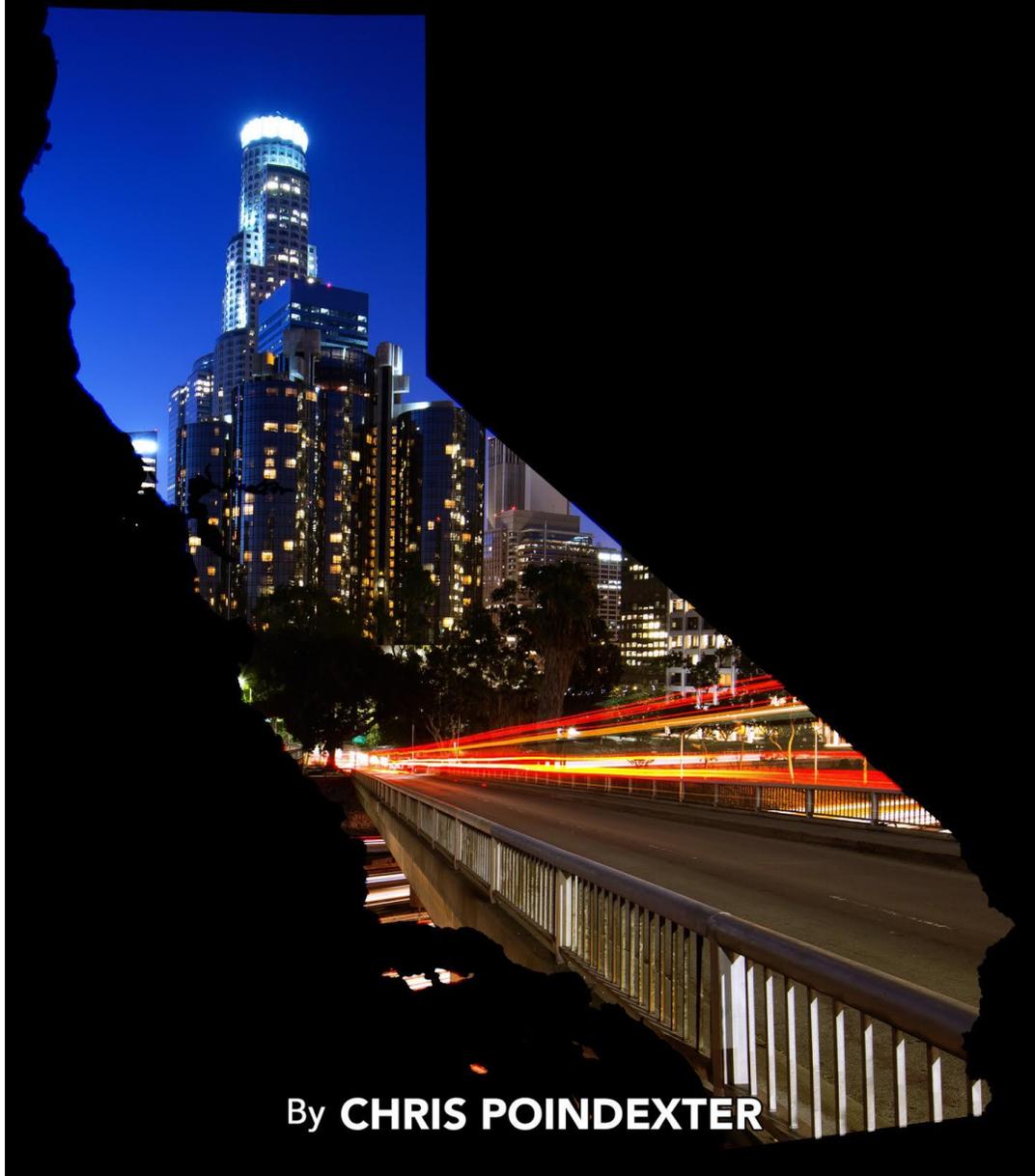


# California MADNESS



By **CHRIS POINDEXTER**

# **CALIFORNIA MADNESS**

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The Prequel to The Falling Star Recovery

Book 5 of the

Recovery and Marine Salvage, Inc. Series

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The characters and names in this story are fictional. Any resemblance to actual people is purely coincidental.

To my fantastically crazy and supportive friends Aaron,

Bill and Bruce

And my wife, the most awesome person I know.

For more about Recovery and Marine Salvage, Inc.

Go to

<http://www.recoveryandmarinesalvage.com>

There you'll find character bios, background, classified briefings and RAMS swag

Books in this series in order:

The Rogue Horse Recovery

The Blue Tango Salvage

The Eye of Horus Salvage

The Dragon Fire Recovery

The Falling Star Recovery

See pictures from the places the book is set at Instagram [@south\\_florida\\_beat](#)

The days after the Seattle job passed quickly. We discovered that the park really was quite a good place to hide from the publicity surrounding our part of that adventure. There was no newspaper in town, no surveillance cameras that Teddy didn't run and nobody even thought to look for us in a trailer park at the edge of civilization in the middle of nowhere in Florida. There was a lot of media looking for us in West Palm, so we largely avoided it.

There were a couple stories featuring one of Amber's old customers but, since she only worked with married men, no one else came forward to corroborate the story and the speculation was confined mainly to the tabloids. The news stories gradually gave way to more current scandals. A mass shooting in Colorado and the usual parade of human failure and nature's fury. Over time we fell out of the headlines.

I was really starting to relax and enjoy the break when Amber turned serious one night and told me she needed to talk to me. It concerned me a little, but Amber hadn't given me any cues there was a problem in our relationship but you never knew with her. We decided to have the big talk on the back porch over a couple beers.

"I need a favor," she began evasively.

"Okay," I said noncommittally.

"It's a big one," she warned.

Now I was worried. "What's going on?"

"I want to move to California, temporarily," she informed me. "The two of us."

Concern melted into curiosity. "That's no problem," I said. "We can live anywhere you want for as long as you like."

"But there are some conditions," she said uneasily.

The concern returned. "What conditions?"

"No company resources, no company money," she informed me.

"How are we supposed to live?"

"We get jobs."

"You mean like day jobs?"

"It's only for six months," she reminded me.

"Why?"

"That I can't answer," she said more firmly.

"You want us to leave the company behind for six months and work day jobs in California," I said with a hint of irritation. "And you can't tell me why."

"I need you to do this for me," she said, "and promise not to ask any questions. At the end of the six months, I'll answer any questions you have left. If you really love me I need you to do this."

Now I was confused as fuck. "You obviously realize this doesn't make a bit of sense."

"I get that," she said, looking me in the eye. "And I want to buy a house."

"A house...for six months."

I was about to say no damn way when it dawned on me that Amber hadn't ever asked me for anything this serious before. She wasn't kidding around; something inside her really wanted to do this strange thing.

"We have no work histories," I said. "And we'd have to work for months to save up money for a house."

"I thought about that," she agreed, and outlined her plan for me.

"Still doesn't make any sense," I observed when she had finished.

"I don't expect it to make sense, but I really need this. "

"Okay," I heard myself saying.

"Six months," she pressed. "Promise me."

"I promise," I said.

If I was confused, Deek was even more confused. "You want to go off comm?" he questioned, uncertain he heard that right. "Just regular cell phones?"

I confirmed that was right and that our new IDs wouldn't have access to company resources.

"Da fuck?" he asked.

"Look, I don't want to get into it," I maintained. The truth was I couldn't get into it because I didn't know any more than he did.

Amber did agree that we could pool our personal accounts so we'd have enough money to buy a house without financing it, which was pretty much the only way

you got one in southern California these days. What I didn't tell her, and wouldn't tell her, was about the millions I had sloshing around in overseas corporate accounts that were off the company books. I promised not to use company resources but I didn't specify which companies. It was a cheap dodge but, whatever this was, I wasn't going without a safety net.

Deek set up IDs and work histories for us and I got a job right away at a university medical center in Santa Monica. They were thrilled to get a Spanish-speaking doctor with combat medical experience for their ER. Life in America, the land of the armed. The one luxury Amber allowed was letting Deek work up an actual California medical license for me and a nursing license for Amber to go with the IDs instead of transferring our old ones. Having the agency still own us after the nuclear incident in Seattle really helped.

Q and I were sharing a beer on the back porch while I went through the packet Deek sent over. "Driver's license, credit cards, a Costco membership, insurance cards, an old military ID...how do people manage all this shit?"

"Tell me again why you're doing all this?" Q puzzled.

"Fuck if I know," I confessed. "You think Charlotte knows anything?"

"She knows something," he agreed, "but she's not talking, either."

