous. The night sky is staggering.”

“Did you help him?”

She nodded, smiling, tears forming. I held her close.

She stepped back after a minute or so, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. I took her hand and kissed it, tasting her tears.

“How do we claim our prize, and how do you suggest moving it?”

“You like it?” she asked, almost little-girl giddy again.

“I think it will work fine. The old Linhof should feel at home in it.”

“I’ll get George started cleaning it up. We could probably move it in a couple of days, depending on what you want done to it.”

I looked it over. “Get rid of the dust, evict the mice, buff it with a cloth -- I wouldn’t touch the finish. I hope I look as good when I’m that old.”

“Oh, you will,” she whispered.

“This will look great under the windows. I could even display some prints on top of it.” I put my arm around her. “Thank you for thinking of me.”

“Oh, I’ve wanted to rescue this piece for a long time. I’m glad you like it.”

“Anything else here we should look at?”

“Some mattresses in the back?” she suggested.

“Really?” I replied, inching my hand around her waist.

“Yes,” she whispered, “If you’re interested, of course...”

“Show me...”

She started to the far corner of the building. Was she unbuttoning her blouse as she walked? I wasn’t sure.

The lighting wasn’t as good, but there they were -- a stack of four twin-size mattresses, in between a wall and a stack of boxes six or so feet high. A clear plastic sheet covered the stack.

Suzanne pulled the plastic cover off to one side, and turned to me. As she did, she undid the last button on her blouse. She started reaching around to her back.

I stepped closer to her. “Let me get that,” I said, reaching around to undo her bra. As I did, she stepped out of her shoes and started unbuttoning my shirt.

She was naked and on her back in record time, and I wasn’t far behind, leaving on only my socks. She pulled her knees up and held out her arms. I slid on and into her, our lips meeting and muffling our cries of pleasure.

As she pulled up her knees a little more, I sat up, holding her waist, pulling her in closer. My legs were sort of folded under me. As I we moved, I pulled her bottom up to me more. Her legs went around me, and she helped. That freed up one of my hands to pleasure her button.

That first touch changed the way she moved, and the way she sounded, her hip motion and her moans more insistent. She grabbed my knees and pulled as she rocked her hips.

“Oh yes,” I cried, holding on, trying to push deeper into her.

“Don’t stop,” she moaned, grinding into me. I didn’t stop, even though I was right at the delirious edge, sliding in and out, teasing her with my thumb.

“Oh yes,” she moaned, and the motion of her hips changed again, slower, more intense. She pulled my hand off her button. I grabbed her waist.

“Oh yes... Now!” she called, “Oh come for me, now!”

I pulled, she pushed, and I came, pumping into her, holding her waist, feeling her legs around me. She pulled on my arms, straightening out her legs, bringing me closer and into another kiss. I slid my arms under her back as she put hers around my neck. As our bodies moved together, my nose was filled with her scent mixed with the dusty musty smell of the mattresses.

“Oh, that was nice,” she sighed as I kissed and nibbled her neck.

“We can take our time tonight,” I told her, pushing up on to my arms.

“I expect we will,” she said with a smile and a wiggle.

We sat up and dressed. We brushed off each other’s clothes, giggling as we did, trying to remove the evidence.

On the way out, we looked at the chest again. “That is going to work really well,” I told her, an arm around her waist.

“I hoped it would,” she told me, smiling as she looked up into my eyes.

We walked back along the path, gravel crunching under our feet. At one of the junctions, she pulled me to a hug.

“I’m going to get people started cleaning the chest. I’ll see you back in your office.”

“Okay. Don’t be long.”

She smiled and walked off, hips moving quite nicely as she walked.

Ooh, my hips moved differently as well -- especially the right one. I was a little sore.

She took about twenty minutes, rejoining me in the office. We made a substantial dent in things by lunch. At lunch, Kendra reminded me that I needed to be in the exercise room at three.

Still, that gave us over two hours more to organize things. About twenty to three though, I had to call it a day.

“I’m expected,” I sighed, “but I don’t know for what.”

Suzanne shook her head. She hugged me as I walked to the door. “Kendra is great. Just save some for me tonight...”

I cleaned up a little, changed back to shorts, T-shirt, and shoes, and headed over.

“Good! Right on time,” Kendra said, handing me the chest strap.

I mimicked her earlier actions, moistening two flat areas as I put it on. “Now what?” I asked.

She pointed to a treadmill and I moaned. She chuckled. “It’s only for twenty minutes.”

“And then what?” I asked.

“And then you get off the treadmill,” she answered with an evil grin.

As I started out, she explained to me that the goal was to keep my heart rate within a specific training range, and the treadmill would adjust its speed automagically.

It wasn’t bad -- I made it.

“Okay, good job. Now, shoes and socks off, and on your back.”

I collapsed on to the towel spread out on the mat. I thought I was in for more abdominal work. She fooled me -- we did leg stretches first, with her “helping.” Actually, she helped a lot, and I could feel the difference. Then we did the ab work.

Finally she let me rest, helping me with more stretches for abs and spine.

“Shoes and socks on, let’s go!” she said, just as I was unwinding and catching my breath.

“What now? Road work?” I asked.

“Would you like that?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

She laughed. “We’re headed to Bernadette’s office. How are you feeling?”

“Better than tomorrow morning, I think...”

She nodded and helped me stand when I had my shoes on. “That’s what we’re going to help with.”

“I’m so stiff compared to the rest of you,” I told Kendra as we walked to the offices.

She laughed. “Don’t worry -- as long as you take it easy and don’t overstretch, you’ll loosen up quickly.”

Bernadette and Linda were waiting for us. We went into the side room, where a massage table was set up.

“This is a good idea,” I told them.

They laughed. Bernadette said, “Every day or so for a while, to help you through the rough parts. Anything bothering you?”

I’d slipped out of my shoes and shirt. “My right hip, something in the back. Other than that, I’ll probably know better in the morning.”

“Are you going to come to my session in the morning?” Kendra asked.

“Would it help?” I responded.

She nodded. “Yes, it would.”

“Okay then, I’ll do it.” I turned to Linda. “I’d guess you’re here for a reason. Can I ask you a favor?”

She smiled. “Sure -- what is it?”

“Help me with my motivation to attend these early morning sessions?”

“I think we can do that. You’re still going to sleep in on the weekends, at least.”

“Up on the table, face down,” Bernadette told me.

I eased myself down. “Ooh, triceps and upper back...”

“We’ll get those too. Let’s get you arranged first.”

She stretched me out a bit, arms and legs, and adjusted the cradle holding my head. Then a hand held the back of my head, squeezing gently. That scent filled me again, and Linda’s voice told me to let go and relax.

It was weird, floating and rocking, even though part of me knew I was on my stomach on a massage table. Every so often, Bernadette would do something, work on an area such as the sides of my legs, my calves, or deep in my hips, and I’d almost fly off the table. Linda’s touch and voice would take me deeper again.

It was easier when I was on my back. My eyes were covered. She worked my arms, shoulders, chest, and into my abdomen. Then her hands went to the back of my neck, that scent filled me again, and another voice carried me away.

Dialogues

“Coming up slowly, moving your hands and feet, back with us now, so relaxed. Open your eyes...”

I could feel a blanket on top of me as I moved a little. I opened my eyes. Linda was standing beside me. Moving my head, I glanced around. Bernadette wasn't in the room.

“How do you feel?” Linda asked.

I took a breath. “Wow... Better. Rested, tingly almost. I thought I heard a different voice -- who is she?”

Linda smiled. “You'll meet her soon. Right now, you have enough time for a quick shower before dinner. Let me help you up. Slowly...”

“What time is it?” I asked as she helped me.

“A little after six,” she said as she handed me my T-shirt.

“Nice nap,” I said with a chuckle.

“Get used to it,” Linda said as she helped me stand.

I moved around a bit, moving my legs and hips, arms and back. “Much better! Tomorrow morning may be a different story, though.”

Linda nodded. “Oh, you'll undoubtedly feel it, but we'll be there to help.”

I noticed a mark on the inside of my right elbow. “What's this?” I asked, pointing.

“Another booster; it was easier to do that way.”

I nodded, slipping on my shoes. We walked to the house together, and up the stairs. I still had some residual soreness, but seemed to be moving a lot better.

It took a while to get the massage oil off me. I shaved again. I put on slacks and a pullover shirt. I put my bathroom things in an overnight-sized bag, along with workout stuff for the morning. The bag already had the alarm clock I used when traveling. I was looking forward to the evening...

It was a carnivore's dinner -- broiled tri-tip with an assortment of garnishes, hash browned potatoes, asparagus, and a full-bodied red wine.

And I was surrounded by full-bodied women... Bernadette sat to my right, Kendra on my left, both prodding me on how I was doing. Suzanne was sitting across from me, looking patient

and delicious. Deb was to the left of Kendra, and started making pointed remarks about what red meat and red wine did to her (already quite healthy) libido. That started a round of very thinly veiled remarks about what was to happen to me over the next few days, and how I'd better eat well, as I was going to need my strength. Through it all, Suzanne and Linda seemed aloof and above the fray. I guessed that Linda and Bernadette were egging Deb and Kendra on. I was a little surprised at the growl and look I got from Annette. As I responded to one remark with laughter, Kendra raked my leg with her fingernails.

Dinner ended, the table was cleared. I had water rather than coffee. Suzanne excused herself and left the room. That seemed to signal the breakup around the dinner table. Some of the ladies were headed to the rec room and invited me along.

Ellen surprised me by asking to speak with me in her office. Of course. I helped Bernadette and Kendra with their chairs, then went to Ellen. She held out her arm, and I took it in mine. We walked over to her office.

I closed the door when we were inside. As I turned though, she pushed me back against the door, kissing me and running her hands over me. But as suddenly as it started, it stopped, and she stepped back.

I shook my head.

"Just so you know you're not safe from me, either," she growled.

I laughed and we hugged. We sat around the smaller table she has in her office. I poured water for both of us.

"Did you get your water pitcher?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes -- Kathryn brought one over, and showed me where to fill it. What can I do for you?"

She smiled. "After the conversation around the table, you're asking me?"

I smiled. "Yes."

It was her turn to sigh. "I'll get my turn, don't you worry. How are you doing?"

I shook my head and had another sip of water. "That's a popular question. I'll know a lot better around lunch tomorrow. So far, fine. I expect to work out tomorrow morning, and every weekday morning, at least for a while."

"Linda said you asked for some help with that."

"Yes. Why not? I know I was in great shape in college, and for a few years after that. Since Tina left, though, I've let things slide."

“Kendra says you’re in good condition, more flexible than Suzanne was when she started.”

“That’s a surprise. I think my biggest problem will be to not push myself to hard. I think Kendra will keep an eye on me.”

“She’ll certainly help, as will Bernadette. Did the massage help?”

“Very much -- I hope she’s got me scheduled for tomorrow, as that’s when I think I’m really going to need it!”

“Oh, I think that’s a given, for a week or so. How’s your office going?”

“Suzanne showed me a great cabinet to keep things in. She’s getting it cleaned up. What’s happening with my computer?”

“That’s one of the things I wanted to talk about. We don’t use CRTs here, and yours is a little old to mate to a flat panel display. Would you be upset if we got you a new computer?”

“Not at all! The newer ones are much faster with Photoshop; I won’t spend as much time watching my fingernails grow. We could use the old one as a server.”

“Good. That should happen in a day or two, about the same time to get the network connection set up. And we should have business cards for you by the end of the week.”

“That sounds great. I’m looking forward to actually digging in to things next week. Who do I talk to about getting documents? Are they kept centrally, or can I get my own copies?”

“I’ll take care of that -- we’ll set you up with your own binders, as well as give you electronic copies. But I don’t expect you to spend more than half-time on that.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“We can talk more tomorrow night, to see how you’re doing physically. If you’re feeling up to it, we’d like to push you in terms of the physical training. That would entail working with Kendra, Bernadette, and Linda a few hours each day for the next week and a half to two weeks. They both think you’re up to it, but the decision is yours, and I don’t think you’re ready to make it quite yet. As you’ve said, how you’re doing tomorrow will be a better indicator.”

“And the reason for pushing is?”

“Valid question. Due to schedule reshuffling in Lucerne, one of the family could be here in two weeks. She’d visit for a few days, and then we’d go to Sedona for three or four days. After that the two of you would go on to Lucerne.”

“I feel like I’m being fattened up for the 4-H show, or worse.”

She laughed and reached over the table to hold my hand. “No, it’s just that our owner ... has certain expectations. You’ll understand when you meet her. We’ve all gone through it. If you’re willing, and able, you’ll go through it faster.”

“And if I can’t, or won’t?”

Ellen raised her shoulders in a shrug. “You do your best. That’s all anyone can ask.”

“Are there other men in the family?”

“One, currently, in Toronto.”

“And in the past?”

“Our owner’s first husband, who died at age 94. Another, died at 91. One other, expelled from the family five, no six, years ago. You’re the first one to join since then.”

“Why was he expelled?”

“Rob, please realize I’m giving you more information than perhaps I should, but I want to be honest with you. He took advantage of both family and staff, abusing them, and his position.”

“Thank you, Ellen. I appreciate your telling me. I’m still not sure what I’ve gotten into.”

“I know. It’s worth it. Thank you for your trust.”

“As I told Linda, the alternative is madness...”

She nodded. “You’re such a good fit.”

“That seems to be a common opinion,” I muttered.

She laughed. “We’ll see now, won’t we? I told Suzanne I’d protect you while she got ready... Do you need to pack a bag?”

I shook my head. “Already did that, including things for tomorrow morning.”

“I should have known... Have you thought about photography, where you want to start?”

“The tree, the tea house and the Japanese garden, the front stairs. Miriam’s hands on the piano keyboard ... so many things...”

Hidden Images

Ellen took on a more somber look. "Linda told me the remark you made -- very perceptive. Would it surprise you to know that none of the members of the family have any cavities in their teeth?"

"No, it wouldn't. I'll reserve for later whether or not that's extreme."

"That's a good approach. Some times perceptive vision is considered cynicism. I don't remember who said that."

"Sounds like Bierce or Clemens."

"Yes, it does."

"Ellen, what do you need me to do for you? What do you want? What do you need?"

She smiled and chuckled. "Ah, what an invitation..."

"Please accept it as such. Otherwise, I'll just have to guess..."

"Oh, that could be nice... I do like surprises, at least nice ones."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Perhaps we should look for Suzanne... The others may start to wonder..."

"I'll go up and get my bag. I could use a pit stop on the way."

"Please... I'll wait here. If you aren't back in ten minutes, I'll barge into Deb's room..."

"A wise plan. Thank you again for your candor -- I'll be back down in a few."

I let myself out and headed upstairs. I grabbed my bag, and visited the loo once more, taking the opportunity to brush my teeth and run the shaver over my face once more.

When I went back downstairs, Ellen's door was open, and Suzanne was sitting with her. As Ellen glanced over at me, Suzanne turned. She stood and picked up her bag.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Oh yes," I said, holding out my hand.

"Oh get out of here!" Ellen called.

We all laughed. Suzanne and I waved to her as we left.

Hidden Images

While the air was cool, it was surprisingly warm inside the tea house. "It's warm in here!" I said. It was warm, and lit by candles.

Suzanne nodded as she slid the door closed quickly. "Double walls, and radiant heating in the floor. I'll still need you to keep me warm, though."

I started shedding my clothes, and walked into the bathroom for one last leak. When I returned to the main room, she was standing by the bed.

I said, stepping closer to her, "Use me for your pleasure, and hold me afterwards."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," she said softly.

Her hands touched my shoulders as mine touched her hips. Our bodies moved closer, touching lightly as our lips met, then pressing together more. I hope she felt the electricity that I was feeling.

We moved to the bed, and under the light covers. Her skin felt so soft and smooth. We rolled around, caressing and kissing. I started moving down her -- I needed to know how she tasted. My hand could feel the heat radiating from between her thighs.

But as I kissed my way down from her navel, she pulled me back up. "Not tonight," she whispered, holding me to a nipple.

Her skin felt so soft and smooth, so sensuous. Soon I was on my back and she was impaled on top of me. I held her waist as she rocked.

Her head went back and she moaned, "Oh my God..."

I reached up and rolled her taut nipples in my fingers. She moaned more, rocking and shuddering on top of me, bringing her knees up to my sides and squeezing me. After a bit she grabbed my hands, holding them to her breasts. She raised her head and looked down at me with a mixture of lust and bliss.

"Your skin is so soft and warm," I whispered to her.

In response she put my hands over my head, still holding them. She spread her knees, pressing into me, and moved her hips slowly. I moaned as I felt my tip swirl around her cervix, my eyes closing.

She let go of my hands, still moving her hips in a slow, delicious grind.

Then that scent filled me, a hand found the back of my neck, and her voice growled, sending a shiver of pleasure through me.

She used me; we used each other. I was hungry for her, hungry to have her in so many ways. She was on her knees as I took her from behind, pounding into her bottom. As she moaned and came once more, I was amazed I still hadn't come. That's when she said something, and my hands went to her waist once again, and I felt it building in me, building, and I couldn't stop, feeling our bodies slide together and apart, sliding on her sweat-slicked bottom, finally coming convulsively, needing to press in deeper, trying to hold on...

We collapsed, holding each other, cooling quickly. My lips found her sweat-covered shoulder, and I sucked on her skin as I held her, my arms around her waist.

She started moving in my arms. Our arms and legs flailed as we slipped apart and rearranged, ending with her partially on top of me holding me. She pulled a sheet over us.

I woke partially some time later. She was on her back and I was at her side. I could feel her moving, and hear her moaning softly. I moved by touch, taking her nipple in my mouth, feeling it tighten as I sucked on her. And I was filled with another scent, one with a jasmine base, a scent that made me even hungrier for her. We started out with me on top, but after she came for the first time, she rolled me to my back.

She encouraged me with her hands, her body, and her voice. I didn't hold back -- I couldn't, and I didn't need to. We kissed as I started coming inside her. Our kiss turned into another embrace, and I drifted to sleep with her head on my chest.

The alarm went off and I moved to silence it. I moaned and moved toward Suzanne.

She moved to sitting up. "Sore?" she asked.

"God, yes," I replied, reaching for her.

"Need help getting up?"

"Do we have to?"

She moved to all fours. "Yes. We're expected. You need it."

I knew what I needed. I moved over closer to her, pulling her on top of me.

"Oh all right -- for just a minute," she sighed.

I sighed as well, feeling her on top of me.

But soon she was getting us up.

"Do I have time to shower?" I asked as we went into the bathroom.

"No -- don't bother."

“Oh God, I don’t know if I could take another class like yesterday,” I moaned as I sat on the toilet.

She laughed. “You should have seen and heard me! I was a basket case!”

She walked too close to me and I got my arms around her.

“Oh you...” she whispered, holding me for a moment.

I managed to brush my teeth, comb my hair, and run the shaver over my face. Last night’s clothes went into my bag, and I put on my shorts and a T-shirt with sweats over that.

“How far ahead do you have to book that place for Friday or Saturday night?” I asked as we crunched along the gravel path.

She laughed, a hand on my back. “Oh, we’ll get the chance, don’t you worry...”

Annette and Kendra were already in the exercise room when we arrived.

Kendra was concerned about how I was doing. Quickly I was on the floor being prodded, gently. She wasn’t concerned that I was sore in so many places I hadn’t known I had, and was happy my knees and low back weren’t sore. She had me roll to my back and lift my right leg up in the air. She stepped up close to me, held my ankle, and started moving my leg closer to my body. I moaned, feeling the stretch from my bottom all the way to my ankle.

She let up quickly, looking down at me and shaking her head. She looked to the ladies and said, “Could someone help Rob relax a bit?”

I was surprised when Annette hopped over to me, sitting by my head. She surprised me even more when she slid her hands under my head and leaned over, pressing my face between her leotard-covered breasts. She did something, said something, and I was floating again.

I was still there, partially. I could relax and let Kendra move me, stretching.

I remember Bernadette coming in and taking Kendra’s place working with me. Turning my head to the side, I saw Annette and Suzanne working together. Annette was remarkably limber. She gave me an interesting look.

We switched places. Kendra stood by me, helping me work with Bernadette, learning what to feel for, to watch for.

Where the previous day’s class had been quite strenuous, this one was much calmer -- not that it was any easier. We held poses for much longer, either by ourselves or with help, letting gravity do most of the work. More than once someone gave me a squeeze, or whispered,

“Relax...” into my ear. That, and Kendra’s voice saying, “Let each breath take you deeper ... into the pose.”

Near the end we did a spinal twist, shoulders on the floor, one leg over to the opposite side. As I did it, Bernadette held my shoulders down on the mat, and Kendra pulled and positioned the rest of me. Glorious.

As I held Bernadette’s shoulders, looking down at her body, I heard a sound -- it wasn’t just a sound, it was a sound I recognized -- it was the sound of Suzanne coming. I looked over and saw Annette holding Suzanne’s shoulders and whispering in her ear, Suzanne moaning and shuddering, her eyes closed.

Something in me clicked. I leaned down to Bernadette, inhaling her heady aroma.

“Relax deeper,” I whispered. “Relax and come for me. I want you -- I want you on top of me, riding me, squeezing me, oh so good, riding me and coming... Come for me, please...”

As I whispered, her breathing shifted and she started moaning as well. I held her shoulders, whispering hotly in her ear, whispering as if someone was telling me what to say, listening to her moan, feeling her body respond as well.

“That’s good; let her relax,” Kendra said in my ear. She whispered to me and I repeated what she said. She helped me move to my back, then led us all into a few minutes of relaxation.

“Thank you, ladies -- see you tomorrow morning,” Kendra announced.

I wobbled my head and started to sit up. Bernadette, Annette, and Suzanne were getting up.

Kendra walked over and pushed me back to the floor with a foot. “You’re not finished,” she growled.

“Leave some for us,” Bernadette chided as she stood up.

As the others laughed and gathered their things, Kendra moved to the floor next to me. As I looked over to her, she smiled.

Then she said, “Both legs up, 90 degrees -- lower the right, one, two three...”

We did leg lifts on our backs, then on our sides. Then it was on the back again for more abdominal work.

“Okay, relax again -- left leg out, right knee up, swing it over to the left. Deep breath.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, feeling Kendra pressing my shoulders down again, feeling the stretch not only in my back, but also in my abdominal muscles.

“What you did with Bernadette was pretty hot,” she said.

I chuckled a little.

“What prompted that?” she asked.

“Hearing Suzanne -- that was a surprise. I thought Annette was Deb’s pet or something.”

I heard Kendra chuckle. “Annette is a very complex woman. It’s hard to say some times who’s the pet... You did very well today -- I’m surprised you didn’t jump Bernadette.”

I sighed. “I wouldn’t jump her, I’d pull her on top of me. God... I was half in a fog most of the time -- that helped, actually.”

“You’d like her on top of you?” Kendra asked.

“Oh yes.”

“Would you like me on top of you?” she whispered hotly in my ear.

I moaned my reply.

She pushed more on my shoulders as she whispered in my ear. I felt myself growing harder, my breath picking up again.

She let go of my shoulders. I opened my eyes and looked up. She knelt by my hips and with a lusty smile pulled off my shorts. She reached down and unsnapped the bottom of her leotard, pulling the front portion up a bit as she straddled me.

We slid together with a moan.

