

~ A Place To Dance ~

by Ali Vali

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If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed move on, literally.

Sit back and enjoy the story, any comments can be sent to me at terrali20@yahoo.com.

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Beth, Jaden, my Florida buddy, and Ken, you are all godsends. I bow to your grammatical knowledge.

This is dedicated as always to the one woman who holds my heart. As in all things you've taught me to enjoy life and to live it so it makes me want to dance.

I would also like to thank all the wonderful people who take the time to read these stories. Thank you for all the great notes you have sent. I appreciate them all.

A Place To Dance

by
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Chapter 1

Tim Andolini looked at the blonde sitting across from him and sighed. Sometimes it just sucked to be married, especially when someone like Christina Griffin walked in and turned your brain to mush. Women who looked as good as Christina could make you forget your name and your religion in the wisp of one flirty smile. Thirty seconds into his fantasy of Christina dancing for him in a bikini Tim remembered had a wife and two children.

"Ms. Griffin, my partner called this morning and said the foundation has been poured with no problems. If this weather holds, construction will begin next Monday." Tim pointed out the large expanse of windows in his office to point out the blue cloudless skies. "If you have any questions you can call either myself or Jolly, and we'll be happy to help."

"Thanks, Tim. Let's hope this weather does hold. I've discovered I'm not one for apartment

living. My house sold sooner than I thought so I didn't have much of a choice but to move into what seems like a box with three small windows. I'm looking forward to the space this is going to give me." Christina tapped her finger on the house plans spread out over Tim's desk.

Christina had found the architectural firm of Andolini and Andolini through a friend and so far had been impressed with their work. The house Jolly Andolini had designed was going to be built on a large parcel of land Christina's parents had given her as a graduation present a couple of years before.

For years young professionals stayed in the city's old neighborhoods, preferring the charm of New Orleans's architectural masterpieces of wood and slate erected decades before, to the stodginess of the suburbs. The shores of the lake were left either in their natural states or were inhabited by older generations looking for a quiet lifestyle. A paradise for the lovers of Purple Martins that came in the spring to roost under the Lake Ponchartrain's twenty four mile long bridge, leaving for warmer climates in the fall.

Surprisingly it was the flocking Martins that brought a renewed interest to the area. Bird lovers of every age sat on the lake's levees every afternoon to watch the massive black cloud of birds return to their nests for the night after consuming their weight in mosquitoes as if someone had rung a recess bell. After the nightly show people went back to watching the multitude of boats that glided over the brown murky waters of Louisiana's greatest body of water.

Jolly seemed to have understood the specialness of the area, creating a home that would blend in with the woods and Lake Ponchartrain at the back of the property. The house the young architect had designed called for large plantation style windows that not only would infuse the rooms with light, but serve as a perfect place to see the natural beauty of the area. From the veranda of the master bedroom suite, Christina could sit and either watch the flight of the punctual insect eating machines or the ancient willows and magnolias that had stood witness to the area's history unfolding over the years. The small blonde was looking forward to meeting Tim's partner who was an apparent artist at the drafting table.

"Will the infamous Jolly ever be around for me to thank for this great house you two are building me?"

"Jolly isn't much for being in the office on days like this, Ms. Griffin," said Tim with a smile. He rolled up her plans and placed them in a tube for her to take with her. "Remember, it's not too late if you want to make changes to the rooms."

"Thanks, Tim, I'll expect an update from you when we start."

They shook hands and Tim stood by the windows to watch Christina leave. She removed the tailored jacket of her suit and threw it and the house plans into the passenger seat before getting into the midnight blue BMW z3. The voyeur enjoyed the flash of leg he got as she slid into the small car. The ringing phone on his desk was what pulled him away from watching the car backing out below.

"Who are you checking out now?"

Tim dropped into his office chair and started twirling a pen in his hand to keep from laughing. "I could be hard at work you know."

"Yeah, and I could build the Eiffel Tower out of toothpicks but I don't see that happening, buddy. Was Ms. Griffin happy with her final draft?" Jolly walked up the levee to look at the lake and get away from the noise of the trucks delivering the lumber they would need for the next week.

"Very pleased. Her only disappointment was the genius who did them wasn't here to bask in her praise."

"That's what I have you for, Timmy, to charm the clients into loving the plans of what will eventually be. I'm sure 'the hot babe' as you call her would rather I see to the construction of her house," said Jolly.

"Tell me again why you went to school to become an architect, if all you really wanted to do is be a carpenter? You should've gone to contractor school. I believe one of the courses was how to spit, scream at laborers and get your pants to hang low enough to see the top of your butt crack. I'm fairly sure you would've aced it. I've heard that mouth of yours, you're like a sailor when you want to be." Tim propped his feet on his desk prepared to fight their ongoing argument. "Think of how many more projects we could take on if you didn't insist on overseeing and participating in the building phase."

"Tim, I told you before, take on as many projects as you want, but..."

"I know, I know. When someone spends this kind of money and has envisioned this kind of space, they deserve your all. I just worry about you."

"I know, Timmy, it's why I love you so much," said Jolly.

"You aren't your old man, Jolly. Cookie cutter isn't your style, and that's why I love you so much."

"Thanks, buddy, but think, if you'd stayed with the firm you'd be rich by now," teased Jolly.

"True, but you seem to attract all the beautiful artsy kinda of people who wouldn't go near Uncle Anthony so it's an even trade. Thanks to you I can live vicariously in my own little twisted fantasies."

"I'll make sure and mention that to Pam the next time I see her."

"Pam knows what I'm capable of and she married me anyway. Good thing there's a large streak of mental illness running down the center of her family tree. Now get going and see if all of your wood arrived." Tim dropped his feet to the ground and hung up the phone.

As he turned the light on over his drafting table he thought about his relationship with Jolly. He was convinced it was their partnership, which had kept his work clean and fresh. Unlike some of their classmates who had gone to the large firms and lost the creativity that had driven them to study architecture in the first place, Tim was proud of every project.

He and Jolly specialized in building things that became an extension of their surroundings. In their six short years together as business partners, they had made Architectural Digest ten times, so despite his grumbling, they were doing more than all right. They had a waiting list of projects for people who were willing to put off construction for at least a year, rather than to going on without their designs.

From the start he knew their partnership would be a success considering they'd seen each other almost every day from the time of their birth. Jolly had stood by him through every major event in his life offering praise or a shoulder to cry on depending on what fate threw his way. If there was one thing in his life Tim never questioned it was Jolly's being there for him and his family.

The only other project Tim and his wife Pam worked on constantly was getting Jolly married and settled. His cousin was almost relationship phobic after a lifetime of watching her parents go at each other with hateful intent. Anthony Holland, Jolly's father, wasn't someone who tolerated dissent well, especially from his children. The big man had used his height and bulk to intimidate and bully his family into what he wanted from them. All of his children had succumbed to his wishes except for one.

Jolly had almost gone out of her way to follow her heart to a life that made her happy, but made Anthony's blood pressure rise. The only thing father and daughter had in common was that they were both architects, albeit successful for different reasons. Tim remembered the day Jolly packed up her office at her father's firm and walked out. Before leaving she told him he had sold his work out for the money and his family's love because of his need for control. Her cousin would've applauded her if he hadn't been holding a box filled with his own stuff. To complete her break from her father, Jolly had taken her mother's maiden name as a tribute to her grandfather. Papa Francois, as Tim and Jolly called him, was the real reason Jolly had studied architecture.

The two young Andolinis had started with a small office and a few clients willing to take a chance. Within six months their gamble had paid off and it irked Anthony that the two children who had run around together from the time they were toddlers had clawed their way to a stellar reputation one project at a time. The old man had expected his daughter and nephew to come crawling back three months from the day they both walked out. Jolly's mother had often commented that of all the Holland and Andolini children, Jolly and Tim had been the two who inherited Papa François's looks. Their grandfather had been a hero to both children, but especially to Jolly. Francois's children had married two very different people, but his two first-born grandchildren had formed a bond that time had only strengthened.

"How'd the meeting go? All set to build next week?" asked Lisa Whitney. She had been

Christina's assistant for three years. Together with a small staff they ran one of the largest and most successful art galleries in New Orleans.

"Seems that way, if it doesn't start to rain every day. I'm praying that doesn't happen since I haven't been able to find half my stuff in all the boxes around that apartment you found for me. I hope you like this outfit and the other three I've managed to put together. They're the only ones I have at the moment. I'm starting to think the movers tossed some boxes out along the way so they wouldn't have to carry them upstairs."

Lisa laughed at her boss. The woman was known for her organizational skills as well as her ability to find new and exciting artists. Having been exiled to a small space for about eight months was about to kill her. "I'll say a prayer for drought conditions until you're done."

"Thanks. Has the stuff for the new show started to arrive yet?" Christina walked to her office past the empty walls that had been cleared for an opening they were hosting at the end of the next week.

"The truck is at Mimi's studio now, so they should be able to start hanging by tomorrow morning. Before you ask, the invitations have been sent out and Amy's working on calling the "A" list so we have good attendance."

Christina smiled up from the ton of mail on her desk glad she had found the young woman who had a knack for reading her mind. "I want to sell as many pieces as possible opening night. Mimi's going to be a hot commodity after this and I want her experience with us to be memorable."

"Yes, captain. Anything else?"

"Yes, see if you can clear some time for me next week so I can drive out to the property and check out the progress of the construction. I think it'll be fun to see it the whole way through."

"Boss?" the question came through the intercom on Christina's desk.

"Yes, Amy?"

"Mimi Mulle's on line one for you."

Christina picked up the receiver and answered with her most professional voice. "Mimi, hi. I was just talking about you. Did the guys get there all right?"

"They're packing up crates as we speak. I just wanted to call and let you know I'll be out of town for a couple of days so just leave a message if you need anything. I'll be checking the machine throughout the weekend."

"Have fun and don't worry about any of your stuff. We'll get together at the beginning of next week to make sure you're happy with the display before the opening."

"Thanks, Chris. I'm looking forward to working with you. I've got every confidence in you and Lisa to make the show a success. Call me if you have any problems."

Christina dedicated the rest of the weekend to emptying as many boxes as she could so there would be a chance of her wearing something else besides the few outfits she was able to find and hang in her closet. She had driven out to the construction site of her house and was pleased by how few trees had to be cleared away to make room for the foundation slab. The large multi-leveled piece of cement looked like a blank canvas to her just waiting for someone to come along and create something wonderful.

Christina smiled thinking of the first day she had walked this little piece of the world that belonged to her. Her father had inherited the land from an aunt, and when he saw the light that filtered through the trees in the afternoon, he thought Christina would be in heaven if she had a studio there one day. That dream was getting closer and she couldn't wait to get back to her true passion, which was painting.

The phone on her hip buzzed and Christina's smile grew bigger when she saw it was her parent's cell number. "Hi, guys," she said brightly into the phone knowing her parents would each be listening in on the other end.

"Hi, sweetheart. What's got you out so early already on a Sunday morning?" asked Hillary her mother.

"Just checking my land, ma," teased Christina.

"I still can't believe you're building a house and you've never met the architect. This person could be a nut for all you know," chastised Hillary.

"Hill, leave her alone. I'm sure Chris knows what she's doing, and I've looked at the prints myself and they look like a winner, baby." There wasn't much Dell Griffin wasn't willing to side with his only child on. He had watched the bubbly child grow into a confident young woman and talented artist, so if she wanted to live in a tent under a tree it would have been fine with him.

"Thanks, daddy, and he's right, mom, I love the design Jolly came up with. The same firm built Marie and Allen's house and I hardly ever see them since they find it hard to walk out the door. When are you two due back?"

"Six weeks, sweetie, so call us if you need anything." Dell and Hillary were on their annual summer vacation in Europe, so except for the daily postcard Christina got, their phone calls were the only way she knew where they were for sure.

With one last look at the trees, cement and pile of lumber awaiting the crew the next morning, Christina drove back to the city missing Jolly driving up from the back of the property. The architect was there to check every plumbing and electrical connection coming out of the slab wanting everything to go smoothly the next day. Christina didn't know it, but Jolly had

incorporated some of the designs she had been working on for her own house into the one they were going to start Monday.

"At least someone will enjoy all those pictures in my head since I doubt I'll ever build the one I'm thinking of," said Jolly to the trees around her. Mimi had been out of town visiting a friend for the weekend so Jolly found herself lost. It'd be good to get back to something she loved in the morning. Designing was fun, but watching it come to life was the best part.

"On three, ok?"

"You got it," said the row of workers waiting to lift the second section of outer wall into place. Starting at six that morning the workers had framed the studs that would anchor the skeleton to the outside of the first floor and had been working together to put them into place.

Jolly sat straddled at the top of a fifteen-foot ladder waiting for the long span of wood to be lifted so that she could hammer the supports into place. With any luck they could get the section they were working on done by lunch.

"Ok, one, two, up boys." She loved the smell of pine that came up to meet her when the wall came up. A quick hammer put the nails that would hold it up into place and Jolly was sliding down to scramble up to the other side to get the job done.

"Why fourteen feet, boss?" asked Hank, one of the master carpenters Jolly had contracted to work on the project.

"It's a fifteen foot levee, so if Ms. Griffin hopes to get a look at the lake from upstairs I thought I'd give her an unobstructed view by going another four feet on each floor. With the two foot cross beams in between floors she'll get a great waterfront view from upstairs. The size of the house will make it look great and we'll be able to go bigger on the crown molding to bring the scale down a little." Jolly wiped her brow of the sweat already pouring out of her. With a pair of shorts, work boots, t-shirt and tool belt she blended in well with all the rest of the crew she had put together for this job.

The guys pulled out their coolers and headed for the trees for lunch. They loved working on any of Jolly and Tim's projects because Jolly was there for most of them working along side them to make sure the job met her specifications. At first they had doubts about working with the architect thinking that she would be there just to bitch about every aspect of the process, but those had quickly died when they saw her work. Jolly had a way with wood that could make any guy envious of her skill. The inside of the homes they had built together had a mix of glass and wood that gave them a uniquely stylish, but comfortable appearance. For a carpenter, Jolly's plans were always fun to put together.

"Boss, the lumber company's back with the cross beams for the second floor," said Buck, one of her helpers. He hated to disturb her as she poured over the plans but the guy making the delivery

was anxious to get going for lunch himself.

"Put them by the back over there and tell the guys to tarp them after lunch. I don't want them warping if they get wet with dew out here in the morning. It'll be a couple, maybe three days before we need those anyway."

"Thanks, Jolly."

The work continued until six when they knocked off after getting up most of the framework for the walls downstairs. A small BMW passed a line of old trucks coming out of the site on its way in. Christina waved to the tired looking group as she kept on toward what was starting to look like a house.

The next day, Christina made it a point to make it to the site before the crew left for the day to talk to the foreman and get his rough timeline on the completion date. When she drove up there was a crane lifting beams up to the two workers who were doing what looked like a high wire act on the top of the skeletal walls of the downstairs. Half of the pieces that would support the ceiling at the bottom and the floor at the top were in place and the artist found it funny they wouldn't finish one floor before starting in on the second.

Leaving her suit jacket on the seat next to her, Christina stepped out of the car and leaned against it as she watched one of the workers putting the beams in place. *Oh my, she looks like a goddess up there*, thought the blonde she shielded her eyes from the sun. Balanced on the balls of her feet was a tall woman swinging a hammer. The long nails they were using to secure the long pieces were being driven with three forceful strokes, and Christina could see why that looked so easy when she looked at the heavily muscled tan skin on display.

"That will be the last one, Joe, then we'll take a break and let Buck and somebody else up here."

"You got it. Heads up, boss." The crane operator lifted the last beam and swung it into place waiting for the nails to go in before releasing the cable holding it up. None of the workers noticed the good looking woman move away from her car and walk into the site until she was standing below where the two workers were nailing the supports up.

Christina stood there and watched the woman finish her side, and was surprised when the worker did something the artist wasn't expecting. The female carpenter jumped from her perch, doing a back flip and landing two inches in front of her startled audience. By pure reflex, Jolly grabbed Christina as she was falling backward into a pile of sawdust. It was only after she had grabbed the smaller woman that Jolly remembered how dirty her hands were and from the feel of it, the shirtsleeves she had a hold of were fine Irish linen. *And cream colored too. Crap this isn't my day.* Jolly quickly released her captive hoping the woman would stay on her feet.

"Sorry, Ms. Griffin, I didn't see you standing there. If you send the cleaning bill to the office I'll have Tim take care of it. I really didn't mean to startle you."

Christina looked at the big hands the carpenter was holding up and didn't even want to see how

much of the gunk covering them had been left on her clothes. "You big goober. Don't you know what you did was dangerous not only to me but to yourself as well. If this is how your foreman runs this place, one of you should be dead before the end of the month." The only thing missing from the tirade Christina had going was her finger poking Jolly in the chest. Most of the men hid their smiles behind rough hands as the small spitfire lit into their boss with a set of perfect handprints on her sleeves.

"I promise you we run a safe operation, ma'am, and I do apologize for your clothes and for scaring you. Is there anything I can do for you?" Jolly wiped her hands on the back of her shorts in case there would be any more touching involved before Christina left. Tim had not exaggerated for once and she could see the gallery owner was a beautiful woman even if designer sunglasses covered her face.

"No, I just came to see what was going on before heading to a meeting on this side of town. I had a few minutes so I thought I'd stop in. Now I'm going to look like I got mauled along the way," said Christina pointing to her sleeves.

Christina wanted to stay mad, she really did, but looking up at the poker straight light brown hair and deep blue eyes was doing something to her righteous indignation. For a brief moment she had felt like a romance novel heroine being swept up by the rogue pirate who turns out to be the good guy. The thought of Lisa's face if she showed up on a date somewhere with a construction worker was almost worth asking the woman out.

"I'd offer you some club soda but I just drank my last one. Is there any way that I can make this up to you?" Jolly put her hands up, laughing when Christina took a step back.

"You could put your hands in your pockets for me, and keep them there until I drive away."

"Fair enough. How about I walk you to your car then we'll know you'll be out of harms way from any other falling carpenters during your visit," suggested Jolly.

They walked in silence to the small sports car each looking everywhere except each other. Jolly opened Christina's door for her then put her hand back in her back pocket as a joke. After the engine purred to life and was about to drive away, it occurred to Christina to ask how Jolly knew her name. Her run in with the carpenter had made her forget the purpose of her visit, but if the good-looking worker was going to be there, she sure didn't mind coming back.

"Hey, goober, how'd you know I was Christina Griffin?" asked the blonde with her head sticking out the car window.

"Timmy did a great job of describing you."

The sunglasses came down to reveal big blue eyes with a flirtatious look to them and Jolly could have taken the rest of the day off just to stare at them. When Christina saw she had the woman's attention she went on with her questions. "Aren't you going to introduce yourself?"

"Goober. Ms. Big Goober to you. Now run along, ma'am, you wouldn't want to be late. Oh, and if anyone asks just tell them the mauler got off a lot worse than you." As Jolly turned and walked back to her men, Christina thought to herself a tool belt never looked so sexy.

"Come on, tell me your name."

"Jolly," was shouted over a broad shoulder before the architect disappeared into the construction sight.

Christina caught sight of her again as the tall body climbed back into position to receive more beams from the crane operator to the applause of her crew. "Holy crap," she muttered to herself. All she could do now was pray that the walls of her kitchen didn't collapse after her insult.

"Then she called you a goober?"

"A big goober."

"Well you are big, Jolly, even you've got to concede to that. Goober though, implies you're somewhat clumsy and we both know that's not the case. You're big, but I'd have to say you're the most graceful person I know. Zip me up and let's get going. Hopefully there's a gallery full of people waiting to buy some great art," said Mimi. Jolly walked up behind her and zipped up the smallest mini dress she had ever seen on a woman, thinking only Mimi could make it look chic.

"You'd better hope no one with a big check book spills anything on her tonight, it may mean curtains for your career," teased Jolly as she picked up Mimi's wrap and put it around the petite woman's shoulders.

Jolly gathered the small woman into a hug and kissed her on the cheek before she could walk to the door. "Before you get caught up in the swell of well wishers and forget all about me, let me congratulate you, sprout. I'm so proud of you."

"You're the best, Jolly, so there's no chance I'll forget about you. Thanks for coming with me tonight. There isn't another person I could think of that I want to share this with. Just for your unselfish acts on my behalf I have a surprise for you."

"You didn't have to do that, sweetheart. Just seeing that my investment has started to pull in dividends is good enough for me." That earned her a slap on the arm as Mimi pointed to the door and the fact she was ready to go.

"Tell me you left the truck at home tonight?" asked Mimi already pouting.

"Come on, I wouldn't do that to you. I borrowed Buck's since his has less dings in it." Jolly's date was about to start complaining until she saw the Land Cruiser's lights come on when its owner pressed the alarm key as they neared it.

At the gallery, Christina and Lisa stood in front of one of the paintings and tried to figure out why Mimi had created it. It was so different from the colorful free creations that marked the rest of the exhibit in that it was a portrait of someone nailing together bits of draft drawings. The person perched on top of the little numbers and scales that made up drafts was caught mid swing with just her back showing. A short ponytail looked like it was about to whisk sweat on you if you got to close and the hand the shiny chrome hammer was held in, looked like it had spent plenty of afternoons practicing its craft.

"I've gotten a ton of inquiries on this piece but Mimi left instructions this one was to be in the show but wasn't for sale. Think she's some hot babe Mimi's dating?" asked Lisa pointing to the woman in the piece.

Christina thought back to a couple of days ago when she came in contact with her own hammer wielder and saw how Mimi could get carried away by someone like this. "Tell her that when she gets here and maybe she'll change her mind. Sometimes the price keeps pace with the increased interest. I'm sure she won't want to miss out on a really large sale."

The buzz around the door clued both women their tardy artist had finally decided to make an appearance. Not for the first time Christina looked at the small blonde who had created the large canvases hanging in her gallery and smiled.

Mimi was constant motion and it showed in her work. It'd had to take tremendous energy to put the amount of talent she was able to cram into each piece. Christina was just glad to get her first formal showing since there was already a buzz about her in the art world. This night was important to them if she was to continue to represent Mimi and her talent. The artist was still young so Christina was banking on the fact Mimi's art would only mature with her age.

"Chris, Lisa, I'm sorry we're late but the traffic was murder getting here. How am I doing?"

Both Christina and her assistant looked up at the woman Mimi had a strangle hold on and smiled, now used to the disjointed conversations Mimi engaged in. Whoever her date was looked at Mimi adoringly and was oblivious to what a great looking couple they made as she too listened to the artist jump from one topic to the next. "Great, there are only a few pieces not sold, but they won't be here for long. The night's not over and people are already demanding another show as soon as possible," said Christina. As she was talking it was hard to focus on Mimi and not the big Amazon she was holding hands with. There was something familiar about the woman wearing the best looking suit she had seen in forever, but it wasn't jumping out at her.

"That's great, I knew you two would do wonders for me, but if you'll excuse me I have a gift to give. Come on, killer, I want to show you your surprise." Mimi pulled Jolly along by the hand until they were standing in front of the strange out of place painting. The artist waited not wanting to influence Jolly's opinion as she looked at her creation for the first time. "Do you like it?" She asked after what seemed like an eternity had passed with Jolly not saying anything.

"Mimi, thank you it's beautiful. I was wondering what you found so fascinating last summer at

the project we had going. I love it, and I love you."

Christina watched from a few feet away as the tall woman pulled Mimi into her arms and hugged her with affection. She was whispering something in a small ear but her eyes had not left the painting on the wall. All the women in the gallery could see why the very out Mimi had not shown them any interest in the weeks she had been coming in to finalize the show. With a date like the one she had come with, they wouldn't be looking either.

"How much?" asked Jolly.

"Nothing, it's my gift of thanks to you for all you've done for me, Jolly. If it were up to mom and that husband of hers, the only painting I'd be doing would be the outside of the house. I did this because it was me doing something I love, capturing you doing something you love. I think it would look great in your office, and Tim told me it might prompt you into spending more time there," teased Mimi. Jolly looked into the big green eyes and got lost for a moment. Mimi had a way of giving pieces of her heart away with the art she created, and Jolly had come to cherish all of the ones she'd received.

"That's been getting a lot of hits tonight, Mimi. You sure you won't consider parting with it?" asked Christina.

"Ask the owner. If she's willing to sell it, it's hers to do so," said Mimi pointing to her companion.

"Sorry, Ms. Griffin, but the painting's coming home with me." Jolly held her hand out for Christina to shake and almost laughed at the question in her mind if her hand was clean.

"Have we met?"

"This is the big goober cleaned up," supplied Mimi with a little too much glee. The look on Christina's face was almost worth another go at portrait painting.

"Oh my God," whispered Christina. It was the hair that had thrown her off. The day she had met Jolly for the first time the architect had had it pulled into a tight short ponytail. The thought of Mimi never gracing her door again for calling her girlfriend a goober occurred to Christina as she continued to ignore the offered hand.

Jolly for her part was willing to leave it hanging out there all night if it gave her the chance to see those blue eyes again. It was Lisa nudging Christina from the back that got her boss to finally notice her second mistake with the tall woman.

"No, my friends call me Jolly," teased the architect. Mimi looked on as Jolly took the small hand in her own and almost swallowed it when she wrapped her fingers around it. The softening around the blue eyes was a sure sign for Mimi that Jolly liked the gallery owner, and she tried her hardest to keep her smile in place thinking of only Jolly's happiness.

"I'm so sorry for the other day. You just scared me when you jumped on me and my mouth got away from me. I'm not usually so bitchy as to go around calling people names like that, and you left before you gave me the opportunity to apologize." Christina stopped babbling when Jolly squeezed her fingers.

"Jolly, you jumped her? I don't remember that being part of the story you told me an hour ago. Go on, Chris, tell me more," said Mimi ignoring the glare she was getting from Jolly.

"I didn't jump on her, well not technically anyway. I was taking a break from laying beams and jumped down from the second floor. Ms. Griffin was nice enough to be standing there to break my fall."

"Then you called her a big goober?" asked Mimi.

"No it was after she grabbed me and ruined one of my favorite shirts and I'd recovered from my scare. Then I called her a big goober," supplied Christina.

"You ruined her shirt?" Mimi was loving this conversation.

"I offered to pay the cleaning bill," said Jolly. The sinking feeling the tides were turning against her occurred to Jolly as the two blondes bantered back and forth. At that moment, the fear in Christina's eyes fell away and was replaced by something else.

"Yes, he told me the dirt was no problem, but the tree sap was another story. I hope this doesn't effect our working relationship, Mimi?" asked Christina.

"Why, because you called my sister a big goober? Not a chance, and believe me, Chris, it won't be the last time someone says that about her. Though I would've loved to have seen the exchange. You must have been some kinda fierce for her not to chew your head off. That's more Jolly's style."

Christina looked at the two of them together and tried to see the family resemblance. Jolly had to be a good seven inches taller than the bubbly blonde at her side. "I don't see it at all."

"My father's second wife came with a ready made family to add to the one he already had. The munchkin here was the only redeeming one in the litter," explained Jolly.

"That explains the names Mulle and Andolini," added Christina.

"I already had a father so I wasn't interested in adoption like the rest of my siblings, not that Anthony's a complete loser. His main fault was marrying my mother and ruining my chances at dating the big blue ox here, but I'm a forgiving kind of person. Jolly was the only one aside from my dad who believed in my work. She paid my way through school, so you should be thanking her for tonight," said Mimi. She hugged Jolly again getting her to let go of Christina's hand. The move let her see that Lisa was still nudging her boss to go and mingle, so the artist intervened again since Christina seemed captivated by Jolly.

"Come on, Lisa. You can introduce me to the people with the most money to spend. Behave until I get back," Mimi told Jolly.

"Let me apologize formally for calling you a bad name," said Christina moving closer to Jolly.

"Big goober's not a bad name so forget about it."

"If your father's still living, why did you pay her way through school?" Christina rewound what she had just said and could have kicked herself for letting it spill out of her mouth. "I'm sorry, that's none of my business. Forget I said it."

Jolly laughed at the fact she wasn't the only one who was nervous. "Don't worry about it. Mimi and I are a lot alike, Ms. Griffin. I love her a great deal so I'd do anything to make her happy. Because we're so alike it makes us complex and misunderstood on occasion, but we grow on you eventually. My father is Anthony Holland, and he didn't pay because he's not a man who believes in frivolous things. Learning how to perfect your painting skills to him is just that. We parted ways a long time ago and when I saw Mimi getting ready to cave and pick what my father considered a more responsible career track, I stepped in. I'm not rich, but I thought it was a good way to spend some money. Mimi deserved better than she's gotten in her life and I was just glad I could help her." Jolly scanned the room looking for the person she was speaking about, smiling when she saw Mimi talking to one of the guests in her usual effusive manner. "She's easy to love." *And that woman Mimi's talking to looks like she'd like to find out how easy to love Mimi is,* thought Jolly as she continued to look on.

"Are you two alike in that way too?" asked Christina with a tease in her tone. "And please call me Christina."

"No, in that regard we aren't I'm afraid." Mimi's calling out to Jolly from across the room to meet someone kept Christina from responding to the comment Jolly had made. "Excuse me, duty calls."

"I'll see you soon."

Jolly smiled and took Christina's hand again squeezing her fingers before stepping away from her. "I hope so."

Lisa returned from her circuit around the room and looked again at the nice looking couple Mimi and Jolly made. "That Mimi's one lucky girl."

"She's her step sister and I'm feeling a little lucky myself," said Christina before moving closer to Jolly again. The night was young and she felt like getting Jolly's hands on her again for whatever reason.

"You're calling her, right?"

"I'm building her house, Mimi, so I assume I'll be seeing her around. I don't think I need to call her."

"You're kidding me, right? The way the woman was checking you out all night, she's so wanting you to dial her number, Babe."

"Mimi, does it ever occur to you that I might not appreciate you referring to me as a big blue ox?" Jolly turned onto Mimi's street, which was the only thing that kept her from shaking a finger in the young woman's face.

"You don't fool me, Jolly Andolini, you love that nickname just like you love me. And stop trying to change the subject. Tomorrow around noon I want you to call her and ask her how's she's doing."

"You trying to get rid of me?"

God no, you idiot, thought Mimi rolling her eyes knowing Jolly couldn't see her. "No, Jolly, I want you to be happy, and Christina sure was making you smile."

"Here we are, Mimi," said Jolly pointing to the front of the house. "Let's get you inside so you can get some sleep. You need to get busy tomorrow painting new stuff for all the people who missed out tonight. All the buzz tonight was about how you didn't make enough of them."

Mimi accepted a hand out of the vehicle before she poked Jolly in the chest. "They aren't muffins, Jolly. They're pieces of my soul so show some respect please."

"I love the piece you gave me, and I love my painting too." Mimi hugged her for the comment before poking her again.

"Tomorrow no later than noon, I mean it, and thanks for going with me tonight."

"Anytime, shrimp. Don't forget to lock up and I love you too."

"Dinner on Monday?"

"I wouldn't miss it," said Jolly kissing Mimi good night before she went in. She waited to hear the lock slide into place before walking back to her car and leaving.

Mimi stood on the other side of the door and listened to Jolly's steps fade away. She stood motionless until the car door closed and she couldn't hear the engine anymore. Not for the first time she made a wish Jolly would forget the scars Anthony had put on her heart and be happy. If she had possessed a more selfish heart, Mimi's wishes would've centered on asking for things she thought she couldn't have.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Griffin. You just missed her. Jolly let us start early today so we could knock off early for the weekend. Buck and I volunteered to pick up all the tools then we'll be heading out too. If it's important just call Tim and he'll find her for you," said Hank.

"If I offer to buy you two dinner, could I bribe her address out of you?"

The two carpenters looked down at the blonde sitting behind the steering wheel of one of their dream cars and thought about her offer. Jolly loved her privacy, but finding this gorgeous creature ringing her doorbell made them think it would be a good thing, not something she would fire them over.

"No bribe needed, ma'am. Though if she looks pissed when she sees you tell her Mimi told you. The boss has the hardest time getting mad at that sweet girl," said Buck.

"Deal," answered Christina pulling out a pen and paper to write down the address.

It added to the mystery of Jolly, when Christina turned her car back toward the city. The address the two carpenters had given her was in the warehouse district down by the river. Over the years the area had become a sea of abandoned spaces, its buildings victimized by vandals as the businesses that had utilized them moved south of the border. Over time smart developers bought them cheap and started turning them into high priced lofts and condos.

The district had made a total turnaround thanks to the young business people willing to pay the outrageous prices for what was basically an apartment. Christina was having a hard time picturing the person who was creating the beautiful home on the lake for her living in the area. The street address on the piece of paper in her hand turned out to be an old furniture store warehouse on the cusp of the district. It was one of the only ones with enough floors and was close enough to have a descent view of the river a few blocks away.

After she found a parking spot close to the front entrance, Christina ran to follow some residents in so she wouldn't have to buzz Jolly's number. She figured it would be harder to turn her away from the front door than from the sidewalk. The lobby was not what she expected when Christina looked at the pieces of old warehouse equipment that had been left as pieces of interest. Someone had painted them in outrageously colorful patterns giving them new life as pieces of art instead of their boring utilitarian past existences. The second surprise was the old time elevator that was large and had a door you pulled down instead of one that slid closed. Christina leaned against one of the sides and waited for it to make its way to the fourteenth floor.

A soft curse escaped when it stopped one floor short and no amount of button pushing would make the thing move. Without getting out, Christina pulled out her cell phone and called the one person she could think of that could help her. Two minutes after her phone call with Mimi the elevator started back up again and when it stopped, Christina found herself at the entrance to Jolly's living room.

The blonde never noticed the amused figure at the head of the stainless steel staircase when she got a good look at Jolly's walls. Everywhere there wasn't exposed brick someone had painted a huge mural that made you feel like you were in a submarine. The underwater masterpiece had been done by a genius with a lot of time on their hands.

"It's beautiful," whispered Christina to no one but herself.

"It's Mimi," said the deep voice from somewhere above her.

"Don't jump," teased Christina looking up. Her smile grew bigger when she saw Jolly standing there wearing only a robe. "I can see why the elevator doesn't come all the way up without a little prompting on your part."

"I don't know, Ms. Griffin, it might spice up my showers a little if I took the lock off. Make yourself at home while I get cleaned up. Feel free to look around, and if you want anything, the kitchen is through there," Jolly pointed to the area directly under her.

Christina hoped the owner of the space took her time in the shower since she planned to take her up on her offer to look around. The room she was in with the underwater fantasy world was sparsely furnished; she guessed it was so it wouldn't take away from the art. The only thing that could have given Mimi's work a run for its money was the floor. She could see the wood strips were probably the originals despite the pristine finish that coated them. There too, there was nothing too much to take away from the beauty of the wood.

