

A photograph of three women in a social setting, smiling and clinking champagne glasses. The woman in the center is the most prominent, looking towards the camera. The woman on the right is in profile, also smiling. The woman on the left is partially visible, looking towards the center. They are all holding glasses filled with a bubbly, orange-hued liquid. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor event.

After years of no strings attached relationships,
can Opal, Pearl and Debbie give romance a try...
and like it?

Dana Littlejohn

Tri-Romance

A decorative border with intricate gold filigree patterns on a dark background, framing the bottom half of the image. The patterns are symmetrical and ornate, with swirling lines and floral motifs.

Tri-Romance

By Dana Littlejohn

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Twin sisters, Opal and Pearl Jefferson, and their best friend Debra Flores were living blissfully by their ‘no strings attached’ rule, enjoying the many comforts of a good life. All was well in their world until Frank, Jake, Doug and Rakim entered into it. When one of the girls abandons their well-practiced rule and falls in love, does her decision throw a monkey wrench into the lives of everyone else around her? Or does it

open up the possibility for love to
capture them all?

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CHAPTER ONE

On the start of a bright and hot work day, Pearl Jefferson

waved goodbye to her twin sister, Opal. Opal flipped an impatient wave back at her, as she continued to pace the floor. She stomped over to the stair once again.

“Come on, Deb, let’s go!” she screamed up the stairs.

“I’m coming! I’m coming!”

Hearing the phone ring, Opal stomped into the living room with an exasperated breath and sat heavily on the couch.

“Yeah, hello,” she snapped and peeked over her shoulder,

hearing Debbie run down the stairs.

“Hello, may I speak with Debra Flores?” a man with a heavy Spanish accent said.

She sat up and softened her tone. “Oh, yes, umm, who’s calling?”

“Uncle Carlos.”

“Okay, hold on.” Debbie came up behind her and she handed her the phone. “It’s for you. *Uncle Carlos.*”

“Uncle Carlos? No way!” She snatched the phone and plopped down next to her. “Uncle

Carlos!”

Opal leaned back with her arms wrapped around her chest as Debbie plunged into a loud Spanish conversation. Hanging up, more than half an hour later, she smiled at Opal’s scowl.

“You know we don’t have time for breakfast now, right?”

“Sorry, Chica, but that was Uncle Carlos.”

“So he said.” She picked up her purse and grabbed Debbie’s hand, pulling her to the door.

“So, Uncle Carlos is...*who?*”

“You know him. He’s my mother’s oldest brother.”

“Oh yeah!” Opal locked the door behind them. “So what did this Uncle Carlos want?” She pushed her toward the car.

“Wait, wait, I think I forgot something.”

“Tough.”

“But...”

Debbie almost fell out the car as Opal started the car and pulled out onto the street. Frantically, she closed the door.

“You know, just once I’d

like to sit down and eat breakfast instead of wolfing down a bagel with jelly or a BLT.” She sent several quick looks between her and the road. “Is that so much to ask?”

She dropped her head back. “Damn, Chica, do we have to go through this every day?”

“Yes, because you’re slow as hell every day.”

She sucked her teeth. “Not *every* day. You can be such a bitch when you don’t eat. I swear!”

“Hey! This isn’t bitchy. If I

don't get some food in the next fifteen minutes--then you'll see bitchy!"

"Yeah, yeah. Same crap, different day. Anyway, Uncle Carlos wants me to come visit."

"Really?"

"Yup, and guess what?"

She turned into the restaurant drive thru. "What?"

"Uncle Carlos says I can bring my roommates if I want," she said with a triumphant smile.

"Woo hoo! We're going to

New York City!”

“Well, you’re at Happy Burger now. May I take your order?”

She covered her mouth giggling. “Sorry.”

After ordering, they drove off to the beauty shop that they co-owned with Pearl, ‘Double the Beauty’.

“My, my, look at the time. A whole ten minutes to eat before everyone gets here.”

The sarcasm dripped from her words, as she unlocked the door. “Whatever will I do with

the time?”

“Will you just shut up and go in the back. I’ll turn on the lights and the stations before everyone gets here.” She shook her head as she watched her disappear in a back room.

“Honey, you’re supposed to have all this done before we get here,” a male voice said from behind her.

“Yeah? Well, you’re early and you always have the option to wait outside.”

“Thanks, but no,” the man said closing the door. “I’ll take

care of my own station for you and watch you work on the others, girlfriend.” He sashayed over to the second station on the right and unloaded his duffel bag. Debbie continued the opening ritual as the other stylists showed up one by one. Opal came from the backroom and grabbed the appointment book from the front desk, before joining her crew on the floor.

“All right, ladies—and Sean—it’s time to make the world beautiful,” she said, pleasantly.

“Humph, sister-girl must have gotten some food this

morning,” whispered a blonde girl to the left of Sean. “You didn’t have to single me out like that, girl,” he called out.

“Aww, I’m sorry, Sean. I didn’t mean to offend. I’ll stick with *ladies* next time since you feel like it fits you better.” She gave him a quick smile then turned her attention to the book. “Anyway, let’s see...Debbie, your favorite client will be in today at nine-thirty,” Opal told her with an exaggerated wink.

“Great.” She sucked her teeth and sat heavily in her chair.

“Girl please, if you don’t want him, just send his fine ass my way. I’ll sure take him.”

“Sean, please leave that man alone. Just let him come in today and get his hair braided in peace.” Opal warned

Sean’s hand went to his chest. “Opal, you wound me with your accusations. I’m just as pleasant and social as anyone. Am I not allowed to admire the incoming beauty like everyone else?” he said innocently, batting his eyes.

“Whatever, Sean.”

He snickered and spun in his chair.

“He is a cutie, Debbie. Why don’t you want him?” the girl to the left of Sean asked.

“Because he *knows* he’s a cutie, Margie, that’s why.”

Sean stared at the girl on his left. “Girl, what have you done to your hair this time?”

She ran her fingers through her pixie-cut, cotton candy pink, hair and smiled. “You like it? I’m looking for a new summer color for this year.”

He shook his head and

sighed.

“Okay, okay,” Opal said with a chuckle. “Let’s move on. Debbie, Grandma called. She said she’ll be in around eleven o’clock.” “All right,” she acknowledged sorting things at her station.

“Margie, you have Mrs. Summers at eight.” She took a quick look at the clock. “So, you’d better get ready. You know she hates to wait.”

“Okay,” the girl with the pink hair said.

“Sean, your girlfriend

changed her appointment from ten to eleven o'clock."

"Of course she did, but she'll still be late."

"You know, Sean, if you ever get back on track and decide to date women, she'd be the first one in line," said the blonde with a small laugh.

He twisted his lips, looking her up and down. Her long blonde hair was twisted in the front held down flat by a camouflage bandana tied backwards around her head.

"I *know* you did not go

there with me, girlfriend. You're the last one to be talking about getting back on track, when you look like Go Army Barbie, Krystal."

All the stylists burst into laughter as Krystal rolled her eyes and smoothed out the tee shirt she wore that matched her bandanna.

"All right, all right, settle down. Krystal, we have a twelve-thirty hair appointment, a newcomer. I'm giving her to you, and Roxie is coming at two-thirty for a manicure and pedicure."

“Gotcha, boss lady. Will there be any other nail techs in, or will I get all the walk-ins?”

“Leslie will be here today, but she won’t be in until after twelve o’clock.” She closed the book. “All right, ladies...” she said, sending a quick wink at Sean, who smiled at her, “that’s all the appointments for today. Remember our motto: treat the walk-ins with respect and courtesy and...” she held her hands out expectantly.

“And they will become our regulars!” her team finished the statement in unison.

“That’s right. Now let’s do it.” Opal reached the desk just as bells on the back of the door rang, letting her know someone was coming in. “Hi, Mrs. Summers.” She slid the book across the desk. “Margie is ready for you.”

“Good morning, Opal. Thank you.”

Debbie walked to the desk. “Chica, call Pearl and tell her to meet us for lunch so we can tell her about New York.”

“All right.” She sat down and dialed her sister’s job.

“Thank you for calling Little People Academy. How can I help you?” A pleasant female voice said.

“Hi, Janet, it’s Opal. Can I speak to Pearl?”

“Sure, Opal. Did you tell Sean I wanted my hair done Friday?”

“Yes, I told him. Five fifteen, right?”

“Yup. Hold on, I’ll transfer you.”

There was a short pause while Opal tapped her pencil on the desk before Pearl came on

the line.

“Hello, this is Pearl Jefferson.”

“Hello, baby sister.”

“I don’t think two minutes makes me a *baby* sister, Opal.”

“Younger is younger. Any who, what are your plans for lunch?”

“A sandwich and salad in the break room is the working plan.”

“Mmm, sounds yummy.”

Pearl chuckled. “Are you offering me something better?”

“Yup. How about we come pick you up about noon?”

“Something happened, didn’t it? You sound way to chipper for the A.M.”

“You’re just going to have to wait until lunch time for that info, aren’t you?”

“You suck,” she said laughing. “See you at noon.”

“Bye. Okay, she’ll be ready. Where are we going?”

“Hmm, how about—“

“Applebee’s!” they said together. Laughing, they turned

to the door as the bells sounded.

“Ooh, who’s going to Applebee’s? Their riblets are delicious, child.”

“Hi, Miss Betty. How are you?”

“I’m fine, Opal, dear. How are you Debbie?”

“I’m great, Miss Betty. I thought your usual day was Friday, it’s only Wednesday. I know you’re not that old.”

She covered her mouth, snickering.

“No, child, it’s not that

bad...not yet.” She chuckled. “I was talking online with one of my male friends and he finally wants to meet. We’re meeting at the mall for lunch.

So, I was wondering if someone could squeeze me in.”

“Oh, you know better than that, Miss Betty. We’d do anything for you.” She took her arm, linking it with her own, and walked her to the styling floor as Debbie followed.

“Now, do you think this is wise, Miss Betty?”

“Is what wise?”

“You know...meeting some strange man online in real time. It could be dangerous. People don’t usually tell the truth out there in cyberspace.”

“Oh no, it’s not dangerous at all. My daughter Robin meets men from online all the time and everything turns out fine. Besides, I’m just a nice old woman looking for a nice old man to spend some time with. How dangerous can an old man be?” she asked.

Opal and Debbie exchanged looks and sighed.

“Okay, Miss Betty, if you say so. Debbie, can you get her washed? I’m gonna fix her hair myself.”

“Sure, Chica. Come on, Miss Betty, let’s get you started.”

Life at beauty shop commenced. As soon as Margie was done with her client, Opal sent her to watch the front desk while she ended to Miss Betty. When she was under the dryer, Opal walked the floor chit-chatting with clients and answering questions from her stylists as the day went by. Walk-ins and appointments kept

the shop busy all morning. Opal and Debbie slipped out just before noon to pick up Pearl.

“All I’m saying is it sounds like a lack of trust to me,” Opal said, walking into the restaurant.

“Uggh! What? All I said was I just can’t show up late from lunch whenever I want. All I get is an hour,” her sister said, coming in behind her. “That’s why I drove my own car.”

“So, you don’t trust us to get you back to work on time. Well, you could be a few minutes

late if you worked at the shop that you owned, you know.”

“I don’t want to work at the shop anymore. I like running the preschool. I love working with the kids.”

A greeter approached them, but hesitated to speak as the twins debated. Debbie shook her head and walked pass them.

“Don’t mind them, they do this all the time,” she said to the greeter. “Three please.”

She smiled. “Okay, follow me.”

The twins continued to

argue as they followed the greeter stopping only to order their drinks. When the waitress returned with their drinks Debbie slammed the table.

“Hey! Enough! You guys will drive anybody to drink.” She took a long sip from her glass and stared at it. “Too bad it’s the middle of a work day or I’d be able to add something to this soda. Now...” she paused to put the glass down. “Let’s get down to why we’re here, shall we?”

“Sorry, Deb, you’re right. What’s your news?” Pearl asked pulling the paper off the straw.

“This morning my Uncle Carlos called and he wants me to visit.”

“Uncle Carlos? Isn’t that your mom’s *oldest* brother?”

Debbie twisted her lips at Opal. “Hmm, see Chica, Pearl pays attention.”

Opal rolled her eyes and sipped her lemonade.

“Anyway, yeah, that’s him. He wants me to visit and he says I can bring you guys with me.”

“What? Us in New York City? That would be so cool.”

“Yeah, I know. I haven’t been there for years. He wants us there for the Fourth of July.”

“The Fourth of July? But that’s in two weeks.”

“Not a problem for us, *baby* sister. That’s one of the perks to being your own boss.”

“Stop calling me baby sister. It is kind of short notice, isn’t it Debbie?”

“It’s two weeks advance notice. Will it take longer than that to get things in order for you to go?”

Pearl shrugged. “I don’t

know. How long will we stay?”

“He wants us to stay for at least a week and he’s paying for everything.”

She smiled. “All right, I’ll see what I can do.”

CHAPTER TWO

Opal, Pearl and Debbie met in the kitchen to prepare dinner. Each took a course and passed

one another in synchronized motion.

“I have to leave right after dinner tonight,” Pearl said, pulling apart a head of lettuce at the sink.

“Why?” Opal asked.

“Because, Chica, she’s got a booty call with her *mystery man* again,” Debbie supplied, in a teasing voice stirring spaghetti at the stove.

“That’s right.” Pearl confirmed on a giggle. “So, don’t wait up.”

“Don’t wait up, huh? You’ve

got school tomorrow, young lady.” Opal shook her finger at her, smiling.

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll be there.”

“So, umm, when do we meet this *boyfriend* of yours?” Debbie asked.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Pearl corrected quickly, then cleared her throat. “We just hook up every now and then, that’s all.”

“Hmm, so what’s wrong with him?” Opal asked putting breadsticks in the oven.

Pearl stopped smiling.

“Nothing is wrong with him.”

“So why are you hiding him?”

Pearl yanked the lettuce apart with more force than was needed. “I’m not hiding him.” Irritation showed in her tone. “Why are you guys badgering me?” she snapped turning on her sister. “I don’t question you guys on your booty calls.”

“No you don’t, but I don’t think guy *is* a booty call. A booty call is when you call him, you let him tap it and you don’t call him

again until you want some again,” Opal clarified pointing at her sister. “But you’ve been hanging out with this guy as well as giving him some booty on the regular. That puts him in a whole different category. So, I think you’re either hiding him or he doesn’t exist.” She waited for a reply that never came. With her hands on her hips she huffed and turned to Debbie. “Can I get a ruling on this one, Deb?”

Debbie removed the pot from the stove then dumped spaghetti into a colander in the adjacent sink. She turned on the

water and moved the faucet back and forth over the food. The twins looked at each other then back to her.

Opal put her hand on her hip and tapped he foot. “Well?” she urged.

Debbie sighed and turned to Pearl. “*Well*, I think I’m going to have to side with Chica this time, Pearl.”

Pearl threw her hands up. “There’s a big shock.”

“Hey! Don’t be like that. I don’t side with her on everything.”

“Ain’t that the truth!”

“Chica, shut up. Now look, Pearl, she’s right. You *have* been sneaking around with this guy for a minute and we still don’t know him. Clearly he is something more than just a booty call. He could be another Jack the Ripper for all we know...for all *you* know, for that matter.”

Pearl sighed and walked over to the table. “He’s not a murderous killer, guys. He’s so sweet and loving... It’s not that he doesn’t want to meet you guys, he does.” Her head hung

making her voice lower. “It’s...it’s me.”

Debbie and Opal sat across from her. Debbie reached over and tilted Pearl’s face up.

“Why?”

Pearl shook her fingers loose and turned away. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

They ate quietly and then after dinner Pearl left as planned. Opal and Debbie cleaned up then took a bottle of wine into the living room to relax.

“So what do we do about

Pearl?” Opal asked.

“There’s nothing we *can* do if she won’t talk to us.”

“Yeah.” Opal reached for the wine on the coffee table and filled her glass. “You know what we need? A stress reliever.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“Hmm, you know who we haven’t seen for a while who maybe could help us with that?”

Debbie shook her head and held out her glass.

“Roy, our little boy toy.”

“Oooo...”

Opal nodded toward her cell phone on the table. “Call him.”

Debbie grabbed it and dialed the number. When it started to ring she put the call on speaker.

“Hello,” a young, deep voice said.

“Roy boy, how are you?” her voice was soft and deliberately sexy.

The smile was evident on his voice. “Ahh, my little Latin lover. I thought you guys had abandoned me or traded me in for an older model or something.

I haven't heard from you guys in a while."

"You could've called, Roy Boy."

"Yeah, but I'm not supposed. That's not part of our game."

She giggled. "You're right, it's not. You always did learn fast and retain well. Are you free tonight?"

"For you, always. What time?"

"How about eight o'clock?"

"I'll be there with bells on."

“See you then,” Debbie said then ended the call.

Opal smiled and raised her glass. “To an orgasmic night!”

* * * *

“Jake, I’m here! Where are you?”

“I’m in the kitchen, babe!”

Jake sent her a wide and genuine smile over his shoulder when she entered the room. His long legs quickly covered the space between the table and door. He scooped Pearl off the floor and spun her around,

giving her a long, deep kiss.

“Damn, I’m glad to see you. It’s been too long since we’ve seen each other. Come sit down.” He pulled her to the table.

“Two days is too long?”

“Sweetheart, two *hours* is too long to be away from the one you love.” He kissed her hand then pulled out her chair.

“You are so sweet.” She surveyed the table as he poured he filled a second flute handing it to her. “So, what’s all this?”

He sat across from her.

“This, honey, is a celebration.”

“Really? What are we celebrating?”

“Well, we’ve got an anniversary coming up, don’t we? Next month will be a whole year since we started seeing each other, and I think it’s time we took this thing to the next level.” He tapped his glass to hers before taking a sip. “Don’t you?”

Pearl took a drink then rolled the glass between her hands. “Are you sure that’s what you want, Jake?”

“Yes, it’s what I’ve *been* wanting.” He pushed a bowl of strawberries toward her and leaned on the table. “I gotta tell you Pearl, I don’t want to keep doing this. I’m starting to think you’re, you know, maybe a little embarrassed to be seen with me.” He turned pain filled blue eyes to her. “Are you?”

“No, Jake, of course not.” Pearl went around the table to sit on his lap. “We have a nice quiet existence. What’s wrong with that?” she added popping a strawberry in her mouth.

“I don’t want a nice quiet

existence. I want the whole world to know how happy I am, how happy you make me.” Jake took her hand and kissed it again. “I want to do what other couples do. I want to take walks in the park, go on picnics, out to the movies. I want to walk down the street and hear the old people say, ‘Aww, look at them, they’re so in love.’”

She smiled.

“I—I want more, Pearl.” His voice softened with his plea.

Pearl sighed. She opened her mouth to say something, but

closed it changing her mind. Then, a small, playful smile touched her lips as another thought came to mind.

“I can give you more, Jake.” Her smile turned seductive while she pulled down the straps to her tank top and bra. “I can give you *a lot* more.”

“Pearl, I’m serious.”

Pearl heard the seriousness and determination in his voice. She turned her torso toward him exposing more to him in an effort to alleviate the tension lines in his brow. Jake tried to avert his

eyes, but couldn't. Pearl saw signs of his will waver and relaxed.

"I know, baby." She grasped his face kissing him. "The strawberries and champagne are very good together. We've never had them at the same time. What gave you the idea?"

Jake smiled reaching for one of her breast. "I heard some lady in the store talking to her friend about how her man always gets them for special occasions because they turn her on. I was hoping they would do the same for you." He chuckled

leaving a kiss on her breast.

She slid off his lap and sat on the floor, tugging at his shirt. “I think they’re working. Do you think we might find another use for them and continue this conversation at a later date?”

He nodded and grabbed the bottle.

She giggled. “Don’t forget the strawberries.”

He reached for the bowl then slid it next to her, but before he could make it to the floor a mischievous grin came to his face.

“I’ve got an idea.”

Pearl’s brow rose as Jake pushed the table and chairs out of the way and went to the refrigerator.

“What are you—“

“Shhh,” he said holding a finger in the air. He disappeared behind the door and reappeared moments later with a can of whip cream and a ear to ear smile. “Voila! Are you getting ideas, too?” he said shaking it.

Pearl burst into laughter. “Oh, yeah! Come on Jakey, show me what’s on your mind.”

Jake's smile vanished. "I hate it when you call me *Jakey*." He returned to her side.

She twisted her lips and pushed him playfully. "No you don't."

"Well, just don't tell anybody," he said giving her a quick kiss.

Jake pulled off her tank top and helped Pearl out of her shorts and panties. Sitting on his knees, he sighed as his gaze swept over her.

"You really are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

There was no teasing in his tone. As he looked down at her the love he spoke of shined in his eyes. Pearl caressed his face and Jake nuzzled his cheek into her palm. She knew in her heart that this man loved her like he claimed. Should she take a chance like her sister suggested? Pearl gave herself a mental, deciding to worry about it later. She rose on her elbows.

“Thank you, sweetie. So, what do you plan to do with this beauty?” she asked with a teasing smile.

He smiled and glided his

hand over her torso. “Mmm, just like rose pedals,” he muttered almost to himself.

His large hand slid over her belly before slipping a naughty finger between her nether lips and coming back to her breast. He pinched her nipple lightly. Shaking the can he nodded.

“I think I’m going to start right there.”

Jake stretched out next to her and sprayed her nipples with the cream. Pearl yelped as the cold cream touched her heating skin. She giggled and laid back.

He kissed and licked across her breast making her nipples hard. Shivers of delight ran like currents through her body.

“Yeah.” His was voice husky with his lust. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

He continued to suck back and forth over each breast until they were clean and ultra-sensitive. Watching him was exciting and turning Pearl on further. Picking up a strawberry, he sprayed it and put it to her lips. Instead of biting it, she flicked out her tongue to tease the tip. Jake’s mouth dropped

open. Pearl continued to lick and suck the cream off the tip of the fruit. She smiled when she heard his breath hitch. He shook his head and pushed the strawberry into her mouth.

“Stop doing that shit, Pearl. You’re fucking with my concentration,” he said with a chuckle.

Pearl laughed. “What?”

“Yeah okay, Miss *What*. Are you up for trying something else?”

Pearl nodded, licking her lips. Jake rose to his knees then

sprayed a line down the valley between her breasts to her pubic area. The goose bumps rose on her skin instantly when the coolness of the cream collided with the heated area of her vulva. She closed her eyes to enjoy the feeling it created.

“Damn, I love that sound you make when you feel good. It makes my dick hard.”

Pearl smiled to herself. She hadn't noticed she made a sound, but her body certainly felt good. Another strawberry touched her lips. She opened her mouth to accept it. His finger

slipped into her mouth as she finished eating the berry. When he tried to extract it, Pearl pulled the digit in to suck on it. Jake let out a groan that made her pussy throb. She knew her teasing would push him over the edge soon.

Jake snatched his finger from her and concentrated on sucking the new cream from her nipples. The naughty digit was back between her legs as he sucked diligently moving back and forth pulling a fast and satisfying orgasm from her. He continued until she was clean

again and the tremors of ecstasy stopped.

“Mmm, you taste good.”

“Really? You should taste the rest of me,” Pearl said, still out of breath.

Jake’s brow rose. “Is that an invitation?”

Pearl nodded. “Uh-huh.”

He shook the can again. “I can do that. How about I go lower this time?”

Pearl sighed and closed her eyes. The anticipation of his mouth on her again sent her

blood rushing. “Yes.”

“Oh good, I’ll have to pull up a chair for this part.”

Pearl gasped.

Jake spun around and leaned over to block her. “Joe! What the fuck are you doing here?” he shouted angrily.

“I live here, dude.”

“You know what I mean.”

He felt Pearl scrambling frantically into her clothes

behind him.

“You were supposed to be staying at your girl’s house tonight.”

“Yeah, well, me and Michele had another fight so she sent my ass home.” He sat at the table and leaned to the side to look around Jake.

Pearl jumped to her feet, fully dressed.

Jake looked up and grabbed her arm. “I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t know this fool was coming back.”

“No, no, I should go.”

Her voice sounded calm as she snapped her shorts, but the tears filling her eyes told him another story. “Baby, wait, don’t cry, I—“

“It’s late and I— I’ve got school tomorrow and...”

Jake glared at Joe. Joe shrugged then turned away. Pearl pulled away from him to leave the kitchen.

Jake followed her to the door. “Pearl, let me talk to you. Please”

“No, no. It’s okay. I know it’s not your fault.” She gave him

a quick peck on the cheek. “I’ll call you.” She tried to smile as the first tear fell.

He wiped away her tears. “I really am sorry, baby. Hey, why don’t you come over tomorrow and I’ll make it up to you.” He lifted her chin and kissed her.

Pearl made another attempt to smile. “Uh-huh. Yeah. I’ll call you.” She pulled the door open and moved quickly through it.

Jake leaned against the door and tapped his forehead. His night went from delirious to disaster in one fell swoop

because of Joe. Jake managed to keep his anger under wraps to calm Pearl down, but now... He stalked toward the kitchen slamming the door wide. Joe sat at the table with a sandwich drinking the rest of their champagne from a mug. Jake's eyes narrowed. Joe popped the last strawberry in his mouth and gave him a nod.

“Want me to make you one, man?”

Jake ignored the question. “Why are you are such a dick?”

Joe shrugged. “You were

right, man. She *is* fine and she's got nice tits, too."

Jake resisted the urge to slam his head to the table. Instead he turned a chair backwards and sat on it.

"You did fail to mention that she was Black or African American or whatever is PC nowadays. But I guess ain't nothing wrong with a little jungle fever, right?" he muttered before biting his sandwich again.

"You got a problem with that, Joe?"

He shrugged again and

talked with his full mouth.
“Nope. Pussy is pussy to me, man. It don’t matter what color it is. It all feels good! Your brother is the one who ain’t gonna like it. *He’s* gonna have a fuckin’ cow. You know he’s off *all* women and wants everybody else to be off them too.”

Jake leaned on the back of his seat. “Yeah, I know. It’s a good thing I don’t give a shit what he thinks or that would really bother me.”

He watched Joe eat, smacking loud, crumbs falling onto the table as he chewed with

his mouth open and shook his head.

“Just how long were you standing there, anyway?” Jake asked with his arms around his chest.

Joe turned a particle filled grin to him. “Long enough to see you turn her into a human sundae...from start to finish,” he added with a wink.

Jake glared at him and took a deep breath. “You know you just fucked up my night, right? And possibly the relationship with my girl?”

Joe sputtered. “Join the club.”

Jake scoffed as he stood then slapped Joe hard in the back of his head. “You are such an asshole,” he said walking out the kitchen.

“Ow! What the hell, man!” Joe yelled.

CHAPTER THREE

Opal ran down the stairs. She stopped at the door to catch her breath then ran her fingers

through her honey brown hair, dragging any wayward strands back into place before swinging the door open with a smile.

“Hello, Roy.” She took a deep breath and looked him up and down. “Our little boy toy.”

Roy leaned casually on the door frame and smiled with a wide, boyish grin. He was young, but old enough to buy the apparent alcohol in tell-tale brown bag he held up. Opal chuckled to herself. It had always amused her that an Indiana born and raised boy like Roy Benson could achieve a

California surfer look. She raked her fingers through his sun bleached blonde hair to move a wayward curl from his forehead. He grabbed her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist then stepped closer to brush a kiss to her forehead.

“Sweet and *sexy* Opal, I’ve brought us a drink to mark the occasion.”

Opal closed the door and leaned against it. “And what occasion would that be?”

“It’s always a reason to celebrate when you guys call me

over to play. Now, where is my little Latin lover?”

Debbie's arms slipped around his waist, hugging him from behind. “Right here, Roy boy.”

Roy smiled and looked over his shoulder. “Hey. Is this a new position we're going to try tonight? I think I like it already,” he said with a chuckle pulling Opal to the front of him.

Opal laughed. “We'll see, but for now let's move this party upstairs before my sister comes back home.”

Roy spun and put their arms through his. “I agree. Whose room will we use tonight?”

“I think we were in my room last time, Chica. So it’s your turn.”

“Works for me.”

Opal’s room was the first on top of the stairs. The mat in front of her door was black with green writing— LEAVE YOUR CLOTHES AT THE DOOR. Already accustomed to her room rules, Debbie and Roy were disrobing before they reached

the top of the stairs. The carpet, walls and ceiling were all black. Track lighting with four black lights held the only light in the room. On the ceiling, over a king-sized, four post bed, was a large mirror that, on closer inspection, turned out to be several smaller mirrors. Pale, sheer green material was wrapped corner to corner around the top of the bed and hung loosely down each post, giving off a faint glow on the black satin coverlet.

One at a time they discarded their clothes and

shoes and entered the room. Opal and Debbie slid across the bed then turned to Roy.

“So, what are we drinking?” Opal asked.

Roy stood before them. A soft purple hue tinged his pale skin. His youthful status showed in his physique. The slender features—narrow chest, long thin legs—were the tell-tale signs of a young man who had not yet reached manhood. He snatched the bag away from the bottle he carried.

“Tequila!”

“Tequila, huh?”

“Yup. We’re going to do body shots tonight.”

“Do we need to go get some shot glasses?” Debbie asked.

Roy smiled and walked to the bed. “No, my little Latin lover.” He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I said *body* shots. That means your body will be my glass. Lay back and I’ll demonstrate.”

Roy poured the drink onto her belly button when she complied. Opal moved closer. As the liquid filled the space Roy

sucked wildly on her belly before it overflowed to the bed. Debbie burst into giggles.

“That, my lovely, is a body shot. Much more fun without the glasses, don’t you think?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Want one, Opal?”

“Hell yeah!” Opal answered mimicking her friend. She flopped back on the bed playfully.

Roy poured a shot on her and licked it off while Debbie drank from the bottle. He took turns drinking off them and they

took turns drinking from the bottle.

“Hey, when do we get lick shots off of you?” Debbie asked, with a slight slur giving Roy a push.

“When do you want to?”

“Well, it’s my turn, so do me first, then I’ll do you.”

“All right,” he chuckled, looking at the two of them.

“Opal, would you care to help me?”

“Sure, what the hell.”

Roy poured the alcohol onto

Debbie's stomach. Opal dropped her face onto Debbie's belly and drank noisily then blew on her stomach like she would a toddler. Debbie lay back in full laughter. Opal touched her mouth then turned a frown to Roy.

“How'd you do that without cutting your lip on that damn charm?”

Roy burst into laughs. “I have prior experience with belly rings.”

“Okay, Roy, your turn,” Debbie said pushing against his

chest.

Opal took the bottle as Roy lay back on the bed. Debbie positioned herself with her face over his stomach. Opal laid on her other side near his groin. Debbie took the bottle and poured the drink across his abdomen.

“Whoops,” she exclaimed on a laugh.

Opal beat the bed and pressed her face on Roy’s thigh in an attempt to muffle her laughter.

Roy rose onto his elbows.

“Brother. You guys are drunk.”

“No, it was merely a slip of the hand,” Debbie said. “No big deal. Chica can wash her sheets in the morning. Now lay back down.”

Roy did as instructed. Debbie pushed the drink into Roy’s hand then leaned over to lick at the liquid she spilled. Opal scrambled over his legs and joined her. Together they covered his chest and stomach with licks sucking the liquid from his belly button.

“You guys should invite me

over, like, every week or something,” he said when they were done. “This could be our Thursday night thing,” he added rising on his elbows again.

Opal crawled to the top of the bed beside him to lie on a pillow. Debbie rested on his leg.

“But next time I won’t bring Tequila. It looks like it might be a bit much for you guys,” he said with a chuckle.

“Uh-uh, Roy, you can’t invite yourself over here. You know the rules. We call you, and you come,” Opal reminded him.

“Chica is right, Roy. I’ve got a nice buzz going over here and your chatter is messing it up,” Debbie told him.

“All right fine. That’s enough drinking then. I want some pussy before you guys pass out on me. So, who’s it going to be?”

Opal threw her hand up.
“I’ll do it.”

“Just remember, Roy, you’re our threesome guy. Just sex, no strings, remember,” Debbie said going to the other side of the bed as Roy positioned

himself over Opal.

“Yeah, yeah, I got it, just sex.” He dropped a kiss on Debbie’s head then to Opal’s lips. “But tonight it’s gonna be *great* sex,” he muttered as he eased himself into her.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Mmm, smells good in here,” Opal said entering the kitchen. “Looks like someone had a really good night if they’re waking up cooking,” she added in a singing voice taking a seat.