“Oh, slow down -- you feel so good,” I told her. It was so different, on the floor covered by the thin padding, compared to a bed. I felt her weight pushing my lower back to the floor, felt her pubic bones. Her hands found my shoulders again. I pulled my feet up, spreading my legs, letting her do the work.

Her rocking, which had been deliciously slow, suddenly changed. I saw the look of concentration and bliss on her face as her hips moved faster. Her eyes closed and her motion shifted a bit more. I pressed my hands gently against her breasts, her nipples protruding proudly in her leotard.

“Oh yes...” she hissed, raising her chin, her hips accelerating a bit more.

“Neck...” she whispered a few moments later.

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I moved my hands up to her neck. Part of me was unsure what to do. I squeezed her neck gently, my thumbs at the front of her throat, my fingers going around the back of her neck. She moaned and shuddered. I held her a bit tighter.

I relaxed my grip on her as she opened her eyes. She looked down at me.

“Like this,” she whispered.

I felt her hands move from my shoulders up my neck. The sensation was exquisite as her fingers moved along my neck.

She fixed my eyes in hers, and as she squeezed me, she commanded, “Come!” rocking her hips slowly and strongly. I moaned and held on to her arms as I pumped into her. She lowered herself down lower, lower, lower, until we kissed. I slid my arms around her.

She sat up on me and with a sigh and a smile said, “Ah, that’s much better!”

I put my arms around her waist. “I agree -- didn’t think getting into shape would be so much fun.”

She laughed and wiggled a bit more. She grabbed one corner of the towel we were on, and as she slid off, wiped us with it.

Snapping her leotard closed, she growled, “I’ll see you here at three this afternoon.”

I moaned, then chuckled. “Okay -- thanks. I hope I can still move...”

I got my shorts on again, put on my sweats, socks, and shoes, and headed back to the main house.

I had a light breakfast, took a shower, and then went to my “office.” My copy of the Wall Street Journal was on the desk, in a wooden “in” tray. The water pitcher was full. I read the paper, sorted through boxes, and started pulling out prints to display.

“Knock knock?”

I looked up to see Bernadette coming in.

“Good morning -- again. Have a seat. What can I do for you?”

She smiled as she sat down. “I hope you enjoyed this morning as much as I did.”

I sighed and nodded. “That was quite an experience.”

She laughed. “You learn fast. How are you feeling? About ready for lunch?”

“Is it that time already?” I asked. “I left my watch upstairs. Guess I could use a clock down here. I’m feeling much better. When I woke up this morning, I was sore -- wow.”

“You’re getting another massage this afternoon, when Kendra finishes with you.”

“Then I’d better get something to eat to keep my strength up! I’ll pop upstairs to the bathroom and meet you next door.”

“Oh, you don’t have to go upstairs -- you can use the one in my office, as long as I don’t have any customers.”

She stood up and I followed.

I saw the look on her face. “Why do I think I might have to pay a toll on the way out?”

She laughed. “I knew you were smart...”

It was an inexpensive toll -- she pulled me up against her as she leaned against the wall. I took the hint and pressed into her as we kissed.

Lunch was good. Conversation included innuendos about the exercise session this morning. Annette was full of remarks, displaying a vitality I hadn’t seen in her before.

After lunch, Annette dropped by, nominally to check out where I wanted the new storage cabinet which would arrive Tuesday, and where the old cabinet was going to go. The way she moved, though, carried another message. She left and I got back to work.

“What’s the matter?”

I looked to the door. Suzanne was standing there. I took the green index card in my hand and tossed it in the trash where it joined two or three others. “Nothing. How nice to see you again.” I stood up and gave her a hug.

“Thanks for a wonderful night -- I look forward to another, with a much more leisurely morning after,” I told her, kissing her neck.

“Oh, I enjoyed it as well,” she said, giving me a squeeze.

“What brings you by?” I asked, running my hands over her back.

She laughed softly and stepped back a bit. “I’m to escort you back over to Kendra -- go up and get changed.”

I sighed, pulled her closer, and let my head down on her shoulder. She laughed and gave me another squeeze. “Go -- you don’t want to be late.”

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I kissed her neck once more. "Okay. Will you be joining us?"

She put her hands on her hips, shaking her head. "Not today -- I'm still catching up from yesterday."

"I'm sorry -- I enjoyed your company immensely."

She smiled again. "So did I -- now get moving!"

"Yes, dear!" I said, scooting out the door before she could swat me in the rear.

I visited the loo again, changed into my running stuff, and headed over. We did much the same routine -- running on the treadmill followed by stretching on my back, then walking over to Bernadette's office. Once I stripped down, she had me do some stretches, then had me get on the massage table.

I put my face into the cradle, that scent filled me, her hands touched my back, and I floated away.

I woke on my back, a blanket on top of me, Bernadette standing by my side.

"Thank you very much for this morning," she said, placing a hand on my chest.

"I want you on top of me," I whispered. "I want to hold you and be lost in your arms."

She smiled. "Spend the night with me?"

"Love to."

She stepped back, holding out her hands. She helped me sit up, and after I'd been sitting for a bit, watched me stand. "How do you feel now?"

I shook my arms out a little, then my legs. "Much better." I rubbed my ears. "My ears feel funny -- like I've been wearing headphones or something. Definitely not as sore."

"Good. You've got time to shower before dinner. I need to shower as well."

"We could save water," I suggested.

She laughed. "We don't have that much time, but save that thought..."

END of Part 4

Dark Passage

I sat between Deb and Ellen at dinner. I was surprised to learn that Ellen was not only the director for our site, but for Sedona as well, spending one week a month there.

An odd thing -- the dinner plates are prepared in the kitchen, with serving dishes brought out later for those who want seconds. The food is great. But my first reaction when a plate was put in front of me was to sweep the vegetables, green beans prepared with shallots and bacon, off of the plate. But they were delicious -- I had more. As a kid I'd not liked many vegetables, especially green beans. The beans we had when I was a kid were canned, a livid unreal-green color. Come to think of it, at breakfast, I'd torn off the top crust on my toast -- something else I used to do as a little kid. Weird. Similar thing at lunch -- a strong reaction to something, a reaction that surprised me, but faded quickly.

When I mentioned I was going through prints for display around the estate, Ellen let me know quite clearly that I should bring them by her office first -- so she could select the ones she wanted in *her* office. While her tone was overtly conversational, I answered, "Yes, dear."

Ellen's office door was closed when I came by after dinner with an armload of prints. I knocked on the door and she called out, "Come in!"

Kendra was sitting at the small table with Deb. She closed up a folder and said, "See you in the morning..."

"Oh, stick around -- you might want some for your torture chamber," I told her.

She gave me a funny look.

I sighed and put a hand on her shoulder. "Thank you for your efforts. I know I'll thank you -- just not when I first try to move in the morning..."

She smiled. "You're doing fine. Maybe we can go for a run this weekend."

"Have some pictures?" Ellen interrupted.

"Yes, dear," I replied, to laughter.

After two or three pictures, another damn green index card fell out of the stack. I quickly pocketed it.

"What was that?" Kendra asked.

"Nothing -- a bad joke," I told her, and went back to the prints I'd brought. Ellen liked three, and Kendra thought a few would look good in the fitness center.

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We sat talking for a while. I felt tired; it had been a long day. "Sorry, folks -- I'm heading for bed. Someone insists I be up early in the morning..."

"I can drop the other pictures in your office," Kendra offered.

"Thanks -- just put them on the desk."

After brief hugs I headed upstairs. I wasn't tired, I was exhausted. I cleaned up in the bathroom, set out my exercise things for the morning, set the alarm, and crawled into bed.

It wasn't a dream -- I woke at least partially to a warm, soft, amorous, and quite naked woman in bed with me. I was wearing a T-shirt, and we struggled together to get it off. We kissed, our bodies sliding together again, that delicious contact of skin against skin. After a brief period, I was on top of her, sliding in. At some point she put her hands on my lower back -- they felt so warm, so good, as she urged me into her deeper. We came, our lips locked together. We settled in together, snuggled up.

I woke suddenly -- wide awake. Two thirty said the clock. I got up carefully, looking at Bernadette sleeping peacefully next to me. I walked across the hall and used the bathroom.

Back in "my" room, I stood there by the bed for a bit. What was going on? I had that feeling again, that feeling of the instant before impact when time feels suspended. I sat on the edge of the bed, moving my arms, rolling my head. I felt weird, physically and mentally, but didn't have a clue as to why.

"Is something wrong?" Bernadette asked softly behind me.

I turned and slid back into bed. "Don't know -- I'm wide awake all of a sudden."

She opened her arms. "I can help with that..."

I moved over into her arms, sliding down. She held me, nestling my head between her breasts. As she cradled my head, I had a momentary surge of almost panic, even as I melted in her arms. She held me, rocked me, and whispered me back to sleep.

When the alarm went off, I whacked the snooze bar and held her again. She held me to her, sighing, "Oh yes, just like that..."

When the alarm went off again, we got up. We separated with a hug and a kiss, heading to our respective bathrooms.

I don't know how Kendra's class was -- it was challenging, yet all the time I had more of these weird feelings.

After class, I walked back to the house with Bernadette. "Sorry I ducked out on you last night -- I was exhausted," I told her.

She put an arm around me. "That's okay; that's what Kendra told me. It was nice waking you."

I put my arm around her. "I'm not sure how awake I was..."

"What happened in the middle of the night?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Don't know -- woke up suddenly, wide awake, feeling weird somehow. Don't know what it was. You had the antidote, though. I'm glad you were there."

"Mmmm... So was I. You are so warm to snuggle with..."

I chuckled. "Thanks -- I don't know if I'm feeling warm, cold, or what right now."

I cleaned up, had something to eat, and went to the office. The other prints were nicely stacked on my desk. I put them aside and read through the Wall Street Journal.

Going through the prints and putting them away around ten thirty, I ran across another damn green index card.

"Shit! This is going to stop!" I muttered to nobody in particular. I turned to the phone, picked it up, and put it down again. I didn't know how to call other people in the complex.

I picked up the latest card, and walked down the hall to where Kendra had her office. The door was closed, so I knocked.

"Yes?" she said from inside.

I opened it, sticking my head in. She was sitting at her desk.

"Could you come over to my place? I've got a problem."

"Sure," she said, getting up.

We went back to my office. I offered her a chair.

"What's going on?" she asked.

I poured myself more water, and took the latest card out of my pocket.

"Someone is playing games. I want it to stop. Recognize the writing?"

I handed her the card. It had "RUN AWAY NOW!" scrawled on it.

She looked at it, frowning, turning it over. "This the one that I saw last night?"

I shook my head. "No, this one appeared a little while ago."

"So there's more than one? How many have you gotten? When did they start?"

I looked over to the trash can. It hadn't been emptied. I retrieved six more. "They started about two days ago, appearing randomly, in the office here." I handed them to her.

She looked them over. She held one out to me. It was the one that had "YOUR IN DANGER" scrawled on it -- it looked as if it had been done by a six-year-old.

"Yeah, the grammar matches the penmanship," I said sardonically.

"Do you recognize the handwriting, if you could call it that?" she asked.

I shook my head again. "I'd say no, but then again I'd say not quite -- it's like I should recognize it. Thought you might."

She shook her head. "Can't say that I do. Someone is trying to send you a message, though -- 'Danger,' 'Your in danger,' 'Run away.' Do you know where the cards themselves came from?"

"Oh yeah -- I use 'em for taking notes, marking places in books, picking stuff out of my teeth. Oh shit..." I opened the desk drawer. The top card on the stack bore the scrawl "GET OUT NOW!"

"When's the last time you opened this drawer?" she asked.

"Yesterday?" I replied. "Last night?"

"Is that a black pen?" she asked, pointing to a ballpoint at the front of the drawer.

"Yeah," I said, reaching for it.

Her hand grabbed mine. "Don't touch -- I may want to try to get prints off it. Who else has seen these? Who else have you told?"

I sighed, sitting down again. "You and Ellen saw the one last night. Suzanne saw one, I think. I haven't told anyone about it other than you. I thought it was a joke at first, and let it slide. It's beginning to bug me."

She held one of the cards in front of her, looking at it almost sideways. "God -- whoever did this pressed really hard -- you can read it from the other side of the card." She held the card in front of me, turning it. You could see the creases in the card from the lettering.

"Okay -- precision work, going right along with the penmanship and grammar."

She smiled. "Yeah, not quite up to the standards of your to-do list..." She pointed at the list I had on the desk. As is common with the profession, my printing was small, neat, precise.

"A little different... What now? This is your domain."

She nodded, her lips pursed grimly. "Yup. Go take a walk. Stay out of here until after lunch. Don't tell anyone about this -- not Ellen, not Deb."

I nodded. "I won't knowingly tell anyone. Okay, have fun. I'll be out by the tree."

I headed next door, got a light jacket, visited the loo, then headed out and sat by the tree.

Snakes in paradise? What was going on? Who was our "owner?" So many questions, so many things going on... I closed my eyes, sitting back. My head hurt. So did my knees, although it wasn't a muscle or ligament kind of hurt. And my armpits hurt. That was weird.

As I looked up through the tree, I saw a couple of leaves turning color. Next week would be it. Part of me started composing images. I laughed to myself -- I could see one series in my mind's eye -- from the angle, they'd have to be taken from a cherry-picker, the camera up about thirty feet off the ground. Somehow I didn't think I'd have a problem getting someone to rent one for me for a few days. I knew I'd want to use a plum-bob and a long string, and some kind of marker on the ground so I'd be able to shoot from that same spot in the spring and summer.

The artistic side of me chewed on that problem happily for a while. I knew what I wanted to do, how to approach it, and what the shots would look like. And damn, they felt like they'd look really good.

Ah well, about time to head back for lunch. I headed by the storage building and spoke with George for a few minutes as he cleaned up the cabinet that was to go in my office. It was looking quite good.

Lunch was good, but I wasn't that hungry. Once or twice I almost looked behind me, the feeling of something not-so-good approaching was so strong.

I went back to the office and started sketching out shots, figuring lighting angles. I could use an overall plot of the property to figure sun angles. Terraserver should have something. When was my new confuser arriving?

I refilled my water pitcher -- I was thirsty. When I got back to the office, another damn card was on my chair -- "GET OUT BEFORE ITS TOO LATE." Gee, getting positively wordy. I put the pitcher on its stand and walked to Kendra's office. I knocked on her door -- no reply.

I started back to my office, but stopped suddenly. I felt like shit, and I mean really bad. I held on to the wall, trembling. I didn't know if I was hot or cold -- I felt like both. I wobbled to Bernadette's door. Thankfully it was open.

Hidden Images

I held on to the door frame. She was at her desk, and looked up at me. Her smile quickly changed to a look of concern, and she practically bolted from her chair.

She helped me inside. "Rob, what's the matter? You don't look well!"

She walked me directly to her little infirmary next door.

I told her how I was feeling -- shitty, sore armpits, knees, elbows, hot and cold, trembly...

I started shivering as she took my temperature and checked my blood pressure.

"Okay, let's get you covered up -- you're running a fever," she told me.

We got my shoes off. I emptied my pants pockets and got into her little infirmary bed. She put another blanket on top of me.

"How do you feel? Any warmer?" she asked, putting a hand on my head. Her hand felt quite cool.

"Still freezing," I told her. I closed my eyes. "The light hurts."

"Okay... You're quite warm. I'll get shades for your eyes. Don't go away."

The eyeshades seemed to help. After a bit, she put a mask on my face. I don't know if she gassed me, or what, but I was really out of it. I wasn't awake, but I wasn't asleep either.

I was more awake. I was thirsty, and also needed to pee. She helped me to the bathroom. I changed into sweats. When she asked how I felt, I told her I was sore from head to toe -- it felt like every muscle and joint in my body hurt.

Nightmares -- when I was little, the few times I was sick, I had nightmares and hallucinations. This time I was little again, six or seven maybe. I was in my old house, where I grew up, except the doors were wrong -- and the hallway was too long. I had to get away; they were after me. But my arms and legs wouldn't work right. My legs were so slow and hard to move that I tried pulling myself along with my arms, but they didn't help much. I looked behind me, and Linda was after me -- so much taller than me, her eyes glowing red. I cried and screamed, trying to wake myself up, but it didn't work.

I saw someone ahead of me -- Suzanne. I cried out to her. But when she turned around, her eyes were glowing red as well. She came closer.

It was so hard to move. I squeezed my eyes shut, screaming, crying. They touched me and I tried to fight...

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That scent filled me, and someone held me as I melted into their arms. I still tried to get away; I had to get away. They held me, rocked me, tried to comfort me.

I was on my stomach. Strong hands were massaging the muscles in my legs. I could feel a mask on my face, eyeshades covering my eyes. I tried to say something, but a noise was all I could make.

The hands paused. "Rob, nod if you can hear me." It was Bernadette. I nodded.

"Rob, you're still feverish. Does this help?"

I nodded again.

"Good. Relax, Rob, and let us take care of you."

Her hands started in again, working on my legs. My head started buzzing again. On my back, I remember doing stretches for my legs and hips.

More nightmares -- they were after me again. I felt older, fourteen or so. There was something I could do to escape but I couldn't think clearly. I stopped trying to run. I was in the upstairs hall of the main house. No, that wasn't right -- some part of me knew that wasn't right -- I was somewhere else, on my back. I closed my eyes and tried to wake up, trying to scream, to shout, to make some sound. Something was on my face -- that made me even more scared. I couldn't see anything.

Linda's voice -- trying to help, trying to calm me. Part of me wanted to run, but part of me trusted her, needed her. I tried calling out to her, holding my arms out to her. Something held my arms, my wrists.

I tried to scream as something was taken off my face. Then I felt cool skin, heard a heartbeat, felt hands cradling my head. I was safe -- I was in Linda's arms. She would protect me. I wanted to hold her, but something still held my arms. I cried, and she held me, cradled me, spoke to me, trying to calm me. Something bit my right arm -- she held me, spoke to me -- I was safe. A flash of heat and buzzing enveloped me.

Voices filled me. I was floating somewhere. I still hurt, but I was safe. Linda's voice, Bernadette, and another woman's voice that I'd heard before. They would protect me, and I would protect them.

The voices went on and on, sometimes talking to me, other times talking to someone else. The voices carried me, soothed me, as strong hands massaged and stretched my still-sore body.

I was hot and sweaty. I managed to kick off a seemingly endless layer of blankets on top of me. That helped -- I was cooling off. Something was still holding my arms and wrists.

Hidden Images

Hands on my body again. I opened my eyes; the room was dimly lit, but I could see Bernadette over me as she worked the outside of my legs. I took a breath, feeling myself grow erect, feeling her hands work the outsides of my legs.

She paused and moved her head over me. She smiled.

“I want you,” I whispered. “I need you.”

I felt her on top of me. I slid into her, and she leaned forward as she rocked, teasing me with her breasts. She slid a hand behind my head and held me to a breast. I pumped into her as she rocked, holding me.

I was on my side. My eyes felt as if they were full of sand and glue. My throat was dry. I felt clammy, sweaty, sticky. But I could move my arms again. I pushed the covers off me.

I struggled my eyes open. I was in the little infirmary still, the lights in the room off, but light coming in from next door. I tried to call out, but only succeeded in making a noise.

That was enough -- Bernadette came in.

“No, don’t rub your eyes. Let me get a washcloth,” she said. The washcloth felt good -- cool. I sat up, my feet touching the cool floor. She got me a glass of water. The first two sips I took slowly, then gulped the rest down.

She sat on the bed next to me. “How do you feel?”

I moved my head around and cleared my throat. “Like I’ve been through hell. God, what a night!”

She put a hand on my back. “It’s about ten in the morning, Monday...”

I sighed, putting a hand on her thigh. “Shit... What hit me?”

She rubbed my back. “You had a high fever, and pretty violent hallucinations.”

“God, I remember those -- haven’t had anything like that since I was a little kid.”

“Want to try and stand? I’ll help.”

“You’ll have to...”

She helped me stand. I hugged her. Her arms went around me.

“Feel better?” she asked.

“Was making love with you a dream?”

She sighed. "No, that was real -- last night about ten. You slept through the night."

She walked me over to the little bathroom. "Think you can stand on your own and shower?"

"Yeah, I need one."

"At least one, darling..."

I managed to shower, although I was glad there were grab bars and a stool to use.

Bernadette helped me dry off.

"What happened here," I asked, pointing to marks on the inside of my right elbow.

"I had you on IV fluids, you were sweating so much."

I also had marks on my forearms near the wrists, and pointed to one of those.

She sighed and held me, wet towel and all. "When I said violent hallucinations, that's what I meant -- we had to restrain and sedate you for a while."

"I hope I didn't hurt anyone."

"Oh, you didn't -- you made it."

When I was dry, she had me get on the scale. We figure I lost around eight pounds.

"God, I could eat a horse!" I muttered. I turned and saw Linda in the doorway, clothes in her arms. I stumbled towards her, ending up where I wanted to be, which was in her arms.

"You're doing better," she said happily.

"Yes, thanks to your help, you and Bernadette."

"And Kendra -- we took turns watching you."

Linda helped me dress. Bernadette handed me a large glass of something cold.

"What's this?"

"Help replace your electrolytes -- if that stays down, you can have lunch later on."

I drank it down fairly quickly. "That helped," I told them.

“Feel like talking?” Linda asked.

Before I could respond, Bernadette said, “Not until later this afternoon, after he’s had something to eat and a little more rest.”

Linda nodded and gave me another hug. “I agree.”

“What now?” I asked.

“Why don’t we go to your office,” Linda said.

I was still a little wobbly going down the hall. The wooden cabinet had been installed, as had the file for negatives and photos.

“Wow -- looks great,” I said as she managed me to my chair.

“Thank Suzanne for that -- she put in quite a bit of time yesterday organizing things.”

“I will -- I’m not sure how I’m going to thank you all for taking care of me.”

Linda leaned back in her chair and gave me a sultry look. “Oh, I can think of a few things...”

Bernadette filled my water pitcher with more of the colored stuff. I started looking through the paper.

“Are you baby-sitting me?” I finally asked.

Bernadette smiled. “Yes -- someone is going to be with you all the time until we’re sure you’ve recovered.”

I sighed and nodded. “Want to see some of the paper?”

I drank a few more glasses of stuff. I stopped to use the bathroom in Bernadette’s office on the way to lunch. She took my blood pressure and temperature, both pretty close to normal.

We stopped by my room on the way, mainly so I could shave.

Lunch was weird on a number of counts. Aside from Ellen asking how I was doing, and Suzanne looking quite concerned, it was as if nothing had happened. Okay, maybe they’re right, nothing has happened, at least nothing important. I was served soup for lunch, that and bread. Linda and Bernadette sat on either side of me eating what looked like Caesar salads with chicken.

I was walking back to my office, and had just stepped out the door of the main house. The air smelled fresh and crisp, late fall. I looked to the distance, and the bright light in my eyes

was matched by a sharp pain in my head. I covered my eyes. Someone put a hand on my arm; another arm went around my waist.

“What is it?” asked Linda.

“Bright light -- wow, instant headache!”

I was hustled back to Bernadette’s lair and on to the bed.

“I want another blood sample,” Bernadette said, walking in with a tray.

To my sigh and look of discomfort, Linda sat next to me and started leaning over. “I know how to help,” she said softly.

She held me, and I floated off in her arms.