A quick scan found two guestrooms and a complete gym just off the living room. The kitchen was huge with all stainless steel appliances and white tile. Not being able to resist the urge, Christina opened the refrigerator to see how Jolly lived. She was convinced you could tell a lot about a person by what was in their icebox.

The first shelf was filled with fruit juice bottles, the second with soda, the third with four types of beer and the last with a variety of breads. The detective shook her head at Jolly's apparent non-culinary skills. Christina moved on and found it was the last room that she loved the most.

The big open area was a studio much like the one she hoped Jolly would build for her when the house was done. The only difference was the wood working tools that lined the walls. So many of them, Christina didn't know what most were used for, much less be able to name them.

Jolly found her a little while later running her hand over the piece of wood clamped to the worktable. Jolly thought the carvings along the edges of the piece were a poor imitation of the paintings in the living room, but no less amount of love and devotion had gone into its creation.

"So beautiful." Christina said as she looked at the fish chasing each other along the edges of the wood.

"It's a lap desk for Mimi. Not as good as the original but I figured she might like it when she's sketching in bed."

"You're wrong, Jolly, this is gorgeous. I can see there's more than one artist in your family. You aren't mad that I just barged in on you, are you?"

"I'm glad you're here so no, I'm not mad. Trust me if I didn't want you here, you'd still be on the thirteenth floor trying to figure out how to get up here."

Christina smiled and stepped closer to the woman who had been consuming large parts of her daydreams since Thursday's opening. "I'm glad too, and I hope this doesn't sound too forward, but I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since the day you jumped me."

Jolly laughed and pointed toward the kitchen. She was in her bare feet so a walk through the studio was not in her plans. "If I get you to marry me, I refuse to allow our grandchildren to hear that story from your point of view." She would have to listen to Mimi more often when she talked about women. Jolly wasn't any stranger to dating, but starting at square one was always awkward. Christina had snagged her attention from the moment Jolly had wrapped her hands around her and looked down at her at the house site.

Christina's smile grew bigger as a small part of her brain wanted Jolly to drop to one knee and pop the question, already certain of what her answer would be. "That's negotiable."

"You want something to drink?"

"Grab something for the both of us to go with the food I brought with me," said Christina. It was then Jolly noticed the large paper bag sitting on the counter. When Jolly opened a drawer and took something out, Christina was surprised it wasn't a fork when it was pressed into her palm.

"Here I think anyone who can't stop thinking about me and brings me Chinese food deserves a way to make the elevator go all the way up when she comes over."

The small blonde looked at the key Jolly was offering her and said, "Let it go and I'm keeping it."

"That's why I offered it. What do you want to drink?"

Christina could not resist the attempt to play so she opted for the one thing the icebox didn't have. "I'd love a bottle of water if you have it."

Jolly laughed at the confused look she got when she held up two different kinds. "You didn't look in the door, and before you ask, there's an alarm upstairs that let's me in on unauthorized entry."

"Funny, you're so funny. Mimi forgot to mention that to me."

"This is my 'I'm trying to date you' witty personality - Mimi's unfamiliar with it," teased Jolly. "Want to eat down here or go up a little?"

"Up sounds interesting," answered Christina.

Jolly packed the food back in the bag and grabbed Christina's hand for the walk upstairs. She opened one of the sets of doors in the master suite and walked her dinner date out to the private terrace.

From the brick lined enclosure Christina could see there was a great view of the river traffic as well as a comfortable looking set of teak patio furniture. Jolly pulled out her chair at the table and went to the outside bar to get plates, utensils and some drinks from the box under the high countertop. When she came back to set it all up, Jolly was happy to find Christina had kicked off her shoes and had propped her feet on the chair across from her. The arrangement meant Jolly had to sit next to her if she didn't want to push the small feet to the floor.

They started to scoop food out onto their plates as the first date questions started flying. "Did you become an architect because your father was one?"

"My grandfather had more of an influence on me than Anthony did. My father believes bigger is better, and conformity is the name of the game. Not that thinking that way is wrong, it's just not for me," explained Jolly.

"Was your grandfather in the business?"

"Papa was a carpenter, and since I was old enough to form any kind of intent on what I wanted to do, it was to be just like him. My mother's father had a way of making wood become the pictures in his head, and it fascinated me to watch. Becoming an architect taught me what would last and what was possible, but standing next to him at his work table taught me to love doing it."

Christina looked at Jolly's face as she spoke about the man who was her mentor. It was apparent that she loved him. "He sounds like a wonderful man."

"He was. We lost him last year to a stroke. Funny, the one thing he never taught me was how much you could miss someone." Jolly shook her melancholy when Christina slipped her hand into hers.

"He's not really gone if that workshop full of tools downstairs is any indication. The gift he gave you will make him live on for years to come. Until you pass that gift on to your children."

"Thanks, that's a nice way of thinking about it. How about you, what made you pick an art gallery?"

"I studied art for six years before I decided I needed a real job to supplement my hobby. With the education, I had the background to know what was good, and with a little luck I've been able to find new talent." Christina shrugged her shoulders as a way of saying it was the best explanation she could come up with.

"I seriously doubt anyone who studies something for that long is just a hobbyist. You'll have to invite me to the new house to see your etchings," teased Jolly.

"What about you, any other hidden talents I haven't discovered yet?"

"Are you talking hobbies or some sort of hidden sexual talent I might possess?" asked Jolly.

"Let's finish eating before we move on to your inner layers of secrets, shall we?" As they continued their talk, Christina was glad she had taken the chance and come over.

The dishes lay forgotten as their information swapping continued and when Christina looked at her watch and saw it was after eleven, she was shocked and sorry their time was coming to an end. The thought of going back to her apartment alone was something she was not looking forward to.

"Hot date?" asked Jolly when she saw Christina looking at her watch.

"Yes, I'm on it right now. I just can't believe I took up most of your day, but I don't want to leave. Would it make me sound easy if I told you I wanted to spend the night?"

"That depends," said Jolly.

"On?"

"If you slept with me or not." Jolly dodged the slap heading for her head as she laughed. "Do you have to run off?"

"Not really."

"Then come on." Jolly pulled her up and walked her to a room off the living room Christina had missed in her self-guided tour.

Mounted on the wall was a large flat-screened television with a comfortable looking couch sitting in front of it. With a bowl of popcorn between them, they sat to watch a movie before Jolly walked Christina to one of the guestrooms. Pointing to the locations of towels and sleepwear if she was interested, Jolly shifted from foot to foot in the doorway wondering if a good night kiss was going too fast. Christina helped her out by pulling her head down and pressing her lips softly to Jolly's.

"Thanks for a wonderful day," said Christina when they parted.

"I should be thanking you. If you hadn't shown up, I'd be knee deep in wood shavings by now. When that happens, Mimi screams at me for not getting out more." Jolly kissed her again to thank her for her thoughtfulness before moving to her own room.

"Good night, Chris. Call me if you need anything."

"Sweet dreams, Jolly." Christina answered to Jolly's back. The night had been wonderful, but it amazed her how many times Jolly could bring up Mimi's name in a conversation no matter what the subject had been.

"Can I ask where you are?"

"You'll think I'm slutty if I tell you, so I think I'll pass," answered Christina as she put stuff back into her purse. The ringing coming out of the leather bag had woken her up and dumping everything out was the only way to make it stop.

"Chris, you dog, I already think that about you so now you have to tell me," said Lisa, her reasons for calling forgotten.

"I spent the night at Jolly's." The silence from the other end made Christina think she had lost her connection with her assistant. "You still there?"

"Um, yeah. You can't see me but I'm on my knees worshipping you at the moment. I can't believe you bagged your carpenter, and so quickly. This must be a new record for you," said Lisa with a little too much gleefulness for the hour.

"Calm down, crude one. We ate, watched a movie then she kissed me goodnight at the guestroom door. There was no bagging involved."

Lisa laughed from her end trying to imagine Christina trying to keep her hands to herself all night. In a way, Christina had learned all her womanizing ways from a very good teacher who was thankfully out of her boss's life. "I'm sure not from your lack of trying." The groan coming from the other end got Lisa to stop kidding around and get to the point. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. Your parents called looking for you and considering the early hour didn't want the whole skinny on your personal life. This prompted them to call me at six on a Sunday. I guess it's all right for me to dial your cell and take the chance of finding you doing something naughty. Hillary and Dell love you, but even they have their limits."

"Is anything wrong?" asked Christina as she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Honey, calm down. If it were important they would have called you even if you had Jolly tied to the bed. They just were moving to their final destination and called to check up on you. Forgive me for calling you so early, but it was pay back for disturbing my beauty sleep. Do you have time to give me the scoop on last night?"

Christina looked at the equally sleepy Jolly standing in her doorway and turned her phone off. Lisa would have to accept her apology later but this was too good to pass up.

"Hey, I didn't mean to barge in on you, but I heard you talking and I wanted to make sure you

were ok." Jolly looked like a piece of forbidden fruit standing in the door and Christina's mouth watered at the thought of taking a bite.

Jolly walked closer when Christina crooked her finger at her and gave her a warm smile. "Aren't you sweet, but you look tired."

"Your second floor beams have done a number on my back. I was just going to take some aspirin when I heard you talking." Jolly put her hands in the small of her back and stretched much to Christina's delight. Years of woodworking had done wonders for the tall architect's body, as the muscles, which stood out in relief while she tensed, attested to.

Christina patted the bed and scooted over to make room for its owner. "I have a better cure, so come over here and lie down." The first moan out of Jolly made Christina want to peel the borrowed t-shirt she was wearing off and do the massage naked.

"Everything ok? You don't have to run off do you?" asked Jolly picking up the discarding phone. The small hands working on her lower back were loosening spots she didn't even realize were sore.

"I have all day for you."

"You do that like a girl."

Christina looked down her body slowly before looking back up at Jolly. "No one has ever complained about that before."

"I didn't say I didn't like the fact you're a girl. You just swing a hammer like one is all."

"Leave me alone, this is the first time I've done this," said Christina bumping shoulders with Jolly. After going out for breakfast they had driven out to the work site to check things for the next day when Christina had asked for a carpentry lesson. It would make a good story to tell her friends once the place was finished. None of them would believe she had a part in constructing even a small part of the house.

"If you're a fast learner then I can go back to the office tomorrow and you can supervise the construction," teased Jolly.

"No thank you, I'll leave the building to the experts and stick with my finger paints. Now take me somewhere and feed me."

"Feed you? We just ate breakfast."

Christina held Jolly's hand up and showed her the time. They had been there for over three hours and the heat was starting to get to her. "Tell me you aren't this clueless when it comes to

designing things?"

"Just for that, no nice cabinets in the kitchen for you." The small blonde trailed after Jolly like a puppy when she went to put away her tools before heading out. Jolly had admonished herself all day to go slow, but her heart was falling. She had never felt so comfortable around another person except for Mimi, and she was quickly learning Christina Griffin was someone who was hard to say no to about anything.

Once everything was put away, Jolly drove them out to a restaurant on the lake for lunch and afterward offered to take the blonde to a movie as a way to keep her a little longer. The weekend was turning out to be one of the best in memory and despite the work she had waiting for her, Jolly wanted to spend the night on the couch again watching Christina instead of the television.

Christina was thinking the same thing as they walked hand in hand back to Jolly's vehicle. The woman walking silently beside her was so different than all the women who had gone through Christina's life. Jolly was rough around the edges, but she was so genuine.

"Are you going to be building more of my house tomorrow?" Christina asked when Jolly opened the passenger door for her and gave her a boost into the seat. She grabbed her date around the neck before she could escape to the other side of the car.

"I'm going to help the guys with the second story floors then I have to get back to the office so I can design nice things for other people. Why, you want to learn how to use a screwdriver?"

"All this talk of tools is making me hot," joked Christina before kissing Jolly on the cheek.

"Come on I'll drop you off by your car so you can get some rest before you have to go to work tomorrow. I apologize for monopolizing all your time today, but I couldn't bear to let you go."

"You don't have to apologize for that, Jolly. I enjoyed today. And I'm not just saying that because I want nice cabinets in my kitchen either. Just remember the nicer they are the better those dinners I'm going to make you are going to be once you finish putting my kitchen together." Christina loved the contact of Jolly's body so close to hers, so much that she pulled them even closer together.

"You're going to cook for me?"

"I got a look at that great kitchen of yours, the one with no food in it, and I figured I'd have to if I want to keep you looking good."

Jolly looked at her confused by what Christina had said. Then it occurred to her Christina had only seen the refrigerator in the kitchen and not the one in the pantry. "You never know Ms. Griffin, I might just have some hidden tricks up my sleeve you don't know about." Jolly laughed when Christina made a point to look up her sleeves.

When she got into her own car after arriving back at Jolly's place, Christina leaned against the

seat and looked at the wonderful sight leaning in from the window. "You put them all on there?" She took the card that Jolly was offering.

"If you can't find me with all this, I've either fallen off your roof or I'm dead."

"Don't say that. Can I call you?"

"Honey, I didn't give you all my numbers because I think I have a good looking business card. I want you to call me. Besides you'll be too busy answering calls from me to call. Drive safe and I'll see you soon." Jolly straightened her legs so she could get further into the car and kiss Christina good night.

"What're you doing?" Was the question that came over the receiver when Jolly picked up.

"I'm carving. You got home ok?" Jolly asked as another fish came to life on the piece of wood she was making for Mimi.

"I was getting ready to go to bed, but I wanted to talk to you first. Thanks for the great weekend, Jolly. I hope we can have a repeat real soon."

"Count on it. Now get some sleep so you can sell lots of stuff. You haven't seen my bill yet, and I don't want to end up with your house by default."

Christina drove to the site before heading into her office just to see if Jolly was there yet. When she got out of the car the only option she had was to sit on the hood and put her hand over her mouth to muffle the laugh that wanted to spill out. There on the partially finished second floor was Jolly and a hand full of men doing a line dance to some country western song on the radio. The one thing Christina was grateful for was the dancer she was interested in was the only one without a beer gut.

The group bowed at the end of the song and accepted her applause with gratitude. When Jolly reached her car she looked over her shoulder and gave everyone a glare that meant get back to work.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, twinkle toes. I tried calling you early but you were either in the shower or up there putting down my floor."

"Sorry I missed you but I had to get up early and start work." Jolly looked down at her hands to make sure they were relatively clean before offering one to Christina. "You seem to call me names when you aren't pleased with me."

"You could not drive another nail into this place and I'd be pleased with you."

"Good to know. Kiss me then, you have to go and I have to get back to work."

When they broke apart the applause was coming from the opposite direction of the car and it was Christina that bowed this time. She wiped the pink lipstick off of Jolly's lips before pecking them one more time. Looking in the rearview mirror, she could see Jolly watching the car drive away. Hopefully Jolly would have that half dazed look for a long time to come.

[Continued in Chapter 2](#)

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~ A Place To Dance ~
by Ali Vali

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A Place To Dance
by
Ali Vali

Chapter 2

Christina put her new key into the elevator and tried to turn it while juggling the bags in her arms. She hadn't seen Jolly's Land Cruiser in the lot so she figured she'd be well into her surprise before the architect got home from work. There was soft music playing and the table was set for two when Christina stepped in and wondered how Jolly knew she was coming over.

From the kitchen, Jolly heard the elevator and waited for her usual Monday night date to come in and keep her company while she cooked dinner. "Madeline, are you going to hang out in the living room all night, or are you going to come in here and kiss me hello?"

The first thought to cross Christina's mind was to pull out the large bottle of olive oil she had bought and throw it at Jolly's head. Instead she calmly put the bags down and walked into the kitchen preparing her goodbye speech with each step. If Jolly was involved with someone, why

had she led her on all weekend?

To Christina's surprise there were three pots going on the stove and Jolly was cutting vegetables on the large work area like a pro. The work clothes had been replaced by a pair of pressed chinos, a pale pink cotton shirt and brown bucks. When she looked up from her task a smile broke out on Jolly's face that reached her eyes only to die away just as quickly when she saw the pissed off stance of the woman in her kitchen.

"Sorry to ruin your surprise for Madeline, but I thought the key was for me to use any time I wanted. And gosh you never mentioned you could cook."

"Surprise, what surprise? I do this every Monday."

"You bitch, if you were seeing someone why not just say so before I made a fool of myself by coming over here?" Christina was just getting started when Jolly caught on to the reason the blonde was mad. The deep belly laugh made Christina forget what she was going to say next and drove her anger up another notch.

Jolly stopped laughing and looked at the face she had thought about all day, which now showed more hurt than anger. "You never asked if I could cook, that's a conclusion you came up with all on your own. And this isn't a surprise, I cook for Madeline every Monday night from the day we met. Only you know her as Mimi, great talented artist, not Madeline, annoying shrimpy pest. I mean, who in the hell would name their child Mimi?"

"I did it again, didn't I?" Christina buried her face in her hands and waited for Jolly to ask her to leave.

"I'd think you didn't like me anymore if you weren't calling me names. Now come over here and kiss me like you aren't my step sister." Christina let out the breath she was holding and once again thanked God that Jolly was so forgiving. When she stepped around and kissed Jolly hello the smell coming off the stove made her break it earlier than she wanted, but it was almost like a burning desire to know what was under the lids.

"I saw your icebox and none of this stuff was in there," accused Christina looking at the bubbling pot she had uncovered.

"You didn't go into my pantry where I keep all the food. I put another refrigerator in there since it was closer to the service elevator that comes up in that storage area. You just thought big and goofy couldn't translate into decent cook."

Christina couldn't help but kiss the pout that had formed above her head. "You just don't look like the type who would know her way around a kitchen. Around the bedroom definitely, but I thought you wouldn't know what a flame was much less what to do with it."

"Chris, the great father of architecture Frank Lloyd Wright once said no self respecting architect could design a kitchen if they didn't know how to cook. I figured he knew what he was talking

about so I took lessons. The bedroom stuff, you're right, I'm a natural."

"A natural who is obviously tossing me out on my rear," said an over dramatic Mimi from the doorway with her hand over her brow for emphasis. "And this being the only home cooked meal I get all week. You get a girl and I'm out on my ass, is that it?"

"Mimi, behave. Christina came over to surprise us, since she missed us so much and all."

"Yeah, I can see she's been pining away for me all week." Mimi teased as she made her way across the kitchen to kiss Jolly hello then doing the same for the gallery owner. "Well you can forget it, sister, I'm not leaving. You'll just have to learn to share the wonderful person who is Jolly," she said to Christina when they broke from their hug.

"I'll go put out an extra place setting if you show me where the plates and stuff are, Jolly." Christina pulled down all the items she would need after Jolly pointed to where they could be found. She knew in her gut Jolly would tell her sister what had happened before her arrival and that would be the final straw that would drive Mimi into talking Jolly into not seeing her anymore and lead her to find someone else to sell her stuff.

"Christina." Mimi said her name stopping the gallery owner before she left the kitchen.

"Yes?"

"I heard what you said, and I don't want you to agonize over it all night. If I thought Jolly was cheating on anyone, I would've reacted pretty much the same way. But my Babe is as honest as they come. She won't hurt you if that's what you're worried about."

"Thanks." Christina felt a hundred pounds lighter leaving the kitchen.

"She called you a bitch," whispered Mimi, making air quotes toward Jolly. "You're moving up in the world, Babe. When a woman uses those kinds of words with such passion she's either an artist or she's in love."

"She's an artist," said Jolly with a sigh.

"Chris was right the first time," Mimi released a sigh of her own before snatching a carrot off the cutting board.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Big goober wasn't it? She likes you, Jolly, learn to live with it, and don't let it rattle you too much." For the first time in their talks about Christina Jolly could see Mimi's smile didn't reach her eyes and made a mental note to ask her about it later.

Jolly opened a bottle of wine after she had put all the food on the table letting the two women serve themselves while she poured. They had put all the food Christina had brought over away

with the understanding the small blonde could come back and put it to use in the near future.

"Chris, you're going to love this," said Mimi spooning some of the beef stew into her plate. Jolly had also made peas with almonds, rice and an apple pie for dessert. "This is one of Jolly's specialties."

"You look good, you're a carpenter and you cook. Had I known this I would've jumped at that marriage proposal Saturday," said Christina reaching up to kiss Jolly when she leaned over to pour her a glass of wine.

"Jolly, you sly dog, you proposed the minute you saw her in the living room?" asked Mimi.

"I was making an observation about something Christina had said."

"So you didn't mean it?" Christina pouted for effect and got Jolly to come and kneel by her chair. "I'm kidding, but you can kiss me since you're here." Her carpenter delivered on her request and got a pea thrown at her from across the table.

"You have plenty of time for that when I leave, but I'm not leaving until I'm full so cut it out," ordered Mimi.

Jolly spent the rest of the meal listening to Christina and Mimi talk about new art trends and show ideas as she ate. The two women followed her back into the kitchen where they had dessert and watched Jolly load the dishwasher and pack Mimi the leftovers so she would have something to eat at least twice more during the week. Christina told the artist goodbye at the elevator and waited for Jolly to get back from walking her to her car.

"You do this every Monday?" Christina asked Jolly when she came back up.

"It's a good compromise. I get to practice my cooking skills and Mimi gets to eat something other than cheese and crackers, which is her staple when she's working."

"No one with that many plastic containers is doing it for the practice, Jolly. Admit it, you're just sweet." Christina pulled the chef down to sit with her on one of the couches in the living room so they could admire the art painted on the wall. "You think if I cook for her, she would do this for me?"

"Mimi's a special woman, someone who's overly generous, so I'd imagine if you asked real nice she would. Just like someone who was going to come over here and cook me dinner." Jolly pulled Christina closer to her and kissed her on the temple.

"I could do it tomorrow if you like?"

"That would be great, if you're not too busy."

Christina turned and pulled Jolly closer to her so she could kiss her like she had wanted to all

night. She was starting to crave this woman, but wanted this relationship to be different. There'd been too many one night stands in her life, and the thought of a chance of something more sounded good. "I'll never be too busy for you."

The gallery owner made good on her promise the next night and it turned into a nightly ritual for almost the next month. They shared the meals on Mondays with Mimi, and spent the rest of the nights getting to know each other better.

On their fifth Monday together they sat out on the deck watching the tugs float by on the river after Mimi had left for the night. Christina was sitting pressed up against Jolly running her fingers along a muscled tan arm.

"Can I take you out to dinner tomorrow night?" asked Christina.

"I would love that, but I'll have to take a rain check."

"Don't tell me you have other sisters who you take care of and cook for?" asked Christina.

"I have three sisters in the eyes of the law, but Mimi's the only one I love to take care of, so no. Actually I'm declining because I'm flying out to Atlanta tomorrow for a couple of days to give a presentation at the architectural school for inner city children. It's part of a national mentoring program Mimi got me involved in a couple of years ago."

"I won't get to see you for a couple of days?"

Jolly kissed her before answering the question hoping it would get her off the hook. "Not until next Saturday. I'm doing the workshop and then Tim and I are pitching some ideas for a project the city's proposing."

"You won't forget about me while you're gone, will you?" A slim finger ran around the rim of Jolly's ear sending a chill down the architect's body. Christina was moving closer and it was wreaking havoc with Jolly's self-control.

"Chris, I have a hard time keeping my fingers intact when I'm driving nails I think about you so much, so no, a week isn't going to erase you from my memory banks."

Christina relaxed under the hands running along her back and enjoyed the kisses being placed on her neck. "Jolly, why didn't you ever want to go to work for your father? I would think with the size of his firm you would've gotten the chance to do more projects like the one you're going to Atlanta to do."

The question surprised her, but Jolly chalked it up to getting to know someone and how they ticked. "I did work for my father when I first started out, Tim and I both did. After a few very frustrating months of him turning down all my drafts and ideas I couldn't take it anymore and I left."

"He didn't like them because you were still inexperienced?"

"No, he thought with his form of criticism he could break me into seeing the world through his eyes. He's all about control, in his work and in his family. With one it makes him very good at what he does because he's consistent, and vigilant about every detail. But it makes it hell when it comes to his family. It drove my mother away and eventually drove a wedge between my siblings and her. Anthony's golden rule always was, he who has the gold makes all the rules. My brother and sister couldn't get used to the lesser things in life, so their mother was a small price to pay to keep the cars and jobs. I guess I can be counted on the evil side of the family since I took her side and am still in contact with her."

Christina reached up and ran her hand along Jolly's cheek in comfort. "I'm sorry I asked."

"I don't tell people that because I'm trying to hide it or get sympathy when asked. I just got over it and moved on to find my own path. He's my father but he's still a liar and a bully. We wanted different things for my life and I thought I was the only one who held a vote that counted. I can look back now and see I have what I have because I worked for it, not because I owe it to him. As for family, I've made my own and they love me and make me happy."

"You're not anything like him, and I really like that about you." Christina kissed Jolly and sat with her until past midnight getting up to leave without much gusto. She knew she had to get up before they got too carried away. New clients meant she had an early day in the morning and that's not how she wanted to start on the next phase of her relationship with Jolly.

"Will you call me?"

"Count on it, Chris." Jolly walked her to her car and kissed her good night before letting Christina drive away.

During the days that followed, Tim took over as foreman at Christina's house until he was due to fly out, and Jolly enjoyed her time on the phone learning about the woman that was slowly getting her to open her heart. Between her partner and Christina, Jolly knew how the house was progressing and what was waiting for her when she got home.

"It's Friday, does that mean you can stop your pining now?" asked Lisa as they were getting ready to lock the gallery for the night.

Over the four days Jolly had been gone Christina had figured phone calls weren't enough. She was planning on meeting the plane tomorrow morning and locking Jolly in her loft for the rest of the weekend. There were merits to moving slow and getting to know each other, but there was also something to be said for hot sex.

"Almost, I figure another thirty six hours then you're home free until Jolly's next business trip," said Christina with the closest thing to a smile she had displayed all day. The day had been a

series of small crises at the gallery from the time they had arrived including a small electrical fire, and she was ready to go home.

The chime over the door rang out and they both groaned at the thought of having to get rid of whoever had wandered in ignoring the closed sign. It was a contest as to which of the two tired women was more surprised. At the door stood Dell and Hillary Griffin home early from their trip, and with them was Jan Shaffer.

Christina had met Jan Shaffer as a sophomore in college. The tall athletic blonde with the looks of a Greek goddess had pursued her with a relentlessness and charm that was impossible to resist. It was the first time Christina had slept with someone on their first date, but Jan had been like a drug there was no rehab for. Jan had made her feel so wanted Christina didn't feel like she could hold out.

After two months of seeing each other they moved in together, sharing a small apartment close to campus. As the weeks passed, Christina was sure she'd found the one person she could share the rest of her life with. Jan listened and encouraged her when Christina spoke of her future plans, and at night the tall blonde fueled her passions with the type of sex Christina had only read about.

They were happy until the night Christina made plans to meet her study group for a late cramming session for their upcoming midterms. A headache caused her to go home a few hours early. The sight of Jan in their bed with a beautiful freshman had made Christina physically ill. The girl was the first of many over the next two years she and Jan would stay together.

For Christina, their time together turned into a hellish cycle. Jan would cheat then go through the process of courting her again to prove the parade through her bed meant nothing. To make it harder for Christina to leave the humiliating situation Jan had completely won over her parents, convincing Dell and Hillary she was perfect daughter-in-law material.

It took months of therapy on Christina's part to find the strength to just walk away. Jan Shaffer had been her personal nightmare and Dr. Frankstein rolled into one handsome package. Jan had killed the part of Christina's heart that believed in commitment and love, creating another woman chaser that used sex strictly for her own gain.

Lisa knew the whole story from Christina's perspective, but the art dealer had completely taken the Griffin couple in giving them a different idea of she and Christina's relationship. Maybe it wasn't the assistant's place but Lisa wasn't going to allow Jan to play her boss again. Christian had Jolly now and the architect was slowly making the gallery owner believe in fairytales again. Therapy had helped her boss get over the hurt Jan had caused her, but hadn't found a way to make Christina forget the way Jan made her body burn.

"Mom, dad? I wasn't expecting you for another week." Christina stood frozen in place having flash backs of what she'd found so attractive about Jan. The two years since their last meeting had been good to the well-dressed fit woman who stood before her. Jan knew just what buttons to push, and the smile she was giving Christina was making the smaller woman hot. It was the

same smile the tall blonde had used to explain away the multiple women she had slept with when she and Christina were together.

"That's no reason you can't come over here and tell us hello, young lady," said Dell. He picked his daughter up when she moved closer then let her go to greet her mother. The hesitation she showed in giving Jan a welcoming hug was what really confused him. To help them out he pushed Jan forward gently and nodded his head in Christina's direction. "I'm sure she missed you too."

Jan moved forward and took advantage of the situation. She pulled Christina against her and started with a soft kiss to the lips, which she deepened the second the smaller woman didn't pull away. "I missed you so much."

"Let your father and I take you two out to dinner then you can make up for lost time. Jan told us when we ran into her in New York it's been over a month since you've seen each other, you must be frantic, dear," Hillary told Christina in a teasing voice. The Griffins had always been accepting of their daughter's sexual orientation, but Hillary seldom asked questions. She was sure if there was someone special Chris would tell them and the last person she had talked about was Jan. Since Christina had moved out, they had dinner twice a week, but their daughter had always come alone. There was no way for the couple to know Jan's absence from Christina's life had been more than a month, or why she was absent at all.

"No, mother."

"Nonsense, Christina, I was young once, I understand about love and what it needs to be fulfilled. Your father and I may only see you once or twice a week for dinner but it doesn't mean that we don't want you to be happy. Maybe tonight we can prove to you that we won't embarrass you if you start bringing Jan along with you," teased Hillary.

"Chris, could I see you for a moment?" asked Lisa.

"Excuse me, we were just getting some stuff finished up."

Christina walked into her office and closed the door. She had tried her whole life not to disappoint her parents in anything including her relationships. Jan had spent holidays with them as well as vacations, so when her parents came to love her, it had been hard to tell them Jan had left never looking back. And the multitude of women who had shared her bed after Jan certainly wasn't dinner small talk material. Now her parents had been alone on a plane with the woman for over two hours listening to God knows what fantasy Jan had painted for them.

"Are you out of your mind? Get out there and tell the clueless couple that woman's a manipulative bitch. You do not need this in your life again," hissed Lisa as quietly as she could.

"Dinner, Lisa, that's all this is, so calm down ok. If she wants to make it more than that I'll set her straight don't worry."

"Chris, you spend two minutes alone with her and you'll be straight all right, or should I say horizontal. Think about the consequences this time. Jan's a player and you're not going to change that about her no matter how hard you try. She's only in it for the conquest can't you see that? If you're not careful you could lose Jolly over something that'll mean nothing to Jan."

Christina put her hand up to shut out anything else her assistant was going to say. The last thing she needed was a lecture about her will power or lack of it when it came to Jan Shaffer. Lisa was right, she had Jolly, but this was only dinner - nothing more. She was shocked to see Jan again after so much time, but she was ok now. Chris just wanted to show Jan how well her life was without her.

"All set?" Jan asked when the office door opened and the two women walked out. The tall blonde hurried to help Christina on with her suit jacket and kept her hands on her shoulders when it was on. Christina's ex didn't need anyone to tell her Lisa still didn't care too much for her. The hatred almost dripped from Lisa's pores.

"Yeah, Lisa's going to lock up for the night. How about we try Kelsey's down the street?" Christina moved forward a little to get away from Jan's hands. The warning Lisa had issued about Jolly ran through her head, but one look back to the blue eyes that still haunted her dreams erased it just as quickly.

Dell opened the door and led everyone out when they were in agreement. Lisa stood near the entrance in disbelief when Jan reached for Christina's hand and wasn't rebuffed. The phone started ringing the moment she had locked the front door and Lisa thought briefly about letting the machine pick it up.

"Griffin Gallery."

"Hey, Lisa, the boss got you working late?"

"Jolly, you just missed her," said Lisa trying to keep her voice light. Had Jolly seen the white knuckled grip on the phone she'd have known there was something wrong.

"Maybe I called to talk to you," teased Jolly.

"Well anytime you want to talk to me, I'm available. If you want to talk to Chris though, she's having dinner at Kelsey's with her parents. They got home early and surprised her."

"I was wondering why her phone was turned off. You take care, and I'll see you soon," said Jolly before hanging up. Tim shook his head standing next to her at the luggage carousel waiting for their bags to come out. "Don't make fun of me, I just missed her."

"It's actually kind of nice to see you off balance like this over a girl, workaholic. But don't worry, after all the shit you gave me after I met Pam, making fun of you will come later. That's what big cousin's are for."

Jolly saw her bag and when she went to pick it up, a solid warm weight landed on her back, and legs wrapped around her waist. "Babe, did you miss me?"

"You know, I'm going to dedicate all my free time this week thinking up an equally annoying nickname for you," said Jolly turning her face to meet Mimi eye to eye.

"I'm fond of goddess," said Mimi before kissing Jolly hello.

Jolly pulled her around to the front so she could get a hug. "I was thinking more along the lines of shrimpy." She pulled Mimi against her again and kissed the top of her head. Mimi was the only other person she had called all week aside from Christina.

"You can't profess to love me then call me shrimpy."

"Come on then, goddess, you can give me a ride home."

Mimi carried four leather tubes full of architectural drawings as Jolly hoisted her bag and briefcase for the trip to the Land Cruiser Mimi had been using while she was out of town. "Does she know you came home early because you missed her?"

"I wanted to surprise her, but she's out with her parents who beat me on the surprise factor, so I'll wait till later. Want to have dinner with me?" asked Jolly.

"Sure I'll play second fiddle if you cook."

Jolly shook her head at the playful blonde as she maneuvered them out of the airport lot. "Madeline, you know you're my best girl."

The statement appeased the artist enough to reach over for Jolly's hand for the trip to the penthouse. They sat together on the balcony and ate the omelets Jolly had made and caught up on the week they had been apart. The sofa that faced the mural was their last stop as they drank coke floats side by side.

"Jolly, are you happy here?"

Jolly put her glass down and put her arm around Mimi before answering. "I guess every builder dreams of constructing a house somewhere of their own design. To look around and see your ideas in every wall and fixture, but I think a great builder knows when to admire when someone else has done that for them. I didn't build this place, but I brought it back to life and that makes me happy, so the answer is yes."

"I'm glad you are, and I'm glad you like my additions. This place is so you that I really missed you not being here when I came to stock the fridge this week."

Jolly looked down to Mimi's face seeing the expression of sadness before she buried it in Jolly's shoulder. "Are you happy, Mimi?"

The blonde head nodded against her shoulder and Mimi took a deep breath before lifting her head and looking at Jolly. "I'm just glad you're home, and that you have a girl to come home to now. And I'm sure she's dying to see you so take me home and get your ass over there."

