



BY RAHHEEMME



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Chapter 1

Starting Off With A Bang

The three squirrels chatted in the hallway at what they thought was a reasonable volume. By the time they reached the door of their apartment, they were talking excitedly back-and-forth loud enough to be heard between floors, with one particular voice rising above the others. While the two female voices giggled and swapped stories, the male voice stopped in front of the door.

“Hang on, I got it,” he rumbled, his voice deep, but unexpectedly soft. With the grinding sound of metal-key on metal-lock, the deadbolt clacked open and they pushed their way inside.

“Oh *fuck* yeth,” Daphodille mumbled excitedly with her characteristic lisp as she pushed past Darwin into the apartment. Her hair cropped short from a recent haircut, she wore a dark button-up that covered most of her copper-red fur, a pair of loose jeans she could still move comfortably in, and her characteristic athletic toe-shoes over her wide squirrel paws. This was the closest thing to a 'nice' outfit she owned, or at least something that wasn't her usual athletic clothes or work uniform. Scurrying inside with her enormous tail bobbing weightlessly behind her, the athletic squirrel planted one foot on the thick coffee table and leapt nearly four feet in the air, turning in mid-air and falling back-first onto the thick, plush couch cushions with a mushroom cloud of dust.

“*Gggaaaaaah*,” She groaned, happily shifting up on the couch and sitting up to move her tail out of the way. “I love your fuckin' *couch*, you guyth!”

“You keep doing that, you're going to pop one of the cushions,” Darwin complained. A tall, fit, long-eared squirrel himself, he wore a simple polo and slacks which were more expensive than they appeared. His fur was a light brown, his tail not quite so overpoweringly large as Daph's, and his front teeth cropped short to not affect his speech. Without looking, he gripped the door with one of his broad hands and held it open for his petite wife, Georgia.

“She's too little to do that,” Georgia giggled, pushing the door closed behind her. Another squirrel, just a little shorter than Daph, she wore a flowing, pleated dress that went just below her knees with a small, waist-length shawl over her shoulders, both fashionably vintage. Unlike the muted, earthy colors of her husband and friend, her fur was a bright, golden blonde color that matched perfectly with her blue eyes to give her an exotic, almost pure appearance.

“You remember in middle school when I tried to climb up the storm drain?” Daph asked, her friends long having grown accustomed to her heavy lisp. She turned to Darwin and explained, “It broke off the roof when I was halfway up and I fell, like, twenty fuckin' feet to the ground.”

“It was more like *ten* feet, Daph,” Georgia rolled her eyes, taking off her shawl and laying it across a chair. “And onto *grass*.”

“Whatever, Daph,” Daph shrugged. “I rolled when I hit the ground and didn't break a bone or nothin'. It was rad.”

“And then you got detention for a month and your mom had to pay for the repairs,” Georgia added, raising an eyebrow. Daph's grin faded slightly and she cleared her throat.

“Yeah...that wasn't so funny...”

“None of this is making me very confident about letting you inside, Daphodille,” Darwin snarked, standing in the middle of the room with his hands in his pockets.

“What do you think I am, a fuckin' tornado?” Daph asked, incredulously. “Comin to your apartment like a vacation, like I'm staying in a hotel.”

“Ok sure, but *we're* the maids that have to pick up after you,” Darwin said. Daph sat up and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, I know, that's why I try not to fuck anything up.” Daph looked Darwin up and down and gestured to him. “The fuck are you doin'? Thit down, you're

makin me nervouth.”

“Sitting for too long after eating just makes me sleepy,” Darwin shrugged, his tail bobbing behind him.

“Well, you're our guest, anyway,” Georgia smiled at Daph. “Just...please don't break anything.”

“Why do you guyth think I'm gonna fuck everything up!?” Daph shouted, flopping back onto the couch.

“Because we've seen your apartment,” Darwin said, flatly.

“But that'th *my* thtuff. That'th different.” Daph sighed, smacking her tongue against the back of her oversized teeth. “You got any peanutt or thomething? Walnutth? I'll kill a motherfucker for thome wallnutth right now.”

“Didn't we just eat?” Darwin asked. “Or was that just me?”

“No no, dude, don't get me wrong,” Daph said. “That wath, like the betht fuckin' place I've ever eaten at in my whole fuckin' life. It just...there jutht wathn't all that *much* yknow? I almotht wanted to order dessert after it.”

“Why didn't you?” Georgia asked. Daph glanced at her, mouth hanging open in shock.