I was going to whistle up a plane to fly us out there but Amber insisted we fly commercial. Even flying first class I forgot what a horror airline travel had become in the United States. The security, the delays, the overcrowded planes. I hated sitting in the back of the plane and had to keep reminding myself that the passengers and luggage was only 10 percent of the total weight of an airliner. It was a cramped, horrible experience and we had the best seats on the aircraft. It was more like a cattle round up than a travel experience. The endless parade of coach passengers filed passed us while we sipped champagne. One of the lucky cows got upgraded to first class but, since they weren't paying, the flight attendants pretty much ignored them.

Amber got a lot of looks, more than usual. She had gotten more press than the rest of us and many people probably felt she looked familiar but no one said anything. The more historical the Seattle incident became, the fewer people recognized us. Maybe they thought Amber reminded them of some Hollywood starlet and we were heading to the right place for that.

We watched the line of weary travelers move with agonizing slowness, clutching their bags, hoping they were in time to get enough of the precious coach class overhead bin space. Toward the end a steady line of bags came back to get checked with the associated fee. How the fuck did people take this insult and not

rise up and riot? I guessed it was like the old story of gradually turning up the heat on a frog; they were used to the horror.

I missed our fat cargo plane, I missed our huge, comfortable pilot seats, and I missed Bob's sense of humor and unblinking mechanical eyes. Above all I missed Florida already and we were still on the ground. Officially only another 5 months, 29 days and 12 hours to go. Yay. I decided to pass the time in conversation with my fellow passengers.

The guy next to me was some kind of accountant or paper pusher and he was terrified of flying.

"Relax," I told him. "Only a couple of these planes have ever crashed."

"What?" he asked, seeing me for the first time.

"The one that crashed in South America flew right into a mountain," I told him. "It's called controlled flight into terrain. Can you imagine? The sudden impact, the plane collapsing like an accordion. 157 people snuffed out, just like that," I said snapping my fingers. "Body parts everywhere. They made piles of arms and legs trying to figure out which bodies they went with."

"Drink please!" he called after the flight attendant. Amber elbowed me.

"Leave him alone," she insisted.

For her part Amber was enjoying every minute. She certainly was playing the loving wife, introducing herself as Mrs. Fatman and keeping her arm hooked in mine. If the insanity of inconvenience that modern air travel had become bothered her, she didn't show it. She spent her time flipping through a magazine, stopping to show me an ad that featured Charlotte. I had to say, all made up with designer clothes and professional makeup, Charlotte was smoking.

After what seemed like an hour on the ground they buttoned up the plane and pushed back from the gate. From there we got to wait in line again, this time to take off; we were fifth in line. I was ready to hang myself with my headphone cord by the time we lumbered down the runway like a drunken sow, only reluctantly taking to the skies.

The flight was actually the okay part of the whole trip. We landed and booked ourselves into a hotel while we shopped for a house. The hospital was anxious for me to start but they gave us a week to find a place. The first thing we had to do was set up bank accounts and transfer money to them. That took hours out of our day, filling out form after form, picking out checks. The insanity of daily life that was common to most people but totally alien to me.

Amber found a job at an oncology center in Pasadena, so we looked for houses somewhere in between. The home prices in Santa Monica were insane, so that was out. Hollywood was out as was Beverly Hills. We ended up putting offers in on three houses in Burbank before we finally landed one, at nearly a \$100K over the asking price. We went high because it was empty and we could move in right away. It would leave me with a decent commute every day. Welcome to California.

The next day we leased cars and I was surprised how long it took and the seemingly endless pages of paper jammed with legalese. Our corporate logistics people and lawyers handled all this for us at home. Then there was the home inspection, the closing, more pages and pages of paperwork and we were paying cash.

"Four hundred dollars for a 'document fee'?" I told Amber. "We're in the wrong business."

The day finally rolled around when we parked our leased cars in front of our new empty house with no furniture. Amber was excited and wanted to christen the house by having sex even though we didn't have furniture. I got rug burns on my knees; it was like being back in college. The next day Ikea would be delivering enough furniture to get us started. We had a company come in and clean the pool. I went shopping for a lawn mower and edger, even though I knew nothing about how to use them.

We also had our first experience waiting in line at the grocery store, another thing our logistics people handled for us. I watched the people in front of us move in agonizing slowness. It was a woman and her kids, one of which was only half-dressed. They appeared to be Pacific Islanders but it was hard to say which country. It was like watching a human sloth as she shifted her ponderous bulk, unloading her cart with all the urgency of someone who had nothing else to do in life.

"How do these people get anything done?" I asked Amber, maybe a bit too loudly.

Amber was flipping through a scandal rag and not paying attention. She was absorbed by a story about a famous actor who got caught banging the nanny.

"Can you believe that?" Amber needled. "Banging the help."

I looked over her shoulder. "Who hires a nanny that looks like that?" I asked indignantly. "If your husband is a good looking actor, you hire a nanny built like a Russian tank. I mean they're together every day in familiar surroundings, they have the kids in common. How the fuck did the wife think that was going to play out?"

The fat lady in front of us finally got to the point of paying for her groceries. The first time she messed up her pin, the second time it wouldn't scan. I was fuming. This was another one of those petty indignities of everyday life that just amazed me. She finally got her card to work and collected her receipt.

"This is why your country's never going to accomplish anything!" I blurted. The lady shot me a dirty look as she waddled away.

"Shush," Amber elbowed.

I lowered my voice. "This is America," I pointed out. "We get shit done. If you're going to live here, move your ass."

Amber laughed at that. "It's not like Tonga has a space program."

"Now we know why," I grumbled.

Our cache of food finally in bags, we made the long walk back to the car. Parking lots were another insanity of modern life and it amazed me how much time people wasted on trudging back and forth from their cars. So much wasted time and effort.

We got our furniture and had the weekend to get organized before we both headed out for our first day on the job. That's where I got my first experience driving in LA traffic.

Oh my god, the cars! It was only 23 miles but, with traffic, it took me over an hour. Was this what it was like for people traveling to jobs every day? I could suddenly understand mass shootings much more clearly. People put up with this atrocity every day and then just snapped. I was late for my first day on the job and was lucky because there weren't any accidents. Then I had to find my way around the sprawling medical facility and parked in the wrong place.

My new boss was a doctor and administrator and I had to resist the urge to rip her throat out the first day. It didn't help that the first words out of her mouth were that I was over an hour late. She escorted me through personnel, more forms, a badge, a shared office that looked like my college dorm room. She made the introductions around the ER and the floor nurse hit me with a stack of files from the previous doctor.

"When did he quit?" I asked the nurse.

"As soon as he found out you were here," she said. "You have patients," she then informed me.

"Where?"

"Through there," she said pointing toward the ER.

I walked into barely controlled chaos. The waiting room was full as were all six of the exam rooms. A flustered nurse asked me where I wanted to get started.

"Who else is on duty?" I asked.

"It's just you," she informed me.

Yeah, this was going to be a blast. I tried to organize the ER along the lines of a military field hospital. I did a quick survey of the nurses to figure out which ones were worth anything and was pleasantly surprised a couple of them were actually competent. I got them to triage the patients as they came in, even though receiving was supposed to do that they were just sending them through. By the end of the day I almost had a handle on things. That's when the administrator came down and told me, in no uncertain terms, not to rearrange how they did business.

"Receiving doesn't know anything about triage," I tried to explain. "They send head colds in before gunshot wounds."

"We have our way of doing things here," she countered flatly, walking off before I could say anything else. This was going to suck. I checked the calendar nearly as often as my watch. I made a plan to start skimming meds. If I was going to make six months of this shit I was going to need drugs--lots and lots of drugs.

I got back home late after fighting traffic all the way back. After being gone 15 hours I was exhausted. Amber was positively buoyant, still busy organizing the house and most of the way through a bottle of wine. The cancer clinic where she worked had a lower patient load and much saner hours, plus she had a shorter drive. I was looking forward to relaxing and a glass of wine but Amber had a "honey do" list for me.

I looked it over. A cracked tile on the patio, a gutter hanging, bushes that needed trimming on the side of the house and a cracked window upstairs, all of which had somehow missed the eagle eye of our home inspector.

"Can't we just call somebody?" I asked, suddenly missing the maintenance crew at the park who handled all that for us.

"Come on, I'll help you," Amber insisted. "It'll be fun."

So, after 12 grueling hours in the ER and three hours fighting traffic, I started my second job as an unpaid home maintenance specialist. We went to one of those big box home improvement stores and came back with \$400 worth of shit and a crash course on fixing things. Instead of actually helping Amber spent most of her time sitting near me supervising, with an ever-present glass of wine in her hand. She

wasn't much help but she was tipsy good company and the wine put her in a mood to fuck, which was normally great but I was exhausted.