“Wake up, sleepy...”

I rolled over. Bernadette was standing next to me. “How’s your head?”

I blinked and sat up. “Okay... Headache is sort of gone, but it feels like it’s gone for a while but coming back, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I do. How about the rest of you?”

I rolled my shoulders. “Tense, tight somehow. I need to use the bathroom.”

“Let me help you up.”

She helped me up and into a hug. “Oh, that helps a lot,” I whispered.

As we walked to the bathroom, I saw my workout clothes on top of a cabinet. Yup, about twenty to three in the afternoon. “Am I up for that this afternoon?” I asked, pointing to the clothes.

She chuckled as she picked them up. “I’d say yes. It will be a light session. We just want you to warm up enough so you can stretch safely, then it will be back over here for a massage. How about that?”

I sighed. “Sounds good to me.”

I went to the bathroom, and changed my clothes.

“So, how am I doing?” I asked as we walked to the fitness center.

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“Your electrolytes are coming back to normal, balanced levels. You’re still showing signs consistent with a severe bout with a virus.”

“Well, I think I won...”

“I think so,” she said, a hand on my back.

Kendra ran me on the treadmill for a few minutes, then we went to the floor for some serious stretching. I drop into that haze almost automatically; it’s so much easier.

I was aware enough to notice Bernadette stepping away for a minute.

“What about the green cards?” I asked Kendra. “Find out anything?”

She smiled as she pressed on my shoulders. I exhaled as the world went softer again.

“Yes, some loose ends to take care of, but you won’t be getting any more of them.”

“Who?” I asked.

She smiled and pressed again. My eyes closed. I heard her say, “Ask again in a few days...”

On the massage table back at Bernadette’s office, it seemed as if every place she touched me made me twitch or jump. After a few minutes of this, she placed both her hands on my back. That made me twitch too.

She sighed. “Let’s try it this way then...” After a moment, she said, “Lift your head a little.” She placed a mask over my face. I could hear a soft hissing. “Deep breath for me now... Hold it... Now blow it all out, all out, all out... Good -- deep breath in again...”

That turned me all fuzzy and buzzy; things went far easier.

I was still a bit spaced as we walked back to the house. I had time to shower and clean up before dinner.

I guess I wasn’t out of the weeds just yet -- I had pasta for dinner while everyone else had fish, veggies, and rice. Still, the pesto tasted freshly made, with plenty of garlic. At least I was drinking water, rather than the colored stuff I’d had so far during the day.

Near the end of dinner, Annette had some news for me.

“We set up your new computer this afternoon. What should we do with your old one, and the printer and scanner?”

I wished for Linda or Bernadette’s hand on my back, that calming touch.

“Move them into the office so I can transfer the files. I’ll use the old printer and scanner.”

“We can get you new ones if you’d like,” she said.

I forced a smile. “No, I’d prefer the old ones. I spent a lot of time doing color calibration on them, and they’re very stable. The newer models don’t give you the performance or the repeatability of the older stuff. That’s very, very important to me in color work.”

She gave me an inquisitive look, so I spent a few minutes talking about the different color systems, additive and subtractive, different color models, and the problems involved in keeping green looking the same shade of green from the source through to a print or a display screen. I told them of friends in the wedding photography business who regularly sent in fabric swatches with print orders so the prints would match the shade the very picky bride selected.

That got nods of understanding. It also got us dessert. We all had orange sherbet; it was tangy and good; the first taste brought a pang from the glands in my neck and throat.

“Oh, I dropped off something this afternoon as well,” Ellen mentioned as she licked her spoon.

I raised an eyebrow.

She gave me a grin as she lasciviously took the spoon from her mouth. “A nice big 3-ring binder of some of the densest language I’ve ever seen. You have electronic copies as well.”

The thought of digging into that stuff was actually exciting. That must have showed, as Annette shuddered.

I chuckled a bit, shaking my head. I thought about suggesting we go through them together -- in a lewd voice, but realized we’d end up doing that eventually.

As we left the table and headed out, I started walking back to the office. Linda caught up with me in the hallway. Her hand felt very comforting on my back. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

I sighed. Suddenly I felt exhausted. I leaned against the wall. “Beat,” I managed to say.

Linda and Bernadette helped me upstairs. I got ready for bed. I could barely keep my eyes open, but managed to say, “Please hold me...”

Linda tucked me in, holding me for the few moments it took for me to go to sleep.

I woke in the middle of the night -- all that fluid I’d been drinking had to go somewhere, and it wanted to go now. I made it to the bathroom, sitting for an extended period of time.

I was still spacey as I stepped back into the hallway. It was almost like one of the nightmares I'd had. I saw the "Do not disturb" sign hanging on my door and paused. Should I go in? Why not, it's my room. Is it? Someone else might have moved in. I knew I wasn't supposed to go into a room when it had that kind of sign out. But it's my room! I reached for the doorknob and those nightmarish feelings increased.

With a shudder and a shake, I threw those feelings off. I looked both ways down the hallway. I moved my arms and legs -- they moved freely, so I knew I wasn't dreaming. I turned quickly, opened the door, and went in. I resisted the urge to turn on the light. I didn't need it, I told myself. I closed the door and crawled back into bed -- into an empty bed, a cold bed.

I woke to the alarm, rolled out of bed, and went to the bathroom, grabbing my exercise things on the way. I was the second one in the fitness center; Linda was already there. She smiled at me and I gave her a pained look. She started moving closer, but a bunch of people came in at the same time.

She worked with me during class. We spent most of the time stretching, especially hips and legs. While I enjoyed the work, especially being on my back and having someone work with me, something inside me was holding back. Even when we were relaxing at the end of class, it was hard to let go, even with Linda leaning over me, looking in my eyes.

She leaned over me, smiling softly, and pressed on my shoulders. I relaxed a little more, but was still caught on something. She frowned a little, a look of concern. I closed my eyes, trying to let go -- that sounds so silly, and it was, trying to let go.

But I guess it worked, at least some. I floated and relaxed -- with something twitching in the distance -- twitching, uncomfortable.

Kendra didn't keep me after class. Linda took my arm in hers as we walked back. I managed a wave to Suzanne -- she gave me a pained look.

"What's wrong, Rob?" Linda asked as we went in the back door to the house.

We ended up in her room. The words spilled out of me -- waking up alone, the way I felt in the hallway struggling with that sign on my door, the feeling of something holding back, something uncomfortable, something scared.

"Will you let me hold you?" she asked.

I nodded. "I ... I feel six or seven again..." I whispered.

She smiled, taking me to her bed. She pulled down the covers. I slipped out of my shoes and got in.

"Close your eyes," she whispered.

I closed my eyes. I heard her moving about the room, her door opening, but not very far as it soon closed again. I heard something like drawers or doors, and then she was sliding into bed next to me.

She leaned over on top of me a little. My arms went around her. Her hands went around me, cradling me to her, pulling my head between her bare breasts. I trembled a little and she paused.

"I'm scared..." I whispered.

She held me gently, rocking a little. "There's nothing to be scared about. You're safe in my arms. I'm going to hold you just like this until you know you're safe..."

It was like waiting for a muscle to uncramp, so slow and painful. Eventually I snuggled in, kissing her softness and warmth.

She offered me a nipple, which I accepted. She cradled me, speaking softly, helping me loosen the knots in my muscles, and the knots somewhere else as well, the knots that were holding me back.

Oh how I wanted to be filled with that scent again, to let it take me away... But she held me, whispering me down into softness in her arms, so slowly, so gently, until finally the scent did fill me, and I faded away...

I woke up in her arms. I held her, squeezed her, taking in her scent. This time her caresses filled me with fire. She cooed for me to let go to her. I cried for her to help me; I didn't know how. She taught me with her hands, her body, her voice, riding us to bliss, and back to comfort in her arms.

"We have time to shower before lunch," she whispered in my ear.

"Together?"

"If you hurry," she said, slipping out of my arms and getting out of bed.

That was the best shower I'd had in a long time. Drying off afterwards was fun as well. We separated to our rooms to get dressed.

When I stepped out into the hall though, Linda was nowhere to be seen. I knocked on her door -- no answer. I headed down to lunch.

Tuesday is do-it-yourself day. We had a buffet-style thing set up in the kitchen. I was quite hungry, and built a sandwich as well as loading my plate with two different salads.

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In the dining room, Annette and Suzanne were already seated, with Suzanne's back to me. I walked over to her.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?" I asked her.

She looked up with a surprised smile. "No! Please!"

I sat down. We hugged as I tried to put my napkin in my lap.

"They're not guarding you?" she whispered to me conspiratorially.

"Guess not," I muttered, trying the macaroni salad. It needed pepper and a little salt.

"What are you up to this afternoon? Feeling better?" she asked.

I nodded as I ate, trying not to wolf down my lunch -- I was starved. "Moving files to a new computer, stuff like that."

She nodded. "I might drop by for a while."

"Good -- don't know if I'm in for the usual 3 o'clock routine or not."

Deb came in with a plate and asked Suzanne about winter preparations for some of the buildings. They dived into details.

A hand on my shoulder -- I turned to see Ellen sitting down next to me. I started to get up to help with her chair, but she said, "Don't bother."

"You're looking much better," she said once she was seated.

I nodded. "My appetite is back as well."

Kendra came in, followed by Linda and Bernadette. I went back for some more macaroni salad. When I returned, Kendra told me, "Looks like you're ready for a good workout this afternoon..."

The others chuckled a little at my plight. Bernadette said, "I'd go easy on him for another few days yet."

Linda muttered, "I wouldn't..." and that got more laughter.

Ellen wanted to know when I'd start looking at agreements. I told her I expected to start skimming through them as I moved files from one computer to the other. When she asked about photography, I told her of the series I wanted to do, and that I'd need the use of a cherry-picker. Other than being careful how and where it was parked, that didn't seem to be a problem. Suzanne thought it would be fun.

I wanted to talk to her more, but she had to get back to her crew; with a smile she said that she'd catch up to me. As people drifted away from the table, Ellen leaned over and told me she was glad I was doing better.

Kendra must have heard that as she walked by, because she leaned over and said, "We'll see how well you're doing at three, sweetie."

When I got to my office, a large flat-panel display graced the desk, the computer sitting to one side. The old system was on top of the old wood cabinet. Once I found my box of random cables, it took me about twenty minutes to get things cabled together.

The new box was fast, and already hooked up to the internet. We seemed to have a very fast connection, which was nice. I got the old box hooked up and started shoveling files across a fast Ethernet connection.

And as I told Ellen I'd do, I started going through agreements. I read with a highlighter in one hand, and page tags handy. Things seemed to have a European influence. I wasn't worried that I didn't understand it all at first blush -- there looked to be six major documents setting things up.

"Having fun?"

I looked up to see Kendra in the doorway. I looked at the clock in the upper right corner of the flat panel -- quarter to three.

"Up to now," I groaned, capping my highlighter and putting down the binder. The current batch of files would take another twenty minutes.

She laughed. "Body and mind together..."

"Okay, I'll go change..."

"Don't worry -- we're still taking it easy."

I don't want to know what all-out would be, if we were still taking it easy... She ran me on the treadmill, a slow build-up, then some sprints, then a long steady trot. I was quite happy to collapse on to the mats. We stretched for a while, then went into leg-lifts and abdominal work.

With most of the abdominal work, she did it right alongside me. And she'd be holding a pose, explaining to me what she wanted me to do, speaking so calmly and without effort, and I'd be shaking from the exertion...

We ended up with some serious stretches, things we hadn't done before, things she hadn't done to me before. Then it was over to Bernadette's office, where I collapsed on the massage

table once more. She put her hands on my back, pushed down as she whispered something, and I was gone.

I noticed a sore spot on my rump as I showered -- another injection? I dried and dressed quickly so I could get down to the kitchen and help with dinner. Annette and Linda were there, along with Kathryn. When I volunteered to do the salad, Annette gave Linda a questioning look. Linda looked at her and said, "No problem." Don't quite know what that was about.

Kathryn made a very nice sauce to go over the ravioli. I was even allowed one glass of wine with dinner!

Deb wanted to know if I was going to volunteer for cleanup tonight. I wiped my mouth with my napkin and told her, "Nope, but I will clear my plate..." She gave me a frown and I stuck out my tongue at her. Ellen remarked, "Don't stick it out unless you're going to use it..." I gave her a raised eyebrow, leaned over, and tongued her ear lightly. She made very appreciative noises.

Back in the office, I'd pretty much gotten moved in to the new computer when Suzanne dropped by. She closed the door and sat down.

"It's good to see you!" I said.

She smiled. "It's good to see you as well -- they've been keeping you pretty close for a few days."

I shrugged. "Guess so. I'm feeling much better now, though."

She leaned forward a bit, an intent look on her face. "What was it like?"

I sighed and shook my head. "Don't think I've ever been that sick before. A bunch of us got food poisoning in college when I was an undergrad -- some of my buddies ended up in hospital. I was just in agony for a few days. With this, I hurt from one end to the other, and pretty much every place in between -- and the nightmares were ferocious."

"Nightmares?"

"Yeah, nightmares, hallucinations, fever dreams, whatever you want to call 'em -- don't think I've ever gone through anything like that. Well, maybe when I was doing the CPA boards, but that was different."

"Nightmares?" she asked again.

"Yeah, I was little, and being chased. You know how you feel -- your arms and legs don't respond -- it's like you're in molasses or something. I tried to do the usual things to wake myself up, but they didn't work."

“So what happened?”

“Don’t know -- things resolved after a while. Bernadette and Linda were there to hold me, to comfort me. I wanted you to be there as well. But hey, that’s over, and I’m feeling a lot better -- Kendra ran me on the treadmill today, and I think I did pretty well, not that I want her to hear that.”

Suzanne chuckled a bit. “I won’t tell, I promise.”

I looked at her. I wanted to change the subject. “You know, you’re one of the reasons I kept coming back to this place.”

“Oh really?” she said, leaning back and smiling.

It was good to see her smile. “Yes -- and it seemed like you looked better and younger every time I came by.”

That didn’t have the effect I thought it would have. She turned cloudy and troubled, sitting up, moving nervously.

“What did I say?” I asked softly.

“Oh Rob... I hope I’ve done the right thing...”

“Suzanne, I’m very happy I’m here. I feel like part of a very special family.”

She shook her head, but smiled. “You are... I should go...”

I stood up as she did. “Why, Suzanne? Please...”

She gave me a perfunctory hug. Something told me not to press things. She turned and left, closing the office door after her. I walked over and re-opened it.

I sat down in the chair again. What the hell was going on? I knew I’d walked into a matriarchal society -- to some extent I thought I’d been pulled in. How had I screwed up with her? Well, I’ve slept with more different women in the last week than I have in the last five years, how’s that for a start, I thought. But hell -- I was “Project Bicycle,” right? To be ridden, right? Why was I here? I looked at the binder of agreements. Let’s dig in.

I went through them until about ten thirty. There were some definite oddities, but nothing as bad as I’d seen over the last few years. I shut things down with a sigh. I thought about heading upstairs to the rec room -- why? I headed over to the house, and upstairs. I got ready for bed, and hung the “Privacy Please” sign outside my door before I went to bed.

About halfway through the exercise class Wednesday morning, it started dawning on me -- I was a hell of a lot more flexible. I still didn’t have the abdominal strength (Kendra calls it

“core strength”), but I was putting both palms on the floor with my legs straight. No way could I do that two weeks ago! I was more flexible all the way around, and my strength was definitely increasing. I still had a long way to go as far as balance was concerned -- I couldn’t hold “tree” for shit, but damn -- my hips, legs, even shoulders and back were so much more flexible.

When we started doing two-person stuff, I moved over to Suzanne, but Annette got to her first. I didn’t know how to interpret the look on Suzanne’s face.

Ellen grabbed me. We worked together, and it was fun. When we did the two-person version of Swan, it was hard for me to believe how much more open my hips were. Then she leaned down and bit the back of my neck as she held me. What a rush!

When we went to our backs for the relaxation part of the class, Ellen leaned over me. She slid her hands along the sides of my head as she whispered something, and I fell into a cloud.

When I woke up, folks were filtering out of the room. Suzanne was already gone.

“You’re awful tempting there on your back, you know,” said Kendra, walking up to me.

I sat up, and on impulse swung my right leg forward and my left leg back, trying to do splits. I was amazed -- my bottom was about three inches from the floor, and as I breathed deep, I could feel myself sinking lower!

“Easy, take it easy,” Kendra said, stepping behind me and pulling me up a bit, her arms under mine and around my chest.

“I can’t believe this! I’ve never been this flexible!” I told her.

She chuckled. “Oh, you were, once upon a time.”

I let my head fall back as she held me. “You’re a miracle worker...”

She gave me a squeeze. “Okay, switch to the other side -- let’s see how good you are that way.”

The other side wasn’t as loose, at least not at first.

“Is this something you want to work on?” she asked as she held me.

“If it involves you holding me, sure,” I told her.

She leaned over and kissed my neck.

She helped me stand.

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"This is amazing," I told her.

She shook her head, smiling. "You're making great progress, but you need to be careful, especially now. If you overstretch, you could hurt yourself -- especially your back. I don't want you stretching, doing anything on your own, understand me? Only here, with one of us helping. I'm serious."

"Yes, dear," I said, holding out my arms for a hug. She stepped into my embrace.

She sighed as she held me. "Two or three more weeks -- it takes time for strength to catch up with flexibility."

"Thank you for taking care of me so well," I whispered, giving her neck a kiss.

"Thank me later," she rumbled, running her hands down my back to my bottom.

"I'll do that..." I answered, kissing her neck again.

She dug fingers into my sides. "Just not now! I'm meeting with Ellen in half an hour!"

"Okay, meanie," I said, and she tickled me some more.

I had a bagel and some juice for breakfast, then headed back to the office.

About ten Linda dropped by.

"Good morning, beautiful," I said as she walked in. When she'd seated herself, I whispered, "I love being lost in your arms..."

She smiled and raised an eyebrow. "You hung out your sign last night. Anything wrong?"

I sat back with a sigh. "I don't know. Suzanne and I were talking last night after dinner. I must have said something that put her off, although I don't know what."

Linda nodded. "What were you talking about?"

"Oh, she wanted to know how I was feeling, and what I'd gone through -- I don't think I've ever been sick like that before, especially the nightmares."

Linda nodded again. "That bothered her?"

"I guess; I don't know. She's so special. Hell, everyone here is special, in their own way."

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Linda chuckled. "That's a pretty safe response. She's a complex person. What are you going to do next?"

I opened my mouth -- I was going to wonder out loud if Suzanne had been the one behind the green cards -- but Kendra had told me not to mention it to anyone. "Don't know. Approach her gently, apologize for whatever I might have done. Suggestions?"

Linda shook her head. "Sounds like a good path to me. I'd go easy on the nightmare stuff though."

I nodded. "Wish I could have. I'm glad you were there, you and Bernadette. God, I needed to be held last night -- why the hell did I put up that sign? I should have gone to you, or Bernadette. Why do we pull away from what we need the most?"

She smiled, nodding now. "Why indeed? That's an interesting exploration. We can work on that, if you want."

Time for another sigh. "I feel like you've helped me with so much -- I've changed so much in the short time I've been here. I'm much more flexible, mentally and physically, it seems. So many bonds and restrictions have fallen away..."

"Yes, pretty remarkable. We're all very lucky." She stood up. "Oh well, back to the grind."

I stood and held out my arms. We hugged.

"I need to be held too," she whispered in my ear.

Suzanne was definitely avoiding me. I tried approaching her at dinner, but her body language signaled very strongly. I whispered, "Please," as I looked into her eyes. She turned away.

She practically bolted after dinner. I saw Linda and Bernadette exchanging glances. I made a mild pass at Deb, and was startled when Annette growled at me! I backed off, and Deb laughed, putting an arm around Annette.

I helped them arrange some of the prints in the rec room a little later; they were playing intimate games, and were in for an interesting night. Good for them. I spent a while on documents downstairs, and updating e-mail lists; I had a "family" e-mail address.

I headed to the house and hit the bathroom; a spot had been cleared on a shelf so I could leave my shaving kit, toothbrush and such in the bathroom.

When I left the bathroom and crossed the hall to my room, I was startled to see the "Privacy Please" sign on my door. My mind wobbled a bit -- I know I took it down this

morning, and it wasn't there this afternoon when I changed for exercise, or after my massage when I came up to shower and change. I opened the door and went in.

In the light from the hall I could see that my bed was occupied. I closed the door quietly and undressed, folding my pants and putting them on the chair.

I left my usual T-shirt, the only thing I slept in, on the nightstand, and slipped into bed.

As I did, Linda turned over, holding her arms out for me. Oh, she was so warm! She pulled my head to her bosom, and I was engulfed in her warmth, softness, and that special scent. We held each other, made gentle yet passionate love, and held each other again. She woke me at least partially in the middle of the night and we made love again, our hearts pounding as we made the beast with two backs.

The alarm went off. I silenced it and slid over to her again, finding a nipple. She held me and I melted into her. When the alarm went off again, I whacked it and asked, "Want to join me for class?" I asked, kissing her forehead.

She smiled, not opening her eyes. "Not a chance -- get out while you can, or I'll join you right here..."

"Mmmm... Save that thought for the weekend," I told her, moving my body away as a hand reached for me.

I was early to class, feeling great. Deb and Annette showed up a little late, looking like they'd had quite the night.

Kendra kept me after the others left; we did more strength work, a lot of it focusing on abdominals.

As we finished up, I asked her. "Was it Suzanne who did the green cards?"

Kendra looked surprised. "Why?"

I frowned. "I don't like this. Suzanne has been avoiding me. I don't know if I did something to get her upset, or what, but it definitely feels weird."

Kendra wanted to know why, and that led into me describing the last conversation I'd had with Suzanne.

"I didn't realize you had nightmares," Kendra told me.

"Violent, from what I'm told -- I guess they restrained me for a while -- something was on my wrists."

She shook her head. "The times I watched you, you were quite peaceful."

“I’ve never had nightmares like that... I had some when I was going through the CPA boards...”

“Really? Why?”

I raised my eyebrows. “It’s an intense multi-day exam, with a not-very-good pass rate. I kept having this one dream, almost nightmare -- I was doing the boards, but the only thing I had to write with was a potato, and I couldn’t keep it sharp...”

She laughed. So did I. “Yeah, why a potato, I don’t know, but I had to write, and I tried writing with it, and couldn’t keep it sharp...”

As I thought about it, remembering that recurring dream, things tumbled into place...

“Shit!” I shouted. I knew who wrote the damn cards. All of a sudden, I had a bunch of questions, and I was going to get some answers. I got up and ran to the door.

End of Part 5

Answers

“Shit!” I shouted. I knew who wrote the damn cards. All of a sudden, I had a bunch of questions, and I was going to get some answers. I got up and ran to the door. It wasn’t until I was nearly to the house that I realized I wasn’t wearing anything on my feet.

Where would Linda be? I bounded up the back stairs. The bathroom door was partially open -- nobody in there. The privacy sign was off my door. I knocked on Linda’s door.

“Linda? You in there?”

“Yes -- come in!” she replied.

As I walked in, she was bending over putting on her bra. She wiggled her shoulders a little and straightened up, wearing only bra and panties. The smile on her face quickly changed to a look of puzzlement and concern -- undoubtedly brought on by my dress.