“Georgia, did you *thee* that menu? A cup of chocolate fuckin' milk woulda probably coht me eighteen buckth and half a finger. I wathn't gonna order dessert.”

“You could have. It was our treat, remember?” Georgia grinned, happily.

“You tryin' to 'wine and dine' me?” Daph said. She glanced at Darwin and thumbed toward Georgia. “Were you watchin thith bitch? Did she put thomethin in my drink?”

“I wasn't exactly paying attention,” Darwin shrugged.

“Well, if I wake up in the bathtub without a kidney,” Daph pointed to Georgia. “I'm callin the coph. I don't give a fuck if you were a girl scout or not.”

“I don't think you'll have that to worry about,” Georgia giggled.

“Well, why fuckin' not?” Daph shouted, feigning exaggerated anger to make her friend laugh. “I got good kidneyth. You want 'em?”

“Stop, stop,” Georgia said, her hand over her mouth, straining not to burst into a fit of giggles.

“Please don't give my wife a heart attack, Daphodille,” Darwin said.

“Aw c'mon, who doethn't wanna literally die of laughter?” Daph glanced around the room, sitting up and glancing in the corners. “Didn't you have a mini-bar latht time I wath here?”

“We moved all that to the kitchen,” Darwin said, crossing around the couch. “We didn't entertain enough to get much use out of it.”

“I'll thay,” Daph said, smirking. “I ain't been over here in like a year and a half.”

“We've been busy,” Georgia explained.

“Oh, *I know*,” Daph said knowingly, winking at Georgia. She blushed beneath her fur and giggled, her tail flapping.

“We've just been working a lot,” Darwin said, stepping into the open-door kitchen. “You want a beer? We've got a few.”

“Too many kalorieth,” Daph waved dismissively. “So...what you been workin' so hard on thith patht year?” She peeked her head over the couch and raised an eyebrow at Darwin.

“Oh, you know,” he leaned against the doorway and opened a beer for himself, taking a swing and adding, “Stuff.”

“Uh-huh,” Daph smirked, raising both eyebrows. “*Thtuff*.” She shook her head and made a series of disapproving *tch* sounds with her teeth. “You heteroth and your secreth.”

“Who are *you* calling hetero?” Georgia said, throwing a pillow at Daph and standing up to join her husband in the kitchen.

“And what's wrong with being hetero?” Darwin said, raising an eyebrow. Georgia walked up next to him and sighed, putting a hand on his chest and shaking her head.

“Poor straights,” she teased, looking back at Daph.

“They jutht never learn,” Daph agreed, shaking her head in unison with Georgia. Darwin glanced between the two confusedly, sighing while he took a swig of his drink. Georgia giggled again, hopping up in the air to kiss her tall husband before going into the kitchen.

“Do you want a drink, Daph?”

“Whatcha got?” Daph leaned back on the couch, but then quickly sat up again. “Oh! You got any *nice* vodka?”

“Is Absolut nice?” Georgia asked.

“Did it coht more than ten buckth?”

“I think so.”

“Then it'th nice.” Daph gasped, suddenly realizing what she wanted. “You got any orange juice?”

Make me a thcrewdriver!”

“No but...we've got lemonade.”

“Fuck...okay, that'th good enough,” Daph said, leaning back. “We can call it...a *flathead* or thomething.”

“Can do!” Georgia said happily, taking the bottles out of the fridge.

Daph sprawled out on the couch, letting her muscles relax. She'd made sure to go to the gym early that day as she probably wouldn't be up for it the next morning. With a good workout, a good shower, and good friends to visit for the first time in what felt like ages, she was more content than she had been in months. The monotony of her job was starting to weigh down on her, and even staying fit was starting to feel like a boring routine. She still made regular meetings with her

parkour groups, but a lot of them were more interested in training and gym work than actual in-city free running, and even that wasn't much fun to do by herself. Even at age 24, it seemed like her life was starting to slow down, which was something she never ever expected to happen before she hit thirty. Seeing Georgia and her husband again, after being apart for so long, was just the kind of stimulus she needed. Daph hoped she wasn't being too overwhelming for them, but it was hard not to get excited.

Sighing, she fell into a relaxed, thoughtless peace on her friends' couch, one leg dangling over the side with her tail bobbling lazily on the floor. But with those few moments of quiet came the feeling she'd been trying to repress the entire night. A hot, burning sensation that seemed to flush under her body, like she was smoldering under her fur and skin. She sighed, trying to push the uncomfortable feeling away. She'd heard about medication to lessen the effect of her 'time of the month,' but she naturally couldn't afford it. She usually never went out around that time, choosing to stay home and deal with her discomfort in her own way, but she wasn't about to reject an invitation from her best friend and her husband. So far, she'd been successful in distracting herself and powering through her biological needs.