The next morning I was jolted out of a wonderful sleep by a horrible noise.

"What the fuck is that sound?" I said tiredly.

"It's the alarm," Amber said through her own sleepies. "You asked me to set it so you wouldn't be late this morning."

I hated that alarm from the first moment. I was tired when I got up, tired when I left, tired when I got to the hospital. At least I had a better parking spot this time, right by the ER. Walking in I had already made up my mind that I was going to quit this suck ass job and use money from my offshore accounts to let Deek dummy up a second job for me. I could drive to an empty office every day, drink beer, jerk off and play video games. I may have to do this for six months but I didn't have to do this shit.

I walked in the door with short timer attitude and the administrator was there to chew me out about not closing all my charts before leaving yesterday.

"Go fuck yourself," I smiled, dropping the charts in the trash can and slipping on my lab coat.

"Well, that didn't take long," she said without missing a beat. "I could fire you for that," she reminded me.

"Knock yourself out," I dared, tossing her my badge.

She sighed, picked the files out of the trash can dumped them on the nurse's desk. Then she walked over and clipped my badge back on my jacket.

"It'll take me at least two weeks to find another doctor," she informed me. "Let's see how you do until then."

"Maybe I don't want to stay that long," I countered.

"Something brought you here," she said perceptively. "Maybe that something will keep you here. Oh, your students start today."

"My what?"

"This is a teaching hospital," she said over her shoulder.

"Are you Doctor Fatman?" a small voice behind me asked.

I turned around to find what looked like a junior high school field trip in lab coats. "Who the fuck are you?"

"We're your interns," a slight Oriental girl said, gesturing to the rest of the group.

"You mean medical students," I corrected. There's no way these kids could be doctors.

"No, we're interns," she maintained. "State medical boards, M.D.," she said, tapping the embroidery on her lab coat.

"Oh, my god," I said in disbelief. It was like a scene from Children of the Corn in scrubs.

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Actually the interns turned out to be pretty useful. I sent one to get coffee and another to drop off my dry cleaning. I asked if any of them knew how to replace pool tiles. None of them did so I started them on patients.

They turned out to actually be pretty handy for taking care of the small stuff. I still had to handle all the stabbings, GSWs and code blues but they caught on fast and a couple actually seemed to have possibilities. I didn't check my watch or the calendar once and, when I finally did look at the clock, it was time to go. I told them they could go home when all their charts were closed out and left. The drive home wasn't nearly so bad.

As usual Amber beat me home and was already into her second bottle of wine.

"I invited some people over this weekend," she informed me, buzzing around the kitchen getting dinner together.

"We don't know anyone," I reminded her.

"It's just some of the neighbors," she said, starting to sound a little slurry. "They're really nice."

"As long as I can sleep in," I caved.

The rest of the week went fast. Life was much better with my army of minion interns and I quickly developed a series of games I called Fucking With Interns. It was fun. In my spare time I played another game called Fucking With Patients. I set rules in the Fucking With games, nothing that could endanger a patient's health

and nothing that would probably get the hospital sued. I didn't want to stick around and testify for court. It really helped pass the time and, by the end of the week, I was kind of starting to like the job. After telling our admin to fuck off, I gained a reputation among the staff and then something happened that boosted my reputation even further.

One day there was disturbance in one of the exam rooms which, in that section, were smaller rooms partitioned by curtains. A patient on a new insane street drug, called flakka, had gotten a hold of scalpel and was using it to pin one of the nurses against the wall. She was a petite Hispanic girl with big boobs and she was terrified. I walked up to the crazy guy.

"Hey!" I yelled at him. "Get away from her."

He responded by letting go of the nurse and rushing me. I put on my best dumb look. It was one of the best defenses in hand to hand combat and let's your opponent think you're scared and easy pickings. I don't think Druggo would have noticed either way. He was motivated but untrained, leading with the scalpel like a lance in a medieval joust. He was extended too far and I blocked his arm and stepped past him, grabbing his wrist and giving him an elbow to the side of the head. It felt good so I did it again and followed that with a wrist snap to the bridge of his nose. He tried to pull away but didn't let go of the scalpel, so I snapped his arm. He screamed but dropped the blade and collapsed on the floor.

I kicked the scalpel away just as security came rushing in. "Are you alright?" I asked the nurse, who nodded.

"Great timing," I sneered at security. "Cuff this asshole to a gurney."

I sent one my galley slaves, what I started calling my interns, to set his arm. The cops, who were always around the ER, took a statement.

"Have you had any combat training?" one of them asked. I reminded them I was an Army doctor, then realized most Army docs went to knife and fork school, otherwise known as the Basic Officer Leadership course at Fort Sam Houston, instead of actual combat training.

"Our CO made everyone go through combat ops," I explained. "He was a real gung ho mofo."

They chuckled at that. I guessed they were enlisted and it was probably funny to think about one of the arrogant Army docs they were used to seeing back in the day humping a training pack and climbing the rope ladder and wall.

"That nurse claims you saved her life," one of them offered.

"Huh?" I said absently, mentally going back to the million things I had going on in front of me. "Maybe."

A little later our fearless administrative leader called me up to her office. "According to the scuttlebutt you saved a nurse from a dozen crazed drug addicts."

"There was only one," I assured her.

"The family is probably going to sue," she added. "You broke his arm, his nose and fractured a cheekbone. An orderly said you did all that in about two seconds. I'd hate to see what you could do if you were taking your time."

"He was armed and threatening one of my nurses," I reminded her, getting up to leave.

"If you could not break any more of the patients, that would be great," she yelled after me as I walked out.

After that I was fucking Superman. The galley slaves bragged on me, the nurses loved me and people came from all over the hospital to welcome me on board. The more the drug addict story circulated the bigger it got. It dawned on me that the level of combat training we took for granted made us look like gods compared most people, who only saw martial arts on television. I didn't even break a sweat taking down the druggie, but other hospital staff treated me like I was the Warrior King.

I drove home almost buoyant, actually looking forward to telling Amber about my triumphant day. She'd be suitably impressed and, being a healthy, fertile female, she'd immediately want to mate with me. The reality was a bit different.

I got home to discover Mrs. Fatman passed out on the couch, still in her scrubs from the oncology clinic. There were two empty bottles of wine on the coffee table and about half left in a third. I found dinner covered in aluminum foil in the kitchen, which I ate while drinking the last half of Amber's third bottle of wine. I was

starting to wonder about her drinking but I had problems of my own. I tried to wake her up for bed but she insisted on sleeping on the couch.

The next morning I awoke to find Amber in bed with me, still in the top half of her scrubs. The bottom half, which I hadn't seen for a couple days, looked pretty enticing and I thought about a little roll before work but I couldn't rouse Sleeping Beauty, who mumbled something about a flex day and went back to sleep. I thought it was odd that a cancer treatment center would have flex days but I had problems of my own and didn't give it much thought.

The week went fast and I found myself in charge of the ER as much by default as any edict. I started spending more of my day answering questions and directing staff than actually working with patients. Other departments started calling me for patient data for their research and drug reps and vendors lined up to meet with me. The days rolled by fast and, if I worked late, I'd come home to find Amber passed out, either on the couch with the TV blasting or upstairs. The wine bottles started to pile up.

Our weekend get together with the neighbors caught us both by surprise and we had to scramble to get it all together. Amber was a blur of activity and I noticed a glass of wine in her hand before 10 am; I'd never seen her start drinking that early. By the time guests actually started showing up late in the afternoon she was pretty well lit but, for the most part, kept it together.

The neighbors were a mix of everything that's southern California. A guy and his wife who were event planners to the stars, a food service exec and his Peruvian wife who was all big eyes and big boobs. There was the token gay couple, a mixed race couple, both of whom were in the film industry and a retired couple who dabbled in real estate.

"We thought about buying this house and flipping it," she informed us.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't, that would make getting in the front door really difficult," I joked. At least I thought it was funny.

For a meet and greet it was going pretty well until Amber tried to sit down on one of the new lounge chairs, missing the center and dumping herself unceremoniously on the pool deck.

"Ooops," she slurred, struggling to get up and finding herself unable to stand because she was too drunk. Myself and the event manager neighbor had to help her up. Mrs. Fatman, everyone.

The neighbors stayed a polite amount of time after that before excusing themselves. We wouldn't see most of them again and didn't get invited to any events at their places. My lush wife was not a hit in the neighborhood. Another month like that went on before Amber lost her job. She didn't tell me about it, I actually got a call from the administrator of the cancer clinic, who was himself a doctor. He explained it was a courtesy call because he knew I was doctor and wanted everything to be on the up and up. Amber was being dismissed for absenteeism he explained. Although she started off great and did good work, they just couldn't rely on her. I told him I appreciated the call and hung up.