“After working and talking with Kendra,” I told her in a no-nonsense tone of voice, “I’ve started to figure some things out. I think I’m owed an explanation.”

She sighed and stepped back to her bed, halfway between leaning and sitting on it. She gave me a slight smile.

“You were given a tailored virus which targets joints, musculature, and connective tissue, resulting in your sudden and dramatic increase in flexibility. Suzanne was supposed to get it, but a number of things happened to cause us to do you first.”

Holy shit. “Without my consent,” was all I could think to say.

She nodded, a sad look on her face. “This is the first time Bernadette and I have been involved in administering it without clear and complete consent. Rob, I’m sorry -- I hope you can forgive us.”

I started to speak; I don’t know what I was going to say, but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Yes?” both of us said.

Ellen and Kendra came in, closing the door. Ellen looked concerned, as did Kendra, who was also a little winded.

We sort of looked at each other for a moment. I broke the silence.

“I was just about to tell Linda that I figured out who had been doing the green cards.”

Linda got a funny look on her face -- not knowing whether to laugh or cry, I guess. She dropped her head forward and held it in her hands.

“And?” Ellen said.

“And I have a few questions that need answers. I did the cards, or part of me did, or something like that. I was hoping Linda could explain it better.”

Linda looked up, a warped smile on her face.

“How did you figure it out?” she asked. “Knowing will help me in working with you.”

I walked over to her slowly. She was still leaning against the bed, looking more apprehensive as I approached. I reached out, slowly, and took her in my arms. I hugged her, and she hugged me. I heard sighs from around the room.

I walked over to her desk, pulled out the chair, spun it around, and sat on it backwards, facing the three women. Panic flashed through me -- I'd placed myself on the opposite side of the room from them, the three of them between me and the only way out of the room.

“My nightmares were the clue,” I said.

Linda nodded, moving on to her bed, sitting on it cross-legged to face me a little more.

“Rob, how do you feel right now?” Linda asked.

I shook my head. “Don't know -- confused, hurt, scared.”

She nodded. “Quite understandable. Thank you for coming to me, rather than running for the gate. Now let me ask you, or rather the seven-year-old in you, how does he feel?”

I closed my eyes for a moment. “He feels ... He needs to be held. He feels ... different, not as distant, more a part of me somehow.” I opened my eyes.

Linda smiled now. “You still don't remember a lot about your childhood, do you?”

I had a creepy feeling when she said that. “I don't want to...” I replied.

She nodded. “Yes... And rightfully so... Rob, I've been doing a lot of deep work with you, with that seven-year old, and with the teen-ager. We hit a critical point last week, and they became very frightened and rebellious. That's when the cards started appearing.”

I nodded. “The weird feelings I had at some meals -- wanting to sweep vegetables off my plate, tearing crusts off bread -- little rebellious things I did as a kid...”

She kept nodding. "Yes, that was part of it -- I didn't know about those. Then ... when you were sick, feverish, things came to a head. I worked long and hard, and together, you and I, we healed a lot of old wounds. We still have a ways to go -- we made great progress yesterday -- but we've covered an awful lot of ground, and made tremendous progress."

I sighed, reflecting momentarily. "Yes, we have. Yesterday and today I felt more open, not only physically, but -- I don't know -- emotionally, I guess. More observant as well." I turned to Kendra. "Well?" I asked her.

She leaned back against Linda's chest of drawers. "I popped a surveillance camera in your office to catch the culprit. I saw you -- you became a different person for the span of a few seconds as you scrawled on that card. I went right to Linda."

I turned back to Linda. I took a breath, smiling. "The nightmares I was talking about -- while I was doing the CPA boards, I had this recurring dream where I was writing the boards, but the only thing I had to write with was a potato. I couldn't get it sharp enough, and I was pressing so hard, I was surprised I wasn't tearing the paper, and my writing was so big, so crude... That's what led me to figure it out..."

Linda smirked and shook her head again.

I looked to Ellen and Kendra. "Crisis over -- nothing else to see here..." I told them.

Ellen looked to Kendra, then to Linda, then to me. "You're not upset?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "At what? At who? I knew, at a number of levels, that things were happening, that things were going on. I think a higher level of informed consent would have been nice, or at least an invitation to provide me with more information and to give me the opportunity to make a decision, or at least the illusion of participating in the process."

Linda gave Ellen a stern look as she nodded her head. Ellen sighed and raised her eyebrows.

Linda turned back to me. "Rob, I want to assure you that I do not share the details of what goes on in sessions with anyone. I would leave the family before I violated that confidence." She gave Ellen a sharp look. Ellen nodded.

"Thank you, Doctor. As I said earlier -- I trust you. I have to -- even more now, the alternative truly is madness."

Ellen gave Linda an inquisitive glance, one with a management edge on it.

Linda smiled. "Ellen, I'll tell you right now the same thing I'll tell you in private. Rob is incredibly resilient. I have confidence in him, I hope I still have his trust, and I hope to demonstrate to him that his trust in me is not unfounded."

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Ellen nodded. "Okay... Rob, thank you. I'd like to talk to you later." She looked around the room. "Never a dull moment around here, is there?"

Kendra said, "You'd be bored if it was any other way."

Ellen sighed. "Yes, I suppose I would. So now I'll get back to my other crisis..."

I stood up and walked over to her. We hugged. I hugged Kendra. I felt a hand on my back, and turned to hug Linda once again. She held me, and I held her, rocking gently. I rested my head on her shoulder, smelling her hair and kissing her neck. I heard the door open and close behind us.

She slid her arms down around my waist. We both leaned back a bit. She gave me that wry look again. "What a surprise you are..."

I chuckled a little. "You provided most of the surprises..."

She nodded. "Yes, I really spilled the beans... I'm not mentioning that to Ellen, by the way..."

"That's fine. I will drop by and talk to Bernadette some, though."

She nodded. "You should. We both think you deserved more information, and argued strenuously for it."

I shook my head. "It's the same in so many areas -- we continually fought that battle with Banister -- if you expect us to make decisions, draw conclusions, operate professionally, then you need to provide us with information, or at least give us the opportunity to decide whether we want more information or not. He never got it."

She nodded, then smirked. "And when we try to hide things, you try to figure them out..."

"That's the business I'm in -- looking for problems, looking for things that don't add up, don't make sense."

She rocked her hips. "What now?"

I sighed. Oh, how I wanted to be held... "I want to talk to Bernadette..."

She nodded. "Go easy on her..."

"I will, beautiful..."

I closed my eyes and pulled her into a kiss. With a squeeze and a sigh we separated. I thought about throwing her back on to the bed, plowing her... No, Bernadette and Suzanne first.

"I'll see you later. Be gentle with me this afternoon -- I'm still a bit rattled."

She smiled and shook her head. "We'll take very good care of you."

I stepped out into the hall. T-shirt and shorts -- my sweats, socks, and shoes were back in the fitness center. Oh well...

I walked over to Bernadette's office. Her door was open. I closed it behind me. She gave me quite the puzzled look.

"Where are your shoes?" she asked.

"Fitness center," I told her as I sat down in the chair in front of her desk.

"How are you feeling? What can I do for you?"

I leaned back a bit. "Well, I thought you could explain this tailored virus that you gave to me rather than Suzanne..."

Bernadette is a dark-skinned beauty. A great deal of color drained out of her face, and very quickly.

"Ah... How..." she managed to say.

"Part I figured out, part Linda told me. Nobody else knows that I know, though. Linda won't tell, and neither will I. I also know who wrote the green cards -- we talked about that with Ellen and Kendra."

She shook her head. "Let's go next door..." She got up. I stood and watched as she hung the privacy sign on the outside of her office door.

We walked next door; I was in the lead. Walking into that little room was strange, the room where I'd spent three days in a fever, the room I came to in the afternoons for bodywork...

"Oh, Rob..." I heard Bernadette sigh behind me.

I sat on the bed and pulled her to sitting next to me, holding her hands. She put her arms around me, her head on my shoulder. I held her.

"Oh, I wanted to tell you," she said, almost sobbing. "Will you forgive me?"

I held her, moving a hand to the back of her head. "Yes, of course. Tell me, please..."

She held on for a couple of minutes, not saying anything. I held her just as silently.

“What did Linda tell you?” she finally asked, sitting up a bit.

I scooted back. “That it was a tailored virus, it was Suzanne’s turn, not mine, but things conspired to do me first. Is that why you watched me so closely Monday and Tuesday?”

She nodded. “That’s part of it. Suzanne hasn’t had it, and we don’t want any of the staff exposed, although it’s damn hard to transmit -- it pretty much has to be by blood, or *very* intimate contact.”

“Okay, that makes sense. Linda said it affected primarily muscles, joints, connective tissue?”

Bernadette nodded. “Yes -- giving you the flexibility and responsiveness you’d find in a six or seven year old. Did you talk about your ... dreams?”

I smiled a little and nodded. “Nightmares? That’s what made the connection, that and I figured out who was leaving me the little green note cards...”

She sighed and shook her head. I pulled her arm to get both of us reclining on the bed.

“Hold me,” I asked softly.

“Oh, gladly,” she replied in a whisper, moving to her side and wrapping me up, pulling me to her.

“What can I expect?” I asked, then nuzzled in.

She held me, squeezed me. “You need to be careful -- I hope Kendra has told you that.”

I moved my face a little out of her bosom. “Yes, only stretching and such with her help so I don’t strain anything.”

“Good,” she said, then slipped a hand behind my head and pulled me back to her. I moaned and my arms started going soft around her. “You’ll need to be careful for two or three weeks. You’ll be increasing strength as well as flexibility. You may notice some other side effects, such as changes in hair and beard growth. We’re monitoring your diet -- so if you wake up starving in the middle of the night, come wake me before you raid the kitchen.”

I took that as an invitation to press more against the side of a breast; I was hungry for her.

She sobbed softly. “Oh Rob -- I wanted to tell you first, and so did Linda. We argued, we yelled -- we were told there wasn’t time. Dammit, Rob, when I graduated from Harvard Med school, I took a oath...” She held me closer.

“You gave it your best,” I told her. I wanted to let go to her, stop thinking, and just be there in her arms.

She squeezed me again. "Oh, I don't know... I could have..."

I snuggled in more. My stomach threw in its opinion, grumbling loudly.

She chuckled, shaking me. "You've had another interesting morning."

I sighed and pulled her over more on top of me.

She pushed herself up on her arms. "You need to get something to eat. Where are your shoes?"

"Fitness center," I said, then moved to nuzzle a breast.

She lowered herself a bit, filling me with her breast. "You're not going to get anything there, I'm afraid," she whispered to me after a minute or so.

That thought sent a shudder through me...

She moved a hand behind my head, holding me. "Oh, I thought so -- you'd like that, wouldn't you..."

She pulled away. "Let me help you up..." She chuckled a bit as she helped me to my feet.

"Tonight?" she asked.

"I need to talk to Suzanne," I told her.

She nodded. "I understand."

"When will she get it?"

"The virus? Not for a month at least. Timing is more complex with women. Why?"

"You watch everyone as carefully as you did me?"

She smiled and nodded. "Oh yes, we do."

"Then I'd like to help watch her, when it's her turn -- if she agrees, of course."

That brought a broader smile, and a hug. "That sounds like a good idea."

We hugged quietly for a bit.

"We're forgiven?" she asked.

I sighed. "I think so. It's Ellen I don't know about now..."

"Oh, she supported us -- completely, loudly. And she had the difficult job of telling us the decision had been made, and to go ahead. Go easy on her, Rob."

I nodded, but I wasn't so sure.

"Why don't you go to the kitchen, and I'll go pick up your things. I'll have black coffee and a lightly toasted plain bagel."

"Okay," I said, then pulled her close for another hug.

Eduardo and Janice were in the kitchen. They raised eyebrows at my dress, but that's all.

I decided to have a big glass of orange juice. As I moved more into the kitchen, Janice took a pointed glance at my feet, and "offered" to help. I smiled and had a seat. Janice started two bagels toasting, poured a cup of coffee, and a large glass of juice.

Bernadette showed up with my clothes. I got dressed; my feet were cold.

As we finished our breakfast, Bernadette asked, "What's next?"

"Get cleaned up and dressed..." I said.

"Good idea," Kathryn said, coming in to fill up her coffee cup.

I smiled -- she always dressed quite well. "Then drop in on Ellen."

As Kathryn stirred cream into her coffee, she told me, "She's tied up on a phone call -- it will probably last until lunch."

I sighed and shook my head. "Better her than me, I suppose. Thanks -- if you could, drop her a note that I'll stop by this afternoon."

"Okay, I'll do that," she said with a smile.

Bernadette stood up. "See you at lunch." She put a hand on my shoulder.

I got a glass of juice to go.

I "dressed up," with pants, a dress shirt, and a pullover vest. In the office, I started cross-referencing documents. Things were somewhat complex, but looked manageable, and more important, everything looked completely above-board.

"Knock knock?"

I looked up to see Linda in the doorway. "Come in, please," I said, putting down a notepad.

She shut the door and had a seat. "How did your chat with Bernadette go?"

"Pretty well. So Ellen wanted you to tell me as well?"

Linda sighed. "Not at first. But we talked to her, and we thought she was convinced. She talked to Lucerne -- we were party to some of those conversations, but not all of them. She backed us. But..."

"So the nominal sequence is different than what I've been through?"

Linda rolled her eyes a bit. "Oh yeah -- you're different, that's for sure."

"Hope I'm worth it -- I don't understand why."

"Rob, you are worth it. And you're making us rethink our assumptions, the way we do things."

I chuckled and shook my head.

"What?" she asked.

"Like answer questions?"

She nodded, that wry smile returning. "Must have been my guilty conscience."

"I guess -- still, I came in looking for answers, and got more than I asked for."

"Yeah, the old 'be careful what you wish for' deal... How did Bernadette take it?"

I shook my head again. "Surprise, relief, wondering if she could have or should have done more. How did you take it?"

She nodded. "About the same -- relief, glad the charade was over... Then disbelief that I'd let the cat out of the bag."

I gave her a steady look. "What does Ellen need?"

She sat back again, smiling. "Interesting... Why don't you ask her?"

I smiled. "If I have to *tell* you what my fantasy is, if you did it, would it still be a fantasy? There's a difference between having something happen, and asking for it."

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She nodded. "True..." She gave me a sultry look. "But *I* could ask, and you'd never consciously know..."

That brought out a sigh. "Yes... And that's part of the lure of this place, your lure..."

"And what do you think of that?"

I shivered. "It's terrifying and so seductive at the same time. You've talked about making me 'part of the family.' That first weekend, I don't know how long ago it was any more, when you and Ellen asked me, I gave myself to you, body and soul."

She nodded. "Yes, you did -- and you did to a degree that Ellen, and I, still find difficult to believe. Yet one of us understood -- she told us that's what would happen, and she was right."

"Suzanne?"

"Yes, Suzanne."

"I hope I haven't hurt her."

"She's a complex person. I'm available to her, if she approaches. Speak to her."

"I will. But what about Ellen? What does she need?"

She laughed. "Let me think about it. The best answer, especially for you, is to follow your instincts and act from the heart."

"At times around here, I don't feel it's my heart that is in control..."

"True, too true -- but isn't it exhilarating?"

I looked at her, feeling so hungry... "Oh, this morning it would have been so nice to push you on to your back, take you right there and then..."

She smiled. "What was that you said about having to tell someone your fantasies?"

I nodded. "We will have the time..."

She stood. "You must *make* the time for the things you consider important."

I nodded once again. "Yes dear -- some times you remind me of an aunt."

Something brief but intense washed over her face. She held out her arms. I stood and we hugged.

"It's one of the many lessons you'll learn as part of the family," she whispered to me.

She left, and I returned to work.

Bernadette stuck her head in the door. "Lunch time?"

I capped my highlighter and used it as a bookmark. "Great idea! Let me stop next door for a moment."

I used her little bathroom. She was waiting outside for me. I took her in my arms, holding and kissing her. For a while I pressed her against the wall, and then turned so she did the same to me.

When we separated, she asked with a smile and a sigh, "What brought that on?"

"Someone told me that I need to *make* time for the important things."

She brought my hands to her breasts. "Ah, very wise counsel..."

I enjoyed the sensation. So did she, the way she let her head lean back, her eyes closing, the smile on her face.

"What about lunch?" I asked.

She sighed and raised her head. We kissed once more. "I've got you later this afternoon. Let's go."

"Yes, dear," I whispered.

Part way through lunch I asked, "Where's Ellen?"

Kathryn spoke up. "Packing -- she's headed to Sedona this afternoon."

The murmur around the table told me this was an unusual occurrence.

"I need to talk to her -- how about I drive her to the airport, or did she have other arrangements?"

Kathryn nodded eagerly. "That sounds good to me -- I wasn't looking forward to the drive anyway."

From what little was mentioned, I gathered we were having contractor problems at the Sedona site. I knew from document review we were doing building and renovation there.

I stuck my head in Ellen's office after lunch. She had a bag sitting near her desk. She was standing, looking over some papers.

“When do we leave?” I asked.

She looked up, blinked, then forced a slight smile. “Thanks for volunteering -- about a half hour. Check in with Deb on the routine -- now, please.”

I nodded, turned, and headed over to Deb and Annette’s office. Deb was in, with Annette nowhere to be seen.

“Ellen says I’m supposed to check in with you on the routine,” I told her.

She nodded and pointed to the chair. I had a seat.

“You already know to check in with one of us if you’re going to be leaving the site.”

“Yes dear, very much...”

She smiled. “You don’t have a cell phone, do you?”

I shook my head. “Nope. No business need -- my old employer would have made do with goose quills if he could.”

She chuckled. “We’ll give you one. When you leave, you turn it on. When you get back and check in with me, or Ellen, or Annette, you turn it off.”

“Sounds simple. Anything else?”

“Call in if you’re going to be later than expected, need to make stops, that kind of thing.”

“Okay. My car or a family car?”

“Ellen likes the Mercedes.”

I nodded. “Then I’ll drive the Mercedes.”

“Fine. Annette is bringing it around. Where will you be?”

“I need to visit the plumbing once more, then I’ll head to Ellen’s office and wait there.”

She smiled, a smile with a promise of something more in it. “Thanks. Have fun.”

I nodded and headed back to the main house. I used the bathroom on the first floor, then went to Ellen’s office. Her bag was there, but she wasn’t. I looked around a bit. The prints she’d chosen were up, displayed very nicely.

“Ready to go?”

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I turned to see Ellen in the doorway, holding a set of keys. I walked over and picked up her bag. "Sure. Car out front?"

She nodded, handing me the keys.

The trunk was already open.

"Put it in the back seat -- that will be easier for us at the airport," Ellen said.

I opened the passenger door for her. She gave me a big smile. "When Kathryn or Annette drive me, I have to take care of the door myself."

I chuckled and closed the door for her. I plopped the bag in the back seat, then walked around and got in. I adjusted the seat to my liking -- a nice seat, in an S-class Mercedes.

"Where to?" I asked.

"America Worst, San Francisco," she said in an exasperated tone.

The cell phone was in a cradle on the dash. It was already turned on. We had a full tank of gas. "Away we go..."

After a few minutes, she said, "Thanks for doing this. How are you doing? Kendra was quite concerned this morning."

"I'm doing okay. I appreciate it when people level with me. I find I make better decisions that way as well."

"Point well taken," she said. "And I agree -- let's see if I can get some others to agree with me as well."

I nodded. I'd seen some references to Sedona in the documents I'd skimmed. "What's the crisis, if I can pry? Construction related?"

She sighed. "Yes -- I don't know what it is about this damn contractor. If someone isn't breathing down his neck..."

"We have a holdback?"

"Oh yeah -- we're holding back 20% until we're satisfied. That doesn't seem to bother him."

"Can we get rid of him and bring in someone else?"

"We could, but I'm not sure what good it would do. The general isn't the main problem - it's a couple of his subcontractors. I really don't know what they need to see to get the idea."

I nodded. "Someone with balls? Sorry to be crude, but some guys don't respond when the client is a woman. Maybe Linda could explain it -- when I was at the big accounting firm I helped one of the female partners who was in a similar pickle. A sub on her house was acting up. I spent a few days watching the job and yelling at people, and things straightened up. One of those dog things, I guess."

She nodded. "Dog thing? What's that mean?"

I chuckled. "You're getting me at my erudite best today. It's something my writer friend told me -- why does a dog lick his balls?"

She gave me a strange look, one of distaste but curiosity. "I don't know. Why?"

I smiled and glanced over to her. "Because he can. Sometimes that's about the best explanation I can think of for some behavior -- why the hell is he doing that?"

She nodded. "Because he can. Makes a lot of sense."

"Yup -- one of those chromosomally-linked disorders."

She laughed at that. "That may have made the trip worthwhile. Oh, I'm glad you're with us, Rob."

"When do you fly back?"

Another sigh. "Sunday or Monday; we'll see. You don't have to pick me up -- one of the others can take care of that."

"I wouldn't mind... I'd been thinking that we should get to know each other better -- you might like a distraction..."

That brought a sigh and a chuckle. "Oh how right you are -- Linda said you could be perceptive when you wanted to be... But the way things are happening, mid to late next week would be our chance."

"I understand. Let me know."

"I'll keep that in mind, believe me..."

We both went quiet for a few minutes. "Have you spoken with Suzanne recently?" she asked.

I sighed. "I will this afternoon or this evening. I don't know what I said..."

"Have you considered that it might not be your problem?"

“No,” I replied quickly.

She laughed. “It’s something you might want to do. Just because you’re male, it doesn’t mean you’re wrong *all* of the time...”

I laughed as well. “Can I quote you on that? I’m not sure my sisters would agree.”

I dropped her at the airport. She gave me an unexpected but very nice hug and kiss. The drive back was uneventful; it did look as if we had a storm approaching.

I had enough time to drop off the car keys and the cell phone, change, and make it to Kendra’s domain.

I wanted to talk; she wanted to run me ragged. Still, I felt quite strong running.

While we were stretching afterwards, I asked her, “Do you want to talk about this morning?”

She paused, easing up on my leg a little. “I suppose so,” she answered.

“I’m sorry if I startled you -- that whole thing had been bugging me.”

She increased the pressure on my leg, stretching my hamstring and calf. “Yeah, that’s what Linda explained to me. You really didn’t realize you were doing it?”

“Not at the time, not at all. Even now, knowing I did it is like knowing something I read in a book -- I still don’t remember doing it at all.”

“Deep breath, good, now let it out. That’s better. It was pretty wild -- I showed Linda the video. One moment you were standing there, and then the next moment, it was like there was someone else in your body -- you moved differently and everything. Then after you closed the desk drawer, you were normal again. Very freaky.”

“I’d like to see that.”

“Sorry, Linda erased it in front of me.”

I sighed and tried to let go as she pressed more. “Okay... Guess that makes sense.”

“Linda told me you’re doing fine. Are you?”

I chuckled a little. “I think so. I feel a lot better, thanks to the help and attention I’m getting from you and others.”

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“Thanks. Roll on to your stomach and let’s give some attention to your psoas and hip flexors.”

I moaned and rolled over.

When I walked into Bernadette’s office, I came to a full stop just inside the door. Bernadette and Linda were both there, and the smiles they had on their faces when they saw me were ... unsettling... “Ah, good afternoon, ladies,” I said hesitantly.