Pearl chuckled. “Good morning, Opal. It’s more like I

got lots of sleep...even with all the noise that you guys were making.”

Opal laughed. “Sorry about that. We were drinking Tequila. I’ve only got pockets of memories from last night. Now, what’s this about sleep? I thought you were seeing your mystery man.”

“I did go see him, but the night wasn’t a total loss.” She pushed a plate of scrambled eggs and sausage links across the table to her.

“Thanks. Why not a total loss?”

“Well, he did lick me up pretty good.”

“Fantastic! I like him already. Wish I knew him, though.” Opal pushed her chair back and pushed the door open. “Debbie! Come on, girl! Breakfast!” She scooted back to the table and shook her head. “I swear molasses can beat that girl down the stairs on a cold winter’s day,” she muttered. “So, about you boy...”

“Come on, Opal, don’t start, please.” Pearl sat a plate on the table in front of Debbie’s seat.

“I’m not trying to start. I’m just saying—“

“What are you saying now, Chica?” Debbie said, walking in.

“Nothing,” Pearl answered bringing two glasses of orange juice to the table.

“You’re not eating?” Opal asked.

“I’ve been up for a while. I ate already,” Pearl said filling another glass.

“Well, I was just mentioning to Pearl that I’d still like to meet her mystery guy. He sent her home early last night.”

“He sent you home?”

“He didn’t send me home.”

“Was that with or without some nooky?”

“Without, but she did get her thang licked.”

“Opal! Do you mind? I think she was asking me,” Pearl chastised.

“What?” she asked, full of false innocence.

Pearl groaned then downed her glass of juice.

“Chica, stop it. It’s too early for all that. So what’s up, Pearl?”

It's been a long time since we had breakfast at home before work," Debbie asked.

She took a deep breath sitting up. "Guys, I have a confession to make."

They urged her on with their forks and continued to eat.

"Well, I've been seeing Jake ____"

"Jake is it. Well, at least we have a name," Opal interjected cynically.

"Chica, stop it!"

Opal put her hands up in

surrender then sipped her drink.

Debbie shook her head. “Go on, Pearl.”

Pearl rolled her eyes.
“Anyway... He’s— he’s not a booty call. Jake and I have been...*seeing* each other...for a while.”

Debbie glanced at Opal, then back to her. “How long is a while?”

“Umm, eleven months,” Pearl confessed in a small voice then squeezed her eyes shut.

Opal choked on her next bit. Debbie patted her back as

she gulped on her juice.

“That’s a little longer than you led us to believe, isn’t it, Pearl?”

“Damn right it is! You lied to us!” her sister accused.

“No, no. I didn’t lie. Well, maybe a little white lie, but nothing major. I might have, umm, withheld some information more than anything.”

“Withheld the truth is more like it!”

Debbie touched Opal’s shoulder. “Calm down Chica. Let her speak. Why tell us now,

Pearl? What's changed?"

"Yes, Pearl, what the hell is going on?"

"Dammit, Opal, calm down." She threw herself back in her chair.

"Calm down? How the fuck can you tell me to calm down?" she yelled then stood pointing an accusing finger at her. "You're my sister. My twin! We do not lie to each other and we don't keep secrets. Not like this!"

Pearl jumped up to her feet facing her. "I know that! Don't you think I know that? I'm

soorry!” she shouted shaking her arms erratically.

Debbie jerked from her chair to push them apart. “Enough! What’s gotten into you two? Malcriados hijos culo, los dos. Lo julo!” She took a deep breath then she pointed to the empty chairs. “Sit down, both of you.”

Their eyes darted over to her then back at her other as they huffed and puffed, but neither moved.

“I said, sit down. Don’t make me slam your heads

together to break that damn stare down.”

The twins glared at each other for a few more moments before simultaneously easing into their.

Debbie turned to Opal. “Now look Chica, this has obviously been bothering Pearl for a while or she wouldn’t be so upset,” she said in a calm tone. “Let her finish telling us the whole story.”

Opal wrapped her arms around her chest and slammed back into the chair. “Fine,” she

said through gritted teeth.

Debbie held the bridge of her nose. "Go ahead, Pearl."

Her breathing was calmer, but her voice was low and shaky. "I wanted to tell you guys before this, but I..." She sighed. "Do you remember when my brakes were bad last year? Janet suggested I go to where she got her brakes done. I met Jake there. He owns the place. He told me it would take about an hour so before someone to fix my car so I waited. His mechanic got behind on an earlier job so it was going to take longer than he

had said. Since I was the only one there at the time he felt bad about making me wait longer and offered to buy me lunch.”

“Hmm, wonder if that’s a courtesy he extends to all his single clients,” Opal mumbled.

Debbie glared at her then urged Pearl on.

“There’s nothing else to tell really. We talked and hit it off immediately. After that we met for lunch a few times a week. One night he offered to make dinner for me.” She shrugged. “From there our lunches turned

into dinners and we've been seeing each other ever since. Whenever he asked to take me out I'd go over there with movies, drinks, food, so we don't have to go out."

"Does he live alone?"

Debbie asked.

"No, he has a roommate."

"Really? I bet the roommate knows about you. Why are we the last to know?" Opal asked.

Debbie cut her another look and Opal threw her hands up in surrender.

"Does the roommate know

about you, Pearl?”

“He does now. He walked in on us last night. We were on the kitchen floor making use of some whip cream, strawberries and champagne.” A small grin came to her face at the memory, but vanished quickly. “We were still on the floor when he came in.”

Opal reached for her drink. “Champagne, huh? Celebrating something were you?”

Pearl leaned on the table. “Jake asked me to come over because he wanted to celebrate our time together and to tell me

he wants to take our relationship to the next level. But I don't know if I'm ready for all that."

Opal slid the empty glass across the table. "Spit it out, Pearl. What's wrong with the man?"

"Nothing is wrong with him. He's romantic, loving, caring, and sweet. The sex is the bomb. He says he loves me."

Debbie gathered the dishes and stood. "Do you love *him*?"

"Yeah, I think I do."

"What does he look like?"

He's got some kind of deformity, doesn't he? That's the problem right there, Debbie. What is it, Pearl? A peg leg, a hump, what?"

She chuckled. "Don't be stupid, he's fine. He's about six foot one, nice wide chest and a really nice booty."

"Yum, sounds tasty," Debbie said returning to the table.

Pearl nodded in agreement. "He's got black hair and a goatee that comes across his jaw like this..." She traced a line from her ear lobe across her face to

her chin and smiled dreamily.

Opal laughed. “It’s called a chin strap.”

Pearl shrugged. “Yeah, that, and he’s got the prettiest, clearest blue eyes I’ve ever seen with long swooping eye lashes—”

“Whoa! His eyes are *blue*?” Opal looked at Debbie with a raised brow then back to Pearl. “Is he white?”

“Yeah, he’s white.”

“Well...how white is he?”

Pearl chuckled. “What do you mean, how white is he? He’s

white. Caucasian. A white lady had sex with a white man and had a white baby.”

“You’re not hiding him from us because he’s white, are you?” Debbie asked.

“No, of course not, and I’m not hiding him. I’ll admit that different scenarios have crossed my mind about being in a mixed relationship. What would happen if we got together and it didn’t work? Will I date another white man? Or marry one? Or marry *again* for that matter? Will I go back to dating black guys?”

“Sounds like you’re over thinking the situation just a bit,” Debbie said.

“Jake sounds like a cutie, Pearl. Black hair, blue eyes, a good job, no hump... I think you should nab him and quit playing.”

“I don’t know guys. What really scares me is the long term picture. I think I love this guy. I’ve never been in love, what if it’s just lust and not love at all?”

“You will never know the difference if you don’t move forward with him. The

relationship can't stay where it is. The man has already come to you saying he wants more."

"What if he just wants to be with me to see if, you know, the grass is greener?"

Her sister laughed. "It doesn't take eleven months to check out the grass, honey. If that was his intention, he'd have checked out your grass and left a long time ago."

"Stop making up reasons to sabotage the relationship," Debbie told her. "You already have you guys married, divorced

and you contemplating celibacy. You're on an emotional roller coaster and nothing has even happened yet. You've made it these past eleven months. He's obviously happy and so are you."

"Yeah, but we haven't been out. Mostly we've only kept to ourselves."

"Oooh. So you think that he stayed in house the whole time you guys have been together?" her sister surmised. "Only walking out his door to go to work, huh?"

Opal looked at Debbie and

they both laughed.

Pearl wrapped her arms around her chest. “I’m not stupid, Opal. I know better than that.”

“Pearl, if that man wanted another woman I’m sure he’s had plenty of opportunities to have one. Especially with all the good qualities you just named off. Women probably throw themselves at him all the time because of that, but he chooses to come back to you,” Debbie reminded her.

“At least give the man a

chance to fuck up before you condemn him,” Opal suggested.

Pearl relaxed letting her arms fall to the table. “Yeah, I guess you guys are right.”

“Now, tell us why you left last night? Did his pretty face say something stupid?” Opal said giving her a nudge.

“No, his stupid roommate not only walked in on us, but he stood there watching us for who knows how long. I was so embarrassed I just ran up out of there. I didn’t want his roommate to find out about me

like that.”

Debbie mouth dropped open. “He watched...*without* being invited? Mmm, hmm, he was definitely in violation for that one.”

Opal scoffed. “That’s messed up. Before you left you should have introduced the back of his head to one of the pots in the kitchen.”

Pearl chuckled. “Yeah, well, I was focused on getting out of there.”

“And what did your white boy say?”

“He was pretty pissed at Joe, that’s his roommate’s name, and he followed me to the door trying to get me to stay. He wants me to come over tonight, so he can make it up to me,” she said, fiddling with her fingers.

“And you’re going, right?”

Pearl shrugged.

“I don’t know, Pearl, if what you say is true, he doesn’t sound half bad to me.” Debbie looked at Opal.

“Don’t look at me. I’m reserving judgment until after I meet him face to face.”

Pearl sighed. “I don’t know. I’m still afraid.”

“You’re just gonna have to suck it up. That’s the risk you take when you fall in love. If it doesn’t work you chalk it up as another lesson learned in the never ending game of life.”

“That’s easy for you to say when you’re on the outside looking in.”

“All right, if you feel that way make him stay. Daddy used to tell us we were *Jeffersons* and if we wanted something we had to work to make it a reality,

Pearl.”

Pearl tapped her chin as she thought then grinned. “Hmm, so I should let him make it up to me?”

Debbie nodded. “Absolutely. Show that slimy roommate of his you can still hold your head up high.”

Opal slapped the table. “So it’s settled. First go show that roommate what you’re made of and then get your Jake ready to meet us. It’s way overdue. No more stalling.”

Pearl nodded. “I know. I’m

sorry I didn't tell you guys sooner." She leaned across the table and grabbed their hands.

"No more secrets, all right?" Debbie said.

"Okay." Pearl looked at her sister.

"No more lies...ever."

"No more secrets, no more lies," Pearl promised. She sent a look to the clock then stood. "I have to go. I'll talk to Jake tonight, okay? Love you guys, see you later."

"Bye. Come on, Chica. We should get going, too."

Opal sat back with her arms folded across her chest again. “Man, I cannot believe this.”

Debbie went across the room to start the dishwasher. “Let it go, Chica.”

“Let it go? Debbie, she lied to us.”

“I’m upset about all this, too, but technically withholding information isn’t lying.”

“It is in a court of law.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that we’re not in a court of law, isn’t it?”

She stood up abruptly.

“Debbie—”

“Opal!” Debbie shouted cutting off her rebuttal. “Let—it—go. Don’t turn this into another feud...like the one that lasted over a month over that stupid necklace you had when you guys were fourteen.”

“Hey! That was a crystal necklace and my favorite. She broke it!”

Debbie leaned against the sink with her lips twisted. “Yeah, she did, but it was broken in a fight with you...that *you* started,

as I recall.”

“Humph! I don’t remember that part.”

“Uh-huh, imagine that. She told us and that’s all that matters.” She walked back to the table. “Now, let’s turn our energy toward something else, okay? Please.”

Opal sighed and sat back down. “All right. I’ll try.”

Debbie smiled and pulled her up again. “Good. Now, let’s go make the world beautiful.”

“Thank you for coming to Double Your Beauty. How can I help you?” Opal said cheerfully pushing the appointment book back.

“Hi, my name is Sandra. Betty Jackson is my mother. She told me she comes here to get her hair done.”

“She certainly does. I’m Opal. Miss Betty’s been a loyal customer of ours since we first opened. She comes on Fridays to get her hair done and every other Wednesday for her nails.”

“Was she here yesterday to

get her nails done?”

“Well, she came in, but she got her hair done, not her nails. She said she had a hot lunch date.”

Sandra leaned on the counter and sighed. “Did she mention anything about this date? What his name was or where she met him?”

“Well, she said something about meeting a nice old man she was talking to online. They were going to meet for lunch at the mall. Is something wrong?”

“I was afraid of this. She’s

been horseback riding, salsa dancing, go-cart riding at the putt-putt range... she even tried to roller blade a week or two ago. She's been doing all kinds of wild stuff in the last three months that we can hardly keep up with her, but this computer..." She paused shaking her head. "My sister got my mom a laptop for her last birthday. She's been like kid in a candy store with that thing. On it day and night. You know what," Sandra added with a scoff. "I went to visit her the other day and she was having cybersex. Can you believe that?"

Opal's hand couldn't muffle her snickers. "Cyber sex? Get outta here. Miss Betty? She's like, what, in her sixties?"

Sandra nodded. "Yeah, she just turned sixty-seven in April."

"Wow."

"I personally don't trust meeting people online. I know everything is going online and lots of people are doing it but..." Sandra shook her head leaving the sentence incomplete.

Opal nodded. "Yes, I agree. Have you spoken to her about it? I mean if it really bothers

you...”

“Yes, but she won’t listen. My sister does it all the time, so she encourages our mother to do it. I haven’t seen my mom since Monday, but she did call me yesterday. She told me about her little date and said she’d call back with details, but she hasn’t.”

“Well, if she comes in to brag, I’ll tell her to call you from right here. All right?”

“Thanks Opal.”

Opal walked out to the styling floor when Sandra left

and sat at an empty station.

“Have any of you seen Miss Betty around since she left here yesterday?”

Nina shook her head as he covered her client's face to spray her head. “Nope.”

“Uh-uh, honey. Spunky old ladies are rarely seen in my neighborhood,” Sean said pinning another roller to his client's head.

“Why, Chica is something wrong?”

“I don't know. Her daughter was just here and she hasn't

seen her since Monday, but she said she spoke to her yesterday.”

“Humph, sounds like Miss Betty is getting her freak on,” Sean’s client said laughing.

Sean popped her lightly with the comb on the shoulder. “Stop that, girl. Nobody wants that visual stuck in their heads,” he chastised with a light laugh.

“I don’t know. Micki might be right. Miss Betty did say she was meeting some cute old man at the mall,” Nina said joining in their laughter.

“I touched up her manicure

yesterday, too,” Krystal said cleaning her area.

“Wow, I hope I’m that active when I get her age,” Micki said.

“Girl, please, you wish you were that active now.”

Sean laughed again and everyone laughed with him.

“Whatever, Sean,” Micki said as she laughed too.

“Everyone’s love life can’t be as fulfilling as yours.”

“Shoot, from what I hear Sean should be giving classes on *How to snag a man*,” Nina said.

“You kitties sound a little jealous to me,” he said in a singing voice.

“Hell no, we ain’t jealous, but I think Nina is right. Instead of dogging us you should be teaching us, since you think you know so much.”

“Well, you know what they say, men do know what men like.”

“Oh please, I don’t need any tips from fag-boy here on how to catch a man,” Krystal said with a flippant wave to Sean. “I’m looking for *straight* men.”

A loud ‘oh’ rose in unison in the room.

“That’s fag-*man*, Miss Ghetto Barbie. If you’re going to insult me, at least add some respect to it.”

The ohs were silenced as a roar of laughter ensued.

“I don’t know. I think I have to agree with Krystal. If we take tips from fag-man over there...” Debbie paused to nod toward Sean and wink.

He gave her a bow. “Thank you, girl.”

“Won’t we just pick up gay

men?” she finished.

Opal shrugged. “Like Sean said, men know what they like. So, who better to teach us than one of their own?”

“True, but, gay men like their sex a *little* different than the men who will be wanting us, don’t they, Chica?”

Sean held up one finger. “Excuse me Maybe I should just give a class just to remind you kitties about sensitivity. Let’s try not to talk about me like I’m not here,” He rolled his eyes and tapped his clients shoulder.

“Let’s go, honey, it’s time to dry.”

“Why does that fool always call me Ghetto Barbie?”

Renewed laughter filled the room. Opal looked over her shoulder then left the floor. She smiled when the next customer entered the shop.

“Hey, lady. What’s up?”

“Rakim! How are you? I see Debbie hooked you up. Your braids look good.”

He slid his hands over his head, smiling. “She always does. Is she free? My friend wants his hair braided too. He’s out

parking the car.”

“Yeah she’s free. Which friend is it?”

“Doug.”

Opal tapped her chin in faux thought. She knew who Doug was, but didn’t want Rakim to know she had noticed him. “Doug...Doug... Isn’t that the tall one with the poofy hair that looks like a blond ‘fro?”

Rakim chuckled. “Yeah, that’s him. He’s been letting it grow out so he could get braids.” He looked at the door. “Here he is now.”

Opal could not swallow her gasp when Doug walked in and slapped Rakim five. He was much taller than Rakim and more handsome than she remembered even with the mass of wild, untamed golden curls bouncing on his head as he moved. He turned gleaming white teeth to her.

“Opal, this is Doug. Doug, Opal. She owns the shop with Debbie.”

“Hi Doug.”

“What’s up, baby girl?”

Opal was surprised to hear

such a smooth, tenor voice come from such a slender frame. She swallowed her shock and accepted his hand.

“Oh yeah? That’s what’s up. Brains and beauty. You got it all Opal.”

Opal’s brow rose. She contemplated whether his compliment was just that or flirtingthe thought for a moment than tossed it aside. “So, you’re going to let Debbie try to tame that bird’s nest of yours, huh?” she said in a teasing tone.

He shrugged. “I had to

come up with something legit to get into the shop to meet you.”

She heard no mockery in his tone, but chose to ignore his statement anyway. “Uh-huh. Let’s just take you over to Debbie and see what kind of miracle she can come up with for this head of yours, shall we?”

Opal led them across the styling floor. She glared at Rakim over her shoulder as his titters reached her ears.

“Hey, Rakim. How are you today?”

“Looking good, Rakim.”

“Rakim, I’m still waiting for that phone call.”

“You always look so hot in your braids, Rakim.”

The greetings came from stylists and clients as he passed them. Rakim spun, smiling brightly.

“Ladies, ladies, how are ya’ll doing today?” His arms opened wide to include them all in his greeting. “You’re all looking as lovely as usual, but I have already dedicated myself to the pursuit of one woman. All I can offer you are air kisses. Ya’ll

already know my heart belongs to Debbie. I only have eyes for her.”

He blew kisses in every direction and continued behind Opal. Disappointed noises filled the area. Opal shook her head. She stopped in front of Debbie’s station and pushed Doug into the chair.

“This is Doug. You’ve probably seen him a couple times in the shop when he’s been here waiting on Rakim.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen him. What’s up?”

“He wants braids.”

Debbie fingered a few of Doug’s curls. “Hmm, he needs is a haircut or at the least a deep conditioning.”

Opal giggled. “Yes, I noticed that too, but he wants braids.”

“Come on, girl, I heard you were the best. Hook me up,” Doug chimed in.

Debbie wrapped a bright purple cape around his neck then turned to Rakim who appeared at her side. “You told him I was the best?”

Rakim lifted her hand to

kiss it. “You know you’re always number one in my book. Mmm, you always smell so damn good,” he said adding another kiss to her knuckles.

She snatched her hand from him. “Whatever, Rakim. Come on, Doug, let’s get this stuff washed and see if we can make a miracle.”

Rakim shook his head and followed Opal back to the front.

“Boy, that woman sure can kill a man’s dream.”

“So why do you keep trying, Rakim?” Opal asked, taking her

seat.

“Because she’s beautiful, smart and she doesn’t put up with no shit, especially *my* shit.” He chuckled then leaned on the counter. “Why won’t she take me seriously, Opal?”

“Oh come on, Rakim, don’t be coy. You know why.” She rocked her chair. “You’re a player-player, a man’s man. Your very aura oozes sexy, Rakim. I can feel it and I don’t even like you like that,” Opal confessed with a laugh. “Back in school *Rakim Jacobs will rock your world* was all over the

bathroom walls. You know once your name makes it to the walls it's hard to live that rep down."

"Yeah, I know, but that was back in the day, Opal."

"Well, say what you want, but that reputation was the basis of our first impression of you."

"But it ain't like that no more. A man wants different things when he gets older."

"Oh yeah? So you don't want a pocket full of women to choose from anymore? One for everyday of the week, or

month?” she questioned with a raised brow.

Rakim waved her challenge away. “Nah, I been over that. Messing around with women who just want to see if all the old rumors are true is not the way to go. I learned that lesson years ago. I need a real woman if I’m going to down. I want to buy a house and have a few kids... maybe a dog.”

Opal chuckled. “Well, you better be ready to prove all that to Debbie. You’re my dude and all, but I’m not getting in the middle of it. You’re on your own.”

Rakim sighed. “Why did I know you were going to say that?”

“So, Debbie, do you think your girl would give me some play if I came to her like that or what?” Doug asked.

Her eyes caught his in the mirror. “What? Are you serious? You want to kick it with my Chica.”

“Uhh, is that Opal?”

She chuckled. “Yes, that’s Opal.”

“Well then, yeah. She’s fine as hell.”

Debbie’s lips twisted. “Yeah, well, she’s more than just a pretty face, you know.”

“I’ve heard that. I want to find that out for myself.”

“Uh-huh. Well, if you’re for real, I say go for it.”

“When you gonna let me take you out, Debbie?”

Debbie didn’t jump when the question appeared by her ear. She let out an exasperated breath and started another braid. Rakim’s body was close to

her back. He said he smelled her earlier, but now she smelled him and her body reacted to the sensual scent. A sharp elbow to his gut backed him up. He grunted, rubbed his stomach and moved to her other side, undeterred.

“Okay, not yet, but I’m trying to wear you down.”

“If she’s not interested, Rakim, you’re welcomed over here!”

Debbie cut a look in the direction of the voice, as she put a rubber band on the braid she

worked on. Laughter started up on the floor. Rakim looked over his shoulder and smiled.

“Thanks, Margie, but I told you, I’m only interested in Debbie.”

“Ha! Whatever, Rakim,” Debbie said working on the last braid.

“Don’t be like that, girl, I’m serious. I’ve got my heart set on you so I’m not dealing with nobody else.”

“Uh-huh, but I already said no.”

“Yeah, but you don’t mean

it,” he said with a teasing grin.

Doug chuckled and so did she.

“Oh, I don’t mean it, huh?”

“Naah, not really. Once you get to know me, the *real* me, you’re gonna love me.” He pressed his back to hers. “Come on girl. Give me a chance to show you.”

Debbie stepped to the side and Rakim fell on Doug.

“Hey, get off me, man.” He pushed him up, laughing.

“Sorry, man.”

She snickered and grabbed a small mirror from a hook on her station. "Humph, we'll see. There you go, Doug. All done."

Doug turned this way and that then ran his hand over his head. "Yup, it definitely looks better braided. Thanks Debbie. It's worth every penny." He handed her some money and the mirror.

Rakim walked up so close to her that they were nose to nose and his lips caressed brushed hers as he whispered, "I'm wearing you down, girl, I can feel it." He brushed his nose against

hers and winked at her before following Doug.

Opal spotted Doug coming from the floor, but tried not to smile. The braids fit his head nicely. They made the almond shape of his eyes and cute rounded ears stand out more.

“So, what do you think?” he asked leaning across the counter.

“It looks great. Debbie always does a good job.”

“I’ll be in the car, man. See

ya, Opal.”

“Bye, Rakim, remember what I said.”

Doug nodded at him then returned his attention to Opal. “Okay, maybe I should rephrase the question. What I meant was, how do you like the braids on me? How do you like me in the braids? How about just me, by myself? Do you like me?””

She chuckled. “You want to know all that?”

He laughed, too, a throaty, sexy sound that put a smile on her face when she heard it.

“Well, maybe not all of that. How about just this one: will you go out with me?”

“I don’t know you, Doug.”

“I’m trying to change that, baby girl, if you give me the chance. Let me take you out so you can get to know me. People who know me like me, you know.” He flashed that beautiful smile again.

“They do, huh?”

“Yeah, girl. Come on, let me show you.”

“Well...”

He came to the other side of the counter and pulled her up. “Will ‘please’ help my case?” he whispered.

He held her firmly by the waist, pulling her closer. She put her hands on his chest to push herself back. The firmness of his chest excited her.

“Umm, okay.” She reached over to pull a business card from the desk and handed it to him. “Call me and we’ll set something up.”

He smiled again, dazzling her one more time. “Awesome,

I'll do that." Letting her go, he pulled a pair of shades from his top pocket and put the card in its place. He gave her a wink and walked toward the door.

"Doug..."

He stopped holding the door open and slid the glasses in place.

"You do look good in your braids, much better than that poof you started with," she said with a teasing smile.

He chuckled and tapped his pocket. "Thanks, and I will call," he added with a wink then

walked out the door.

Opal made her way to the styling floor.

“Oooh weee! You go, girl,” Nina said as she walked by.

“What?”

“Come on, Opal. Ain’t nothing wrong with having a little pure cane sugar to curb that sexual sweet tooth of yours,” Sean said as she walked by him.

“Yeah, girl, he did have a nice little booty on him. I say go for it,” Nina told her.

Her brows furrowed. “What are you guys talking about?”

“I didn’t even know you were into white boys.”

Opal sat in her chair spinning back and forth. “I don’t go bar hopping looking for them, if that’s what you mean, Nina. But, yeah, I’ve done a couple of them in my time.” She sent an exaggerated wink to Debbie.

Debbie snickered behind her hand.

“I mean, what, same stuff, different color, right? Even you have to agree with that one,

Sean.”

Sean shook the plastic shoebox on his clients lap and continued throwing rollers into it. “I have no clue, girls. Being the one man-man that I am, I wouldn’t be privy to that kind of knowledge.”

All the women around him roared with laughter including his client.

“I wondered if you kitties would buy that. I was gonna break out my map to El Dorado next and put it up for auction,” he said with a smirk.

“Well anyway, Opal, I thought your white boy was cute, especially after Debbie did something with that head.”

“Doug is not *my* white boy,” Opal corrected.

“Really? Well, if you really don’t want him, girl, I’ll be glad to take him off your hands. He did have a pretty tan and some sexy lips, too. I wanted to lick them from over here.”

“Damn, Nina. First you drool all over Rakim and now you’re going for Chica’s man? That’s bordering on hoe status,

isn't it?"

Everyone laughed again.

"Umm, hello...he's not my man, guys," Opal insisted. "I don't even know him like that. I just know *of* him."

"For your information, Debbie, I'm just keeping my options open for whoever is available. You're just jealous. Everyone knows you like Rakim. You're just playing hard to get. Don't play too long, he may get tired of waiting."

Debbie rolled her eyes.
"Whatever Nina."

“Oooh, who are we talking about? Did I miss something good?”

“Oh look, girls. Ghetto Barbie can walk and talk at the same time.”

The laughter returned.

“Shut the hell up, Sean,” Krystal said with a dismissive wave going to her station.

“What’d I miss guys?”

“We’re talking about Opal’s white boy. He’s a cutie and how Debbie still ain’t giving Rakim no play,” Nina explained.

Debbie sputtered.

“Again, he’s not my white boy,” Opal exclaimed throwing her hands up. *“Is there no one here listening? The man just said he’s interested in getting to know me better. I’m going to give him the same chance as anyone else.”*

Groans and stammering noise filled the room.

Opal scoffed. *“Hey! What does all that mean?”*

“Girl, please. I only come in here every two weeks to get my hair done and I know how hard you are on men. That’s why you

don't have one now."

"What? I'll have you know, Dawn, that my lack of a man is by choice," Opal said with a huff.

The unbelievable sounds rose again.

"For real."

They noises continued.

"Forget ya'll."

"A white boy, huh? I stopped doing them back in high school," Krystal said redoing one of her braids.

"Girl please, who are you trying to fool. It's more like *they*

stopped doing *you*,” Sean retorted. “They probably preferred a Stewardess Barbie type and your *from the hood version* just confused them.”

Krystal sucked her teeth at the laughter that roared up again at her expense and gathered her nail polishes.

“You don’t have nothing else to do but mess with me, Sean?”

“Sure, but I can do that and mess with you at the same time.”

She picked up her case and

walked back to the manicure room with her nose in the air.

“Sean, leave that girl alone.”

“All right, all right. I’m off her today. Tomorrow is your turn, Nina. Bring your thick skin,” he said with a smirk.

“For the record, guys, I’m going to deal with Doug on a day by day basis and give him the same chance everyone else gets to impress me.”

“If you say so, Chica. Since everyone is here tell them about our vacation plans.”

“Vacation time, huh? Where are you guys going this time?” Nina asked.

“We’re going to New York to visit my family.”

“New York, huh? That’s my second favorite vacation spot. San Francisco will always be number one for me though,” Sean said with a laugh and handed his client a small mirror.

“We won’t be gone for longer than a week. You guys can hold down the fort while we’re gone, right?” Opal asked.

“Sure,” Nina said.

“Sean, you are amazing!”

Dawn stood up and shook her head vigorously. “Look at it, it looks wonderful. I love it!”

“Yes, darling, I know,” he said with a wave of his hand then snatched the cape off her with a loud crack.

“In case you missed it, ladies, I’m amazing. Forty-five dollars, please, Miss Dawn.”

She handed him the money and exited the floor. “See you in two weeks!”

“Thank you, and on that note, I’m out to lunch. Ta!”

Nina waved. “Good riddance. Now, what’s this about New York?”

“My uncle is going to send for me and the twins so we can be there for the fourth.”

“Do you know what day you’re leaving yet?”

“Nope, but we’ll keep you posted.” She looked up at the clock. “Come on, Chica, let’s go to lunch, too. I’ve got a two o’clock coming in.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Opal stood at the base of the staircase. “Debbie, damn!

Come on!”

“I’m here, I’m here!” she said running down the stairs.

Debbie ran pass Opal, snatched her purse off the table in the in the foyer and trotted out the door. Opal followed her out shaking her head.

“So, what did your uncle say?”

“He paid for the tickets. We’re leaving on Sunday the thirtieth. That gives us time to take care of anything we need to do before we go.”

A waitress delivered two

coffee cups to them. Opal stirred sugar and milk into her cup

“Thanks. The fourth isn’t until that Thursday, so we have a few days to sightsee and do some stuff.”

“Girl, yeah, we’ll have plenty of time for that, my cousins will see to that. Our flight back is on Friday morning.”

“Even better. We have the weekend to chill before going back o work.”

The waitress came over to take their order. “So, umm, what

are you going to do about Doug?"

Opal sipped her drink, looked the edge and countered. "What are you gonna do about Rakim?"

Debbie chuckled. "I asked you first."

Opal's lips twisted as she lowered her cup. "Okay fine. It's not that I don't think he's cute, I do. He's got nice lips, pretty eyes and, well, this, I don't know, kind of *aura* around him."

"Aura?" Debbie repeated with a raised brow.

“Yes, aura. Don’t ask, I can’t explain it. All I know is when he pulled me close to him...” She paused to sip her coffee and shake her head. “Girl, my heart sped up, goose bumps rose on my skin and I got to tingling everywhere.” She laughed and took another sip. “Who knew I’d meet someone who could do that without me helping him.”

“Well, that’s good because he and his aura are coming this way.”

“What?” she squealed, lowering the cup to the table

with a thud.

“Yup, right behind you,” she confirmed with a nod in the direction.

“What’s up, Debbie? How you doing, Opal?”

“Hi, Doug.”

“Hey, Doug.”

“Mind if I sit for a minute?”

“No, no, sit,” Opal said moving over.