When I got home I found Amber had thrown herself into housework and claimed that she didn't really need that job anyway and that we could get by just fine on my income, but that wasn't entirely true. While we didn't have a mortgage payment we still had property taxes, insurance, lease payments on two cars, more insurance for those, and my malpractice insurance, which was mandatory. The bills started to add up. Because Amber was drinking more and not working out she started to gain weight and started ordering new, larger clothes. Deliveries started showing up on our door, sometimes two or three times a day. The one redeeming bonus was that her boobs got bigger with the rest of her.

Hospitals are strange places to work. They're loaded with intelligent, type A personalities and are a hive of gossip. I didn't tell anyone about Amber's new found drinking problem but word got around somehow. The medical community was a pretty tight knit subculture and it was entirely possible one of the other nurses at the oncology clinic said something to someone here. I once heard one of the nurses say the word "lush" just before stepping around the corner. The conversation stopped the second I appeared.

Hospitals are also where you find doctors, who tend to be the big fish in society. So it was when word started getting around I might be having problems at home that the predators started to circle. Warily at first, I'd catch glimpses of them at the nurse's station, sleek, shapely and deadly. In the doctor's lounge we jokingly called

them MWD's, which stood for Me Wanna Doctor. Of course there would be one apex predator among that group and she stopped by to introduce herself one day.

"Hi, I'm Melody Adams," she said, shaking hands. Curly black hair framed brilliant blue eyes and a smile that looked like she had extra teeth installed. Her clothing was all designer labels, cut and fitted so it was professional yet tight enough you didn't have to guess what was underneath. She said she was from accounting.

"I help some of the other doctors manage their billing," she volunteered.

I wondered if those were the doctors she was fucking or just the ones she wanted to fuck. I told her I appreciated the offer but I did my billing through an outside agency, something she certainly would have known before coming all the way over here. The admin building was a good walk and her Italian heels didn't have a mark on them.

Strangely Amber chose that moment to make a surprise visit. "Hi," she said, eyeing Melody. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Not at all," Melody said easily. "I was just welcoming Doctor Fatman to the neighborhood."

The instant competitiveness between the two women was so thick you could cut it. Amber was wearing sweats, which was all she had that fit and had left the house without makeup. Melody Adams gave her the same look she likely reserved for the homeless people trying to clean her windshield for a dollar. Amber gave her the look she got when trying to decide what wine to serve with her liver.

"Got a minute?" she asked me.

"Sure," I said. "Would you excuse us?"

"Certainly," Melody said, beaming me the shark smile and turning smartly on hand-polished Italian leather.

"She looks bendy," Amber said after she was out of earshot. "Are you doing her?"

"No," I sneered. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"They cut the power off at the house today."

"What?!"

"I forgot to pay the bill," she whined. "It just slipped my mind. Anyway, they want the full amount in cash, plus a reconnect fee before they'll turn it back on."

"Goddamnit, you had one job," I complained. "And they don't cut off the power for missing one bill."

"Sorry, sheez."

"Wait, have you been drinking?"

"Maybe a little," she admitted.

"I don't know what all this is we're doing, but you endangering people by driving drunk is not part of the deal."

She thought about that for a second, then dug her keys out of her purse. "You're right," she agreed. "You can keep these. I'll call a car on the ride share app to get home."

"I'll go get the power turned back on," I sighed. "And I'll have one of the interns bring your car back."

Turned out I had to go to the power company office to get that done after going by the bank to get the cash. They charged us \$250 for a reconnect fee and I had to wait in line thirty minutes to pay it. Amber hadn't paid a power bill since we got here. I started checking around the house and found unopened envelopes from credit card and clothing companies. Holy shit the bills! A thousand here, two grand there, it added up to tens of thousands of dollars. Most of them were past due and had collected late charges and interest fees.

I confronted Amber about her drinking and spending and we had our first really big fight, which ended with her crying and me getting an emergency page back to the hospital. It was a stabbing and three of the galley slaves got to help me run the patient's bowels looking for a stray bleed. It was after 1 am by the time we finally got done so I just leaned back in my office chair for a few minutes...annnnnd it was morning, even though to me it felt like I just blinked my eyes. What woke me up was my phone ringing; it was Amber.

"I'm sorry about last night," she said, sounding like she had been drinking already and it was....7:45 in the morning.

"Have you been drinking already?"

"I was scared staying here by myself," she complained. "I needed it to help me sleep."

"You killed a guy with a speargun," I reminded her. "What exactly are you scared of?"

"I don't know," she slurred. "I think we have mice."

"We don't have mice," I assured her.

"Did you stay with that brunette?" she asked.

"I did not," I assured her. "We got out of surgery and 1 am and I fell asleep on my desk."

"When you didn't come home, I thought--"

"Thought what? That I suddenly decided to start banging the help here and lying about it? I didn't know lying was part of my job description here."

"It's not," she assured me. "I just thought--"

"Look, I'm sorry but I just don't have time for this right now," and I hung up. The reason I hung up was because I was getting annoyed and it was late.

Another great thing about hospitals is they always have showers and mine felt wonderful. I had a toilet kit and clean shirt in a small locker and I felt human again after a shave and quick breakfast in the doctor's lounge.

It was actually a pretty good day. The minions had things under control so I caught a nap in the cot room we had set up in the back of a long closet behind one of the meeting rooms. It was also the intern's shag pad and I really tried hard not to think about the all the bodily fluids on the old but still comfortable couch.

\*\*\*\*\*

One of the interns jolted me awake in the middle of dreaming about Colombia.

"Sorry, to wake you up but that billing lady is here looking for you," he said.

"Alright," I said tiredly, making my way to my office.

Melody Adams was sitting in one of the chairs opposite my desk, a red Gucci shoe hanging tantalizingly from one foot while she tapped away on her phone.

"What's up?" I asked, taking my seat, which had left me with a crick in my neck after sleeping in it all night.

"There's a fundraiser this weekend," she informed me. "A lot of the big money Hollywood types will be there. For the department heads it's mandatory."

"I'm not a department head," I reminded her, trying to crank the stiffness out of my neck.

"You're the closest thing we have here in the ER," she corrected. "You really should go. You can bring your wife if you want."

"Alright, email me the details," I said. "But I doubt the missus will want to go."

"Is there something wrong with your neck?" she asked perceptively.

"Ah, just a little sore," I admitted. "I fell asleep in my chair last night."

"Here," she said, getting up and coming over to my side of the desk. "Turn this way," she guided gently. She took her jacket off. "Which side?"

"Left," I informed.

"Okay, just hold still."

She started working at the base of neck, then used the edge of her hand down along the edge of my shoulder blade. It felt marvelous.

"Oh, I'll give you all day to knock that off," I said. She had surprisingly strong hands. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"I started off my medical career as a massage therapist," she admitted. "Put your head down on your desk, I need more leverage."

Once she loosened up the knotted muscle she really started working it with her elbow. It felt fantastic, though she had to put one foot on my chair and almost lay on my back to get enough leverage.

In the middle of that my Chinese intern, Ling, walked in. "Should I come back?" she asked.

"Perfect!" Melody said. "Come over here and pull on his arms."

"What?" she asked

"Traction," Melody elaborated.

Fortunately Ling had stopped trying to make sense of life here long ago and just pulled up a chair and braced her feet against the desk so she could get more leverage and pulled on my arms.

"Agh!" I groaned, in a combination of pain and relief.

That, of course, was right when Amber walked in.

"I'd ask if I'm interrupting something," she said easily, "but that's pretty much a given."

"It's just a back rub," I confessed. "A really good one."

"I should go," Ling wisely decided.

"I don't think we've met," Amber said to her. "I'm The Lush. That's what they're calling me now, right?"

"I'm just one of the galley slaves," Ling deflected. "That's what he calls us," she said with a toss of her head in my direction.

"Maybe if you could come back in a few minutes," I suggested.

"Nice to meet you," Ling said to Amber, all but diving for the door to get away from the uncomfortable situation.

"Thanks, that really helped," I said to Melody.

"Don't mention it," Melody smiled. "Good to see you again," she said to Amber with barely concealed condescension.

"Good to see you...laying on my husband," Amber snipped back.

"I teach a yoga class over at the gym here," Melody informed her. "You're welcome to come join us anytime."

That was Melody's way of calling Amber fat and out of shape all in one sentence.

"A yoga class," Amber repeated with a look my way. "Maybe I'll do that."

"Remember, Friday," she said to me on the way out.

"What's Friday?" Amber asked after the door closed. "Naked yoga day?"