They approached and took me by the arms, leading me to the other room with the massage table -- and bed.

“Why don’t you get undressed and on the table, where we can take good care of you,” Linda cooed.

They helped me strip down. As I lowered my head into the face cradle, that scent filled me. I moaned and took a deep breath. I felt hands on my back, and the back of my head...

I woke on my back, a little surprised -- I was alone, unmolested! A light cover was on top of me. I felt very relaxed and refreshed. I knew somehow that Linda had just left the room. I looked around -- Bernadette was sitting in a chair. As I watched, she raised her head, taking a deep breath. She looked to me with that semi-glazed look and smiled.

I moved to sitting. “Hi there,” I said.

She stood up, stretching. I knew that look. Linda had been up to something.

“Been somewhere nice?” I asked.

She sighed as she moved closer to me. “Oh God, it was nice... And you’d better get out of here while you can!”

I sat there. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because we’d both miss dinner!”

“Yes, dear!”

By the time I got dressed, she’d gone.

I rolled my shoulders as I stood in the shower. I felt pretty damn good. I felt as if I had a freedom of movement I hadn’t had before. Was that mentally as well as physically? I felt healthy, relaxed ... and horny... When I dressed, I put on one of my turtle necks. We only had a few minutes until dinner -- Linda had kept me, us, for a while...

At the foot of the back stairs, I practically ran into Suzanne.

“Can we talk for a minute, please?” I asked her.

She had a complex look on her face, but it resolved into a slight smile. “Sure,” she said.

We walked to the rear parlor, the small one next to Ellen’s office. I closed the door part way behind us, but not completely. She sat in the small chair. That brought a small smile to my face, and some understanding. I opened the door a little more.

As I sat on the loveseat opposite her, she took a brief glance to the door.

“Suzanne,” I said, leaning forward a bit, “I’m sorry if I’ve said something to upset you. You are very special to me. What can I do?”

Oh such a complex look on her face... “Rob, it’s okay... I’m just... I’m trying to figure it out myself.”

I nodded, and waited until I was pretty sure she didn’t have anything to add. “I understand now why they were keeping me isolated for a while. Bernadette and Linda told me that you were scheduled for it, but they did me instead...”

She nodded, her lips tight, but in a slight smile.

I sighed. “And they didn’t explain it to me beforehand, or ask me...” That seemed to surprise her. “I talked to them about it this morning -- don’t know if you heard about me running around or not, but that was one of the things involved -- it’s still pretty quiet, I guess a lot of things are kept quiet around here...”

She gave me a grim nod at that.

I looked into her eyes again -- sparkling green, so full of life. “And I offered, it’s your decision of course, but when you go through it, I’ll be there to watch you, to sit with you, if you want.”

She sighed and smiled at that, nodding her head slightly. After a bit she said, “Thanks... Rob, I really appreciate that. I will want you there. I appreciate you talking to me, forcing me... I just have some things that I need to work out. I’m sorry if I’ve been so stand-offish...”

“Don’t be -- but don’t hold things in, please -- talk to Linda, talk to the tree, or the koi in the pond, but don’t hold it in. If I’m learning anything here, that’s it.”

She nodded, smiling a bit more. “Now you’re the one giving the sage advice...” She looked at her hands, fidgeting a bit, then looked back to me. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but paused and closed it again. “Rob,” she said eventually, “it’s not your problem -- I’ll figure it out.”

I nodded, trying to be supportive. "Let me know what I can do to help -- all you have to do is ask."

She nodded, frowning a bit. "I know. I wish ... I wish sometimes I didn't... Ah well, it's too late for that." She stood up, smoothing her skirt. "Would you escort me to dinner?"

I stood up. "Of course -- I'd love to."

She put her arm in mine as we walked down the hallway to the dining room. As we entered, she stopped. "Hold me, please," she whispered.

I gave her what I hoped was my most affectionate, caring hug. I kissed her neck. "Any time you want," I whispered. She wrapped her arms around me, squeezed me, and sighed.

As we separated, I looked to the table, and was reminded again of the new world I was in. There was an empty seat between Deb and Annette -- Annette looked surprised and a little upset. Deb looked wistful, maybe hopeful as she glanced at Annette. Bernadette gave me a look of lust, and Linda looked highly amused as she glanced around the table.

I helped seat Suzanne next to Annette. Annette gave her accusing, almost injured looks. I went to the other side of the table, sitting between Linda and Bernadette. After putting my napkin in my lap, I touched their thighs, pressing gently. Hands grasped mine, squeezing gently.

Deb raised her wine glass, nominally in charge. After looking around the table, her wistful look became more amused. "Good evening, all," she said, and took a sip of her wine.

Penny and Kathryn had both joined us for dinner, sitting on the other side of Linda. Kathryn reminded me I had an art show the following weekend, and wanted to know if I'd like any help working it.

"Thank you, that would be nice," I answered. And it would be -- Tina had helped me a number of times. "But I'll warn you -- it's boring as hell. If I remember correctly, this one is at a winery, which means we'll be in a fairly cool room the whole time. I'll have to check my records, but I think it's one of the shows with not a lot of people, but one which brings in quite a few orders." Thinking of her sitting in one of the high chairs wearing a long wool skirt and a warm top -- she'd certainly help bring in people.

Penny looked a bit miffed. "How big a booth do you have?"

I took another sip of wine -- a French wine, a Sancerre. "Oh, it's about ten by ten feet. Three sides showing larger prints, two chairs, bins for smaller prints, and a table for orders."

Eye-daggers passed between Penny and Kathryn -- yet both smiled.

“When we move into spring and summer, I’ll have opportunities for practically every weekend. If you’d like to help, I’m certain there will be plenty of opportunities -- for both of you.”

I don’t know if that answer made anyone happy. Ah well. “Vivian handles my schedule for those -- we should talk to her in a month or so...” I caught a glance of Deb out of the corner of my eye. I turned to her, raised my glass, and added, “With the approval of management, of course.” I gave a nod to Deb, who gave me an Imperial smile in return.

We talked a little more about shows, the good and the bad -- big orders coming from flea markets, kids dribbling ice cream.

Linda took my arm after dinner, leading me back to my office.

“Well,” she exclaimed when we were in my office with the door closed, “That was an interesting meal... I gather you spoke to Suzanne?”

“Yes, just before dinner.” I sighed, shaking my head. “What a complex group!”

Linda nodded. “Yes, but how is Suzanne doing?”

I shook my head again. “I don’t know -- she says it’s her problem, something she needs to figure out. Suggesting I’d be there to watch when she goes through it, that was the right thing to say. Still, I can’t help but feel there are wheels within wheels still hidden from view.”

She shrugged, a wry smile on her face. “Not too much hidden at the dinner table tonight.”

I furrowed my brow. “So many surprises -- Suzanne asking me to hold her, there in front of everyone, the reactions, and the reactions to the reactions... Wow... I wonder -- is it always like this, or have I just not paid attention to these things in the past?”

Linda leaned back a bit, smiling. “We should be doing this in the parlor, with cognac...”

“Well, let’s go, then,” I offered.

She shook her head. “We’ll stay. Rob, would you say that you’re an emotional person?”

I sighed. That question stopped me in my tracks. I thought for a bit before I could answer. I reached for her hand and held it.

“You know, if someone had asked me that question last year, or even a few months ago, I’d have told them that I was a creature of intellect, of reason. I’d have said that proudly, confidently. Yet I’ve had hints, so many hints over the years -- the way some images move me, even the memories of them -- some songs...”

Hidden Images

She smiled and nodded. "And so what would you say now?"

"I need to be held, that's what I'd say. That intellect, that reason, is a thin shell, like the shell of an egg, covering something so much larger and stronger. And emotion is part of it, but it's more than just emotion -- it's, I don't know, soul -- something larger. My strength is in that larger part."

Her smile broadened. "And your intellect?"

I shook my head, smiling slightly. "Just another tool -- to be used some times, not others. I know when I'm composing images in the camera, part of the work is done here," I pointed to my eyes, "but what gives an image impact, soul, comes from here," I touched my heart.

"And what's changed?"

"I'm still me, the world must have changed," I said, laughing. She laughed along with me. "No, I've changed. You're changing me -- this place. I'm more aware, just a little, but more aware."

She shook her head. "It's that old light bulb joke..."

"What?" I asked.

"How many shrinks does it take to change a light bulb? Just one, but the light bulb has to want to change."

I sighed, nodding. "I don't know that I wanted it at first, but I certainly do now. Thank you for your help."

"You're quite welcome. It has been fun, if you haven't noticed."

I noticed her nipples... "Oh, I've noticed that too..."

"And what did you notice at dinner tonight?"

I shook my head, sighing again. "So many things -- Suzanne affirming to others that she still cared for me. I'd guess Suzanne and Annette are currently together, from the look on Annette's face -- surprise, jealousy, something like that. And Deb, wistful, hoping to get Annette back, or something else. Bernadette not sure what it meant, then Kathryn and Penny -- that was almost funny."

Linda nodded. "I didn't catch the look on Deb's face. Remember -- there's a strict line between family and staff."

"I know -- that's why I deferred to Deb." I sighed. "I know that on my own, I'm safe -- that's the other weird thing these days -- I'm so full of dichotomies. I've never felt stronger,

better -- yet I also feel so vulnerable. I know that you, many of you, could touch me, caress me, and I'd be lost -- all yours."

"How do you feel about that?"

"More dichotomies -- scared and excited both. I want it -- with you, with Bernadette, with Suzanne. Yet I fear it -- what would happen if Kathryn caught me? Would I be able to resist, or would I give in, let go, give myself to her like I do to you?"

Linda nodded. "You aren't that vulnerable -- you aren't at risk from anyone walking up to you on the street..."

"I guess I've used that emotional part all along -- working for Banister, and before that -- I'd have the feeling that something didn't smell right, and I'd dig further until I found something. That part was there helping, if I listened to it."

"You're changing the subject," she chided.

I smiled. "Yes, I guess I am. It's troubling, new-found strengths and weaknesses. And what's supposed to happen tonight?"

She smirked. "Such a suspicious person!"

"That's me," I replied.

She chuckled and pulled two small perfume sprayers from a pocket, one silver the other gold. She put them on the desk. "She will respond quite well to the silver one. The gold one will affect you both."

I picked them up. I held up the silver one. The metalwork was the same on the pair, except for the color. "So this is the one I should use with you, so I can pleasure you for hours..."

I saw her nostrils flare, saw her chest expand as she took a slow breath.

"Yes, tomorrow night in the tea house if you like -- we don't have to get up early the next morning..."

I felt her eyes burning into me. I hope I was returning her gaze watt-for-watt. "I'd love to," I rumbled.

"Good," she replied, holding my eyes in hers. "I'd hate to spend the night alone there..."

We let the lust build for a bit. I felt my body responding, aided by watching her nostrils flare, and her nipples perk up.

"I'd better leave while I still can," Linda said, standing up.

I stood up as well, not shy about my tented pants. "What's your hurry?"

She chuckled. I stepped over to her, putting an arm around her waist and pushing her against the closed door.

She pulled me to her eagerly, tilting her head back so I could bite her neck.

"Oh, let's get out of here," she moaned.

"And go where?" I asked between nibbles.

She laughed. "You have an assignation..."

I moved my hands up to her breasts, feeling gently. "If you insist..."

She pushed me away playfully. "Oh, it would be nice -- but I can wait for tomorrow night."

I kissed her hands. "I could get the sprayer..."

She chuckled. "And I could drop you in your tracks..."

I sighed. With one more kiss of her hands, I let go, then turned to the desk to pick up the sprayers. "Silver for her, gold for both of us, right?"

She nodded.

"And what color is the one for me?" I asked.

She reached into a pocket, pulling out one in a dark metallic blue.

I sighed. "Oh, tomorrow..."

She nodded. "I know -- take good care of Bernadette."

"I'll make you proud..."

That brought a low laugh. "I'm sure you will..."

It was just a little after eight when I headed upstairs, alone. I packed my little bag with clothes for the exercise class in the morning, then visited the bathroom for my evening routine. I ran the shaver over my muzzle once more. My whiskers seemed to be a bit softer, hard to tell.

What to wear? I had my sweat pants on, nothing underneath, bare feet. I grabbed the dark grey velour turtleneck -- that had been one of Tina's favorites. I had an idea for making it

Bernadette's favorite as well... I dumped the sprayers in my pocket and headed over to her room.

Her door was partially open. I knocked, no answer. A peek inside -- nobody home. There was a light on in the bathroom across the hall. "Hi sweetie," I said, knocking on the door.

"Give me half an hour," came Bernadette's reply.

"Okay -- be back in half an hour."

I went back to my room. What to do? I turned the clock on my nightstand around so I could see it, then settled down on the floor to stretch. It was amazing how flexible I'd become. I took it easy, remembering the admonishments I'd been given. Oh well, I can still do leg-lifts and abdominal work.

"You in there?" asked a sultry voice at my door.

"I'll make a pit stop and be right over," I said.

"I'll be waiting..."

I stood up and my heart took off racing for just a moment. What a trip! I grabbed my bag and went across to the bathroom. Heading down the hall afterwards, I patted my pocket -- and turned around, back to my room to get the perfume goodies. I paused again outside her door. She had the "Do Not Disturb" sign up -- this one was from the Meridian Hotel. I took out the silver sprayer and spritzed the top of my velour turtleneck, around the neck and shoulders. That should work -- at least if she hasn't done something similar! Only one way to find out.

I knocked lightly. "Hello in there..." I said softly.

"Please come in!"

I opened the door and stepped in.

The room was dark. I dropped my bag. Bernadette was standing next to her bed wearing what looked to be a silk robe. As I stepped forward, I saw her opening her arms for me. We pulled into a full-body kiss.

Her breathing changed to a sharp, deep inhale. I pushed her back to the bed, leaning her on to it. As we moved on to the bed, I pulled her head to my shoulder. She gripped me, her fingers digging into my back, as she inhaled deeply. She exhaled, moaning softly.

My right hand cradled her head. "I've got you -- you can relax now. Relax and let me hold you. I'll hold you, and protect you, as you relax and drift deeper and deeper..."

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Linda's voice was with me as I eased her into trance. As her arms fell away from me, I moved over a little, sliding my left hand into her robe, stroking her soft, warm skin.

I paused and sat up. I peeled off my shirt and draped it over her face. I took the two sprayers out of my pocket, and moved to place them on her nightstand.

And there on the nightstand was another one... From the dim light in the room, I guessed it was dark blue -- for me. I moved a bit more and picked it up. From the glow of the clock, it looked dark. And all three looked the same, enameled metal filigree cases...

I dropped the silver one in my pocket, then took the caps off the two others, gold and blue. Yes, the caps interchanged. How about the bottom pieces? Yes, nicely... The blue sprayer case now held the gold one's contents... I moved off the bed and put the silver and gold units in my bag, then returned the blue one to the nightstand. Surprise, dear...

"Oh so good... It feels so good..." I started whispering to her again as I sat between her legs and ran my hands over her body. Linda's voice in my mind helped again as I brought pleasure to Bernadette, exciting her, caressing her.

I moved my shirt away, leaning forward over her, laying on top of her, kissing, holding her head again. She responded eagerly, her arms moving to hold me, but without much strength.

I started kissing my way down her body. Her nipples were so distracting -- how I loved to be held to her breasts, feeling her weight on top of me. I told her that as I kissed her nipples, then moved to suckle in earnest. As I settled in, I was rewarded with deep sounds from her, and her arms moving once more to hold me.

I gradually became aware that she was moving very rhythmically, and I was sucking in response to her motion. I slid a hand to her other breast, pressing gently in time. She moaned. I slid my hand down between her legs. I barely touched her, and she came with a shudder and a moan.

I quickly kissed my way down her body, nestling between her legs. I closed my eyes, luxuriating in the warmth radiating from her, and in her scent. I slid my arms under her legs and moved in.

Her legs grasped me, tightly at first, but her strength diminished along with the intensity of her moans.

I moved up her body again. As I reached her nipples, I slid out of my sweatpants, and flipped the sheet and blankets on top of us. Her nipple was cool as I took it in my mouth. She moaned and her arms moved around me. After a while her hands helped me move to her other nipple. I spent a while there, then moved up.

As I kissed my way up her chest and neck, I slid into her. She was so warm and tight! Her head moved back and forth a bit. I held her shoulders and kissed her, joining at both ends.

One of her hands was on the back of my neck, the other found its way down my back. She seemed to awaken more, throwing her legs open, holding me tighter, moving more. I held on, our lips together, soon coming inside her.

She fumbled for something as we slipped apart. She tucked something between her legs as I slid up to her side. With a sigh, she pulled me to a breast. I slid closer, she leaned over, and we connected again. One more sigh, a deep breath, and I was asleep in her arms.

The alarm went off -- but it was still dark out. I was confused, and put a hand on her side as she rolled to her nightstand to silence the alarm. She moved up on an elbow.

“Oh, you’re going to get it now,” she whispered.

I heard the soft sound of the sprayer...

“Oh you!” she moaned. She rolled to her back and pulled me to her. As I was drawn to her again the scent caught me -- that spicy scent I’d experienced in the tea house. I wrapped my arms around her, latched on to a nipple, and breathed deep as I devoured.

I was filled with fire, and I think she was as well. We rolled around, kissing touching, squeezing. Her hands were all over me, as mine were all over her. I did something, and her nipple tightened in my mouth, becoming oh so much more tasty.

As I sucked, she held my head and moaned, “Oh, don’t stop that...” I was lost in her arms.

She squeezed me as she came, a hand reaching down my stomach to my cock. She rolled me to my back and impaled herself on me. “The other side,” she said, moving my head.

We both moaned as she rode me, the bed joining in the chorus. I felt it approaching, building so strongly. Her rhythm changed as well, and with a shudder she cried, “Oh, now, please!” A few more strokes and I complied with her request. We collapsed together again.

Answers

The alarm sounded again and I found a nipple. Bernadette held me with one hand as she whacked the clock with the other.

“Oh you,” she sighed, rolling more on top of me.

I wanted to settle in, but she said, “We need to get up...”

I pulled her more on top of me, smothering me.

She gave me a squeeze, then moved off.

I looked at her and sighed -- so nice being in her arms.

She smiled, then reached over and tapped me on the forehead.

“Was that nice?” I asked, sitting up.

She sighed and smiled. “Later, I promise.”

“I know.” It’s *always* later.

We made it to Kendra’s domain. I collapsed on the floor, fading out.

Laughter -- I opened my eyes and saw Linda and Bernadette huddled together, Linda laughing. Must have been told about the switch I’d made. Yup, from the look they gave me, that was it.

Kendra put the chest strap on me, and ran us ragged. I thought we’d get to rest when we went down to the mats, but she kept working us hard, my abs shaking from the exertion. The others were complaining, moaning.

“Linda, towels please?” Kendra called.

Moans of relief from the others -- I collapsed on my back.

“Put one under his head -- yes go ahead,” Kendra said.

Linda moved over me. I could see the sweat rolling off her face. She lifted my head a bit, putting a folded towel under me. She smiled and whispered, “You are full of surprises. Enjoy, lover.”

She slid her hands under my head and did something delicious. I sighed and dropped deep, deep, deep.

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That woman's voice again -- floating, rocking sensations. Those sensations drifted into feelings of family, of belonging. Belonging drifted into touching, caressing, feeling, kissing, sucking, ever-growing lust.

The intense sensation of someone impaling themselves on me forced my eyes open. Suzanne was sitting on me, her head back, eyes closed, face in ecstasy as Bernadette pressed down on her shoulders and whispered in her ear. More hands were on Suzanne's breasts as she rocked on top of me.

I moaned and reached for her, and as I did, hands squeezed the back of my neck and a voice whispered in my ear, sending me tumbling again as a nipple found my mouth.

Oh so intense, so good, hearing and feeling her come atop me, letting go and coming so strongly into her, hands and voices holding, caressing, soothing us, drifting on those voices and caresses.

Awakening to just Kendra and me in the room, helping her pick up towels, taking a quick shower in the back, washing each other. She loaned me a set of sweats to wear back to the house.

Upstairs changing, looking at myself in the mirror. I felt great. I was looking better, too. I rubbed my face. I'd never had much of a beard. Was that changing? Hard to tell.

I picked up a bagel downstairs and was headed to my office when Deb caught me.

"Ellen's on the phone from Sedona -- she needs to talk to you, right away."

"My office, or yours?" I asked.

"Mine is closer."

I followed her, sitting in her guest chair. She handed me the phone.

"Good morning," I said.

"Oh Rob," Ellen said, her voice full of amusement, "You were so right..."

"About what?" I asked.

"About needing a man here. You're flying out today. Plan on spending two or three weeks. Plan on dressing to put a mind-trip on the general contractor and his crew. If you need more clothes, plan on getting them here; Deb will give you the run-down. Got it?"

"Okay, I'll be on a plane this afternoon, and expect to be there two or three weeks. I'll talk to Deb."

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“Oh, and Linda and Bernadette will probably want to see you, and give you things to bring out. I’ll talk to them and have Deb coordinate.”

“Do I need a car at the airport when I arrive?”

“No, I’ll meet you.”

“Okay, see you this evening.”

“Thanks, Rob -- I’m so glad you’re with us! Let me talk to Deb.”

“Okay. Here she is.” I handed the phone back to Deb.

Deb took it, and started taking notes. After a bit she paused. “Start packing!” she told me, pointing to the door.

With a nod I got up and headed for the door.

Sitting in the back seat of the Mercedes with Linda, Kendra driving us to the airport, Bernadette in the passenger seat beside her. What a whirlwind morning! I’d packed what I could, what I had. Deb gave me the rundown, and a “family” credit card -- that’s what I was supposed to use, for anything and everything. I’d mentioned it would be good to have a computer to use while I was there. I’d said that at about nine thirty. Just after lunch I was handed a brand new PowerBook, loaded with memory and software.

Linda loaded me up with some CDs for Ellen. Bernadette gave me at least one injection - - I don’t know how many, as she held me deliciously first, turning out my lights. She gave me pills to take, twice a day. Bernadette also gave me a package of stuff for Ellen; that went in my checked luggage.

I had the run-down on Sedona and what was happening. The site was actually a ways outside Sedona, a few hundred acres in a secluded area. We had one “family” member living on-site, Julia. She was living in one of the two guest houses on the property as the main house was being extensively rebuilt. The other guest house held the husband-and-wife resident staff; he did landscaping, she did cooking and the like.

I remember looking to Linda, who smiled, reached for me, and did something. I floated in tranquility as she talked to someone.

I woke to find us on highway 380 near the San Francisco International Airport and Perennial Construction Zone.

Yes, I had a family cell phone, my tickets, my family credit card, some cash, everything packed. I knew the phone number for the Sedona site.

They dropped me off with hugs and kisses.

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Carry-on bag in one hand, towing the bag I was going to check, I headed into the terminal.

Transition

There's that stretched-out moment of time, of inevitability, just before impact. I remembered being a little kid, falling from something, remembering being caught in that long, drawn-out moment as I was in the air, knowing I was falling, before I hit the ground.

Wednesday afternoon, coming in for a landing in San Francisco, Suzanne sitting next to me. I'd been in Sedona three and a half weeks; Suzanne had been with me a week and a half.

I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose. Calm -- focus on the breath.

And my mind is whizzing around at a zillion miles an hour.