Jolly walked Mimi to her door after driving her home, and hugged her one more time before leaving sensing there was still something wrong. "Dinner on Monday?"

"Have I ever turned you down on a Monday?" asked Mimi.

"I know, silly question. Lock up and I'll call you in the morning."

Jolly drove three blocks down from Mimi's to the small apartment complex Christina was staying in until her house was done. The little sports car was parked in the lot so Jolly got out and checked the mailboxes for the right one. She had never been but remembered Christina mentioning she and Mimi were almost neighbors.

The knock was loud enough for Christina to hear, but soft enough not to wake the neighbors. Noticing the proximity of the front doors, Jolly could see Christina had been right about how small the apartments were.

A look of shock was not what Jolly was going for but that's what was registering when Christina opened the door wearing a robe. Jolly wanted to put her hands in her pockets and turn back toward her car the silence lasted so long, but she tried a different approach. She stepped forward and kissed Christina on the lips.

The gallery owner watched Jolly move forward like it was happening in slow motion and her feet were stuck in quick sand. When Jolly's lips reached their destination Christina's blood ran cold as the kiss died as quickly as it began. What up to then had been a pleasurable experience felt like a train wreck.

"I can explain." The line sounded as lame to her as it did to Jolly. The taste Jolly had come away with was unmistakable.

"You paid your way through college as a contortionist with the circus?" Jolly's glib question was not a good sign as she scrubbed her lips with the back of her hand. "Or is it you have a naked blonde in your bed?" Christina's shocked expression got worse with the question making Jolly laugh. "No, I'm not a mind reader, she's waiting for you in the hall, and couldn't find a robe I guess."

"Jolly, please." Christina reached for Jolly's arm.

Jolly stared at her hand until it dropped back to Christina's side. "Honey, you don't owe me any explanations, and don't worry about me making a scene, that's not my style. It was a great couple of dates, and I'm building your house. And don't worry about a leaky roof or something because of this, that's not my style either."

Christina stood in the hall and watched Jolly walk away as Lisa's warning about consequences rang in her head. She had allowed Jan to play her again and in the morning she'd be gone after having her itch scratched. The only problem was that Jolly would be gone with her.

"Mimi, it's Christina Griffin."

Mimi stepped back from her canvas with a paint splattered portable in her hand and looked at it as if she had heard wrong. Chris was the last person she figured she'd be hearing from that weekend. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you know how I can get in touch with Jolly?"

"Problems? I can't imagine she would fly home a day early because she wanted to pick a fight with you."

"We had a misunderstanding and I just want to talk to her about it before it gets any worse. I care about her, Mimi, you have to believe me."

Mimi looked at the phone again starting to get a bad feeling about the call. "I'm not interrogating you, Chris, calm down. Jolly can be a hothead but she's a real sweetheart once she cools down, just give her the space to do that. If she doesn't want to be found though, not even I can do it so you'll have to wait."

"If you talk to her, can you ask her to call me?"

"Sure."

Mimi changed into a clean shirt and shorts before grabbing her keys and heading out to her car. There were only four pieces of real estate Jolly owned, and Mimi was standing in one of them. If Jolly wasn't in the building the penthouse was in, or the office, it left only one place left to look. The small shotgun house wasn't too far from Mimi's place, and it had been built by Jolly's grandfather. She had bought it when her grandparents died for the workshop in the back.

The sound of a saw could be heard from the driveway when Mimi walked up. She pulled at her short blonde hair until it stuck straight up as the rapid sound of Jolly's hammer came next. Mimi hated when Jolly got upset but loved the great furniture she ended up with.

"You promised you'd call me this morning." Mimi spoke loudly enough to be heard over the hammering. Whatever had happened it wasn't good since Jolly still had on the clothes from the night before.

"I started on a new supply box for you and time got away from me," said Jolly around the nails in her mouth.

The large piece Jolly was working on could fit most of the paint at Home Depot Mimi guessed, but it was beautiful. "A little big huh, Babe?"

"This is a dresser for your bedroom, the paint supply box is over there," Jolly pointed to a smaller piece sitting on one of the worktables so the glue could dry.

"What's wrong?"

"What makes you think anything's wrong? Maybe I had a burning desire to do something nice for you," said Jolly. The tall woman stepped away from the piece she was working on to see if she had missed anything.

Mimi pulled on her hair again and thought about finding a nice piece of wood to beat Jolly with. "Babe, you're in here sweating when you should be at home sweating for a whole different slew of reasons."

"I'm not into group sex, but thanks for asking," said Jolly picking up the next piece of wood she needed.

The blonde hair got pulled tighter and Mimi let out a groan of frustration. "What are you talking about? Christina just called me and she sounded upset."

"Funny, she should have sounded relaxed after all the sex from last night."

"You slept with her then left her hanging? Jolly, that's not very nice."

"No, I went to see her and she was having sex with someone else. I didn't really stick around to catch her name and shaking hands was out of the question." Jolly didn't sound too upset and Mimi watched her go back to taking measurements.

"You sure that's what they were doing?"

"It's the only activity I could think of off the top of my head that I know people do naked, which the mystery blonde was, and Christina's kiss left no doubt."

Mimi shuddered with both disgust and anger over what Jolly had come home to find. "Gross."

"You said it, shrimpy."

"She failed to mention that during her call to tell me how much she cared about you. Why aren't you mad?" Mimi asked picking up the small hammer Jolly had been using and played with it to give herself something to do with her hands. She had been begging for a dresser to match the bed Jolly had made when she had moved out on her own, but was sad that this is what it took to get it done.

"I didn't have a hold on her, and she didn't make any promises." Jolly shrugged her shoulders and went back to hammering.

"But she kinda did, make promises I mean. You wouldn't have given her a key to the elevator so quick if you didn't feel anything."

"I'm trying to forget that part, Mimi. Just because I have bouts of idiocy doesn't mean I like to be reminded of them." Jolly looked up and snapped her fingers. "Want to change a lock with me?"

"Do I get a key?" asked Mimi.

"Now who's asking silly questions?" Jolly opened her arms and held Mimi tight. The disheveled look of the small blonde made the irritation she was feeling melt away.

They spent the morning piecing together the oak wood Jolly had cut until the main part of the dresser was finished. If she wasn't too tired, Jolly planned to start on the drawers later that afternoon. She was too fatigued to start on the tongue and groove method that would hold the drawers together right then. It was an old technique her grandfather had taught her that was hard to do, but the finished product lasted longer under wear.

A stop at the hardware store got them a new locking mechanism for the elevator, and a stop at the deli scored them sandwiches so Jolly wouldn't have to cook. Mimi tore pieces of Jolly's sandwich off and fed her as they rode the elevator so Jolly could switch out the locks. Whenever anyone got on with them, Jolly let Mimi do all the talking, laughing at how easy she got them to open up and how much information you could get out of someone in less than two minutes.

"Jolly," said Mimi softly as they reached the first floor again. Christina was standing in the lobby staring at them waiting for Jolly to notice her.

Jolly put the last screw into the plate that held the lock in place and put the screwdriver back in her tool belt. "What?" Mimi pointed to the lobby and Jolly just stared at the upset looking blonde standing there.

"Can I talk to you, Jolly?" Christina took a step forward and stopped. A part of her wanted to be angry with Mimi for lying to her that morning, but kept quiet knowing she didn't have a right to feel anger toward anyone.

Jolly grabbed Mimi by the arm before the hothead could beat Christina for what she had done. "Down, girl," Jolly told Mimi. "What can I do for you, Christina?" Jolly didn't step out of the elevator and had pressed Mimi up against her front to keep a hold of her.

"I just want to talk to you."

"And I'm listening. I told you last night, I don't make scenes over women," said Jolly.

"Can I explain?" Christina saw Jolly tightened her hold on Mimi over her question.

"Mimi, darlin', you're gonna have to calm down for me, ok?" It was killing Christina inside to listen to the warmth in Jolly's voice when she talked to Mimi. Only a day had passed since she had been on the receiving end of the same affection. "You can explain, but you don't have to."

"I want you to understand," Christina tried again.

"What, that you have the ability to bed women?" Jolly let loose some of her temper and it was Mimi who pressed her feet into the elevator floor to keep Jolly back when another couple walked in and didn't know how to react to the tension.

"Come on, Jolly, I think we should walk Ms. Griffin to her car," suggested Mimi.

"Please, Jolly, she didn't mean...", started Christina.

"Don't!" Jolly pointed a finger in her direction. "Don't insult me by finishing that sad excuse. You want to fuck someone else, that's your prerogative, but don't do it and expect me to believe it doesn't matter. Be a big girl and own up to it. I don't own you and you sure as hell don't own me." Mimi decided she'd best hang on to the back of Jolly's pants since she had never seen her this mad.

Christina ignored her and put her hands out palms up in a plea of mercy. "It didn't matter. She was someone I used to live with and she ran into my parents on their flight. I didn't mean for it to happen. Jan's my past, but I want a future with you." Christina stood in front of Jolly not caring that Mimi hadn't left the architect's side. If there was a chance Jolly would give her another chance, Christina didn't mind the size of the audience present to hear her begging. Mimi just snorted and walked back to the door not willing to listen to anymore of the explanations Christina had. If Jolly wanted to pulverize her it would be something Mimi was willing to live with.

"That's one big joke; a future with you? I don't think so. As your architect let me explain to you what a bad idea building on a faulty foundation can be. I think that holds true for most things in life."

"It's one mistake, Jolly, one." Christina put her index finger up to make her point, only making Jolly madder.

"Me finding you with your face buried between some woman's legs is not a mistake. That would fall under the category of cluster fuck. If you can't grasp that concept, it tells me you're more sorry you got caught than that you were a willing participant."

"I'll give you some time to get over your anger, then I'll call you," said Christina before turning and getting into her car.

Jolly stood on the sidewalk and shook her head. "Yeah, you do that."

"You ok, big guy?" Mimi asked as they rode back up to Jolly's place. The new elevator key was already resting on Mimi's key ring in her pocket, and Mimi was resting against Jolly's chest.

"Just irritated I guess. She acted like some kinda delicate flower for over a month, then some woman from her past comes along and she's doing the nasty two minutes later," said Jolly as she put her arms around Mimi and looked at the roof of the elevator.

Jolly's looking up was the reason she missed the big smile that broke across Mimi's face momentarily. "You didn't sleep with her, and that's why you're upset?" *Yeah, they never slept together.*

"Please. I'm not wired that way, Mimi, so no that's not why I'm upset. When you meet someone, let's say at a bar, they come across with certain intentions." Jolly kept her arms around Mimi but moved her head to look into the green eyes.

"With you so far."

"You buy some drinks and maybe breakfast, depends on the girl. But when someone works you up to a point and keeps backing off, well that can only mean two things."

Mimi pulled Jolly out of the elevator by her belt and pushed her to sit on the nearest sofa. "Go on, it's fascinating to hear how your mind works."

"If she does that it either means she's not really interested, or she wants it to mean something when it finally happens."

"And she made you think it would mean something, didn't she?" asked Mimi.

Jolly laughed and lowered her head. "Big dummy, huh?"

"Oh, Babe, no. It just makes you human. If you changed that about yourself, you wouldn't be my favorite person anymore. You want to come home with me and watch me paint? It's better than watching the grass grow." She pulled on the belt again trying to get Jolly to smile, smiling herself when it worked.

"Sure, shrimpy, sounds good." Mimi hitched a ride down to the car on Jolly's back teasing her all the way down. It would take her some time, but Mimi was convinced she could get Jolly on the right track.

For the next month Christina made arrangements with Tim when it came to making decisions about the house. The time away from Jolly was killing her, but she wanted enough time to pass to help Jolly forget. The architect never saw Christina watching her work from the levee on the afternoons she could get away from the gallery.

Lisa had been right in that Jan had taken off before the sheets got cold, and hadn't called since. Christina was convinced she'd never have found out her ex was in the city if Jan hadn't run into her parents on that plane. No amount of time ever taught her the final lesson on Jan. The woman was only interested in the hunt, and she had proven herself easy prey too many times. The gallery owner had tried to drown in a sea of women when Jan had finally walked out, but Jolly was going to be the one to put a stop to that. *So what if I slept with Jan, Jolly should understand if she cared about me*, thought Christina as she watched the tall woman talking to Mimi.

Christina was starting to get an uneasy feeling about the number of times she saw Mimi at the construction site. The bubbly blonde was the only one out there who constantly got into Jolly's personal space and was never rebuffed. Whenever Mimi sat in the shade with her sketch pad Jolly had a hard time keeping the smile off her face and her eyes off the beautiful young woman.

The days that passed made the form of the house that much more recognizable, and it gave Christina hope since Jolly was still so involved with the project. Lisa didn't make any comment the day Christina showed up in jeans and a light sweater. It was not her boss's usual business attire but she figured there was a reason behind it and Christina would eventually tell her. When an hour of silence passed she broke down and asked.

"Taking the day off?"

"Just going out to the house to review some flooring choices. Tim said they're starting to brick today so the guys are concentrating on the interior," answered Christina not looking up from the document in her hand.

"Jolly going to be there?"

"I don't know, Lisa, would you like me to pass along a note for you if she's there?" The good relationship the women had shared suffered after what had happened with Jan. When Lisa sided with Jolly's decision not to see Christina anymore, the gallery owner had found it easier to blame her assistant than herself.

"Chris, I'm not your enemy here. You asked me and I told you the truth, don't hate me for it now." Lisa left the office before Christina could respond, and Christina didn't try to call her back.

"Just take the doors off the hinges and the forklift will be able to get through," yelled Jolly over the engine of the delivery truck. The electricians and plumbers had finished their job, so they could start putting up drywall. Piles of the white boards were stacked on the truck she was standing next to, ready to be unloaded.

"Heard you were looking for a few good men," said the deep voice behind her. Jolly turned around in disbelief having not seen the guy in months.

Jolly crossed her arms and stretched out to her full height, so she could take advantage of her

inch advantage, and looked him over. The blonde hair tied back in a ponytail now reached the middle of his back, and the beard had a little more white mixed in but the green eyes never changed. "Not a sorry looking son of a bitch like you."

"Bite me, bitch."

"You'd better not let your daughter hear you say that. She'd kick your butt. Hell she might anyway considering it's been, what, five months since she's heard from you?"

"Cut me some slack, Jolly. You're my secret weapon, man, when it comes to keeping me on Mimi's good side."

Jolly laughed and opened her arms to give him a hug. Ricky Mulle was a man who traveled the country on a Harley looking for construction jobs only to fill his stomach and his tank. It was the reason his ex-wife had taken their three children and married Anthony Holland.

"How's it going, Rick?" Jolly asked keeping her arm around his shoulder.

"Working up in Phoenix for awhile, but I missed my kid. Called Tim and he told me where I could find a job before I had to go over to Mimi's and crash empty handed." Ricky looked at Jolly and wondered if she had found what was staring her in the face for six years.

"She doesn't care about that, Rick, you know she just wants you where she can find you. You missed her show a couple of months back. Sold every piece before the night was over." Jolly picked up his tool bag and threw it into the back of her truck. She wanted to go home and give Mimi her surprise.

"Thought you had dry wall to put up?" Ricky pointed to the forklift passing by into the house.

"I've got a whole damn house worth, but that'll keep. We have a lady to see about some paint," said Jolly. They were two blocks passed the driveway when Christina's car pulled into the construction site.

When they reached the house, Ricky got out of the truck and leaned against the front looking at the new set of porch rockers Mimi had out front. He figured Jolly had been a busy girl since his last visit. The unlocked front door made him shake his head when Jolly opened it and walked right in, Mimi would never change.

"Jolly!" Mimi cried running over to hug her when she heard Jolly step into the studio. "You aren't sick are you?" She asked feeling Jolly's forehead.

"I'm fine, I just wanted to come home early and bring you something."

Home? The word was put away in Mimi's heart like a gold coin in a treasure chest. "A table to go with my new rockers?"

"Better, come on." Jolly took her hand and led Mimi to the front door. The shriek the blonde let out when she saw her father left Jolly a little light headed.

"Daddy, it's really you. Jolly get his stuff and put it in his room. You're staying right? Jolly's got stuff for you to do, and I want you to stay." She turned and looked at Jolly, "You have stuff for him to do, right?"

Ricky hugged Mimi close to his chest and laughed at the rambling. From her first word, he remembered Mimi had had only one speed for talking. Rapid fire, so you were agreeing to stuff you had no intention to, and by the time you figured it out she was off to the next subject.

"Slow down, baby girl, I'm staying and I got a job set up starting tomorrow. The boss was nice enough to give me the afternoon off with pay." Ricky smiled at the arched brow shot his way from Jolly.

"You're working for Jolly, right?"

"He's working for Jolly," answered Jolly getting her another hug when Mimi latched on to her. "Now bring my vacationing worker in for his grilling and I'll leave you alone to get it done." Mimi pouted at the fact Jolly was leaving and tried her best sad puppy dog eyes to get her to change her mind. "The sooner I get done, the sooner I can come back and take you two out to dinner."

"Promise you won't be late?" asked Mimi looking up at Jolly through blonde lashes.

"I promise, shrimpy, go have fun with your dad."

"Thanks for bringing him over and not making him work the rest of the day."

Jolly handed Ricky his tools before heading back to the site. She planned to lock up his bike for the night so he could have an uninterrupted night with Mimi. The two blondes watched the old Ford pickup turn the corner driving out of sight before heading into the house.

"You haven't told her, have you?" Ricky asked his daughter as they stepped into the house. Jolly's hand was everywhere he looked and it made him feel good. He had never been able to temper his wanderlust, so having someone like Jolly take care of Mimi made him feel less guilty.

"This isn't open to discussion with her, daddy. Besides, she's getting over a broken heart." Mimi reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. Except for the hair and gender thing, Jolly and her dad were a lot a like. "Want to see the new dresser I got out of the deal?"

"Jolly loves you, Mimi, she just needs a little push to figure it out."

"She's my sister, daddy. Even the great state of Louisiana frowns on such unions," teased Mimi. They had had this conversation every time they were together from the first time Ricky had seen the two of them together.

"Honey, Jolly's not related to you. Your mother was her father's secretary and they ended up with the same last name through marriage. If you're fond of the name Andolini then marry her. Trust me, it's the one way I'll be happy for you to get it tacked on after Mulle, and I'd love to see the look on big Tony's face the day that happens. You have to love a plan that makes everyone happy."

"Promise me you won't say anything. Jolly's my best friend and if that's the only way I can get her, then I'll be happy." Mimi looked up at him and looked into his eyes. Ricky might have never been around as much as she had wanted him to, but like Jolly, he wasn't a liar.

"I promised you when you were sixteen, Mimi, and I promise you now, I won't say anything. The other thing I promise is, the day she finally wakes up and finds you standing there, I'm going to whack her one upside the head. She's brilliant at so many things except for the one that's the most important. Tell me about your show?" Ricky put his feet up on the kitchen chair across from him and put his chin in his palm to listen to his daughter talk. He missed this most of all when he got the urge to hit the road. Mimi always made everything sound like an adventure you were sorry you missed sharing while it was happening.

The tour of the house came next and Ricky spent a half an hour looking at the dresser Mimi had bragged about. The detail of the piece and the hours he knew Jolly had put into it, made it easy to decide how he would spend the next few months. No one put that kind of work into something for someone they weren't in love with. Ricky wanted to give his daughter the one gift that would make up for all the disappointments she had experienced because of him.

"You two ready?" Jolly called on her way home wanting to know what they were in the mood for. Ricky was a man of simple taste so there would be no gourmet meal in her future tonight.

"You promised you wouldn't be late."

"Honey, it's four thirty in the afternoon. I usually don't get home until six. I'm not late. Tell me where you want to go so I can dress accordingly."

The blonde was currently standing in front of her closet in her underwear wondering the same thing. "You aren't coming here first?"

"At the moment I'm covered in white dust. I think you'll want me to take a shower first. How about twenty minutes, a fresh pair of jeans and I come pick you up?"

"You think he'll want to be a little more adventurous than Mexican tonight?" Mimi asked as she tapped the nail of her index finger against her front teeth as she visually looked through all the stuff hanging in front of her.

"This is Ricky Mulle we're talking about, right? Take one of those l's out of the last name and you'll have your answer."

"Jolly, be nice, he's my father," laughed Mimi.

"I know, now put something on and I'll be there in a few minutes." Mimi looked at the phone and wondered how Jolly knew she wasn't dressed. When she couldn't, she just stuck her tongue out at the receiver before putting it back in its cradle.

Ricky let Jolly in when she knocked thirty minutes later, both of them surprised Mimi wasn't ready to go. He handed her a beer and they stepped out to the backyard to discuss an addition Jolly was considering for the house. The home Mimi had moved into three years before had been a dilapidated mess when Jolly had purchased it for pennies on the dollar almost right out of school. It had been her idea to fix it up a little and put it back on the market, but Mimi had fallen in love with its location.

The modest house sat on a large expanse of land a couple of blocks off St. Charles Avenue. It was the size of the lot that had made Jolly think it was a good investment since the house could be added to extensively still leaving a good sized yard. The best thing about the place was it backed up to Audubon Park.

In the middle of one of New Orleans's oldest neighborhoods, Audubon Park was a huge haven of massive oaks and colorful flowers. The city planners had set aside enough land to eventually include a public golf course, playgrounds, picnic areas and a two-mile track that circled the whole thing. To the front was the famous St. Charles avenue and Tulane University, and to the back was the revamped Audubon Zoo. The fact Mimi could have all that by just walking out the back door was what had grabbed her from the moment she stepped into the house. Like in most things, Jolly had given in and aside from repairs to make it livable, the only addition she had made was the large studio at the back.

Stucco dividers held up the large panes of glass that mostly made up the walls letting in light no matter what time of day it was. On the floors Jolly had put thin strips of long leaf pine that had been varnished to a high shine, not for looks but for easy cleaning. The paint that dripped off Mimi's brush was buffed up once a week by the crew Jolly hired to clean the house. When Mimi had protested, Jolly told her beautiful women shouldn't waste time doing housework.

"I'm thinking you should consider a nice gazebo out here under the oaks," said Ricky. He took a swig out of his beer and pointed to the spot in the yard he was talking about. Jolly nodded her head and tried to picture how that would look.

Behind them Mimi stepped out to the patio and cleared her throat to pull their attention away from the talk of wood. Jolly turned around to say hello when the beer she had been drinking slipped without notice from her fingers. The splatter reached even Ricky's jeans when the bottle shattered after hitting the floor.

The wet spots on her pants snapped Jolly out of the trance she was in and she looked down as if not sure where the bottle had come from, much less how it broke. Mimi was standing there in a pair of black leather pants with matching vest with nothing on underneath. The curve hugging material did everything but have arrows saying 'look here' to accentuate Mimi's figure, and Jolly

was having a hard time breathing all of sudden.

"You ok there, Jolly?" asked Ricky slapping her on the back. Mimi shot her father a warning glare before his questions got any further out of hand.

"I'm sorry, it just slipped out of my hand. Let me get a broom and clean this up before we go." Jolly walked into the kitchen and got the broom and dustpan out of the closet, cursing herself mentally with every step.

The hose washed away the beer after Jolly had gotten all the glass into the garbage. She had made Mimi and Ricky go inside to wait on her so they wouldn't get wet. The double paned doors she had installed out to the patio kept Jolly from hearing Ricky's roar of laughter.

"Damn, girl, I think Jolly just got a clue you aren't sixteen anymore. Nice choice of outfit, Mimi."

Mimi's blush ruined her plan to deny the allegation so she just said, "Thanks. I just get curious every so often to see if she's paying attention."

"You struck her dumb, sweetheart, I'm thinking that counts as paying attention. Jolly, all finished?" Ricky's voice rose to let Mimi know their friend was finished and standing at the door.

"Yeah, I smell like a brewery, but if you two can live with it, I'm ready. How about Tacqueria Corona on Magazine street?" Jolly picked up the last piece of leather apparel to Mimi's outfit and held it up for her. The black jacket matched a larger version of one Jolly owned but it was a rarity for them to have to pull them out so soon into the fall season.

The restaurant was crowded enough so they would have to wait thirty minutes at the bar if they wanted to stay. Jolly and Ricky gave Mimi the only barstool left as they stood next to her and talked about the dove tailed drawers Jolly had made for Mimi's bedroom dresser.

"Guys, could we talk about something other than woodworking techniques? It makes me feel useless if all I can contribute to the conversation is, my underwear looks really nice in there."

"What would you like to talk about?" asked Jolly accepting a nacho chip covered in salsa from Mimi.

"The gazebo you're putting in the backyard would be a good start," said Mimi backhanding Jolly in the stomach. She kept the smile on her face as her eyes looked toward the door of the restaurant.

Christina was talking with the host as the older couple with her stood back a few feet. She turned to them and said something that got them to nod their heads and close the door. Mimi dunked another chip into the salsa and held it up for Jolly. With any luck Christina and her guests would head to the other side of the bar and Jolly wouldn't notice them.

Mimi wasn't the only one who noticed the joy that broke across Christina's face when she saw Jolly standing at the bar. Ricky took a second to size up who he now considered the competition. The casual outfit made the blonde look impossibly more beautiful to Mimi, who cursed her rotten luck.

"Hello, Jolly, how've you been?"

Almost for the second time in one night Jolly came close to losing another beer bottle. It was weird, Christina had hurt her by her actions, but that part of her brain that liked really pretty girls didn't care when she looked at the gallery owner.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend, Jolly?" asked Ricky getting Jolly to look at him.

"This is Christina Griffin, she's the owner of the sheet rock we'll be hanging tomorrow. Christina, this is Ricky Mulle."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Mulle." Christina shook his hand then held it up to Mimi. "You been busy?"

"I'm working on some new stuff, thank you for asking." The answer was curt and Mimi hoped Christina would take the hint and be on her way. If not she couldn't make any promises as to not adding the entire contents of the salsa container to the nice sweater the gallery owner was wearing.

Having gotten the niceties out of the way, Christina was free to turn her attention back to Jolly. "I want you to meet my parents, Dell and Hillary. I've bragged so much about you, I'm sure they thought you weren't real."

Jolly smiled and shook hands with the couple before introducing Mimi and Ricky. Dell was about to offer to buy them another round when the host called out Jolly's name signaling that their table was ready. She held up a hand to help Mimi off the barstool and didn't let go when she was on her feet.

"Are you in the mood for a burger?" Jolly asked holding Mimi's coat up again.

"I could use a little protein in my diet tonight. How about you, daddy?"

"A burger sounds good, baby. Why don't you give these nice folks our table," Ricky told the host. The young Spanish guy nodded and used the menus in his hand to point Christina and her parents to the waiting table.

Jolly paid their bar tab and shook hands with Dell and Hillary again before they stepped away. "Nice seeing you again, Christina. I hope Tim's keeping you informed of all the stuff we're doing. Now that the outside is done on our end, the interior will start to take shape. With any luck you can be celebrating Christmas in front of the fireplace in the den."

"We'd have left if you feel uncomfortable, Jolly."

"I'm not uncomfortable, it's Ricky's first night in town and I wanted Mimi to enjoy dinner," Jolly looked over Christina's head and smiled at Mimi while she waited for her change.

"Can we have a drink or something soon? I can't stand that you hate me because of what happened."

"I don't hate you. Like I said before, you're a big girl, free to see or sleep with whomever you please. You don't have to answer to me for any action you take."

"No forgiveness in here for me, Jolly?" Christina reached out and tapped Jolly's chest over her heart.

"What's to forgive? You want to have a drink with me, call me."

"Really? It's that simple?"

"Really, it's that simple. Have a nice night." The bartender handed over Jolly's seventy dollars getting a ten back as a tip. She patted Christina's shoulder before walking to Mimi and her father.

The rest of the night went as Jolly had planned, with Mimi loving having her dad home. Ricky was so different from her own clean-cut father that Jolly wondered how Kelly, Mimi's mother, really felt about Anthony. How Anthony felt about Ricky was crystal, the words 'long haired hippy freak' coming to mind.

"Night, kids," said Ricky as Mimi closed the front door. "You coming to get me in the morning?"

"I'll be here at seven. Don't worry, I won't forget you, you know how much I love hanging drywall," answered Jolly. Ricky nodded his head and laughed before kissing Mimi good night. No one in their right mind liked hanging sheet rock.

"You want some coffee?" Mimi asked Jolly as she shed her coat and dropped it on a chair.

Jolly took off her own jacket and nodded her head. It was still early and her place seemed so empty lately.

"Light a fire and I'll be right back," ordered Mimi. When she came back Jolly had a small fire going and was staring into it as if the flames were mesmerizing. Jolly noticed the leather outfit had been replaced by flannel pajamas when Mimi handed her a mug.

"You have fun tonight?"

"Yeah, I love having daddy around. When he disappears on me, I worry about him." Mimi smiled when Jolly moved over and let her sit on the spot she had just warmed up on the leather

sofa.

"If he wants, I can keep him busy for months. I like your dad, he's the most genuine person I know aside from you."

"He loves you too, Jolly. You're the only person in your family he can say that about," Mimi kidded. "You doing ok?"

"I was thinking about what I'm going to do when you fall in love and hook up with someone. My Mondays will be all shot to hell."

Mimi put her head down on Jolly's shoulder and got more comfortable. "I'm not going to fall in love with just anyone, so our Monday night dates are safe. How about you, Jolly?"

"How about me what?"

Jolly watched the small hand running up and down the top of her leg. She was sure Mimi didn't even realize she was doing it they were so comfortable with each other. "Do you think about falling in love?"

"After seeing what my parents went through and how my father is, I don't know if I'd be the best partner for anyone."

The coffee cup spilled over a little when Mimi put it down in a hurry and swung around to face Jolly. "You'd be great, Jolly, don't say that about yourself. Think about how happy a pack of little kids would be to have you as a parent, not to mention the lucky woman who'll have them for you."

"Wow, how do you figure?"

"Are you kidding? Having the best carpenter and architect for a parent can only mean the best tree houses in the city."

Jolly laughed at Mimi's always optimistic look of the world. "I'll tell you what, when you have that gaggle of kids, I'll be here to build a tree house."

From your lips to God's ear, thought Mimi as she leaned against Jolly again. For the moment it didn't matter that Jolly had skillfully side stepped her question. There was always time later to think about Christina and ways to keep her away from Jolly.

[Continued in Chapter 3](#)

Comments to: terrali20@yahoo.com

~ A Place To Dance ~

by Ali Vali

Please See [Chapter 1](#) for disclaimers

A Place To Dance

by
Ali Vali

Chapter 3

"When's the mud guy coming?" asked Ricky. They had stopped to eat lunch after most of the first floor was done. The crew Jolly had working with her was good, fast and didn't need a lot of direction to get things done.

Jolly swallowed the mouthful of sandwich Mimi had packed for them and pointed to a truck that looked even worse than hers. "Already here. Pacho and boys are fast and the best in the business. Once they're done they come back and do the painting if that's what Christina wants."

It was the best opening Ricky could hope for from Jolly. "What's her story?"

"Christina is the owner of the gallery that hosted Mimi's show. Small world huh? I didn't figure who she was until the night I went to Mimi's opening. Long story short, we went out for a while then she fucked up."

"Fucked up?" asked Ricky.

"I went over one night and she was fucking an old girlfriend. Jolly don't play that."

Ricky laughed at the joke and continued with his fact-finding mission. "You had feelings for her though, am I right?"

"When have you ever known me to see someone for more than a week? Doesn't matter anyway, there's no going back."

You've had Mimi tied in knots for years, so that's not true, Jolly, thought Ricky as he finished his soda. "I don't know, Kelly was screwing big Tony behind my back and I still have feelings for

her," fished Ricky.

"Murderous?"

"Sometimes."

"That's a different situation, Rick, Kelly's the mother of your children. That's a bond no amount of animosity can break or change. Christina's someone who cooked me dinner a few times."

"And would like to again," Christina said from behind them.

Ricky looked at the skirt and figured she wasn't there to learn the art of applying mud to drywall. Here was a woman on the hunt and she had painted an imaginary bull's eye on Jolly's forehead.

"I'll be getting back to it, boss," said Ricky as some of those murderous thoughts Jolly had mentioned ran through his head. "Ma'am."

"He doesn't like me, does he?" asked Christina.

Jolly looked up from her seat on the grass and laughed. "Do you always anoint yourself with so much self-importance?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ricky doesn't know you, so why would you care if he likes you or not?"

"Can we start over? Maybe you could give me a tour, then go out for that drink you promised?" asked Christina.

Jolly took her around the house with a pad in hand making notes of any changes Christina wanted. The blonde approved the hiring of the painters and hung on every word out of Jolly's mouth. It thrilled her that Jolly even walked her back to the car when she had run out of excuses to stay.

"Want to come over tonight and have that drink?"

The flash of the tall naked blonde standing in the hallway ran through Jolly's mind making her shake her head. "I don't think so, Chris. Just give me some more time and we'll see, ok?"

The shortening of her name made Christina smile. It was the first time Jolly had done it in weeks. "I'm sorry, Jolly." The blue eyes similar in color to Jolly's filled with tears at what she had thrown away. It would be so great to share the new house with the woman who was building it.

"Come on now, don't cry. You should be glad I'm pissed with you. The mental experts say it means I care. I got angry because I thought we were going somewhere special," said Jolly reaching down to wipe a tear running down Christina's face. Seeing her like this made Jolly

wonder if she had been too rash.

"Will you just come when you think you're ready? I'm willing to wait."

"Let's not put any expectations on ourselves." Christina nodded to that, knowing it was better than goodbye for good.

Upstairs Ricky stepped away from the bedroom window so Jolly wouldn't see him on her way back up. "The tears gets them every time. Come on, Jolly, you're smarter than that."

Jolly drove passed Christina's apartment four times in the next week never slowing down much less stopping. A part of her wanted to try again since Christina was the first person she felt as comfortable with as Mimi. The feeling came so naturally to compare everyone to Mimi that Jolly never took the time to analyze why she did that.

The one good thing that had happened was a painting Mimi had placed as an entry for the *No Aids Task Force's Black and White Ball* had been accepted. The honor meant it would be made into signed and numbered prints and the original would be sold at auction the night of the ball. All the money raised would go to the leading organization in New Orleans that cared for all the needy suffering from the disease. It was a good cause, and the exposure the event would get would give Mimi's career as an artist an incredible boost.

Jolly had been thrilled and shocked that the talkative Mimi had been able to keep the whole thing a secret. The best part Jolly guessed was Ricky would be there to share in Mimi's achievement. No matter how much Mimi said she didn't mind Ricky always being gone, Jolly knew better. The petite blonde craved her father's approval as much as she wanted him to be a part of her life.