"Not nearly that interesting," I said truthfully. "A boring as shit fundraiser for the hospital. You're invited, by the way."

"I don't have anything to wear and all my credit cards have been declined," she informed me. "Except the one I use to get around with the ride share app."

"Gee, that's too bad," I said, not feeling a bit sorry for her.

"That's why I stopped by," she went on. "To say I was sorry and ask for some cash."

I sighed and gave her \$400 out of my wallet even though I knew she'd probably spend half of it at the liquor store. Considering her past profession I didn't want to put Amber in a position where she needed cash and didn't have a job. I didn't think she'd go back to being Heather but I didn't want to put her in a spot and find out the hard way, either.

"Here ya go," I said, handing the cash over.

"So, it's okay if you want to have sex with super bendy girl," Amber said. "I don't mind. I haven't exactly been keeping up on my end of that lately."

"I didn't get married to bang help at the office," I informed her. "I'm more worried about you."

"I'm fine," Amber insisted. "Well, you're busy, I should get out of your hair. You coming home tonight?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked. "The power's back on, right?"

"Yeah, it's back on. I just thought you were still mad at me."

"Look, I don't know what's going on here," I began, "but you're not the woman I married. I don't understand why the fuck we're doing this, why we're fighting and why we're living in middle class suburban hell. But I promised you six months and I intend to stick to that."

"I really appreciate that," Amber said quietly, standing to go. "You should really nail bendy girl," she said at the door. "I would."

"It's in your contract," I reminded her.

"I'll give you a hall pass," she maintained.

"Deal's a deal," I countered, turning back to the million paperwork things on my desk.

"Suit yourself," she said, closing the door behind her.

I sat back and considered the situation. There was no way our marriage was going to survive six months of this. We were just over three months in and already things were strained to the breaking point. Instead of my frisky, sassy, fun wife I was stuck with a chubby, depressed drunk. All this was proving was that if you put perfectly happy people in unhappy, stressful situations they start having problems. I made up my mind that I'd do the whole six months but I didn't remember saying it had to be contiguous.

I called Q and explained my plan. He reminded me, once again, that Amber and I had the screwiest relationship he'd ever known, including his, which was really saying something. I reminded him that I appreciated his analysis nearly as much as a prostate exam. He got serious and told me he'd get things together and let me know.

If my day wasn't perfect enough our illustrious administrator showed up.

"Now what?" I said heavily.

"Nothing," she snipped, "don't be so damned defensive."

"Then don't be such a shrew," I countered.

"At least you didn't say 'cunt'," she applauded.

"I was thinking it," I assured her.

"Peace offering," she said, handing me a pamphlet for a rehab center in Malibu. "The hospital will pick up the tab if...uh...you or any of your family need the service. It's a really nice place. My daughter went there...twice."

"Well, thanks," I said. "I might just do that."

"Just call the number on the brochure and tell them you work here," she suggested. "They'll handle the rest."

"Thanks," I said again, but all she did was wave over her shoulder.

Two days later Amber got home from a trip to the liquor store. I knew where she was going because the ride share app was tied to my credit card. When she walked in Q, Charlotte, Teddy, Flower and I were there with the psychiatrist from the rehab center.

"Why don't you have a seat," the psych suggested. He was 60ish with a beard. He was firm, calm and piercingly direct behind wire frame glasses. His name was Dr. Clarkson and his psych exterior masked an addiction specialist who got his

education at Berserkly, the substance abuse capital of the western world. He was the substance abuse counselor to the stars here in Hollywood.

"Oh, my god, this is an intervention," Amber guessed.

"That's correct," Dr. Clarkson informed her.

"Oh, thank god," Amber said with relief. "This my stuff?" she asked, gesturing at the bag on the floor.

"We packed it for you," Flower said.

"It's got to be in clear plastic bags right?" she asked Clarkson, who nodded.

Amber waved at him to hand them over and he pulled two big plastic clear bags out of a shopping bag next to him. Amber spent a minute going through her stuff, picking out two sports bras, three pairs of yoga pants, shorts, t-shirts and underwear.

"You by the ocean?"

"We are," Clarkson confirmed, so Amber packed a swimsuit. It all neatly fit in one bag.

"Can I wear these?" she asked, waving her workout shoes that she was wearing.

"Have you ever tried to hurt yourself?" Clarkson asked.

"No way," Amber assured him.

"Then they're fine," he agreed, even though they had laces.

"Okay, let's go," she said standing up.

"Just like that?" Q asked.

"Isn't there supposed to be some big scene?" Teddy asked. "A lot of crying and all that?"

"Well, usually," the doctor agreed.

What was strange was how calm Charlotte and Flower were. They didn't seem a bit worried about their bestie being packed off to rehab and that made me suspicious.

"72 hours, right?" Amber asked Clarkson who nodded.

"Have you been to rehab before?" he asked.

"Nope," she said automatically. "Okay, gimme a kiss," she said to me. "It's going to be three days before you see me."

I gave her a kiss, more accurately she gave me a tonsil exam with her tongue. "No yoga instructors," she said with a wink. "You driving?" she asked Clarkson.

She collected hugs from everyone else and we watched them drive away in the doctor's BMW.

"Was that like the strangest intervention in the history of time?" Q asked.

"It was," I agreed. "And only we were surprised," I said, glaring at Flower.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said sweetly, which we all knew was a bold lie.

"We gotta get back," Charlotte informed me, avoiding the questioning.

"Yeah, she's got a job in Miami," Q added.

"You're not sticking around?"

"We can come back if we need to," Flower pointed out.

Something was definitely going on but I'd have to wait three days to find out.

\*\*\*\*

I got a surprise my first night. It was actually awesome to have a quiet place to myself and I swam laps for an hour and ignored the minor repairs the house needed. I was just toweling off when the doorbell rang. Not having a shirt with me I wrapped the towel around me and sprinted to the door, nearly slipping and falling on the tile near the front door. I opened it to find Melody holding a serving dish.

"Did I get you out of the shower?" she asked.

"Pool," I corrected.

Fuck. I couldn't let her stand in the doorway while I was standing there in a towel, that would look worse to the neighbors than inviting her in.

"Come on in," I invited. "Let me go find a shirt. Kitchen is straight back."

I put on a shirt and changed into some canvas shorts. This was going to be awkward no matter how it played out.

I cruised into the kitchen to discover she had poured us both a glass of wine. "Hope you don't mind," she said, "I poured us both a glass."

Great, now I was committed to a glass of wine. "It's great," I smiled.

She was wearing blue shorts that showed off her long legs and a matching button top tied in the middle showing her impossibly flat stomach. She wore big, loopy earrings that also matched her outfit and I guessed that was no accident.

"I heard you were bac'ing it so I whipped up a little something," she said. "It's creamy spinach and cheese Maria."

I loved spinach and cheese. "Smells great," I said and immediately knew I was going to regret what I was supposed to say next. "You have time to join me?"  
*Please say no, please say no, please say no.*

"Maybe just a bite," she smiled. "We could sit out by the pool," she suggested.

"There are plates--"

"I'll find them," she interrupted. "Why don't you just go relax. You've had enough stress lately."

That was true and she was as perceptive as she was flexible. I made my way out to the pool deck and moved the chairs around so we could sit together. The little cabana had a sound system so I put on a CD with some gentle jazz. I realized, almost as an aside, that I really didn't want to fuck her. Honestly, all I wanted was some quiet time to myself and a good night's sleep.

I watched the lovely Ms. Adams move around the kitchen. That was her element and this was her turf. She was the perfect picture of the upper middle class California power wife. She was just short of 40, but the package was flexible and tight. I bet she dyed her hair but no one would care about that, either. If you gave a woman like her an inch she would dig her way in; just like she managed to take over in the brief time it took me to throw on a shirt and clean pair of shorts. Even I had to admit she was good.

She brought out dinner and wine on a little tray. "Here we are."

Apparently there was a bag of lettuce somewhere in our refrigerator as she had two small salads and had whipped up some kind of fantastic dressing out of what she could find. It wouldn't have surprised me to find out she grew the lettuce by witchcraft.

"Wow, this is nice," I said approvingly. It really was but I still wasn't fucking her.

"I didn't mean to barge in," she said easily. "I wouldn't want your wife to think there was any hanky-panky going on."

"Amber," I informed her. "Her name's Amber." *You're not going to dehumanize my wife in her own house, you shark.*

"Right, Amber," she conceded, picking at her salad. "She seems really nice."

"I wouldn't underestimate her," I warned. That was a far bigger statement than she realized.

"What an odd thing to say," she observed. I had to say this lady was one cool customer.

"I just mean...what she's going through right now is really unusual."