“So, you guys are headed to work, huh?”

“Yup, but if you don’t feed Opal in the morning, it won’t be

a good day for those around her.” Debbie confessed with a laughing grin.

Opal kicked her under the table.

Doug smiled at her. “Oh yeah. A breakfast person, huh? I’ll have to remember that.”

“I’m not that bad,” Opal said hoping her cheeks didn’t look as hot as they felt.

“My crew was just about to leave when I saw you guys. I just wanted to over and say hi. I was going to call you later to see if you were free for lunch. So,

are you?”

“We don’t have anything planned, do we?” she asked Debbie.

“Nothing concrete.”

Why don’t you give me a call before ten o’clock. I will check my appointment book and give you a time slot when I’m free.”

“Cool.” He stood. “I’ll call you later and see.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and Debbie, give my boy Rakim a break. He really

does like you.” He winked at her, then blew Opal a kiss before leaving.

“Krystal, do you have time for a walk-in before your next appointment?” Opal shouted across the floor a few hours later. “She needs a full set.”

“Yeah, Opal, that’s fine. Give me a few minutes.”

“Have a seat, Rose. Krystal will come to get you in a few minutes.”

“That’s fine. Can you turn the T.V. up, Opal? There’s some breaking news going on.”

“Sure.” She pulled the remote from the top draw as the phone rang. “Thank you for calling Double Your Beauty, how can I help you?”

“Hi, Opal, it’s Doug.”

“Hi, Doug.”

“I was checking to see what time you were free. Can we still go?”

“Yeah, we can go, but I don’t think I can get away for at least another hour. It’s crazy here.” She put the remote down and glanced up at the T.V.

“...no info yet. To recap, I’m

here live at the Sweet Inn on South Street, downtown, where two bodies were found dead early this morning. One of the victims has been identified as Betty Lou Jackson. Both Ms. Jackson and the unidentified man were shot by a single gunshot wound to the chest. The identity of the man is being withheld at this time. The police are asking that if anyone has any information on what might have happened here to please call 555-1000. Again, there are no leads on this story. This is Chuck Jenkins, Channel Six

News at noon.”

Opal stood slowly, staring at the T.V.

“Opal? Are you there?”
Doug said in her ear.

A woman came to the counter with tears already running down her face. “Opal, tell me that’s not Miss Betty’s name, is it?”

Tears stung her eyes as she shook her head. “Oh my God,” she said. “I wish I could.”

“Oh my God, what? Opal, what’s happening? Talk to me. What’s going on?”

Doug's loud voice in her ear reminded her she was on the phone. "I'm sorry, I have to go."

"What? Opal, wait, what's —"

She put the phone in its cradle and reached for the tissue box. Debbie came from around the corner reaching for the sign-in log.

"Okay, Susan your— What's going on?" She looked around the lobby then to Opal. "Chica, what's wrong? What's happened?"

Opal sat hard in her chair,

barely able to speak. “Miss, Miss Betty is dead,” she squeaked out, breathing hard.

“What? No, that can’t be.”

Opal nodded. “Somebody shot her in a hotel downtown,” she forced out, wiping the tears away.

Only a choking sound accompanied the instant tears that welled in Debbie’s eyes. She returned to the floor and returned with the others in her wake. The ladies and Sean communed in the lobby to comfort one another. After a

while Opal released one of the clients she hugged and flipped through her rolodex.

“What are you doing?”
Debbie asked.

“I don’t have Sandra’s number, but I have Miss Betty’s. I’m hoping she or her sister will be at her house so I can offer our condolences.”

“Okay, we’ll try to get back to work.” Debbie turned to urge her team mates and their clients back to the floor. “Come on, Susan, you’re next.”

Opal continued flipping as

the phone rang. “Double Your Beauty, how can I help you?”

“Opal, have you seen the news?”

“Yes, Pearl.” She sniffed then wiped her eyes with a tissue.

“I’ve seen it.”

“Miss Betty wouldn’t hurt a fly, Opal. Who could do something like this to her?”

“I don’t know, Pearl. I was just looking for her number to call her daughter and offer our condolences.” She sighed. “How did you see it? Aren’t you at school?”

“Yes, but I was in the break room having lunch. I can’t believe this, Opal. Miss Betty is gone,” she said unable to stop the deep sobs from coming again.

“I know, Pearl.” Opal wiped away fresh tears. “I was gonna ask her advice about Doug when she came in. I had a lunch date with him today, but we’re getting slammed. I don’t even know if I should go.”

“Doug? Oh, Rakim’s friend.” She sighed. “Finish your call to Miss Betty’s daughter and then call Doug. I think you should

keep your lunch date.”

“All right, I’ll see you at dinner. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Opal rested the phone in its cradle then let her drop to the desk and cried again. At the sound of the bell, she lifted her head.

“Opal, baby, what’s wrong?” Doug’s voice was filled with worry as he hurried to the counter. “You just hung up and...oh, man. It’s not your sister, is it? Is Pearl all right? Where’s Debbie? Is it Debbie?”

He moved closer to the partition separating the styling floor from the lobby.

Opal reached for a tissue and waved it around. “No, no, no. It’s not them, they’re fine.” She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “We were watching the news and one of our clients was killed in a hotel downtown. Somebody shot her. She was like a second mother to all of us in here.”

Doug came around the counter and pulled her into a hug. “Aww, man. I’m sorry to hear about your friend.”

To her surprise Opal felt safe and comfortable in Doug's embrace. He let her cry then returned her to her seat when she was done.

"It's so hard to believe, Doug. She was the sweetest lady in the whole world. She came in like clockwork, every week, once for her nails, once for her hair. She could've done it at the same time, but she said we were her other children and she wanted to see us more than just one a week. She answered all of our questions crazy questions, gave us good old-fashioned advice,"

she paused to chuckle and offered Doug a sad smile. “She would definitely put us in our place, too, when we did or said something she felt was out of line.”

Doug offered her a smile, but said nothing.

Opal shook her head and new tears fell. “It would be different if she were sick or something. Kinda easier to deal with, you know? I mean, she was old, not that old, but, she didn’t just die—some fool killed her!” She snatched up another tissue and wiped her eyes,

again. "I'm sorry. I must look like a hot mess."

Doug dropped to his knees and pulled her chair to him. "Hey, you look beautiful to me." He kissed her forehead and shrugged. "This old lady obviously meant something to you or you wouldn't be all broke up over her being dead. I understand that." He stood and pulled her to her feet again. "Come on, let's go outside. You need some air."

"I don't know, Doug. I was trying to call Miss Betty's family and—"

“Just a quick walk around the block, Opal. It will give you a calmer voice and a clear hear when you call the family.”

She sighed. “Doug...”

“Come on. Walk with me.”

He smiled and pushed her gently pass the dividing wall. “Go ahead. Tell your girl where you’re going.”

He watched her go and walked out the front door pulling out his cell phone.

“What’s up, Ra? Dude, you

ain't gonna believe this. I'm down at Opal and Debbie's shop and some sad shit done went down." He paused, listening.

"Naah, man, that's the first thing I asked. They're cool. It's one of their clients got popped in a hotel downtown. It was on the news and everything."

Doug watched Opal talk to Debbie through the window as Rakim spoke. "Yeah man, the whole damn place is crying. I thought you might want to come down here and offer your girl some *comforting*." Another pause. "I don't know, man, think

of something— I gotta go, Opal's coming. Later." He shoved his phone back into his pocket. "You good, baby?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Once they're done with the clients that are inside we're going to close early. A moment of silence kind of thing. We don't get that many appointments late on Fridays, just walk-ins."

"You're open on Saturdays?"

"Yeah until noon, but Debbie and I don't work Saturdays."

He smiled. “Ahh, a perk to being the owners, huh?”

She chuckled. “I guess it is.”

Doug took her hand and kissed it as they walked down the street. “I know you’re upset about your friend, is there anything I can do to make it go away?”

Opal stopped and looked up at him. She touched his golden goatee then traced his lips with a finger tip. Shivers raced down his spine.

“Thanks, knowing that you

want to make it go away helps.”

* * * *

“Hello?”

“Hey, baby, what’s wrong? You sounded so upset on the message.”

“Oh, Jake, I need to talk to you so bad. Something terrible has happened.”

“It’s not your sister is it?”

“No, Opal and Debbie are both fine.” Pearl cradled the phone between her ear and shoulder to wrap the last potato in foil then handed it to Opal.

“Go ahead, we’ll finish up.”

“Thanks, Opal.” She switched the phones position and walked out of the kitchen.

“Some kid handed me this when Doug and I were walking today,” Opal said passing a small flyer to Debbie.

*THE GRAND OPENING OF CLUB
CALIENTE`!*

*COME DRESSED TO IMPRESS TO
THE BLACK AND WHITE BALL!*

DATE: JUNE 20th, 2015

TIME: 9:00- UNTIL LATE

***PLACE: CLUB CALIENTE` ON THE
CANAL.***

***1/2 PRICE FOR ALL IN BLACK OR
WHITE ATTIRE.***

“Hmm, be right back.”

Debbie went through the swinging door and then returned. “I gave Pearl the flyer. That party would be the perfect place to meet Jake, don’t you think?”

“Why? You don’t think it’s a good idea for him to come here and meet us?”

Debbie twisted her lips.

“Fine, fine.” She grabbed three glasses from the cabinet. “Get the wine. The steaks are

done and I set the microwave for seven minutes for the potatoes.”

Pearl walked in. “Jake thinks the party is a great idea.” She took a glass from Opal then sat at the table with Debbie. “I’m going over there after dinner.”

Debbie filled everyone’s glass.

“Doug really wants to go. He said he never gets the chance to dress up. He’s casual most of the time and at his job he wears a blue jumpsuit all the time.”

“Yeah, it’s like that for Jake too, except he stays in his greasy

overalls all the time.” She giggled. “I’m kind of looking forward to seeing what he looks like all dressed up.”

“Great! Let’s toast to the six of us and the good time we’re going to have at the black and white ball,” Opal suggested lifting her drink.

Pearl raised her glass with her sister, but Debbie didn’t.

“What six?” Debbie asked with furrowed brows.

“What do you mean what six?” Opal questioned.

“I mean *what* six. You, me,

Pearl, Jake and Doug,” she answered counting her fingers. “That’s five.” She wiggled them to emphasize the word.

Opal put her drink down and stood. “Girl, please. You know damn well that as soon as Doug got away from me he told Rakim about the party. He’s number six. You know he’ll be there, too.”

“Rakim? Oh please, Chica. This is a *black tie* affair. We’re going to be all dressed up. What’s Rakim going to wear? A pair of brand new black jeans and a clean white tee shirt?

That's all he wears, you know," she supplied laughing.

"Debbie!" Pearl laughed with her.

Opal shook her head as she prepared the plates. "You are so wrong for that Deb. I can't wait to see your face when Rakim surprises you and turns out to be a good guy after all."

Debbie shrugged and sipped her drink. "Uh-huh, right. I guess we'll see."

Opal handed her and Pearl a plate then went back for her own.

“So, what are you wearing to the party tomorrow, Debbie?” Pearl asked.

“Well, I was thinking about wearing the dress I wore in Constance and Diego’s wedding last year. The long one with the low scooped back, it’s black and white.” She gave a small laugh. “I told her I’d get a few good wears out of that dress. What about you?”

“I don’t know, I was thinking about this white dress that I have. It’s all glittery stars on it,” she answered between bites. “With the right bra, my

titties could look really perky,” she added with a giggle.

“What about you, Chica? Do you have something already or do we have to go shopping?”

Opal shrugged and picked up her glass. “I don’t know. I’ll have to see what I’ve got and...” She choked on her drink, laughing. “Girl, who am I fooling? Yeah, we’re going shopping.”

“Well, I guess Club Caliente` will earn its name tomorrow, huh?”

They laughed together and

finally clicked their glasses.

CHAPTER SIX

“Honey, I’m here!”

Pearl scanned the living room then walked over and pushed open the double doors to the kitchen.

“Jake?” she called poking her head inside.

Going back to the living room, she put her hands on her hips and looked around again. This time she noticed a bright orange paper on the coffee table.

“Hmm...”

***Take this paper with you
And match it to its juice***

An instant smile appeared on her face. She took the note to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. On the center of the top shelf was a champagne flute with a bright red piece of paper on top of it. Taking a sip, she read it.

***Take the glass and
Climb the stairs to paradise***

Tucking both papers under her arm Pearl returned to the living room. Hanging from the

ceiling in front of the steps was a white sheet of paper.

***Gather the flowers
Of my color***

She yanked at the note down, putting it with the others and looked up the stairs. Red and white rose pedals alternated on each step. Taking another drink from her glass, Pearl collected the white pedals. At the top of the stairs lay a single white rose with a bright blue note message covering its stem

with the same color ribbon attached to it.

Follow me

Adjusting the pedals on the multi-colored pages, she followed the ribbon knowing it would lead to Jake's room. Opening the door, she poked her head inside.

“Jake?”

“Come in, baby. Close the door,” he whispered.

Pearl closed the door behind her. Three candles burned across the room giving

off just enough light to see strings of smoke swirling around the ceiling. An erotic, woodsy smell tickled her nose and the soothing sounds of piano music played somewhere in the room. Fire light flickered on the black lacquer head board of Jake's king-sized bed.

Jake lay in the bed's center holding a glass that matched hers. Struck by his masculine beauty, Pearl's mouth dropped open. His white skin glowed softly in the dim lighting as he lay comfortably with one leg out. The hand with the glass rested

on the knee of his other leg that was bent at the knee, framing his manhood that stood at full staff. The same sleek black hair on his head peppered his chest and swirled in thick circles around his impressive piece. On his neck lay a single gold chain that just barely caught the light. It was a simple, but an elegant ornament that helped to display him as a magnificent specimen of the male species. His casual pose and seductive grin set fire to her loins.

Pearl gulped at her drink to wet her mouth that suddenly

went dry. “You look incredible,” she said after a few moments.

His smile widened. “Thank you. Would you like a closer look?”

Not waiting for an answer, he finished his drink in two swallows and put the glass on the night stand. With a combination of power and grace, his long legs carried him across the room to her in a few short strides. Taking the flower pedals from her, he tossed them across the black sheets of his bed.

“What about this one?”

Pearl asked waving the white rose about.

Jake took the flower from her and laid it on the night stand. “That one is for you to keep and remember this night,” he explained pulling her into his lap.

“Mmm, you smell good, too. You know I love that cologne.”

“Of course, that’s why I wear it. I’m trying to impress you while I plead my case.” He kissed her shoulder.

“Really? Well, you’re doing an excellent job.” She finished

her drink and put the glass on the other side of the flower next to his.

“You think so, huh?” He slid her off his lap onto the bed and lay back with her. “Well, you ain’t seen nothing yet, baby.” He palmed her cheeks and kissed her softly.

“Well, not that I want to stop you from pleading your case, but I did go home and think about what we talked about earlier, and I think you’re right. We have been together almost a whole year and—“

“Really?” His handsome features exploded with joy. “Oh, Pearl, I swear you won’t regret it.” He kissed her all over her face. “We’re going to make a great couple,” he said between kisses, and then stopped abruptly.

“What?” she asked.

“I think I need to say something first. Dr. Phil was on T.V. at the shop the other day and he was saying to the men that they should tell their women they want to be with them and how much they love them. You know, keep the lines

of communication open.”

Pearl’s brow rose. “Dr. Phil?”

“Work with me, baby. I’m trying to make a point.”

She muffled her giggles. “Sorry. Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” He kissed her and cleared his throat. “Okay, here goes. I started liking you in the beginning when we were doing the lunch thing. I want to be with you because you’re smart, sexy, beautiful and fun. I have no idea when I fell in love with you, I just know I did. I love

you very much, Pearl” He climbed over her and played in her hair. “Besides, you’re a twin. If I’m lucky I might get to have that twin fantasy I’ve been having since I was nineteen,” he added with a teasing grin.

“Jake!” She slapped at his shoulder lightheartedly.

“All right, all right, all right. I’m kidding about the twin thing, but I’m serious about the rest. You know that, right?”

“Well, if Dr. Phil says...”

“Pearl...” he whined, rolling his eyes.

Pearl swallowed her titters and kissed his cheek. “Okay, I’m sorry. Yes, honey, I know. And I love you.”

He kissed her, again. “Now, enough verbal talk. I’m getting a whole lot of body language from you right now.” He kissed her neck. “Accept, I think I could hear better...” he kissed the right side, “...if you weren’t wearing...” he kissed her forehead, “...so much clothes...” he kissed her lips. “Don’t you?”

She nodded. Jake pulled her to her feet to remove her shirt and bra. Kissing her down

the valley of her breast, he pushed her shorts down and gasped.

“Girl, you came to my house with no panties on?”

She giggled. “I was trying to show that I was agreeable to your suggestion.”

Jake laughed as he lowered her shorts to her feet. “You did that for me? Well, I’m going to have to thank you properly for being so darn helpful.”

He rose slowly and took a small step back. “You are so beautiful. I don’t think I’ll ever

get tired of looking at you.”

His voice was soft and seductive. It fueled the fire that already smoldered in her loins. Jake took hold of her cheeks again and kissed her deeply, engulfing her with his need, completing her internal combustion. Pearl didn't realize she was moving until she felt the coolness of the sheets and the rose pedals on her back. Opening her eyes, she saw the hot blue fire of desire burn behind his and felt his arousal rising between them. Closing her eyes again, she surrendered

herself. His hands slid over her sensitive skin, concentrating on her nipples, turning them to little pebbles as they responded to his touch.

“Mmm...” She took a deep breath and smiled. He moved back and forth over her then she felt his lips and something else brushing across her nipples.

Her eyes popped open as she gasped. “Oh! Jake, what was that?”

“Nothing harmful, baby, just a little ole feather,” he said in a soft teasing voice and

switched nipples still kissing up her torso. “Do you like it?”

She giggled. “Mmm, hmm.”

“Good.”

Jake reversed his kisses, breathing in her delightful scent. Trailing the feather behind each spot his lips touched. He licked down one side of her torso while gliding the feather down the other then paused to concentrate in the area just below her belly button. Goose

bumps prickled her skin and her breathing quickened at his efforts. Moving down between her legs he reveled in the heat from her loins as he breathed it in. Pearl's breath caught and the sound made his cock throb with need.

“Jake...”

“Shh, not yet,” he answered on a whisper.

Her breathing was erratic as she clutched his sheets, “Jake...please...”

Smiling, he brushed his face across her pelvis before

going up to her face. “Yes, baby?” he answered placing a kiss on her neck.

“Don’t tease me, Jake.”

“Oh, come on, Pearl. Just being near you and not being able to have you is a tease for me.”

He kissed across her collar bone not really expecting an answer. Moving further south, he brushed his nose against her mound and felt her shiver. Gripping her hips, he pressed his lips to hers and sucked.

“Ohh!”

Jake drank her sweetness into his very soul, feeding off it, wanting to drown in it. She was intoxicating him with her pleasurable noises. When she released her essence to him once more he reluctantly crawled back up her body. He had to have more of her.

“Mmm, I love being with you, baby. You always taste so sweet.” He pushed her legs open with his own and slid himself into her without hindrance. “Ahh and you always feel so damn good.”

They moved in perfect

harmony, their own private symphony. He took his time, taking her to the brink of ecstasy and backing off several times. Her body pulsed and shook around him until as she cried out in joy with each small release. Pearl pressed tiny kisses on his neck and chest after each one.

Jake knew exactly what to do at this point and continued pressing into her wet, inviting core. They fell into a familiar rhythm that she matched thrust for thrust. Moaning his pleasure out loud, he ground her harder,

delving deeper into her, wanting more of her.

Suddenly Pearl she grabbed his butt, thrusting him further even faster within her. Pearl's cries of euphoria echoed in his ears as Jake finally turned the gentle waves of his water bed turned into tidal waves with his release.

* * * *

"Well, look who decided to join us," Debbie said when Pearl walked into the kitchen.

Pearl dragged herself to the

table and dropped her head down.

“Here you go, sister dear, this will perk you up,” Opal said in a singing voice, sliding a cup across the table to her.

“Mmm.”

“You should have been up for breakfast, Pearl. Debbie worked her magic. She made waffles.”

Pearl sipped her coffee staring at her sister over the cup. Her eyes shifted to Debbie. Debbie shrugged and Pearl’s brow rose. Opal bounced in the

chair bringing Pearl's attention back to her.

“With the waffles she made sausages and eggs and we had orange juice, too.”

“Uh huh,” Pearl said.

“Yup, she put strawberries on them, too. Oh! Oh! And the coffee was good, too. It's French vanilla. Do you like it? I liked it. It was really good. It went perfect with breakfast, and—”

“Opal, did Debbie put drugs in the damn waffles? Why the hell are you so bouncy?”

“What? Can't I just be in a

good mood?”

Pearl stared at her sister then turned a questioning look to Debbie. Debbie threw her hand up and laughed. Pearl sipped her coffee and shook her head.

“What are you making now, Deb? I’m starving,” Pearl asked.

“Just throwing together some seafood stir-fry.” She turned the wok toward her.

“Looks good. You putting that over rice?”

“You want rice?”

She nodded, finishing her drink. “Yeah.”

“All right, I’ll make some rice, too.”

“Pearl, Pearl, you know what else we had with breakfast?” Opal said waving at her.

Pearl put her cup in the sink and turned to her sister. “You know, Opal, you’re a little scary when you’re like this. I’m going to take a shower.”

“What’d I say?”

“Chica, can you see if there’s a pair of stockings in that top drawer,” Debbie said brushing her head.

“Stockings? Uh-uh, girl, we don’t do stockings in the summer, you know better than that.”

“But my shoes are closed toe,” she protested over her shoulder.

“Then paint your toes and change your shoes,” Opal suggested.

“I don’t have another pair of shoes that will go with my

dress.”

“What color do you need?”

“Black,” Debbie told her digging through her makeup case.

“All right, let me check my closet.”

Opal started to go next door to her bedroom, but changed direction going across the hall to the master bedroom instead. Knocking once on the door, she walked inside. She looked around the room and laughed to herself and shook her head. The walls were beige with a sea shell

border. The two curios she gave Pearl for her sixteenth and twentieth birthdays still hung on both sides of the window. One held eleven tiny dragons and the other held nine mini castles. At the foot of her bed sat an old cedar trunk...the only thing left in the room that belonged to their parents.

“Hey, Opal, what’s up?”

“You know it should’ve been me that took over mom and dad’s room, you know. I would have laid it out.”

“I seem to remember

offering it to you, but you said it would freak you out doing the things that you do in your parent's room," she said with a chuckle.

"Hmm, yeah, that sounds like something I'd say."

Her sister laughed. "So what's up?"

"I just came to check on you. Are you almost done?"

Pearl fumbled with the clasp on her choker. "Yup, just about."

Opal walked over and helped her. "There you go. You

need help with anything else?”

“Well, you can make sure the stars in my hair didn’t get them crooked since you did my hair. I know how you hate that,” Pearl said with a grin.

Opal straightened the tiny rhinestone stars that held Pearl’s hair in place then pulled on the little curls at the base of her neck so they hung closer to her shoulders. She returned to Pearl’s bed when she was done.

“You know, sometimes I wish I would’ve never dyed my hair. It would be just as black

and shiny as yours.” She jumped up abruptly, with a smile. “Then the feeling passes and I’m over it.”

“You’re so crazy.” Pearl said with a laugh. “Go get dressed.”

“What?” She looked down at terry cloth bathrobe. “You disapprove of my outfit? It’s white,” she said with wide eyes, batting her lashes.

“Whatever.” She chuckled and stepped into her dress that rested on the trunk.

“Zip me up and go get dressed.”

An hour later they arrived at Club Caliente`. For two hours they mingled in a sea of black and white, talking and laughing with old friends and new.

“Holy cow. Lift them boobies, ladies. To your right is one fine ass specimen of maleness coming this way,” one lady announced.

Turning, along with everyone else, Opal, Pearl and Debbie watched the man walk across the dance floor. He came toward them like a tiger stalking his prey.

“Holy shit. Talk about your eye candy,” another woman said.

The black, double breasted suit fit his body excellently, complementing his blue eyes and dark features perfectly and creating a mesmerizing image. Opal turned to her left and right. She wasn't the only one who was wide-eyed, slack jawed watching the handsome man breathlessly.

“That man is fine. Don't you think so, Pearl?”

“He looks incredible,” she answered on a whisper.

The man moved closer.

Every sucked in a collective breath as he stopped directly in front of Pearl.

“I don’t think I’ve seen anyone look so beautiful,” he said lifting Pearl’s her hand to his mouth.

“What! *That’s* Jake?” Opal asked.

“Pearl always did have good taste in men, Chica.”

“How did you spot me in this crowd?” Pearl asked.

Jake looked to his left and right then back to her. “Crowd? What crowd? All I see is you.” He

took her other hand and held it high then took a step back. “You are without a doubt the most beautiful woman in here.” He smiled then kissed her knuckles again.

An audible sigh rose around them from the other women. Pearl beamed. Opal rolled her eyes and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Umm, excuse me. Hello. Yes, hi, I know it’s hard to see pass the stars in your eyes, but there really *are* other people here. Like me, the one that’s been waiting to meet you all this

time.”

Debbie nudged her. “Chica, you can be such a hater.”

Jake turned a smile to Opal as he slid Pearl’s arm through his. “You must be Opal. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.” He offered her his other hand.

“Yes, I’m Opal and this is Debbie.”

“How are you, Jake? I’m glad we’re finally getting to meet you, too. Pearl described you to us, but her description didn’t do you justice at all.”

“Thanks, Debbie. So she’s

told you about me, huh?”

“Oh yeah, Jake. We know all about all you. All your freaky little likes and habits, uh-huh, we know it all. Twins tell each other everything, Jake, Debbie just happened to be there when Pearl was sharing with me.”

Jake turned wide eyes to Pearl, who nodded agreement. His Adam’s apple bobbed wildly as he swallowed. Before he could speak Debbie busted into fits of laughter.

“Relax, Jake, they’re just kidding.”

The twins laughed.

“For real, Jake, we’re kidding. Opal likes doing that to people.” She leaned up to kiss his cheek, only then did he let out a relieved laugh.

“Well I have a table reserved across the room if you want to sit.”

The women nodded and picked up step beside him.

“So, Jake, do you think you’ll have any trouble telling me and Pearl apart?”

He looked between them and chuckled. “No, I think I’m

good.”

“Chica, do you think Doug and Rakim will be able to find us in this crowd?”

“They know we’re here, they’ll find us.”

At the table Jake took Opal’s twenty questions game with a good natured smile until Pearl pulled him to his feet.

“Come on, honey. I think my sister has harassed you long enough. Let’s go dance.”

“I’m having a blast, Pearl. Your sister and Debbie are great,” he said excitedly.

“Yeah, yeah, they’re a barrel of laughs, let’s go.”

He laughed, letting her pull him to the dance floor.

“Girl, I think I like this Jake. He’s really into Pearl. What do you think, Deb?” she asked, picking up her drink.

Debbie didn’t answer. Her posture was erect and her eyes wide as she stared into the crowd ahead.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Opal followed her blank stare and almost choked on her next sip. She returned her glass

to the table with a thud and laughed. “Wow, Doug, look at you! You look great!” she said jumping to her feet.

“You look pretty damn good yourself. I didn’t have a tux, so...” he left his sentence unfinished and shrugged.

“No, no, this is good. The white suit with the black satin shirt and tie looks very nice on you. I like it. You deserve a kiss for that.”

She kissed him and felt his arms slide around her waist and his passion rise between them.

He looked down at himself and then quickly back at her, red faced.

“Mmm, will your kisses always do that to me?”

She smiled. “Hmm, I hope so. Doug, are you blushing?” she asked teasingly.

He reddened more and opened his mouth to speak, but she touched his lips to stop him.

“It’s cute.” She put her hands on her hips and turned to Rakim.

“And look at you, Mr. Jacobs. You clean up real good.

The double breasted pinstripe really brings out the gangster in you,” she said with a laugh.

“And here we were thinking you only wore jeans and tee shirts,” she said shifting a smug look to Debbie.

“Thanks, Opal. You looking pretty hot in that little ass black and white dress, too. As far as the suit goes...” He showed her the golden stitching of the label on the inside of his cuff. “The same folk that make the jeans I wear made the suit. They make even us retired gangsters look good.” He laughed, giving her a

wink then turned to Debbie.

“Debbie, Debbie, Debbie. You looking good, girl. Real good.”

“Thanks, Rakim. You look... I mean, wow...”

“Man can’t live by jeans alone, baby?” He thumbed the dance floor. “You wanna dance?”

She smiled. “Yeah, I do,” she said, taking his hand.

“You know, I think I’m going to like this blushing thing that you do,” Opal said, pulling Doug to the table. “I can talk nasty to you and I can literally

see if you like it.” She chuckled.

He smiled again. “You plan on talking nasty to me a lot?”

She shrugged and leaned toward him. “Don’t know, depends on the topic at hand. It’s in my nature not to hold back what I think. Can you handle that?”

“Sure, I can handle that. I like a woman who speaks her mind.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I’ve got lots of male friends.”

He shrugged. “Most beautiful women do.”

Opal turned twisted lips to him. “And that doesn’t bother you?”

“I’m not a jealous man, Opal. If you say you’re my girl, then you’re my girl. Why would I doubt you without reason?”

“Hmm, you sound way too confident. Why?”

Doug shrugged again. “I was always told in order to make a woman happy you have to find out what she needs and then give it to her. I plan to do that.”

“Uh-huh, but I’m not your girl.”

He leaned toward her. “Not yet.”

“Is that more confidence or cockiness?”

Doug shrugged. “A little bit of both, I guess.”

“Uh-huh, and what about you?”

“What about me?”

“What issues and complications do I need to know about you?”

Doug tapped his chin pretending to ponder. “Nothing I can think of at the moment. I

guess you'll have to learn them along the way," he answered with a mischievous grin.

She chuckled. "Okay, but let's take this thing one day at a time."

He scooted his chair closer taking her hand. "One day at a time is fine with me."

Just as his lips brushed against hers, wild movement on the dance floor caught her eye. She cocked her head to look pass him.

"Uh, I think something's going on over on the dance

floor.”

Doug's brows rose then he stood up to look over the crowd. “Come on, I think it's your sister.” He pulled her to the dance floor, pushing past the people until he saw Rakim. “Dude, what the hell—”

Rakim held his hand up to silence him and pointed.

“Get the fuck out of here, Frank,” Jake yelled, pushing Pearl behind him. “You're drunk and you're making an ass of yourself.”

“I just don't get it, Jake?”

Did you really think black and white ball meant bring some black chick with you?" he slurred.

"Frank..." He blew out a long breath. "You're drunk...and you're an idiot. Don't fuck this party up for everyone being both. I'm sure somebody has called security by now. Just go home."

"Frank, come on," a small, wispy blonde said, pulling at his arm.

Frank yanked his arm away from her, slinging beer from the

bottle he held.

“What’s wrong with you, Jake?” He clutched his beer to his chest. “How can you do this? After everything thing that they’ve done to me.” His voice was tight and his expression pained.

Jake sighed. “Frank...”

“No! Jake, tell me you’re just fucking her for some jungle fever fantasy or something. I can deal with that! That’s all they’re good for anyway. Just hit and quit. Anything more than that and they will take your heart,

chew it up and spit it out.
Women hateful creatures and
deserve everything they get,”
Frank shouted giving the woman
beside him a hard look.

A collective shocked sound
that went through the crowd like
a ripple in a pond. Debbie pulled
Pearl closer to her.

“Frank...” Jake said in a
warning tone.

Frank took a long drink
from his bottle shaking his head
and then pointed it at Jake with
it.

“You know, Barbara told me

you were dating again. She said you'd be here tonight meeting your new girl friend's family and that I should come and meet her, too. I couldn't believe it. After everything I've told you!" He took another long drink from his bottle. "So I came. I had to see for myself." He took another drink and shoved the bottle at the little blonde. "Jake, please, please, just tell me you're not falling in love with that bitch," he slurred pointing pass him to Pearl.

Before Frank could utter another word, Jake's fist landed

square on his left jaw. The force behind it sent him flying through the air. The crowd parted allowing him to land flat on his back at the feet of his date.

“Oh, shit!” Rakim took Debbie’s hand. “Time to go, man. This is about to get ugly and the girls don’t need to be around it. You feel me?”