It all fit. It fit so well, all the little pieces.

All the little pieces -- all the little accidental discoveries, all the little pieces of information that didn't seem to fit, that stuck out, crying for a pattern to hold them together.

By accident they popped up. And by accident they'd fallen into place.

At the airport when I'd flown out, I'd been not really looking at magazines at a newsstand.

"Rob Flynn! How are you?" a woman's voice called out.

I turned to see JoAnne, an investigator I'd worked with over the years. I pulled her into a hug -- it felt like the natural thing to do. I guess that surprised her. Thinking about it afterwards, it surprised me, too. I've changed.

"I'm doing fine -- how are you? Where are you headed?" I replied.

She looked me over. "I can tell your new position suits you really well!"

I laughed a bit. "It's much better. I'm with a private foundation."

"Card?" she asked.

I dug out a business card and handed it to her.

She nodded as she looked at it. She sighed. "I think you left at the right time."

"I don't want to know," I told her.

She smiled. "Good for you. Where are you headed?"

"Sedona -- manage a construction project for a few weeks. You?"

“Oh, that sounds nice. I’m going to spend the next week or two digging through stacks of masters and doctoral feces at Harvard -- but it’s paying well.”

I had a hunch. “Could I ask a favor of you? A research favor?”

She smiled. “Of course! What?”

I took my card back and wrote on it. I put the Sedona number on the front, and Bernadette’s full name on the back. I handed it back to her. “Should be easy. This is the number where I can be reached. This woman, who is black, supposedly graduated from Harvard Medical School. Last name might be different, not sure, but the first name and being black hasn’t changed. My question -- did she graduate from Harvard Med, and if so, when? What can you find out?”

JoAnne lit up as she looked at the card. “Oh, that sounds like fun! And easy. I have some similar skullduggery, I mean research, to do next week.” She paused and sighed again. “Remember Pohlmann?”

I nodded; that had been a big one, a nasty one. I’d brought her in to dig into aspects of an inconsistency I’d found. What started with me finding a note stuck to the back of a page in a file folder turned into unearthing a major accounting fraud. We’d been yelled at, screamed at, threatened -- and I stood by her, and she stood by me. I expect one of the screamers was still in prison, based on what we found.

She put a hand on my shoulder. “I still owe you a lot for that one. You said you didn’t want to know, so I’ll just tell you that the way your old boss responded to you and Dave Patterson leaving has cost him a lot. There are a lot of people who won’t do business with him anymore. I’m one of them.” She gave me a quick hug. “Got to catch a plane -- I’ll give you a call on this!”

I didn’t hear from her for a week and a half. But what she told me -- I’ll always remember where I was, how I was standing, the scent of dry air, wood shavings, Julia next to me. So many things fell into place.

Sedona is about two hours north of Phoenix. Ellen met me at the Phoenix airport. She smiled, laughed, and squeezed me. Since we had a drive ahead of us, we stopped at an Italian place for dinner.

“What’s happening? Why am I here?” I asked her.

“Oh, you were so right -- we need you here for a few weeks.” She handed me a small orange pill to take.

When I pressed her to explain, she laughed. A big part of the problem, she told me, was Julia. When I pressed more, I learned that Julia had been a member of the Family for about two

years; while she'd grown up in the Southwest, she'd been at the Family estate in Lucerne for about six months, and back in Sedona for a little over three months. A big part of the problem, Ellen explained, was that Julia was driving some of the guys on site crazy. Why? How? I'd find out when I got there, she assured me. She thought things would be much better by Monday when construction resumed.

The drive was scenic and the site spectacular. The sky was crystal-clear and full of stars. The "main" building was large, larger than our Silicon Valley home. The two "guest houses" were good sized two bedroom houses. The "staff" one was about a hundred yards from the main house, and our place was another few hundred yards past that, not visible from the main house.

Good Southwest construction, thick walls, shaded porch. I got my bags from the back of the rental car and followed Ellen inside.

Once I saw Julia, I understood part of the problem.

Julia looked to be in her late twenties, and was a bombshell. Short hair, narrow waist, gorgeous, full bosom, hips, legs, large brown eyes -- and radiating sex and sexual frustration. The way she looked at me, I felt like a mouse under the gaze of a very hungry cat.

"Julia," Ellen said softly, "This is Rob Flynn. He's a member of our Family."

Damn, I thought I saw her twitching.

Ellen looked back to me. "Rob, why don't you wait here for a bit while Julia and I talk." As she led Julia off to the back of the house, Julia looked back over her shoulder at me.

I visited the half bath next to the kitchen. My nose felt a little stuffed up. I turned off the porch light and stood out on the front porch, marveling at the night sky.

I don't remember what happened, whether Ellen used the spray on me, or just her voice. Doesn't matter. I do remember being led into the bedroom, seeing Julia naked on top of the bed.

Friday night to Sunday morning are a delirious blur, making love with Julia. Some times the two of us, some times Ellen's voice, or that other woman's voice. Some times with the silver sprayer for her, some times with the gold sprayer for both of us. On the bed, on the floor, in the shower, bending her over the couch, taking her on the kitchen table.

My mind cleared some Sunday morning; I was in the shower, alone. Ellen handed me a towel when I got out.

"Where is she?" I asked.

Ellen smiled. "Asleep -- she's sore, and needs the rest."

Hidden Images

I could feel it in my stomach muscles, in my back, in my thighs. “Is this part of the cure?” I asked.

Ellen laughed. “I think so. Hungry?”

My stomach growled. I don’t think I’d had much to eat. “Yes!”

After I dressed, we walked to the other guest house to meet folks, Javier and Alicia. We had a very good meal, and talked about the construction.

After lunch, Ellen pulled out a set of prints for the job. We walked through the site.

What a mess. Well, mostly the sheetrock. I could see spots where they’d covered outlets, a really dumb thing to do. I found a roll of painter’s tape and littered the place with blue tape tags, duplicating them on the prints.

We sat on the front porch. Ellen asked, “What do you think?”

I sighed, looking at the gorgeous view. “I think I’m going to have a come-to-Jesus session with the general contractor tomorrow.” I shook my head. Then I chuckled and gave her a sideways glance. “But I understand -- if Julia was walking around the site, I’m surprised more isn’t screwed up. Rule 1 is she stays indoors during work hours.”

Ellen laughed and nodded. “I agree. You may need to take long lunches, though.”

“I may need a long vacation after this!” I replied.

She laughed again, then dug out a business card, which she handed to me. “I told Jeff we’d probably walk the job today. He said you could call if you wanted.”

I shrugged. Why not? I dug out my family phone and gave him a call.

“Jeff?” I said when he answered. “This is Rob Flynn. I think Ellen mentioned me; we’ve walked the site, and I’m looking forward to talking to you early tomorrow. What time will you be out?”

We talked for a while; he insisted on coming out and walking the site with me as soon as possible. Okay, no problem.

He was mid to late 30’s, weathered complexion. I was glad I was wearing well worn levis, an old flannel shirt, and my favorite hiking boots.

We shook hands and Ellen disappeared. We walked the site. I kept things low key, but methodically pointed out problems, comparing the prints to what I saw. He didn’t argue.

As with Ellen, we ended back on the porch. I leaned against a post and looked at him.

“Okay, Rob, we’ve got a lot to clean up. How long are you here?” he asked.

“For as long as it takes. Oh, and this site is off-limits to Julia during the day.”

That brought a smile to his face. “You’ve met her?”

Had I... “Oh yeah. Under control.” I hoped.

He chortled. “Some of the younger guys...” He shook his head.

“I can imagine,” I agreed with him.

He nodded his head. “Rob, thanks for all the notes on the prints. What say we go get dinner and go over them once more? We can figure out where to start.”

“Tamales?” I suggested.

He broke into a big smile. “I’ve got just the place.”

The tamales were great; that became one of my favorite places to eat. We went through the prints and put together a priority list.

When I got back to the guest house, I asked Ellen, “How is she?”

She smiled. “Asleep again, but she had two good meals and a hot bath. How’d your meeting go?”

I nodded. “He’s a good guy. I think he’s pleased I’m not an asshole. It could have been far, far worse. I think we can work together.”

She laughed and hugged me. “That’s great. Why don’t you go wake her?”

Somehow I made it out the door to meet Jeff Monday morning. We walked the job again with the subs. When one of them complained, I told him that my Uncle Bob used to mark problems on *his* jobs using his framing hammer... Jeff smiled and nodded at that.

I got along well with the crew. I told ‘em I expected to get what we contracted for, and expected good, solid work. If they thought I was being an asshole, talk to Jeff, or talk to me.

Long lunches... Talk started about Julia... All the time she was on the site, she wore white cotton gloves. Weird. Tuesday afternoon we got in a big load of materials; I helped load them in, pretty quickly taking off my shirt. Hadn’t realized I had scratches on my back. Improved my stature...

Hidden Images

Julia -- Wednesday afternoon when I got back to the guest house she was sitting talking to Ellen. I'd not seen her coherent prior to that. And she was wearing the white cotton gloves. That night we actually had dinner and conversation! Julia was Kendra's equivalent for the Sedona site -- security, physical conditioning, that kind of thing. She gave me a sly look and said she'd vary my exercise...

And that night, she took me, rode me, and suckled me to sleep. I need that so much...

I got some of my own work done, besides working closely with Jeff. Julia and I started running in the early evening just before sunset. There were trails all over the property. Ellen left, replaced by Linda, who had Julia and me in a fog for a few days. Linda left and Suzanne replaced her.

Suzanne was a great help. She was used to working with construction and maintenance people as well, and helped Javier and his crews immensely.

But that phone call... All the little loose ends...

Hands -- I'd done so much photography of hands. My friend Ira in college, he was always putting on hand cream, worried about the skin on his hands. I remember meeting a famous politician at a Sunset Magazine event; from his face, you'd think he was in his late 40's. But if you read the skin on his hands, he was mid 60's at least.

I knew, explicitly and implicitly, no photography of Family members, even hands. If I closed my eyes, I could see Bernadette's hands, or Linda's, or Kendra's. Soft, smooth, supple.

Julia's hands -- one of those clues. Her hands were soft, smooth, supple as well. Why the gloves? I never asked her, but I saw it as we showered together. She had ridges about halfway down her fingernails, almost like a new nail had been growing in, the old part dullish yellow-gray, and the new part pink, smooth, and strong. I massaged her feet one night and her toenails were the same.

So many little things I should have caught and put together earlier. Reactions to some of my remarks, anomalous reactions that puzzled me. The way some of the ladies spoke, especially when they were together. The music they liked on the radio was another clue. Little things out of place -- only out of place if you're trying to fit them into the wrong pattern. Once you know the right pattern, all falls into place.

JoAnne called. She found Bernadette's records. She told me her maiden name, graduation date, and her birth date. Time stopped for a moment; I had her repeat that. She did. And she told me all the school had was a post office box in California. Did I want her to dig more? No, that was all I needed. Thanks. Yes, I'd keep in touch.

I squeezed Suzanne's hand as we started our descent into San Francisco. Soft, smooth, supple skin and strong, healthy nails. What would I expect from Family-select eugenics?

Since the phone call I'd probed gently, observed more closely, seeking to confirm.

Damn, everything fit. Suzanne's behavior, the photography prohibition, Julia's nails, all the little bumps and seeming discontinuities.

"What is it?" Suzanne asked, kissing my hand.

I looked into her eyes. Clear and youthful -- another place age shows itself. "Nothing much, figuring things out, that's all."

"You've changed, the last few weeks," she told me.

I smiled as I kissed her hand. "And so have you." We'd had some wild lovemaking in the last week and a half, the two of us, the three of us, the two of them.

"I'm happy," she said simply.

"I am too," I agreed. But what was I going to do? I couldn't ignore what I knew. Do I let it slide, or do I bring it out in the open?

Don't know. One day at a time. I had a good idea of *what*, but I didn't know *why*. Well, some self-evident reasons for why, but they begged many, many other questions.

Kendra met us at the airport; I'd expected staff, someone such as Kathryn or Penny. She helped us with our bags, and once we were in the car, started filling us in on Family gossip. Ellen was very pleased with the way I'd turned things around at Sedona. She'd also spoken to Julia recently, and was glad I was getting plenty of exercise. We chuckled at that, at least until she told me we were going to work more on my strength and flexibility. I was encouraged, though, when she reminded me that massage was part of that regimen. Lucky for me, we wouldn't get back to the house until after four in the afternoon, so I wouldn't start back on the grind until the morning.

So good to be back "home," back with the Family. Hugs all around. Linda let me know she still felt cheated out of a night in the little house... After what we'd done in Sedona? "Yes, dear," is what you say.

More-or-less business meeting with Ellen after dinner. She was happy with how Sedona was going -- Jeff liked working with me. I'd go back for a few days in two or three weeks to check on things, but all the rough interior work was done, and they were into the seemingly endless finish and detail work. She apologized for making me miss the first art show of the season; Suzanne or Kendra could help me with the one coming up in three days. Ooch -- I remembered; a two-day deal at the old Novitiate winery up on the hill in Saratoga. I told her one each day probably, and I'd need half of Friday to get things together. Not a problem. I needed to meet next week with the finance types on quarterly filings.

Hidden Images

And I got cornered afterwards by Bernadette and Linda for a not-so-business meeting. I know I looked at Bernadette differently. But she was still beautiful, and I loved what she did to me. They'd decided Bernadette could have me tonight, and Linda had me on Thursday night. I reminded them of the art show on the weekend -- I needed to be up and out of the house by eight on both Saturday and Sunday. Well, in that case, someone else could have me!

In bed with Bernadette, anxious, unsettled. I whispered to her, "You know what I need."

She whispered back, "Yes I do," and pulled me to a nipple.

So hard to get up in the morning... "When can we have more time together?" I asked her.

She sighed as we hugged. "Next weekend?"

It was good to get back to the grind. When I told Kendra I'd missed her morning classes she laughed. I walked up to her, grabbed her, and kissed her, squeezing the back of her head. When I helped her straighten up I told her, "I mean it -- I missed you." The other ladies in the room applauded and whistled.

So for a supposed "light" day, she worked us hard. And I enjoyed it. Deb grabbed me for the two-person work. She worked me, teased me, and turned out my lights. Kendra and I worked more together after the others took off. That ended with Kendra riding me. Showering together afterwards, I asked if she'd spend the night with me Saturday and help at the show Sunday. The way she kissed me, I think she said, "yes!"

Suzanne gave me much the same answer when I asked her about Friday night and Saturday, but she said, "yes," explicitly after we kissed.

Kendra ran me and worked me more in our afternoon session. I knew I was stronger and faster, as well as being more flexible. The massage session afterwards was just Bernadette. When she quizzed me on how I was feeling, I told her I'd had something like a stuffy nose for the first few days in Sedona. She chortled and told me that was a side-effect of a drug I'd been given. Given for what? To help me survive Julia... She stretched me out on the table and worked a few weeks worth of kinks out of me; I could tell I hadn't had a massage in a while. She worked so long and so hard that we both needed a shower, together of course, and only had a few minutes to hold me before we had to dress for dinner.

The show went well. Suzanne was great to work with, as was Kendra. Kendra and I spent Sunday night together as well, and dragged in to her class Monday morning. Picking up a bagel later, Bernadette thanked me for wearing Kendra out! I moaned and hung on to her, not quite feigning exhaustion.

Financial review kept me busy all day Monday, missing my afternoon session with Kendra, but concluded Tuesday in time for me to arrive only a few minutes late. I started in on the treadmill.

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Only to be interrupted a while later by Ellen, Linda, and Bernadette. We sat on the floor; I'd just gotten warmed up. Amazing the shape I was getting into!

Ellen was frowning. "Feel like traveling?" she asked me.

"Lucerne?" I replied. Wasn't I supposed to be going there about now?

She shook her head. "No, that's postponed, indefinitely. Back to Sedona, I'm afraid."

"What's happening?" I asked.

Another sigh. "Got a call from Jeff. He's concerned that Julia is going weird on them again."

I nodded. "Define 'weird' for me," I requested.

Linda answered. "I spoke to him -- I'd summarize as short-term memory lapses, some irrational behavior. We're very concerned."

Ellen added, "She agreed to stay away from the site; I told her we'd have people out there as soon as we could. Javier and Linda will make sure she's safe, as best they can."

"What's the plan?"

"Deb is figuring out flights to Phoenix for the three of you," Ellen said.

"Three?"

Linda told me, "Bernadette and I are coming along."

"To evaluate her?"

Bernadette nodded.

"Should I keep my schedule flexible?" Kendra asked.

Ellen pondered for a moment. "Might be a good idea. Rob, you'll be there for a week or two, at least. If ... No, too early to tell... Better clean up and start packing."

We got on a six o'clock America West flight to Phoenix. Eduardo made us a picnic-style dinner which was superb, and the envy of those around us. We had a car reserved. I drove, getting on the road at about eight thirty. Bernadette was in the back seat, Linda sat next to me.

"Should we call Javier?" I asked as we got underway.

“Ellen was going to fill him in, and let Julia know we were on the way. They have our cell numbers.”

“And we’ll be out of range in about twenty minutes, and stay that way for a little over an hour,” I told them.

“Shit,” Linda said, quite eloquently. She got out her phone. She spoke with Javier. They could see lights on, and motion. So far, so good, but Javier was worried. She told him we were on the way.

“How we doing?” I asked.

“Doesn’t sound good -- Javier lapsed into Spanish on me -- he sounded quite troubled,” Linda informed us.

“Hypotheses?” Bernadette asked.

Linda shook her head.

“Alzheimer’s?” I suggested, remembering an aunt. As soon as the word was out of my mouth, I regretted it. Oops. Big oops.

I glanced over to Linda, who gave me a very curious look, a frightened look.

“Rob, why would you suggest that?” she asked very cautiously, deliberately pacing her words.

What the hell -- in for a penny, in for a pound. “An aunt, not part of my bloodline, she married into the family, had serious Alzheimer’s which came on quickly. She was about the same age -- early 70’s.” There. Said it, even if it was speculative.

“The same age?” Linda asked, effort apparent in her quest to keep her voice in control.

I sighed, shaking my head. “Julia’s fingernails, the way they’re growing out. The old part looks like the nails of someone in their seventies.” Should I mention the hair? “Also a textural shift in her hair, about two inches out.” That part of the pattern fit -- Suzanne’s hair was short, and seemed to have funny ends.

A deep sigh from Bernadette in the back seat.

I glanced over to Linda again. “Should I pull over so we can talk?”

She shook her head. “Not unless you want to.”

“Rob, what have you figured out?” Bernadette asked.

“Well, some things I know, and some is speculation.”

“What do you know?” Linda asked.

I nodded. “Bernadette, the only black woman with your name to graduate from Harvard Med turned 64 in August.”

Another deep sigh from the back seat.

“And I love the way you hold me -- please don’t stop,” I added. I put a hand on Linda’s thigh. She put a hand on top of mine.

“And the speculation?” Linda asked.

“I’m the only family member under 60 years of age? I don’t know. So many little things point that way.”

“Such as?” Linda followed up.

“Language patterns, choices of music, memories of contemporaneous events, responses to remarks I’ve made...”

“What kind of remarks and responses?” Linda asked.

“Kendra talking about studying with a particular Yoga teacher -- Scaravelli or something like that -- either Kendra studied with her when she was a year old, or Kendra is in her sixties. Suzanne talking about her dad and the photography he did, working with the f/64 group when he was young and she was a little girl.”

I sighed and shook my head. “And Suzanne weirded out on me -- we were talking, and I told her she reminded me of an aunt or grandmother, I’m not sure which. I couldn’t figure out why she responded the way she did. She’s probably old enough to be my grandmother...”

“Yes, she is,” said Bernadette softly from the back seat.

“Oh my,” sighed Linda. “Tell me more about Julia -- what do you think happened?”

“Julia’s body, particularly her nails and hair, tells me something happened to her four months or so ago. Like I said, the old part of her nails look like those of a seventy-year-old. The new part looks young.”

“So what do you think happened?” Linda continued to prod.

I sighed again. “Another tailored virus? Dorian Gray? I’ve been to Miami; I know Ponce De Leon didn’t find his fountain down there! It’s so fantastic, but it fits so well! It explains so much, fits all the loose pieces together. But the questions that begs! Why me? Why

us? Why not so many others, our so-called 'leaders' and 'captains of industry,' the Pope? You tell me..."

Linda sighed and held my hand. After a few miles of silence, I asked, "Bernadette? You all right? Linda? Talk to me, please..."

Linda sighed again. "Rob, you're right. I'm 68. Suzanne is 73. Julia is 74. Ellen is the youngster of the group, 54..."

I squeezed her thigh. "Linda, I'm still part of the Family -- I'm not turning back; I'm not running away. I just need to know better where I'm heading. You've done so much for me -- both of you have. I trust you, and I want to trust you. Help me, please..."

I felt a hand on my shoulder from the back seat.

Bernadette said, "It is a kind of virus. It's been around for at least a hundred years; we don't know how much older it might be. As to why so few, why not so many others... You made a remark earlier, I think, about someone being 'eugenically flawed,' I think was the phrase?"

"Yes, Miriam, the pianist. ... Wait -- given that part of the pattern, the older you are when you're given the virus, the younger you become?"

Linda laughed. "That's why I've argued for telling you from the beginning!"

Bernadette managed a chuckle. "Pretty close. Remember the one you were given?"

"Don't think I'll forget that, even if it's the only time I've been sick in my life!"

"Rob, this other one is incredibly, immensely harder on the body. That's one of the reasons why it's not more prevalent. It takes months of intense preparation, and even then, you're on life support for days."

"One of the reasons?" I asked.

Bernadette spoke up again. "Rob, have you heard of the varicella zoster virus?"

I frowned. "Oh, chicken pox, and shingles?"

"Right you are. There's a vaccine for it now. Kids get chicken pox, and in the vast majority of them, the virus goes dormant in nerve roots. It can reappear later in life as shingles."

"So?"

"One of the problems with the virus, your Dorian virus -- not only does it take quite a toll on a healthy body, but *any* other virus, *any* infection or disease present in the body goes wild."

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About twenty years ago we had a Family member who we thought was clean -- she didn't know she'd had a mild case of chicken pox as a baby, and they had no way of testing... She died a very, very painful death."

"But Julia was tested for everything under the Sun..." I proposed.

I saw Linda nodding. "Everything we can test for, yes..."

"Holy shit," I muttered.

We were silent the rest of the drive. We pulled into the site a little after eleven. Bernadette got the gate for us. They had me stop just inside the gate, and opened their checked luggage, getting something out of Bernadette's bag.

I drove us to the guest house. Lights were on inside.

"Rob, wait here," Linda told me. I nodded. She and Bernadette got out. I reclined my seat and closed my eyes.

"Okay, let's get the bags."

I opened my eyes to see Linda leaning in through the passenger door, picking up her carry-on. I got out, glancing at the clock -- I'd snoozed about 20 minutes.

"What's happening?" I asked as we gathered at the back of the car.

Another long sigh, from Bernadette. "She's sedated. We ... tried to talk to her, but she's not really coherent. We ..."

I hugged both of them, and they hugged me.

We managed to get the bags moved in.

"It's cold in here!" I complained. The place also looked to be a shambles, things scattered all over.

Linda nodded ruefully. "She had the air conditioning turned up all the way, and was wearing about eight layers of clothing."