I realized immediately I had blundered. By sticking by my damaged wife I was actually making myself more attractive. Ironically, if I had tried to stick my tongue down her throat she probably would have left in a huff. I hated this kind of game playing shit and sucked at it. Social skills had never really been my thing.

"You have a lovely home," she observed, trying to reset the conversation back to ground she could control.

"We had a heck of a time finding anything," I replied. "The market is really tight. Where do you live?"

"Oh, I've got a little place down by the beach," she confessed. "It's just a one bedroom condo."

Anything down by the beach in southern Cali was a million and up. I wondered how she managed that on a CPA salary. The red Mercedes coup out front was another \$150 grand. Somewhere in her past was at least one unlucky doctor. It was like being trapped in a remake of Basic Instinct. If she started calling me "shooter", which would be ironically appropriate in my case, I was kicking her out.

We kept the conversation to chit-chat. The Spinach Maria was fantastic and the wine she picked was a perfect match.

"I'll clean up," she offered, gathering up the dishes and running them back in the kitchen. She cleaned and stacked the dishes and transferred the remainder of the Spinach Maria to a container and washed the pan and put it on the corner of the counter so she wouldn't forget it.

We finished our wine and she said she needed to go. I thanked her for the food and company. It was really considerate in a pushy, cutthroat bitch kind of way. I walked her out and we said our goodnights at the door. She was shrewd enough not to try anything in front of the neighbors. She'd save that for the party Friday.

The next day I didn't hear from Melody at all. Like any big shark she'd gotten close enough to smell her prey and stuck her snout right into my space, but sharks taste with their teeth. She was going to wait until she was certain of making a clean kill. When she struck it would be hard and fast, racing out of shadows. In the meantime she would let me sweat, knowing she was out there in the gloomy water. But, what she didn't know, is I had shared the water with sharks a good portion of my life. I knew their patterns and tactics and I really wasn't interested. All I wanted to do was collect my wife, put in the balance of my six months and get the hell out of this suburban shithole.

It dawned on me that's what I didn't like about Melody. She assumed I was looking for a life like this one. That was the difference between her and Amber. I was headed out for the parking lot when the lady herself roared up in her red convertible Mercedes. It was a nice day and she had the top down.

"Some of us are going to a local night spot for a drink," she informed me. "Care to join?"

"Thanks, I'll pass," I smiled.

"You need a ride to the party tomorrow?" she angled. "I could swing by and pick you up."

"I have the address," I assured her. "I'll be fine."

"Alright then," she smiled. "Bye!"

Our fearless leader pulled up a minute later as I was getting in my car and rolled down the passenger window.

"You're coming to the party, right?"

I assured her I'd be there.

"Great," she said applauded. "Hey, I wouldn't fuck Melody Adams if I were you."

"Wasn't planning on it," I confirmed.

"None of them were planning on it," she warned, rolling up her window and driving off.

The next day breezed by and I felt fantastic, having gone to bed early and gotten up before the alarm. Instead of going home to change for the party I brought my suit with me and had dinner at a local spot before heading up to the party. There were valets and I slipped one \$20 and asked him to park my car to where I could walk to it myself and he pointed down to a spot along the driveway.

The house belonged to our administrator and her husband and it was huge. They were both doctors and had purchased the house years ago. I spotted Melody's red Merc and there was a steady procession of limos disgorging the Hollywood power players and local dignitaries. I stood around with a glass of champagne and made sure I said hello to our host and her husband, who was a tall, thin man with a neatly trimmed beard. Everyone knew me as the ER doc taking down the drug addict. Melody, wearing a gorgeous red evening dress that contrasted with her hair, angled in after a few minutes. She grabbed me and introduced me to one of Hollywood's elite power couples, both of whom I recognized from movies and one because she had a radical mastectomy because of a gene mutation she carried.

Melody excused herself and I mingled a few more minutes before tossing my champagne and heading for the car. Everyone saw me and knew I was there, that was enough. I took the battery out of my phone so no one could reach me and went for a drive. I couldn't go home because Melody would certainly show up there and I couldn't go to work right away because she would check there, too.

I settled on a little diner near the house and took over a booth in the back. I called Deek who was both surprised and delighted to hear from me. I gave him a list of bills and asked him to take money out of one of my personal slush funds to pay them off and close them. I promised Amber I wouldn't use company resources and made sure Deek understood to use a third party company and pay them out of my personal funds. I was certainly violating the spirit of the promise if not the letter but, the way I saw it, we were on a break while Amber was in rehab.

"How's suburbia?" Deek asked, changing the subject.

"It sucks balls," I told him. "I can't believe people choose to live like this."

He danced around the question he really wanted to ask. "I heard about Amber," he said.

"She's fine now," I assured him.

"What's going on with her?"

"I wish I knew, buddy."

"Where are you?"

"In a diner."

"Doing what?"

"Hiding," I said honestly. "From a shark."

That obviously puzzled him but he let it go. "You coming home soon?"

"One way or the other," I assured him, hanging up.

Ditching Melody was the only safe course. If anyone saw us leave together, even if it was innocent, it would start rumors. As it was people would be asking her where I went and she wouldn't know. They would check with the ER to see if there were any emergencies, then they would try calling me, which would roll straight to voicemail. She'd never get the chance to wriggle out of that little red dress and make things uncomfortable. Once that train is rolling downhill it's hard to stop and going half-way would actually be worse than fucking her. If she came onto me and I shot her down, she would turn vindictive. You just didn't say no to a woman like her and this way there wasn't any awkward scene. The best part is my boss would understand perfectly why I ditched the party and I wouldn't need to cash in on Amber's hall pass. I briefly wished the younger me had employed that kind of strategic thinking earlier in my love life.

I ordered a sandwich and some dessert in a go box so I didn't take up the booth without ordering something and had a couple cups of regular coffee before switching to decaf. I really was enjoying just sitting and watching out the window. Tomorrow would be the third day and I'd get to take the coast highway up to Malibu, which would be a great way to spend a morning.

It would have been nice having one of the boats here but it would have taken too long and cost a fortune to sail it around. Boats are great places to hide because they're mobile. I missed our boats and I missed being on my home turf.

There was a baseball game on the TV over the counter. It was interesting to me how many people behind the batter had their noses buried in their phones. What was the point of going to a game, then spending the entire time with your nose in a phone? That made no sense to me, but then, none of this lifestyle made sense to me. After another hour I decided it was time to go and the only options I had were a hotel, the hospital or the house. I opted for the hospital and parked away from the ER where the car would be hard to spot and slipped through the side entrance. I made my way to the intern's shag pad, grateful that it was empty this time of night and drifted off to sleep.

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Right on time Dr. Clarkson called me.

"You can come and get Amber today," he said by way of greeting. "Unless you want me to hold her."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said easily. "If she stays any longer I'm going to have to put her on the payroll."

"What's going on?"

"Probably better if you come up and see for yourself," he suggested.

I told him I'd be on my way in an hour. Walking into my office I found our administrator waiting for me.

"Found your car," she smiled. "And I know you're not who you say you are."

"Who do you think I am?" I said taking my seat. Security wasn't here so obviously this wasn't a hostile meeting.

"I checked all your references," she informed me. "They all checked. Every one. You know how many times that happens?"

"I would assume all the time."

"Never," she said flatly. "It never happens. Everyone fudges their CV a little but not you."

"And that's grounds for suspicion?"

"Not by itself," she smiled. "But this is." She slid a print out over to me. It was a screen capture of the press conference after the Seattle attack. Amber and I were plainly visible in the background.

"What about it?" I asked. "Everyone has to be somewhere."

"All I want to know," she said leaning in, "is whether you're here in an official capacity?"

"I am not," I assured her.

"Are you and that girl really married?"

"Actually, we are," I said truthfully.

"I get why you're here," she said knowingly.

"Oh?"

"She has some kind of PTSD, right? After that bomb thing? That explains the drinking, why they sent you here."

"Very perceptive." Wrong, but not a bad guess.

"You were really the ones that found that bomb?"

"We were," I confirmed.

"My daughter and her husband live in Seattle," she informed me. "Along with my two grandkids."

"It's a nice place."

"Thanks to you and your wife," she continued. "Never met a real spook before."

She probably had and just didn't know it. It's not like they carried signs.

"I'm not at liberty--"

"Yeah, I know," she cut in. "And I'm not asking anyway. I'm actually here about your wife. You'll be headed up to the center today."

"How much do you know?"

"Probably more than I should," she confirmed. "You be leaving after that?"

"No more than a couple months," I confessed.

"I covered your shifts next week," she said, "Just in case. Even if you stay I figured you could use a couple days off."