Doug nodded and reached for Opal. “We’re right behind you,” Doug said.

Debbie pulled Pearl along with them. Rakim pushed his way outside and along the canal.

Debbie walked Pearl to the closest bench with Opal close behind them.

“What the hell is going on?” Opal ranted. “Are you all right? Who was that guy?”

Pearl shook her head, but said nothing.

“What happened on that damn dance floor, Deb? Doug and I were talking one minute and all hell broke loose the next.”

“I don’t know, Chica. One minute we’re dancing, having a good time, the next thing we

knew that guy, Frank, grabbed Jake by the arm to snatch him away from Pearl.”

“That Frank guy sounded like he has some real issues with women. He was saying stuff that was way out of line, you know?” Rakim said. “Women should be seen and not heard. They’re only good for one thing, you know, crazy shit like that.”

Debbie turned to the sound of Rakim’s voice. He and Doug were against the wall of the building just behind them. Pearl nodded silently in agreement. Debbie blew out a breath and

moved closer to Pearl on the seat.

“Pearl!”

Jake rushed from the building toward them, but Rakim and Doug blocked his way. Opal stood in front of her sister.

“No, Jake. I don’t like the way this is playing out.”

“Opal, please. I need to explain things to her. My brother was drunk. He—”

“Your brother? That guy was your brother?”

“Yes, but we are nothing alike, Debbie. Please, let me talk to her.”

“Do you want to talk to him?” Opal asked her sister.

“Just go away, Jake,” she said softly.

“No! Baby, please, let me explain.” His tone was panicked and strained. “My brother didn’t always feel that way toward women. An ex-girlfriend of his, well, she was actually his fiancée at the time. She left him because he wasn’t treating her right. He ain’t been right since.

But that's him. You know I would never treat you like that."

Pearl stood up. "Then what about you, Jake? How do *you* feel?"

"I told you how I felt. I love you. I meant it then and I mean it now. You have to believe that." His voice cracked with emotion.

She shook her head. "I don't know what to believe. Please go."

He choked on the words barely able to get them out. "Pearl, baby, don't do this. Please..."

She turned away from him,

burying her face in Opal's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Jake, but you have to go," Opal said on a sigh.

"Let's go, man," Rakim said touching his left shoulder.

Jake looked at him, then to his right at Doug and sighed. "I love you, Pearl and I want to be with you. Don't let my family mess us up," he added before leaving.

Opal held her sister a few more moments than sat her on the bench and walked over to Doug.

“I think under the circumstances, Doug, we should call it a night.”

Doug nodded and moved closer. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“I really was having a good time with you, before all this jumped off.”

He gave her a small smile. “I was too. Maybe we—”

“We’ll see,” she said quickly, cutting him off. She turned to leave, but Doug caught her arm.

“Wait, Opal. Are we being affected by this?”

“No, Doug. I just...” She sighed. “I should be with my sister, right now. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I can understand that.”

He leaned in to kiss her, but she turned her face and it landed firmly on her cheek. Doug nodded and released her arm. Opal walked pass Rakim and Debbie to seat with Pearl.

Debbie stepped out of Rakim’s embrace.

“I wish we could have had more time tonight. You look so damn good in that dress. I wanted to enjoy seeing you in it a little longer.”

“Thanks, Rakim. You aren’t as bad as I thought. I guess you have changed some since high school.”

“Thanks. So, is this a good time for ‘I told you so?’” he asked with a grin.

She chuckled. “No, it’s not.”

“All right that’s cool. Can I have a kiss?”

Debbie smiled and slid her

hand over his cheek. “Nope, but you can have another hug and a promise that I’ll call you.”

He laughed. “Fair enough. I’ll take it.”

Doug and Rakim watched the twins and Debbie walk down the canal to the bridge before heading back to their car.

“What’s up, man? You ain’t said a word since we left the canal,” Rakim asked as they drove away.

“Man, Jake’s stupid ass brother didn’t just fuck him, he fucked *me*, too.”

“Yeah, dude I saw that. Opal was getting into you, too.”

Doug wrapped his arms around his chest. “Yeah, I know. I was almost in there,” he said with a frustrated huff. He looked out the window for a moment than turned back to his friend. “Hey man, did Frank really say that shit?”

“Yeah, he did. Some female must have worked him over pretty bad for him to hate women like that.”

“What did Jake say?”

“Jake clicked, dude. He was

pissed. You saw how fast he knocked his brother on his ass when he directed all that hate toward Pearl.”

Doug sighed and leaned his head back. “Yeah. Jake looked all broke up when Pearl dismissed him, too. I’m feeling him on that one, man. Me and Opal were this close to being cool,” he said squeezing his pointer and thumb together. “Now, I don’t know. I might not get the chance to get that door open again.”

“I think we should go talk to the man and make sure they

stay together. I mean, if Pearl loves him we're going to see lots of him."

"You mean, we'd *like* to."

Rakim scoffed. "Where's your optimism, Douglas?" He looked down the street and turned the corner. "We have to *speak* the things we want into existence. You have to see it before you see it if you're ever going to see it," Rakim told him with a laughing grin. "You feel me?"

Doug blinked wildly at him. "What the hell was that? Did

you get that from a fortune cookie or something?”

“You know I did,” Rakim confessed unable to hold back his laughter.

Doug laughed with him.
“Shut up, fool.”

“You know, Jake did mention that he owned that shop on thirty-eighth and Illinois.”

Doug scratched the hair on his chin. “Oh yeah? Hmm, I think my jeep just developed some brake trouble.”

Rakim parked in Doug’s

driveway and laughed, again.
“That’s why you’re my boy. You
come up with the good plans.
See you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Opal reached on the table

beside her and removed a potted plant. “I don’t know, Deb. It’s been over a week since all that mess at the club. I think Pearl should at least hear the man out.”

Debbie shrugged as she tossed new dirt over the roots of her plant. “Well, she’s hurt, Chica. You guys may be twins, but you handle your pain differently.”

Opal stopped digging her hole. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She sighed. “Pearl keeps to

herself and licks her wounds in private, but you..." she paused to pressed the new dirt in place. "Well, you like to rant and rave and let everybody around you know you're angry and hurt."

Opal let out a shocked breath. "I do not."

"Oh yes, you do. Even when we were kids you guys were like that."

"Oh, whatever. All I'm saying is she should at least talk to him before we leave. At Miss Betty's funeral Friday, I got the impression she was crying for a

lot more than Miss Betty.”

“Yeah, I noticed that, too.”
She lowered violet into the new hole.

“So, what are you going to do about Rakim?” Opal asked covering the roots.

“What do you mean?”

Opal cut her eyes at Debbie. “Don’t play stupid with me.”

“Well, what are going to do with Doug?”

“I asked you first,” she said with a smug smile.

Debbie chuckled. “I have decided to get to know the grown up Rakim, instead of looking at him like the girl hopping creep I knew back in high school.”

“And?”

She shrugged. “He’s okay.”

“One would hope that after seven years he would have grown up some.

“Doug seems all right, too.”

“Debbie...” Opal warned.

“Now, Chica, wait, just let me finish. All I’m saying is don’t cut the man down for something

someone else did.”

Opal sighed and sat back on her haunches. “I’m not trying to, really, it’s just... Girl, did you see Jake’s face? I could almost see his heart breaking when Pearl sent him away. I don’t want to go through that with Doug.” She reached for another plant. “We’re cool just being friends.”

“Huh, I guess fears are another thing that twins have in common.”

Opal opened her mouth to protest, but shut it just as

quickly glaring at Debbie.

“And what about Doug? Is it fair to him that you make a decision that affects him without his input?” Debbie continued. “He might even think you’re worth any fight he has to be in, just like Jake thinks Pearl is worth it.”

“Gee, I’m sorry we can’t finish this conversation that might urgent phone call.” Opal pulled off her glove off and slid her phone off the table.

“Hello. Hi, Doug, what’s up?”

“Hmm, speak of the devil,” Debbie mumbled.

Opal stuck her tongue out at Debbie. “Nothing really. Debbie and I were just working in the garden. Doug says hi, Debbie.”

Debbie waved at her and stuffed another violet in a hole.

“Pearl’s still upset, Doug. She doesn’t come out of her room except to eat.”

“Really? No, I don’t mind at all.” She covered the phone. “Hey Deb, go look on the porch and see if something is out

there,” she said excitedly. “Doug said he left something for me. Thanks, Doug, but you know you didn’t have to.”

Debbie returned with an Easter basket. Instead of grass and eggs in the basket it had satiny brown material with a small white box on top of it.

“What is it?” Opal asked reaching for the box.

Inside the box was a gold key and opal heart dangling from a black and white plastic chain.

“Oh, Doug, it’s beautiful. Did you make the string?” She

passed the gift to Debbie as she listened. “And you remembered how to make it after all these years? That’s talent. What’s the key to?”

Debbie fingered the trinket and nodded her approval before handing it back.

“Your house? Don’t you think it’s a little too soon for that? We’re still in the getting to know you phase.” She put the key chain back in the basket and straightened her legs as she listened.

“That’s very sweet, Doug.

I'm glad to hear you have nothing to hide and you plan to be committed, but I'm still not going to use it no time soon. And, by the way, I'm sorry for acting all distant and everything. I know what happen at Caliente had nothing to do with you. I just—“

As he spoke she turned a smile to Debbie and chuckled. “Okay we can do that and thank you for the key chain. I will. Bye.” She slid the phone back on the table with the key chain.

“So?”

“Doug says we can start over and put the craziness of what happened at the club behind us when we get back from New York.”

“Well that’s good. I’m glad you’re going to give him a chance.”

“Yeah. What am I going to do about that man, Debbie?”

“What do you mean?”

“He confuses me. This is so different than when we played with Roy.” She started another hole. “With Roy it was a game from the very beginning. He was

young and I had no intentions on keeping him. But Doug...” She shook her head and smiled. “I could see myself with a man like him. He’s so sexy and dominant. With Roy we set the rules and he followed them. That’s fun when it’s a game, but not if you’re going to keep him. I don’t want a man I can run over.”

“I guess your man’s gotta have some kind of back bone, huh?” Debbie said unable to stop the giggles from slipping out.

“Hell yeah, girl! I’m a

handful.”

* * * *

Carlos Velasquez was a giant of a man. He waited with opened arms when they arrived in the airport's waiting area. His six foot seven, solid frame engulfed his niece. The graying at his temples brought attention to the laugh lines around his eyes marring his otherwise smooth complexion.

“Ahh, Debra. Te pareces a tu Mama, hermosa come ella. Usted debe visitor mas a

menudo,” he said releasing her.

“Thank you, Tio, but, please speak English. The twins don’t speak Spanish.”

“Forgive me,” he amended. “I was just telling Debra how much she looks like her beautiful mother and how she should come see us more often.” He surveyed the twins closely and smiled. “And look at you two. All grown up as well.”

Pearl and Opal looked up at him nodding.

“I see only cosmetic differences between you two.” He

reached his hand out. “Which one are you?”

“I’m Opal. She’s Pearl.”

He took her hand and pulled her into a hug and then did the same to Pearl. “Come, the car is waiting.”

“Umm, Mr. Velasquez...”
Pearl started.

He held up a large hand to stop her. “Please, you have been friends with Debra for...what?”
He looked over his shoulder expectantly.

“Since middle school,
Uncle.”

“Since middle school,” he echoed. “That’s what? The better part of...” he counted on his fingers, “...fifteen years. I won’t hear another *mister* out of you. You’re family! You will call me Uncle Carlos, as well.”

“Oh, okay. Uncle Carlos, we have to pick up our bags downstairs. Is your trunk going to be big enough?”

He smiled and nodded. “Yes...” He gave a quick look over his other shoulder. “Pearl. We have a limo parked out front. There is plenty of room.”

The limo took them from the airport to Kew Gardens, Queens. Stepping out of the limo, the twins stared at the huge two story, Victorian style home. It stood out from the rest of the contemporary homes on its block.

“Wow,” the sisters said together.

“Yeah, I know. I used to say the same thing.”

Suddenly the front door swung open and an older woman squealed and flung her arms wide.

“Oh my goodness! Look how beautiful!”

Debbie smiled and walked into them. “Aunt Carlotta.”

Even with the streaks of silver in her dark hair, Carlotta Velasquez still held beauty of her youth. With her smooth olive skin and that youthful sparkle in her eyes, one would never guess that she was older than her husband.

“Oh, it is wonderful to see you again, darling. And these must be your twins. Look at how grown up they are from the

pictures.” She hugged them in turn.

“Yes, Aunt Carlotta. This one is Opal and she is Pearl.”

“Come, come inside. I’ll show you to the rooms you will be using. The driver will bring the bags in.”

Carlotta took them upstairs to the rooms they would use and the driver followed with their bags. As Debbie unpacked a knock came to the door. “Yes, come in.”

No one came, but the knocking continued.

“Come in!”

The door did not open, nor did the knocking stop.

Debbie stared at the door quizzically and threw the shirt into the draw. “What the hell...” she murmured and walked to the door.

“It’s about time. I thought you were going to let me stand out here forever.”

She stared for long moments at a young man who could have passed for her uncle did in his youth. “Antonio?”

“Ohhh, so, now it’s Antonio.

When we were kids it was always ‘Tony Baloney.’

“Ohmigosh!”

Antonio swept her from the floor in a hug and spun her around laughing.

He put her down and looked her up and down. “Look at you! You’re a hottie. Who knew?”

“Look at *me*? Look at *you*! You’re a hunk!”

He ran his hand through his wavy black hair and puffed with pride. “Well you know, one of my brothers got the brains,

one got the looks and me...well, I got the combo deal.”

Debbie slapped at his arm playfully and laughed. “Still the same ole Tony so full of baloney. So, what’s up? I know you got something up your sleeve for me and my girls. When will your brothers be here?”

“They won’t be here until the cookout on the weekend, and as soon as you guys get settled we’re outa here. We’re going to a party.”

Her brows rose. “A party? On a Sunday?”

“You say that there’s a special party day.”

“Well usually people party on Friday and Saturday nights because they don’t have to work in the morning.”

He chuckled. “This is New York, Debbie, the city that never sleeps. We party *everyday* and sometimes all night. Finish up and get your girls. I’m gonna see if Pop will give me his car or if we’re going to have to cab it all night.” He went out the door then popped his head back in. “Hey. I noticed you even had some booty back there, too, cuz.

It's about time."

"Oh shut up!" She laughed and threw a pillow at the already closing door.

Debbie finished unpacking then went down the hall to find Opal and Pearl. When they settled in they went down to the kitchen for something to eat then to the den to wait for Tony.

"Hey! That's us!" Pearl pointing to a picture on the wall.

Opal walked over. "Holy cow! That is us! I remember this day. I think we were on our way to summer camp. How did your

aunt and uncle get this picture?”

“I guess my mother sent it to them. Wow, look at us.” Debbie laughed. “We were wearing pigtails!”

“Ohh, Opal. Look at our rusty knees!”

“Yeah. I’m sure glad we can fill out a two piece bathing suit better than that now.” She laughed with them.

“Amen to that, sister.”

“Hey, look over there. It’s another one of us.”

They walked around the den looking at all the pictures finding themselves in many of them.

“We need to take a better picture for your aunt and uncle while we’re here,” Opal said.

“Why? I think you look beautiful in the ones we have.”

They turned to see Uncle Carlos in the doorway.

“Uncle, why did my mother send you these crazy looking pictures of us?”

“We have plenty of pictures of you and your friends.

Marquita has been sending us pictures of you for years. Most of them are in a book, but Carlotta enlarges and hangs her favorites. That one is mine,” he stated and pointed to the camp picture.

He walked into the room and sat in a large black leather chair by the dormant fireplace, then motioned for them to the couch across from it.

“I have given Antonio my car for you to use today, but I told him to have you back by seven o’clock. I will need it for errands.”

“Only until seven? That doesn’t give us any time to really hang out, Uncle.”

“I mean A.M., Chiquita,” he clarified with a knowing smile.

“Oh, well, we’ll be back *way* before that.”

His smile widened. “We’ll see. I have also given him money to get you whatever you want. You are here at my request and I won’t have you spending a dime of your own money. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Uncle Carlos,” they said in unison.

He stood. “Now go. He waits out front for you.”

One at a time they hugged Carlos, then almost fell over each other as they ran excitedly out the door. Tony sat outside in a black Lincoln Town Car with cream interior. The twins jumped in the back as Debbie slid into the front seat.

“Hi, Tony.” She slammed the door. “This is definitely nicer than riding in a cab all night.”

“And cheaper,” Tony added, chuckling.

“That’s Opal and that one is

Pearl.” She pointed to them.
“Trust me, by the end of the night you will be able to tell them apart.”

“Hmm, I see time has done them justice, too. So Opal has the streak and Pearl doesn’t. Yes?”

“Yup.”

“Cool. Let’s roll.”

“So where are we headed?”

“Brooklyn. The friend I told you about, that’s having the little get together he lives out there. His name is Rock.”

“All right, let’s do it then,” Debbie said with a laugh.

Tony drove wild and fast, bobbing and weaving through traffic to the music that blasted inside the car. Debbie strapped on her seatbelt, reaching for the door handle to steady herself. Luckily the ride didn’t last long enough for her to panic too much. Tony parked in front of a dreary, dilapidated building in downtown Brooklyn near the docks. Even though there were cans up and down the street, trash lay about on and off the sidewalk, adding to the

buildings' sad look. A man, looking as run down as the building with over grown hair on his face and head and dirty, ripped clothing, lay sprawled on the steps leading to the entrance.

“Hey man, is Rock up there?” Tony asked walking up the steps.

“What do I look like? The fuckin' doorman?” he grumbled.

“Come on, man. Is Rock up there or not?”

He took a long drink from a bottle inside a crumbled brown

paper bag before answering.
“Yeah, yeah, he’s up there...
making all that damn noise.”

Tony continued pass him.
“Damn, man, thanks.”

Inside the building smelled
of urine as they walked up more
stairs to the second floor. They
could hear the music playing
half way up and followed it to
the end of the hall. Tony banged
on the door.

“Yeah, what?” a tall thin
man said swinging the door
open.

“What the fuck do you

mean, *what?* Where's Rock?"

The man scoffed. "Oh, it's you. He's here, man. In the back," he said thumbing the area over his shoulder.

Tony motioned for the girls to follow him as he moved through the crowded apartment. The music was even louder inside, but no one seemed to mind. They stopped in the living room that was definitely filled to capacity.

"Some little get together!" Opal said over the music.

Several people greeted Tony

cheerfully.

“Oh, hells no, Tony!”

“Shit,” Tony murmured.

Debbie and the girls
turned.

“What’s up, Sony?”

“Don’t fuckin’ ‘what’s up’
me. Who the fuck is this, Tony,
huh? Who the fuck is this?” she
yelled waving pass Debbie and
the twins.

“Calm down, girl.”

“Oh, so now it’s calm down,
huh? How you gonna come
through the spot with another

bitch? Or rather three of them.” She threw the girls a dirty look and wrapped her arms around her chest. “You know, Tony, you are too much. First I hear that you still messin’ around with that hoe Rita out on the island and now this.”

“Rita? Come on, Sony. Why would I mess around with a skank like Rita when I got somebody as fine as you to hook up with when I need some loving? That’s like comparing hamburger to filet mignon.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t be like that, Sony baby,” he said silkily pulling her into his arms. “It ain’t like that. This is my cousin Debbie and her girls. They’re visiting me from out of town.”

She twisted her lips, but didn’t pull away from him. “Mmm, hmm, like I’m gonna believe that old bullshit line.”

“It’s not a line, baby girl. You know I wouldn’t lie to you. You’re my baby girl,” he said putting a kiss on her neck.

“Cousins, huh? Not some stinking play cousin, right?”

“No, sweetie, the real thing. She’s my father’s only sister’s daughter. Now that you know my family history, can we stop with all the hostility? Now be a good girl and go find Rock for me.” He gave her another quick kiss on the cheek. “Will you do that for me?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and giggled. “Yeah, Tony, I could do that for you.”

“I knew you would. Now get your sexy ass outa here.”

He gave her a light smack

on the butt as she walked away. Sony turned and blew him a kiss before she pushed her way back through the crowd.

“Well, that was just disgusting to watch,” Debbie said.

“Don’t hate the player, cuz, hate the game,” Tony told her.

Tony sat on the arm of the small sofa that was pushed against a wall. Debbie crowded closer to him and looked around the room. The D.J. was crammed in the corner with a few people dancing around him. A girl sat

on the speaker while a guy danced between her legs. A couple stood against the wall of the doorway, kissing and three other couples squeezed on the sofa that Tony sat on. Others were just milling around.

“Does your friend always have parties like this?” Opal asked.

Tony chuckled. “Naw, man. I told you, this ain’t a party. This is just a few friends over kicking it.”

“Humph! Looks like a party to me.”

“This ain’t nothing. Wait until I—” Tony looked to his right and grinned. “Here comes my man now.”

Rock stood in the doorway. Tall and full of wide, rippling muscles, he filled the door frame easily. Scanning the room, he spotted Tony and walked across the room to his friend with a smile.

“My man! What’s up, Tone?” He greeted him with a rough hug and slapped him five.

“Chillin’ man. What’s up with you?”

“Hangin’ in there, Poppie. I been calling you for a minute, dude. Where you been?”

“You know how it is, man. Busy, busy, busy.”

His gaze shifted. “Uh-huh, three women will keep a man busy. They’re a definite upgrade from that Johnny and Spike you usually roll with, that’s for damn sure.”

Tony laughed. “Nah, man, it ain’t like that. This is my cousin Debbie and her girls from Indiana. This one’s Opal and this is Pearl.”

Rock looked back and forth between them. “You guys are twins?” He watched them nod and a grin touched his lips. “Tone, you shouldn’t have. You know I always wanted twins of my very own to play with...and it ain’t even my birthday,” he said chuckling.

“Sorry dude, not this time, but I’ll keep that in mind when your birthday comes around.” He chuckled and sat back on the end of the sofa.

“Damn man. Get a man’s hopes up all high just to kick him off his cloud,” he muttered

with an exaggerated snap. “But I’m gonna hold you to that promise when my birthday does come. How you ladies doing?”

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

“Hi, Rock.”

“So, what’s going on tonight, Rock? We’re looking for a place to kick it.”

He scratched his goatee in thought. “Hmm, I did hear about a few things. You girls mind some company tonight?”

They looked around at each

other and shrugged.

“Sure they do. They’re here to have the full New York experience,” Tony answered for them.

“Cool. Let me go outside to check my resources. It’s too loud in here. Be right back.” A few minutes later he returned.

“Okay, according to my people, Club Rapture is the hot spot tonight. They’re opening the Dark Room.”

Debbie turned a questioning look to her cousin.

“The Dark Room is a club

inside Club Rapture. Very exclusive,” he explained. “I heard you don’t even know the Dark Room will be open until you get in the club, Rock. How the hell do you know it’ll be open tonight?”

He smiled and winked at Tony. “I got friends all over the place, son. I thought you knew.”

“Hey Rock!”

“Yo!” he shouted waving him over. “That’s comes Ray. I called and told him to come over. He’s gonna roll with us so we’ll be coupled up.”

Tony offered his hand.

“What up, man? I’m Tony and this is my cousin and her girls from Indiana. Debbie, Opal and Pearl.” He pointed to each in turn.

Ray was shorter than Tony and Rock. The tank top he wore hung loosely around his narrow torso. His brown hair sported low spikes at the top. Debbie turned a raised brow to Pearl.

“What’s with the dog collar around his neck?” she whispered.

“I have no clue. I’m stunned

that he's doing the Michael Jackson thing with that spiked glove. What's that about?"

He slapped Tony five in greeting and turned to bob his head at the girls.

"Sup?" he said in greeting.

"Oooh, I like this song. Who's going to dance with me?" Opal said bobbing her head.

"Go ahead Ray, take Opal to the floor."

He slid his sun glasses down his nose to look at her and shrugged. "Whatever."

Rock pulled Debbie to the crowded floor behind them.
“Come on, girl, there’s room for us out there, too.”

Pearl moved closer to Tony.
“So, what time are we going to this Club Rapture?”

“I don’t know, around twelve-thirtyish.”

“Why so late? That won’t give us much time to party, will it?”

Tony turned furrowed

brows to her. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't your clubs close around three?"

"*Three o'clock?* The party is just jumping at that time. Most clubs here don't even open until eleven thirty and they won't close until the last person leaves," he explained on a laugh. "See that girl over there sitting on the speaker?" He nodded in her direction. "If she stays here all night partying, she'll shower here and just go straight to work."

Pearl's eyes widened. "She has to work tomorrow and she's going to stay and party all night?"

He shrugged. "That's the party life in New York, baby. I mean, I don't know if that's her plan tonight, but she's been known to do it." He looked around the living room. "You wanna dance?"

Pearl looked at the people across the room. The living room was not very big and filled to capacity with people attempting to move. At best they were rocking to the eclectic beats of

the house music that played. Pearl shook her head and chuckled.

“No, I’m good.”

“All right, how about we just have a look around, then?”

Tony pulled her along skirting the overcrowded dance area, squeezing past people who spilled over into the walkway trying to find room to move to the beats, to a long hallway. Down the hall they passed a small closet, a bathroom and a small area with a dresser on one wall and a bed across from it on

the other. Pearl stopped on the other side.

“That’s not much room for storage?”

Tony laughed. “That’s not storage space, Pearl. That’s a bedroom.”

“That’s a bedroom?” she asked pointing. She stepped inside and observed it from floor to ceiling. “Where’s the door?”

“This is a boxcar apartment. Lots of apartments are like this in these old brownstones around here.”

“So none of the bedrooms

are like *real* bedrooms?”

“What? You mean, like, with a door?”

She rolled her eyes. “Duh! Yes, with a door.”

He grinned at her. “Yeah, man, they got one. Come on.” He led her down the hall stopping at a door at the other end. He turned the knob but the door didn’t open. Tony glanced at her over his shoulder then shook the knob.

“We’re using it! Wait your turn!” came an angry voice from inside the room.

Tony chuckled and rattled the door harder, banging his fist against it. Pearl snickered behind him.

“Go away! You fuckin’ up my groove!” the person yelled then something hard hit the door from the inside.

“All right! Damn!” Tony yelled, and then turned a laughing grin to Pearl. “I guess he can’t concentrate with all the banging, huh?”

“I guess not,” she said laughing.

“Come on, girl, let’s go

party!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Why are we stopping here?” Debbie asked when they parked.

Opal exited the car and looked up the block. “I know you’re not going to tell me that the line we passed was the line to get into the club.”

Rock chuckled. “Yup, that’s it.”

“Are you serious? I thought you said the club was on Forty-Third Street,” Pearl said.

“It is.”

Opal looked down the street again and wrapped her arms around her chest. “How are we supposed to get in if all these people are wanting in? That has to be some kind of fire hazard.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get in. They should already be out picking the people they want in the club.”

Debbie leaned closer to Tony. “Are you sure your friend is right? I’d hate to be out here on this line for nothing.”

“Don’t worry about it, cuz. If Rock says we’re in, then we’re in.”

The line grew behind them quickly. A girl with black hair and makeup came up behind them wearing a black long sleeve, fishnet shirt that showed her black bra, a black micro mini, black fishnet thigh highs and Mary Jane shoes.

“I think that’s a little on the

overkill side,” Opal whispered to her sister.

Pearl giggled, trying to look the other way. Ray pulled Opal along as the line moved forward, but she continued to check out the people as the line grew.

“What kind of club is Club Rapture?” Debbie asked Tony with a raised brow.

Tony shrugged and they turned to Rock.

“It’s like any other club, I guess.”

“You’ve been to this club, haven’t you?” Opal inquired.

“Yeah, man, I been in Club Rapture a few times, but never inside The Dark Room.”

“What’s so special about the Dark Room?”

Club Rapture is the only cub in the city that has a club inside a club. It’s exclusive. Just ‘cause you get into the club don’t mean you get into The Dark Room.”

“And yet you think that we’ll get in?” Opal muttered.

“Everyone wants to get in and check it out, but he only let’s a few people in at a time,

just enough to generate buzz,” Rock continued moving down the street following the line.

“*He?* He who?” Pearl asked.

“This dude I know named Rapture owns the club. We go way back.”

Opal pulled on Pearl’s arm. “Hey, Pearl, check that guy out,” she said nodding to her right.

Pearl and Ray turned in that direction. The lime green tank top was even brighter in contrast to the man’s fire engine red hair. He rocked back and forth on his heels fumbling with

the two rows of chains that hung across his waist but did nothing to hold up his sagging pants as he spoke to people around him.

“Hey, I know that guy,” Ray said sliding his shades down. “That’s Chunky.”

Opal and Pearl looked at him, shock playing across their identical features. “Chunky?” they said in unison.

“Yeah, we call him Chunky because he’s so damn skinny.” Ray chuckled sliding his shades back in place.

The girls laughed with him,

shaking their heads. The three of them walked a little faster to catch up behind Debbie. A short while later a man swished around the corner toward them. His olive skin was smooth was luminescent in the setting sunlight. His long limbs moved him elegantly along the line as he inspected the people waiting. He moved with the fluid lines and grace of a dancer.

“Wow. Check that guy out. He's beautiful. Not a hair out of place, perfectly arched eyebrows, the way he moves... He's got model written all over him,”

Debbie said in Opal's ear.

“Uh-huh, model.”

Opal's sarcastic tone made Debbie scrutinized the man again. He walked along the line tapping people on the shoulder. Debbie's head tilted. “You don't think he's a model?”

“That's one possibility.”

“Rock, baby, is that you?” the man squealed walking pass half a dozen disappointed people that were trying to get his attention.

"What's up, Rap?"

Rock slapped him five. The hug he offered Rapture wasn't nearly as rough as the one he gave to Tony earlier that evening.

"It's been a minute since I've been out here, but I see your club is still jumping."

Rapture slapped his shoulder playfully. "No you haven't been out here to see me, but I forgive you," he said in a heavy Spanish accent. "Only 'cause we got history. So, who's your friends?"

"I know you remember my

boy, Tony here,” Rock gripping Tony’s shoulder then he lean over to point at the girls. “This is his cousin, Debbie and these are her girls Opal and Pearl. They’re from Indiana. The dude on the end is Ray.”

Rapture looked the girls up and down. “Lovely...if you’re into that. Indiana, huh? Here for the holiday, no doubt,” he surmised then turned an appreciative smile to Tony. “Oh yes, I remember your friend. Been a long time, Tony. You still chasing the cat?”

“As often as I can, Rap,”
Tony replied with a wide grin.

Rapture sighed longingly.
“What a pity. Michael...” he
called over his shoulder
snapping his fingers.

The young man seemed to
appear from nowhere at his side,
holding a clipboard tightly to his
chest. “Yes, Mr. Rapture.”

“Make sure Rock and his
friends get red arm bands so
they can get into The Dark
Room,” he told him then turned
back to Rock. “Don’t make me
come to Brooklyn to get you,

Rock. Try not to let so much time pass when you come back, okay?" he added leaving him with a wink.

Michael wrapped the bands on their arms and ran excitedly to the front of the line. They showed their bands to the doorman as Tony slid a hundred bill beneath the three inch glass to a lady paying for the four of them and followed Rock and Ray into the club. At the first set of doors armed guards were there to pat the guys down as well as females for the girls.

They entered a hollow area

and pulled open the next set of doors and the music hit them like a strong wind. The only source of light was several black lights all around the ceiling and the blinking strobe lights over the dance floor. The girls stood in the doorway taking in the louder than loud house music, watching the people jump up and down, dancing and screaming all around.

A giant, purple, neon 'Club Rapture' hung from the ceiling with two girls swinging on a makeshift swing from the C and E. One girl wore a red string

bikini the other wore a bright orange nylon dress with glowing white panties underneath and no bra. Four other people pushed pass them, running into the crowd, as the guys took their hands pulling them the other way. There was little room to walk to the bar, and people were hugging, laughing, talking, kissing and dancing everywhere. The dress code was as different as the people. Some wore jeans and a tee shirt, while others wore just underwear and all combinations in between.

“Alrighty then. Let’s go

dance. I need to build up a thirst,” Tony said over the music and dragged Pearl off to the dance floor.

“Not me, I need my drink up front,” Rock said, pushing his way to the bar.