The pencil in her hand dropped to the floor as Jolly thought about everything that had happened. Maybe it was time for her to move on because she was tired of being alone. More than one night had been spent thinking about Christina, only to have her morph into Mimi in the leather outfit she had worn to dinner the night Ricky got back to town.

"You look like you're lost," said Ricky stepping into one of the guestrooms upstairs. Like the master suite down the hall, the room had a great view of the lake.

"Just thinking."

"About that pretty blonde thing who keeps sniffing around here like a bitch in heat?"

"Ricky, you're nothing if not blunt," said Jolly bending down to pick up her pencil. She had been in the process of measuring and marking crown molding when the water in the distance had caught her attention.

"Jolly, you know I love you, right?" Jolly nodded her head slowly not knowing where this was going. "I say this with love then, you're a fucking blockhead."

The pencil she had just picked up snapped in her hand. "Excuse me?"

"You have a wonderful girl who's loved you from the day you two met and you're standing here pining away for some scank who slept with someone else. In my book that makes you a fucking blockhead." *God, Mimi, please forgive me if this doesn't work*, thought Ricky as he waited for the blowup.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Jolly's voice had gotten low and glacial.

"Wake up, Jolly, and take a look at Mimi."

"What does she have to do with anything?"

"Madeline's so in love with you she doesn't see anyone else. As her father, I want you to either do something about it or let her go. I know you care about her but as long as you're there all the time, she's not going to open up to anyone else."

The piece of pencil still clutched in her hand snapped in two again when Ricky was done. "You're crazy, Mimi's not in love with me. She's just a kid for pete's sake!" The thought of that black leather outfit popped into Jolly's head for the thousandth time and she tried to ignore it.

"She's almost twenty three, Jolly. It's time you gave her a life, or the freedom to find one. Making her furniture isn't enough anymore. My kid deserves a life and someone who makes her happy. She wants more than anything for that someone to be you."

Ricky calculated how far he could get on a quarter of a tank when Jolly just walked out. If Mimi found out he had gone back on his word, it wouldn't be far enough. He may not have always been there for her, but he had never broken his word. Not until now.

That night and for the next three Ricky watched Mimi as she stood vigil by the front door waiting for Jolly to come walking through it after work. One more night and he would have to tell her Jolly wasn't coming to work either. The lessons he had learned in Vegas should have taught him the evils of gambling, but Ricky figured it was too late now. He'd gambled on Jolly sweeping Mimi off her feet and he'd failed.

Jolly stood at the front door she had thought about knocking on a hundred times and thought about what Ricky had said and how true it was. How had she missed it? He was right in his point that it was time to let Mimi go so she could find what she sought. Not because she didn't love her, but because she wasn't good enough for Mimi. It was time for Jolly to let go of quite a few things.

The knock was as gentle as the first time and Jolly almost turned away when there was not immediate response. Jolly smiled when the door opened and Christina stood there, shocked to see her.

"You know something?" asked Jolly watching the long blonde hair bounce when Christina shook her head. "I just stopped by to tell you that I'm a fucking blockhead."

"I can explain," said Christina. Jolly looked at the swollen lips of the mouth that had just uttered the ridiculous line.

"No need," said Jolly holding out her hand to the woman who had stepped up behind Christina. "Jolly Andolini."

"Jan Shaffer." The tall blonde looked wary since Jolly was being so nice. Usually when she was caught with someone else's woman it meant the loss of an item of clothing when she had to make a quick get a way, or a black eye.

"Jan, you take care of your girl and have fun tonight," Jolly told the stunned blonde. "That leaky roof's a distinct possibility now, though you might have lucked out since I got here before shaking hands was not an option. Don't think you messed up again because I came to tell you there was no chance at reconciliation. I just thought I'd come and tell you in person. Not that I think I owed it to you, but like I said - that's my style." She put her hand to Christina's cheek and stroked it before turning and walking out.

"Do you think we should go by her house? She could be sick or hurt. It's not like Jolly to disappear on me for a week, and she wouldn't miss tonight unless there was something wrong."

Ricky looked at his daughter in the gorgeous gown she had on and decided he couldn't hide the truth anymore. Jolly had decided to follow his advice and let Mimi go instead of taking a chance. He pulled on the bow tie he was wearing and tried to think of how to tell her Jolly wasn't sick and she wasn't coming.

"Mimi," started Ricky finding the rented tuxedo more constricting by the second. "Jolly," the doorbell stopped him from going further. He went to open the door and almost fainted from the relief. "Is right on time."

The tuxedo was one Mimi had taken Jolly shopping for a year earlier so they could attend the New Orleans Modern Art Gala held to help raise money for indigent children interested in art. Jolly had stood patiently for over an hour as they measured and pinned the jacket for a flawless fit, then as Mimi tried different shirt and ties with the suit she picked out. It looked as good on Jolly now as the first time Mimi had seen it. The main reason wasn't how well it fit but that Jolly had meticulously assembled each piece to look good for Mimi. She had gone with the black bow tie and it was knotted as well as the small black silk ribbon holding the ponytail in place. Jolly stepped in and closed the door looking almost shy as she looked at Mimi.

"Hey, shrimpy." It was like a knife twisting in Jolly's chest when Mimi's green eyes filled with tears. "I know a beautiful woman like you probably has a date." Mimi shook her head and

brought her hands up to cover her mouth not wanting to put too much hope in why Jolly was there and what she had said. Everyday of the last week had been like a slow death for Mimi. For every hour that ticked by without hearing from Jolly, was one more hour Mimi's mind came up with different pictures of Jolly in bed with someone else. By the look on Jolly's face, Mimi knew something was different. In her absence Jolly had obviously made some decisions about the future.

Jolly looked at the white strapless dress Mimi had on and wanted to cry herself that this beautiful woman loved her. Mimi was so much more than her physical beauty, it had been her heart that had won Jolly so gradually it had taken Ricky to make her realize what she, in her stupidity, had missed. Now that she did know, having spent a sleepless night trying to think of a way to make it up to Mimi, Jolly knew she couldn't live without her. The only fear was that her weeklong absence had driven Mimi away.

"I'm sorry for waiting until now to ask you, but would you consider going with me?" asked Jolly.

"Did you ask anyone else?" Mimi didn't want to win because Jolly was settling.

"I told you before, Madeline, you're my best girl. The phrase has rolled off my tongue for years, but it took someone calling me a blockhead to realize how true it was. It always has been from the day we met." Jolly looked at Ricky and smiled as a way of thanking him for the kick in the pants.

"Do you think you could love me?" Mimi asked, needing to hear it before she could move.

"I can't imagine a time when I didn't love you, Mimi. You give me the chance, and I won't let a day pass when you can't imagine it either."

The smile on Mimi's face gave Jolly the courage to move forward. She wanted to do it right since every couple got to have just one first kiss. She wanted them to both think back on it and love the memory no matter how many years had passed. The thought of Mimi telling this story to the gaggle of kids she always talked about made her smile.

Mimi's lips were soft against her own, and Jolly could taste the salt from the tears the small blonde had shed. In that one moment every corny line from every movie Jolly had ever seen and every song she had ever heard about love made sense to her. When they parted she smiled wider at the pleased hum Mimi let out with her eyes still closed.

"How about it?"

"Can't we just stay home?" asked Mimi. She stuck her hands in Jolly's jacket and wanted nothing more than to put her pajamas on and stay home.

"I want to dance with you, and I have a painting to bid on so no, we can't stay home. Besides you never went to your prom so I thought I could make it up to you tonight." Jolly handed her a box tied closed with a white silk ribbon. She put the orchid on Mimi's wrist when she opened it then

offered her an arm for her escort outside.

"I would've gone, but you were away at college and didn't ask me," said Mimi.

"Just another reason I'm a blockhead, but don't worry, I'm getting up to speed."

Ricky locked the front door and followed the couple to the waiting limousine, convinced Mimi's feet never touched the ground for the length of the driveway. Maybe another run at the gaming tables was in his future since this risk had hit such a huge jackpot.

The reserved table Jolly had purchased was next to the one her father's firm had gotten. When they saw where they were sitting and Ricky spotted Kelly, he looked like a slug had crawled in his mouth and died. It was going to be a very long night if he had to look at Anthony with his paws all over her in a show of ownership.

"My revenge for calling me a fucking blockhead," whispered Jolly in jest. In reality she was as shocked to see them as Ricky. "I'm kidding. I could've gotten you flowers, but I thought you would like something a little more substantial," Jolly told him.

Mimi came close to stabbing Jolly with the butter knife when a tall brunette walked up and hugged the architect. "Veronica, this is Mimi. Mimi, Veronica's your father's date for the evening. Ricky, you remember Veronica don't you?" Jolly put the woman's hand in Ricky's.

"How does daddy know her?" asked Mimi.

"She works for Pacho the painter. The girl can paint edges like Van Gogh and she's so cute I thought your father would like dancing the night away with her. And speaking of dancing, want to dance with me before Anthony has me arrested for seducing you?" The pointing and whispering Anthony and Kelly were engaged in wasn't exactly covert. It was also a safe bet to figure she and Mimi were the main topic of discussion.

Mimi pulled Jolly to the middle of the dance floor by her lapels. "I've been trying to seduce **you** for years, so you're not the one in trouble. I mean come on, Jolly, I did everything but paint that damn mural naked. You're so clueless sometimes I swear."

"Had you worn that leather number, you wouldn't have made it to the elevator."

The tempo of the music didn't matter to them the entire time they were on the floor. They were oblivious to the stares, comments and attention some in the crowd had focused on them. Ricky was the one paying enough attention to enjoy the shade of red of Anthony's ears going up a notch in color for every kiss Jolly placed on Mimi's lips.

"Are you really ok with this?" asked Mimi. She was enjoying listening to the beat of Jolly's heart as well as the music they were swaying to together.

"Honey, I spent the last week trying to find a way to walk away from you so you'd have a chance

to find someone better." Mimi moved her head away so she could look Jolly in the eye ready to protest. "Let me finish," Jolly requested when the red lips frowned. "I could no more let you go than I could stop breathing. I don't want to see you with anyone but me. I thank God your father set me on the right course before it was too late. The fact is, you own so much of who I am, I wouldn't know how to get it all back. I love you, Mimi, because you're perfect."

Mimi's hands moved from Jolly's shoulders to her neck. "That's a sweet sentiment, baby, but no one's perfect."

"Are you telling me I'm wrong and you aren't the perfect girl for me?"

"Since you put it like that, I can't argue with your logic. Do you think we could try kissing again, or are there too many people around?"

The hands at Jolly's neck applied a little pressure and bent the willing head down. Jolly tried to pour so much into that one kiss they stopped moving to the music. A persistent tapping on Mimi's shoulder was what drove them apart.

With extreme irritation Mimi looked away from Jolly. "What?"

"Can you stop making a spectacle of yourself long enough for me to talk to you?"

Mimi was grateful when Jolly pressed herself to her back and rested her chin on Mimi's shoulder. "Mother, how lovely to see you again. I've been meaning to call you and ask why you didn't make it to my show, but I really could give a damn."

"Madeline, keep your voice down and your distance from your sister. It's upsetting your father," said Kelly.

Both Mimi and Jolly looked toward Ricky and waved when he gave them a thumbs up sign after twirling Veronica. "He seems fine with my date, mother. Don't you think so, sweetie?"

"He was the one who set us up remember, love?"

The long exhale from Kelly was a reflex on her part when the topic of discussion turned to Ricky. "I'm talking about Anthony, dear. Could you show a little more respect and stop embarrassing him?"

"Anthony is hardly anyone's father, Kelly, least of all Mimi's. Biology isn't what makes you a parent, and marriage shouldn't make you someone's lapdog. If he's got a problem tell Anthony to have the balls to come over here and tell us himself." With each word out of Jolly's mouth Kelly's anger grew.

"Why I never..." started the pinched looking woman. Ever since her father had introduced her to his new wife Jolly had the impression someone was always walking beside her holding a piece of manure under her nose.

"No I'd think after you left Ricky you don't anymore. Anthony never has struck me as the sexually fulfilling kind of guy. If that's all, I want to dance with my girl." It took an incredible amount of self-restraint on Kelly's part not to throw anything at Jolly's head. Especially when Mimi covered her mouth to hide the laughter. The new couple stayed in each other's arms until they started serving dinner. Any other stares from Kelly and Anthony were missed as Jolly's table laughed and enjoyed the evening.

It was Jolly's turn to become one big flaming blush when they unveiled Mimi's piece signaling the auction was going to begin as the desert was being served. The painting depicted an angel cradling a sick child, her wings slightly curved in as if to protect the fragile life she held. Mimi's description of the piece 'Wings of Love' in the program was love knew no boundaries when it was genuine. In its purest form, it had no barriers, was more powerful than any other force and would go to any length to protect those who believed in it with out question.

The brief lines of text didn't really explain why the angel was naked and looked just like Jolly despite the fact the viewer couldn't really make out the face since it was bowed as if in prayer. The veins bulging in Anthony's neck meant he had guessed who the model had been. Jolly never moved as the room exploded into applause when the piece was announced and unveiled.

The painting's subject looked at the woman sitting next to her not knowing what to say. Mimi looked back and shrugged her shoulders. "I wanted to tell you how I felt but I didn't have the words, so I used a picture. Are you mad?"

"Um, no," said Jolly looking at the large canvas again. "How did you," she waved her hands at the painting that was like looking in a mirror.

"I didn't peek at you in the shower, Jolly. I'm an artist, and when you become one, the powers that be give you something called license," teased Mimi. The bidding started at five thousand dollars and Mimi grabbed Jolly's hand before she could place a counter. "The real one's at home."

"The real one?"

"I was willing to share the idea in my head of what was under your 501's, but what I knew better than my own heart I'm keeping at home," explained Mimi.

"What's that, sweetheart?"

"Your eyes, my love. They looked at me years ago and blinded me to the world forever. They knew all along you loved me, all I had to do was be patient until the rest of you caught up. The painting at home shows me that truth every time I look at it in the studio. You're head is up and you're smiling just for me."

Jolly cradled Mimi's face as gently as the angel in the painting held the baby. The last thing Jolly remembered before she dipped her head and kissed Mimi with all the desire she had inside was a

bid of thirty thousand dollars.

"You think daddy's coming home tonight?" asked Mimi. They were standing in her den swaying to just the sound of the fire behind them.

"If he can resist the legendary Veronica, he's a better man than any I've known. I'm thinking he's out until Tuesday at least."

"And you know this about this woman, how?"

"The difference between women and men is most women don't brag about what happens in the bedroom. Most guys can't seem to help themselves." Jolly kissed Mimi again not wanting to talk about anyone else for the rest of the night.

"I've waited so long for you to kiss me like you wanted me. Do you want me, Jolly?"

"More than anything." The skin along Mimi's neck and shoulders tasted so good as Jolly moved her lips along getting caught up in trying to make Mimi feel good.

The jacket of the tux Mimi knew wasn't rented dropped to the floor without a word from its owner. The bowtie that wasn't a clip on came next with one slow torturous pull from surprisingly steady fingers. Jolly tried to relax and let Mimi move at her own pace. If she wanted to stop, they would stop even if it meant her jogging laps in the park in dress shoes thought Jolly.

"I know you said if a girl wants it to be special she should wait, but I've been waiting for six years, Jolly. Do you think you could cut me some slack if I told you I wanted to make love with you?" Mimi got swept into Jolly's arms and carried into the bedroom as an answer.

Jolly set her on her feet near the bed and brought the zipper at the back of Mimi's dress down like she was unwrapping a gift she had wanted all year as a kid. She held the top part up to look at Mimi's face and make sure it was all right to continue. The coral tinted lips curved into a smile giving Jolly permission to let go. Jolly would have started sweating a lot sooner than now had she known the only thing between she and Mimi on the dance floor had been a white silk gown.

"You're so beautiful." Jolly was almost afraid to touch her, thinking Mimi would disappear or turn away. The look of rapture made Mimi smile.

"Jolly, would you sit for me for a minute?" Mimi asked as she guided the tall woman to the bed. When the awe struck Jolly sat, Mimi bent down to take off her shoes and socks. The shirt came next after she undid every stud holding it closed. "Ok, you can stand up now." When Mimi unbuckled the belt and lowered the zipper, Jolly's pants pooled at her ankles for a long time as Mimi admired what she had uncovered. The resemblance to the painting was uncanny.

"I love you, Mimi."

"Jolly, you've made me a happy woman. Care to keep going?"

"I'll go wherever you lead."

"I love you too, Jolly, and I'd rather we get there together." Mimi couldn't help the moan that escaped when Jolly pulled her close and their skin came into contact. If they didn't do anything else that night, that one moment would be enough for Mimi.

"Are you ok?" asked Jolly.

"Can I tell you something?"

"You can tell me anything, honey. It won't change the way I feel about you."

"Promise you won't get dressed and leave?"

Jolly put two fingers under Mimi's chin and tilted her head up so she could see her eyes. The blue green shade was so pale they had always reminded Jolly of aquamarine stones when they turned this shade. "You're going to have to ask me to go for that to happen."

"I've never done this with anyone." Mimi said it softly and prayed she wouldn't have to say it again. The thumping in Jolly's chest reminded her of the steady hammering she had heard coming from Jolly's workshop for years, and Mimi hoped it didn't speed up anymore. It sounded dangerously fast already.

"No one?" To Jolly's annoyance the question came out in a squeaky, high pitched voice.

"I wanted to wait until I thought it was right. Tonight is the first time it feels like perfect," confessed Mimi. The tears streaming down Jolly's face were hard to decipher in a good or bad context.

"I don't deserve you, Mimi. I won't ever be able to do enough to make up for what an ass I've been to you for not seeing how you felt. You waited for me?" she asked in wonder.

"I saw you at that lunch your father had to introduce the two sets of children to each other and I said to myself before you took my hand, she's the one. You were older but you listened to me and believed in what I wanted to do, even when no one else cared. How could I not wait for you? I have you now and I'm keeping you, so you don't have anything to make up to me. Tonight I want you to make me yours, Jolly. There was no one else who ever came close to taking what belonged to you. I just thank God you didn't take anymore time. Twenty three years is a long time to be curious about what the fuss is about, so let's get to it," teased Mimi.

Jolly picked Mimi up again and laid her on the bed before getting up next to her. It was a strange thing to think, but Jolly was happy she had made the bed more than comfortable for two people. Mimi looked at her with a mixture of nerves and desire and Jolly wanted to assure her before

they went any further.

"We can stop if you want, ok?" Mimi nodded her head and reached back to let Jolly's hair down.

"I want you to touch me," whispered Mimi swallowing hard when the hand on her hip slid slowly up her body until it closed on one of her breasts.

Jolly watched as the pink nipple got hard under just the brushing of her fingers. It was the only time in her life she wished she had spent her life in the office like Tim instead of building the designs she drew. Mimi deserved soft hands touching her. Almost as if she had heard her thoughts, Mimi picked up the big hand and kissed the callused fingers. She pulled Jolly on top of her when the tall woman smiled at her and the solid weight made Mimi wet.

The shorter set of legs opened so Jolly could fit closer against her and both of them stopped just to enjoy the contact. Mimi clawed at her back when Jolly started kissing her neck again before slipping down to tug on Mimi's breast with her lips. Jolly sucked on one then the other until Mimi dragged her face up next to hers for a kiss. Mimi didn't really know what she wanted but Jolly touching her was paramount. She wanted something more but didn't know how to ask.

"Baby, please," she said breathlessly, hoping Jolly would get the message.

"Mimi, I want you to relax for me," instructed Jolly as she tried to move down Mimi's body only to be stopped by two insistent hands. "You want me to stop?"

"No, I want you up here with me, just for right now." Mimi wanted to look into Jolly's eyes when she gave her the gift she had saved for her.

What started out as a moan, ended in a hiss when Jolly kissed her as her fingers dipped into the wetness between her legs. Mimi wanted to start crying it felt so good but she didn't want to distract Jolly into stopping. The soft stroking that went from one end of her sex to the other was coating Jolly's fingers making each trip back and forth that much easier. When they were wet enough, Jolly moved her fingers to the hard point of Mimi's need and circled around it slowly without touching it.

"Jolly, don't stop doing that, it feels so good."

"I want you to feel good, love. Feel me touching you and feel how wet it's making you." The low voice in Mimi's ear was making her nipples harder, or was it the fingers stroking away her reason? Jolly sucked on one of her earlobes, as her fingers never stopped their circling making Mimi harder and wetter. "Relax, sweetheart, and just let go."

Mimi nodded her head as the fingers widened their arch and dipped lower circling the entrance to her sex, dipping in just slightly before going back to the stroking they had been doing. She whimpered when Jolly took them away momentarily so she could run her thumb along the same path, but when it to was wet, the fingers returned to their teasing movements.

"Look at me, love," requested Jolly. Mimi opened her eyes and looked at her with so much passion Jolly was lost. "Just keeping looking at me and relax." Mimi could feel the length of Jolly's body pressed up against hers, the heat making her feel safe. She moaned when the thumb started to rub where she most wanted contact as the fingers started entering her gently to break through the thin barrier. Mimi's tears did start when Jolly was all the way in, but not from any pain or discomfort.

"I'm so glad I waited for you." After she said it, Mimi felt comfortable enough to close her eyes and part her lips asking for a kiss. She came up to meet Jolly's hand as her body wrapped around her fingers and started the trip over the edge Mimi had taken alone up to now. Their lips came apart when she couldn't breathe because the feeling was so intense.

The fingers buried inside Mimi and the thumb stroking her ignited the orgasm and she wished the feeling would never end as the spasms started. She fell in love with Jolly all over again when it was over and she felt the fingers leave their warm haven.

"I'm glad you waited for me too. Thank you, Mimi, that was an honor."

"You'll be happy to know I'll honor you anytime you want from now on," said Mimi before pushing Jolly onto her back.

Mimi didn't want to wait for this experience anymore either. With no detour she moved down Jolly's body and parted the wet swollen lips with her fingers. Before Jolly knew what was happening, Mimi had latched on to her with her lips knocking all the fight right out of her. She dug her heels into the mattress and wrapped her fingers in the short blonde hair as a way to anchor her body to the bed.

After the time Jolly had taken with Mimi, it didn't take too much to get her to the same ending destination. It was so fast, it bordered on embarrassment. Mimi crawled back up her body and relaxed on top of Jolly. She picked up the limp hands and put them on her back as a hint she wanted Jolly to hold her.

"What in the hell just happened?" asked Jolly.

"When I'm not painting, I read, a lot. I couldn't wait anymore to take my book knowledge for a spin. Did you like it?" Mimi's head lifted to look at Jolly when she asked the question.

"If I could find two functional brain cells to rub together I'd come up with a better answer than, uh huh."

"Maybe it's a good thing you took this long, blockhead." Jolly laughed under Mimi at the use of her father's insult.

"Why's that, goddess?"

"You would've never won any of those awards hanging in your office because I wouldn't have let

you out of bed. We're doing this often, right?"

"Every chance I can talk you into getting naked."

"Promise?" asked Mimi before sucking on Jolly's neck.

"On a stack of Bibles." The only other references to religion that night were half incoherent utterances of thanks to any deities who popped into their heads when the time seemed appropriate.

A dark pair of blue eyes squinted against the glare in the room as soon as they opened. They had fallen asleep and forgotten to close the blinds Jolly had put up two months before at Mimi's request when she decided the drapes that were up were out of style. Jolly blinked her eyes trying to focus on the surroundings as a to do list started to form in her head.

"What are you thinking about?" asked the muffled voice from Jolly's chest.

"This house only has two bedrooms." Jolly's answer was confusing enough to get Mimi to lift her head. The move brought her breasts into Jolly's line of sight getting her to lick her lips.

"You plan on sleeping somewhere else?" asked Mimi. She sat up and put her hand over her eyes. When that didn't work, she got up and pulled the cord to close the blinds with an appreciative audience watching her naked form.

"No wonder the old guy next door likes you so much," commented Jolly. Lying on her side, she rested her head in her palm knowing the hands on hips move was coming next.

"Mr. Verret? He's a sweet guy, Jolly, of course he likes me. He likes all the neighbors." Jolly had to admit the pose looked sexier sans clothes as Mimi faced her with her hands on her hips.

"Come here," Jolly held a hand up toward Mimi. The room was nicer now that the dark wooden blinds had cut out the sun, but still light enough for Jolly to continue to enjoy the view. Mimi crawled under the covers and blushed, the thought she was naked just occurring to her. "I would like it too if you're in the habit of walking around here dressed like this."

"I'm not dressed, Jolly."

"Precisely." Jolly forwent any other verbal teasing and kissed Mimi good morning instead. When they came up for air Mimi wrapped her arms around Jolly's body and squeezed.

"Honey, he's like ninety years old. I'm thinking he doesn't really care what I wear to walk around the house."

Jolly looked up at her wounded by the comment. "You don't think you'll still be turning me into a

puddle when I'm ninety?"

"That's different, I want to be turning you into a puddle. Mr. Verret, I only love him for his tomatoes," teased Mimi.

"You don't cook, woman, so what's so interesting about his tomatoes."

"Please, Jolly, I can make a salad. Ben comes over and brings me some stuff from his garden every couple of days." Mimi sat up and straddled Jolly's body wanting to give the big hands plenty of room to maneuver.

"Every couple of days, huh? You know why that is don't you?"

Mimi had to think before answering when Jolly's hands covered her breasts and squeezed.

"What's your theory?"

"Not theory, fact. Old guy looks in here and sees all this on display. Makes him want to run out and pick tomatoes to bring over before you get a chance to get your robe on. I bet the old lady on the other side of him doesn't get any vegetables out of that garden." Jolly ran her hands down Mimi's body to let her know what she was talking about. She sat up to collect on another kiss and liked that Mimi wrapped her legs around her to keep Jolly close. "Probably comes every two days because it takes him that long to do something about the build up of excitement."

Mimi laughed and looked into the eyes she loved so much, studying the way they darkened the more Jolly got aroused. "There's only one old person I'm interested in working up into a frenzy, and here you are," said Mimi putting her hands on Jolly's butt.

"I'll show you frenzied."

Jolly's touch was light since Mimi was sore from the night before, but it was still fulfilling. "I want you to wake me up like this until you're ninety," said Mimi when they were done.

"Don't think I'm forgetting about that old comment, young lady." Jolly heard the soft laugh coming from the dead weight draped across her body. "Does that bother you?" asked the thirty-four-year-old. Eleven and a half years didn't seem like a big span, but sometimes it was a gulf to people. The pinch was hard and unexpected getting Jolly to make a quick grab for Mimi's hand.

"I have not waited a quarter of my life for you to wake up and smell the coffee I've been brewing, to have you start finding excuses why you shouldn't have taken a sip. You get me?"

"That hurt, Mimi," said Jolly rubbing the red spot on her thigh.

Mimi held up the index finger and thumb that had delivered the attention getter before she went on. "And there's plenty more, Babe, so don't mess with me. You ready to listen to my demands."

"Are you always this perky in the morning?" asked Jolly earning her another pinch from the

woman sitting on her. "Please continue."

"You can leave today to go home and pack a bag and come back, or I can pack a bag and go with you. I'm flexible so it's your choice. You made love to me knowing full well it came with commitment, so don't play the dummy now. That means we're living together, the first of my demands," Mimi stuck one finger up and looked for any disagreement coming from Jolly.

"Did you have a nose ring made up for me too?"

"It's in the new dresser, smarty pants."

"What are the rest of your demands, Miss Mulle?" Jolly asked as she rolled Mimi over and pinned her to the bed.

"That you just love me and not think of reasons to leave," Mimi told her not teasing.

"Baby, I do love you and I'm not leaving. You'll have to throw me out to get rid of me since I just moved in," said Jolly.

"What about your," Mimi's question died away on Jolly lips.

An hour later it was time for Mimi's third demand and she had to shake Jolly awake to make her request. Jolly's telling her, "I know you're making up for lost time, baby, but give me a break," almost made Mimi roll off the bed she was laughing so hard.

"I want French toast."

"Do you have bread of any kind?" asked Jolly, her eyes still closed.

"No."

"Eggs?"

"No."

"Syrup?"

"Again, no."

"Then I can't make you French toast. Go back to sleep."

"Jolly," Mimi dragged out the name and continued her shaking. The whining got Jolly up and into the shower. Before she could deliver on the breakfast demand they had to stop at the warehouse penthouse to pick up some of Jolly's clothes and truck.

The cohabitation had begun.

The sun was setting by the time Ricky came back still wearing his tuxedo and a huge smile. He kissed Mimi before walking over to Jolly to give her a long bear hug before disappearing into his room.

"That's so sweet, he's happy for us," said Mimi looking up from the vegetables she was cutting. They had gone to the market to get stuff for Jolly to cook. It was the only draw back to moving in with Mimi thought Jolly when they kept bumping into each other in the small kitchen.

"I'm thinking it's more like kissing you hello, and worshipping me for introducing him to Veronica. He'll be happy for us later when his brain percolates back into his head," said Jolly. She had her head stuck in a cabinet near the stove looking for a frying pan.

Mimi shivered just having understood Jolly's innuendo. "Honey, I don't want to think about daddy doing that with some painter lady I'm sure I'll see around where you work."

The search was fruitless so Jolly straightened up and kissed her helper. "I'll try and remember that if you tell me where your frying pan can be found."

"I don't have room for a frying pan, and it's never mattered since I've never fried anything."

There would be an argument Jolly was sure but they had to make a slight adjustment to their living arrangements. "We have to move to the loft to keep from killing each other, and so we can eat."

"I love this house, Jolly. Come on, I'll buy you a frying pan. I know what I said about not caring but I want to stay here." If Mimi got to keep Jolly there was no question, she would move, but it would be a hardship to leave the studio Jolly had built for her.

"You already own all the cookware you'll ever need, it's at our other place, and I know you love this house," Jolly looked through the kitchen drawers searching for a pen and a sheet of paper.

"You fixed it up for me, it's where we first made love, my studio's here," Mimi started ticking off reasons to stay.

"Baby, we've made love here a total of three times since last night, which is the exact number of times you've made love in your life. I'm not talking about a permanent move. Just enough time for me to blow out some walls and add some rooms. Once I'm done we can sell my place and live happily ever after."

Mimi watched as the layout of the house came alive on the back of a pizza flyer someone had left taped to the door. When the pencil stopped the house looked twice as big, and Jolly looked pleased.

"How long?"

"You want it done right, or you want it done fast?" asked Jolly.

"You swear you'll be happy living here?"

"I'll be happy anywhere as long as you're around," professed Jolly.

"Are you always this sappy?" asked Mimi pulling Jolly closer.

"Just with you."

"Good. Can I persuade you to forget about the missing frying pan?"

"Not missing, nonexistent. What do you have in mind?"

"Does the number four hold any meaning to you?" Mimi let Jolly go just long enough to check to see if all the burners on the stove were off. Jolly just smiled when Mimi hooked her fingers in a couple of belt loops and pulled her towards the bedroom.

Tim looked up from the papers he was studying and watched Jolly take a seat on her side of the wide partner's desk. The tailored slacks and wool sweater pulled over a crisp blue shirt made her look like a businesswoman.

"Did I forget a meeting this morning?"

"No, I just need to spend some time in the office working on a house I'm redesigning. You didn't sublease my spot did you?" Jolly looked through her messages trying not to think about her new morning ritual. Mimi had almost convinced her to stay home, but figured she wouldn't be able to stand at her easel if Jolly touched her anymore so Jolly was allowed to leave.

"Christina called for you this morning," said Tim. Jolly was crumpling papers and tossing them into the trash as she weeded out the pink slips and mail that had been put in neat stacks by their assistant. "She sounded upset."

"Problem with the house?"

"Problem with not being able to find you more likely. She's probably at the site this morning looking for you."

Jolly stood up and reached for a fresh sheet of draft paper and the file she kept on Mimi's house. "If she calls back tell her I got Mimi pregnant and her father's demanding I do the honorable thing. The fact I'm getting married predicates I stop dating other people. Mimi's got a pinch that'll put the fear of God into you, so I'm not taking any chances."

The chair Tim was sitting in toppled over when he jumped up and ran to give Jolly a hug. "And Pam thought you were a clueless idiot."

"Thanks, I think."

"Whose house are you working on?" Tim followed her to the drafting table and leaned against the wall.

"You've been in Mimi's house, buddy. We need to draw up some space for me to be able to fit some of my clothes and triple the size of that kitchen."

"This isn't too fast?"

Jolly snapped on the lamp attached to the table and thought about how many times she had asked herself that question since all this had begun. There was no denying how she felt and it helped that Mimi was so sure about her feelings for her.

"All my life I went from woman to woman trying to find one who I could stand to be with a week after I met her, thinking spending all my life with just one would be too much to ask for. With Mimi, I know in my heart, a lifetime won't be enough. I've been in love with her so long I feel like an idiot now that I didn't realize it sooner."

"If you talked to me like that, think about how much more sex you'd be having," Pam said to her husband from the outer office. She walked in and kissed Jolly first and just patted the top of Tim's head before taking a seat in Jolly's desk chair. "Mimi called me bright and early this morning. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"About time you came to your senses, but you took so long Madeline won't have to worry about your wild oats, will she? And I won't have to worry about Timmy living vicariously through your known exploits." Jolly and her partner laughed at Pam's observation knowing she was the only one in the world who could talk to the two of them like that and keep them in line.

They all looked up when they heard the front door of the office open and slam shut. Christy, their assistant wasn't in yet so their visitor just walked back to the large office.

"You weren't at the house this morning." Christina made the observation sound like an accusation.

"My job there's done for the most part and I have other clients. Ricky Mulle's taking over as foreman until you're done. Is there a problem?"

"I thought I was paying you to build my house?"

Jolly leaned back in the comfortable drafting chair and looked at the irritated blonde noticing the dark circles under her eyes. "You hired me to design your house and to build it, both of which are getting done. So I repeat, is there a problem?"

"Can I speak to you alone?" Christina ran her hand through her hair and exhaled. It had been a rough weekend and her Monday morning wasn't getting much better having found Lisa's letter of resignation on her desk when she went to the gallery.

Tim was ready to step out but Pam wasn't moving from her seat. Her husband leaned back against the wall when his wife gave him a meaningful look that meant don't move. "I don't think it's necessary. Go back to your life, Christina, and chalk this up as a learning experience," said Jolly.

"But what we..."

"We had nothing, have nothing now and will have nothing in the future. You get a house out of the bargain, and just think, you'll have a built in playmate to share it with." Jolly rolled up the blank page and picked up her briefcase. "Tim will assist you from here on out. If you will excuse me, I have a woman to see about making happy."