Julia was resting in the main bedroom. Clothes, linens, books scattered. What a mess.

The other bedroom was untouched. That's where we landed.

"Do we watch her in shifts?" I suggested. "I can go three or four hours."

Hidden Images

Linda shook her head. “No, we don’t think there’s any need. You can go to bed; we’ll be along in a bit.”

I shook my head. “No dice, especially if you’re going to talk to Ellen, or to Lucerne.”

To my surprise, both of them smiled a bit. We hugged again.

After unpacking, Bernadette checked Julia’s pulse and blood pressure. She closed the door, and Linda hung something on the doorknob.

In response to my questioning look, she said, “An alarm -- she touches the knob on the inside and it makes a racket.”

We went downstairs to the little office, pushing debris around so we could sit and get to the phone.

“I should have brought a camera,” I muttered.

“I’ve got to agree with that,” added Bernadette.

“Rob,” Linda said seriously, “You’ve got to keep quiet -- not a sound. You’re off in bed, not here.”

I nodded. “I understand.” I turned to Bernadette, putting an arm around her waist. “I’m quiet when my mouth is full,” I whispered to her.

A complex smile filled her face. “Later -- we’ll all need comforting.”

We sat down. Linda used the speakerphone to call Ellen, who conferenced in some people from Lucerne. When one woman spoke, the room whirled -- that voice! She was the voice who sent me off to such incredible places in trance! Someone tapped me on the forehead, and I was back in the room.

Linda gave her report, trying to remain clinical, but I could tell she was working at it. Recapping, Jeff had called Ellen, reporting that Julia was ‘going weird’ again, talking nonsense, exhibiting short-term memory problems. When Ellen and Linda spoke to her a little later, she had difficulty communicating, but agreed to stay in the guest house. Javier was concerned, and frightened. When they arrived, Julia was incoherent. She was sedated and resting. The only things they could check, bp, pulse, oxygen levels, were all nominal. Bernadette wanted to know how her course through ‘the process’ had been. ‘Nominal’ was the reply from Europe, and all the screening tests were negative. What did they propose as the next step?

Bernadette wanted to take Julia to a private clinic outside Pittsburgh for tests, most importantly, a PET scan of her head to determine neurological function. Yes, the Europeans agreed. They would arrange for the Family jet to fly from Toronto to transport Julia; they would make the arrangements. Some side conversations in French, and the woman told us that Doctor

Gilbert and an assistant would be on the plane, which would arrive in the morning at Sedona. They would have records with them. Would Doctor Carter like to accompany them to Pittsburgh? Bernadette answered that she would, indeed.

Then the woman asked about Mr. Flynn. How is he? Bernadette wrapped an arm around me as Linda answered. Mr. Flynn was upstairs asleep. He was quite concerned about Julia, since she'd been fine when he'd left. Then she went on a short but *very* intense diatribe strongly suggesting full disclosure to me, as I was a very intelligent individual, and one who had a track record of correlating anomalous data to find patterns. Bernadette threw in her two cents, adding that especially in light of these developments, she considered it unethical to not inform me.

Yes, yes, the European said, they were discussing this matter. Mr. Flynn is healthy? Who has he had contact with since his return?

Linda smirked. Yes, he is healthy. Since his encounter with Julia, he has had contact with Suzanne, Kendra, Bernadette, and herself.

"My! I am quite looking forward to meeting him in person!" the European woman said enthusiastically.

Both Linda and Bernadette laughed; Bernadette pulled my head to her bosom to keep me quiet. I put my arms around her.

Linda's smirk vanished. She said that while Mr. Flynn's previous 'contact' with the subject had produced a marked improvement in her condition, she felt that it was too risky to attempt that again. Oh yes, far too risky, the European agreed. Doctor Carter should take blood samples from him for a repeat screening. Bernadette agreed, giving me another squeeze.

Very well, if nothing else ... the plane should arrive around ten in the morning; they would call to update us in eight or nine hours. Doctor Carter would accompany Julia, with Mr. Flynn and Doctor Klein remaining. If need be, someone from Toronto or Saratoga would be sent to join Mr. Flynn. Given the circumstances, he would not be given the process until midyear at least, and they were leaning to full disclosure. His preparation should continue, as well as the development of his skills. I got another squeeze from Bernadette at that. The call ended shortly thereafter.

Sighs and hugs.

"I'm hungry," I suggested.

That brought a wave of laughter from the ladies.

Bernadette stood and hugged me. "I want fasting blood samples from you in the morning. I can give you something else, though... If you want..."

Hidden Images

I pulled back from her a bit. “Bernadette, I want very, very much.” I looked to Linda. “And I hope you need to be held as well.”

She stepped closer, putting a hand on my back. “Rob, I do, very much.”

Linda bent down to pick up some papers, but stopped. “Tomorrow, or later.”

We left the room, turning out the lights downstairs.

“Someone talk to Javier and let him know things are under control?” I asked.

Linda stopped on the stairs. “You two go ahead; I’ll give them a call. Rob, I want you up early to meet the general contractor.”

“Got it,” I told her. I put an arm around Bernadette and we headed upstairs.

She did something to the box on the door, opened it, and checked Julia again. Resting peacefully. Door closed and alarm box set in place again.

“Questions?” I asked when we were in our bedroom. Glad it had a king-sized bed.

Bernadette sighed and nodded. “Brief ones? I’m exhausted.”

I stepped closer and put a hand on her back. “Not too tired to hold me?”

She smiled. “Never that tired... Ask away.”

“The ... process -- it stops aging?”

She nodded. “Stops, or slows it to the point where it’s imperceptible.”

I frowned. “Not my subject, but what are the cellular changes accompanying the transformation?”

She smiled and hugged me. “Oh, you’re a catch! We’re still studying that.” Her voice changed, lower, not at all as happy or energetic. “We expected to learn a lot from Julia. We’re getting our wish.”

I held her.

We’d just gotten in bed when Linda came up.

“They’re glad we’re here. I’ll be a few minutes.”

With that, Bernadette placed a hand behind my head. I moaned, “Yes, please!” and moved to a nipple. She squeezed me into place, I sighed, and let go.

I woke in the dark to someone or something howling. By the time I sat up, figuring out where I was, Linda and Bernadette were up. "Stay there!" Bernadette commanded. She grabbed something from the nightstand and followed Linda out the door.

God, that noise didn't sound quite human, yet I knew it was Julia... I stood by the door as I heard what had to be the alarm gadget on the door. More howling, sounds of wrestling and a thud, and the howling diminished. Almost five in the morning... I walked into the hall and to the other bedroom. Picked the howling alarm box off the door and turned it off. Inside, Linda and Bernadette were holding someone wrapped in the bedcover -- must be Julia.

"Let me help," I said as I stepped into the room.

Both Linda and Bernadette were panting. There was an empty syringe by Bernadette. The needle was bent some. Ooch -- that must have hurt.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Turn on the hall light," Linda requested. We'd been operating on full moonlight. I turned on the hall light.

The bedroom was a mess, more so than before. The ladies stood up. Linda had some scratches, but other than that they were unscathed. I helped them lift a very limp Julia to the bed, and cover her once more.

"She's out for eight hours," Bernadette said.

"You sure?" Linda asked. "What time is it now?"

Bernadette looked at a bedside clock. "Okay, six to seven hours. I'll whack her up with Vitamin T in four or five."

"Vitamin T?" I asked.

"Thorazine -- a major tranquilizer," Linda told me.

She was shaking. I held her. "I've got you," I whispered. She clutched me suddenly, burying her head on my shoulder. I could feel her heart pounding rapidly.

We took turns visiting the loo. Linda was still shaking when we got back into bed. Bernadette seemed to be taking it in stride, at least on the outside. I looked to her for help.

"Hold her," she whispered. As I moved closer to Linda, Bernadette put a hand on my head. "Down, suck on her." Linda opened her arms to me. As I settled in, I heard Linda sigh. Bernadette squeezed me and started whispering. Oh, so good...

Hidden Images

I woke to the clock radio, and in Linda's arms. She pulled me to where I wanted to be, holding my head just right...

Some time later I was traded to Bernadette, who held me just as well, possibly better.

"Rob," Linda said, rubbing my back, "We need to get up -- you need to meet Jeff."

With sighs all around, we got up. Not enough time to shower, I got dressed, running a brush through my hair, not bothering to shave.

God bless Linda -- she'd loaded up the coffee maker before she came upstairs! At least I had a mug full of hot coffee as I was heading out the door.

"What are you going to tell Jeff?" Linda asked me.

I shook my head. "That I don't have a clue what's going on, and she's going to get medical attention. How's that sound?"

She nodded. Bernadette came down the stairs and said, "That's all I could tell him."

I got another round of hugs and walked to the site.

Javier saw me, and walked to the construction site. I told him Julia had slept well. She was going to see doctors later in the day for tests.

Jeff was already on-site. He gave me a questioning look. I shook his hand. "Jeff, I don't know what the hell is going on with her. She slept well last night. She's going to have some tests done. Sure scared the shit out of me. How are we doing, other than that?"

He shook his head. We talked about the job. Some of the workers were a little spooked. That was understandable. How long was I here this time? Don't know -- as long as needed, at least a week.

I walked the job site. I praised one guy for a nice job, and talked to Jeff about some other work that was going to have to be redone. When a sub and one of his workers appeared, they looked at me apprehensively. I shook my head and told them I expected them to do better -- a lot better. They relaxed. Then Jeff cursed them out. Jeff and I walked off. When we were out of earshot, I told him, "We make a good team." He managed to laugh, and so did I.

I saw Linda drive off around a quarter to ten. She came back about half an hour later, another car following her.

I turned and saw Jeff looking at me from about thirty feet away. I walked over to him. "House call," I told him. "See you in a while." He nodded, and I walked back to the guest house.

Hidden Images

By the time I got there, Bernadette was starting to get into the front passenger seat. Julia was in the back with another woman. A woman was in the driver's seat. Linda was standing on the porch and walked toward me.

I could see the torment in Bernadette's face as she turned to me. I held her, and she held me. "I'll miss you -- I need you," I whispered to her. We kissed fiercely. I closed the car door after she got in. Linda put an arm around my waist. We waved as they drove off.

"That was quick," I said.

"No screwing around -- they'll start tests on her this afternoon," Linda told me.

I turned to her. "What do you need?"

She sighed. "Alicia is going to help me pick the place up. I need you in my arms."

"Good -- that's where I need to be."

I saw Alicia walking to our house.

"I'm sticking with the crew for the day," I told her.

"Good idea. We may go off-site for dinner."

"You like tamales?"

She smiled. "Yes, I do."

"I know just the place."

We kissed, and I headed back to the job.

I ended up working with Javier, and I worked hard. When quitting time rolled around, I was drenched in sweat. When I walked into our house, Linda grimaced and said, "Shower!" pointing up the stairs. I kissed her, and took her advice.

When I got out, I realized I'd used the master bath. The place was picked up again, the bed made. My clothes were still in the other bedroom, though.

Linda was sitting looking out the window when I went downstairs. She stood up and we hugged. "Any news?" I asked.

"They arrived just before you came in. Bernadette wanted to start with a PET scan. They'll call."

"Dinner?"

“Please.”

“You got a lot done,” I suggested as we drove to dinner.

“Superficial chaos -- it didn’t take us long. Oh, the clothes you were wearing are in the laundry -- remind me to dry them when we get back.”

“Do we move to the big bedroom?”

“Oh yes...”

Dinner was good, but we were quiet. I was happy to see Linda enjoying tamales and beer.

We were back home when the phone rang, a little before nine. Linda got it, and put it on the speaker. “We’re here,” she announced, waving me closer.

I put an arm around her, pulled up a chair, and sat down, pulling her to my lap. She kissed the top of my head and wrapped an arm around my neck.

“Okay,” Bernadette said. I held Linda closer -- I could hear the emotion and turmoil in Bernadette’s voice.

“I’d like to thank Dr. Kirby and his staff for their responsiveness to our requests, and the use of their state-of-the-art facilities. Doctor Gilbert and I have been reviewing initial tests with the radiologists and neurologists here. I’ll be brief. Doctor Klein hypothesized Alzheimer’s disease.”

Linda and I looked at each other. She had? Thought that was me.

Bernadette continued. “We may perform a biopsy, but we believe that is not the case. Our interpretation of the PET scan is an advanced case of new-variant CJD.”

“Mad cow,” Linda whispered in my ear.

“From the comparison with a CT scan performed five months ago, the disease,” Bernadette explained, “is progressing at an astonishing rate. We don’t believe a biopsy is warranted, and feel that the only course open to us is to provide what palliative care we can. Further exclusionary studies are underway, but we believe they will not contradict our diagnosis. We propose transferring her to Toronto.”

I held Linda close. I thought I understood what she’d said; if I did, it was grim.

Our European voice said what sounded like a soft prayer in French, then asked, “How long?”

Bernadette answered flatly. "Weeks at most. Questions?"

Silence.

The European voice said, "Doctor Carter, Doctor Gilbert, thank you. I don't know what more any of us can do."

I spoke up. "Bernadette, please come back so I can hold you."

Linda held me and cried softly.

"I will, thank you," Bernadette said. "If there is nothing else, that's all I have."

"May God bless us all," the European said. That ended the call.

I sat holding Linda. We both cried.

We made it to bed. I held her to my shoulder, trying to protect and comfort her, trying to ignore the age difference. "I've got you," I whispered. "You're safe in my arms." She held me and cried.

Awake in the middle of the night, listening to the coyotes serenade the moon. I knew she was awake next to me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She sighed. I pulled her closer.

"What do I tell Jeff and the gang? Inoperable brain something, she won't be back?"

I felt Linda nod her head. "Yes, that works -- inoperable brain tumor."

Linda was usually a lot more helpful. "Okay, I'll tell them tests revealed an inoperable brain tumor, something which had been present for some time, and just recently started causing problems. She's going back to Toronto where Family can care for her. How does that sound?"

"Okay," Linda said flatly.

I hugged her close. "I've got you," I told her again.

I woke to the alarm clock, and held her (let her clutch me) through a few snooze cycles.

"I need to get up," I told her, "to meet Jeff."

I kissed her on the head. She stayed in bed.

I stopped by and told Javier and Alicia. Alicia crossed herself at the news.

Met Jeff by his construction trailer. He gave me a questioning look. "Round up anyone who wants to know, and I'll tell you what I know, and it isn't good," I told him.

It took about fifteen minutes for the crews to gather. Javier brought his crew.

"Good morning," I told them all, as I stood on the little step outside Jeff's trailer.

"You know Julia developed some problems recently." I heard Javier translating into Spanish.

"Yesterday, she was taken to a medical center where tests were performed. We got results of those tests late last night."

I paused, not only so Javier could translate, but to compose myself.

"Julia has an inoperable brain tumor. She's had it for quite some time; it's just recently started to cause problems. She won't be coming back; she's going to Toronto to be with Family."

I saw a lot of workers making the Sign of the Cross. "May God have mercy on her," I added. "May He have mercy on all of us."

That brought nods and murmurs.

One of the subs said something to Jeff, who shrugged. I could guess that one.

"So that means you're going to be looking at me from now on, unless we can find someone prettier."

That got some nervous laughter; the group broke up and headed back to work.

Around lunch time, Javier told me his wife had taken lunch up to our place; Linda wasn't feeling well.

I nodded and headed for the house.

"Honey, I'm home," I announced as I went in the door. No answer. Mmm -- home-made chile verde enchiladas in the kitchen.

Linda was still upstairs in bed.

"How are you?" I asked, kneeling and holding her.

Hidden Images

She sighed. "I don't know."

"Get up and have lunch with me?"

She sighed and rolled to her back. She'd been crying.

I held her. "You're okay -- it can't happen to you. You know that."

She held me.

I got her up, and through continuous effort, got her through the bathroom, dressed, and downstairs to have some lunch with me. I practically forced her to eat, but she did eat.

The architect was coming out; Jeff, Javier, and I agreed with each other and disagreed with the architect on equipment placement, air conditioning, emergency power, stuff like that.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" I asked Linda.

"I don't know."

"Still tired?"

"I guess," she said flatly.

"I have to go -- I'll be back as soon as I can. Holler if you need me."

She barely returned my hug.

As I walked back to the job, I pulled out my cell phone once I was out of sight of the guest house. I called home. Deb answered.

"Hi sweetie," I greeted her.

"We heard the news," she said, emotion in her voice.

"Yeah, a mess. I need a favor, now."

"What?"

"Can you get a hold of Bernadette?"

"I think so, why?"

"Have her call me on my cell as soon as possible."

"Is it an emergency? Can we help?"

“It’s not an emergency, I just need to talk to her as soon as I can. Okay?”

“I’ll take care of it, Rob. Hang in there.”

“Oh, I will. Looks as if I’m going to be here for a while.”

“That’s what Ellen said. She told us we’d probably get to rotate through to keep you company...” She sounded a bit more upbeat.

“Then I’d better get plenty of sleep while I can!”

She laughed. “I’ll get on it right away.”

“Thanks sweetie -- glad you’re around to help.”

The architect showed up. The topography of the site made his placement less than ideal, and the one we wanted was a whole lot better. I was catching on that he wasn’t sure where I stood in the great scheme of things when my phone rang.

I stepped off to the side to answer it. “This is Rob.”

It was Ellen. “Rob, how are you doing? What’s wrong? Why do you need to talk to Bernadette?”

“Hi Ellen. I miss you. It’s nothing major, a personal thing I need help with. How is the group out there taking things?”

“As you’d expect. It’s a great loss. We’re running down Bernadette -- she should call you within the hour. Is there anything else I can do to help?”

I knew Ellen had signed the contracts for the job. I stepped back to the pack so they could hear me.

“Yes, there is. We’re meeting with the architect on an issue, and it would help if you were to tell him that as far as this job is concerned, I’m God.”

She laughed. “I’d be happy to!”

“Okay, thanks.”

I handed the phone to the architect. “It’s Ellen.”

He took my phone. “Yes? Yes... I understand. Oh yes, no problem at all. Yes, thank you.” He handed the phone back.

“Ellen?”

She chuckled a little. “You won’t be having any problems with him. Are the others behaving?”

“Yes. Jeff and I work together well. I try not to get in his way.”

Jeff smiled at that.

“I’ll call later this evening to check in. Oh, you know you’ll be there for a while?”

“Guessed that.”

“Need anything?”

“Might want some of my photographic equipment; too early to tell.”

“You can buy what you need, or we can send things to you. Let us know. Take care, Rob.”

“Thank you Ellen -- give the Family hugs for me.”

“I’ll do that. Bye.”

My, how attitudes change! He agreed with our suggestion. Jeff suggested marking up a set of prints and initialing them so he wouldn’t have to do a change order. That was a nice touch -- a formal change order, as suggested by the architect, would have cost us money.

Bernadette called about an hour later. “Rob, what’s the matter? What do you need?”

“Thanks for calling. When will you be here?” I asked her.

“Ah, I’m not sure -- we’re in Toronto, and I thought I was flying back to the Bay area.”

“I’m worried about Linda.”

“What’s wrong?”

“She cried a lot last night -- we both did. I held her, did my best, but this morning she didn’t get out of bed. When I took a break for lunch, she was still in bed. I had to practically drag her out of bed and force her to eat lunch.”

“Oh... What does she say?”

“Almost nothing. I try to get her to talk, but she doesn’t, or only says a few words. I hold her, tell her she’s safe, that it can’t happen to her. I don’t know what’s going on.”

She sighed. "Okay, I'll get there as soon as I can."

"What's going on? What can I do?"

"Rob, she's depressed, and concerned..."

"We're all a little depressed, but she's completely safe -- it can't happen to her! She should understand that!"

Another sigh. "Rob, she isn't concerned about herself. She's concerned about *you*. We all are."

Holy shit. I hadn't thought about that. "Okay, I'm not too bright some times. What should I do, or not do?"

"Rob, you're extremely bright -- and persistent. You proved that to us on the drive from Phoenix! Engage her; talk to her about it; you need to understand it better as well. I'll give her a call and talk to her too."

"Okay -- thanks. I'll keep holding her, but I need to be held as well."

"Oh Rob -- thank you so much for what you said. I need to hold you, and I need you to hold me."

"As soon as I can..."

"Okay -- I'll call when I have an updated schedule."

Enough for one day. When I got to the house, the phone was ringing, and ringing, and ringing. I ran upstairs. Linda was in bed again, the phone by the side of the bed ringing.

I picked it up. "Hello?"

Bernadette sighed. "I called right after I spoke to you. The phone's been ringing for almost five minutes. I was about to hang up and call you."

"I'll put her on the phone."

"I don't want to talk to anyone," Linda muttered.

I sat the phone down and pulled her to sitting, and not gently. "You're going to talk to Bernadette, because we love you, and you need to pull out of this." God -- where had that come from? I handed her the phone.

She said, "Yes," softly, nodding her head, listening.

She paused. "Go shower," she told me.

I kissed the top of her head. She'd said that with more energy.

I stripped in the bathroom and sat on the can. I could hear her speaking softly.

I had my eyes closed, rinsing shampoo out of my hair when the shower door opened.

Arms around me, a body against mine. We kissed.

"Thank you, Rob," she whispered. "I..."

"Shhh..." I silenced her. I held her, kissed her again, then got the soap and washed her from head to toe. Once covered with soap, she made a wonderful washcloth, smiling and getting more energetic.

"What do you need?" I asked as we dried each other.

"Tamales?" she responded.

I chuckled. "As you wish..."

"And talk?" she added, a little more subdued.

"Good," I answered.

We weren't too talkative during dinner.

"Tell me?" I asked when we got home.

"Let's sit on the porch," she suggested.

There was a rocker on the front porch, similar to the one on "our" house. I remembered rocking with her in that.

"I remember being with you in one of these, rocking, being held. Thank you for so much, Linda," I whispered, and kissed her neck.

She held me tight, so tight for a while, eventually relaxing.

"Tell me?" I inquired again.

"Oh Rob, where to start..."

"With Julia"

“Okay... It’s so frightening -- we think we’ve done everything, tested everything. She’s the ... I think fourth one they, we’ve, lost in the last decade. Bernadette and I were there for Suzanne; everything was nominal.”

“You know, when I think back on it, when I first saw Suzanne, her hair was short and covered, and she always wore gloves. It wasn’t for six or seven months that I saw her without gloves on.”

“And you know why... We work so hard, and yet we lost her, and the others...”

“Tell me?”

“One of the ones they lost, I wasn’t there, and we found out it was just before Bernadette and me. Of course we changed a lot of things. But they didn’t tell us about him.”

“What did you two change?”

“We brought in modern medicine! Modern life support, modern diagnostics; well, they were already using pretty good diagnostics, but we turned that up a notch or two. It was easier for the two of us, the one after that, and Suzanne.”

“What happened to him?”

“Oh Rob -- that’s why I’m scared. I’m scared for you. We thought he was clean... But we were wrong, and he died, horribly. When it goes wrong, it goes wrong horribly.”

“So we wait a few years before I do it; cross a few more i’s and dot a few more t’s...”

She gave me a confused look, smiled, then sighed, shaking her head. “No, it needs to be soon. But we know how to test better.”

“Why? Suzanne was in her seventies.”