Daph paused, discovering that her hand wasn't where she left it a moment ago. Instead, it laid across the middle of her jeans, between her legs, fingers around her zipper and pulled halfway down.

She shook her head, slapped her face a couple times to get a grip, then zipped them back up. As much as she hated it, she might be forced to call their night off earlier than she planned.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Darwin walked up to his wife and gripped her shoulders affectionately, kissing the top of her head while she poured the drinks.

“I think this one's a little too strong,” Georgia said, setting aside a small glass. “You want it?”

“I'm fine with this,” Darwin responded, tapping his beer on the counter. “Give it to Daph.”

“She actually doesn't drink much, believe it or not,” Georgia explained. “She likes it mostly for taste.”

Darwin picked up the extra drink, swirling it around and staring into it, lost in thought.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“You mean 'Are you sure about *her*,'" Georgia said, turning to look coldly at Darwin. “Right?”

“I just...I...” He rubbed the tip of one of his ears, stalling. As headstrong as Darwin was, he usually found himself speechless once his wife's resolve was set on something. “...I'm just not sure.”

“You don't know her like I do,” Georgia said. She sighed, her expression softening as she took Darwin's hand and brought it to her face. “I know, it's strange, but I really think she's the best chance we'll have.”

“But are you *sure*,” Darwin asked, whispering. “She's not our only option, you know.”

“I know she's not,” Georgia said, steely-eyed. “But she's the only one I *trust*.”

Shooting Darwin a determined glance, she picked up two of the three glasses, leaving the strongest drink on the counter, and walked back into the living room, her tail swaying confidently.

Darwin sighed, picked up the mix drink and gulped back nearly half of it in a single swallow. He stalled for time in the kitchen, knowing Georgia wouldn't start the conversation without him. Searching around the cabinets, he found a semi-old bag of cashews that he hadn't felt like throwing away. Daph would probably like them. He dropped it on the counter, next to both his drinks, and stared at the point between them, tapping his foot on the tile floor. Darwin sighed one last time, his stubborn nature finally deciding to defer to his wife's thinking, but not without help from the rest of the mix drink, sour and bitter in its strength.

Walking back into the living room, beer in hand, Darwin glanced over the couch, finding Georgia and Daph chatting happily and nonchalantly about Georgia's new work phone.

“And it comes with all these little programs and applications I can use. They won't let me use any of the paid stuff of course, but I can still customize it and

everything, and a lot of the most useful stuff is free, anyway.” Georgia glanced up to her husband standing over the back of the couch and smiled. Daph leaned her head backward to get an upside-down look at Darwin.

“Did you know they gave her a nicer cell phone than I got for *free*?” She asked, incredulously pointing at the phone.

“I can only use it when I’m on call, though,” Georgia said, dropping it back into her purse. “But I still keep it with me for emergencies.”

“At least it’s better than when you worked in the ER, right?” Daph nodded. “Whenever we thaw you at home, you were asleep.”

“It was really hard work,” Georgia nodded. “I’m glad I did it, I learned a lot, but I don’t want to go back to that. Too much...” She shuddered. “...too much to see...”

“I still got this little fucker,” Daph said, digging into her pocket to pull out a small, black flip phone that looked like an exotic beetle in the apartment’s lamp-light. “I like it, though! It doesn’t do a lot of fancy shit like yours, but it gets the job done pretty well. Plus, if I get mad, I can just *thnap* on a motherfucker.” She demonstrated by thumbing open the lid and slamming it back down with the rest of her fingers, making a loud plastic *clack*.

“Technology is moving so fast that in a couple years, Georgia’s phone will probably be even cheaper than yours,” Darwin added, stepping around the couch and pulling in a far away chair.

“Oh no no no,” Georgia shook her head. She hopped up and sat on the couch next to Daph, curling her legs beneath her and pointing to her empty seat. “Sit there, sit there.”

Darwin shrugged and crossed the room, settling quietly in the chair with his tail draped over the armrest.

“Mmmm,” Daph mumbled beneath a sip of her drink. “I dunno if, like, *this* is really fuckin’ good, or if I just want some lemonade, yknow?” She laughed, then took another sip and set it on the coffee table. Darwin leaned in for it, but before he could reach, Georgia had already pulled a coaster out from the side table and slipped it beneath the glass.