Ricky delivered the turnkey job four months later. He was thrilled to hand Christina the gold key ring Tim and Jolly always gifted their clients with. It was his last official act as the project's foreman. Christina had done everything she could think to delay the project adding two months to the completion date. Every complaint was a ploy to get Jolly back to the site to deal with the imaginary crises.

It hadn't worked and now all there was left to do was have her slip the brass key in and turn to unlock the front door. Their job was done and from the look on her parent's and Christina's face, Jolly and crew had been successful at garnering another satisfied customer. Ricky shook hands with all of them before getting on his bike and heading back uptown. The Lord willing, Christina was now a page of history.

The Harley pulling up couldn't drown out the hammering and sawing coming from the back. Ricky was living with Jolly and Mimi at the loft until the house's new kitchen, two extra bedrooms, workshop and walk in closet in the master bedroom were finished.

Jolly's design went through extensive revamping by Mimi before the first nail was driven, but even the architect had to admit the finished product would flow well with the other historic houses on the block. The crew who had been with Jolly the longest had been hired to complete the job, and both women felt better about leaving Ricky in charge when Jolly and Tim got the contract in Atlanta. Mimi wasn't thrilled Jolly would be gone for so long, but kept in mind the first trip Jolly had taken to Atlanta to present the ideas to city planners was a cause for celebration. Those extra days had brought Jan Shaffer into their lives, ending Christina's time with Jolly.

For the first time in his life Ricky was content to stay and work with Jolly and his daughter, watching with an amused eye as their relationship grew. Where Mimi had learned to become such a master manipulator when it came to Jolly was beyond him, but Jolly was so smitten he didn't think she minded being tweaked too much. The phone bill Jolly was going to get after being in Atlanta for three weeks was going to be painful, but Ricky was ready to pay it himself so long as the architect came home.

Jolly was actually shaving three days off her trip leaving Tim behind to take care of any last minute problems with the historic renovation project they were working on for the city. It was her thirty fifth birthday and Mimi would never forgive her if they didn't celebrate the day for the first time as a couple. Ricky knew Mimi had been working on a special present for Jolly, but like the No Aids painting, his daughter had been extremely tight lipped about it.

Ricky found her sitting and staring at a blank canvas in her studio when he got back. It was the only room in the house Jolly had left untouched in the new design. Mimi thought it was perfect the first time she had walked in after Jolly had built it two years before so there was no need for alterations.

"Hey, baby girl." Ricky tried to snap her out of her trance so the paint she had mixed and put in her pallet wouldn't go to waste. Mimi was one of those artists who mixed her own paint so the hues were truer, and they dried better, but they didn't keep too long on the wooden pallet she used.

The artist looked up and tears filled her eyes when she saw her father. Ricky thought it was just a case of missing Jolly so he just held her until the tears passed. "I'm going to lose Jolly." The voice was soft and full of regret.

The hand rubbing her back stopped and Ricky pried her off his body to look at Mimi's face. "Nothing in the world could make that happen, Mimi. She loves you."

"I did something for her for her birthday thinking at the time it was a good idea, but now I'm thinking she's going to be really mad, Daddy, I can't lose her." Mimi talked fast in between sobs and hiccups not making much sense to her father.

"Baby, what's wrong?" The concerned voice behind Ricky made both blondes jump in surprise not having heard Jolly enter. The architect wasn't due in until that night but had sweet-talked her way onto an earlier flight. When she reached for Mimi, it only made the crying worse. "Come on, baby, nothing can be that bad. Are you sick?"

Mimi cried and shook her head against Jolly's shoulder. She had been sitting in the studio for hours trying to find a way to tell Jolly what she'd done, but no words were enough to cover the scope of what she had to say. Now there might not be a way to undo her choices.

"Rick, could you go and get Mimi a glass of water, please?" Ricky shuffled his feet but went to do Jolly's bidding. He wanted to stay and make sure nothing upset Mimi further especially if her

prediction of Jolly's leaving her had even a remote possibility of being true.

It took them thirty minutes but finally after two glasses of water and plenty of cuddling from Jolly, Mimi stopped crying. Jolly knelt in front of the chair Mimi had been sitting in and looked at the red puffy face hoping her partner was ready to start talking. All Jolly had been able to decipher from the bobbing head was that Mimi wasn't sick or hurt, and she hadn't done anything to upset her.

"My period didn't start yesterday."

It was a simple statement really, Jolly thought later. Precise and to the point, not a lot of meaningless words attached to flower it up. But right after Mimi said it, Jolly mentally wiped her brow and checked the box labeled PMS of possible things wrong with her upset lover. It was an easy problem with a ready solution at hand. "An aspirin will fix you right up, baby, don't worry about it."

Mimi put her hands on each side of Jolly's face and said it again. "I don't think you understand, honey. My period didn't start yesterday."

"It's the house, trying to get another show mounted and moving. All these things cause stress, which is bound to mess up your cycle. I wouldn't worry about it," said Jolly.

"Jolly, I'm going to explain something to you and I want you to listen carefully, ok? Do you think you can do that for me?" Mimi would have laughed at the confused face looking back at her had the seriousness of the moment not dictated she remain calm.

"Of course I can do that, don't be silly."

"I went to the doctor the day after you left to pick up a little something Tim left me. I'm sorry I didn't talk to you about it, but I wanted to give you something no one else could for your birthday."

The color was fast draining out of Jolly's face and beads of sweat had broken out on her upper lip. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not real sure yet, but I think we're going to have a baby."

In hindsight telling Jolly that way had been both good and bad. Good in that the canvas she fell into was blank considering her head ripped right through it, and bad in that it took Mimi and Ricky forever to get her to wake up. Now father and daughter were sitting on the floor across from Jolly who was staring at them like she didn't know where to begin.

Mimi was about to speak again when a finger went up silencing whatever was about to come out. It was Jolly's turn to speak and she wanted no interruptions. "Let me see if I understand this. You went to a doctor and got yourself pregnant with the help of my cousin. My cousin Timothy Andolini, with whom I just spent three weeks and who never mentioned any of this to me?"

"Yes, I asked him and Pam not to tell you so I could surprise you, honey." The finger went up again and Mimi quit talking.

"Are you pregnant?"

"I don't know, I thought I'd wait for you to come home and we could find out together. This was the only way I could think of to give you a little piece of yourself, me, your grandfather and Tim all rolled up into one little person."

Jolly's head dropped to her chest before she stood up. Tears filled Mimi's eyes again knowing Jolly was getting ready to walk out on her and their possible baby. They didn't fall until she felt the hands pulling her to her feet and Jolly pulling her into a hug so tight her feet came off the ground.

"Mimi, I figure you're going to kill me before I turn forty, but that doesn't matter. What does matter is no matter how long I live, I'll never find another person who loves me and thinks of me more than you do."

"I love you, Jolly."

Jolly put her down and went to get something out of her briefcase. "Then it's a good thing I got this. You can't tell me no now." She opened the lid of the small box and showed Mimi the emerald cut diamond in a platinum setting.

"I love you too, Mimi, and I want you to be mine. You and our baby." Jolly pulled the ring out and slipped it on Mimi's finger kissing the adorned digit when she was done. "It's impractical I know for someone who paints so I thought you could wear it on this when you're working." A platinum chain came out of her coat pocket and Jolly slipped it over Mimi's neck.

"Does this mean if we're not, we can try again?" Mimi wanted to do a cartwheel she was so thrilled.

"It means you'll get whatever you want, love."

"I just want you, Jolly."

"See how easy your life is then."

Ricky left to pick up a hammer so he could get to work. He had every faith in Jolly, but it never hurt to stick around for Mimi, just in case. Ricky wasn't the best father, but it wasn't too late to learn. Who knew, maybe he could teach Jolly and their kid a few things. Jolly wasn't the only one getting a gift. Ricky was getting to be a grandfather and that meant a second chance to get it right.

[Continued in Chapter 4](#)

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~ A Place To Dance ~

by Ali Vali

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A Place To Dance

by
Ali Vali

Chapter 4

"You're all right, Jolly. I never have taken the time to tell you that. All those miles I cover, the one thing I never worry about is Mimi." Ricky stopped working when he saw her step outside to survey the progress they had made in her absence.

Jolly put her hands in her pockets and rocked on her feet as she looked at the studs of the new roofline. "You knew about this?" she asked, cocking her head toward the studio. Inside Mimi was setting up a new canvas trying to salvage some of her paint.

"You mad and just not saying? A baby's a big commitment and not everyone's up for the long haul." Jolly arched her brow at his philosophy considering how often he was gone. "I didn't say I was a shining example of parenthood, I just figured you would be. No matter what life throws at you, Jolly, you're a stand up guy. Taking responsibility even when you didn't need to is how best to describe you. Is that what that was in there? Mimi decided for the both of you and now it's too late to be honest about how you feel?"

"This is a little unorthodox granted, but I think she would've stopped taking the pill if I'd different equipment. Am I mad?" Jolly looked at the whirlwind with the fast brush and laughed. "Rick, had anyone else done this I'd be half way to the state line by now because I'd have seen it as a trap to get me to commit."

"But with my daughter?"

"I don't believe entrapment was her motive. Mimi would leave me before she'd manipulate me into something I didn't want. What've I discovered about myself these past few months though, is she could ask me to wail at the moon naked in the middle of that park," Jolly turned around and pointed. "And I'd ask her for how long just to see her smile. I just wish I'd been here so she wouldn't have had to do this alone. How about you?" She reached out her hand and slapped Ricky on the back. "Some little person starts calling you grandpa, it's going to ruin your long haired hippy image."

"You forgot freak."

"No I didn't. I just think Anthony's more of a freak than you ever thought to be. Now knock off for the day and go take a shower. I made dinner reservations and I'd like to get something into my system before Mimi tells me she invited her mother to come and live with us, or something else as bizarre ." She looked at Mimi painting and snapped her fingers just remembering something.

"I'll meet you two at the loft," said Ricky as she dropped the hammer into the box at his feet.

"Baby, put down the brush," ordered Jolly from the door of the studio.

"I'm not finished."

"Mimi, you're done for the day." Jolly put her hand up to stop the 'but the paint is a pain to mix' argument. "Pregnant women are not supposed to be inhaling paint fumes. Think of this as your time to experiment with water colors."

The brush ready for its next stroke on the canvas fell to the pallet next to her. It was the one thing Mimi hadn't figured into this whole equation. No painting for the next eight months would drive her insane.

"I don't like water based paints," whined Mimi. The trembling lip and watery green eyes were the beginning of what Jolly came to refer as Mimi's blue phase in shades of red.

The next morning Jolly sat next to Mimi as they waited for the nurse to call them into a waiting room. They had successfully celebrated Jolly getting a year older and were waiting to see if Mimi owed her a sweater as a backup birthday gift.

"Ms. Mulle." The receptionist opened the glass partition and called out the name. None of the staff commented when Jolly followed Mimi in holding her hand.

Two nurses attended to Mimi quickly, getting all the necessary tests out of the way before sending the doctor in to see her. It would still be a couple of days before they would receive the final confirmation, but as soon as Dr. Eschete saw them, they would have an idea if they needed to start buying baby clothes.

"Good morning, Mimi," Ellie Eschete opened the door and walked in reading the chart the nurse had handed her. She noticed Jolly when she looked up to smile at her patient. "I'm sorry, it's been a rough night. My partner Sam and I delivered eight babies that started arriving about ten last night," Ellie explained accounting for the dark circles under her eyes. "My name's Ellie Eschete," she held a hand out to Jolly.

"Nice to meet you, doctor, I'm Mimi's partner, Jolly Andolini."

"Are you ready to be a mommy you two?" asked Ellie.

"You tell us," countered Jolly.

"Start stocking up on diapers, guys, we're having a baby. I'll call you in a couple of days with the final lab results, but the preliminary stuff says we're on our way." Ellie jotted some notes in Mimi's chart and wrote out a script for vitamins and tried to ignore the kiss Mimi was giving the tall stunned woman she had come in with. The doctor figured she would just wait for their next visit to get any talking accomplished.

Ellie stuck a list of instructions and the script in Jolly's hand before waving and walking out. Any more successful one timers and she and her partner Sam could start to refer to themselves as the stork. It helped when the patient trying artificial insemination was as young and healthy as Mimi. It was heartbreaking to watch the other couples they saw month after month pass with no luck.

With one last look at the happy couple, Ellie closed the door and headed to her next patient. Jolly and Mimi reminded her of another couple she and Sam were following. She could only hope they had as much good fortune.

"Tell her not to be late. The appointment's at eleven so I'll meet her at the doctor's office. Daddy's giving me a ride over there, so be sure you mention that too or she'll freak if she gets over here and I'm gone. Thanks, Christy." Mimi hung up the phone and fell back against her pillow, convinced Satan had invented morning sickness.

It had been almost eight weeks and while Mimi was getting bigger, she wasn't gaining much weight. Jolly had been her salvation since she took such good care of her, but she and Tim were so busy, Jolly was in worse shape than Mimi. The two things they had been looking forward to were the completion of the house, and their first ultrasound. The house was another month away before it was inhabitable, but the test to see the baby was that morning.

"Not feeling good, huh?" Ricky sat on the bed trying not to move it too much. He and Jolly had been taking turns taking care of Mimi in the mornings until the nausea subsided. It was strange but from the hours of noon till about six in the afternoon she was fine.

"If I had a gun, I'd ask you to shoot me numerous times. Let me take a shower and get dressed. Maybe if I can look this kid in the eye and explain how much I hate throwing up, they'll take pity

on me and stop."

Ellie walked in to find Jolly running her fingers through Mimi's hair in an effort to make her feel better. These big tough women turned into such nurturers when their spouses were miserable. The petite doctor had always attributed it to the partner's nesting period. One day soon she and Sam were going to have a little talk. Being on the receiving end of one of those head massages for the reason Mimi was getting one was looking better all the time.

"I promise it goes away. Until then let's look at how cute he or she is and it'll help take your mind off the misery." Ellie squirted gel on Mimi's midsection and placed the wand down to take a look. It was her first time using the new unit the sales rep had loaned them which showed the womb in 4D.

The monitor showed incredible detail with a reddish tint to the black and white that made it look more like a photograph. The baby wasn't distinguishable as a tiny person just yet, but when they were, Mimi and Jolly would be treated to some special images in the coming months. The new technology was like nothing Ellie had seen. The brochure the rep had left them showed pictures of children in their second and third trimesters that you could've sworn were done in a studio their faces were so clear.

Ellie moved the wand, pressing down in the right spot getting the position she wanted. The image that came up made her lean forward and stare at the screen. She moved the wand a fraction to the right and pressed again. "Could you excuse me a minute, I'll be right back."

Jolly went back to running her fingers through Mimi's hair but this time it was to make herself feel better. Doctors leaving the room without explanation never meant anything good. Didn't they teach them that in medical school?

"Hey, guys, this is my partner Sam Casey, and she's just going to take a look," explained Ellie.

"Is there something wrong?" Jolly asked for the both of them. Mimi was taking deep breaths trying to keep the cracker she had eaten during the car ride over down.

"Jolly, right?" Sam asked holding out her hand. Jolly nodded and shook hands with the tall smiling doctor. "Ellie just wants me to confirm something for her, but there's nothing wrong." Sam sat down and picked up the wand putting it where Ellie pointed. When the image came up Sam thought about how much she loved her job. She smiled up at Ellie and nodded her head.

Ellie leaned against Sam's back and pointed to the screen. "Every so often a fertilized egg will split and it results in twins."

"We're having twins?" asked Mimi, momentarily forgetting her nausea.

"Let me finish. That happening results in identical twins. The other way twins come about is when you release two eggs during ovulation and both are fertilized. That results in fraternal twins."

"So we're having twins," asked Jolly looking at the screen trying to decipher what Ellie was saying. The only thing she could compare the image to was a modern art exhibit Mimi had taken her to a year before. If there were children to be found up there, they certainly weren't sitting up and waving.

Ellie leaned further into Sam so her finger would reach the screen, wanting Jolly and Mimi to follow along with what she was about to say. "See this area here?" Ellie pointed to the right portion of the screen while Sam held the wand in place. "One sack means the egg split and you're having twins." She drew a circle around the image with her finger and highlighted the two little guys swimming contentedly inside. Both Jolly and Mimi looked at the two tiny squiggles on the screen through teary eyes and smiled.

Sam looked at Jolly and saw the look of wonder mixed with fear and couldn't help adding to the news. "But you see this spot here?" Her finger moved to the left of Ellie's. "Another separate little guy makes for triplets. They just won't all be identical."

The image went back to a blue screen when Mimi rolled over to look for Jolly. Blue eyes looked up at Mimi from the floor as Jolly tried to remember how she got there. It had been the second tap on the screen by Sam that had made the architect slide off the chair.

"The house isn't big enough, baby, and I'm only working on one crib," said Jolly. The thought of where to put more space already working in her head along with adding to the furniture they would need.

"Are you ok?" Mimi asked concentrating so much on Jolly that she missed her doctors sharing a kiss behind her. The two medical professionals loved coming in and telling parents that they were having multiples. Pregnancies like this added more complications but they also added an air of excitement.

"I'm fabulous," answered Jolly.

"And I'm fertile it would seem." Mimi rolled over and looked at the screen where their children had just been. If all three of them turned out to be as hyper as Jolly, running around nailing on things, she would never get to paint another thing even after they arrived.

"We have to finish this thing by Sunday, people, so work with me. If I have to go back to the loft and tell Mimi she has to climb those stairs one more day, one of you has to stay and hide the kitchen knives." Jolly had given everyone an assignment and instructions on how to get it done. They had decided to add an extra bedroom for Ricky and add space to the ones they had already completed. That was almost done and all that was left was the small touchups that would finish the job to Jolly's standards.

Ricky, Pam and the guys who had come from the crew all headed inside to finish putting up

molding while Tim and Jolly headed for the roof along the back to finish putting up the gutter system. If a spring downpour came and swamped Mimi's flower garden, Jolly didn't even want to think of the consequences. Her partner had taken the barren yard when she moved in and turned it into what looked like a living painting there were so many colors. The blooms and their various hues were an essential part of Mimi's paints. When crushed and mixed with linseed oil, they created the vibrant paints that marked her work.

"How's the little mommy doing?" asked Tim adjusting his tool belt. He and Pam had tried talking Mimi into letting Pam stay with her for the morning, but Mimi had said all she planned to do was sleep so there was no need.

"She's five months pregnant with three children and she's normally a size bigger than a squirrel, how do you think she feels?" Jolly was tired and irritable and felt bad as soon as the words left her mouth. Just because she wasn't getting any sleep, was no reason to take it out on her cousin. "I'm sorry, my hormones must be flaring in sympathy."

"I know what it's like, buddy. Just wait until she has them and then the real hormonal fun begins. Grab that side over there and let's get this last piece on so we can go inside. I don't want to be out here when it's ninety degrees."

They climbed on to the roof on separate ladders carrying two sections of gutters. Behind them the normal Saturday crowd paraded around the park enjoying the beautiful weather. Jolly turned to tell Tim about how well you could see the babies moving around making her miss the hazard right under her feet.

Tim watched in horror as Jolly's foot slid out at an odd angle on the small pile of wet leaves at the edge of the roofline when she turned to face him. She did a flip on the way down and landed on her back with a thump so loud it made him wince in sympathy. The thought to poke fun at her clumsiness died away when he saw that she wasn't moving and her breathing was becoming labored.

"Pam!" The name was ripped from Tim's throat as he clamored down the ladder. The terror in his voice had his wife outside in no time followed closely by Ricky. "Call 911 and tell them to get over here fast." Tim moved closer to Jolly and made a point not to touch her. "Pam, go now."

"What happened?" demanded Ricky. He moved to Jolly and went to touch her head.

"Don't touch her until the ambulance gets here. Jolly, I want you to try and relax. That might help you breathe." She was gasping for air now and her skin was starting to take on a bluish tint. Both men almost slumped over with relief when they heard the sirens in the distance.

"Mimi." Jolly drew in enough air to force the name out of her mouth. The pain in her chest was overwhelming and for some reason she couldn't get enough air.

"Don't you worry about her, Jolly. I'll take care of everything until you get home from seeing the doctor. Relax for me, ok?" begged Tim.

"Love her."

"I know you do, buddy, and she does too." It took an act of will not to shake her when Jolly's chest stopped moving. The idiot hadn't even dropped her hammer on the way down.

Pam came back leading three paramedics rolling a stretcher into the yard. They started barking out orders and radioing in to the hospital, but at least they were working on her and that made the three on lookers feel better.

Tim threw Pam his keys as he grabbed Jolly's off the new kitchen counter. He and Ricky were going to follow the ambulance, which left Pam to go back to the loft and get Mimi.

"Tim, do you think I should? I don't want to upset her," said Pam. They watched them load Jolly into the back so there wouldn't be time for a long discussion.

"If you don't tell her now and something happens later, it'll be that much worse, honey. So yes, you've got to go and let her know. Call me and I'll let you know where they take her."

Pam was surprised to find Mimi sitting up in bed as if knowing Pam was on her way over. The nervous brunette put on a smile she didn't really feel like and tried to be as soothing as possible. "You get any sleep?" asked Pam.

"Don't tell me y'all are finished already? Had I known the kids would be throwing a soccer tournament this morning I'd have come over with you guys, because I sure as hell didn't get any sleep."

The phone hanging from Pam's belt rang and she reached to answer it with a shaky hand. The name on the screen was Tim. The call could only mean they had arrived at the hospital. "Ok, we'll be there in a few minutes. I promise we'll be careful, it isn't that far away." Pam hooked to the phone back and looked at Mimi. She couldn't think of another reason to delay, or of a good way to break the news. "You have to get dressed, sweetie."

"What's wrong?"

Pam told her, trying to leave out some of the details hoping when they arrived at the hospital Jolly would be fine and conscious. Tim was waiting for them at the doors of Charity Emergency wanting to bring Mimi straight to where she would find Jolly. The last he had seen of his cousin was when they had wheeled the gurney into one of the rooms and a slew of people dressed in scrubs had followed it in. The paramedics had explained on their way out that all trauma cases were brought here first no matter if they were indigent or not.

"Where is she, Tim?" Mimi held on to her midsection and tried not to think the worse, but the glassy eyed looks she had gotten from Pam on the way over were starting to worry her.

"They took her in for an examination but they're not finished yet, so they asked Ricky and me to

wait out here."

"What in the hell happened?" demanded Mimi. Her father tried to calm her down as Tim tried his best to describe what had gone wrong. He was almost finished the story when a tall doctor stepped out of the exam room and looked toward the waiting area.

"Who's here for Jolly Andolini?"

Mimi stood up so abruptly that she almost fell forward. "Can I see her?"

"In a minute, ma'am. Let's first discuss what the problem is and what we have to do to fix it, ok?" The tall doctor led Mimi back to her seat and took the empty one next to it so the woman wouldn't have to crane her neck to look up at her. "I want you to relax so I don't have to admit you as well. First off, my name is Harry Basantes and I just finished looking at Jolly's x-rays. The fall managed to break three ribs on her right side, two of which punctured one of her lungs. That explains why she couldn't breathe well and was turning blue."

"She turned blue?" Mimi looked at the three people to the other side of her knowing they had left some parts of what happened out of the version they told her.

"Ma'am, are you related to Ms. Andolini?" asked Harry.

"She's my partner, doctor. Is she going to be all right?"

"She's going to be fine. We're going to move her into surgery in a bit and fix those broken bones so she can be in top shape to take care of the little one you have on the way. Why don't you wait here and I'll be out as soon as we're done. What's your name?" Harry sat with her hands on her knees glad she had come in to do rounds for a vacationing attendant. The woman sitting next to her didn't need any more stress.

"I'm sorry, Mimi Mulle, doctor. Thank you for talking with me. And it's three little ones, not just one, so see if you can implant some sense into my partner when you put her under."

Harry laughed and couldn't believe the coincidence. "I'll try my best, but you'd be happy to know my partner says the same things about me to anyone who'll listen, so don't be too hard on her. Do you want to see her before we take her in? We have her sedated but I believe she'll feel better hearing your voice."

Mimi followed Harry into the room where they were prepping Jolly for surgery. She leaned against Harry for support after seeing all the equipment they had attached to Jolly to help her breathe. "It's not as bad as it looks, Ms. Mulle, I promise," Harry told her.

"Jolly, I know you can hear me, love. You're going to be ok after this nice doctor fixes you up, so don't make things anymore complicated in there, ok?" Mimi ran her fingers through Jolly's hair and kissed her forehead. "And if I see you on the roof again anytime soon, I'll personally kick your butt."

"Maybe you can get her to pose for more paintings while she's recuperating?" suggested Harry.

"What do you mean?"

"My wife bought the painting 'Wings of Love' at the No Aids party this year and I just assumed it was of Jolly. You're that Mimi Mulle aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't stay long enough to meet the people who purchased my piece. I'm glad it went to a good home." When Harry said wife, Mimi gave a silent thank you to the heavens. Here with her was someone who knew more than medicine, she understood she and Jolly's relationship. "Thank you for letting me see her. I'd of gone nuts if I'd had to wait out here for hours."

"We'll take good care of here, Mimi. We promise. Jolly really does look worse than the injury she sustained."

"Thank you, and I really am sorry for not taking the time to meet the two of you that night. Especially after the big check you wrote to bring my piece home."

Harry led her back outside to the waiting area so she could take care of Mimi's partner. "You don't have to apologize, Ms. Mulle, it's not the time to talk about the painting. I just wanted to let you know how much we've enjoyed it. Do you need anything? I could have a bed brought out for you if you like. It made my wife feel better to have her feet up when she was pregnant for our first."

"How many children do you have?" asked Mimi, liking this soft-spoken doctor who understood what Jolly meant to her happiness.

"I have a son, Jackson and another baby on the way. If you ask the mean looking nurse over there, she'll show you pictures of Jack and my wife Desi." Harry pointed to the nurse's station before getting up and leaving instructions for Mimi's comfort.

The surgery was quick and could have been done by one of her students, but Harry had stayed and performed it herself wanting to make Mimi feel better. She put Jolly in room and let Mimi and Ricky stay the night not wanting the pregnant woman staying alone. Jolly was drugged enough to make it through the afternoon and night without waking, so hopefully all three of them would get some rest. Harry was confident, that barring any complications, Jolly could be sent home in the morning.

Harry arrived home to find Desi walking to the house with Jack perched on her hip. The odd thing about the picture was they were both covered in what looked to be mud. Only hearing the last part of what Desi was saying, she could tell Jack had done something he should have reconsidered.

"Jack, I can't believe you did that." Desi sounded like a woman who was on her last frazzled nerve.

The reprimand was lost to deaf ears as Jack turned his attention to the only person who could get him out of the bind he was in, "Doccy."

"Hey there, little buddy," said Harry to Jack before turning to Desi. "Sweetheart, isn't he a little young to be playing in mud?" was her question as she took the baby from the miffed looking blonde. The muttered answer Harry got was too low to hear, but it sounded like a curse having to do with her and fault. It was best not to delve any further so doctor and son just watched Desi scoop a glob of grayish brown substance off her forehead and throw it in the grass before going into the house.

The slamming kitchen door didn't faze Jack in the least as he tugged on Harry's ears to get a hello kiss. "Son, it's not a good idea to try your mother's patience when she's three months pregnant. You have an endless supply of cute quotient, but mine's running a little low. The fact you look like me makes your little adventures my fault."

"Doccy."

"Yeah, cute stuff. Let's go cheer up your mother." The downstairs was quiet being it was Sunday afternoon and Mona was out with her family for the day. Harry stepped into Jack's room and stripped him out of the soiled jumper he had on then put him on the floor so she could take her scrubs off.

Desi opened her eyes to the naked duo at the door and felt her frustration melt in the hot water of her bath. It was an impossibility to stay mad at either of her brunettes. Harry wiped the clay off Jack before taking a seat next to the tub waiting for the water to cool so they could join Desi.

"How was your day, darlin'?" asked Harry.

"I know I'm not supposed to be taking a bath, but it couldn't be helped. Your son..."

"My son? You both end up covered in mud and he's mine?"

"It was clay, honey, not mud. Clay that was up to an hour ago, Kenneth and Tony's anniversary present. A present, I might add, which took me all morning and most of the afternoon to make. Your son crawled over and put his hand down on the wheel control and sent it flying into every corner of the studio. So yes, at this moment he's all yours." Desi looked at her miniature Harry smiling up at her from Harry's lap and lifted her hands out of the water. "Come on, Jackson."

"Now that he's clean and cute he's yours again?" Harry crawled in and sat behind them.

"And Mona calls you a bonehead." Desi smiled when two soft lips pressed against her temple and Harry's hands went to the swell of her mid section. "A boy or a girl?" asked Desi.

"Doesn't matter. Look at how good the first one turned out. Can you imagine what we've accomplished now with a little practice?"

"You've almost made all my dreams come true, Doccy," said Desi turning her head to get a kiss.

"Almost?"

"I wanted two little guys like this, so don't worry, you're half way home. How was work?"

"Did a small surgery, met someone you'd like to know, then I came home to my two mud bugs."

"Clay, honey, try and remember that because you get to watch your prodigy while I recreate that woven style bowl. Who'd you meet?"

"Mimi Mulle and partner."

Desi turned around holding Jack between them so she could look at Harry. Jack took the move as an invitation to stick his hand in Harry's mouth. "You know Mimi Mulle?"

"We're ike dis," answered Harry holding up two crossed fingers and talking as best she could around the little hand in her mouth.

"Tony and I missed out on her first show since she had contracted with Griffin Studios. She's not hurt and in your debt is she?" teased Desi.

"Listen to you. I'm married to an art shark."

"I don't wish ill upon her, I just want her stuff hanging in our place so tell me."

"She's not hurt, but she does though think I'm wonderful."

Desi held up one finger and threatened, "Harry, don't make me count to three."

"Her partner, Jolly Andolini, fell off their roof this morning breaking three ribs and driving them into a lung. Not pretty, but not fatal. I wasn't scheduled but I took her in and fixed the problem. Jolly should be set to go home tomorrow."

"You're so sweet. She was really upset huh?"

"The woman's very pregnant with triplets, so I would've stood on my head if it would have calmed her down."

Desi shivered thinking about more than one kid at a time. They didn't want to know the sex but the one thing she did know was there was only one swimming around in there. "Can I go to rounds with you in the morning?"

"Don't even think about it, Desiree. The hospital is not the place to be cutting art deals."

"I just want to meet her, honey, not twist her arm into showing at Basantes Gallery. That painting we bought is one of my favorite things in the house. If I wanted to arm twist, I would have asked to bring Tony along."

"How about I ask them over when Jolly gets out? Then you and the fruitcake can pitch all you want."

Desi didn't answer, just stood up and stepped out of the tub to grab a towel. Jack came next when she lifted him out and wrapped him in another bath sheet. "Get out of there and get on the bed."

"Where are you going?" asked Harry.

"To put Jack in a sleeper for his nap and then I'm coming back so you can perform your marital duty." Harry moved so fast, any built up insecurities about her waistline on Desi's part vanished.

"Jolly, come on, honey, wake up for me." Mimi stood by the bed and held an unresponsive hand. The doctor had been right, Jolly had slept through the night without any visible pain, but now Mimi was ready to see those blue eyes.

"What are you doing standing up?" The voice was raspy, but to Mimi it sounded like heaven. "Well?" Jolly asked winching a little when she tried to take a deep breath.

"I was trying to wake you up, blockhead. You just wait until you get out of here. You do realize your children and I've been worried sick about you?" The move Jolly loved so much had gained some flair with Mimi's pregnancy, but those beautiful hands on Mimi's hips still looked sexy to the architect.

"You threatening to give me the pinch?"

"You'll be lucky I don't hit you over the head with a hammer," teased Mimi. She tried sitting on the bed next to Jolly but couldn't quite get all the way up. Ricky helped her out by picking Mimi up and laying her next to Jolly. He slipped out of the room to give them some privacy, happy to turn his daughter back into Jolly's care. "I'm glad you're all right."

"I'd fear for my life otherwise," Jolly joked with her. With Mimi pressed against her, Jolly could feel the babies moving around.

"You promise you're all right?"

"Cross my heart, baby." Harry walked in on the two kissing and not wanting to break them apart, studied Jolly's chart until they were done.

"Looks like another satisfied customer," said Harry as soon as their lips came apart. "Let's take a look, and hopefully we can send you home to recuperate."

"Harry, thanks for coming back so early," said Mimi trying to sit up.

"Like I said, my partner Desi is a big fan, so I'm under strict orders to provide my best bedside manner and invite you two over for dinner. Jolly, you might not remember me from yesterday, I'm Harry Basantes and I did your surgery." Harry stuck the chart under her arm so she could shake hands with Jolly.

"Thanks, I feel a lot better than I did after that fall. I've jumped from higher spots, so I feel like an idiot I didn't land on my feet." The fact the doctor hadn't asked Mimi to move from her spot made Jolly take an instant liking to Harry.

Harry put the chart down and lifted the hospital gown up far enough to see the incision. "I would recommend ladders from now on until these set. Any more broken bones and Mimi might just make you wish death was imminent."

"I promise, Dr. Basantes."

Smoothing down the gown and readjusting the bedding, Harry turned her attention back to Mimi. "How are you feeling? Want me to call your doctor before you head home with Jolly?"

"I feel fine aside from looking and feeling like a walrus."

Harry laughed at Mimi's choice of animal, expecting to hear cow or beached whale. *Must be an artist thing*, she thought knowing Desi's favorite was hippopotamus. "You look great, and trust me, the figure you were used to seeing in the mirror comes back. If you doubt me call my house and ask my wife."

"You have children?" asked Jolly.

Harry pulled a picture from the pocket of her lab coat and handed it over. Both Desi and Jack were smiling at the camera sitting on their favorite picnic spot on the front lawn of the house. "Lucky for you I left my wallet in my other coat. This is Jackson and Desi Basantes, or Jack and mommy as they're known at home."

"They're beautiful," said Mimi.

"Thank you, and I'd be lying if I said I disagree with your assessment. You'll be happy to know Desi enjoyed the experience so much we're trying it again."

"Congratulations, Dr. Basantes." Jolly looked at the picture Mimi had handed over and suddenly couldn't wait to do the same when their children arrived.

"Please call me Harry, and I was serious. I've been instructed to invite you both over for dinner when you're able. I had to run out of the house and hide Desi's keys to keep her from coming with me today."

Jolly handed the photo back and laughed. Desi sounded a lot like a blonde she knew. She accepted the invitation for the both of them when Mimi smiled and nodded her head.

"I have to warn you in advance, if you do come over be prepared to look at that painting from the No Aids event in our dining room. Though after doing your surgery yesterday, Mimi forgot to put that freckle you have on your abdomen," said Harry in all seriousness.