She shook her head, then leaned on me, resting her head on my shoulder. The view was superb. “It’s different for men... What killed him was ... prostate cancer. It spread rapidly through his body, killing him in a month. When we had access to the records, we realized -- we need to do men as soon as possible, before there’s a hint of prostate cancer. It’s just too prevalent. We’ve done one prostate biopsy on you...”

“You have?” I thought that was a fairly painful procedure.

“Yes, we have -- early on; you wouldn’t remember it. Just like you weren’t aware of Bernadette getting her blood samples the other morning -- I had you. Oh Rob -- it’s so wonderful to hold you like that, but I wonder, Bernadette and especially Suzanne and I wonder, if we’re doing the right thing.”

“When you hold me like that, you’re doing the right thing,” I told her, wrapping an arm around her.

She sighed. “You know what I mean... How ... It’s almost like we’ve taken away your free will...”

I reached over and pinched a nipple.

“Ow! What was that for!” she exclaimed.

I held her head in my hands. “Free will.” I kissed her.

As I held her, I said, “I chose to join the Family. I choose to continue on that path. It’s my choice. Yes, I understand you make it far easier and far more pleasant for me to take certain paths. But I trust you -- and everything you’re telling me now tells me that I should continue to trust you.”

“Oh Rob...”

After a few minutes of silence, I asked, “So tell me about it? What’s it like?”

She sighed and sat back. I pulled her closer and started us rocking again.

“You go to Lucerne. You’re put through every medical test known to man, and then some. You’re given vicious enemas to clean you out, and are locked in a sterile environment, given a regimen of drugs and a liquid diet for two weeks while you’re retested. Anything shows up, we don’t go forward.”

“It’s easier now. Before... God, it was horrible. People regularly broke bones from seizures. Now, when we go ahead, you’re given general anesthesia. We do major cut-downs on you, connecting you to machines which relieve your system of much of the burden of removing toxins. They also help with oxygenation, nutrition, and maintaining a safe core temperature. You’re put in a thermal control suit as well; without some assistance, people develop fevers that are life threatening. You’re given the virus, introduced into your blood, and watched carefully for a week. If all goes well, you wake up feeling like you’ve been run over by a truck.”

I held her and rocked her.

“Will you be there?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” she whispered, voice full of emotion.

“Then before I go to sleep, I’ll tell you I love you, and that no matter what happens, I forgive you, and I’ll see you on the other side.” I held her closer.

She held me.

“How did you feel afterwards?”

“Like I’d been through hell. I can’t fathom how you could go through that conscious, or at least starting out conscious. They’d partially sedated people in the past, to control fever-induced problems such as hallucinations and seizures. I hurt, I was hungry, I was weak -- and that was with them monitoring and maintaining blood sugar levels. But the first time I looked at myself in a mirror... I laughed and I cried. Then I threw up, because I’d eaten too much too fast, and snuck a look at my reflection in a serving tray.”

“How about Bernadette? Suzanne?”

“Bernadette was before me. I took her through, staying up for days, monitoring everything I could, yelling at people, amazed and disgusted they hadn’t thought of so many of these things before. It was easier on Suzanne.”

“And those that didn’t make it?”

She sighed again. “Julia -- new variant CJD. One to prostate cancer. You heard of the one with chicken pox. One with a fungal infection under a toenail. The fungus spread through her body, taking her vision, then her nervous system. Others, childhood diseases they didn’t remember and we couldn’t test for at the time.”

“I know better why it isn’t well known...”

She almost laughed. “We found out that the Soviets researched it -- we read their reports -- they infected an entire rural, very isolated village with it. Their superiors didn’t believe the reports, that people were dying from so many different things. They gave up on it. It’s *very* hard to transmit, though, blood to blood contact, harder than HIV.”

“So if it was unleashed, it would wipe out most of the planet...”

“Rob, if you were completely clean, and we think, we hope, we pray you are, without intense preparation and support, you’d only have a one in four chance of survival, it’s that hard.”

“Why me?”

She sighed again. “Okay, here’s the part I think you’d have a hard time figuring out. Have we done anything about contraception?”

I thought about it. I’d mentioned unprotected sex with multiple partners to her, or was it Bernadette? “Not to me, but I assumed you were protected. Something about the process?”

I felt her nod her head, still resting on my shoulder. “Yes, in more ways than one. We have a menstrual period about every four months, and it’s brief and easy. That’s a relief.

Ovulation is concomitant with that extended schedule, a few times per year. We ovulate, and produce good eggs -- even Suzanne, even our Mistress. But with ovulation that seldom, the opportunities for impregnation are far fewer. And even if -- we understand better now; we're getting a handle on it. Something about the egg's enzyme coat is different, and normal sperm can't penetrate. We're pretty sure that once you've gone through it, you'll produce sperm with the proper protein coat. We had a very small sperm sample from one of the other men in the Family, and his sperm was able to penetrate and fertilize. They didn't have enough to try *in vitro* fertilization."

I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. "So the new race is sterile, and the way there is almost certain death?"

"That's about it. We're hoping you change that."

"I thought there were other men in the Family?"

"Another side-effect of the virus, or rather the fever accompanying it, is that they were rendered sterile. A lot of fun still, but sterile."

"And you think I'll be different?"

"Yes, we do. We've replicated it in animal models. Keep the testes at reasonable temperatures, and the damage doesn't occur. The high fever, inflammation, severe swelling causes sterility. There are a number of viruses which have that effect."

"Severe swelling?" I knew my voice was higher.

She managed a chuckle. "You'll be sedated, don't worry. Post-pubescent males contracting the mumps, among other diseases, run that risk -- swelling up to the size of oranges, and when the swelling subsides, they don't work right anymore."

I shuddered. She chuckled and held me.

"Why did Julia upset you so?" I asked. "Was she a good friend?"

Another sigh and snuggle. I put an arm around her again.

"No, I hardly knew her. Bernadette and I reviewed all her tests and records; we were a remote part of the final decision to go ahead. Thank you for making me talk to Bernadette. I understand it better. The thing that was so frightening to me, is still so frightening -- her body is perfectly sound. It took away her mind..."

I shuddered again, and held her. To have my mind destroyed, and my body left untouched...

"What's going to happen to her?"

“They did another CAT scan when they arrived; there was noticeable change in less than a day. She’s being kept sedated, and on minimal life support, providing hydration, keeping her comfortable, but not prolonging her life. They expect she’ll last a week, two at the most. When it compromises her brain stem...”

We watched the moon rise over the Red Hills.

It was getting cold.

“I’ll hold you,” I told her. “And I need you to hold me.”

I pulled her to standing. We hugged.

“I’ll hold you. Thank you for everything, Rob.”

“Thank you, Linda. Thank you for talking to me, trusting me, and holding me.”

We went inside and got ready for bed. I held her head to my shoulder. “I’ve got you,” I whispered to her again. “You’re safe in my arms.” I felt strong, and protective. She sighed and snuggled closer.

Crossings

Julia lived eight days. Bernadette was with Linda and me when we got the word. Her passing had been peaceful, and we hope, without suffering. Bernadette and I helped Linda pull herself out of her tailspin. We learned a lot about each other during that time.

Linda and Bernadette left Sedona, replaced by Kendra from the Bay area, Dr. Joyce Gilbert from Toronto, and Katie from Lucerne. Kendra worked with subcontractors on security systems and kept us in shape. Joyce was very interested in me, even in a professional, medical sense... Katie tried to be a manager and run things, but was too good-natured when it came to us -- we were a herd of cats. But we behaved for her, most of the time.

Construction came to an end. Damn, we finished it. We had a party for the construction crew. We moved in to the new house. Javier and Alicia moved into the larger guest house that we'd used.

So many things going on -- business, finances, politics. I'd spotted the trend months earlier. During a teleconference with Lucerne, I told people that it didn't make financial sense to keep the Bay area property, the Palsgraf estate. We could sell it in a market which was still quite strong, and move money and Family to Sedona. We'd be better off financially, as well as in terms of privacy. We had room for everyone. I didn't say that I'd suspected that had been the plan, or at least a component of it, for quite a while. What I knew about the Family taught me something new about long term planning -- I was trying to look twenty and fifty years out.

Our Mistress quizzed me on a number of things, brief and to the point. I answered in similar fashion, pointing out aspects of the report I'd sent her. She thanked me for my insights and would study the question.

Joyce is an endocrinologist, always interested in taking samples from me, one way or the other. She wasn't the sex fiend Katie was, though. I'd thought Linda, Bernadette, and Kendra were bad -- Katie loved to jump me, take me, and drain me. I loved it too, although I did get help in the form of a sprayer from Linda, with Kendra making the switch for me... Katie pouted, but agreed to play fair, at least a little more fair. She learned that some times I just needed to be held. I think she learned that sometimes that's what she needed as well.

I visited my old "home," and got to spend time with Linda, Bernadette, Suzanne, and even Ellen. I shot a lot of pictures of the Estate, continued the art-show thing. It was interesting watching Family members deal with cognitive dissonance at the shows, how they interacted with people their calendar age, compared to how they interacted with people their apparent age. Had some very interesting chats with Linda about that.

I sat up nights as Suzanne went through the other virus, and helped her shower when she woke up. Linda and Bernadette kept her lightly sedated for the whole thing, and I think that worked very well.

Hidden Images

When I got back from that, something was going on, I could tell, something between Joyce and Katie, targeting me. Kendra sensed it as well, but didn't know what it was.

Katie avoided me. She didn't show for Kendra's "easy" exercise days, and evidently Joyce gave Kendra some excuse which Kendra thought lame, but let them get away with.

But I could tell, we *all* could tell, Katie was up to something, and it involved me. She avoided getting close, but still teased me.

I was organizing materials for an art show coming up in a few days. Didn't know who would work it with me yet. A knock on my office door.

"Hope that's Kendra with my boxes!" I hollered.

Katie came in, wearing a very seductive stretch velvet outfit. The top was curvy -- had she gained some size there? I saw her hang a "Do Not Disturb" sign on my office door before closing it.

I was sitting on the floor. She pushed me on my back, laying on top of me. She was wearing an interesting perfume, but not one of *those* perfumes.

"I have something for you," she said sexily.

"Oh?" I was enjoying her weight atop me, and her perfume.

"Like to come with me? I'd like to give it to you where we can be more comfortable," she suggested, wiggling her hips.

"Could it wait a bit?" I asked. Her top felt bulky or something.

She frowned. "I *need* to give it to you *soon*."

I sighed but smiled. I'd missed her, and her charms. She didn't hold me as well as Bernadette did, or Linda, but she was close. "Yes, dear. Let's go."

She helped me up. We hugged and kissed, but when I reached for her breasts, she led me up to her room. She sat me on the edge of the bed, the lights turned down low.

"Close your eyes," she whispered.

I did.

I heard cloth moving, then felt hands sliding around my head, felt myself being pulled to her.

"Oh, I've missed you!" I moaned. Pulled to a nipple -- glorious!

And when I sucked, my mouth was filled with warm, sweet milk! I moaned and she squeezed me. She started whispering, and took me into a dream. She rode me, all the time keeping me attached to a nipple. I came so quickly, so hard! She switched me to the other side, holding me close, but didn't let me drift off until I'd drained her.

It was the same in the morning -- delirious, held to her, so delicious, making love, sucking on her.

As I was about to drift off to sleep again, still attached, she whispered, "Happy birthday."

I tried to move, but she squeezed me, melting me in her arms and rocking me to sleep.

We showered together after we got up. "You did this for me?" I asked, kissing a nipple as we dried.

"To keep you, yes," she growled, squeezing me to her.

"How long will it last?" I asked as we dressed. She was wearing a nursing bra, with little pads over her nipples.

"As long as you want," she said. I held her waist, resting my head between her breasts. "As long as you keep emptying me, I will keep filling up."

I kissed the sides of her bra.

"Would you like to see how this works?" she offered with a wiggle and a smile.

"Of course," I responded.

She showed me, first with one side, then the other, and then riding me on the bed.

Glad it was Saturday -- we made it downstairs in time for lunch!

"Happy birthday!" Kendra and Joyce called out when we came into the dining room.

I looked to Joyce. "I know you were in on this," then to Kendra, "You know, too?"

Joyce looked very pleased with herself.

Kendra said, "I do now, and I'm jealous! Bernadette is going to be beside herself when she hears -- I think we all want to do that for you!"

I helped Katie sit down, then sat myself.

“Well, if they’d get off their butts and send me to Lucerne, we could do it the old fashioned way,” I blurted out.

Iced tea came out of Joyce’s nose.

I’d done it again.

When Joyce could talk again, rather than speak, she gave me a very cross and curious look.

“I know,” I told her. Like Linda, I guess, too hard to hold it in.

“Know what?” Kendra asked, starting to frown.

I shook my head. “That I’m the youngest in this room, by thirty years or so.”

“Really?” asked Joyce, one eyebrow raised.

“Yes. And I’m still part of the Family; I love you all, and I’m looking forward to being a full member of the Family.”

“Do you know what that entails?” Joyce asked, now quite serious and somber.

“I believe I do,” I replied. And when she gave me a look suggesting I didn’t have a clue, I added, “I know why Julia died, and why and how the other four died.”

I think it was Kendra that muttered something about Linda and Bernadette being in deep shit. I told them I’d figured out a good bit of it. Oh, how? I explained it to them.

After lunch we moved into our lounge area. We’d redone the furniture for orgies -- lots of cushions. The somber talk continued for a while. Yes, I understood what I was suggesting, and the risks involved. Joyce told me that men had a much tougher time, or had up to now.

I don’t remember how, but the conversation returned to my “birthday present.” Katie ended up leaned back on some cushions, everyone taking a turn, suspiciously leaving me for last.

“If Bernadette gave me this present, I’d never leave her,” I told Katie.

She smiled and pulled me closer. “That’s why I wanted to be first.” Mouth met nipple and my eyes closed. That scent filled me, hands touched me, and the rest of the day was bliss.

I was a little sore Sunday; I think we all were. As Joyce checked me, she told me the medical people, herself, Bernadette, Linda, and three lady doctors in Lucerne, talked on the phone every week. Tuesday was their next call. She’d tell them about Katie and my “birthday present,” and discuss sending me to Lucerne as soon as possible.

I thanked her and gave her a hug. When she was through poking me, I put her on her exam table, ate her until she screamed, and then rolled her over and took her doggy style.

After dinner, Kendra proposed that she and I could suck Katie at the same time while Joyce ate her. No objections being heard, the motion carried, moving to the lounge, which acquired some blankets from upstairs. After a wonderful time had by all, we went to sleep in a heap together. In the morning, though, I had Katie all to myself -- if you ignore the hands helping us along. We made it to the exercise room for a good workout, punctuated by occasional body noises, gurgles, and drips. Katie needed better support for her now more active charms.

I was more involved in the business and operational side of things. I knew from looking at the lights on the phone when Joyce had her call Tuesday morning. She'd told me they usually went around half an hour. This one went an hour and a half.

Joyce came by my office a few minutes after the light for her phone went out. She pulled me out of my chair and hugged me. We kissed.

"That good?" I asked, "Finally over?"

She nodded, a half-smile. "My part is over."

What the hell did that mean?

Half an hour later, we got a call; Katie got it. After a few minutes, she paged us to her office. Our Mistress from Lucerne was on the line, as was Ellen, and the medical staff.

"Mr. Flynn," our Mistress started out, "You are a most remarkable man. I am looking forward to meeting you!"

I gave Joyce a questioning look. She smiled. The Sphinx was female, right?

First order of business -- the West Coast Estate was to be sold, resident Family moving to Sedona, as suggested by Mr. Flynn. Ellen had already contacted a realtor, who expected an easy and rapid sale, as we were only seeking very modest appreciation over what we'd paid.

"Mr. Flynn," Our Mistress continued, "I apologize to you for not informing you completely of various matters. I also apologize to my staff, particularly Doctors Klein and Carter, for not taking their advice. Doctor Gilbert will insure that you have been fully briefed as to what we wish to do. We look forward to your comments, questions, and suggestions. Doctors Carter and Klein will assist beginning in two weeks. If you consent, and that is your decision entirely, Mr. Flynn, we propose bringing you to Lucerne to begin in one month time. Doctors Klein and Carter have requested to accompany you, as has Miss Fleming."

Suzanne too? I was almost in tears.

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“We agree with these requests, as we have been counseled that their presence will favorably influence the outcome,” Mistress told us. “Do we have questions? Mr. Flynn?”

I held out an arm. Katie sat in my lap and squeezed me. “Mistress, all, thank you,” I said. “I look forward to being in Lucerne, and to returning here afterward.”

Beginning

“Rob, it’s time,” came Linda’s voice from the intercom.

I looked around the sterile walls of the cell, about eight feet by ten, that had been my home for the last eighteen days.

“You’ve drugged me,” I said, sitting up from the cot and looking at the video screen.

Bernadette and Linda were there.

“Yes,” Bernadette said. “We started this morning. How could you tell?”

I shook my head. “Because if you hadn’t, I’d be jumping up and down, hollering that it’s about damn time!”

They managed to chuckle.

The screen switched to our Mistress. “Rob, do you wish to do this?”

That first week in Lucerne with her... Her voice, her touch, her body -- making love with her. It’s “with,” not “to” -- the difference is important.

“Yes, Mistress, I do.”

Linda’s voice, the screen staying on Mistress. “Rob, what would you do differently?”

I almost cried. “I need to be held -- I need to hold you. Hearing your voice, seeing you on the screen, but being alone is so hard...” Bernadette, Linda, our Mistress, had taken me hypnotically during the time, but it wasn’t at all the same. “I need touch.”

I shook my head, tried to get my breath back. I sighed and looked up again, to one of the cameras, and the screen. “This liquid diet sucks. I understand the reasoning behind it, but for eighteen damn days? Excessive. Punitive.”

Linda and Bernadette back on the screen, Bernadette frowning. “I agree completely.”

We spoke for another few minutes about the prep period, going through it stage by stage. I understood the reasoning for each stage -- like in Crichton’s *Andromeda Strain*, cleaning and sterilizing from the inside out. The initial purge was rough. I’d been anesthetized for part of it.

The hard part was the waiting. And waiting, and waiting. In a metal box with two doors -- I’d walked in through one door. Through the other door was the treatment area, where I underwent various indignities. I knew that at any time I could open the first door and walk out. We could try again, but I’d have to restart from the beginning.

Linda and Bernadette dropped off the screen -- that hurt. Mistress reappeared.

“What is it, Rob?” she asked, concern in her voice and on her face.

“I miss them -- I need them,” I told her.

She smiled and nodded. “I know. We are being very careful with you. It is hard to tell you how much you mean to our Family and our future.” Her smile broadened. “And I hope to spend more time with you.”

That brought a smile to me as well. “I look forward to those times too, Mistress.”

“I will be watching, and waiting, Rob,” she told me, with emotion in her voice.

“Thank you, Mistress.”

Finally, it was time. I opened the other door, as I’d done three times before.

The table was there waiting for me -- and two people in full isolation suits -- Linda and Bernadette.

I rushed to them, holding and hugging. Having them hug me through the suits was heaven and hell. “I’ve missed you -- I love you,” I cried. I could tell they were crying as well.

We’d discussed it; we’d argued about it. I thought it made sense for me to help with things like putting the thermal hood on my head, put the sense electrodes on me while I’m conscious and let me put on parts of the thermal suit. No, they wanted me sedated first. Then they’d roll me through the door on the other side of the antechamber, and into the larger room with all the equipment, all the support staff.

Linda and Bernadette helped me on to the table. The cushion on top of it molded to me quickly.

I looked to one side, to a gas anesthesia machine, then up to Linda and Bernadette, now one each side of me. I held up my hands, and they held them.

“I love you, both of you,” I whispered. It was all I could do without crying.

“We’ll be here, and we’ll be here when you wake up,” Bernadette said.

“Naked, with a plate of tamales?” I asked.

She chuckled; Linda did too, but I could see the tears on their faces behind the plastic faceplates.

“Okay -- let’s go,” I said, nodding to the gas machine.

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But Linda stepped to my head, and Bernadette put a gloved hand on my chest. Hands slipped under my head, holding me. I closed my eyes, feeling tears flowing freely. Gentle pressure on my chest, oh so good. They started the wordless lullaby that took me off to a cloud.

Epilogue

“Daddy, I’m scared...”

I looked down to my daughter laying on the prep table. I touched her forehead with my gloved hand, touching her milk-chocolate skin, a lighter shade than her mother, but just as smooth and perfect.

“I know, baby. I was too. I’m here now, and I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Such a complex look on her face!

“What is it, baby?”

She sighed. “Daddy, I’m thirty four years old. I’m not a baby!”

I opened my mouth, but she shook her head. She had her mother’s beautiful features.

“I know, I’ll always be your baby girl,” she said. “But daddy...”

“Yes, Gloria?” I answered her.

She smirked. “I’d rather wake to Brian, with a platter of lasagna...”

Her Brian was off with Cynthia, another of his wives, who was giving birth. There were still too few males to go around.

I squeezed her hand. “Naked, or wearing the lasagna?”

She chuckled; I could still get my girl to laugh. “Now *that’s* one we haven’t tried...”

“I love you, sweetie, and I won’t let anything go wrong,” I whispered, pulling up a chair and sitting next to her, holding a hand in both of mine.

“I know, daddy. I love you. And I understand...”

She understood that this still wasn’t a walk in the park. Two of her sisters, my daughters with Ellen and with our Mistress, had made it. But my sweet little Jeanne, my daughter with Linda, hadn’t. I couldn’t hold back the tears... It still hurt; it would always hurt.

“Oh daddy, I know -- I understand. Please don’t cry...”

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to Bernadette, masked and gowned as I was.

“I love you,” I told her.

“I love you,” she told me, rubbing my back.

“Are you ready?” she asked our daughter.

Gloria nodded, then asked, “Mommy?”

I almost lost it again -- I hadn’t heard her say “Mommy” in years.

“Yes, sweetie?” Bernadette answered in a whisper, gripping my shoulder.

“Sing me to sleep first?” Gloria asked.

“Of course, my love,” she whispered. “Let me get a chair.”

I started to get up, but Bernadette pushed me down again. She turned to get another chair, and I heard her clearing her throat as she did. Oh, I love so many of our Family, but Bernadette, you are so special to me...

She pulled the chair to Gloria’s head. I held one of our daughter’s hands. Bernadette slipped her hands under Gloria’s head, moving her a little. I watched and heard Gloria sigh, her eyes closing, a relaxed smile filling her face.

Bernadette started humming that lullaby... How I still loved to be held, to hear that sweet music combined with the beating of her heart. I forced myself to stay awake, though. I’d promised my daughter I’d be here for her.

I kissed my daughter’s hand through my facemask. “I love you,” I whispered.

I felt motion around me; the med techs ready to prep our daughter. One of them handed a pink plastic mask to Bernadette, who held it to Gloria’s face. “Deep breath for me, love,” she whispered. Gloria took a deep breath. Then another, and another, then lighter, and lighter. The techs put electrode pads on her head and chest, clipping her to monitoring equipment. Something clipped on to an earlobe. Bernadette, my love, continued her song.

“Doctor, we’re ready to proceed,” one of them said.

I looked to Bernadette. She nodded and stood. I stood. One of the techs held the mask. Bernadette held me.

“Time to let the professionals take over,” she whispered to me. “We can only watch and wait.”

“We can pray,” I answered.

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By silli_artie@hotmail.com

<http://www.asstr.org/~artie>