“I’m with you.” Debbie followed him pulling Opal.

“What’s up, man? Give me three Rough Riders,” Rock ordered at the bar.

“What’s a Rough Rider?” Debbie asked moving to his side.

He smiled. “It’s a drink. You’re in New York now, so you

gotta drink like a New Yorker.”

“All right, Rock. Saddle me up!” Opal looked at Ray, laughing. “You drinking, too, Ray?”

He stopped at the end of the bar letting two people separate them. “Naa, man. I don’t drink for my high. I smoke.”

She moved closer to Rock and pulled on his shirt. “Why’d you bring that guy, Rock? He’s not very social.”

Rock looked down the bar to his friend and shrugged. “I

just told him I was kicking it with you guys tonight. He said he was bored, so I asked if he wanted to come.”

“What did he say?”

“Whatever.”

Opal’s eyes widened.

“Whatever?” she repeated.

“Yeah, whatever,” he said with a shrug.

She scoffed. “And what was that? Some sort of code in New York for a yes or okay?”

“That’s what it was, man,” he said with a laughed then

slapped the bar abruptly. “Yo! Where the damn drinks at?” he yelled.

Opal sputtered.

Rock turned to her. “What’s up? You don’t like him?”

She looked back at Ray. The dark shades were still on his face as he bobbed his head in slow motion, although the music was fast paced.

“I don’t know him not to like him, but I clearly get the impression on how weird he is. It’s kind of creeping me out.”

“All right then. He stays

here. Ray!”

“Yo!” he answered, not bothering to turn around.

“Beat it, man. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Cool.” Ray walked away without a backwards glance.

Opal’s jaw dropped open. She turned to Debbie to see she was just as stunned.

“Rock, you can’t do that,” Debbie said urgently. “He rode with us. How is he going to get home?”

Rock’s head snapped in her

direction. “What? He’s a grown ass man. He’ll get home the best way he can.” He banged the counter again. “Yo, man! The drinks!”

The bartender hurried over placing the drinks in front of him.

“Damn, man. Thanks,” Rock said sarcastically sliding a drink toward Opal.

“Sorry, but you’re not my only customer, you know,” the bartender amended taking the money Rock offered him.

“See, that’s why these

mother fuckers don't get tipped like they should," he muttered behind the departing bartender.

Opal stared at the bright blue liquid in the shot glass before her. "What's in it?"

Rock handed Debbie the other glass and lifted his. "Stuff. Now stop being a punk and lift your glass."

Debbie raised her glass, laughing.

"Who me? No way!" She laughed lifting her drink.

"Yeah right. You ain't in Kansas no more, baby girl. We

drink real drinks in New York City!”

“Uh, that’s Indiana.”

“Whatever,” he said with a flippant wave.

“Hey, what are we toasting?” Pearl said appearing beside them.

“Tone, go get a couple of Rough Riders so we can toast to them.”

Tony went to the other end of the bar and returned quickly. He handed Pearl a drink and looked around. “Where’s Ray?”

“He was dismissed.” Rock raised his glass again. “To these fine ladies and New York. May you have the time of your life in the city that never sleeps.”

“To New York!” the rest of them said in unison and drank the drink in one gulp.

“Wow. That was really good,” Pearl said licking her lips. “What’s in it?”

Tony slid his glass across the bar. “Blue Curacao, butterscotch schnapps, some Sprite, I think, and Southern Comfort.” He signaled the

bartender for another round.

“It’s so smooth. Why do they call it a Rough Rider?”

“Because if you have more than two back to back, you’ll see how rough they can get when you try to ride them out!” Rock answered laughing handing her another drink.

“Mmm, we definitely have to make these when we get home. We’ll call them a New York Rough Rider,” Opal said, accepting another drink.

Debbie drank the second drink in one swallow. “Woo!

Okay, Rock, let's go dance off these first two."

Tony and Opal watched them disappear into the crowd and a short while later Debbie reappeared at the top of the crowd dancing wildly.

"Look!" Opal pointed to the dance floor.

"Uh-oh, she's feeling those rough riders now," Pearl said, laughing.

They watched Debbie dance until she disappeared among the people again. Rock appeared next to them with Debbie in tow,

laughing.

“How about one more drink and then we’ll go find The Dark Room?”

Tony nodded and signaled the bartender. “We need another round of Rough Riders,” he told him.

“Where’s the Dark Room, man?” Rock asked when the bartender delivered the drinks to them.

The bartender made a face at him. “You can’t get in without a red band?”

“I know that, man! Just tell

me where the damn room is!”

He rolled his eyes and pointed to the floor. “Just follow the glow in the dark arrows.”

Rock glared at the man as he walked away then shook his head. “Let’s shoot these damn drinks and go before I forget we’re out to have a good time and slap the bartender.”

Rock led them through the crowded club pushing people out of his way to see the arrows people walked and danced on. The decals led them to a red door. On the other side was a

narrow hall that left all traces of light behind when they closed it behind them.

“Oh yeah, this isn’t creepy,” Opal murmured.

Rock laughed. “Just relax and hold onto my hand. I think I see a light down there.”

The bulb barely lit the door beneath it. Rock knocked and a small window in the door slid open showing only a pair of eyes.

“Show me your red bands,” a soft male voice commanded.

One by one they put their wrists to the window. Apparently

satisfied, the window slammed shut and the large door swung open.

A few torches were used to light the room and it reeked of a heavy incense smell that intoxicated them almost as much as the drinks had. The sound of bongos and animal noises played softly in the background.

“Free your mind,” the man behind the door said as he closed the creaky door behind them.

Pearl stood close to Tony.

Opal and Debbie grabbed hold of Rock's arms as he led the way toward a small, brightly lit area. A man hung suspended from the ceiling by long chains. Thick manacles bolted to the floor stopped him from swinging back and forth. Besides his blindfold he wore a leather thong and a spiked collar only.

Two women dressed identically in sleeveless black vinyl body suits with openings where the breast should be and patent leather thigh high boots. One carried a small twisted whip, the other leather and fur

paddle as they circled him predatorily.

Opal's gaze shifted to her right. Pearl stared straight ahead with her jaw slightly gaped, but Tony didn't seem fazed at all by the scene. Before she could assess Rock's impression, she felt his hand on her lower back pushing her forward. Pearl and Debbie were beside her.

"Hey, stop pushing," Pearl whispered.

Tony chuckled low. "Just making sure you get a real good

look. This will give you something to talk about when you get home.”

The man’s head hung low as the women took turns slapping him with the whip and paddle. The whip cracked like a clap of thunder between. His head lifted with a jerk with each connection, but he said nothing. Pearl sucked in a sharp breath at the noise. Tony put his hands on her shoulders.

“Shhh...”

The crowd swayed to the music around them. After the

girl with the paddle smacked him, she flipped it over exposing a furry side. She used it to seemingly soothe his battered bottom. The young woman used the furry side in rotation with its leather counterpart to the whipping by her partner. They continued their efforts until he finally cried out.

“No more, please,” he begged breathlessly.

Smiling, the girl with the whip dropped to her knees in front of him. Pulling on the thong she released his semi-hard penis and took it into her mouth. As it

grew from her attentions, her partner continued striking him with the paddle.

The women worked him into frenzy, simultaneously sucking and smacking him. The man's cries, a mixture of pain and pleasure, morphed into a single howl with his release. The crowd's breathing grew louder and heavier rising in crescendo with him ending in a sigh of unity.

"Whoa," Opal said as Rock pulled Opal and Debbie away from the crowd. A quick look over her shoulder confirmed

Tony and Pearl were close behind.

The next scene was separated by a short distance of darkness. Several people sat on small sofas around the platform area watching silently. A woman lay chained to a low stage spread eagle. A sheer, blood red, scarf travelled across her large, pale, breasts and down her belly to end in a pile between her legs covering her nakedness.

A man lay beside her. His hand moved slowly back and forth between her thighs. The barest glimpse of the golden

vibrator he used on her showed beneath the scarf as he kissed her neck. The long sleeve of his swash buckler type shirt brushed her legs with his movements. She writhed back and forth moaning in obvious pleasure.

Lifting his face to the crowd, the man gave his audience a devilish grin, showing what appeared to be blood dripping from his canine teeth. His smile widened when a universal intake of breath flowed from the crowd. With dramatic flair, he positioned one leg under the

other and licked his lips scanning the crowd making eye contact with everyone around the stage. His smile took an evil twist just before he threw himself back into the woman's neck with a renewed energy. His actions arched her back and she raised her from the platform with a loud groan.

“Oh, hell no!”

“Yeah, that's enough.”

“Oh my go—“ Pearl began, but Opal yanked her away stopping her words.

The guys ran after them,

tripping over people as they tried to catch up. They literally ran into Rapture.

“What? You’re leaving? I let you into the most exclusive club in the five boroughs and you’re leaving?” Rapture ranted. He wrapped his arms around his chest. “Have you at least seen all the scenes?”

“We saw two and, well, the girls have never seen anything like this, Rap. I think it might have been, a bit much for them,” Rock explained with a small chuckle.

Rapture scoffed and shifted his gaze to the girls. “I guess our little mid-western visitors aren’t quite ready for Club Rapture then, huh?”

Rock gave them a smile. “Not quite.” He slapped Rapture five. “See you around, Rap.”

“You’re always welcomed, Rock. You *and* your sexy friend.” He turned back to the girls. “Well, at least you’ll go home and tell people about the strange and exotic club you went to in New York City. Enjoy your trip to the big city, girls.”

Leaving The Dark Room, Opal led the way back to the bar. Tony ordered another round of Rough Riders. They stared at the empty cups and Rock ordered them another round that they sucked down just as quick.

“That...” Opal started slamming down the glass. “...was the freakiest shit I have ever seen.”

Rock and Tony laughed.

“What did you think?” she asked turning to her sister.

Pearl giggled

uncontrollably. Opal rolled her eyes and looked at Debbie.

Debbie stopped licking the inside of her glass and stared at her wide eyed. “What?”

Opal let out an exasperated breath and turned back to her. “What the hell do you mean, *what?*”

Tony and Rock laughed harder.

Debbie chuckled. “Oh, were you looking for confirmation? Yes, that was some freaky shit we ain’t never seen.”

Pearl giggled again.

Opal turned on her. “What the hell’s up with you?”

She shrugged. “I was stunned, but I thought it was kind of fascinating.”

Opal stared at her for long moments. “Uh-huh. And all these years people had the nerve to dub you the *good twin*.”

Rock fell against the bar laughing. “Okay, I think they’ve had enough of Club Rapture,” he said waving his hand around.

Tony laughed just as hard. “Yeah, man, let’s go.”

Rock ushered the girls out

the building and they shrunk back from the light.

“Oh! The sun is up,” Debbie said.

“What time is it?” Pearl asked rubbing her eyes.

Rock looked at his watch.
“Almost six.”

“What?” Opal shrieked. “No way!”

“Wow. We’ve been in there that long?” Debbie asked on a yawn.

Rock shrugged. “Looks that way.”

“I’m starving,” Opal said.

The streets filled quickly with people in the midst of their morning commutes as they piled into the car. Tony dropped Rock back at his place in Brooklyn before heading home. Pushing Debbie, Opal and Pearl into the house, Tony struggled to keep the three of them upright as they went up the stairs. His father came into the foyer when he had them half way up. Tony tossed him the car keys and continued pushing them up the stairs.

CHAPTER NINE

“Buenos tardes, chiquitas.

How are you feeling?” Uncle Carlos said, walking into the dining room.

“Good morning, Uncle Carlos,” they breathed out in unison.

“Morning? No, no, my darlings. It is three fifteen, well into the afternoon.” He took the glass of iced tea his wife offered him. “Thank you darling.”

Debbie looked at the clock and moaned. “Uncle, why did you let us sleep that long?”

“You girls are not used to the twenty four hour pace of New York City. You needed your sleep or you would have waked sooner,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Does everybody here party all night and sleep all day...like vampires?” Pearl asked.

His chuckle was deep and throaty. “No, sweetheart, not everyone, just the young people.” Carlos took a long sip from his glass. “Now, Antonio has called you twice already. You have been invited to a barbecue.”

“Tony is gone?”

“He was up and out hours ago,” her aunt answered.

“One of Alejandro’s daughter called as well. Which

one was it again, honey?”

“Maria, dear.”

“Ahh, yes, Maria. He does has four daughters, sweetheart. I forget which I’m talking to at times,” he explained with a laugh. “Anyway, she has called for you, also. Maria wants to pick you up and take you out for lunch and shopping for something to wear for the red, white and blue party.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“The what, now?” Opal asked between bites.

“The party, Chica.

Remember I told you, the big barbecue every fourth like a family reunion kind of thing.”

She picked up her glass, nodding. “Oh yeah.”

“Does Aunt Constantina still wear the Puerto Rican flag as a skirt?” Debbie asked smiling.

Aunt Carlotta giggled.

“Lord, no, child. She’s gotten too *old* for that.”

“I haven’t seen them in so long, Uncle. I haven’t come for the summer since I was fifteen.

Ten years is a long time not to see someone.”

Her aunt came up behind her, picking up her empty plate and leaving a kiss on her cheek. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. Family is family. It will be as if you never left.”

“Maria said she’d be here around noon, so have Antonio bring you home at a decent hour.” Carlos walked over to his wife and kissed her lightly. “His number is on the refrigerator,” he paused to wait for his wife and they exited the kitchen together.

“How the hell do they do it? I’m tired still tired,” Opal said leaning on the table.

Debbie shrugged. “Must be a New York thing. Wonder what he has planned for us today.” She gave Pearl a quick look. “Or maybe we should be wondering what he has planned for you.”

“What? That man ain’t thinking about me.”

“Oh no, Pearl. He most certainly *is* thinking about you and when he looks at you it’s clear *what* he’s thinking, too,” she countered with a chuckle.

Opal giggled. “Sounds like he’s interested to me.”

“Stop it, guys. You know I can’t do that.”

“Why not? From the last scene I saw it looked like you kicked Jake to the curb.”

“Opal,” her sister whined.

“All I’m saying is if you ain’t gonna be with Jake you might consider having a harmless New York fling with that fine ass Cousin Tony. Who’s *not* your real cousin, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I don’t know what I want, but I do miss him.”

“Well, you need to work on that. You’ve been pining long enough, but in case you decide to help yourself to my cousin remember, what happens in New York stays in New York.” She stood up and snatched the number off the refrigerator.

“Uh, that’s Vegas, Deb, not New York.”

Debbie sputtered. “It works here too. Now, let’s go see where he is.”

The twins followed her to the den and plopped down on both sides of her, straining to

hear as she waited for him to answer his phone.

“Talk to me.”

“Is that how you answer your phone, Tony? Whatever happened to good ole hello?”

“Hey cuz, what’s up?” he said happily. “You and your girls finally got up, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re up. Tired, but up. Where are you?” She pushed the twins away, but their heads snapped back in place bumping both sides of her head.

“Just making some runs,

Cuz. We've been invited to a beach party later, so be ready around five. That will give us time to hit the rides and still make the party. Okay? Peace out!"

"What? Hello?" She stared at the phone. "He hung up on me."

"What did he say? All I could hear was mumbling," Opal asked.

"He said he'll be here to get us around five to take us to a beach party."

The twins looked at each

other then back to her.

“You mean a real beach, like, ocean type beach?”

“Yes, Chica, not that man-made thing we have in Indiana,” she said chuckling.

“Where is this beach?” Pearl asked.

“In Brooklyn.”

“Brooklyn again, huh?” Opal smiled. “Hmm, does that mean we’ll be hanging with Tony’s fine ass friend, Rock?”

Debbie smiled with her. “Hmm, I sure hope so. Come on,

five o'clock will be here before we know it."

Dressed, Debbie rummaged through stuff over her shoulder looking in the dresser when she heard the knocking on the door.

"Come in," she said opening another drawer.

"Antonio just called. He said he'll be here in a few minutes," her uncle said sitting on the bed.

Debbie yanked the bottom part of a bathing suit from beneath the clothes. "Okay." She tossed it on the bed next to him,

stuffed everything else back into the drawers and sat beside him. “I want to go, Uncle, but I’m still tired,” she confessed on a light laugh.

Carlos smiled. “You know what they say, Chiquita, when in Rome...” He patted her knee. “Come, your aunt has made something for you to eat before you leave. You’ll feel so much better after you’ve eaten again. I promise.”

“Okay, ladies, let’s do this,” Tony said busting into the kitchen a short time later. “Hi, Ma.” He kissed her cheek and

sat in an empty chair next to his father. “What’s up, Pops?”

“Now, Antonio, you be careful with the girls today. You’re wearing them out already. They are barely rested from last night,” his mother chastised.

“They’re on vacation, Ma. They’re supposed to feel like that,” Tony said flashing a laughing grin.

His mother glared at him.

“Don’t worry, Ma. I’ve got friends out there. They’ll eat and be able to shower, too. I’ll even

have them back at a decent hour this time,” Tony promised.

She made a face at him, but didn't comment further.

“Well, since you're trying to be on your best behavior, you can wash my car. I don't want any of that sand to make it back to Queens.”

Tony turned to his father and saluted. “You got it, Pops. Okay, ladies, let's go. Chop, chop!” he said, clapping twice.

Debbie reached for her plate. “Okay, okay.”

“No, no, darling, leave it. Go

have a good time,” her aunt insisted.

* * * *

“Well, well, well. Look who has come a callin’.”

Tony gave her his best smile. “What’s up, Rita baby?” He ogled her openly. “You still look good, girl.”

She twisted her lips and leaned against the door frame. “Uh-huh.”

It was just as he expected. He could almost feel the heat coming from her as she glared at

him. “Can I come in?”

She stared at him a few moments longer then turned away, leaving the door open. He gave the girls a quick thumbs up and walked inside.

“Come on Rita, I know you’re not still mad at me are you?”

She stopped in her living room and turned on him with a finger on her chin pretending to think.

“Hmm, let me see. You fucked me and left before I even got up. *Then* I heard that when

you left me you went to see that bitch, Sony. She was out here that night so you fucked her on the beach...the same night! So, yeah, Tony. I'm still mad!" She wrapped her arms around her chest.

"Oh, come on, girl, are you going to believe the crap you hear on the grapevine or me?"

"Mmm hmm," she said turning her head away.

"Rita, come on. Why would I leave someone as fine as you for a skank like Sony?" He pulled her arms free. "That's like

comparing hamburger to filet mignon.” He backed her up to a wall separating the living room and the kitchen. “Tell me what I can do to make it up to you.”

“No, Tony, uh-uh. I don’t think you can make it up to me this time.”

“Come on, Rita. You know I’ll do anything,” he whispered against her neck.

“No, Tony, you always do this.”

“Rita baby, come on. I mean it this time. Just name it, anything at all,” he pressed a

kiss to her throat.

“Well...” She pressed her forehead to his and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Anything?” she asked with a raised brow.

Tony pressed his pelvis against hers. “Anything,” he whispered again.

“Well, we could go upstairs and you could make me feel good.”

Crap!

He squeezed her butt.
“Yeah, I could do that for you, but I kinda need a favor first.”

Her smile disappeared and she pushed him backwards.
“What favor?”

“Nothing big. We just need a place to squat while we’re out here today. I’ve got my cousin and her friends with me. They’re from out of town. I wanted to take them to the rides before going to Desi’s party.”

Rita’s hands went back to her hips. “Uh-huh, and what the hell do I look like? The damn Holiday Inn? I swear, Tony...” She pushed him again and walked away.

He grabbed her arm, stopping her. "Wait, wait, wait. Come on, Rita, don't be like that. I came to spend time with you and show my cousin a good time. Can't I do both?"

She huffed, but didn't pull away. "A *real* cousin, right? Not some stinking ass play cousin from back in the day, right?"

Tony grinned and pulled her closer. "Come on girl, you know better than that. You're my baby girl. You know I wouldn't play you like that." He kissed her cheek. "Rita, come on. I need your help," he whined.

She sighed. “All right, fine.”

“You’re the best.”

A quick smile appeared on her face and she pulled him to the stairs. “If we go now, we can do it real quick and—“

He pulled her back into his arms. “You know I’d like nothing better than to take you upstairs and wear that ass out, but they’re outside in the car. I’ll hook you up later though.”

Tony grabbed the braids on the back of her head and pulled her back bearing her throat. Rita gasped and shivered in his arms

as he sucked hard. He left a tiny bite on her neck before letting her go.

“I promise,” he whispered.

* * * *

“This is taking too long. I don’t think he can get us in,” Pearl said.

“Give him a chance to talk to the girl. He did say she was mad at him,” Debbie said.

“What if Pearl’s right. Can’t we just put our stuff in the lockers at this beach?”

“No, Chica. There are no lockers,” Debbie explained. “We’re talking about a real beach. Sand, rocks, horizon...”

“Look guys, there’s Tony.”

Opal and Debbie turned. Tony signaled them from the doorway to come.

“It’s about time.”

Tony made quick introductions. Rita allowed them to store their bags and then walked them to the boardwalk. Tony directed them to the rides on Coney Island where Opal, Pearl and Debbie were taken

over with childish glee. Hours later they sat on the boardwalk, watching the sun disappear on the horizon with Tony. With a satisfying sigh, they gathered all the stuffed animals, T-shirts and pictures they won playing various games and walked back to Rita's house.

“It's about damn time!” Rita screamed, snatching the door open. “Desi has called me a hundred times wondering if you were coming, Tony. Why'd you turn off your phone?”

He dumped an armful of stuff onto the sofa. “Sorry, man.

It was their first time to Coney Island, you know. They wanted to ride and play everything and I mean *everything*,” he explained and sat heavily beside them.

“Besides, it would’ve been a little hard for me to talk on the phone while I was going damn near upside down on the Cyclone.”

Rita chuckled. “You guys can use my room to change. It’s the first room up the stairs on the left. Tony you’re going to have to use the bathroom down here.”

Laughing and talking excitedly, the girls went upstairs

and returned a short time later.

“Is my cousin still changing, Rita?”

“Uh-huh.”

Debbie rolled her eyes. “He takes longer than a woman to get ready.”

Rita laughed. “Mmm, hmm, that may be true, but the results are worth the wait.”

“Oh really? How long you and Tony been kicking it like that?”

She tied the sarong around her waist. “Like what? No one

kicks it like *that* with your cousin. You're just happy to be penciled in. Now shush, here he comes."

"So, we're all ready? Well then let's go, the party waits."

Rita led them back to the boardwalk and they followed it the opposite way of Coney Island to its end. The smell of food and music filled the air.

"My man, Tone! It's about time."

"What up, Rock?" Tony walked to him and slapped him five. "Where's Desi?"

“On the grill, man, as usual. Go speak, I’ll watch your girls.”

“Hi, Rock. Long time no see.”

Rock’s smile disappeared and the joy left his voice. “What’s up, Rita? How you doing?”

“I’m cool.” She turned to the girls. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Debbie watched her leave and moved next to Rock.

“Hmm, I sense a history there.”

“None worth telling,” he told

her dismissively. Gulping at his beer, he looked her up and down. A genuine smile spread across his face when he swallowed. "But you on the other hand are worth talking about. You sure wearing that little black bikini." He took her hand and twirled her around. "Mmm, hmm, and you wearing it *well*, too." He chuckled and looked to the twins. "And lookie here, lookie here. I feel like I'm in a Double Mint commercial. I got double the beauty over here."

The twins looked at each

other and then to Debbie and laughed.

Rock sipped his beer again.
“What? Too corny?”

“No, that’s the name of our shop,” Debbie supplied.

“What shop?”

“Never mind.”

“Here they are, Desi,” Tony said returning to their side.

“This is my cousin, Debbie and her friends, Opal and Pearl. Guys, this is Desi.”

“Hi, Desi.”

“Hi,” Opal and Debbie said

together.

“How you doing, ladies? Come meet my peeps,” Desi invited waving them over.

Pearl walked beside Desi as Debbie pulled Opal closer and they slowed their pace leaving Rock and Tony behind them.

“Is Desi a girl or a guy?” Debbie whispered.

“Oh, it's a girl alright. She's trying real hard, but she can't hide them big titties even under that super large T-shirt of hers.”

Debbie squinted at the person walking before them.

“Are you sure? The shorts make it look like Desi might be packing something large. That’s why I thought *she* might be a *he*.”

Opal snickered. “I think they're just big and baggy.”

“She's too pretty to be a guy. I like her hazel eyes.”

“Yeah right, you can buy those eyes at any eyewear store. How many pretty guys do we know that hang out with Sean? They have the pretty eyes, too. Sean does most of their hair so its long and braided in the same zigzag kind of style, just like

Desi's."

"Okay, I'll give you that. But how can we be sure? Desi's voice is kind of deep for a girl but not really guy-like."

"Hmm, let's wait until she gets her drink on and then we'll just grope her to make sure," Opal suggested with a laugh.

Debbie nodded and they walked faster to catch up to Desi and Pearl.

CHAPTER TEN

“What! You’re still in the bed at this hour? It’s a brand

new day already.”

Someone pushed Debbie's feet to the side and plopped down on the bed. Reaching out, Debbie pulled the pillow she laid beside on top of her head and groaned. Images of herself in mermaid form toasting everyone at the party with a large blue drink began to fade. She ran her fingers along her scalp in an attempt to relieve the thumping.

Damn that Desi and her made up concoctions. I'm never drinking anything blue again.

A hand gripped her butt using it to shake her whole body.

“Get up, girl,” a female voice chastised.

The voice pulled her closer to reality. Her mental rolodex flipped trying to place the voice, but the last thing she wanted to do was get up.

“Go away.”

“Come on, Debbie, we’re going shopping. I heard you were out with Tony and his crazy friends last night. I promise you’ll feel better once you’re up and moving around. I always feel better after shopping, no matter what the

problem is.”

“Your voice sounds like Maria, but Maria *hated* shopping when we were kids,” Debbie grumbled from under her pillow.

“Well, if you get up, you will see that a lot of things have changed since we were kids.”

Maria slapped Debbie’s bottom. Debbie had the feeling Maria wouldn’t go away like she asked so sat up rubbing her eyes.

“Holy cow! Maria is that really you?”

“That’s right, baby. Check it

out!”

Maria did a slow pirouette showing off a voluptuous figure in a fitted, sky blue slip dress.

“Maria, you look beautiful. Not that you weren’t before, but, wow! How’d you do it? I mean, when we were kids you were, well, umm...”

“Fat,” Maria supplied with a chuckle. “It’s okay, you can say it.”

“Well, yeah. What happened?”

Maria returned to the bed beside her. “I got tired of being

the fat girl in the crew,” she explained with a shrug. “The guys were always saying, ‘oh, baby, you’re so pretty, if only you wasn’t so *fat*’. If that wasn’t bad enough I started getting all those old people issues.”

“Old people issues? Like what?”

“Bad back, bad knees, can’t walk anywhere without breathing hard. I was too young to be doing all that,” she explained on a laugh. “I figured it was my wake up call. So, I got off my *fat ass* and did something about it.”

“That took a lot of heart, girl. I’m proud of you. Did it take a long time?”

Maria nodded. “The whole time I was in college.”

“So how’d you do it?”

“Well, like most students in college I found out that noodles, fruits, veggies and used books put less stress on your pocketbook. It was easier to lose the weight than I thought,” Maria with a chuckle.

Debbie laughed with her. “I bet.”

“Besides, the used books

tuned out to be a blessing. They had loads of highlighted passages and notes written on the pages that helped me a lot.”

Debbie chuckled. “Well, I know you didn’t go totally vegetarian on me, did you? Plus I remember you being a diehard chocoholic.”

“Vegetarian? Girl, please, I just wanted to be a little healthier not some crazed health *nut*. Besides, giving up chocolate and meat together would’ve turned me to the dark side of the force.” She laughed then nudged her. “Now, get your ass up so

you and your girls can get ready. I'm starving."

Debbie dragged herself out of bed and down the hall to the twins to find them already in motion. A short while later they were dressed to meet Maria down stairs. Returning hours later, several women came from the kitchen when they entered. Debbie recognized her cousins and greeted them with hugs and laughter. They helped her and the twins upstairs with their packages.

"Oh Debbie, this is so cute. You're gonna knock 'em dead

when you go back to Iowa,” one cousin said holding a red satin out on display.

“Damn, Lucky, it ain’t Iowa. It’s Illinois,” another cousin corrected.

“You’re both wrong, Carmen. We leave in Indiana,” Debbie said, laughing.

“Hey Deb, why not ask your cousins what to do about Rakim?” Opal said, dumping another bag onto the bed for the ladies to look through.

Debbie turned narrow eyes to Opal. “No, Chica, let’s not and

say we did.” She took the dress Lucky held and packed it away.

“Who’s Rakim?” Lucky asked, picking up another dress.

“No one special. Just a guy we went to school with.”

Maria leaned against the window pane and nudged Debbie’s shoulder. “Come on, Deb, spit it out. Who is Rakim, really?”

“I told you. No one special.”

“Oh come on, Debbie. You ain’t been here in years. What kind of cousin denies her people some real gossip when the last

gossip we talked about was back when Louisa kissed a boy for the first time?” Maria said on a laugh.

“Hey, keep me out of this.” Louisa moved to sit next to Opal. “Debbie will tell us what’s really going on. We’ve got her twins on our side.” She leaned over to nudge Opal.

“Whatever, Louisa, and for the record we are not *her* twins,” Opal corrected with a chuckle. “Pearl, help me out here.”

“I love this. This whole situation is like having a house

full of sisters. Go ahead and tell them, Debbie.” She smiled crossing her legs Indian style before her.

Debbie turned a raised brow to Pearl. “Oh, you think this is cool, huh?”

Pearl nodded, her smile growing.

“Okay then, I’ll tell them about Rakim and then *you can* tell them about Jake.”

Pearl’s smile faded.

“Ooo, another one, Jake,” Maria said.

“Umm...”

“Oh, now it’s umm?”

Opal laughed and all eyes turned to her. “Hey, I’m good,” she confirmed raising her hands. “I’ve already decided to keep Doug.” She pointed between Pearl and Debbie. “It’s them two who have the issues.”

“Come on, Debbie, spit it out,” said another cousin.

Debbie turned to her. “This is borderline badgering, Margie.”

Margie shrugged. “It is what it is. Now tell it.”

All right, all right.” She closed the suitcase and sat in the chair at the desk. “Rakim is this guy I knew back in high school. He was slime ball back then. You know the type.”

“Uh, huh. Jock,” Margie said with a nod.

“Knew he was fine and acted like it,” Lucky added.

“Whore,” Maria chimed in.

Debbie laughed. “Yeah, the type of guy we wrote about on the bathroom walls to watch out for.”

“All right so he played. They

all do. Is he still a player?" Carmen asked.

Debbie shrugged. "I don't know. He says he doesn't."

"Does he have a girl?" Lucky asked.

"He says he doesn't."

"Girl, they all say that shit," Margie said, laughing.

"What do his friends say?" Maria asked.

Debbie turned a raised brow to her. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you can kinda tell

when they're lying when you talk to their boys. If you ask and they say something like, 'they don't know nothing, they're just hanging', you know you know you're guy is full of shit. and they're covering for him," Maria said.

"Well, the only friend he really hangs out with is a guy name Doug."

Maria turned to Opal. "Your Doug?"

"Uh huh."

"Well what does Doug say?"

"He told Debbie to lighten

up on him because he really liked her,” Opal confirmed. “Rakim told me that he’s waiting for Debbie.”

Debbie’s brow shot up. “He did?”

“Yup.

“That’s a good sign. Deb. What does he look like?” Lucky asked.

Debbie smiled as his image appeared in her mind’s eye. “Well, he’s not that much taller than me, about five eight, I think. He’s thick, not really fat, but you could hold on to him,

you know?”

“A gut? No way girl, uh-uh. Give me a chiseled body any day,” Louisa said, shaking her head.

Lucky waved her away. “Shut up, girl. We’re talking about what Debbie likes, not you,” she chastised. “Go on, Debbie. Is he cute?”

“Well I think so,” she said shooting a look to Louisa. “He’s got the smoothest, creamiest brown skin and big puppy brown eyes with those long, curly lashes that we spend a fortune

in mascara trying to get.”

“Isn’t that always the way? Men get the long, swooping lashes and beautiful eyes and we end up making Max Factor richer than he already is,” Pearl said, laughing. “Jake’s are the same way.