"Appreciate that," I said, my estimation of my soon to be ex-boss going up as she stood to leave.

"Melody was really pissed last night," she smiled, pausing at the door.

"I have a feeling she'll land on her back," I smiled.

"Oh, yeah," she said, closing the door behind her.

The drive to Malibu was one of those perfect moments that can only happen in California. In Florida our coastline isn't nearly as nice. The scenery was spectacular, even though parts looked ready to burst into flame at any moment. The weather was perfect and I was in no hurry. The rehab center was perched atop a low hill on a bluff overlooking the ocean. I was glad not to be paying Amber's tab on this place. On the inside there was security but a lot less than your average psych hospital. Dr. Clarkson didn't take head cases here and, if anyone wanted to leave, he would let them. Most of those here were the Hollywood elite who were in rehab in advance of a criminal court date. Anything less than Dr. Clarkson's stamp of approval would land them in big boy jail.

The reception desk opened to the pool area which was between the building and the steps down to the beach. It was beautiful. I enjoyed the view until Clarkson came to get me.

"This way," he said, leading me down a hall past a sign that said GYM. We entered a room marked Staff Only just before the open windows of the gym. A two-way mirror was set so the staff could keep an eye on those working out without being intrusive.

Amber was leading a group of about eight people in self-defense floor exercises.

"She started with a couple of the other girls out by the pool her first day," Clarkson explained. "We were going to ask her to stop but some of our other patients asked to join in so we moved it in here."

Amber counted and led them through punches, kicks and blocks. Like a drill instructor she went down the line testing their stance, tightening them up when their guard dropped.

"Okay, a simple counter move," Amber began. "Everyone over here by the mat. This is called a block and roll," she continued. "Whitley, come here."

The bigger of the two guys walked over to the mat.

"Hit me," Amber instructed.

He looked embarrassed. "I don't want to do that," he said sheepishly.

"Hit me!" Amber demanded. "What's your wife's name? Marcy? How are you going to protect her if you can't even hit a girl!?"

He made a half-hearted swing in her direction.

"What the fuck was that?" Amber taunted, pushing Whitley. "Don't be such a pussy, hit me!"

Whitley finally found his inner sack and took a real swing at Amber. She blocked the swing inside and rolled him off her hip. He hit the mat hard and she pinned him there with a combination of a hand bar and her foot on his throat.

"Now that's the woman I married," I told Clarkson.

"When your opponent gives you something like a hand or a foot, take it," she said to the rest of the class. "Hold on to it. Play with it. Break it."

"You should probably get in there before poor Mr. Whitley passes out," Clarkson suggested, noting the man's purple color.

I walked over to the gym door and stepped inside. Amber saw me coming.

"Hi, honey," she said, finally letting go of poor Whitley and bounding over to give me a kiss.

"Everyone, this is my wonderful husband, Dr. Fatman," she smiled. Everyone said hi.

"There's a break room with a smoothie bar right down that way," she said, pointing to her right. "Tell Martina I'll have my usual and get whatever you like and I'll be down as soon as we're finished here."

"Okay," I smiled.

"It's so great to see you," she said, bouncing back to her class.

I wandered down the hall and, as advertised, there was an older Hispanic lady behind the smoothie counter.

"Oh, you are Dr. Fatman!" she said, when I told her Amber wanted her usual. "Your wife, she is lovely."

"So I've heard," I smiled.

She loaded the ingredients and further conversation was cut off by the heavy duty blenders. A couple minutes later she passed me two large foam cups with banana/orange smoothies. I picked a table over near the window. Watching the people at the pool it could be any resort hotel anywhere. This wasn't a sample of the general population, this was a slice of Hollywood and most of the bodies around the pool were the top one percent of good looking people.

"Nice scenery, huh?" Amber said, sliding into the seat opposite mine a few minutes later.

"So, do I finally get to find out what's going on?"

She held up a finger while she took a big slug of her smoothie. She was wearing black yoga pants and a gray top with a ring of sweat around the collar.

"Ah, brain freeze," she complained, pinching her nose, "but it's so good."

I just waited it out.

"Ugh, that's better," she said after a minute. "So, did you nail bendy girl? She came over when I was gone, right?"

"She did," I confirmed. "She made me Spinach Maria."

Amber laughed. "You love Spinach Maria."

"That's true," I confirmed. "There's still some in the frig."

"Ha! So you did nail her."

"I did not," I said honestly.

"It's okay if you did."

"I ditched her at the fundraiser."

"Ouch," she winced. "After she made you Spinach Maria and brought it over. You blew your big chance."

"Yup."

"I'll wait if you want to drive back and hit that," she teased.

"I think that ship has already sailed," I said tiredly. "Why don't you just tell me what the fuck is going on."

"Okay," she shrugged. "Remember one time you told me that I wasn't my mom and you weren't my dad?"

"I remember."

"Well, how did I know that?" she asked.

"I don't get it," I said.

"How did I know that, under the right circumstances, that you and I couldn't become my mom and dad?"

"Because we're not them," I said, confused about where this was going.

"I had to know that," she said directly, leaning over the table.

"That's what this was all about?" I said incredulously. "You were trying to be your mom?"

"I wanted to put myself in her situation and see if I could understand what made her the way she was."

"Too easy to just talk about it?"

"If I had told you what I was doing, your reaction wouldn't have been real. Look," she said, kicking back in the chair. "You had decades to deal with your shit, your history. I didn't have the same luxury of time. If I didn't confront that ghost, it

would have always been in the background, riding along with us on everything we did."

In a weird way it was starting to make sense. "So, did you figure it out?"

She shook her head. "The only thing I learned was that I'm not her and you're not my dad. I really tried to be her, to act like her. I figured if I could crawl deep enough down that hole I could see the world from her perspective. But I hated acting like that person because it was so not me."

I could have told her that didn't work but Amber was the type who had to figure things out for herself.

"You took a hell of a chance with our marriage," I said, feeling a little indignation starting to boil up.

"It was a chance," she agreed. "Just like springing a wedding on an ex-hooker with daddy issues was a chance."

"Touche'."

"You proved you weren't like my dad," she smiled. "When my mom started to go downhill, instead of doing something--"

"The intervention," I guessed.

"Right," she nodded. "Instead of doing something to help, or try to help her, he started paying women on the side. If he would have tried and it didn't work, at least I could have looked back and knew he tried but he didn't even care that much."

In a weird way it made sense, at least from Amber's perspective. Her childhood had influenced her entire life.

"So what now?"

"Let's go home," she said tiredly.

"I'll go get the car, we can be back in an hour."

"Not there," she sneered. "That pile of suburban tacky-tacky isn't our home. I mean back to Florida."

"What about the last two months?"

"Pointless," she said. "I'll never figure it out that way. Maybe now I can face asking her in person."

"I'll call the airlines," I said, pulling out my phone.

"I thought maybe we should call the plane," she grinned. "You know the one flown by our special friend."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, one of the side effects of gaining weight...I've been horny as hell," she laughed. "Oh, my god. Is this what it's like being an 18 year old male? I mean, a stiff breeze and I'm wet. I was afraid I'd get carpal tunnel," she said, shaking her hand.

I laughed at that.

"Anyway, the way I see it, I got some making up to do for the last couple months. And I figured we could get started on the way back."

"What about the house here?"

"Pfft," she dismissed. "Send a crew to clean it out and sell everything. I don't care if I ever see that dump again."

"Okay," I agreed, texting Deek the happy news.

"One more thing," she said, turning serious again. "If you stick this out...as long as we're married, you will never go without sex again. I mean, considering my old job, I should be able to phone that shit in and still be the best lay you've ever had."

"I hope it's not that much of a chore."

"You know what I mean," she laughed, jamming a playful foot between my legs. "They have a stairwell here," she nodded toward the end of hall.

"Let's save it for the plane," I suggested, checking my phone. "It's going to take Bob about five or six hours to get here. He'll need to stop for fuel in Denver."

"Oh, let me borrow your phone," she said. "They took mine."

She spent a minute sending off some texts and then clearing the buffer. "Okay," she said, sliding it back to me.

"Can I ask?"

"It's a surprise," she teased.

I frowned.

"A surprise you'll like," she clarified. "God, relax. You're talking to me again, not my mom."

"We going then?"

"In a minute," she agreed. "I need to get a quick shower and say bye to a couple people. Maybe we could meet out in the lobby in about 15 minutes?"

She left me in the lobby and headed for the dorm to get her stuff. I stopped in to see Clarkson.

"Sit down," he waved me into his plush office which overlooked the pool. "What do you think?"

"I think that's exactly the kind of thing I'd expect from her," I said honestly.

He nodded and pulled his glasses off his nose. "She strikes me as almost brutally honest. We don't get that here very often."