"What freckle?" asked Mimi.

"I'm kidding. Take care and someone will be back in to bring you downstairs. I'll leave your scripts with the discharge nurse, then all you'll have left to do is make an appointment with my office to have the stitches removed."

Ricky came back from the cafeteria when it was time and gave them a ride home to the loft, helping them both up the stairs when they arrived. He left to finish what they had started the previous day hoping to move into the house before Mimi got any bigger.

"Want anything?" Mimi asked Jolly.

The patient had been propped up by a mountain of pillows on the bed and was looking rather lonely. "If I asked real nice, would you sit on my face?"

"I would but with all this extra weight I might kill you." Mimi sat at the edge of the bed and put her hand on Jolly's leg.

"How about a kiss then? I might not be up for killer sex just yet." Mimi laughed before rolling over and giving Jolly what she had asked for.

"I love you, Jolly, and I can't wait for you to meet these guys." Mimi put her hand over Jolly's. The big hand over her mid section was helping to calm the babies down.

"You think I should buy a bigger wallet now?"

"I feel sorry for anyone needing house plans four months from now. When do you think we can move into ours?" Mimi had a sudden urge to strip all her clothes off and eat cheesecake off Jolly's chest. She hoped all these weird notions would go away after the babies were born.

"Missing the studio?" asked Jolly.

"Our bed would come in first."

"Soon, baby, soon." Jolly kissed Mimi's cheek and tried not to think about running her hands

along Mimi's body. Ellie had put the brakes on that kind of behavior after the fourth month point because of the triplets.

"Tell me you miss it at least?" asked Mimi.

"How long do you think we can get Ricky to baby sit after you give birth?"

"You're good for my ego, honey."

"I've joined blockheads anonymous to try and spruce up my image. You're younger than me so I have to do whatever I can to keep you interested."

"You're a sexy nut, Jolly, so you have nothing to worry about. What I need from you is access to our babies' room so I can get moving on the walls and ceiling."

"Let me go and I'll give you something to help you with the preliminary sketches." Jolly moved down the stairs slowly with Mimi fussing at her the whole way. The lap desk had been finished for three days and Jolly had planned to give it to Mimi as a house warming gift. She grabbed it along with a sketchpad.

"Oh, Jolly, you are so getting lucky when I can see my feet." Mimi ran her fingers along the fish and other sea creatures Jolly had included along the border of the wood. The center had been sanded and polished until it gleamed, and on the underside a thick pad had been covered with soft suede. It always amazed Mimi how much effort and thought Jolly put into the things she made for her. Mimi leaned against Jolly for the rest of the afternoon talking about their future plans and sketching.

At the house Ricky and the work crew worked hard to finish everything the girls had in mind. By noon of the next day they had moved everything that had been packed from the loft. After a brief argument over whether or not Jolly should go to work, Mimi made her way to the large babies' room. She calmed down after Jolly promised not to drive to any construction sites and spend the day in the office with Tim and a few clients wanting to finalize plans.

Ricky smiled seeing Mimi with a drawing pencil in hand creating the same underwater haven she had created for Jolly. He was putting a tarp down so his daughter could paint away at the almost completed walls. The room was also a new addition, and the way Jolly and Tim had designed it was almost genius thought Ricky. Just like with everything else in Jolly's life she had considered how well the space could be utilized in the future as well as what would make Mimi happy now.

The room was large enough so it could be subdivided if they had what she jokingly referred to as a mixed litter. To bear the weight of the ceiling they had put pillars, which later could be replaced with solid walls. Mimi had thought for weeks on what to paint, so like Jolly had planned, the art would grow along with their kids. The end product was fish, a blue sky for the ceiling along with a wall of trees that would resemble the park that bordered their yard. Now all she had to do was talk Jolly into going furniture shopping to fill it up.

Mimi stopped mid way in bringing a parrotfish to life when someone knocked on the door. The last person she expected to find on their doorstep was Sophia Andolini, Jolly's mother. The first Mrs. Holland had left for the Alabama gulf coast as soon as the divorce was final and her children had chosen to stay with Anthony. Jolly talked with her every couple of weeks, but it was seldom that Sophia ventured out of her beach cocoon. It was a strange relationship she and Jolly had, but Mimi never pushed considering the relationship she shared with her own mother.

"Mrs. Andolini," greeted Mimi.

"I'm sorry for not coming sooner, dear, but Jolly said the house was a mess." Sophia put her hand on Mimi's active midsection and tears came to her eyes. "It was more like I was afraid of any more rejection."

"Mrs. Andolini, that's unfair. Jolly lost out on relationships with her siblings to take your side. That and also that I would kick her butt if she disrespected our kids' grandmother."

Sophia's smile appeared and she hugged Mimi. "I'm glad she woke up and found you, Mimi. My wish for you is they bring you as much happiness as I got when I had Jolly. You know that's how she got her name."

"I was always curious about that. Come in and tell me about it." Mimi led Sophia into the kitchen.

"Jolly must be in heaven." Sophia looked around the new fully equipped kitchen. The oak cabinets were filled with all of Jolly's pots and pans, as well as the ingredients she needed to create the dishes Mimi loved.

"Thank all that's holy one of us likes to cook. I don't think we would have done such an extensive renovation if I had owned a frying pan when she first moved in. Now tell me a story."

"All those years ago when they put Jolly in my arms, I felt such a profound happiness the name came to me. Jolly connotes happiness so I went with it. I figured if I named her Happy she would never forgive me. Considering how much teasing she's gotten over Jolly, I'm glad I went with my second choice."

Mimi laughed thinking about what Sophia said. Life held no guarantees, but one she was sure about, was that Jolly would be there to bring bundles of happiness as long as her body drew breath. "That might be my new nickname for her," said Mimi.

"I've also come bearing gifts." Mimi called her father from the workshop out back to unload Sophia's car. The two old friends greeted each other before Ricky went out to the Suburban parked out front. They had gotten to know each other during the two divorce hearings they had gone through because of their cheating spouses. Their relationship grew after those unhappy times because of their children.

Ricky brought in two wrapped pieces of what felt like wood. It was Mimi's turn to cry when the

old blankets came off and she recognized the carved pieces. Only one other person had the style and technique that Jolly possessed when she made something like what she was looking at. He had been Jolly's teacher, her grandfather.

The two pieces, which made up the head and foot of Jolly's baby bed, had been carved by Sophia's father as his gift for his first grandchild. She didn't know what possessed her to take it with her with she left Anthony, but knowing how Jolly felt about the elder Andolini had made Sophia take the time. Francois had taken a blank slate of cypress and carved out every fable and popular bedtime story for his granddaughter's entertainment.

When Jolly walked in from work she found Mimi running her fingers along the Cat in the Hat holding his goldfish friend. It was an act she vaguely remembered doing as a child.

"She kept it."

"She loves you and wanted to pass it on to her grandchildren," said Mimi loving the expression on Jolly's face. "I want you to fix it so we can hang it in the babies' room. Your mom didn't bring the railings and I couldn't make the choice between the three as to who gets to use it."

"The specifications for baby beds have changed through the years so don't worry about having to choose." Jolly's fingers joined her partner's in running along the smooth wood. "I started thinking about this bed from the day you told me about our babies."

"I just hope they don't use it to teethe like some people," said Sophia from behind them. She cried again when Jolly swept her into a bear hug and just held her.

Sophia stayed in the new guest room after Jolly cooked dinner and they had a chance to talk. Any fear of putting Ricky out was unfounded when Jolly showed her Mimi's father's permanent room at the back of the house. Jolly had put a separate entrance so he wouldn't feel so hemmed in, hoping to encourage him to stay longer.

The slow steady breathing coming from Mimi later that night signaled Jolly to get back to work. If she wanted to finish her surprise, she was going to have to ignore the pain in her side and put in some late nights. The soft tapping from her hammer prevented Jolly from hearing the shop door open admitting a late night visitor.

"It's nice to know that if you're having an affair, it's with wood and not some other blonde who will remain nameless," said Mimi.

Jolly looked up from what she was doing and frowned. "You're supposed to be sleeping, and I'm supposed to be surprising you."

"That's the chance you take for leaving the other side of the bed cold," said Mimi putting her hands up. "So, surprise me." The hands went a little higher in expectation.

Jolly shook her bowed head before getting up and standing behind Mimi. She turned Mimi

around to look toward the back of the new workshop. The workroom had been the first thing finished in the new renovations and Jolly had been hard at work on creating memories for their children's futures.

"For baby number one," she pointed to the bed. The concept was the same as her grandfather's with the addition of some new character. "For baby number two." The headboard was finished and Jolly was almost done with the other. All that was left was the carving for bed number three.

"You know something, Jolly?"

"What's that, baby?"

"All those years of waiting for you were worth every minute. You've given me so much love, and all these tangible things that'll live on for years to come. All the love you pour into these pieces will inspire a lot of Andolini carvers for generations to come." Mimi stepped closer to the finished bed and ran her fingers along the wood. Even though she was looking forward to having their family there was one thing she had neglected to ask Jolly. "You aren't mad I didn't give us more "couple time" before we started a family?"

Jolly walked Mimi to the new recliner by the worktable, and eased her down. "You were smart with the timing before I got too old to play with them, and I'm planning on "couple time" for the rest of my life. So no, love, I'm not mad at you. I love you for doing this." With a quick flick of the lever the chair went back so Mimi could get comfortable.

"Where'd this chair come from?" asked Mimi before pulling Jolly down for a kiss.

"Knowing you so well, the surprise was you held out this long before coming out here." The answer got her a pinch along with a sleepy audience that visited every night until she was done. All they needed now were children to put in the beds Jolly had made.

Their doctor's appointments moved to a once a week schedule as Mimi's mid November due date got closer. The usually energetic, good-humored blonde was marking off the days on the calendar they kept in the kitchen hoping the days would click by faster. She swore even the act of sleeping made her tired, and as she added more weight to all the pounds she'd gained, the more short tempered she got with Jolly. When the architect took it in stride and just smiled when Mimi complained, the angrier the expectant mother got.

"You ready to go?" Jolly had cleared her morning at the office to come and take Mimi to see Ellie and Sam.

"Once you find and put on my shoes. Then I'll be ready." Mimi sounded irritated enough already so Jolly turned and headed toward the bedroom for shoes. "I remember a time when you walked in and kissed me hello first," was the yell Mimi sent Jolly down the hall with.

"I tried kissing you last night and you told me to take a lap around the park," said Jolly as she knelt and put Mimi's shoes on.

"Did you fall off the roof again? Just because I was tired last night, you don't want to kiss me ever again?" The bottom lip started to quiver and Mimi's green eyes got extremely glassy.

Shit! I can take the crabby Mimi, but tears are a different story. Jolly knew better than to say another word before soothing the hormone induced hurt feelings. She stood up and leaned over the large belly to reach Mimi's lips. It was as long, soft and longing as Jolly could make it without putting her libido into overdrive. Chunky fingers combed Jolly's hair back when they broke apart making her smile. *I knew the old Mimi was locked away in there somewhere,* thought Jolly.

"I'm sorry I'm such a bitch lately."

"Baby, you've got every right to be in a bad mood. I'd of killed somebody by now." Jolly tried her best to commiserate with her swollen partner without sounding condescending. "Let's go and get this doctor's visit done so you can come home and take a nap."

Jolly kept her eyes on the road but as they passed, she pointed out their newest construction site on the way to the doctor's office. The fact she now spent her days trying to keep the neighbors happy during the day and Mimi when she got home in the afternoons made her want to laugh. The owners of the older homes always circled the wagons whenever there was new construction on the few vacant lots left in uptown New Orleans. So far they seemed pleased with the style of house Jolly and Tim had designed.

When they pulled up to the clinic Jolly got out and walked Mimi to the elevator before going to park the car. Jolly walked in to find Mimi sitting across from another petite blonde who she could tell was pregnant, but not as far along as Mimi. What made Mimi smile was the sight of an older African American lady chasing after an active dark haired little boy.

He would run and knock some magazines on the floor before running to the blonde and crash into her legs and slam his hands playfully on her lap. "Honey, stop throwing all those books on the floor and making Mona pick them up."

"Doccy, mama."

"I know I can't wait for Doccy to get here myself. You want mama to read you a story?" She pulled a book out of the diaper bag and sat the toddler in the chair next to hers. Mimi reached and held onto Jolly's hand wishing for the day she was doing the same thing with their three.

"Mimi, Jolly, how are you?" Harry Basantes had walked in and saw the couple listening to Desi read a story to Jack. Mona was sitting on the other side of Desi with her eyes closed grateful the little menace was taking a reading break.

"Hey, Dr. Harry, we're doing fine in the broken bones department, just waiting to fill up all the

extra rooms I added onto the house. What are you doing in here?" asked Jolly.

Harry pointed to the crew sitting across from them but wasn't able to get anything up before Jack stood in his chair and screamed, "Doccy."

"Hey, little buddy." She had to run forward before Jack just walked off the edge of the chair. "This motley crew belongs to me." Harry held Jack as she sat next to Desi, kissing her wife before she made introductions.

"See, Jolly, you're supposed to kiss the girl before anything else," said Mimi.

"I'll take note, honey."

"Guys, this is my wife Desi, our son Jack and our live in grandmother, Mona. Everyone, this is Jolly and Mimi Andolini."

"It's so nice to meet you. Harry's told me so much about you and I hope she conveyed how much we've enjoyed your painting, Mimi." Desi got up and shook hands with the two women.

"Like I told Harry, I'm glad it went to a good home."

"Have you been working on anything new?" Desi ignored Harry's arched brow meant to stop her from bothering the artist.

"Triplets," said Mimi in a teasing voice. "I'm sorry, I was joking. I was working on a new series but standing in front of an easel has been replaced by standing in front of our refrigerator. The only painting I've been doing is in the babies' room. Maybe after I give birth I can come by your gallery and talk to you and your partner about hosting my next show."

"You know our gallery?"

"I keep all my clean brushes in one of your pieces and we have another one in the bedroom I use for all the flowers Jolly buys me, so yes I know your work. The gallery I know from all the bragging Harry did about you when Jolly was in the hospital. She said you and Tony would be the perfect choice if I wasn't happy with my current arrangement."

"We'd love to talk to you anytime you want, and I'd love to see what you did for your upcoming gang." Desi wanted the nurse to come and call either them or the Andolini couple in so she could thank Harry for what she did.

Ellie walked out instead and grabbed Jack from Harry. "How's my godson?"

"He acts just like that overgrown adolescent there," Mona pointed to Harry. "If you want, he can come to live with you for a while."

"Mona, you'd be the first person to knock me down if I tried to leave the house with this sweet

boy." Ellie hugged Jack tighter and turned to Mimi and Jolly. "And how's my population explosion doing?"

"Counting the days," answered Mimi. She looked up at the baby her doctor was holding and it made her want to cry. All this misery she was going through would be worth it if in the end she held such a precious gift who looked as much like Jolly as Jack looked like Harry.

"I'll bet. Why don't you and the fainter come on back and let's take a look at the brood."

"One little incident and I'm labeled for life. Just wait until someone looks at your ultrasound and tells you college is going to cost you \$200,000 a year." Mimi was starting to enjoy the visits with their two doctors. It seemed they saved jibes for Jolly and loved teasing her about the first ultrasound Mimi'd had to check on the progress of her pregnancy.

Desi handed Mimi a card before Ellie escorted them to a room, thrilled that the artist's second show was almost assuredly on its way to opening in their studio. Her other half had obviously downplayed her sales pitch to Mimi and Jolly when talking about Desi. Mona took Jack without asking why having seen that look on Desi's face before.

"Harry would you like to show me to a room, please?" Desi grabbed the front of the white lab coat and pulled Harry toward the inner office. They didn't need an audience for the thank you the generous doctor was going to get from her wife.

One of the nurses just smiled as Harry followed Desi into an empty room and closed the door. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?" asked Desi.

"You're pretty good about that so I have no complaints."

"Well I do love you, even when you're out playing Santa and getting me stuff I want."

"I had ulterior motives." Harry helped Desi on the exam table and stood between her legs.

"What's that?"

"I love the little crab puffs you have at all those openings, so I thought this might be a good way to get some."

Desi leaned her head to the side to give Harry more room to nibble knowing the food line was just a joke. "So it had nothing to do with making me happy?"

"Of course it had to do with making you happy, woman. I'd think by now you'd know I'd dance naked in the OR if that's what it took to make you happy."

"Don't get crazy on me, Harry, and don't stop what you're doing."

In the next room Jolly and Mimi looked at the screen staring in fascination as two of the babies

sucked their thumbs. Ellie was moving the wand getting a good look at each little face letting the expectant parents get a glimpse of what was waiting at the end of the pregnancy.

"Mimi, I can't begin to tell you how important it is for you to take it easy for the next month or so. Your pressure is just slightly elevated but nothing we have to do anything about now. Think of this as Jolly's time to wait on you and fulfill your every whim." Ellie finished up her exam and jotted some notes into the chart in her hand. Sam and her were keeping their fingers crossed that Mimi would at least last until the first of November.

"No problems there. If there's one thing this pregnancy's done for me is that I'm never alone. Having Jolly working from home is going to make me dread the end almost, but then I have to go to the bathroom so often it'll be nice to get my bladder away from the constant attack it seems to always be under from these guys."

When they got home from the appointment, Christy was waiting in the kitchen for Jolly. The assistant didn't mind the trips to the house to bring her boss all the files and records she needed for upcoming and current projects. Jolly got Mimi comfortable on the sofa with a drink and a blanket to watch television before turning her mind toward Christy and business.

"Christy, I need the folder on the Pearl property first. There was a message on my voice mail this morning saying they'd finally come to a consensus on the style and are ready to proceed."

"You got it boss." Christy dug into the box she'd brought over with her to find the first of all the files Jolly had asked for. "What to place a bet on who caved?" In her short time with Jolly and Tim, the assistant was familiar with the argument the Pearls were fighting. The first time it had happened she'd been shocked when the wife had chunked Jolly's stapler at her husband after he disagreed with her on how many bathrooms they needed.

"If he knows what's good for him and he's smart, Mr. Pearl caved."

"Why do you say so?" asked Christy standing next to Jolly's chair with the folder she'd asked for.

"Because no woman no matter how great her husband is, wants to live in a house that reflects just his personality. He should just add a study to the plans and be done with the process."

"You speak from your personal experience as a husband?"

Jolly laughed at the sarcasm dripping from her assistant's question. "No from my personal experience with designing and building Tim and Pam's place."

"How about with Mimi?"

"Any disagreements we had during our renovation were quickly resolved so there was never a problem."

"Never?"

"No, any disagreements we had were quickly resolved with my giving in."

They both laughed when a loud, "Ha!" was heard coming from the direction of the den. "Jolly Lee Andolini, God could strike you down for telling lies that big."

Christy really laughed at Mimi's reprimand. "Boss, Mimi must make a mean soufflé."

"Mimi's beautiful and she paints divinely, but she can't cook. So no, she can't boil water much less whip up something as complicated as a soufflé." Jolly leaned back in her chair thinking how strangely off course their conversation had gotten.

"I just thought she's done such a good job at whipping you, it would transfer into the kitchen."

It was Mimi's turn to laugh when Christy ran past her with Jolly hot on her tail. If she had to be stuck vegetating at least she'd have entertainment. The funniest part was Jolly had been right. All the changes Mimi had wanted were incorporated into the house. "You guys are going to have a great life. I know I do," she said with her hands over her midsection as she spoke to their unborn children. She meant every word since having Jolly around would be like having an always willing playmate at their beck and call. Mimi went to sleep as the sound of laughter rang through the house. Her dreams carried her to a time when it would be three little children Jolly was chasing.

[Continued in Chapter 5](#)

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~ A Place To Dance ~

by Ali Vali

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A Place To Dance

by

Ali Vali

Chapter 5

"Are you comfortable?" Jolly put one more pillow behind Mimi's back before moving down to rub her feet.

"I'm as good as I'm going to get for the night I guess. Can we talk about something while you carry out your nightly pampering?"

"Is something wrong?"

The blonde held out her hand suddenly wanting Jolly close to her. "Nothing's wrong, honey. I was just thinking about what comes next."

"Hell of a time to think about it now, isn't it?" Jolly moved so she was pressed up against Mimi's back with her hand on her partner's large midsection. "That's an easy one though. We bring these little guys home, love them, then set them loose on the world some day."

"It's that simple, huh?" Her voice was light, but her grip on Jolly's hand was too tight. There was something else on Mimi's mind.

"What's wrong, love?"

"I want you to promise me you'll be ok if something happens to me."

Jolly sat up a little so she could see Mimi's face. "What do you mean, if something happens to you? What's going to happen to you?"

"Honey, I just want to talk about this so it won't be on my mind later. During child birth there's a million things that could go wrong, and if they do, I want to know you'll be all right. We're going to have three children and they're going to need you."

"Mimi, I really don't think I want to have this conversation with you now. You're young and healthy, nothing's going to happen to you."

With a grunt Mimi rolled onto her back and lifted a hand to rest on Jolly's cheek. The same wave of depression that rolled over her every time she looked at her ring finger minus the diamond Jolly had given her swamped her again. After her fingers started their imitations of sausages she'd had to remove it or face pliers to pry it off. The ring now rested at the end of the platinum chain Jolly had gotten and Mimi was counting the days when she could wear it again.

"Promise me you'll be ok and I'll drop it."

"I promise, but trust me, it won't be necessary." Jolly kissed Mimi's palm and smiled. "Now promise me you won't waste anymore time on this."

"I can't help it. There's nothing to do all day but lie here and imitate a slug, so the weirdest things just pop into my head. I have some more to do in the babies' room, but after I mix the paint I need, I'm too tired to use any of it." The tears the little tirade caused didn't bother Jolly as much as they did at first. Having a pregnant partner had been a lesson in emotional trauma of every proportion.

"You know what I wish?"

Mimi wiped her face with the edge of the sheet and shook her head, "What?"

"I wish I could make love to you." What Jolly thought was a compliment only made Mimi cry harder. "Baby, I only said that to make you feel better. I miss you is all. Why are you crying?"

"I was just thinking what my body's going to look like after this. You may never want to touch me again I'll be so hideous." The word hideous was dragged out so long in Mimi's whine, Jolly thought she would pass out from a lack of oxygen.

"So the truth comes out does it?" Jolly tried to sound stern as she moved behind her partner again to hold her.

"What?" Mimi asked through a hiccup.

"You must think I'm some sort of old leach who married you just for your body. A hot blonde who fulfills my every desire and sexual fantasy."

"You mean I don't?" The teasing tone Jolly was using got Mimi to stop crying.

"And then some, sweetheart. Only you're so much more to me."

Mimi leaned further into Jolly loving the way the warm body behind her made her feel wanted. "I've loved you for so long, Jolly. More than anything I want to be whatever will make you happy."

"Love, you don't have to do anything special to do that. The day we met I was busy being angry at what I felt was one more imposition on my father's part. I had met your mother a couple of times before that so I wasn't holding out too much hope her spawn would be much better. How surprised do you think I was when I laid eyes on you?"

An embarrassed giggle escaped Mimi as she remembered that luncheon. Jolly had made her so nervous she couldn't stop talking the most important thing she remembered was Jolly didn't laugh when she confessed to the young architect she was going to be a great artist.

"I was some stupid kid huh?"

The valet looked at the old truck with a mixture of disdain and disbelief. One of the perks of the

job was driving the kind of cars he could only afford with a winning lottery ticket in his hand. He already drove a piece of crap; he didn't want to have to park one.

"Should I just pull it around myself, or are you taking a break?" The tall woman standing next to the open cab door pulled him out of his revelry.

Maybe her other car is broken, thought the restaurant employee when he got a good look at the expensive suit she was wearing. "No, ma'am, let me just grab a ticket." He ripped one off the booklet he carried around in his back pocket. "Name?"

"Jolly."

"You're certainly tall enough to be a giant," the young man joked.

"How original." With a frustrated hand running through her hair, Jolly dropped the truck's keys into the kid's hand and started for the door. Stopping and turning around when her hand was on the knob. "Try to not put any dents in it."

He put his hands on his hips and tried to figure out if she was joking. There was sawdust falling from the cab floor from the open door, and it was hard to find a place on the vehicle that wasn't dented. "You're kidding right?"

"Don't let my name fool you, kid. I'm not at all happy to be here, so no, I'm not kidding."

Great another one of those places where people like to be seen and serves tiny food. I see a trip to a good burger place after this. The thought occurred to Jolly as she waited for the hostess with a foreign accent to help the couple in front of her. Her father loved frequenting restaurants like this especially now that he had the attractive Kelly hanging on his arm. "It could be worse I guess. She could be nineteen."

"May I help you?"

"Yes, you can pour me a very large drink with vodka and whatever you want to mix in with it then give me directions to the Holland party."

The hostess put her hand up and motioned for Jolly to follow her. From the sound of the table they were headed to, her father was holding court as his new subjects were informed of the laws of the land Holland built. Two of the three blondes she didn't recognize were shaking their heads hanging on Anthony's every word.

"Jolly, how nice of you to join us. Only thirty minutes late. It's a new record for you, isn't it? I thought I told you this was important?" Anthony spoke in a low chilling voice, one he used as a means to intimidate.

"I'm here, aren't I? That should supercede when I arrived."

"Jolly, I want you to meet your new family." Kelly stood and went to stand behind her eldest son before the situation got too explosive. "This is Richard," pointing to her the next child, "That's Henry, and on the end there is Madeline."

Each of the boys stood and shook her hand to be polite. Their mother had told them enough about Jolly to know that to align with her was the quickest way for Anthony to write you off. There were two empty chairs and the Mulle boys were happy when Jolly chose to sit next to their sister.

"Hi there. Having fun?" Jolly asked the young blonde.

"It beats having to do this at some sporting event or something else just as hideous. Is your name really Jolly?" Mimi put her elbows on the tabletop and smiled at the new arrival.

"It's really Jolly, and if you don't like sports it may hinder your chance at becoming a full fledged Holland."

"I'm a full fledged Mulle, so that's not a problem."

The rich laugh spilling out of the tall, good looking newcomer made Mimi happy for some reason. It was when Jolly wiped away a tear that she noticed how blue her eyes were. "That's a good thing, Madeline. You should always try to stand up for the things you believe and you love."

"Please call me Mimi."

With no menu ever looked at by anyone at the table the appetizers arrived and Anthony's order of "Eat," set everyone's fork in motion except for Mimi's. "I don't like caviar so you're welcomed to mine if you like." She pushed the plate toward Jolly. For her part Jolly ignored her plate as well and took a sip of the drink the waiter had delivered. With a snap of her fingers the brunette got the man in charge of their table to come back.

"Could you bring the young woman and I a menu and take this back from whatever fish lost it?"

"What's wrong with it?" Anthony asked with food still in his mouth.

"We didn't order it, so we're sending it back."

"I already ordered for everyone to save time." Richard Mulle plucked a piece of lettuce off his shirt when Anthony spit in his direction.

"That was sweet when we were two, but we're all big now and just like in houses, people have their own tastes in food."

The man at the head of the table looked like Jolly had just hit his last nerve, but in the interest of getting through the lunch he let it go. Quiet conversations followed after more food was brought

out, but Mimi could have cared less. She answered all of Jolly's questions and tried to mix in a little humor with her answers so she would get one more smile out of the newly minted architect.

"What do you want to do when you get out of school, Mimi?"

"I'm going to be an artist. I love painting and I want to see if I can make a living at it."

"She's going to be a decorator, that's something more practical," Anthony boomed from his end.

"That's right, Mimi. Your father's an architect so you'll have a good built in clientele." Kelly looked at Anthony as she answered getting him to curl his lips up in a smile.

"My father's a construction worker and he said he'd help."

"The guy's a deadbeat, so I wouldn't count on it, girlie. I'll pay for school, but not for no artist. That's nothing but a waste."

"If that's what you're interested in, Mimi, I'll help you."

Jolly had seen the fire in Mimi from that first day. Her father had thought her offer of help was a boast to get under his skin, but nothing could have been further from the truth. She had wanted to give Mimi the world to see her happy. It had never been a sacrifice to provide the means to making her dreams come true. "More like a warm, funny, bright kid who stole my heart in one afternoon. I've loved you for a long time and it was never the way a sister loves a sibling. For a long time I was afraid to admit even to myself how I felt about you."

Mimi turned her head wanting to see Jolly's face. "Why? You had to know how I felt."

"No, I didn't know. For years I cooked every Monday, escorted you to art openings and cuddled with you on the sofa when we watched movies. I thought that's all I could hope for, and it would've been enough if you were happy with your life. To be totally honest though, the thought of you with someone else would've killed me." A warm set of lips pressed to hers stopped Jolly's confession for a long sweet moment. "You know what made me realize I had to take a chance?"

"What?"

"It's more like who. Christina."

Mimi pinched Jolly's arm for mentioning the woman's name in their bed. "Just for future reference, honey, when you're trying to make me feel better it's not a good idea to bring up old flames."

The tall body behind Mimi shook the mattress with laughter. "I'm mentioning her name because she's the one who made me face just how often you're on my mind. The thing that makes me the happiest now is I can finally admit to myself that I plan my life around you. I've done it for years but it makes me happy for you to know you're the center of my world."

"You know something, Jolly?"

"What?"

Mimi kissed her before answering. "I wish we could make love too."

"Soon, baby. I promise."

"Call me if you need anything, and I mean anything. I shouldn't be long." Jolly stood in front of the closet tucking in her shirt. She had an appointment with Harry that morning to remove her stitches. She was upset with herself for not accepting the doctor's offer of coming to the house to do it. After their long talk the night before Jolly wasn't anxious to leave Mimi alone.

"I'm sure you won't be long, I'll be ok. Stop worrying so much."

"Just remember, Madeline, there will be no birthing of babies until I get back."

Mimi laughed and crooked her finger at Jolly to get her to get closer to the bed. "When you get back I'm tempted to defy Ellie and throw caution to hell. If an orgasm lands us with some kids and the ability for me to hug you, I'm all for it."

With a gentleness Jolly always used with Mimi she ran her hand over the expanding midsection. There was movement under her fingers, and like it always did, the awe of what it represented choked the architect to the point she couldn't speak. "We'll be fine, love, we promise," Mimi swore. Jolly nodded, loving the adoring look Mimi was giving her.

At the doctor's office Jolly didn't have to wait didn't have to wait long, and was surprised to see it was Harry who came out to escort her to an exam room. "The pain almost gone?" asked Harry as she removed the bandages on Jolly's chest. The x-rays showed her ribs were setting nicely pleasing Harry with her progress.

"I've tried to ignore it so it's not too bad. It'll be nice when I can start swinging a hammer again and it not bother me."

"Won't be long now. I should've recognized you name as quickly as I recognized your partner's. Some friends of ours got you to design their house for them and they're always raving about it."

They continued talking about different topics as Harry probed Jolly's side, finally landing on Mimi and how she was holding up in her last trimester. "You told her you wanted to make love to her?" asked Harry. She spoke slowly like Jolly was mentally challenged as she pulled the stitches out of her chest. Having been where Jolly found herself it was easy to poke fun.

"Well I thought it would be a compliment. You know, since we can't. I didn't want her to think I

find her hideous as she so lovingly put it last night. Do the hormones eventually calm down?" Jolly laughed when Harry let out a laugh of her own. She had looked so down when she got to the office that Dr. Harry had been giving her some friendly advice on how to deal with pregnant partners.

"Trust me, buddy, she doesn't want you to comment on her body one way or another. If you tell her how beautiful she looks, she'll think you're just being nice. On the other hand if you don't ever comment on it, she'll think you're disgusted." Harry shook her head remembering Desi breaking out into tears more than a few times after a compliment on how beautiful she looked.

"So good doctor, what's your best advice?"

Harry used a small set of tweezers to gently remove the sutures on Jolly's chest. The tight weave she had used would help minimize the scar. Some doctors didn't take the time anymore using the universally acceptable staples, but Harry didn't want Mimi to have a visual reminder of the traumatic accident every time she saw her partner's chest.

"There's no good advice here, Jolly. Pregnant women are like fingerprints. No two are alike, so there's no rule of thumb. With Desi the things that made her feel better were threatening me with imminent death if she gained another pound or if I got close to her if she wasn't in the mood, and chicken salad. She ate so much of it I was waiting for her to lay an egg instead of going into labor with Jack. In the end I think she loved the stuff more than me, but it made her feel better so I wasn't complaining. The one thing to remember is keep all conversations away from her body if at all possible when she brings it up. You bring it up, and be honest about what you see. Unless you're an idiot, you'll agree with me and there's nothing more beautiful on this earth than the sight of your partner carrying your children."

"But I do love the way Mimi looks now." She accepted her shirt back from Harry and started to get dressed. The nurse who had assisted Harry laughed softly at her predicament before stepping out so they could finish their talk.

"I know you do, and if you tell her that often enough eventually she'll believe you. Desi and I agreed to have only two kids, but you're right, if I could talk her into five, I'd love it. We were separated by circumstances for a long time, so you can imagine the joy of getting her back was unbelievable. But seeing her carrying our second makes me sit and cry sometimes just like the first time around. I know physically it's hard on her, but she's just beautiful right now." As Harry made the very personal admission Jolly nodded her head in agreement. In the hall, out of sight, Desi wiped a tear away. For the millionth time since finding Harry again she thanked God for the life she'd been gifted with.

"Talk about me like that and I'll give you six little namesakes," Desi said softly from the doorway.

"You weren't supposed to hear that, but it's true nonetheless. Jolly, you remember Desi right?"

"Nice to see you again, Jolly. How's Mimi holding up?" Desi stepped in and leaned against

Harry's seated form. "I can't fathom having three in one shot. She must be miserable."

"I think we passed miserable about two months ago, but Mimi's a trooper. Aside from being tired and not being able to find a comfortable spot in any position, she'd doing great. Maybe I can call Mona and get her recipe for chicken salad."

Desi laughed but she understood. "Why don't you two come to dinner tonight? If Mona can't cheer her up with a good meal she's a lost cause until labor sets in."

"Thanks for the offer, but I doubt she'll want to leave the house unless it's on fire. I'm betting though, she'd love company. Why don't you all come to our place and I'll cook? Bring Mona and Jack too."

The doctor could feel her wife's excitement at being that much closer to Mimi's art collection. "Are you sure?" asked Harry.

"I'm positive. Mimi's not finished with the babies' room but she's dying to show it off. It's not canvases but I keep thinking about three small blondes looking at those walls as they drift off to sleep. I'll bet they set off on some great nighttime adventures with the inspirations their mama's provided them."