“One guy at a time, honey. We’ll get to your Jake in a minute,” Maria said holding up a hand.

“Hmm, so, he’s cute, he used to be a player and I bet the writing on the bathroom wall said he was good in bed, too,”

Carmen said counting on her fingers.

“Yuck, fat guys fucking is not a turn on,” Louisa muttered.

“Louisa shut up. He’s not fat. When he played football in school he was nice and tight, but none of us look the way we looked back then.”

“Nope, some of us look better, baby!” Maria laughed, spinning around.

“Besides even if he was physical body type is not that high on my list of priorities,” Debbie said with a huff.

“If you say so. I’m going to get something to drink. You guys want something?”

There were yeses and nods all around as Louisa left the room.

“Never mind her, Deb. Are there still rumors floating around about your Rakim’s skills in the bedroom or was his reputation left behind in high school,” Margie asked.

Debbie giggled. “Yeah, I heard a few over the years. I do work in a hair salon. You know all news comes through there.”

“Okay, so he gets around. That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Lucky said.

She wrapped her arms around her chest. “I just don’t want to be another notch on Rakim Dixon’s belt. From what I’ve heard he has enough on there already.”

“Has he tried to get with you? You know, just come right out and asked you?” Maria asked.

“Yeah, once or twice.”

The twins snorted at the same time. Debbie’s cousins

looked at them and burst into laughter, then turned on Debbie.

“Okay, maybe it was a little more than that.”

“For how long?” Lucky asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know, about a year maybe two.”

They made another noise.

Debbie threw her hands up exasperated. “Okay, fine. Maybe longer than that.”

“Okay, guys, do you think this guy is trying to play my

cousin just to get in her pants or what?” Carmen asked.

“Well, I don’t see him as much since I started at the school,” Pearl started. “But when I see him out and about, he always asks about her. He seems sincere to me. We’ve all been friends with him since high school. I trust him.”

Carmen nodded and turned to Opal.

“Rakim has had a crush on Debbie since...forever. It’s common knowledge. I told him once before that I wouldn’t help

him, but I wouldn't stand in his way either, as long as he was serious." She shrugged. "He seems to be serious."

Everyone looked around to each other then all eyes focused on Debbie. Her eyes narrowed as she looked into their faces.

"What?"

"I don't know, Deb, but it looks like we're all in agreement."

Her lips twisted as she set her gaze on Opal. "Uh-huh, and what would that be, Chica?"

"Well, if he ain't playing no

more and his gut don't bother you, then I say go for it," Louisa answered coming through the door carrying a tray of drinks.

Debbie took a bottle off the tray. "How do I know that he's not a player, Lucky?"

"All right, let's to the pros and cons thing. The man is easy on the eyes, right?" Maria asked.

"Yeah."

"Pro!" her cousins shouted.

Pearl and Opal jumped at their cheer then fell over laughing.

“That’s what we do, girls,” Maria explained. “Join in next time. Now Debbie, does he have his own house?”

“He’s got an apartment.”

Maria rolled her eyes and her hand went to her hip. “He don’t live with his mama, right?”

Debbie chuckled. “Right.”

“Pro!” Opal and Pearl yelled with them.

“That’s all that matters. Does he have a job?”

“Yeah, a good job.”

“Pro!”

“And his own car?”

She nodded sipping her drink. “Uh-huh, a motorcycle, too.”

“Pro!”

Maria shrugged and returned to her seat. “I don’t see the problem here, Deb. I didn’t hear any con shouts on the necessity list. He’s been digging on you for a while and he ain’t playing no more. If he isn’t your man, make him your man. Shit, you guys are already friends, so what the hell.” She fished the straw out of the bottle Louisa

passed to her and took a long sip, walking over to Pearl.

“So, what’s up with you and your Papi?”

Pearl told them everything that happened from the time she met Jake until the last time she saw him at Club Caliente`.

“I don’t see the problem,” Carmen said. “Who cares what the brother thinks? If Jake says he loves you and wants to be with you, you guys should be together.”

“I agree. You don’t marry the family when you marry the

guy,” Margie said with a nod.

Louisa turned wide eyes to her. “Really? You believe that? Being in this family?”

“Our family isn’t that bad,” Debbie said chuckling.

“You say that because you ain’t married yet. Uncle Carlos, my father and Uncle Hector, will come down on your man like a ton of bricks if he steps out of line,” Maria said. “Even Uncle Pedro and he’s so soft spoken you can’t hardly understand him sometimes. They only get one warning.”

“She can’t ask him to choose her over his people,” Carmen said. “That just ain’t right.”

“I would never ask Jake to do that.”

“We know that, sweetie,” Margie said patting her knee. “In case anyone has forgotten, this is the twenty-first century. We are free to choose our own mates. If Jake has chosen Pearl Frank is the one who has to come to terms with that.”

“But the decisions we make effect everyone around us,”

Louisa said.

“You guys aren’t helping,” Opal said in a singing voice.

“Well, this ain’t Dr. Phil, honey. We’re just tossing it around, giving Pearl something to work with,” Maria told her.

“Look, my sister just wants to be with this man. Are they both to suffer because Jake’s brother is a lunatic?”

“He’s a grown ass man that can make his own decisions. He shouldn’t need his people’s okay when he chooses a girlfriend, a wife or whatever,” Margie said

wrapping her arms around her chest.

“It’s true, we’re allowed to choose our own men, but it sure makes life easier if they get along with the family, that’s for sure,” Lucky said.

“Oh, come on. Family is family. Just because I don’t like your man don’t mean we ain’t family. Debbie, you know all this, didn’t you tell your girl?” Margie said.

She shrugged. “Sometimes you need to hear stuff from an outside source for it to sink in.”

Louisa shook her head. “I don’t know. This kind of thing has the tendency to get ugly down the line. What if they do get married and the brother gets worse? Family functions would be out of control. The kids could be in the middle. That will put a strain on her relationship with Jake, the kids will be all confused from that...”

Maria threw her hands up. “Whoa! Slow your roll, girl. You got them all married, with kids, his family about to kill them and everything,” she said laughing.

Louisa laughed with her.

“My bad. My imagination just took off.”

“Besides she doesn’t even know if the rest of the family has issue with them being together. He could be alone in that.”

“Wait, wait, aren’t we forgetting something? Didn’t you say Jake was trying to tell you Frank had issues with his ex? He didn’t always feel like that, right?” Lucky pointed out.

“Yeah,” Pearl answered with a nod.

“So, maybe it *is* just him,” Margie said.

Everyone fell silent then all eyes turned to Pearl.

“So what are you gonna do about your boy, now?” Maria asked.

“I don’t know. I do know I miss him like crazy.”

“Just go back to him, Opal. If you love him make it work.” Maria finished her drink and pulled her to her feet.

“Umm, I’m Pearl.”

Giggles rose in the room as Maria’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Ooops, that’s right.” She

turned to Opal. “No stripe.”

“It’s a streak,” Opal corrected pointing to her head.

“Whatever,” she said with a flippant wave and grin. “Now, let’s get out here. I want all of you guys to come hang out at my house for a while. My Victor has taken the kids to his mama and the house is empty and waiting. Besides we can get a real drink at my place.

Something with a little more kick than these tired little coolers Aunt Carlotta got for us.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Several hard knocks on the door roused Debbie from her sleep.

“Yes, yes, I’m up! I swear

these people never sleep,” she mumbled, shuffling to the door.

“You know, you’re never going to make it in this city if you don’t learn how to cat nap,” Tony told her when she opened the door.

She rolled her eyes. “Screw you, Tony baloney.”

He stuck his foot in it to keep it from slamming shut. “Sticks and stones, cuz. My brothers are here. They want to see you and your twins.”

She slid across the bed pulling the pillow on her head.

“That’s nice. Tell them to come back at a decent hour of the day.”

“So you don’t think one thirty in the afternoon is a decent hour?”

Debbie lifted her head.
“What? Stop playing.”

Tony chuckled. “I’m not, it’s one thirty.” He looked at his watch. “Well, no, actually it’s one thirty-five.”

“Oh my God. You’re trying to kill us!” she yelled into the pillow.

Tony chuckled. “No, cuz, I’m

just trying to show you a good time. Didn't you have a good time when we went to Madison Square Garden?"

Debbie nodded.

"I bet you did. Your Pacers whipped up on the Knicks like they were a high school basketball team. What about when we went to the city to all the tourists spots the other day? You guys loved that."

Debbie turned over and rose onto her elbows. "Yeah, Tony, we did. You have been awesome as a tour guide of your

city, but we have been going strong all week. Running around with Maria and everyone, going to parties with you and all the sightseeing... I mean, don't you guys ever have down time? You guys don't just chill out?"

Tony laughed. "This is New York City, cuz. Even our down time is fast paced. Now come downstairs so you can deal with the questions, the babies and little kids running around your feet."

"Sounds fun," she said full of sarcasm.

Tony walked toward the door. “Didn’t I hear you say that Opal sleeps naked? You want me to wake the twins for you?” His grin spread to each ear.

Debbie twisted her lips. “Thanks for offering, but I’ll get them myself.”

He shrugged. “Just trying to help. I’ll tell everyone you’ll be down in a little while.”

Over the next few days the Velasquez family engulfed Opal and Pearl into their family,

accepting them as if they were always there. The night of the Fourth, Opal, Pearl and Debbie stretched out on blankets with the rest of the Velasquez girls as the sky filled with red, white, blue, yellow and purple star bursts overhead and in the distance. A short while later, though the party raged on, Tony urged them to bed for the first time since they came to prepare for their morning flight home. Exchanging e-mail addresses with their new family, they hugged everyone and left with a promise to keep in touch.

“I’m gonna miss you, cuz. It was just like old times...with a kick.” Tony laughed, hugging her. “Keep in touch, man, and remember if you marry this Rakim guy, you’ll have to send a box of invites for the family. You know we’ll be there to represent in full force.”

Debbie laughed. “Marry? I don’t know about all that, but I’ll keep you updated.”

“Well, Tony, it was nice meeting you.” Opal hugged him.

“Hey, I watched you guys grow up, with the ‘Debra and

her twins' this, 'Debra and her twins' that, from my parents. I'm glad I got the chance to finally *meet* you too. Stay in touch."

"I'm sure we'll see each other again. You should come hang out with us in Indy."

He smiled. "I was thinking the same thing." Tony turned to Pearl. "I hope you guys had a good time. Remember, you're family, too. So if you marry your dude, give us a holla," he reminded her with a hug.

"We had a great time and it was nice very meeting you, Tony.

If you come to Indy we'll show you a great time, too."

* * * *

"Man, I think I need a vacation from my vacation," Opal said unlocking the door. "Uncle Carlos couldn't have picked an eleven o'clock flight. He had to choose five freaking am?"

She pushed her bags against the wall and dropped herself on the couch. Debbie sat next to her.

"Yeah, I know. Those New Yorkers are late nighters *and*

early risers. How in the world can they function being both?” Debbie asked rhetorically.

Pearl took the chair. “I don’t know how they do it. Every day non-stop with the partying, then they go to work and do it all again. We only did it a few times and it almost killed us.” She chuckled.

“I’m exhausted. Let’s get some Chinese food and take a nap.”

Debbie pulled out her phone. “All right, I’ll call. We should call the shop, too and let

them know we're back safely."

"Yeah, yeah, we just walked through the door, Deb. Can we eat first?"

"Yeah, hello. This is going to be delivery, okay? I want a large shrimp and broccoli combination." She elbowed Opal.

"Egg roll and a small chicken with garlic sauce."

"Yeah, also a small chicken with garlic sauce and an egg roll." She waved at Pearl.

"Shrimp with lobster sauce and something to drink," she answered.

“No, a regular egg roll.

Yeah, shrimp with lobster sauce and a Mountain Dew. Yup, that’s it.”

“Get a big one, a big one,”

Pearl said motioning with her hands.

“Wait. Make that a two liter. How much is that?” She put her feet up on the couch.

“Okay, how long? Thanks. It’ll be here in forty minutes,” she said sliding her phone across the coffee table.

“Forty minutes? Damn, that’s a long time when you’re

hungry. I could be dead by then.”

“I’m going upstairs to call Jake while we wait.”

“All right. Come on, Chica, let’s get this stuff put up before you pass out.”

* * * *

“Okay, either we’re getting old or we were definitely more tired than we thought.” Opal laughed, walking into the kitchen.

“Man, it’s a good thing we don’t work until Monday. I’m still

kind of tired,” Pearl said sitting at the table.

“Well, I feel better.”

“Fifteen hours of sleep ought to do that, Debbie,” Opal said giggling.

“I’ll get the mail,” Pearl said on a stretch.

Debbie got up to help Opal with breakfast.

“Okay, here’s what we got,” Pearl said upon her return.

“Magazine, magazine, bill, junk mail, bill, oh look. Sandra sent us a letter.” She dropped the stack of mail onto the table the

ripped the small envelope open. “It’s a thank you card. She thanks us for being there for her and her sister and wants us to visit when we get back from vacation.”

“Hmm, maybe she knows something more about what happened to Miss Betty,” Opal suggested flipping a pancake.

Debbie handed Pearl a glass of juice. “You guys want to go today?”

“Might as well, we really won’t have another chance to go.”

“I’ll call the shop after we eat to tell them we’ll be there for the morning meeting. We can go over to Sandra’s afterwards.” Opal handed Debbie a plate.

Pearl pushed through the envelopes on the table. “Another bill, another magazine, oooh, Playgirl.” She took the plate Debbie offered her. “Thanks. That’s fine, I haven’t seen the girls in a while.”

“Sean’s still there, you know,” Debbie reminded her.

“I know that. I said the *girls*.”

Later that morning Opal, Pearl and Debbie arrived at the address Sandra mentioned in the card.

“Hi, guys. Welcome back,” Sandra said, opening the door.

“Hi Sandra. I hope this isn’t too early.” Opal hugged her and walked in. “How are you?”

“No, this is fine.” She closed the door behind them and shrugged. “I’m, you know, I’m okay. Please, sit down. I know you guys wanted to know if I found anything else out.”

On the coffee table, on top

of beautiful white doilies were several small, framed pictures of Sandra and Robin, a picture of everyone in the shop with Miss Betty at a barbecue and one of Debbie, Opal and Pearl in front of the shop on their first year anniversary.

On the walls were pictures of young Robin and Sandra during their school years, Miss Betty with them and a family picture with a man who was obviously their father.

“This is Miss Betty’s house, right?” Debbie asked picking up the picture of them and passing

it. “We’ve never been here.”

Sandra nodded. “Yes. We’ve been here since the funeral. It’s paid for, but we haven’t made up our minds what we’re going to do with it yet.”

“How’s your sister? Robin, right?”

Sandra nodded.

“How’s she doing? She looked pretty bad at the funeral.”

“Yeah, I know. She hasn’t come out of her room since. I take food to her and have to make her eat. Robin blames

herself for turning Mama on to the internet in the first place. ”

Pearl sat next to Sandra.
“So what did you find out?”

“Not much, but some things do make sense now.”

“Like what?”

“Well, a few people I didn’t know came to the funeral. They said they knew my mother from the St. Vincent’s Cancer Center.”

“Cancer!” they said in unison.

“Yeah. Of course I had no clue what they were talking

about, but it bugged me, you know? So, I came here and started looking around. At first I didn't know what I was looking for, but when I came across a prescription I knew nothing about in her purse and I knew I found something."

"What was it for?"

"Zofran."

The girls looked at each other, shrugging and then back to Sandra.

Sandra chuckled. "Yeah, I didn't know what it was either so I looked it up on Google.

Basically it's a drug to help with the severe nausea, the kind that comes from doing chemo." She let out a soft, sad laugh. "I guess that's why she's been running around like she's crazy. Mama was doing all the stuff she's always wanted to do...and she never said nothing to me...or my sister." She paused for a moment and shook her head before continuing.

"Anyway, we also found out who the man was. You know, the one that was with her. His name was James Friedman. I spoke to his daughter last week. She was

really nice. Emily was her name. She said her mother died about ten years ago and James was going to retire next year. He was the foreman of a construction company on the Southside. Emily said he was all excited about being able to spend a lot of his free time with a sweet woman about his age that he'd met online."

Pearl sat back and sighed sadly. She was sure Opal and Debbie shared her melancholy by the look on their faces.

"But, enough of that," Sandra said clapping. Her smile

was clearly forced as she wiped a tear from her cheek. “Tell me how your vacation in the big city went. I need some good news.”

They talked and had a light lunch with Sandra before returning home.

“Has anyone checked messages since we got home?” Opal asked.

“I’ll check them.” Debbie walked to the living room.

*You have five messages!
First message!*

Hi Opal, it’s Roy...

Debbie pressed delete,

shaking her head. "He knows he's in violation when he calls here."

Next message! Hey boss ladies. We just wanted to say hey and let you know that Miss Betty's daughter wanted you to stop by, in case you didn't get her card. Sean may call me Ghetto Barbie, but I'm smarter than he think, a chipper voice assured on a whisper. Okay...so, what do I do now? She paused. The problem is I don't know how to work this thing. Because I got voicemail on my phone, Sean, that's why! Yeah, I left the message already. Laughter

flared up in the background of the call. *Oh...*

Debbie laughed and hit delete. "Gotta love her."

Next message! Hey, Ladies! What's up? a happy male voice began. I'm leaving this message is for my baby. Yeah Debbie, I'm talking about you girl, it's Rakim. I know you guys know that already, but anyway, I just wanted to tell you that we talked to Jake and we're now official members of the Jake fan club. We think he's cool people. Well, I hope you're having a good time, but could you hurry home? I

miss you, girl. Call me when you get back, okay? Bye.

Debbie sighed and deleted the message.

Next message! Good morning. This message is for Opal Jefferson, this is Susan calling from Bartledge, a perky voice began. This is a courtesy call to let you know that we had to return your check for insufficient funds. Please bring in a cash payment or send a money order at your earliest convenience to our office. Our office hours are...

Debbie laughed.

Next message! Pearl, it's me. Baby, I can't eat I can't sleep and can't even keep my mind on my job! That's how much I miss you. Please call me. The man's voice was tight with anguish as he rushed his words out. I can't stand the thought of losing you. This has been the longest two weeks of my life. Please, Pearl, please call me. I love you.

End of messages!

Opal and Pearl came from the kitchen and handed her a bottle of soda.

“So, who we got?”

“Well, the check for your car payment apparently bounced, so you’d better get on that.”

“Shit. I’m glad we keep a house phone for stuff like that. I would have been upset if my cell rang all week with phone calls about stuff that could have waited until I got home.”

Debbie twisted the top from the bottle and took a sip. “Yup, that’s why we got it. Rakim called, too. He says misses me. I got the impression that he and Doug have started a Jake fan club. From the message I

gathered that they've been hanging out with him and they like him."

"That's cool. Was that it?" Opal asked turning her own bottle up.

"Well..." Debbie reached back and pushed replay. "Jake left this message."

Quietly they listened then Opal and Debbie turned to Pearl. She sighed.

"I miss him, too. He didn't answer his phone when I called before."

"Well, call him back

already, Pearl. He may have just been under a car or spinning wheels or something.”

Pearl nodded and rushed pass them to the stairs.

“I think we should call the guys and meet them for lunch.”

“Lunch? Chica, we just ate lunch with Sandra.”

Opal made a face. “Debbie, you didn’t really think that some chicken salad on some crackers and a little fruit was going to fill me, did you?” she inquired with a chuckle. “You know better than that. I mean, it was good

and all, but it was just an appetizer. Give them a call so we can hook up for some real food. I think I feel like having a margarita.”

* * * *

“I missed you, girl. I’m glad you’re back.” Doug said hugging Opal. He sat across from her and waved to Debbie. “What’s up, Debbie?”

Debbie smiled. “Hi, Doug.”

Opal pulled a bag out from under the table and handed it to him. “I brought you something

back from New York.”

Rakim stood next to the table with his arms open. “Can I get on for a hug? I haven’t seen you in over a week, you know.”

Debbie smiled and walked into his arms. “I guess I can do that.”

He let her go and sat next to Doug as Debbie sat beside Opal. “What’s up, Opal? Did you guys have a good time?”

“Yeah, we had a blast and we took about a zillion pictures, too.”

“That’s cool. Whatcha get,

man?”

“Opal brought me a souvenir back from the big city,” Doug said rifling through the bag.

“Cool. Did you bring me something back, too, Deb?”

“Why would I do that?” she asked innocently.

“Oh, come on. You know you missed me.” He grabbed her hand and smiled. “I’m wearing you down, remember?”

Debbie snatched her hand back, but a smile appeared on her face. She tossed a bag at him

and he caught it chuckling.

“See, I knew you couldn’t resist me.”

“Oh brother. I can see what being with you is going to be like already.”

The waitress came over with the margaritas and the sample platter.

“Can we get one of those?” Doug said pointing to the food.

Rakim took a sip from Debbie’s glass. “Yeah and one of these drinks, too.” He slid the glass closer to Debbie, smiling. “You know when you’re a couple

you share a lot of things, not just drinks.”

“Whatever,” Debbie said under her breath.

“So, do you still have the heart I sent you?” Doug inquired Opal holding a t-shirt against his chest.

“Of course. I got you a key chain, too. It’s in there somewhere. It’s not as nice as mine, but...”

He fished it from the bottom of the bag. “No, I like it. Thanks.” He attached the tiny Statue of Liberty to his keys. “What’d you

get, Ra?"

"I got a Brooklyn Cyclone t-shirt. I'm assuming they're a baseball team from the logo and I got a Yankee's hat because somebody remembered I like baseball." He put the hat on and rifled through the bag some more. "Wow, it's a bunch of stuff in here. I'll check it out for real later," he said hanging the bag on the corner of the chair.

"What does that mean? You're not leaving, are you?"

Rakim smiled. "Me? Leave you? Never. I just want to spend

this time focusing on you and not the gifts. By the way, I could thank you for real, if you give me about, hmm, let's say, an hour and a half. Maybe two if I eat too much. I move a little slower on a full stomach.” He chuckled. “I’m not as young as I used to be, you know.”

Debbie tried to stifle her laughter, but giggles slipped out.

“Okay, play time is over, let’s eat,” Opal announced.

She moved Doug’s bag, giving the waitress room for their plates. While they ate

lunch, the girls told them the highlights of their trip.

“So, what did you guys do while we were gone?”

Rakim smiled. “Well, you know how we do. We hit a few tittie bars, had a couple of wild parties, went to naked karaoke —“

“Yeah right!” Debbie laughed, playfully slapping his arm.

“Okay, okay, we didn’t do any of that stuff, but we *did* spend a lot of time with Jake.”

“Really? You think he’s

good for my sister?”

“I don’t know about all that, but I like him. He’s a good guy with a decent head on his shoulders,” Rakim told her with a shrug.

“You like him, too?” Opal asked Doug.

“Yeah, I think he’s cool. We were supposed to meet up Saturday, but he cancelled. He said he and his sister were going to a funeral for a close family friend or something. It was on the news and everything.”

“What? It was on the news?”

You saw it?”

“Naa, not me, but Ra did.”

Opal turned to Rakim. “So, what happened?”

“The reporter said a couple was in the car outside the girlfriend’s house and someone shot them through their opened window at point blank range,” he explained.

“That’s messed up.”

“The girl was the little sister of one of Jake’s brother’s best friends. He said they all grew up together.”

“The cops don’t know why it happened or who did it?” Debbie asked.

“Nope, Jake said he was going to represent his brother and the family.”

“Did you see Jake’s brother?”

“Nope, Jake said he’d be out of town for a while.”

“Good, can’t say that I’d miss him. He left a bad impression on me at our last encounter.”

“Huh, on us all.” Opal agreed. “So, did you meet Jake’s

sister?”

“Yeah, we did. She was nice.”

Debbie’s head tilted.
“Really? What’d she look like?”
she questioned.

“Ooo, I hope that’s a hint of jealousy I hear in your voice, Deb,” Rakim said, excited.

Debbie elbowed Opal to stop her giggles. “Can’t I just ask a question? Why does it have to be jealousy?”

Doug chuckled. “Jake’s sister—“

Rakim laid a hand on Doug's forearm and he sat back smiling.

"Jake's sister is very nice and she's pretty, too," Rakim finished.

"Uh-huh. How pretty?"

Rakim pulled Debbie's hands to his lips. "Oh, I don't know. She's not really my type." He kissed her fingers one at a time.

Her brows scrunched in confusion. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know, the whole

married with children and being ten years older thing was a real turn off,” he explained with a grin.

Debbie relaxed against the table. “I bet you thought that was funny, huh?”

He shrugged and continued kissing her fingers.

Debbie leaned forward and spoke softly. “Well Rakim, I had decided to take you up on your *pushy* offer and give us a try.”

“Oh yeah?” he said with a wide grin.

“Yeah, but I can see you’re

going to need to be discipline for your bad behavior early in this relationship,” she informed him.

“Well, then I guess I’ll have to be bad often to see if I get spanked,” he countered with a wink.

Debbie smiled. Opal laughed. Rakim and Debbie turned to her.

“Okay, guys, that’s just way too much information. I just ate, for crying out loud.” She grabbed her purse off the arm of her chair. “Let’s go down to the canal and walk off this food. You guys

clearly need some air.”

* * * *

Pearl pulled into Jake’s driveway. Just as she opened her door, his front door swung open and he ran out to her car.

“Pearl! Baby, I miss you so much.” He pulled her into his arms and kissed her all over her face.

“I missed you too,” she said between kisses.

Jake lifted Pearl like a bride and carried her into the house. They tripped over each other,

trying to kiss and walk up the stairs at the same time. Barely able to restrain themselves, they pulled and tugged on each other's clothes. Finally naked, they fell onto the bed, laughing and kissing until he lay on top of her, stroking her face lovingly.

“I’m so sorry, Pearl. I missed you so much. I didn’t realize how much I loved you until I almost lost you. Don’t leave me like that again.”

“I won’t, Jake. I love you, too. I’m—“

Shaking his head, he put

his finger to her lips. “No, don’t.”

Tears fell onto her cheek when he lowered his face to kiss her. Her arms slid around his neck automatically bringing him closer. Jake moaned as he entered her. The sound reached deep into her soul and took hold. Pearl lifted her pelvis welcoming him, matching his pace, move for move. The rhythm they gained was new, exciting and primitive. His need for her was evident with every thrust. Each one excited her more. His hand slipped beneath her palming her bottom keeping her close as he

grinded into her. She cried out in joy. Jake's arm shook as his hips slowed.

“Pearl... I—I can't—” he started.

“It's okay, baby. Come for me, I'm ready,” she whispered.

Jake's sigh was filled with relief. With both hands beside her head, Jake rode her with fierce determination until he released an uninhibited cry of pleasure. Gasping for air he grasped her face. Love, gratefulness and satisfaction were in his kisses. Finally he fell

to the bed and gathered her in his embrace. She lay in his arms contented listening to his thumping heart until it slowed to its normal pace.

“I can’t tell you how hard these last two weeks have been without you,” he said after a while. “Not knowing if you would come back to me or not was the hardest thing I ever had to go through. It feels good to have you back in my arms,” he added giving her a squeeze.

Pearl lifted her head. “I’m sorry, Jake. I wasn’t—“

He kissed her quiet.

“Sweetheart, I’m not blaming you. I know this couldn’t have been easy for you either. My brother made it hard for us both. It was just an ugly situation.” He sighed. “Frank has changed, Pearl. He ain’t been right for a while.”

“What happened to him?”

“About two years ago he was going to marry this girl name Nicole, but she changed her mind and left him.”

“Why?”

“Frank got real possessive

after they set a date. He treated her like prisoner, dictating when, where and *if* she could go anywhere. Snapping at every little thing she did when she didn't clear with him first." He shrugged. "She got tired of it and called off the wedding three months before. She was a nice girl, too, real pretty. I paid my respects at her funeral."

Pearl's brows shot up. "Her funeral? She *died*? How?"

"In a car accident. The police said they think someone might have run her off the road. Their car slammed into a tree.

She died at the scene and her boy friend died from his injuries a couple of days later. Frank didn't go to the funeral. He had never forgiven Nicole for breaking up with him. He thinks that *all* women are evil and that all the guys in his life need to stay away from them."

Pearl scoffed. "Well, at least I know it's not me personally he doesn't like."

Jake dropped a kiss on her head and chuckled. "No, sweetheart, it's not you."

"Did all this just happen?"

“Well Roxanne just died, yeah, but they have been broken up for two years. She moved away, but had just came back recently.”

“Why is Frank still so angry if they’ve been apart for over two years?”

“I guess he wasn’t over her. He’s just had one bad experience after another ever since. Now, enough about Frank. He’s working out in Michigan City with my other brother, Dennis.”

“Dennis?”

“Yes, Barbara and Dennis

are twins. They were twenty-three when our parents died. I was only eleven and Frank was thirteen, so they raised us. They come down here every so often to see us and they will be here for my birthday.”

Pearl nodded. “So how long will Frank be out there with Dennis?”

“About eight weeks.”

She snuggled against him. “Ooo, eight weeks without Frank. How will we manage?” she asked in a playful tone. Pearl rolled him to his back and

climbed over him. “Why don’t you show me again how much you missed me,” she said leaning down so their noses touched.

Jake ran his fingers through her hair and smiled. “My pleasure.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Weeks passed as the three couples drew closer to each

other.

“So who’s winning now?”

Pearl asked setting up the picnic table.

“Well, *we* would be winning if Rakim wasn’t cheating,” her sister replied.

“What? Man, I ain’t cheating. This is just payback for all the ass-kickings that you and your boy been dishing out over the last two months.”

“That’s right, Chica. But you’re sure you not cheating, right baby?” Debbie added in a teasing voice, snickering behind

her cards.

“Deb!” Rakim laughed.

“Come on, Opal. We’ve got time to stage a comeback.”

“A comeback, huh? What’s the score, Doug?”

He peered at his paper beside him. “It’s not that bad. We’ve got two hundred fifty eight.”

“Uh-huh and they’ve got...?”

He smiled. “Four hundred twenty eight.”

Everyone around the table

laughed.

Pearl turned to Jake. “This game goes to five hundred, doesn’t it, honey?”

“Yup.”

Opal shook her head.

“Doug, sweetie, you’ve got some serious optimism going on over there.”

“We can turn this around.”

“Turn it around? They’ve set us twice, how are we supposed to do that?”

“Yeah, but we’ve beat them before. Besides, it ain’t over until

the fat lady sings.”

“Well, you can tell your fat lady that she’s on in five!” Rakim threw down a card slamming the table. “That’s our book, baby, and here are the two jokers so the last two are ours too! Bazing! Gimme some, girl!” He put his hands up and Debbie gave him two high fives laughing.

“Looks like we’ll be up soon, honey,” Pearl mentioned.

Jake chuckled as he filled a plate with hamburgers then brought the plate to the table,

sitting next to Rakim.

“Here you go. So, no one has any ideas what to do for my birthday next weekend? You know my older brother and sister are coming down to meet Pearl.” He smiled and pulled Pearl into his lap.

“Sounds like a good reason to party to me. What do you think, Doug? Shit! Was that your queen, baby? I didn’t know so I cut it.”

“It’s cool, we got the book. It’s still your turn,” Debbie said.

“Well, I’m down for

whatever. You guys know that,” Doug replied.

“Yeah, Jake. Why not have a party?” Opal suggested.

“I like that idea, too, this way you can cook,” Doug agreed.

Jake chuckled. “Shouldn’t someone else cook if it’s my birthday?”

Doug tossed a card to the table and shrugged. “All right, Jake, we’ll bring some stuff and slap it on the grill for you, but don’t be mad when it doesn’t taste as good as yours does.”

Rakim dropped his card on

top of Doug's. "We can bring some music and drinks. Right, baby?"

"That's fine with me."

"Sounds like the makings of a good party, Jake," Pearl said.

"All right then, but you guys know my sister has little kids, right? She and Robert have eight year old twin boys, a five year old boy and a baby girl. She'll be bringing them all."

"Shit!" Doug said slamming down his cards.

Rakim and Debbie jumped up with a loud *woo*, then did a

quick victory lap around the table.

“Well, I guess that means the fat lady is singing.” Jake laughed, pushing Pearl to her feet. “Come on, baby, let’s see if we can wipe that smug smile off of Rakim’s face.”

Later that night...