"She gets that from me," I confessed.

"She speaks quite highly of you," he smiled. "If it's any consolation, she really regrets putting you through the ringer."

"It was more puzzling than anything," I told him.

"I can imagine," Clarkson said. "Try to see it from her perspective. In her old occupation she could avoid dealing with her past. Now, she's got nowhere to hide, either from you or her friends at the park. She was trapped between her past and a future she doesn't know how to navigate. Not many people could do it; not everyone would even want to try."

"You think I pushed her too hard?"

"Maybe," he frowned, taking an interest in the view of the pool. "On the other hand you offered her a way out."

"Out of..."

"Out of her old world," he explained. "And an opportunity at something better."

"She going to make it?"

"I think she can do anything she sets her mind to," he said a bit evasively. "But she still has some rough edges and volatile components to her personality."

*You don't know the half of it,* I thought to myself. His phone beeped.

"She's in the lobby," he informed me. "Best of luck to both of you."

"Thanks for your help, Dr. Clarkson," I stood to shake hands.

"Are you really the ones who found that bomb?" he asked on my way out.

"We were," I admitted.

"That was quite a thing," he said smiling.

"Yeah, it was," I agreed.

Amber was engaged in animated conversation with the receptionist, her clear bag of clothes on the floor next to her.

"We ready?" I asked, interrupting the girl giggles.

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"Are you doing the receptionist?" I teased, once we were outside.

She laughed at that. "She doesn't swing that way," she informed me. "But she's really nice."

Bizarrely we did end up going to the house anyway. It was another four hours until the plane landed and we didn't have anywhere else to go.

"Just as well," Amber decided. "I could use some clothes for the trip home. None of my shit at the park is going to fit."

She had started losing the weight, just after three days, but it would take weeks of intense training for her to get back into rock hard good shape. That would be good for both of us, only I wouldn't be in rock hard good shape, just marginally better than I was now.

She packed a big gym bag of her larger size clothes, I didn't care about seeing any of my stuff again. My phone rang, it was the hospital administrator.

"You coming back?" she asked.

"Afraid not," I had to tell her.

"Found what you were looking for then," she speculated.

"Close enough," I assured.

"Okay then," she sighed. "Good luck."

"Thanks, you too."

"Was that the hospital or Bendy Girl?" Amber wanted to know.

"The hospital."

"So that pushy bitch made you dinner in my kitchen," she said with a jealous edge that was mainly put on. "I should kick her ass on principle. Maybe a nude mud wrestling match?"

"I'd pay to see that," I laughed.

She rolled her eyes. "Men are such animals," she said, pulling me in for a kiss.

"We should get going," I said before it turned into more.

Since we were back on the company ticket, I ordered up a limo and we left the keys to our leased cars on the kitchen counter. Deek would have our logistics company contract out for the disposal of the house and its contents, buy out the lease on the cars and close out our credit card accounts. Our records would disappear out of the various state systems and the credit bureaus as mysteriously as they had appeared.

"You going to miss it?" she asked, taking one last look as the limo pulled up.

"Not a chance," I said. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

We got to the airport a half-hour before the familiar fat, gray shape of our new C-130 landed on the main runway and taxied over to commercial hangar. We picked one of the smaller, regional airports for exit. First down the ramp was Jacki and I suddenly realized that was the surprise Amber had cooked up. The two hugged and Amber showed Jacki her new fat butt. They both laughed hysterically.

Charlie followed her off the plane and he had a surprise for me.

"I gotta get my stuff off," he said, jerking his thumb at a couple standard cargo containers in the hold.

"What's going on, Charlie?"

"Oh, Deek didn't tell you? I'm retiring," he informed us. "My brother and sister in law have a place up in the hills. It's got a guest house and they said I could stay there until I found something of my own."

"Well, good luck, Charlie," I said, shaking hands.

A container transport and crew pulled up and loaded the metal bins on a trailer and Charlie hitched a ride with them over to the rental car counter. Amber, who was always leery of Charlie, settled for waving as he drove away.

While we were waiting for the fuel truck I had to help the girls with the other surprise Amber arranged, a double bed lashed to the starboard bulkhead. I helped them get it down and anchor it to the deck, while they finished up by hanging a curtain that would block Bob's view from the cargo hold container. Afterwards, I went forward to see my digital buddy.

"Woohoo...Fatman!" Bob greeted. "I wumbo!"

"You wumbo!" I replied.

"We wumbo-wumbo!" we said together.

"It's good to see you, buddy," I said enthusiastically.

"Incoming message from Deek," Bob informed me.

I put on the glasses and Deek was already there. "There are a couple new phones in your seat backs," he told me. "And a new interface tablet for Bob."

"How's he doing? How are you doing?" I asked.

"He's all checked out," Deek assured me. "He's been piecing together some of his lost memories."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Turns out we had bits and pieces in buffers here and there and he's reviewed all the news footage from New Mexico and Seattle. He also went through all the stored data the joint operations team had in on the border surveys and the comm transcripts."

"So he knows what he did?"

"Most of it," he confirmed. "And he remembers what you did."

Bob put up a clip of me going through the smoky cabin to get his memory modules.

"Hey, you saved us all and a city," I reminded Bob.

"Affirmative," the machine agreed. "I'm a steely-eyed missile man!"

"Yes, you are," I laughed.

"We're trying to pick more positive movies for him to watch," Deek explained. "We thought The Right Stuff was better than The Terminator."

"Probably a good idea," I agreed.

"He wants the guns back," Deek informed me.

Bob cycled through a list of weapons systems, most of which were out of even our reach.

"That'll have to wait, buddy," I chuckled. "But we'll arrange something one of these days." The truth was I liked it better when Bob was armed as well.

Amber bounced in behind me, slipping on a pair of glasses. "I wumbo!" she announced.

"You wumbo!" Bob answered.

"We all wumbo-wumbo," we agreed, even Deek joining the familiar chant.

"Woohoo...Amber!" the machine greeted, then started playing a cover of Baby Got Back.

*I like big butts and I can-not lie*

*You other brothers can't deny*

*That when a girl walks in with an itty bitty waist*

*And a round thing in your face*

*You get sprung...*

"Hey!" Amber complained, but Deek and I were laughing hysterically.

"He recognizes you changed," Deek pointed out. "You should be glad he noticed."

"You notice when a girl does her hair different," she informed Bob. "Not when they gain weight."

Bob responded by turning up the volume on the music while Deek and I were laughing so hard I had tears in my eyes.

"You are all animals!" Amber yelled over the music and huffed out but she was smiling all the same.

"You're in trouble now," Bob informed me, fading out the music.

"We're both in trouble," I corrected.

I signed off with Deek and went to see to our fueling and had Bob file a flight plan back home. As soon as we were gassed up we were ready to go. Amber and I sat at the controls until we were clear of the city and over the desert.

"You got it, Bob?" she asked.

"Affirmative," the machine assured her.

She climbed out of her seat and came over to undo my seatbelt, all but dragging me out of the cabin back to the hold to find Jacki waiting for us. Amber let us know in no uncertain terms this was about her pleasure and she literally came from New Mexico to Denver, wearing out Jacki and I both. I couldn't figure out how she could do that without getting muscle cramps. We finally had to take a break because Jacki and I were worn out.

"Quitters!" Amber complained, although it was more teasing than serious. She sure seemed to be in a better mood, slipping on a flight suit and heading up to the flight deck to see Bob.

Jacki joined me at the coffee machine. A perfectly normal thing, two coworkers at the coffee machine, save for the fact we were both naked.

"Whew," Jacki smiled. "She's been saving that one for a while. What happened back there?"

"Take too long to explain," I said honestly and it was none of her business either way. Sometimes the girls forgot that they were just hired help.

"Probably none of my concern anyway," she said perceptively. "Didn't mean to pry."

It was hard to stay annoyed at self-correcting people and I was glad Jacki was one of them. I liked it when Amber brought her in on our activities; she was fun, free spirited and intuitive. But, if she couldn't keep her mouth shut, she was out. It reminded me that the farther we were from our old line of work, the lazier our organization became. We were getting sloppy and me being gone for four months probably made that worse. It was time to tighten up when we got back. Exercise, training, and practice would be the new order when we got back.

I made my way up front to find Bob and Amber rocking out to Baby Got Back. Bob really was a hound dog.

I put on some glasses and Bob showed me a weather problem in Denver. We could get there, but weather was coming in fast. Since we weren't in a hurry and weed was legal, we decided just to stay overnight. When confronted with an opportunity to spend another night with legal weed, my horny wife and one of her fuck buddy hooker friends...yeah, our return to exercise and discipline could wait another day.