"I'd love to see it, Jolly. What time do you want us?" asked Desi.

"Come whenever you like this afternoon. I'm working from the house now so if after Harry's appointments are done is good for the two of you, come on over, we'll be waiting. Mimi will be thrilled she'll have someone to talk to besides me."

"The way that girl looks at you makes me think you could be reading stock quotes and she'd love you anyway." Harry stood up and shook hands with Jolly before she left. "What brings you down here, beautiful?" she asked Desi, as she leaned her against the exam table.

"Our boy had a play date with Mona and his little buddies at the park so I thought I'd take my brilliant spouse out to lunch if she's available. Though, after hearing all that nice stuff you said about me, could I interest you in a hotel room instead?"

The lab coat Harry was wearing opened slightly as her partner ran her hands up her sides. The move made Harry step closer until she felt the swell of their growing baby between them. "For once in my life I wish I dug ditches for a living."

Desi pulled away from the line of kisses she was placing up Harry's neck and looked at her in total confusion. "This ought to be good, please go on."

"It's raining outside today so I'd have the day off, but since I chose a profession that works inside, I have a huge patient load this afternoon. Considering what I've got in mind for you it's going to take me longer than lunch to get done." The kiss that followed the declaration made Desi moan into Harry's mouth.

"We could go sit and make out on the sofa in your office."

"Feeling frisky today, are we?" Harry took her hand and pulled Desi toward her office.

"I was just thinking we only had a couple of weeks on that old swing when we were kids. It's nice sometimes to just pretend life after that would've followed the course we were both hoping for."

There was a wistfulness in Desi's voice that was an echo of the young woman who'd dreamed of being courted and romanced, only to be thrown into a miserable situation. "Miss Thompson, would you like to have lunch with me?"

The use of her maiden name was odd, but Desi was willing to play along. "I don't know, don't you have to study or something?"

"If you say yes I don't think anything else is important enough to keep me from going. I promise to walk you home after we're done." Their joined hands sawing between them, both of them enjoying the reminiscing and pretending.

"Are you going to try and kiss me? I have a curfew after all."

Harry stopped in the hall close to where her staff kept the charts they'd need for the day. "I promise to get you home on time, but I can't promise I won't try to kiss you."

"I accept."

"Margaret, could you please reschedule everyone until after two? Please apologize for me, but it can't be helped." Harry couldn't help but notice the woman's large smile as she asked. It was a verification she'd been listening to their conversation.

"Honey, I can't let you do that. I'm just being hormonal." That Harry would even consider going through the trouble of rearranging her day was enough for Desi. "We can just eat in the cafeteria. I now you're busy."

Before Harry could respond to Desi's bout of guilt, Margaret did it for her. "Mrs. Basantes, can I say something?" Desi nodded her head. "Offers like this don't come around very often, so take an old woman's advice and just go. Don't worry about anything else, because in the end you'll both remember a day of fun more than Harry will remember seeing patients she has scheduled today when you're both old and gray."

"Thanks, Margaret," said Desi gripping the woman's hands.

"One more thing," Margaret's voice stopped both of them on the way to Harry's office. "If she tries to kiss you, Miss Thompson, I'd say she's a safe bet. One of those you don't want to let get away."

"Oh letting her get away is my last intention."

Margaret watched them step into her boss's office as she leaned against the counter with a happy look on her face. Another one of Harry's nurses stepped out of an exam room after finishing with a patient finding Margaret's expression interesting. "What's the smile for?"

"I was just thinking about how Dr. Basantes was before Desi came along. Remember the girls?"

The younger woman nodded. "I wasn't around here for very long before that, but yeah, I remember. They didn't stay around long, did they? It made me think for the longest that Dr. Harry was a bit of a player."

"The thing is none of them stayed around, but not for their lack of trying. She was waiting and I'm glad she didn't have too long a stretch before she got back what she lost. Desiree Basantes is a very lucky young woman, but I'm betting it's Harry who pinches herself every morning. I'm just happy for both of them."

The couple at the center of their conversation stepped out of the office holding hands and laughing. They were a long way from the teenagers who had started their relationship on a porch swing years before, but the feelings they had back then had only grown and strengthened through the years.

The younger nurse standing with Margaret waved at the departing pair. "I'd say they're both pretty lucky."

"Honey, shouldn't you be cooking something if you invited them over?" Mimi yelled her question down the hall as she contemplated if she could get away with not wearing a bra.

"Everything's marinating and waiting for the grill so don't worry about it. Do you need any help?"

Struggling into underwear that looked like something her grandmother would have love, Mimi wondered again why Jolly hadn't moved out after watching her body expand to scary portions. "Could you..." Soft lips pressed to her shoulder as Jolly's hands came around as far as they could on her naked middle.

"You are so beautiful." The kisses moved further up Mimi's neck. "You get more beautiful everyday." A snort escaped the woman being complimented but it didn't discourage Jolly. "I'm sorry if I haven't been convincing before now, but you are." Slowly she moved Mimi to one of the comfortable chairs they'd gotten for the master suite.

"You're incredibly sweet, and incredibly prejudiced. I feel far from beautiful."

Jolly knelt in front of Mimi and kissed the surface of the warm haven that held her children. "For a long time I've enjoyed building things. Places where people enjoy the holidays and their families. Places where they make love and dream of starting a family, but it's never mattered how well I drew the plans or mitered the wood around the doors, what mattered was what those places became once I handed over the keys."

For the first time in months Mimi forgot all the discomfort and focused on Jolly's voice. "What did they become, love?"

"Homes. I can only provide a pleasing space, honey. The people who move in are what make it a home. I never truly had a place I felt that way about until I woke up next to you." Jolly kissed one of the pudgy hands resting on the arm of the chair before going on. "You're beautiful to me because you're giving me all the things I thought were out of my reach. You, beautiful, are my home and if you finish with the granny panties I have a surprise for you."

"You shit. You had me tearing up until the last part." Mimi threw the bra she'd picked out at Jolly's head as something occurred to her. "Would you hate me if I don't breast feed?"

A person could get whiplash having a conversation with my girl, thought Jolly. "I could never hate you, honey. Besides you've got plenty of time to decide, and since I don't come with a tap it'll be up to you to make that decision."

Tears welled up in the pretty green eyes, but unlike in the beginning, Jolly held Mimi's hand and waited. Their cause would come spilling out shortly if she gave her a chance. "It's just that putting on a bra is an exercise in pain. If someone, I don't care how small, bit down on my nipples it might drive me over the deep end."

It was hard not to smile, but Jolly had a mental image of getting strangled with the underwear on her head so her face stayed neutral. "I think after a few times those little suckers toughen up, sweetie. That's what it said in the book anyway. Either way, they'll be fine. I was bottle fed and I'm no a serial killer."

"Toughen up? What exactly does that mean?" A look of horror swept over Mimi's face.

"I'm thinking that's a Desi question when she gets here. Come on, don't you want to see your surprise before you have to share it with the world?"

"Help me?" Mimi plucked the beige instrument of torture off her partner's head.

"Surely, and later if you want I'll volunteer for sucking duty to get these babies ready."

Mimi looked down to what seemed like some other woman's breasts Jolly was cupping and laughed. "You're a person in need of help, Jolly, but I love you because you are."

Walking slowly and leaning heavily on Jolly, Mimi followed her to the babies' room. The walls were almost finished and after she got rid of the extra weight Mimi was planning on completing

her first gift to their children, but that didn't matter now. What did were the three new additions not in the room when she'd walked by that afternoon.

With the same attention to detail her grandfather had taken great pride in, Jolly had finished the baby beds. They were far apart enough to ensure the others could maybe sleep through a sibling's crying, but close enough so Mimi could appreciate what Jolly had accomplished. The multitude of characters flowed from one bed to the other making them all inter connected. Famous cartoon rivals chased each other from one foot board to the next, but evenly divided so no bed was more important than the other.

"Oh my God, baby, they look great." Mimi had seen them slowly come to life in Jolly's workshop, but they looked totally different with stain and varnish.

"Your dad helped me with the ten coats of finish he insisted on, so remember to thank him. Do you really like them? It's not too late to order something else. We've got at least two months."

The blonde turned in Jolly's arms and rested her hands on the strong chest. "I love them and so will our brood. You know what I spend my days thinking about besides my next trip to the bathroom?"

"What, love?"

"I picture three little brunettes with big blue eyes trailing after you with tiny hammers in their hands. I bet our yard has the only tree house in town with a functional elevator if I know you."

Jolly laughed as she led Mimi to one of the rockers in the room. "I don't think so. I told Desi and Harry this afternoon that they'd be little blondes. All of them with paint brushes and palettes telling some hyper dog to sit still. Their mother's a creative genius so I want them to be just like you." If there was going to be any rebuttal from Mimi it was cut off by the doorbell. "Sit and I'll be right back."

Mimi waited until she heard the sounds of Jolly greeting their guests before letting the grimace of pain mare her face. It was the second jolt of extreme discomfort to rip across the bottom of her abdomen in as many hours. Mimi thought of telling Jolly but her tall overprotective spouse was on edge enough, and they were both looking forward to spending the evening with the Basantes couple.

"What a great house, Jolly," said Harry as Jolly led them back to the babies' room.

"It's getting there." Jolly laughed watching Desi look at the large canvases they had hanging throughout the house, including the one Mimi had given her the night of her opening. Hanging in their home was a history of Mimi's progression as an artist. "This through is my favorite room," said Jolly walking into the nursery.

"Wow," said Harry and Desi together. The room was filled with color with only one small patch left undone.

"Jack would love this." Harry walked to a wall of sea life and ran her finger along the back of a dolphin.

"We were looking forward to some seeing him Mona again. Did they get a better offer?" teased Mimi.

"Jack has a case of the sniffles, so Mona forbid us to take him out in the night air. I think she's still skeptical about my having actually attended medical school. Whatever the reason, it was easier to give in than to argue about it with her." Desi stepped closer to Harry and patted her on the chest. The day Mona stopped giving Harry a hard time would be the day she stopped drawing breath.

"Let me go light my coals. Why don't you keep Mimi company for a bit, Desi?"

With Jolly's back to her, Mimi took the opportunity to breathe deeply. *You three calm down in there and I won't have to get rough with you and lay off the chocolate tonight*, she mentally chastised the three active little bodies under her hands.

"Since I'm our resident grill master let me help," offered Harry.

"Then your resident art master's probably interested in seeing some of my wife's work." Jolly looked back at Mimi with a smile.

"Mimi, this is beautiful." Desi stood in the middle of the room and spun slowly in a circle. The young artist had created a wonderland that would be just as pleasing when the triplets turned twenty. "I'm sorry, we've been here admiring your work and I haven't asked you how are you doing?" Desi remembered her manners and turned her attention back to Mimi.

"Someone seems to be sitting on all of my vital organs, but aside from that I'm great, and thank you for your compliment. I wish it was done, but I can't stand being on my feet for more than ten minutes at a time anymore. Hell sitting up is taking its toll." She moved around in the chair trying to find a more comfortable spot then just gave up. "Look at what my sweetie finished today."

Desi looked at the beds and figured if the children Mimi was caring tapped into just half the talent their parents had combined, they'd be prodigies. "What a wonderful place to raise children." Her fingers ran over the wood finding it smooth and warm.

"Want to go and make sure our other halves haven't set the yard on fire?" Not that Mimi didn't enjoy Desi's company, but she had the sudden desire to be near Jolly. It felt like something just popped and gave way when Mimi stood. Her next statement was to thank Desi again for her kind words on the room, but the warm gush of fluid down her legs gripped her with fear. "Desi, could you run and get Jolly for me?" Mimi's question finished in a whisper as her world turned black.

Desi turned around in time to see Mimi crumple to the floor. The comfortable shoes Jolly had

placed on her feet just moments before were covered in blood. It seemed surreal since the request the blonde had just uttered had been said so calmly. Not familiar with the layout of the house, Desi stepped into the hallway and screamed, "Harry! Jolly!" The sound of running feet let her go back and kneel at Mimi's head.

When the architect who reminded Desi so much of her beloved Harry turned the corner the sound she made reminded her of a wounded animal. The sight of Mimi lying in her own blood was enough to make even Harry blanch a little.

"Mimi, what's wrong?" Jolly looked at Desi with tears streaming down her face. "What happened?"

"It doesn't matter now, Jolly." Harry placed the unconscious woman on her back and lifted her knees. One quick look under the hem of the dress Mimi had on confirmed she was still hemorrhaging. "I need you to keep it together and help me. Do you understand?" Jolly nodded but she looked lost. "Desi, get Ellie and Sam on the phone. Tell them I'll meet them in the hospital in the first OR I can book, so tell them not to dawdle."

"It's too soon," said Jolly softly.

"Buddy, I don't want to scare you but we need to get Mimi to the hospital now. Come on, Jolly, grab her feet. We don't have time to wait on an ambulance."

"I can't lose her."

"Don't talk like that, Jolly. Just do what Harry says, she'll be fine." The ringing in her ear stopped and Ellie's voice filled Mimi's ear.

"Lift her legs, Jolly. Come on dammit, don't make me slap you." Harry didn't mean to sound harsh but there was so little time before Jolly's world came crashing in around her. Losing a child was hard for any couple but there was a real possibility the architect would lose everything she loved that night.

"Ellie, it's Desi. Listen very carefully you have to meet Harry at the hospital now. We're at the Andolini's and something's gone wrong with Mimi." She tried to keep up as the two tall women carried the blonde down the hall. Mimi had yet to regain consciousness and it was starting to worry her.

"Desi, talk to me and tell me exactly what's going on." Ellie slipped her shoes back on and searched for her sweat pants. They had just gotten back from the hospital and she was getting ready to jump in the shower.

"Ellie, it's Harry. She collapsed and she's bleeding. I'm not familiar enough with these things but from what I remember of my rotation in med school, I'd have to say her water broke. There was a clear fluid mixed in with the blood. How far along is she?"

"Just barely seven months. I don't know until I see her but we might not be able to stop the labor if that's true."

"I think you have to worry about her first, and the kids will work themselves out. Get going and I'll try to have everything ready for when you two get there." Harry drove like she was trying to outrun death down the quiet streets. Behind her and Desi, Jolly held her partner begging her to wake up.

"Please, Mimi, you can't do this to me. You can't leave me all alone." She could feel the seat of Harry's SUV getting soaked beneath her and with the puddle slowly went Mimi's life force.

It was a nightmare when they reached the Emergency Room and they wheeled Mimi away from Jolly into a trauma room. Desi took her by the hand and led her to the waiting area wishing they were at Charity rather than the posh interior of Mercy. If they were at the state hospital there might be a chance of getting comfort from the charge nurse Sally.

"Don't worry, Jolly, Harry's not going to let anything happen to her if it's in her power, and Ellie and Sam should be here any minute. Do you want me to call anyone and tell them what happened?"

"I should call her father and my cousin Tim and his wife."

Desi put her hand on a broad shoulder and rubbed comforting circles along the cotton fabric. "Just give me the number and I'll call for you." The group she called almost beat Desi's doctors to the door and looked just as sick as Jolly.

"Mona, listen we might be gone for awhile, there's been an emergency." Desi explained what had happened and smiled when Mona offered to pray for Mimi and Jolly for the rest of the night.

"Jolly," Harry's voice broke through the tension in the waiting room just long enough to ratchet it up another couple of notches when they saw the grim look on her face. "Ellie and Sam wanted me to come out and tell you they're taking her into surgery. I'll let them explain exactly what happened, but she was bleeding pretty severely and they have no choice but to go in and fix the problem." The nurse behind Harry handed Jolly a clip board and pointed to the places she had to sign.

"But she's going to be all right, isn't she?"

"It's too soon to tell, buddy. We just have to wait." Harry's eyes filled along with Jolly's at the thought of this happening to her. "She's young and I'm sure she'll pull through. Mimi has a lot to live for."

They all sat and waited for news, Pam sat between Jolly and Tim holding both their hands. Doing so made her realize how similar they were to each other. Each had long elegant fingers; the only difference was the calluses on Jolly's. It made her wonder if Jolly and Mimi's children would inherit Francois Andolini's hands as well. Would they even live out the night for any of

them to find out?

"Jolly," Sam's presence in the doorway was like a cold hand ripping Jolly's chest open. She wasn't a fearful person by nature but all this was scaring the shit out of her. It had been over three hours since Mimi had disappeared behind the steel doors of the Emergency Room.

"How is she? Can I see her?"

Sam moved and sat on the other side of Jolly and put her hand on her shoulder when Tim moved to another seat. "Something caused the wall of Mimi's uterus to rip, which sometimes happens in cases of multiples. What doesn't usually happen though is the rip to be sever enough to bleed like an artery wound, but that's what happened and that's why all the blood."

"Why wouldn't she wake up?"

"It might have been her body's way of dealing with the pain, but it's a good thing it happened since it slowed the blood loss some. The thing about what happened, Jolly, is we had to go ahead and deliver the babies so we could get to where we could repair the damage. Congratulations, it's a girl three times over." There wasn't a dry eye in the room as Jolly just bent over and buried her face in her hands. She had always imagined finding this out to be a time of happiness not because it served the purpose of saving their mother's life.

"How are they?"

"They're small, really small so don't get too alarmed when you see them. I wish I could give you better news but we'll have to wait at least forty-eight hours until I can give you more definitive answers. All four of your girls are in critical condition, but they're fighters so don't give up hope."

"Can I see Mimi?"

"Ellie's finishing up now, but I promise as soon as she gets into recovery you'll be her first visitor. If you want though, there are three other ladies who can't wait to meet you." Sam didn't want to force her but more than anything she wanted Jolly to agree since, like Mimi, the babies might not live out the night. The suffering woman deserved to see them while they were still breathing. In the end it might be the only happy memory she would have.

The staff lent Jolly a pair of scrubs so she could strip off the blood stained clothes she was wearing. In the neonatal unit three incubators sat side-by-side holding the only patients they had in the ward for the moment. The staff had washed her hands until they stung but it was so Jolly could touch the paper-thin looking skin.

She moved closer and looked at the first baby wearing a pink sock looking thing on her head and socks on her feet. The tiny waif was lying on her stomach looking like she was panting for breath. Jolly stuck her hands in the holes along the side and put her finger on the baby's foot noticing the small appendage was almost three times smaller than her digit. She pulled the cap

off and laughed through her tears when she saw the little wisps of blonde almost white hair. It was the same color of the baby pictures Mimi had at home of herself.

"Hey, little one, you have to hang in there and get bigger so your mama won't be worried. She painted a room for you at home that I can't wait for you to see. She'd be here but she's busy getting better herself, so don't be mad at her. Mama loves you very much."

Jolly moved to the next child and repeated the talk. The tears fell harder when she found the same hair and looks of the first baby. The first two she thought had to be the identical twins. The last child had slightly darker hair, but still the blonde locks of her mother. Their eyes had been taped shut so Jolly would have to wait to see if her dream of what they would look like had come to pass.

"Come on, Jolly, Mimi's done and we want you to go in and talk to her. I believe she'll hear you, and we need to get her back from the place she's gone off to, understand?" Ellie held her hand and walked the gentle giant to recovery. Her partner looked small lying on the stretcher with a multitude of tubes sticking out of various parts of her body. The problem they would be fighting in the next couple of days was the tremendous amount of blood Mimi had lost, and making sure there was no other bleeding to complicate things further.

Jolly sat next to the bed and waited until she was sure words would come out of her mouth before she moved closer. Mimi looked so fragile just laying there her chest barely moving. When she picked up her hand it felt cold and lifeless so Jolly pulled it under the blanket.

"Hey you have to stay warm. We have a whole bunch of girls in the next room who are going to need you and I can't have you getting sick. You did it, baby. We have three beautiful girls who look just like you. I wish I would've made a bet with you now since I told you if given a choice they would want to take after you."

The soft-spoken woman used her free hand to wipe her face and running nose before continuing. Jolly often spent her mornings talking to a very asleep Mimi so this was no different. "Mimi, I want you to concentrate on getting better. I maybe didn't tell you enough before now, but I love you more than anything or anyone else in my life. There are so many promises I have yet to make and keep to you, so I would hate for you to miss that. The other thing too is we have three girls to name, and I swear if you don't wake up soon I'm putting Curly, Larry and Moe on the birth certificates."

No one came up to bother her as Jolly sat in the same position holding Mimi's hand for over four hours. She spoke of things they needed for the house, and vacations they had gone on together before they'd become a couple. With each passing minute the dread in her heart grew. Jolly was no doctor, but four hours was more than plenty for her partner to have opened her eyes.

"Please, Mimi. I need you to open those pretty green eyes for me. I need to tell you some more stuff, or you can wake up and tell me to shut the hell up." On the other side of the bed a nurse moved the blanket down to expose Mimi's arm for the blood pressure cuff. The red had seeped as high as Mimi's thighs and with a quick push of an alarm button the medical team came rushing

back in. The bleeding had started again.

"What's happening?" Jolly's cries were lost on the rushing professionals pushing Mimi away from her again. Harry appeared next to her again now wearing the same outfit Jolly had on, and led her back to the anxious family. "Where are they taking her?"

"The bleedings started again, so she's headed back to surgery." In all her studies and practice of medicine, Harry wished there was some magic line someone would come up with that would make situations like this more tolerable for the families left in these sterile looking rooms to wait.

"I'm going to lose her, aren't I? She was just saying how she couldn't wait for this day to come so I could hug her again, and she could hold those babies and rock them. That's not going to happen is it?"

"You can't give up on her so fast, my friend. This is a time to have faith in Mimi and her will to stay with you. If she doesn't, it won't be for her lack of trying. When you came in with your accident and I got to meet her, Mimi touched me in a way people seldom do. The life she exudes explained a lot about the person who painted that canvas hanging in my house. I can't imagine someone like that just quitting so early in the game that is her life."

Desi handed both of them a cup of coffee before taking a seat next to Harry. Her feet were killing her and her back hurt, but like everyone else who had been there since the beginning, she didn't want to leave Jolly alone. Almost like her partner had felt her discomfort Harry took her hand and offered a shoulder for her to rest her head on.

"My love, you've got to be heading home." She pressed a finger to pouting lips before Desi got started and talked her into staying. "I can see those grimaces you keep making, it means your back hurts and I'm not taking any chances with you. Please don't ask me that, especially not tonight." The voice was a low whisper but Desi heard the fear in them. What was happening to Mimi and Jolly could just as easily be them.

"I can't leave until I know she's ok, honey. Please don't ask that of me. I know I've only spoken to Mimi a couple of times, but I like her and Jolly. They need as much support as they can get right now."

"We can stay, but you're lying down for a little while. Come on, I'll go with you." Harry explained to Pam and Tim where she was taking Desi not wanting to bother Jolly anymore. The architect was sitting with her eyes glued to the doorway Sam had come out of earlier. "I'll have the surgery nurse keep me informed and as soon as I hear anything, I'll come out and tell you all. Just have them come and get me if you need something before that."

"Thank you, Dr. Basantes," said Pam.

"Please call me Harry. I know this has been a hectic night, but this is my wife Desi." Introductions were made and they watched as Harry led Desi to one of the doctor on call rooms.

"Jolly?" Ricky stood up and put his arm around his daughter-in-law's shoulders. "Stop beating yourself up over this, Jolly. You don't have to answer me but I can tell you are. Sometimes stuff just happens but like that young doctor said, you've got to have faith in Mimi. She loves you and she'll fight her way back."

"Thanks, Ricky, and I know." It was more to appease him than herself, but Jolly didn't feel like talking to anyone.

It took another three hours and twenty pints of blood but they stabilized Mimi as much as they could after stopping the bleeding. The staff let Jolly sit with her a little while longer before she was moved to the Intensive Care Unit where visitation was a little more strict. Jolly walked off by alone and waved her family off when they tried to follow. "I just need some time alone. Don't worry I'll be fine."

The chapel was on the second floor and because of the early hour it was empty. At any other time Jolly would have taken time to appreciate the old pine pews and woodwork someone had put into the space. Now all she could was sit and cry into her hands wishing she had the day to do over again.

Two floors above her Mimi tried to find a way out of the darkness. She kept calling to Jolly but there was no answer and she could've have sworn she had heard her voice earlier. The only answer was to sleep until Jolly came back so she surrendered further into the darkness.

[Concluded in Chapter 6 \(Conclusion\)](#)

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~ A Place To Dance ~

by Ali Vali

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A Place To Dance

by
Ali Vali

Chapter 6 (Conclusion)

>"Honey, it's been a week, you need to go home and get some sleep. I'm here and so is Ricky, if anything happens we promise to call you." Sophia spoke softly as she held her daughter's hand. The usually easy going Jolly looked tense and there were deep circles around the blue eyes.

For the past week Jolly hadn't left the hospital at all. The only reason she wasn't wearing the same clothes was because Sophia and Pam were taking care of her while Jolly took care of Mimi. The only time she left the Intensive Care Unit was to visit the babies who had gone through their own tribulations. So far the smallest of them had stopped breathing twice and the other two were fighting severe infections in their underdeveloped lungs. The large amount of medication they were on, and the fight to stay alive wasn't helping in their goal to gain weight.

One of the only times Jolly showed any life was when one of the nurses suggested they give Mimi the medication to stop milk production. Jolly remembered well their talk the night this nightmare had begun, but she was determined to let Mimi make the decision not someone not wanting to be bothered with the task of pumping. The problem was, no amount of talking, hand holding or care from Jolly had gotten Mimi to wake up.

"It could be a year and I'll still be sitting here waiting. She isn't going to wake up without me being here for her to see. I don't want her to feel like she's alone."

"Mimi knows how you feel about her, and I'm sure she wouldn't want you to get sick from pushing yourself too far."

Jolly ran her hands up and down the tops of her legs in an effort to release some anxiety. When they made her leave Mimi's side she felt like crawling out of her skin. "Can we just drop this discussion? There isn't a damn thing you're going to tell me that'll make me leave." She stood up and released a frustrated sigh. "I'm sorry for being so gruff, but I feel so helpless. My life's always been about order. I draw plans other people follow and in the end I get the results I intended. That's so much easier than this."

"Jolly, I wish there was some wise thing I could say right now, but life isn't that easy. It's unfair as hell, isn't it?"

A mirthless laugh forced its way out of Jolly's chest. "You know what all this has made me think about?"

Sophia watched as Jolly walked another couple of miles pacing the room. "What's that?"

"My father."

It was Sophia's turn to let out the same kind of laugh. "Why ever would you do that?"

"You're right, life's not fair and he's the prime example of that isn't he? I mean he's spent his existence bullying his employees, those he supposedly loves and turning his back on anyone who doesn't march to his tune. What's all that gotten him? Nothing's ever happened to him that's cut him to his very soul has it? Mimi on the other hand is the epitome of goodness and look where she is now."

"I don't know, honey. Losing you out of his life hurt more than he'll ever admit."

Jolly spun on her feet and looked at her mother not believing what she'd just said. "Yeah right."

"Don't you ever sit and think why he pushed you harder than all the others?"

"Because my siblings are a pack of goddamn sheep. I'm sorry, but you know it's true."

The older woman patted the hard plastic chair beside her to encourage Jolly to sit. "I know, but when we started having children you were, in his eyes, the most like him." A snort from Jolly made Sophia smile. "Jolly, you've done with your life everything you wanted to, haven't you?"

"I guess." Jolly went willingly when her mother pulled her closer so her head was on her shoulder. Taking advantage of their position Sophia ran her fingers through the thick dark hair.

"So has he. Granted you went in a different direction, but neither of you are ones to have your life dictated. He fought with you yes, but he admired your tenacity. If he ever gets over his pride you might find a person you can like. So I believe he has suffered some, and it came from losing you."

"How can you still defend him?" Jolly asked stifling a yawn.

"It'd be easy to hate your father, but I'm not wasting time on that anymore. I don't think of what I said as defending him either. I just don't want you to let the past and your anger over it rob you of any relationship, even if it's with your father. Go on, close your eyes and get some rest."

Jolly's laugh this time sounded almost normal. "You're giving up on getting me to go home?"

"I don't want to rob you out of seeing Mimi well again either."

"Thanks, mama."

Their talks continued for the next week and provided for Jolly the only high points to her day. Sophia told her stories about her father François that Jolly had either not heard or had forgotten. In her time sitting at Mimi's bedside Jolly repeated them all as she put lotion on her partner's dry skin, or just held her hand. There had been no other bleeding or emergencies but Mimi showed no improvement.

"You should see Moe, baby. She's gained an ounce this week and she fans her fingers out when I touch the bottoms of her feet. She must've inherited the Mulle ticklish gene."

"Jolly?" One of the nurses stood in the doorway hating she had to interrupt. Ellie had told them to give Jolly more time with Mimi, but there had to be breaks. Not so much for a patient like Mimi, but for people like Jolly. There was no sense in the caregiver ending up in the hospital along side their loved one. "Time's up, darlin'. Go take a nap and get some lunch then we'll sneak you back in."

Ricky was stretched out on the small sofa in the waiting room sleeping when Jolly stepped out. The thought of waking him to go and see the kids occurred to her but she decided to let him sleep awhile longer. With her hands flat against the wall Jolly tried to stretch the muscles in her back when she felt two small hands press against her.

"Jolly?"

The voice was one she hadn't heard in over a year, and in reality, it was one Jolly had hoped never to hear again. Maybe her mother was right about her being like her father since she was able to carry a grudge so well. "What do you want?"

"I heard about what happened and I wanted to come and see you."

Jolly turned around if only to reclaim her personal space and looked at Christina with cold eyes. "For what, to gloat?"

"Please, Jolly, I want to help. I heard Mimi isn't getting any better and I thought you might need help with your kids. Or maybe you just need a shoulder to lean on once you have to start making the tough decisions."

"Get out."

"Don't be so stubborn, I made mistakes but I'm here to prove to you things can be different between us. I still love you. I want us to be able to depend on one another. You need me, Jolly."

"I said get the hell out of here." Jolly's voice stayed low but it was enough to wake Ricky, but he stayed where he was for the moment.

"Honey, she could be like this for years and then what? You're going to just live in this room and hope she wakes up and picks up where you two left off. You have to be realistic here, you have to be..." Christina stopped talking when a large hand wrapped around her throat and squeezed.

"I warned you didn't I? I told you to get out. You are fucking something else, lady. My wife's in there and you think it's a good time to come here and restake your claim." With each word Jolly squeezed harder until the blonde was hitting her arm in an effort to make her let go.

"You have to let her go, Jolly." Harry spoke soothingly but tried to pry the architect's hands off

the woman's throat. "Let go, Jolly."

"God, what about you ever attracted me? You're nothing but a fucking ghoul." Christina was turning red and her blows were becoming lighter as she became more light headed, but still Jolly wouldn't release her. It was as if she didn't realize what she was doing.

"Jolly!" Harry screamed. When she did two things happened, Ricky sat up and Jolly punched Harry connecting with her eye.

"Harry, what are you doing here?" The sight of Harry on the floor was as confusing to Jolly as why Christina was gasping for air.

"Getting a black eye would be my first answer. What in the hell were you doing?" Harry pushed Christina's head down after escorting her to a chair. "You could've really hurt her."

"I don't know. She started talking about how I had to let Mimi go and forget about her and something snapped."

Ricky came up behind Jolly and put his arm around her shoulders pushing her toward the door. "Come on, let's go get a soda or something." She started walking not really caring where she was headed. "As for you, bitch, stay the hell away from my family. You come in here and talk about my kid like she's a piece of celery again, and I swear I'll finish you off myself. Consequences be damned."

They sat together in the cafeteria with two cups of coffee and silence between them. It was Ricky who finally couldn't take it anymore. "Want to talk about it?"

"No, not really." Jolly stirred the contents of the cup slowly as if it was the only thing she was interested in doing with it because she hadn't taken a sip yet. "You should head home and get some sleep. I appreciate you spending the night last night, but I can handle this."

"You look like shit, and you've lost more weight than is healthy in the last two weeks, so I don't think you're handling this too well at all. You've got to let some of us in eventually, don't you think?"

The milky spoon finally stopped and was put on the table. "What do you want from me? For me to say we should all hold hands around the bed and tell Mimi it's ok for her to die? Well fuck you if that's what you want, because it's not ok with me. I want my wife back. I want us to go home and raise our girls and be happy. Is that too fucking much to ask?"

All the conversations around them just stopped as Jolly's voice got louder. Without realizing it she was screaming at Ricky, taking every bit of frustration she felt on the one person in the world who loved Mimi almost as much as she did. "I don't want that at all, I just wanted you to let some of that out. It's been building for sixteen days and I didn't want it to cut you off at the knees if you kept it all inside."

"God, Ricky, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean any of that, I know you love Mimi."

"Kid, I said don't worry about it. Hard as it may be to believe, I have heard the word fuck before, though never with such passion. What I want is for you to keep talking to her and bring her back. You're the only one of us who can. I'm looking forward to that." His hand moved across the table and covered Jolly's.

"You miss her huh?"

"Yeah, I miss her, but what I'm waiting for is her reaction when she sees those nametags on the incubators. She's going to get madder at that than finding out Christina was here trying to lure you away."

Jolly laughed until the tears started running down her cheeks and she couldn't stop. The waiting was starting to get to her and her fear was it would break her if Mimi didn't come around soon. "Let it all out, Jolly. Trust me, it'll make you feel better."

She cried until there was no emotion left, only the welcomed relief of exhaustion. Harry came in and found Jolly and Ricky both looking drained. "Can I sit?"

"Come to have me arrested for attacking blondes?" joked Jolly.

"After you left she told me you attacked her for no reason and was thinking about pressing charges against you."

Jolly shook off some of her tiredness and pointed her finger at Harry. "That's a lie, she was..."

With both hands up to stop the denial, Harry started laughing. "I didn't say I bought it, just that she said it."

"What changed your mind, doc?" asked Ricky.

"When she wanted to discuss her options over lunch if I was available. If not we could make it dinner if I wanted to give her my phone number. I was sorely tempted to do just that and have Desi talk to her when she called the house. She's tiny but even I'm afraid of her in the middle of a pregnancy."

"She asked you out?" Jolly wasn't surprised but if Christina wanted to stalk someone else for a while until Mimi was better, more power to her. If only it wasn't Harry.

"Why? You think I'm bad looking or something?"

"No but trust me you want to stay away from this one, Harry. She's cute but she's a bit of a physco."

"I was just kidding. I stay away from all of them no matter how good looking they are or aren't."

Desi is the girl for me, always has been. I have a feeling Christina just found that out not only about me but you as well." Harry was glad to see a smile on Jolly's face. "Speaking of small, demanding blondes, mine asked me to come down here and throw my weight around and do something to make you feel better. How would you like to take a nap?"