“Rakim, you can stop gloating now. Yes we won three games tonight, but we play every weekend. Our few wins don’t make a dent in the spankings we

get on the norm,” she reminded him on a chuckle, closing the door behind her.

“Don’t be kicking me off my happy cloud, woman. It felt good rubbing Doug’s face in the losers’ box for a change. Let me ride this one for a while.” He chuckled and sat in the corner of the couch.

“Fine.” Debbie sat at the other end of the sofa. “So when your little gloat-fest is over, what do we do?”

“Well, the only thing that can top off a winning night like

this is some bomb ass sex. So, if I had my way..." He smiled leaving his sentence unfinished.

"Is that right?"

"Uh-huh."

"That was amazingly subtle."

He smiled. "You like that? I'm all about subtlety."

Debbie giggled. "Yeah, it's so you."

Rakim nodded as his smile morphed into a devilish grin. "Yes, and I've been so very patient."

“Have you now?”

“Uh-huh,” he said and turned toward her.

“I guess you’d like to be rewarded for that patience, huh?” Debbie leaned back and let him cover her body.

“Oh yeah. I’d like that a lot.” He stopped at her face. “And so would you.”

She slipped her arms around his neck. “Hmm, your argument is sound, so...okay.”

His brows shot up. “What?”

“I like this grown up Rakim

I've been getting to know over the last couple of months and you're right. You have been patient while I got to know you."

"I suppose this isn't a good time for *I told you* so, huh?" he asked with a laughing grin.

She twisted her lips. "Shut up and kiss me."

Rakim obliged her. Grabbing a handful of hair, he pulled her head to the side to kiss down the long column of her throat. Her moans of desire mingled with his. Debbie's breathing quickened. Her hands

slid down his back to palm his butt as she grinded herself against his erection. He let out a staggered groan.

“Let me make love to you now, Debbie,” he breathed out huskily into her neck.

“No.”

The shock from her one word answer yanked him from his sex-induced daze like a bucket of cold water on his head. Rakim leaned up so quick he almost fell off her.

“Wha-? But, but you said
—“

Debbie smiled and touched his lips. “Allow me.”

Rakim’s jaw bobbed as he lost all communication skills. He stared blankly at her as she pushed his body backwards. She gave him a Cheshire cat grin and straddled his lap as he adjusted himself to lie back.

“Relax, Rakim. Your reward is coming right up.” she said, unbuttoning her shirt.

Speechless, he watched as her delicate fingers undid the buttons on her shirt. He gasped when the garment hit the floor,

but his gaze never left hers. Debbie reached behind her back to unclasp her bra then hovered over him to discard it. Rakim's breathing accelerated and his erection throbbed against her bottom. His hands shook as they rose hesitantly.

Debbie his fingers in her and pulled his hands up to her breasts. He took a deep breath and concentrated all his control not wanting to crush the perfectly formed orbs he held. His eyes fluttered closed. He exhaled, welcoming the warm feeling that engulfed his body.

When he felt Debbie touch him, his eyes popped open.

“Are you ready for what’s next?” she asked on a whisper, brushing her nose against his.

He nodded then licked his lips. “Yes, please.”

Debbie giggled and stood up. Unzipping her shorts she wiggled out of them and her panties, letting them both fall together. Rakim sprang to a sitting position and scooted back into the corner of the couch. Grinning like a fool, he quenched the urge to touch the

ring hanging from her bellybutton. Debbie posed for a moment then climbed onto the sofa onto his lap.

“Now that you have been granted access, what are you going to do?”

Looking up, Rakim swallowed loudly to stop himself from slurping. He dragged his face from her pelvis up to her chin as he pushed her back to her feet allowing him space to stand.

“Lay down on the couch,” he told her in a husky voice.

Debbie's brow rose and then she shrugged. She lay back, leaning on her elbows. "Oh, I see. You're gonna *stare* at me all night."

Rakim chuckled as he knelt beside her. "Look here, woman, you already kicked me off one cloud tonight. Can you just give me this one? I've waited a long time for this moment. I want to take my time and enjoy every second." He picked up her foot, massaged it for a few minutes then kissed it. "I want to make a good first impression so I get invited back."

“Well, you’re started off on the right *foot*,” Debbie said with a light laugh wiggling her toes.

Rakim paused to remove his clothes. “If you’re naked I might as well be naked, too. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable or anything.”

Debbie giggled and laid back.

Rakim lifted her leg resting it on his shoulder. Kissing his way up her thigh he took a deep sniff before diving into the honey pot before him.

“Oh my God, Rakim. That

feels so good.”

He let out a muffled chuckle. “Girl, you ain’t seen nothing yet. You about to wake my neighbors ‘cause I’m about to break out my A-game.”

Debbie let out a playful laugh that soon faded under Rakim’s administrations. He licked on and around her sensitive button of pleasure. Her taste was electrifying. It was everything he knew it would be and so worth the wait. He shoved his hands under her butt to massage he cheek. Debbie cried out and rode his probing

tongue to a wild eruption of satisfaction. She crushed his head with her legs, letting out a wail that left his cock throbbing with need. Rakim drank in her essence like a man with an unending thirst. He stayed in place unwilling to move even when her breathing returned to normal. Resting his head n her inner thigh he let out a sigh of contentment. Debbie's light laughter a short while later roused him.

“What?” he asked, lifting his head.

“You know, I think you

were right. I might *have* woke up a neighbor or two of yours.”

Rakim laughed then stood and pulled her to her feet. “Well, the night is young and I’ve got lots of neighbors, baby,” he said kissing her.

“Well, hell, we might as well wake them all!”

* * * *

Pearl plopped down on the couch beside him. “Okay, here’s the *final*, final draft. What started out as a small get together with just a handful of

people hasn't stop growing yet."

Jake chuckled. "It's not that bad is it?"

"Baby, we've been planning your party all week. It has gone from just the six of us with your brother and sister and her family." She put the paper down and counted her fingers. "Then it was us, them and the people from your shop, that's six more. Now the people from my shop are coming, too. Oh yeah and your stupid roommate. See, I ran out of fingers a long time ago," Pearl concluded wiggling her fingers.

“You know, we don’t have to have this party at all. I’ll be happy just spending the weekend with you, locked up in some nice little hotel room watching you dance for me in some cute little outfit. Just say the word, baby, and it can go all away,” he offered with a grin.

Pearl smiled. “I bet you would. No, Jake. It’s too late for all that. We can’t call everyone and cancel at the last minute.”

Jake rolled his eyes. “Huh, yes we can.”

“Oh no we can’t, but I’ll tell

you this, Mr. Thompson, my birthday won't be so complicated.”

His brow rose. “What are we doing for your birthday?”

“We’re just going to stay in my room and fuck all day long,” she said with a wink.

Jake burst into laughter. “Now that’s the kind of birthday I’m talking about! I love when you talk nasty like that.” He leaned her back on the couch and laid on top her. “Why didn’t I think of that for my birthday?”

Pearl gave him a smug

smile and slipped her arms around his neck. “Because you’re not as smart as I am, that's why.”

“Really? What if I get closer? Do you think some of your smarts will rub off on me?” He kissed her.

“That might work, but you’re going to have to get very close.”

Jake’s knees nudged against hers and her legs opened. “Is this close enough?”

“Mmm, that’s close, but I'm sure you can get closer.”

He kissed her, again,
grinding his pelvis to hers.
“How’s that?”

“Mmm. That’s nice. I like
that, but I’m sure you can do
better.”

“Yeah, I can, but in order to
get closer I’ll have to take you
out of these clothes,” he
whispered along her neck.

Pearl closed her eyes.
“Mmm, well, you gotta do what
you gotta do, Jakey.”

He nuzzled her neck. “Don’t
call me Jakey.”

She giggled. “You know you

like it.”

“You like it, huh? Does that mean that I can call you Jakey, too?”

Pearl and Jake looked toward the intruding voice.

“Joe, what are you doing here?” Jake asked in an annoyed tone.

“Same as always, man. I live here,” Joe said with a shrug.

“If he says that again I’m going to strangle him,” Pearl mumbled near his ear.

Jake smiled at her then

backed up to pull her into a sitting position. He turned narrowed eyes to his roommate.

“Joe, I swear, you’ve got to be the most cock blockingness mother fu—“

Pearl touched his knee stopping his rant. “Joe, I thought you and Michele were having dinner at her house. Did you do something stupid to piss her off...*again?*”

With mock shock, he grabbed his chest and plopped into the chair next to the couch. “Pearl, that was just plain

harsh.”

She twisted her lips. “Huh, is that a yes?”

He shrugged. “Something like that.”

Pearl rolled her eyes.

“She started talking about that commitment shit again. We’ve only been kicking it for, like, what, four months and she wants to be, like, the only one I see. I told her she could be my number one, why can’t she be satisfied with that?”

“Gee, Joe, I’m just as stumped as you are.”

Pearl's sarcasm was apparently lost on him. "See that, Jake. Pearl understands. Why can't all women be like your girl?"

Jake palmed his forehead and shook his head.

"I'm going to make a sandwich, you guys want something?" Joe asked standing.

"Yeah man, we want you to leave."

Joe laughed Jake's comment off and went in the kitchen. Jake turned to Pearl.

"You know I'm really

starting not to like that guy.”

“Now, now, sweetie, he’s your friend and he ain’t about the right.” She patted his leg. “Besides, you know we have to love the special people.”

“You know, I don’t even need a roommate. I was just trying help him out,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken.

“Mmm, how long as he been here?”

“Too damn long.” He wrapped his arms around his chest and slammed back on the

couch. Then a slow grin came to his face and he leaned toward her. “I can throw him out, make him find somewhere to go then we can pick up where we left off.”

Pearl gasped. “It’s pouring down raining, Jake. Besides, you know he’ll just come right back.”

“Uggh!” He slammed back again.

“Come on, we can go to my house.”

“You just said it’s raining.”

“You said that like we’re walking.”

“I shouldn’t have to leave my own house when I want some alone time with my girl,” he grumbled.

Pearl shrugged. “That’s a down side to having a roommate.”

“You guys don’t have that problem.”

“We used to, in the beginning, but we worked it out in time.”

“This is my house.” He palmed his chest. “If I want to make out with my woman on my couch, then I should be able to

do that. He knew we'd be here and he came back anyway. I never do that shit to him, but he always does it to us." His anger grew the more he spoke.

Joe interrupting their evening was becoming a bad habit of his. He has caught them in a few other compromising positions since the first night he found out about Pearl. Jake's eyes narrowed as the memory of Pearl screaming when Joe walked into the bathroom just as she stepped out the shower.

His timing was questionable then, but now...

“Perhaps it *is* time you said something to him about it.”

Pearl’s voice brought him back to the situation that just occurred.

“Mmm, hmm, you’re right, honey. Let me put a bug in his ear that we need to talk and then we can go to your house.”

“Real quick?”

Jake smiled. “Yeah, baby, real quick. I’ll talk to him about the whole thing later.” He kissed her forehead then hopped over the back of the couch. “While he’s packing his shit,” he

muttered, pushing the kitchen door open.

Joe looked up when he entered and bit into his sandwich. “What’s up, man? You changed your mind?”

Jake didn’t bother answering his question. Without a word, he walked across the room, slapped Joe hard on the back of his head and walked back out.

“Hey!”

* * * *

“So, this is it for me, huh?”

Opal tucked one leg beneath the other beside Roy. “Oh, don’t say it like that. You knew the rules coming in.”

“Yeah, yeah, all fun and no strings.” He leaned back on the couch and put his hand on her leg with a chuckle. “I gotta tell you ladies, you guys are going to be a hard act to follow. How do you expect me to be happy with just *one* female when I’ve had the two of you for so long?”

Opal shrugged. “Don’t know, Roy. Guess you’re going to have to find you a Jedi knight.”

“A Jedi knight?”

Debbie chuckled. “Yeah, that’s what Chica calls a woman who’s so good in bed that she can still control your mind and body even when she's not there.”

“Oh. So I guess you guys are Jedi’s then, huh?”

“What do you think?” Opal asked with a raised brow.

Roy looked between the two of them and laughed. He finished his drink then refilled his glass. “Damn. I’m going to miss you, guys. When can I come back?”

Debbie shrugged. “I don’t

think you can come back. I like Rakim. He's turning out to be better than I gave him credit for."

He sighed and turned to Opal. "And you? How's your boy treating you?"

Opal smiled. "I like him. He's very sweet and he's no punk."

Roy nodded and took another long drink from his glass. "So how come neither of you wanted to keep me?"

"Oh, come on. When we met you last year at that wedding

Debbie was in you were hitting on both of us. You were going for the threesome and you got it.”

Debbie nodded as she mixed another drink for herself. “That’s right, so don’t pout.”

He gulped down his drink and poured another. “Actually, when we met I was just talking shit, but then you guys put me in a *put up or shut up* position. Hell, I’ve been just winging it ever since just waiting around hoping to get an invitation to come back,” he confessed on a laugh.

“Stop being such a baby about this. It’s been months since we last called you. We should be out of your system already by now.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. It’s over. I need another drink.” He emptied his glass in one loud gulp and snatched the bottle of the table. “Damn, it’s gone already? I’ll get the other bottle of gin I brought.”

“Hi guys. What’s up?” Pearl said a short while later.

Opal and Debbie leaned over the back of the couch.

“Hey, little sister. Hi Jake. What’s up with you guys?”

Debbie raised her glass to them, giggling.

“Well, you guys look like you’re having a good time.”

“We’re having a blast, Jake.”

Opal and Debbie sat down at the same time then looked at one another giggling uncontrollably.

“You guys carry on with your little celebration. Jake and I will be upstairs having our own party.”

“This ain’t no celebration! It’s a *good-bye* party,” Roy said with slurring words.

“Uh, okay. Thanks Roy.” She pulled Jake pass them to the stairs.

"Goodbye party?" Jake asked.

"Don't ask."

“Yeah, don’t worry about who I am. I won’t exist in a few minutes,” Roy shouted as they ascended. “So, how about one last time, before you guys kick me to the curb?” he said nudging Opal. “You know, a one

for the road kind of thing.

Opal's brow rose. "Are you crazy?"

Debbie shook her head vigorously. "No way, Roy. Chica's right. You're cancelled. Now come on, it's getting late, so you should be going."

She stood, but he snatched her back down.

"Hey!"

"Come on. One more time," he insisted.

"No, Roy, it's time for you to go. We told you, this threesome

thing was all good, but as soon as we found somebody permanent it would be over.”

Opal gulped down the rest of her drink. “I’ll tell you what. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll give you a call.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have a problem doing that, but not if you keep acting the way you’re acting,” Debbie said scooting away from him.

Roy leaned forward to rest on his knees. “What if I don’t want to leave?”

“You don’t have a choice,”

Opal told him.

“Roy, you’re losing more cool points by the minute. It really is getting late. You have to go.”

Debbie patted his knee and pulled him to his feet.

“I said I don’t want to go.” His voice was angry as he yanked his arm away from her then grabbed her arm roughly.

“Roy! What are you doing? Let her go!” Opal pulled at his arms.

He turned and swung back hard, slapped Opal backwards.

Stunned by the blow she hit the couch then bounced to the floor.

Debbie struggling to free her arm, but his grip tightened. He yanked her other arm to him and threw her roughly to the other end of the couch then jumped on top of her.

“Roy! Stop it!” she shouted beating his chest.

“Come on, my little Latin lover, don’t be like this. I’ll do that thing that you like,” he slurred in her ear, leaving wet droplets behind.

Opal jumped on to his back

with a roar. Roy held Debbie down by her neck then turned to palm Opal's face. Shoving her hard she fell on top of the coffee table knocking over the glasses and drinks.

“Chica! Oh God!” she choked out.

“Don't worry, Goddess Opal, you're *next*,” Roy told her, his voice dripping with ice. He turned his attention back to Debbie. “So, where were we?” A sinister grin split his face.

“Roy, don't do this.” She pushed against the arm that

was crushing her throat.

“I don’t understand why you are fighting me. It’s not like I’m asking you to do something we haven’t all ready done.”

“But we said no, Roy.”

“But why? I’m just asking for one more time.” He released her neck to roughly grab and pinch her breasts.

Debbie swatted his hands away, but the pain of his attempts slowed her words.

“Roy, listen to me, please. If you stop now we can chalk this up to you having a drunken fool

moment and we can still have some kind of friendship in the morning, but if you don't—“

“If I don't, *what?* Huh? What can you and Opal really do?”

His harsh laugh sent a chill down her back.

“We can start by doing this!” Opal said behind him. Debbie saw a grey blur hit the side of his head with a dull thud. He fell on top of her, bleeding heavily and out cold.

“Quick Deb, push him off. Don't let him bleed on the

couch.”

Opal yanked while she pushed and Roy hit the floor with a heavy thump. Debbie scrambled to her feet and stood beside her friend.

“Don't let him bleed on the couch? *The couch?* It's okay for him to bleed all over me, but you're more worried damn couch?” Debbie screeched indicating her blood covered t-shirt.

“Hey, we can wash you and we can even clean the carpet, but the couch, well, that would

be a little more difficult. I'm just saying."

Debbie rolled her eyes then looked down at Roy. "You think he's dead?"

"I don't know. Are you okay?"

"Me? I'm just a little shook up. What about you? He slapped you over the coffee table." She turned Opal's face left to right.

She shrugged. "My lip is busted though." She licked her lips. "I can taste blood. Other than that I'm fine."

"I think you're cheek is

going to bruise too.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine.”

“What the hell got into him?”

Opal chuckled. “Don’t know? Maybe the thought of missing out on such good sex drove him crazy.”

Debbie turned a raised brow to her. “How can you be joking at a time like this? This fool just slapped you around and tried to rape me. Bastard,” she added kicking him hard in the side.

Opal shrugged. “If I don’t

laugh, I'll cry."

Debbie sighed. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Well, we've got to get him out of here, I know that. He's making an ugly stain on the carpet."

"I'm just glad Pearl and Jake were too busy doing their own thing to hear anything going on down here."

"Oh shit, I forgot Pearl was here. We really have to get him out of here. I have no desire to explain why we killed this fool."

Debbie turned a laughing

grin to her. “We? You hit him with the frying pan?”

“Whatever. Grab his feet.”

Debbie picked up his discarded flip-flops and put them on Roy’s chest. They struggled to carry his six foot two frame dropping his body several times on the way to the kitchen. Opal picked up a t-shirt from the floor near the washing machine as they passed it.

“What’s that for?” Debbie asked.

“I’m going to wrap his head in it.”

Debbie's head tilted as they continued to the back door.

“I don't want him bleeding all over the seats in my car, too,” Opal explained. “It's bad enough we'll be up all night cleaning up that spot off the living room floor and this trail through the house, I don't want to explain to the carwash where there's blood in my car.”

Debbie nodded seeing her point. She looked behind her at the smeared line leading from the house to the car and sighed. Opal was right. They would be up most of the night cleaning.

Opal went around the car to pull Roy across the back seat as she pushed. It took time to get in. Exhausted, Debbie slammed the back door, but it bounced open. She opened the front door to get in, but turned with a raised brow. Debbie looked through the window to see if Roy was awake and maybe kicked the door open, but he looked asleep. She gave the door a harder swing, but the same thing happened.

“What are you doing, Deb? Close the damn door. Let's go!” Opal said from the driver's seat.

Debbie made a face at her

and shut the front door. Putting her hands on the glass, Debbie pressed with all her might to close the door, but it wouldn't shut. Breathing hard, she grabbed the handle and pressed her shoulder into the door leaning with all her weight into. It still didn't close. Finally she took a step back and pulled the door open. Her eyes grew wide and a shocked breath escaped her when she looked inside.

“Uh-oh.”

Opal leaned over the seat to look into the back. “What?”

“Umm, we didn't push his legs in good enough. His right foot was sticking out and I slammed it in the door.”

Opal burst into an uncontrollable laughter.

“Opal! This is not funny.” Debbie made a face as she looked at the swelling appendage. Two large lumps were where his ankle should be. Long purple red spots darkened on the top and sides of his foot. There was no real shape to his foot and all the toes were the same size. She bit her bottom lip. “I think it might be broken.”

She laughed harder.

Debbie huffed. “Will you at least help me get him in the car?”

Opal was unable to stifle her laughter, but she walked around the car to help. They shoved Roy's legs into the car wedging his banged up foot against the small triangle window near the back window. Opal returned to the driver's side as Debbie slipped into the car.

“So where are we taking him?”

“Shit, I don’t know,” Opal said with a chuckle. “I just aimed for the closest car to get him out the house.”

“Well, I don’t know either, Chica!” She peeped over the seat. “Do you think he’s dead?”

“Didn’t you check?”

“When the hell did I check? When we were dragging him? Can you just check the man, for Pete’s sake?” Debbie snapped.

Opal held the steering wheel staring at her.

“What, Chica? What now?”

She smiled. "You're a mean drunk, you know that?"

"You're still cracking jokes? You're a crazy ass drunk," she said with chuckle. "Just check him."

Opal leaned between the seats. "Well, he's still bleeding. It's soaking the shirt and getting on my damn seats," she reported then returned to her seat. "That's a good sign, isn't it? You can't bleed if you're dead."

"I don't think so."

"Hmm, maybe I should crack him again," she said

through renewed laughter.

“You really are crazy.
Drive.”

Opal laughed harder and started the car. She turned on the radio and bobbed her head to the music. After a while she turned down the music.

“Hey Debbie, I've got an idea.”

Debbie groaned. “Why does that scare me?”

"Let's take him to Oliver's.”

Debbie looked at her.
“*Oliver's*? You mean the

winery?"

"Yup."

Opal looked between her and the road for long moments. Debbie's brow rose.

"Do I really have to ask?"

Opal smiled. "Well, I just figured that after having such a bad night when Roy finally gets up he's definitely going want a drink. So, what better place to leave him?"

Debbie's jaw dropped as she stared into Opal's laughing grin. Suddenly they burst into simultaneous laughter as Opal

turned to follow the exit signs to winery.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After a long work day, Opal

and Debbie sat half asleep in the living room.

“We can’t just lay here, Chica.”

“Oh yeah, why not?”

“Because we’re already sore it will just get worst if we don’t do something.”

Opal lifted her head from the back of the chair to look at her friend. “What would be your suggestion, *Debra*?”

Debbie frowned at her. “Nothing too strenuous.”

Opal twisted her lips and

flipped her hand expectantly.

“How about we just give ourselves a manicure? That’ll make you feel better.”

Opal lifted her hand inspecting her fingers and then shrugged. “Yeah they can use a little sprucing up.”

Debbie left the couch to retrieve a basket filled with nail polishes, oils, pumice rocks, lotion, files and toe separators. She moved the coffee table back and tested the spot for dampness before sitting and doing each other’s fingers. After a

while the front door opened then closed.

“Hi Pearl!” Opal called out.

“Hey,” Debbie greeted when Pearl entered the room.

“Hi guys. Whoa, you guys look like death warmed over,” Pearl said leaning over the sofa.

“Yeah, well, we had a rough night,” Debbie said shaking a bottle of polish.

“*Rough?* When I came through here you guys were feeling no pain.” She chuckled and sat in the chair.

“Well, a little later in the evening we definitely felt some pain.”

Her head tilted. “What does that mean?”

Opal turned to face her. Pearl leaned forward to inspect her closely.

“Oh my God! Opal, what happened?”

Debbie moved over making room for Pearl to sit on the couch. She left sat between them, turning her sister’s face side to side.

“It’s nothing major. I’m fine.

We just had a small disagreement with Roy.”

“I didn’t hear any arguing?”

“Well, I don’t remember there being much *arguing*. Besides, you were a little too preoccupied with your own business to be eavesdropping on us.” She winked at her.

“We?” She turned to Debbie. “What did he do to you?”

“Some bruises here and there, but I’m all right.”

Debbie lifted her arm. Finger sized, dark spots were apparent on her biceps. She

pulled the front of her shirt down to expose similar marks on her breasts.

“Don’t worry about it, Pearl. We took care of it,” her sister said.

“*Really?*” Pearl crossed her arms over her chest. “What did you do?”

“Let’s get dinner started and we’ll tell you all about it. I tried to eat something at lunch and it burned the hell out of my lip. I’m starving.”

During dinner, Debbie and Opal told Pearl about their

experience with Roy. When the cleaning was done, they went back to the living room where they worked on Pearls fingers together.

“I thought Roy was your friend as well as your threesome guy. That’s why you kicked it with him for so long.”

Debbie shook a bottle of clear polish. “Yeah, we thought that, too, but it seems he thought we owed him something when the relationship came to an end.”

“You’re not concerned

about him being angry behind this?”

Opal finished painting Pearl's pinky then blew on each finger. “He'll be alright.”

Debbie twisted the top loose on the polish. “Here Chica. Start on this side while I grab the wine from the refrigerator. We can finish it while we do each other's pedicures.”

“Thanks, but I'll do my own pedicure,” she said moving over.

Pearl chuckled.

Debbie shook her head as she left the room. She returned

quickly with three glasses and the bottle.

“Chica, you need to let that foot thing you have go.”

“It’s not a foot thing. I just like doing my own feet.”

“You know she’s always had issues with feet, Deb,” Pearl said waving her right hand while Opal polished the left.

“I don’t have foot *issues*. I just don’t like doing feet.”

Debbie put the bottle and glasses on the coffee table.

“Sounds like the same thing to me. Okay, Chica, tell me this

then, if all the techs were busy doing manicures and someone came in for a pedicure, what would you do?" she asked filling their glasses.

"I'd pull one of them off the manicure to do the pedicure and I would finish the manicure myself," she answered readily accepting the glass Debbie handed her.

Pearl burst into laughter. "That sure sounds like an issue to me." Pearl gingerly touched the fingers on her right hand then took the drink from Debbie.

“You would go through all that?” Deb asked.

“What part of *I don't do feet* don't you get?” She repeated on a laugh then reached for the phone. “Hello.”

“You know you guys were wrong for leaving me out there in no-man's land with a cracked skull and a broken foot. How the hell did you expect me to get back to the city?”

Though she immediately knew who was speaking, the soft, rich sounds of the voice she was used to were not there. In

its place were hard, cold tones.

“Yeah, well, that wasn’t our concern at the time. You got what you deserved,” she answered unaffected.

“No, I didn’t, but *you* will.”

Opal rolled her eyes. “Ooo, I’m shaking in my boots,” said before ending the call.

“Who was that?” Pearl asked.

“Roy. He didn’t sound too happy about the drop off location we chose for him last night,” she said in a casual tone. “But like I said he’ll be alright. Now, pass

me the Egyptian musk oil so I can soak my feet and get my pedicure started before one of you try to touch my feet.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Happy birthday, little brother!”

Barbara’s ebony hair bounced around his shoulders as she crushed Jake in a hug.

“Thanks sis.”

“Uncle Jake, Uncle Jake!”

Identical twins boys with the same black hair grabbed him from both sides.

“Hey guys! Look at how big you are.”

Robert came up behind them, pushing a stroller and holding the hand of a smaller boy.

“Hey, Jake. Happy birthday, man.”

“Thanks, Robert.” He slapped him five.

“Okay guys, let him go of your uncle and go inside.”

“Yea!” The twins ran off.

“I’ll stay with them, honey.”

“Thanks, Robert.” Barbara pulled Jake into the living room. “So, where is your Pearl? She’s

here, right?" she asked sitting.

"She's here, but at the store with her sister and Debbie."

"Is Frank coming to the party? You did invite him, didn't you?"

"No, Barbara, I didn't invite him. I'm not going to have him here talking crazy to my girl, her sister or my friends."

She nodded. "I understand, but you guys are going to have to work this out sooner or later. You're brothers and technically, Jake, this is his house too," she added softly.

“No, it’s not, Barbara. Mom may have left it to both of us, but Frank didn’t want to live here. When he moved out I bought him out. I figured if I was the only one living here paying on the bills doing all the work to keep the house up, I might as well be the only one owning it. I paid him half of what the house was worth.”

“Hmm, that sounds like Frank all right. But Jake, you’re still brothers. So please, try to make the peace... for me, okay?”

He sighed. “Okay, I’ll call him tomorrow.”

Barbara patted his knee and smiled. “That’s all I ask. Now, let’s go track down the boys before they harass your friends to death. Robert can’t keep the little ones *and* the twins under control for too long.”

“Hi, baby.” Pearl kissed Jake. “The crew from the shop showed up right behind us,” she said thumbing behind her.

“That’s cool. A few people from my job are already here. My

sister and her family are here, too. They showed up a little while ago. Let me flip these burgers and I'll take you to meet her."

He pulled her pass Rakim and Doug as they swung one of the twins back and forth by his hands and feet.

"Guys can you keep an eye on the grill for me while you do that?" He chuckled. "You do know that one came in a pair? You break him you brought him."

"We got you, Jake. We can

do two things at once.”

“Don’t worry about it. Besides, they’re very flexible at this age.” Rakim said.

Barbara came toward them as they walked in the back door.

“You must be Pearl.” She extended her hand. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Hi, Barbara. I hope it wasn’t all bad.” She chuckled.

“Not at all. I’d like to meet your sister and your friend as well if that’s all right. Jake can you give us a minute? I want to talk to your girlfriend alone.”

“Sure.”

Jake kissed Pearl's cheek and left them. She and Pearl talked for a moment and then went towards the kitchen. Opal and Debbie filled a tray with shish kabobs and corn.

“Guys, this is Jake's older sister Barbara. Barbara this is Debbie and my sister Opal,” Pearl said pointing to them in turn.

“I'm so happy to meet you girls. Between you and Pearl, you've made my brother very happy.”

Opal looked at Debbie. “Us? What’d we do?”

“You guys brought Doug and Rakim in his life. Jake was such a shy kid growing up. He ran track and was on the swim team, but never really socialized. Even if it doesn’t work between the four of you, he’ll still have them as friends.”

“Well, I hope it *does* work out between the four of us. I mean, I can’t speak for Chica, but, I’d—“

“Chica? Who’s Chica?”

“Sorry, I mean Opal.”

“You call her Chica. That’s so sweet. What do you call Pearl?”

Debbie looked at Pearl and shrugged. “I call Pearl...Pearl.”

Barbara laughed. “All right then. So, you’d like it to work between you and Rakim, huh?”

“Yeah. He’s not nearly as bad as he used to be when we were in school. In fact, he’s very close to being great,” Debbie admitted with a light laugh.

“That’s wonderful. How’s the sex?”

Debbie’s jaw dropped and

she looked wide eyed at Opal and Pearl. “Barbara! I don’t think I know you well enough to talk about my sex life.”

Pearl chuckled. “She asked me the same thing.”

“Oh. Well in that case, girl, it’s the bomb! We did it last week for the first time and I’ve been jumping on him every chance I get ever since. He’s adapting to me like gold fish in a new tank.” She laughed.

“Well, that’s a plus. A man can have a job, a car and his own place, too, but if he isn’t

compatible in bed..." Barbara sputtered. "It won't last long." She chuckled then quickly held up her hand. "Now don't get me wrong, girls. I'm not saying you don't have to have all that other stuff, too. You don't want to be teaching him everything, but he's got to come to the table with some kind of skill." She turned to Opal. "Do you have that?"

"Yeah, but just like Debbie and Rakim, we're just getting into each other like that. He shows a lot of potential and has a never ending thirst for the knowledge of satisfying me."

Opal laughed.

“I like you girls. I think Pearl will be good for my brother and you girls are good for Pearl.” Barbara hugged each of them. “Now, let’s get back outside to the party.”

* * * *

Frank glared at the clock in his truck. Another hour had gone by and more cars pulled up to Jake’s house. He reached into the cooler on the passenger seat and pulled a beer free from a six pack ring. Emptying the can in

four gulps, he tossed it through the window to a pile accumulating in the cab.

As the evening went on an electric blue Delta 88 drove pass. He admired the car, but became confused when it did a u-turn and then parked two houses down from Jake's house. Frank squinted out the window, but couldn't make out the driver. He pushed the door open and staggered across the street toward it.

"Who the hell are you?" he slurred into the window of the blue car.

The driver jumped at his sudden arrival. “What the—? Who the hell are *you*?”

“I’m Frank,” he said thumbing his chest. “That’s my brother’s house you’re scoping out. So, who the hell are *you*?”

“Oh. Well, look Frank, I ain’t got no beef with your brother. I’m just waiting on the two bitches that live with his girl to come out.”