"Maybe after I go in and see Mimi again. The nurses promised I could go back in after I got some lunch. I'd rather not miss spending time with her."

"How about I show you where I want you to take a nap and if you don't want to, we'll go with your plan? Deal?" She held out her hand and waited for Jolly to take it.

"Deal."

While Jolly was out the nurses had moved Mimi over the bed a little to make room for Jolly. The blankets were turned on one side and another pillow had been placed on the bed. "Want to take me up on my offer?" asked Harry.

"I won't hurt her getting up there?"

"In my medical opinion I think you can only do her good by getting up there. Maybe what Mimi needs is to feel you as well as hear your voice? It might remind her of what's she's missing while she's taking this long nap of hers."

Not needing to be told twice Jolly slipped her shoes off and climbed into the bed as gently as she could. "Is it ok for me to put my arm around her?"

"I think she'd like that so go for it. If you need anything just press the nurse call button behind you. If not sweet dreams and stay as long as you like. A full eight hours is what the doctor's ordering."

"Thanks, Harry, and I'm sorry about your eye."

"You can make it up to me by getting some sleep." The lights were dimmed when Harry stepped out and before she'd made it out of the ward Jolly was asleep. But not before pressing a kiss to Mimi's temple and enjoying the feel of her against her body.

"I love you."

The soft breath against her neck was what woke Jolly up about five hours later. She stretched slightly and pressed Mimi closer to her. It was nice to finally be this close again and feel Mimi's head tucked against her shoulder. In their time together it didn't matter what position they went to sleep in, this was how they always woke up together.

"You know, sweetheart, you'd better start thinking about opening your eyes. You're missing out on a lot here, and if you're not careful Christina's going to show up and raise your kids. Can you believe she showed up here telling me she wanted to help with the girls and make me feel

better?"

Jolly laughed as she leaned back a little so she could run a finger along Mimi's bottom lip. "I think it would've hurt more if I'd told her she hasn't crossed my mind once after seeing you naked."

"More than what?" The voice sounded like it hadn't been used in days and Mimi tried to clear her throat before opening her eyes. It died in a squeak when Jolly squeezed Mimi so hard she lifted her off the bed.

"I knew you were going to be ok." Tears ran down Jolly's cheeks when she felt Mimi lift her hand and rub the back of her neck. "Thank you for coming back."

"I was never gone, love. I've just had the hardest time getting my eyes to open." Even with the dim lighting in the room Mimi blinked rapidly until her eyes adjusted. "I missed seeing you, so I guess it was time to wake up."

"I've been talking to you, did you hear me?"

"I kept calling for you in my dream, but you never answered me, but knowing you, you're never too far away so I kept looking." Her hands went from the back of Jolly's neck to her midsection that wasn't completely flat, but now was missing the three people who had stretched it to the limit. "We lost them? Oh, Jolly, I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened."

"No, sweetheart, they're small but they're fighters like their mama. Three perfect little girls."

"All girls?"

"All beautiful blonde girls who get bigger and more gorgeous everyday. You did good, honey." Jolly wiped the tears from Mimi's face and laughed. Every bad thought and fear she'd experienced in the last couple of weeks just faded from her mind.

Mimi laughed with her and ran her hand over Jolly's face into her hair. "No brunettes?"

"Not yet, but my hair was fairly light for about a year so you still have a shot. Not that I'm not enjoying this but let me go and get them to call Ellie."

"Not yet." Mimi's hands moved again mapping along Jolly's body like they were hungry to touch her. "Would you kiss me first?"

"You never have to ask me that, love. Of course I will."

"Even if I have nuclear strength morning breath?"

"Even then." Jolly rolled Mimi onto her back and leaned over her and started on her forehead. As her lips touched now responsive lips, Jolly had a feeling this was what it felt like to win the

lottery.

"I love you so much, and I'm sorry I worried you. I wanted this to be so different." Mimi put her hand on Jolly's chest over her heart.

"We're here and we're fine. All five of us are so you've got nothing to be sorry about."

"Good, now answer my question." Mimi demanded as she pinched Jolly on the arm.

"What question?"

"It would've hurt the supreme bitch more than what?"

"Before I answer that, I should let you know Christina's probably going to try and sue us for everything including the kids."

"Jolly, I would rather be talking about them anyway so just tell me."

Taking a deep breath Jolly forged on, "She told me it was time to let you go and move on, or in with her. My reaction to that was to try and choke the life out of her."

"Figuratively or literally?"

"That would be literally."

"Even if it costs us everything it's worth the price of admission."

Ellie and Sam checked her from head to foot before calling Jolly back into the room. Both of them were scratching their heads in confusion. "You're sort of an anomaly, Mimi. There was no explanation as to why you were unconscious for so long, and there's no explanation as to why you woke up," said Ellie.

"Some woman was trying to put the moves on Jolly so I had no choice." The group laughed and looked toward the blushing brunette holding Mimi's hand. "Can I go and see our daughters?"

"About that. You do realize they're going to have to hit four pounds before you can take them home. Until then we want you to come as often as you want so they'll know you. We've been giving them breast milk and they're improving rapidly, so hopefully they'll be in that great room Desi told us about before too long." Sam rocked on her heels and waited for the objections that usually came in similar situations.

"Whenever I want, I can see them?" Mimi looked like she too was ready to do battle.

"Day or night, sweetie. The more interaction you have with them, the better they'll do," answered

Ellie.

"I want to see them now."

A nurse walked in pushing a wheelchair at Mimi's request. "We figured, so let's go get you ready." Sam unfastened all the monitors and leads not necessary since they were moving her to a private room closer to the children after the visit. "Besides, we got a look at Harry heading into surgery, I sure don't want to be the one to piss Jolly off by not making you happy. Harry looked like she'd been mauled."

"Jolly, what'd you do?" Mimi's question made Jolly take a small step away from her.

"It was an accident."

"Spill it, Andolini."

To the amusement of the two physicians Jolly's blush got darker. "I accidentally punched her in the eye."

"Jolly! Good God, what for?"

"I was busy strangling Christina when Harry snuck up on me. It's not like I meant to do it, and I did apologize."

Mimi shook her head and pointed an index finger at her partner. "We'll talk about this later."

"I told you you'd get in trouble," Sam taunted Jolly.

"Shut up."

"Sam, do not make me turn around," threatened Ellie. She pushed Mimi out of the room toward the elevators. "You're worse than a two year old."

"Wait." All three women stopped laughing and looked to Jolly to see what the problem was. "In all the excitement I forgot to go out and tell your father."

"Daddy's here?"

"He's like old faithful here," Sam pointed to Jolly. "The only time I think I saw him leave was when he was going home to get stuff for Jolly."

"How long was I out exactly?"

"A little over two weeks," replied Ellie.

"Oh, Jolly, I am so sorry." Mimi started crying again at the thought of how out of her mind she

would have been had it be Jolly lying there. "I never meant to hurt you like that."

Jolly knelt next to the wheelchair and held Mimi as well as she could. "All that matters to me is you're all right. We just worried so much because we love you so much, but just like always you never let me down. You fought your way back to me and our babies are going to do the same. They're yours so it's in their makeup to be beautiful and gutsy."

"Let's go get daddy and see the girls."

He was standing looking at the painting over the sofa not really thinking about anything when the caravan stopped in the hallway. "Daddy." Ricky spun around and just as quickly his knees echoed loudly when they hit the tile floor. "Come on, daddy, let's go see your granddaughters." Mimi held her hand out trying to not let the emotions of seeing both her father and Jolly so vulnerable.

Ellie and Sam smiled at each other as they walked behind the two tall protectors holding Mimi's hands looked down at her every so often as if convince themselves she was really awake. By the time they walked into where they were keeping the babies no one had dry eyes when they watched Mimi look at each one of the small creatures in turn. The two doctors had no doubt the three angels would have a wonderful life at the knee of Jolly and her special partner.

"They look so much like you when you were born," said Ricky holding his hands close together. "Only smaller."

The pleading face turned toward Ellie and Sam was hard to resist but Mimi would have to wait at least a week before they could take them out and let her hold them. "Give them a little time to get stronger then we promise you never have to put them down if you don't want to," said Sam.

Jolly helped her to stand and showed her where to reach in so Mimi could touch them. "Hey, guys, this is the lady I've been telling you about. Say hello to your mama." The first little head moved a little as if to better hear the voice that spoke to her all the time. "Didn't I promise she'd be ok?"

"They're so beautiful, and you're so dead if you really named them Larry, Moe and Curly." Mimi turned and glared at Jolly with tears in her eyes when she saw the pink nametags taped to each incubator.

"Even I'm not that brave, sweetheart. You carried them so that means you get to name them. All these girls in here have been more than persistent that I come up with some names but I couldn't do it without you." Jolly pulled her arm tighter around Mimi's waist and kissed the top of her head.

"I want us to do it together, baby." Mimi pulled off the first name tag and looked inside to the smallest baby, one of the twins. "I sat and thought about this for months, and like I told you in the beginning, I wanted to give you something of your grandfather, your cousin, you and me all wrapped up in one little bundle. It would've never crossed my mind I'd get three bundles to give

you."

"You always do things different from everyone else, but that is the most unique thing about you." Jolly held her tight so that there was no pressure on Mimi's stitches.

"I hope this little girl inherits Francois's strength and perseverance, so what do you think of Francis?"

"I love it."

Mimi moved to the next baby, the other twin with the white blonde hair. "I'm thinking this little girl will steal your heart every time she bats her eyes at you. It'll be my job to teach them how sweet you are." She turned and ran her hand over the little back, loving how soft the skin was. "Daddy's right, you may never survive into their teens since these two little ones look so much like me."

"Then it's only fair she share a little of her mama, and they don't need any lessons on how to play me. You do that well enough already." Jolly turned Mimi's head and kissed her. "How does Laine sound, Madeline Laine Andolini?"

"I didn't mean for you to name her for me."

"Madeline, if she grows up to be like you, how lucky would we be?"

"Then I get to name Moe over there." Mimi pulled off the last of the nametags the staff had put up after listening to Jolly talking to the babies. "So Jolly Lee Andolini, how about Lee?"

"Francis, Laine and Lee welcome to the world and welcome to our family."

"Ok, I can't stand it anymore. Here put these on." Ellie held out two sterile gowns and a pair of masks. "Come on, Ricky, let's give them a few minutes alone."

Not wanting to miss seeing Mimi hold her daughters for the first time, Ricky stood at the edge of the observation glass and looked on, his forehead pressed to the window. He might not have been the best father in the world but Ricky remembered the day the nurse put Mimi in his arms for the first time. In his mind he had made so many promises that day. He'd failed at keeping most of them, but making Jolly wake up to the life she was meant to lead had made up for a lot Ricky had done wrong. He waved to Mimi when she stepped up holding Lee; behind her the nurse put both Francis and Laine in Jolly's arms.

"Honey?"

Jolly looked down at the two tiny miracles in her arms and thought her lips would crack from the smile on her face. "What?"

"Why are my breasts killing me?"

"They wanted to give you something to stop the milk you're producing, and I know what you said, but I thought it should be up to you. If you want the nurse said it wouldn't take long and we can give them formula instead. Whatever you decide will be all right with me."

With careful steps Mimi sat in the rocker and waved Jolly over. "I was miserable at the time, which in most cases makes me an idiot. There's nothing I would enjoy more than to feed them. If I do I'll get to hold them and maybe they'll come home sooner."

Jolly sat across from her and played holder as Mimi held all three of them to her breasts. When she was done one of the nurses came in and changed them all before putting them back. The room they had put Mimi in allowed for everyone to be able to come and see her together and after a long afternoon of kissing and crying, the young mothers were left alone for the night. Before they got ready for bed, Jolly walked Mimi back to the nursery so she could sing each of the little girls a song to put them to sleep.

"Are you ready for all this, honey?" Mimi moved around until she was comfortable lying next to Jolly. She was glad they hadn't had to punch anyone else for trying to keep them apart for the night. After everything that had happened she could tell that Jolly wasn't quite over the trauma of it all.

"One of the things I was telling you when you were out of it, was what we'd be doing about thirty years from now. We'll be sitting out in the yard with a whole bunch of grandkids running around. Inside there'll be a whole house full of art the girls did. Since we raised them they'll give us a few pieces at a reasonable price." Mimi laughed and slapped Jolly's arm.

"They all won't be painters, goober. I bet we get at least one whittler in the bunch." With slow circles, Mimi ran her hand over Jolly's chest feeling her partner relax with the attention. "You know something?"

"What?"

"I feel so happy right now that I'm about to burst." Jolly laughed and nodded her head. "And you know what happens when I get like that don't you?"

"Yes I do, and you're in no shape to be that happy so think about something else."

"Come on, Jolly, we can talk about it can't we? You just wait until I get over all this child birthing stuff, you're in for the night of your life."

Jolly bent her head and kissed Mimi as a down payment on the promise the blonde had just made. "Lucky me."

They snuggled down for the night each thinking the same thoughts after the memories Mimi had evoked. Ellie and Sam had suspended their sex life for months, but they had more than saved up on experiences before that had happened. Mimi might have started as a novice, but with Jolly a

now willing participant to her advances, she had driven the older woman to distraction.

"Ricky, call the lumber yard and tell those idiots they delivered two by tens and I specifically asked for two by fourteens. If they don't get their asses here in an hour I'm going to have to send all these guys home, and I'm taking it out of their hides." Jolly was screaming in frustration but Ricky didn't take it personally. They had been rained out for the last couple of days that Jolly had used to fine tune a few things on the plans, and to spend time with Mimi. Time well spent, but now the work was backed up.

"Will do, boss, and since you're already pissed, I'll go ahead and tell you now that I'm leaving early."

A pair of aggravated blue eyes looked up at him from the blueprints and Ricky could have sworn Jolly had growled at him. "What in the hell for?"

Ricky twirled a nail punch in his fingers and tried not to look smug. "I've got a date tonight, so I want to go home and wash my hair. I'm taking Veronica out to dinner."

"And here I thought I was the fairy in the ointment," teased Jolly.

"Bite me."

"You better not let Mimi hear you threatening me like that, grandpa."

He stopped his twirling so he could glare back at Jolly. "I'm not the whipped one, smart ass."

A swift pinch to the back of his arm made Ricky drop the tool he was playing with. "Daddy, I'd appreciate if you didn't tell Jolly she's whipped. That's supposed to be a secret."

"Damn, girl, that hurt like hell." The grumble quickly change to a laugh when Mimi kissed his cheek.

"I tried to warn you, old man." Jolly straightened up and adjusted her tool belt. She wanted a better look at the jeans Mimi had on, or better yet, the movement of the hips in those jeans as she moved closer. "Hi, baby."

"Hey yourself. Busy?"

"Waiting on my right order of wood to get here." Jolly pulled the cap she was wearing off with an impatient tug. Appreciative eyes took in the tall body a little at a time loving the picture Jolly made. Despite the chilly weather she was wearing shorts that were a little longer than the ones she wore in the summer heat, but still showed a good bit of muscled tanned legs. Brown thick socks spilled over the top of the comfortable construction boots, and the leather tool belt hung low on Jolly's hips. "Any more delays and we'll start losing money out here."

The project was one Jolly had agreed to do on a shoestring budget so she was watching the

bottom line as much as possible without making the work suffer. It wasn't fair to Tim to share the costs of her good deed. They were repairing parts of an old retirement home near the park as well as adding a rec center for the residents. The peeling paint and worn exterior needed more work than the project had money for, but Jolly was determined to stretch every cent to bring the historically registered building back to life.

"How long before the wood gets here?" asked Mimi.

Ricky put the phone down and held up two fingers making Jolly's smile disappear. "Two fucking hours?"

"Maybe one and a half but I'd count on about two and some. No sweat, boss, we can pull all that rotten wood out of the back corner until it gets here. That way it gets done and no one goes home. I'm pretty sure we have enough materials to get that part done."

"Thanks, man." Behind her father, Mimi smiled at Jolly's choice of words. Two fucking hours is just what she had planned. "Go ahead and hand out assignments and I'll be there in a minute."

"Sure thing." Ricky laughed at the gleam in Mimi's eye. It was weird to think of his little girl sleeping with someone, but he had feeling the last thing Jolly would be doing was ripping up an rotten outer wall.

"Hey, beautiful, sorry about that. What brings you down here besides making me feel better?"

Mimi walked toward her slowly setting the bait. "I came to ask you a favor."

"Sure, what can I do for you?"

"The door to the studio is stuck and I can't get it to open."

Jolly let Ricky know where she was going before jumping in her truck to follow Mimi home. He guessed after a few years together, Jolly would learn to figure Mimi out, but today she'd been snagged as easily as a trout in a small aquarium.

"Things are going to be different now, huh?" asked one of the workers who had been with Jolly for years.

"I would definitely count on it. Why, you got a problem?" asked Ricky.

"No way, Ricky, that girl of yours is the best thing that's happened to Jolly."

Jolly's Land Cruiser, which Mimi was now driving, was parked in its usual spot but its driver was nowhere to be seen. "I didn't give her that much of a head start." Jolly was talking to herself as she reached over for her tool belt in case she needed it to fix the door. In full forward stride she turned the knob for the front door and crashed into it when she found it was locked. "What the hell, she never locks this door."

Mimi heard the muttering from the other side but ignored it wanting Jolly to work for it a little bit. Knocking came next but she still waited hoping Jolly hadn't broken her nose on the door. When the doorbell rang twice Mimi opened the door and looked at Jolly like she'd never seen her before.

"Can I help you?" The annoyed comment about to escape for having been kept waiting died on Jolly's lips when she saw Mimi had changed. "Are you here about the door?" Jolly just nodded. "Good, come with me, I actually have a little project in the bedroom for you to do first."

The blonde waited for Jolly to stop in the middle of the bedroom before saying anything else. She knew her partner was interested since she hadn't talked about going back to work. With a little experience Mimi cursed herself for not painting Jolly's mural naked so they could have moved to this part of their relationship sooner.

"Have I ever told you how hot you make me in this outfit?" The first question got the work boots to move further apart as Jolly tried to steady her stance.

"No, ma'am, you haven't."

"Oh it does. When I was growing up all my friends talked about this hunk and that hunk, but I never got it until I saw you for the first time." Mimi stepped behind Jolly as she spoke and ran her hands over the t-shirt covered back. "You look so sexy with those tools hanging around your waist, and all these muscles showing." The hands moved down to Jolly's legs making her breathing speed up.

With a quick move the button to Jolly's shorts popped open making her drop her tool belt. "You left this morning and I started to ache for you." Mimi pulled the tie of her robe open and dropped the garment on Jolly's forgotten tools. A soft growl from Jolly followed when Mimi moved away from her, but just as quickly turned into a moan when Mimi sat naked on the bed. "It made me seek out some sort of relief."

Frozen in place, Jolly watched the small hand move over the flat abdomen to one of the perfect breasts. Mimi circled the nipple with her finger until it got so hard it looked painful. "I think about you, and like the song says, I want to touch myself." The lucky finger moved to the other nipple giving it the same treatment. "Only thing is, I much rather when it's your hands on me." When the circling digit stopped and Mimi pinched and pulled her nipples Jolly almost passed out.

"Oh God."

"I think about your hands on me and it makes me want to make love." Mimi's hands went from her chest down her body. She leaned back and put both feet at the edge of the bed. Slowly, and with a surprisingly steady hand, Mimi dipped her fingers into her own wetness. Holding up the glistening digits she asked Jolly, "Does it do the same for you?"

There was no verbal answer out of Jolly. She just moved across the room and buried her face where Mimi's fingers had just been. Just a little taste was all Mimi was willing to give before she wrapped her fingers in Jolly's hair and pulled. "I want to feel you on top of me, lover. I want you to hear what you do to me."

Two of Jolly's fingers slid into Mimi's wetness but parted before touching the blonde where she desperately wanted Jolly to be touching. The move made the nub almost throb as the pleasing fingers stroked around it still not touching.

"Baby, please, just touch me." Mimi had lost control of the situation and he knew it.

"I have every intention of touching you." The fingers stopped and squeezed getting Mimi to buck up into Jolly's body. The pressure made Mimi claw at Jolly's back until she had pulled the t-shirt up enough so she could feel skin.

Jolly started her soft massage again only this time as her fingers slid down they went far enough to just reach the opening of Mimi's sex. "You're killing me, baby."

"You ready for me, Mimi?"

The question had to be a hypothetical but Mimi wasn't chancing it. "Fill me up and take what's yours." Two fingers wrenched a moan out of Mimi that Jolly felt in her bones. When her thumb covered the neglected nub, Mimi ran her nails up Jolly's back so hard it left red streaks. "Yeah, like that, baby. Don't stop."

Jolly went slow, wanting Mimi's pleasure to last, but when the blonde wrapped her legs around her waist, she gave in and gave her lover relief. Mimi's inner walls squeezed her fingers so hard at the end Jolly thought they would leave bruises. They shared a kiss and as Jolly went to sit up, she found Mimi had the strength to roll her over onto her back.

"There's something else I've been thinking about since you left this morning." Mimi stood between the booted feet and leaned over Jolly's body. She lowered the zipper on the shorts so she could slide her hand inside. "Something tells me we're on the same wavelength." Her fingers were surrounded by wet heat and Jolly's eyes looked almost pleading. "Will you charge me extra for the service call if I take a little taste?" The shorts and underwear slid down until they hit the boots.

"Free samples all day long for you," offered Jolly.

"Lucky for me I'm your only client." Mimi started with a flat tongue so she could enjoy the feel of Jolly's most intimate place. When a big hand ran through her hair as encouragement she sucked in the hard bundle and gave Jolly what she wanted. She enjoyed the way Jolly's hips came up to meet her and the way her fingers tightened on her locks the closer Jolly got.

The moans and thrusting Jolly was doing was driving Mimi insane. Her groin was aching again but she didn't want to stop until Jolly had finished. Mimi was surprised when Jolly pulled away

getting her to stop. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing's wrong, but things could be more right with one little move on your part." Jolly smiled down at her and held her hand out. "Climb up here and we'll do this together." Mimi lowered herself onto Jolly's mouth before happily returning to what she'd been doing.

"What're you thinking about?" asked Mimi softly.

"Stuck doors." Jolly looked down when she felt Mimi's face grow warm. "Madeline, after everything you did to me that day you're going to blush now?"

"It was nice wasn't it? We had just found out we were pregnant with the girls and I was so happy I wanted to find some way to show you. More than anything, Jolly, I want that part of our relationship to always be like that day. I want to know I please you."

"You're the best, sweetheart. Days like that are what make me want to quit working at about noon." Jolly kissed her forehead before relaxing back into the bed. "Though next time you should give me the opportunity to take my boots off."

"Honey, it was the boots that sparked my imagination to begin with. We had a great time, and think about how grateful that driver was when you didn't scream at him for being over an hour late with your wood."

It felt good to Jolly to just laugh again. "I would've but I was too busy blushing myself to make it sound convincing."

"You never blush for me, but you do it for other people? What made you act so out of character?"

"Your father asking me how I managed to get a hickey on my neck from fixing a door."

The heat on her chest got worse making Jolly laugh harder. "You never told me that. How'd you answer him? God, I'll never be able to look him in the eye again," whined Mimi.

"I told him you pay all my home repair service with sexual favors." A nurse cracked the door and gave them a stern look when the laughing Mimi's pinch set off got too loud.

"I feel horrible about just leaving them here all alone." Dressed in loose comfortable clothing, Mimi was set to leave the hospital after a week of recovering. She leaned back against Jolly as they both looked in on their children.

"Baby, they won't exactly be alone, and Sam and Ellie said you can come by anytime you want. I'll bring you whenever you want to come see them."

"It's just I've read how important it is for them to connect to us now. I don't want them to think we're abandoning them because they're not perfect." Mimi started crying again making Jolly wonder if she was in danger of dehydration she did it so often. Sam had explained only time and a lot of hand holding on her part would alleviate the problem, so she was taking the doctor's advice. She held Mimi and rocked her until the emotions ran their course. There was no need to say anything since Mimi wouldn't respond to words just actions. Assurance would come when her small blonde saw that she was telling the truth, and a trip to the hospital would only be a request away.

Jolly figured they would be at the hospital in the middle of the night or whenever Mimi's mothering radar would start to ping. The truth was she wouldn't mind what time it was, just as long as Laine, Francis and Lee knew how cherished they were. There was no way she was taking any chapters out of Anthony's book of parenting.

"They'll have a lifetime of connecting with us, sweetheart, and the next six weeks won't be an exception to that fact. You have to come at least once a day and feed them so they'll know you, I promise." Mimi clung to her tigher as Jolly spoke softly to her. Another new mother walked slowly to the next section of glass trying to give them their privacy. Jolly noticed the woman dividing her time between looking at her new baby and looking at them. She smiled at the woman over Mimi's head hoping she wasn't thinking of giving them a hard time.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to bother you but I just wanted to let you know my first child, Bobby was a premie and he's doing great. When I had to leave him here I felt like the worse mother in the world, like I'd failed him, but it's like they know they have to get better before they can go home." The woman stepped closer and put her hand on Mimi's shoulder. "They're tiny things, but they have a great capacity for love."

"Thank you for telling us that. How old is Bobby now?" asked Mimi.

"He's seven and a terror, so enjoy the fact they can't walk yet. He's still my baby though even after this fifth little one."

Jolly laughed and felt Mimi laugh along with her. "One more pregnancy and we'll pass you up."

"All three of those are yours?" she asked pointing to the incubators.

"Yep, all three," beamed Mimi.

"Well congratulations, and good luck."

Jolly pulled a chocolate cigar with a pink wrapper out of her breast pocket and handed it over. "Thank you."

"Just what you want to give an overweight hormonal woman, chocolate," joked the woman holding her stomach. She waved to them as she made her way back to her room peeling the wrapper off her treat.

"I still wish we could bring them home. It's so drab in here, they aren't going to get any visual stimulation." It was no time to remind Mimi the staff still had patches over the girls' eyes so Jolly wisely kept her mouth shut.

Sam and Ellie entered the ward as Mimi continued with her list of reasons they shouldn't leave the children alone in the hospital. They pair in white lab coats gave Jolly an idea that would make everyone happy if they agreed.

"Honey, did you hear me?" Jolly's blank expression said she hadn't.

"Sorry, I see our good doctors are here," she turned Mimi around to show her. "Go in with Ellie and say good bye to the girls for now."

The tall doctor stayed behind hoping to get an honest assessment on how Mimi was really doing. Leaving children in the hospital even over night was traumatizing to young parents. "Is she holding up ok?"

"No, but you and the hospital can fix that." The more Jolly thought about her formulating plan, the bigger her smile got.

Sam crossed her arms and waited for the explanation of how Mimi needed a roll away bed or something brought in to be closer to her babies. "How's that?"

Jolly pointed to the spotless beige walls and started with her pitch. "For the one place in the hospital where most people are supposed to be happy, it looks like a prison."

"Hospitals don't have money to decorate, Jolly, much less buy art. Think of the new babies as our decorations. All you have to do is look through the glass for works of art."

"True, but lucky for you, the new daughters of one of the city's most talented artists are hanging out here for the next month or so. I bet if you asked real nice she'd liven up these walls for you."

The arms stayed crossed but Sam did crack a smile. "Like I said, administration won't spend money on something like that. I've seen what Mimi's pieces go for, we can't afford her."

"How about you feed her, get her a comfortable chair to work out of and let her hold the girls whenever she wants?" Jolly had her hand out waiting for Sam to seal the deal. "It's a great opportunity that'll make us all happy."

"I think we can swing that past administration, especially when I tell them it's Mimi Mülle doing the painting."

"It's Mimi Andolini now, doc. I don't want my kids and me to have different names, so try and remember that." Mimi stepped out with Ellie and caught the last part of the conversation. "And what exactly am I painting?"

The doctor and Mimi's partner explained what they had in mind watching as Mimi's smile grew brighter and brighter. Since she was herself still recovering, Mimi was talked into starting with the half wall under the observation windows to keep her off her feet.

After the initial excitement Mimi got quiet and walked the hall slowly. Sam and Ellie were about to tell her not to worry about taking on the project if it was going to be too much for her when Jolly gave them a lesson in understanding Mimi. "Each foot she passes is one more section of art completed in her head. She gets really focused when she plans, and becomes totally absorbed when she starts. I have a feeling there'll be three new reasons who might change that now. I'll be the one she forgets about now."

"How can I forget you when you're always looking out for me?" Mimi eased her way back into the circle of Jolly's arms and exhaled into her chest. "I love the way you know me. Thanks for thinking of a way to make me not go crazy by the time this is all over. I love you, Jolly."

"I love you too, sweetheart. Come on, let's get you home to your sketchbooks."

They went home until Mimi's breasts felt like they were going to burst. Once she had fed the kids some of the staff watched in amazement as images started to appear under the wax pencil Mimi had brought with her. Before the afternoon was over, the hospital administrator took over twenty minutes to thank Mimi for her selfless act making Harry, Ellie and Sam laugh. The man was usually one big scowl and his favorite word was no, so to see him be so demonstrative and nice was a welcomed change.

In the next weeks, everyone one in the natal unit watched as Mimi added color to her outline and the three Andolini girls gained weight. The day the tape came off the small sets of eyes, with both Mimi and Jolly looking on, was the day the first section was completed Mimi was so full of energy. It was both strange and wonderful to find colors so familiar in the small faces. The twins Francis and Laine both had bright green eyes like hers and Lee had inherited Jolly's blues.

When the girls started to close in on their goal weight, the staff was almost sorry. Not that they wished the children ill, but with their departure so would the fireball Mimi. It was fun to see the faces of new big brothers and sisters when they came to visit new siblings. The fantasy world Mimi had created made them sometimes just stand in the middle of the ward's hall and stare.

There were dragons flying on the ceiling with flowers in their claws, children playing an assortment of things, bears peeking from behind multicolored trees, dinosaurs that served as slides, and in the middle, three small babies holding small hammers in their hands building a rainbow.

The hospital had arranged a dedication ceremony the day the new parents were given the go ahead to take the girls home. All that was left was for Mimi to sign her name to the mural and it would be done.

"Thanks for all this, Mimi. When you have the next batch maybe you could spruce up the lobby,"

joked Sam.

"How about if I just agree to do it no matter what. This long stay was a one shot deal." Ellie frowned and wondered if the trauma had turned Mimi off to having any other children. "Don't worry, Ellie, it's just next time I plan to be here only over night then I'm taking everyone home with me."

They drove home slowly with the new car seats securely fastened, looking forward to starting their family life without all the onlookers. Sophia and Ricky were waiting at home, anxious to get a turn holding their new granddaughters. The only sad thing Mimi had experienced was her mother not calling to congratulate them or ask about her new granddaughters, which meant Anthony hadn't called Jolly either. Before it depressed her too much, Desi had come by with her business partner Tony. The two of them had talked her into a new show before the visit was over, so she would have plenty of other things to think about to dwell on her mother. Tony reminded Mimi so much of herself it was hard to think about anything negative when he was around.

"You're sure you're ready for this?" asked Mimi when they pulled into the driveway.

"All it's going to take is about eighteen years to get them ready to leave for college, so yeah. This will be a piece of cake."

Laine was the last one to be fed that night, and like her sisters, she was rocked and sung to by Mimi until she fell asleep. When she did Mimi put her in the same bed as Francis and Lee. Until they were bigger, Mimi was planning to keep them together since they seemed to do better when they were in close proximity. Once she was convinced they were all sleeping Mimi went to join Jolly on the other rocker in the room. It was still amusing to watch Jolly when she looked at the girls. Mimi had seen more than one deep breath that ended with a big smile and a puffed up chest full of pride.

"Amazing isn't it?" asked Mimi.

"It's like Christmas every time I walk in here and see them. I love you for giving me so much."

After a long kiss, Mimi playfully pulled on Jolly's ponytail and made her an offer. "The baby monitor is setup, you want to take me to bed?"

"No."

This time the tug on Jolly's hair was a little harder. "No? You have plans to go out on the town or something?"

Jolly stood and took Mimi's hand leading her to the back of the house. "Actually I have plans on surprising you. I wanted you to have something to remember their birth by aside from the masterpiece you created, so I have a surprise for you."

"Jolly, I have you that's all I need."

"Then think of this as a place I can take you to stargaze and hold you. And since we have so much fun doing it, a place to dance."

Nestled under one of the big oaks in the yard stood Mimi's new gazebo. Jolly had left the roof just a series of beams knowing how much Mimi loved open spaces. The climbing vine she had planted, whose flowers would one day provide a dark purple tint to Mimi's paints, would eventually provide shade once it wove through the top, but for now the sky provided a good canopy. On a small plaque over the opening were three names with a date of birth. Laine, Francis and Lee Andolini, all sharing the same birthday. Mimi laughed when she saw other spaces for the names that would come after the first three. This would be a perfect place to celebrate all the birthdays in their future.

"Thank you for my wonderful life, Mimi." Jolly turned on the outside speakers and waited for Mimi to finish looking and touching some of the hand carved surfaces. While Mimi spent her days at the hospital creating something for new families to enjoy for years, Jolly had spent her time creating something for Mimi alone. If she could Jolly would spend a lifetime making things for Mimi to show her how special she was.

"Love, it's you who makes mine complete."

"Dance with me?" asked Jolly holding her arms open. There was no hesitation on Mimi's part. She wanted to be held by the woman who held her heart. It was something she had missed when standing for any amount of time had become impossible.

Mimi swayed along with Jolly praying the girls would sleep for at least a couple of hours. "I have a surprise for you too."

"You're not pregnant are you?" teased Jolly.

"Not yet, but I'm finally recovered from being pregnant and I'm really happy." Mimi ran her hands up Jolly's chest very slowly, stopping when they were linked behind the taller woman's neck where they only stayed for a moment before starting their roaming again.

"Really happy?"

"Delirious," said Mimi moving her hands to Jolly's backside.

"Gotta love happy," said Jolly as she scooped a laughing Mimi into her arms.

The soft music filtered through the night forgotten as the two lovers headed inside. Standing at the fence watching them was their neighbor, Mr. Verret. Ben still brought Mimi tomatoes and other things from his garden, only now it amused him to no end the blush his visits caused. He figured they were caused from the noises he heard coming out of her bedroom now. Ever since the architect had moved in the blinds were closed more often and his young blonde neighbor looked like someone had given her the world as a gift she was so happy.

"Dancing? Is that what they call it these days?" He said to himself as he moved the hose to the next section of garden.

Ben laughed when the dark wooden blinds shut for the night, but not before Jolly gave him a quick wave and a wink. "You're one lucky bastard, Jolly. May you both enjoy a lot of dances for years to come." The squeal from Mimi muffled by the outer bedroom wall told him they would.

The End

Comments to: terrali20@yahoo.com