Frank leaned on the roof of the car rocking slightly. “Why?”

“Because them bitches hit me in the head with a cast iron

pan that gave me five stitches and broke my damn foot! Then they dumped me in a winery down south with no way home, that's why."

Frank looked pass the man into the car. His foot was incased in a black medical boot resting on the hump between the seats. He sputtered, spitting on the other man's arm. "So how'd you get back to the city then?"

He wiped his arm off, frowning. "How do you think, man? I crawled around screaming my ass off until someone heard me."

“Damn! That’s fucked up. Why would they do that to you?”

The driver let out an exasperated breath. “We were fooling around off and on for the last year and when then out of nowhere they dumped me for Jake’s buddies.”

Frank’s head rested on the window’s edge. “His buddies?”

The man’s his brow rose. “Yeah man. He’s your brother and you don’t know his boys?”

Frank stared at him for long moments then stood upright. “So, wait a minute, let me see if I

got this. You've been fucking the other black girl? The sister?"

He nodded.

"And the Spanish chick, too? You've been doing them both? At the same time?"

"Damn, man, it ain't that hard to work out."

Frank massaged his forehead and then, without warning, he punched the guy in the face through the window. He yanked open the car door and snatched the man out throwing him to the ground. Frank unleashed a barrage of blows to

his head and face. When the man raised his arms to protect himself, Frank kicked him in every other opened areas. His screams went unanswered and then finally died down. When he was silent Frank dragged him across the street and threw him over the side of the truck bed. He spit over the side on him and slid down to the ground leaning on the tire to catch his breath.

“Now, a word with my little brother.”

* * * *

Jake laughed pleasantly as he and his friends played their card game. Just as he dropped his card Joe tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey man, isn’t that Frank?”

Jake looked over his shoulder. Frank stood at his back gate. His face was red. Sweat glistened on his brow and spit on his mouth made his lips shine in the light. He held the wooden door and rocked slightly as it moved back and forth. Frank’s red eyes and demeanor told Jake he had been drinking

to excess. He rolled his eyes and dropped his cards.

“Frank, what are you doing here?” he asked rising to his feet.

“Why couldn’t you just listen to me, Jake?”

“What are you talking about, Frank?”

“Jake, don’t do this. You know what that *woman* did to me. Yours is going to do the same thing.”

“Frank, Pearl has nothing to do with what your girl did to you. You’ve got to let this go.”

“They’re all the same. They say they love you, but they don’t. They just *use* you and when they’re done they *discard* you. Just ask them. Your girl friend’s sister and friend. They know what I’m talking about.”

Opal and Debbie gasped as all eyes turned to them.

“Don’t you know? Some guy in a bright blue car was watching your house. He said he was waiting for those bitches that lived with your girl to come out.”

Opal and Debbie exchanged

a look. Opal gaze shifted to the stunned look on her sister's face then to the confused gaze in Doug's eyes.

“He said he's been fucking both of them for the last year,” Frank continued. “He also said the kicked him to the curb when they didn't want him anymore, broke his fucking foot and then dumped him down south,” he slurred and wiped his mouth.

This time Rakim and Doug gasped. Opal cringed at Frank's words.

“They took what they

wanted from him and then they got rid of him.” He palmed the fence to help steady himself.

“Can’t you see what’s happening? Your girl friend is no different. She’ll do the same to you.” He staggered closer.

Jake scowled. “You’re wrong, Frank. I don’t what you’re talking about with Opal and Debbie, but true or not it doesn’t mean Pearl will do the same to me. As far as Nicole goes she did what was best for her because you sucked as a boyfriend.”

“You’re delusional. Women

are lying, scheming, conniving creatures. We all would be better off without them.”

Jake walked closer to Frank with his palm on his chest.

“*Seriously?* You think *I’m* the delusional one? I remember when Nicole used to call and complain to me all the time. Why does your brother be like that, Jake? Doesn’t he trust me, Jake? Why does he talk to me like that, Jake? Barbara and I told her that marriage was a big step and she should take the time to be sure. She couldn’t make either of you happy if she

wasn't happy."

Frank's eyes narrowed as he stared at his brother. Spit flew from his lips as his breathing accelerated.

"You guys were broke up for months before she started seeing her new boyfriend."

Frank stumbled forward holding his head, shaking it profusely. "You just don't understand, do you, Jake? I'm trying to protect you from what happened to me! Stop you from making the same mistakes I did." Frank reached inside his

pocket and removed a gun. “I can’t let you do it, Jake. Women can’t be trusted. None of them!”

Jake held his hands up. “Frank, you’re my brother. Are you really going to shoot me?”

“I don’t want to, Jake. I want to protect you. You have to get them before they get you and the ones that have already hurt you should be punished.”

There was a collective intake of breath from all around. Jake looked around at his guests then turned a raised brow back to his brother.

“Punished? What are you saying, Frank?”

Frank staggered a little closer wiping his mouth. “I went over there that night. I just wanted to talk some sense into her, but Nicole wouldn’t listen. She just kept on walking to the car where *he* was. That Tyrone guy. I asked him to give us a minute, but *she* told him to drive. They left me standing there looking stupid. So I followed them, uh-huh, drove right next to them. He kept moving over, trying to move away from me.” Frank raked his

fingers through his hair then waved his arms frantically.

“He could’ve stopped for five minutes so I could talk to her, but did he? No! He kept right on going. It wasn’t my fault that he... I mean, we came up on the turn so fast that I didn’t see it either.”

Shocked gasps and murmurs filled the yard.

“Frank,” Jake said on a stunned breath.

“I backed up when I heard the crash. I didn’t just drive away,” Frank rushed out. “I

thought if I could get her out the car I could finally talk to her.” Frank rubbed his forehead. “She was supposed to be my wife....”

“Do you hear what you’re saying, Frank? You killed Nicole. You ran them off the road into that tree.”

“No! Tyrone was driving. *He* killed her. It was different when I tried to help James.”

“James? Your boss?”

“He wouldn’t listen either. We were supposed to go out for a drink after work, but James blew me off. He said he had a

better offer and would see me later. I wanted to know what the better offer was so I followed him to the hotel he was in downtown.”

Opal gasped. Her hand went to her mouth. Debbie turned tear filled eyes to her.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt him. I was trying to save him. James was my friend, but— She was screaming... he tried to grab the gun...it went off...everything happened so fast...” Frank recalled shaking his head.

Jake turned around. Opal

saw comprehension in his eyes when he looked at them. Pearl and Debbie held her hands. Tears fell from their eyes. Jake scoffed and faced his brother again.

“Save him? You *killed* him, Frank! You need help, dude.”

Frank jumped back. “What? Why? I’m not crazy, but it seems like everyone around me is. I thought you would come to your senses after that girl left you.”

“No, Frank, I love her,” Jake shouted. “I wanted her to come back and I sure didn’t

want her blaming me because my brother was acting like a lunatic.”

Frank’s face screwed up. “Jack’s brother said the same thing about him.”

Jake looked confused, but Frank continued.

“I figured everybody I knew couldn’t be crazy so I went looking for Jack so we could have a drink, but he wasn’t home. His brother said Jack had a new girl and he had taken her out to dinner. Can you believe that shit? And he was supposed

be a confirmed bachelor!”

Jake’s chest deflated. “Oh God, Frank. Rachel’s new boyfriend name was Jack. Are you saying you killed them, too?”

“What?”

Barbara stood at the patio door wide eyed.

“What are you saying Jake? What the hell is going on out here?” she shrieked.

“Barbara, wait,” Jake said holding a hand up. “Stay there.”

“Frank! What are you doing with that gun?” Barbara moved

across the yard undeterred
eying her brothers. “Jake?
Frank? Someone better tell me
what the hell is going on,” she
yelled.

Frank’s voice cracked when
he addressed his older sister.
“Barbara, I—I— I can’t let him
do this.” Sudden tears appeared
in his eyes as he lifted the gun.
“You always said I had to protect
my little brother.”

Barbara scanned the area
then shook her head. “Frank,
no...”

“I—I can’t let him do it.”

“Don’t do this, Frank. There is nothing to protect me from,” Jake said.

“Jake—“ Frank started then pulled the trigger.

“NO!”

The shout rose in unison from voices all around the yard, seconds after the gun shot. An eerie silence filled the area only to be broken moments later by muffled crying. Robert burst through the back door shortly afterwards.

“What the hell is going on? Barbara!” He ran to his wife’s

side. “Oh God. Barbara, you’re bleeding! Is this a gunshot wound?” He pulled her off of Frank’s body and into his lap. “What happened?” he yelled frantically gazing around.

Frank lay where he fell staring blankly at the night sky. Opal and Debbie pulled her sister away from Jake.

“Someone better tell me what the hell happened out here. My wife is laying here bleeding!” Robert shouted near hysterics. He looked around the yard again. “Jake. Oh my God. What’s wrong with Jake? What

happened to her? Which one is that? Opal? Pearl?”

“It’s Pearl, Robert,” Debbie confirmed. “Frank came over and went crazy. He shot them. Pearl and Barbara.”

“Frank shot— What?” Robert looked down at Barbara. “Oh God, I have to stop the bleeding.” He snatched at his shirt popping the buttons as he pulled it off. Shoving it beneath her he inspected her closely. “There’s, there’s a hole...” His voice cracked as he looked her over. “It’s on both sides.” He readjusted Barbara’s torso to

hold the shirt in place on the back. “Baby, you’re going be okay.”

“Robert...please...” Barbara cried softly, wheezing between words. Her large blue eyes were clouded with pain when she spoke again. “Jake...” Her hand barely lifted from the ground as she pointed across the grass.

“Jake? Oh, yes, I don’t know, baby. His friend’s have him.”

Rakim and Doug moved Jake’s limp body to lie across Rakim’s lap. Rakim removed his

shirt and shoved under Jake's head.

“How is he?” Robert asked.

“He's kind of in and out, man. We didn't want to—”

“Oooh,” Jake groaned.
“What happened?”

“You're bleeding all over my damn shirt, that's what's happening,” Rakim told him with a forced smile, but it faded quickly. “But, for real man, there's good news and umm, some bad news, too.”

Jake squeezed his eyes tight and forced his words out.

“Tell me.”

“Well, your brother—”

Jake nodded and then grimaced. “He shot me.”

Rakim tapped his shoulder. “Stay still dude.”

“My head hurts like hell. Did he shoot me in the head?”

“No. You’re not shot. Frank tried to shoot you, but uh, Doug and I snatched you backwards, out the way.”

Jake’s hand went to his head then hovered in front of his face. “Ahh! Shit! I’m bleeding.

You sure I'm not shot?"

"Yes, we're sure, but that's where the bad news comes in. When we pulled you backwards we threw your ass into the grill and busted your head open...but that's better than being shot, right?" he added quickly.

He nodded then gasped and winced again. "Who's crying? Where's Pearl?"

"Umm, that's part of the bad news, Jake. Instead of you getting Frank nailed your sister and Pearl when they tried to push you out the way," Doug

replied.

“What? No! Ahh!” Jake rolled off Rakim’s lap onto the ground. Blood streamed down his neck. “Pearl, baby, where are you?”

Debbie snatched the shirt from Rakim and knelt next to Jake. “Jake, please you’re bleeding badly. You have to stop moving.”

“Debbie, help me,” he pleaded, his voice exhausted and pained. “I have to get to Pearl. She’s hurt.”

He crawled unsteadily

making pained noises as Debbie guided him to Pearl's side.

“Oh God, Jake. What are doing? You're going to bleed to death,” Opal chastised. “Debbie, get me something else. The blood is just pouring through my fingers,” the words stuck in her throat as the tears streamed down her face.

Doug pulled his t-shirt off. “Here, baby, here.”

Jake rested his head on Pearl's leg breathing hard. “Pearl, baby, are you okay? Please say something.”

Pearl licked her lips and swallowed. “Jake...honey... I’m here. I’m, mmm, I’m...” Obvious pain stopped her speech. “Opal...” she called on a gasp.

“Yes. Jake, she’s shot somewhere in the back, I can’t really tell where, but it hurts like hell. Pearl, he’s got a big ass hole in the back of his head and he refuses to lie still.”

“Jake...please ...stop moving.” Her words were strained as she cried harder.

“Jake? Oh, no. Jake!” Debbie screamed. “Rakim, he’s

not moving.”

Rakim rolled him over and touched his chest.

“Is he okay? He’s not...”

Rakim shook his head. “No, Debbie, but he passed out,” he said quickly.

Joe appeared by their side, breathing hard. “I called 911, guys, they’re on the way. Frank don’t look too good. How’s Jake?”

“He’s not good either. He passed out and he’s still bleeding.”

“Hey, you hear that?” Doug

said.

“That’s the Calvary,” Rakim said. “Baby go out front and show them the way back here.”

* * * *

“If you’re up to it, Rakim and Doug want to come by and see you,” Opal said opening the door to their home.

“Opal, I’m not handicapped. I’m okay, just sore.”

“You are far from fine, sister dear. You’ve spent the last two weeks in the hospital,” Opal reminded her. “The doctor said

you still won't have full use of your arm again for at least another three months."

"They did have to almost reconstruct your shoulder from scratch, Pearl," Debbie added.

"And you still need lots of physical therapy," Opal pointed out beating and cushion on the couch.

Pearl sat on the couch holding her sling steady. "All right, I get it. Just don't treat me like a cripple."

Debbie eased onto the sofa beside her.

“Have you guys checked on Barbara?”

Opal sat in the chair. “Yes, Pearl, she’s just as *okay* as you are. The doctor said she needs another surgery, but once he gives her the okay she can go back to Fishers to do the therapy. The commute from Fishers to Indianapolis is killing Robert.”

“You sent her the get well card from us, right?” She rubbed on her sore arm.

“Yes, Pearl. We sent a card, balloons, books, we sent her a

whole damn basket,” Opal said on a chuckle.

“We sent her a thank you card, too.”

Pearl turned to Debbie. “A thank you card? Why a thank you card?”

Debbie chuckled. “She saved your life, Pearl. Indirectly, of course, but we still. The doctor said the bullet slowed down when it hit her first. Unfortunately the gun he used still tore through her causing damage to both of you.”

“Could you imagine the

injuries a Dirty Harry type gun would have done? That thing's a freaking cannon," Opal said. "It would have you both for sure."

Pearl winced making slow circles on her shoulder.

"Barbara is going to have one hell of a scar when they're done fixing her up."

"Yeah, my scar will be a sight too when I'm all healed up."

"The drugs are wearing off, huh? I'll get your medicine," Opal leaving her chair.

"Have you talked to the

guys lately, Deb?”

She sighed. “Well, they’ve been kinda ducking us. They won’t return our calls. Whenever we saw them at the hospital they wouldn’t say but a few words to us.”

“Didn’t you explain things about Roy that night?”

“There really wasn’t time for that, Pearl. Everything happened so fast. Chica was in the ambulance with you and I jumped in my car to follow. The guys stayed at the house with the kids. The police showed up

at the hospital later that night to question us about Roy. They found him in the back of Frank's truck. He had broken ribs, a broken jaw, busted lip, loose teeth, bruises galore and he needed some stitches, too." She shrugged. "Apparently Frank whooped his ass first then came inside to deal with Jake."

Opal handed Pearl a cup of juice and her pills. "You're telling her about that night, huh?"

Debbie nodded.

"Yeah, that was one hell of

an evening. Where were you, Deb?”

“The cops found Roy.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Why didn’t you guys tell me this stuff before?”

“You had enough to worry about after your surgery,” Opal said with a shrug. “We just decided to wait until you were better.”

Pearl shook her head. She popped her pills and gulped down the juice.

“Well, when they found Roy,

if all hell hadn't broken loose after Frank you guys, it sure broke loose after they found Roy," Debbie continued.

Pearl's brows furrowed.

"The police got to them first. They questioned them at the house about Roy," Opal explained.

"They were mad?" Pearl asked.

"*Mad?* Oh, no, that would be like saying a tug boat is the equivalent of a battle ship. They were *way* past mad by the time we saw them. Doug's face was so

red I thought his head was gonna pop off.”

“And Rakim wasn’t trying to hear me at all. All he heard was Frank saying I was banging him and Roy at the same time.”

Pearl’s brow rose.

Debbie raised her hand.
“Those were his words, not mine.”

“I tried to explain the whole situation to Doug, but he wouldn’t listen either so I stopped trying. I figured if we were going to be together he would come see me when he

calmed down.”

“Rakim and Doug came to see me all the time, almost as much as you guys. They never said a word about not speaking to you. Mostly they mentioned that Jake missed me and was trying to sneak up to my floor to see me.” Pearl smiled at a memory. “I did get one of my night nurses to bring me to his floor a few times so I could see him.” She finished the last of her juice and leaned forward. “So, where is Frank, now? Is he still in jail?”

Her sister took the glass

from her and put it on the table. “No, they sent him to Central State to wait for arraignment. First they have to see if he’s competent to go to trial.”

She gasped. “Central State?”

Opal chuckled. “Don’t sound so surprised. The man killed six people thinking he was saving them, beat the crap out of Roy and shot you and his older sister while trying to shoot his little brother. Clearly he was crazy. He might have started out crazy, but he sure the hell is now.”

“I think the deciding factor on sending him to Central State was that he thought he was totally in the right. He was doing what he had to do to protect his little brother from little ole you,” Debbie said poking her in her good arm.

“All right, that’s enough reminiscing. Why don’t you go lie down and let those pills work on you,” Opal suggested.

“That’s a good idea. Go lay down for a while, Pearl and we’ll figure out what we’re eating for dinner.”

“But, we always make dinner together.”

“Not today, little sister, so stop whining.”

“You heard her, Pearl. Go.”

“I hate it when you call me that,” she grumbled going toward the stairs.

* * * *

“Pearl’s still asleep,” Debbie reported taking the glass Opal offered her.

“So, do you think they’ll talk to us this time?”

“I hope so. I feel so bad, Chica. Rakim thinks I played him. Do you know how bad that makes me look? Especially after giving him the blues about all the hoes he used to do. He won’t ever believe anything I say.”

“I know, girl. I know.”

“You know, a few months ago I wouldn’t have cared less whether Rakim came or went, but now...” She took the last sip from her glass and shook her head. “I don’t want to lose him, Chica.”

Opal popped the top on a

bottle of wine. “I know. I feel the same way about Doug. When they get here, you know we have to tell them everything about Roy.”

“Yeah, I know.” Debbie held out her glass.

Opal filled Debbie’s cup then her own. “I guess Doug will ask for his heart back.” She chuckled sadly. “Just when I was going to offer him mine.”

“Oh, Chica...” She turned to look over her shoulder. “Well, I guess it’s time to face the music.”

Opal nodded and followed her out the kitchen.

“Hi. Can we come in?”

“Sure.” Debbie stepped back letting Rakim and Doug walk pass her.

“We were having a drink. Do you guys want one?”

“Sure, what the hell,” Doug said, following Rakim to the couch.

“Rakim?”

He shrugged. “Whatever.”

Opal retrieved two more glasses and the bottle. The four

of them stared at their feet for a while, sipping from their glasses. Rakim broke the heavy silence.

“So, how’s Pearl feeling?”
Doug asked.

“She’s all right. We drugged her and made her take a nap. She wanted to help with dinner.”

“What are you making?”
Doug asked.

“Just a few rib eyes with a baked potatoes and salad.”

“Really? Sounds good is—“

Rakim slammed his glass down, splashing the contents on

the coffee table and stood up. “Let’s cut the damn small talk! I want the truth, Debbie, no bullshit. Who the hell is Roy?”

“Rakim I tried to tell you everything before, but you listen,” Debbie said calmly.

“You’re not doing a good job listening now either,” Opal added.

Rakim turned narrowed eyes to her then addressed Debbie again. “I was mad and though I still am, I’m ready to hear it now.”

Doug put his glass on the

table and sat back. "I have to say I'm with Rakim on this. I think we deserve some answers."

Rakim sat down and sighed. "Look Debbie, I can't speak for Doug but, I feel like you've been playing me the whole time."

"No, Rakim, it's not like that," she spoke softly touching his hand.

He pulled his hand away from her. "Is it true that you were fucking this Roy for about a year?"

Debbie looked at Opal then nodded. "Yes, it's true," she

answered on a whisper.

Rakim chuckled disbelievingly. “So, all this time it’s you that’s the real player, huh?”

“No, Rakim it wasn’t like that.”

“Why is it always okay for a man to have a booty call and not a woman?” Opal said.

“What?” the guys exclaimed in unison.

“You heard me. That’s all Roy was, a booty call.”

Rakim and Doug stared

wide eyed at her. She sighed and leaned on her knees.

“Look, we met him at a wedding Debbie was in last year. He propositioned us and we accepted. Neither of us had a man, so we were like, what the hell. We put the rules in place and he followed them. Only we could call him and when we called, he came. No strings attached.” She finished her drink, poured another before continuing. “He was our threesome guy. That was his only purpose, until recently. We realized we were liking ya’ll more

than we thought so we invited him over to officially break it off. We thought it would be common courtesy after kicking it with him for so long.”

“We hadn’t called him for weeks before that, not since we started seeing you guys,” Debbie added.

“Why?” Rakim asked.

“Because we wanted to be with *you*. Well, she wanted to be with Doug and I want to be with you, but you know what I mean.”

“The only reason we kicked

it with Roy in the first place was because we didn't *have* a man at the time," Opal reiterated.

Debbie sat back. "Yeah, except Roy apparently forgot about the no strings clause."

Rakim gave her a quizzical look. "What does that mean? What happened?"

"Well, the night we invited him over to end it, he flipped out."

The guys gasped and looked at each other.

"Yup, he slapped me a couple times and tried to rape

Debbie. He didn't, but pinched her hard enough to leave bruises all over and he choked her, too."

Rakim looked at Debbie, relaxing closer and let out a sigh.

"When I saw him holding Deb on the couch by the neck I went to the kitchen, grabbed the cast iron pan and slapped in the head."

Debbie nodded in agreement.

"Damn, remind me never to piss you guys off," Doug

murmured.

“We dumped him out south at a winery after that. We might have been wrong for that, but in our defense we were drunk.”

Confusion twisted Doug’s features. “You dropped him off in a winery?”

Opal nodded.

“I’m afraid to ask why on that one. Was he bleeding?”

“Uh-huh. It took us all night to clean up all his blood.”

“So you didn’t know if the dude was dead or alive?”

Opal shrugged. “We figured dead people don’t bleed.”

“Hold up.” Rakim picked up his drink and leaned back with a chuckle. “So, you guys dropped this dude off, bleeding, in the middle of the night, not knowing if he was really alive or not? You just went with a drunken hunch?”

“Mmm, hmm,” Opal confirmed.

Rakim sipped his drink not bothering to stifle his laughter. “So, how was he supposed to get back to the city?”

Opal shrugged. “That wasn’t our problem. And there you have it, the short, but not so sweet tale of Roy Benson.”

Rakim and Doug sat quietly looking between each other sipping their drinks, taking in the story. After a few moments, Doug’s sigh broke the silence and his voice followed.

“I still think you should have told us about him from the start. I would have liked to have heard about it from you Opal, Doug said.”

“Yeah, Debbie, come on.

Your biggest problem with me was you didn't think you could trust me. I never lied to you about my past and I didn't keep secrets from you either."

"I know, Rakim and you're right, but he was just a booty call. Have you told me about all the booty calls you've ever had?"

"Yup."

Debbie wrapped her arms around her chest as her lips twisted. "Rakim, I said *all*."

"Oh, well..."

"See, booty calls shouldn't even count. I'm sure you guys

have had more than you can count up over the years.” Opal said.

Rakim cleared his throat and looked around the room. Doug chuckled.

“Uh-huh, see,” Debbie said on a laugh.

Opal leaped from her seat abruptly to sit on Doug’s lap. Shock raised his eyebrows.

“Listen, Doug, I want to be with you for as long as it will work. I trust you and you said you trusted me. Roy was before you. Since we’ve been kicking it,

I haven't touched anyone but you and you're the only one that's touched me. It was weeks of no one before we hooked up like that. Why do you think I jumped on you when we *did* do it?" she added with a sly grin.

He slipped his arms around her waist. "Damn I thought it was because I was the irresistible type."

She giggled. "Yeah, it was some of that too."

Rakim sipped his drink, staring at Debbie. "I'm still mad at you."

“I know. So, tell me how I can make it up to you?” She smiled nudging him.

Rakim smiled. “Well, I can think of a few things, but don’t think you’re going to get off that easy.” He put his glass on the table and turned to her. “That guy didn’t hurt you did he?”

“No, just a few bruises. They hurt at the time, but they didn’t last long.”

“And you guys really dropped him all the way out south in the winery?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t mean

to break his foot. It just got caught in the door when I slammed it.”

“Damn, you broke the man’s foot, *too*? That’s not the usual way you break up with someone, is it?”

Debbie laughed. “No, but you’re not going to have that problem. I plan on keeping you as long as you want to be kept.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes.” She leaned in and kissed him.

“Yeah, well, we need to get some ground rules in place first.

No lies, no secrets and I don't ever want to hear anything else about you off the grapevine," he counted on his fingers.

"Capeesh?"

She nodded and kissed him, again. "Capeesh. So, are you still mad, really?"

"I might need a minute or two to get over it."

Debbie stuck her lip out in a pout and slid onto his lap. "Oh, come on. Doug forgave Opal."

Rakim turned at them and sputtered. "He's in love so his mind is warped."

Debbie scoffed. “So what does that mean? You’re not in love?”

“I don’t know yet. Now get off me, woman. I said I’m mad,” he said but gave no motion to dislodge her.

“Yeah, I heard you, but hasn’t it been a minute yet?” she asked kissing his neck.

“Mmm, that’s— that’s not going to work either. Mmm, I— you— mmm, yeah. I don’t think a full minute has passed,” he said breathlessly.

“Come on, Poppie,” she said

near his ear. “How can I make it up to you? I’m open to suggestions.”

Rakim angled his head toward her. “Really?”

“Uh-huh, *very* open.”

“In that case how about...”

He whispered in her ear and she giggled.

“I could see that happening.”

“Really? Hmm, I’m feeling more forgiving already.” He laughed, hugging her.

“I am so glad I didn’t hear

that suggestion. That would have been some serious TMI,” Opal said.

“Well, that’s a welcome scene. I guess you guys have made up, huh?” Pearl said coming into the living room.

“We’re still in the negotiation stage, but I think we’re winning them over,” Opal supplied.

“Well that’s good.” Pearl sat in the chair. “So, how are you guys doing? You look good right now.”

“We’re fine, Pearl. How are

you feeling?” Doug asked.

“I’m sore, but I feel all right over all. How are you guys doing? I mean, the *four* of you?”

Doug looked at Opal. “We’ve got a few lumps to smooth out, but nothing major. Right, baby?”

She kissed him. “Right.”

Pearl turned to Debbie and Rakim. “And you two?”

“I’m waiting for the make up process to begin,” Rakim said with a grin.

Debbie nudged him playfully. “We’re good.”

“Good. I’m glad you got it all worked out. I haven’t spoken to Jake today, have you?”

“Since he can’t drive yet, we offered to pick him up since we were coming, but he said he couldn’t come. He was making a run with Robert,” Doug said.

“So can you guys bring him over later so I can see him?”

“Yeah, Pearl, we can do that,” Doug said quickly and looked at Rakim.

“Thanks Doug. I’ve been talking to him every day, but since neither of us can drive

right now it's—" She turned to look behind her. "Someone's at the door."

"I got it." Opal hopped up. "Hey, Robert, what's up? Come to check on my sister?" she said kissing his cheek.

"Hi everyone," he greeted making a wide arc with his arm. "Not today, Opal. I'm just dropping off."

Robert stepped to the side letting Jake walked in. Opal waved at Robert then gave Jake a hug and closed the door.

Pearl stood, holding her

arm in place. “Jake!”

Bypassing everyone, Jake scooped her from the floor in a hug. “I missed you so much, baby.”

“Jake,” she gasped. “My arm—“

He released her and stepped back. “Oh my God. Baby, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean —“

“I know.” Her smiled was forced as she caressed his face. “It’s okay.”

He sat lowered her back into the chair then sat on the

floor beside her. "I'm just going to sit right here, if that's all right with you. I prefer to keep my head down."

Pearl let her fingers rake through his hair. "Any way you can be close to me is all right with me." She leaned forward to kiss him. "How do you feel?"

"Besides an ongoing headache most days I feel okay. I'm mad about this bald spot they gave me on the back of my head for the stitches, but if this is what I had to endure for my boys to save my life, so I'm good." He lifted his head to wink at

them.

“Dude, do you know the problems we would have had if you were dead?” Doug asked. “Opal would be all upset because her sister would’ve been traumatized.”

“And Debbie would be upset right along with her girls. That’s some drama we decided we could really live without, man,” Rakim added with a laugh.

“You are definitely worth more to us alive than dead?” Doug added.

Jake looked at them again.
“Ya’ll thought about *all* that in that one millisecond, huh?”

“We learned how to think fast under pressure,” Rakim explained.

Laughter filled the room.

“Oh! That reminds me, Jake. I never got the chance to give you your birthday gift. With us both being in the hospital and then me going back and forth to therapy...”

“Baby, I don’t need a gift. As long as I got you I’m good.”

Pearl cupped his cheek

then kissed him. “You are so sweet, but I have one for you so you might as well have it. Opal will you--”

“I'm on my way.”

She left the room quickly returning with a long black velvet box. Jake opened the box revealing two necklaces. Black corded satin held a pendent secured by a gold clasp. The pendent looked broken in two, one half, smooth black onyx shaped into a tear drop the other identical but pearl. In the case they were pressed to fit together and form a circle. Opal

lifted the necklace with the dark stone. Jake tilted his head allowing her to put it over his head. She did the same to Pearl with the other before going back to Doug's side.

“I picked them up in Chinatown when we were in New York. It's a yin yang symbol. It represents two souls coming together as one, but still able to work separately. They are opposites that balance each other.”

The pendant rested high on his chest. Jake lifted the gift and fingered it silently.

“You know, like good and evil, hot and cold, black and white, the balance of nature,” Pearl added.

Jake nodded remaining quiet as he inspected the necklace.

Opal grabbed Doug’s hand. “Uh oh,” she whispered.

Pearl slumped in her seat. “You don’t like it?”

“No, sweetheart. I love it, thank you. I was just thinking that it was an amazing coincidence that you would give me such a gift when I have an

American symbol that means kind of the same thing.”

Jake rose on his knees to dig into his pocket and presented a small box to her. Pearl squealed and snatched it from his hand. She stood knocking her knee into his jaw, making him bite his tongue as she made her way to the couch.

“Ouch!” He grabbed his head with one hand and covered his mouth with the other.

Debbie and Opal pushed Rakim and Doug off the sofa make room for her.

“Ohmigosh, ohmigosh, ohmigosh! Hurry, Opal, open it!”

Opal opened the black velvet box and the three of them gasped in unison. The large square diamond sparkled brilliantly. Positioned on both sides of the gold band were two smaller begets to match the even smaller ones going around the rest of the ring. They looked at each other, nodding and smiling.

“Okay, Jake, aren’t there some words that go along with this ring,” Opal said giving the box to him.

“Yeah, but now that half my tongue is gone I might not be able to say them.” He stuck his tongue out. “Am I bleevng?”

She chuckled and pushed the box into his hand. “Stop being such a baby.”

“I’m sorry, Jake. Let me kiss the boo-boo.” She returned to her chair and kissed him. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Jake rotated to position himself on his knees. “Pearl Jefferson, I love you very much. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” Debbie and Opal

yelled together tripping over Doug and Rakim as they ran to him.

Pearl leaned out of their way, laughing.

“Whoa! What have I gotten myself into?”

“Man, I have no idea,” Rakim said.

“Me either, dude, but we’re going to hang around as long as we can to help you find out.”

Doug and Rakim pulled their girls away from Jake to give him room to hug his future bride.

THE END

About the Author

Dana Littlejohn birth interrupted the festivities of a late night Christmas party with her arrival. This may attest for her love of the season. She has always dreamed of being a writer and wrote her first story at 12 years old. As she grew older she put her pen down to enter the world of adulthood taking care of her husband and children. In 2003 her husband encouraged her to pick her pen up again and Dana has no intention on

putting it down again. Experience the wild ride through her imagination with her...you will not be disappointed!

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