“...Hey, Daphodille,” Georgia said, after pausing for a moment.

“Oh *shit*,” Daph suddenly said, pointing to the bag of cashews Darwin had set beneath the chair. “You gonna eat thothe?”

“Help yourself,” Darwin nodded, tossing the bag to Daph, who only barely caught it out of the air with two fingers.

“I don't get thethe a lot, but I fuckin' love em,” she said, cracking open one of the nuts and slipping the shell into her pocket. It crunched solidly between her teeth, making a loud *crack* that echoed slightly around the room. She pushed off one of her toe shoes and brought her leg up onto the couch beside her. “Thorry, Georgia, you were thaying?”

“Okay...Okay, so...” Georgia continued, but her momentum had been interrupted and she had to rebuild her train of thought. “So...Daph, we really wanted to see you and, like, it's been *really* great that you're here and I've missed you a bunch.”

“Awwww, you're gonna give me a heart attack, dude,” Daph said, extending her leg to lay her paw across Georgia's thigh. She winked.

“But that isn't the only reason we wanted to invite you here,” Darwin chimed in, nodding.

Daph's cheeky smile faded into anxious curiosity.

“Well...fuck,” she said. “I ain't ever been told that when it wath *good* newth.”

“Well it's...not... *bad* but it's...um...complicated,” Georgia said, fighting to get the words right.

She absentmindedly took Daph's paw into her hands and started to stretch and massage her toes, a practice they had got into when Georgia was working toward her physical therapy degree and Daph needed a more effective way to relax her muscles after exercising.

“Thometimeth, that'th even worse,” Daph said, nevertheless sighing comfortably as Georgia worked the tension out of her paws.

“Well it's...Daphodille,” Georgia said, stopping her massage. “... Yknow how

we've been trying to...trying to have a baby?"

"Huh," Daph chuckled. "*Do I know?*" I make it my fuckin' buthiness to know every time you're getting it on, dude. You been tryin' for a baby for almotht two..." Daph's sentence slowly halted as she stared at Georgia, finally putting what she thought was two and two together. She gasped, pulling her feet in and staring open-mouthed at Georgia. "*Did it happen? Did it fuckin' happen!? Are you-*"

"No, no no no no, Daph," Georgia said, holding out her hands. "I'm not...It's..." Georgia brushed some hair out of her face and folded her arms, her tail drooping slightly. "It's...kinda the opposite of that."

"Kinda the oppothite?" Daph repeated, confused. "I don't get it. You're not...You...you *can't*..."

Daph's face fell, her mouth dropping open in shock. "Oh...Oh my god, Georgia." She shuffled across the couch and pulled her friend into a strong hug, leaving her tail laying against the couch. "I thwear to god...I didn't know, I really didn't...Oh god, I'm tho thorry." Georgia wrapped her arms around Daph and squeezed, patting her on the back gently. Daph gently rocked them back and forth, only stopping once Georgia pulled away. She smiled sadly, with the shadow of tears in her eyes, and patted Daph on the shoulder.

"It's okay," she said, blinking away the water in her vision. "We've known for a while...but thank you, Daph."

"What?" Daph responded, looking hurt. "What'th 'a while?' And you didn't tell me *before*?"

Before she continued, she stopped herself, closing her eyes and sighing to regain composure.

"...Thorry. I'm glad you're okay but...I would have liked to have known."

"We haven't told anybody else," Georgia said, glancing at Darwin, who nodded solemnly. "We were...counting our options."

"Do you know why?" Daph asked. "...Thorry, you don't gotta thay if you don't...want to..." She added, quietly.

“It's...” Georgia sighed, looking away. “It's a few things...I've always had irregular periods and...heats...so it probably has a lot to do with that. And...yknow, some of...SPS...”

“Fuck,” Daph sighed, shaking her head. “I wath afraid of that.” SPS, or sciuridae prenatal stress disorder, was a phenomenon amongst squirrels living in populated areas. Because they were biologically better suited for forests and natural settings, much of the squirrel population in New York City suffered from anxiety disorders. This was most dangerous in women, where stress often provided difficulties in conception and sometimes even miscarriage.

“So was I...” Georgia sighed. “I guess that's why I'm an only child.”

“They...they got treatmentth, right?”

“We thought about that,” Georgia said, glancing to Darwin. “It's mostly just medications and treatments for the anxiety. SPS is mostly a physical issue.”

“Right, right...I get it,” Daph nodded. “Tho...can you like...ith there anything...can you get like a *thurgery* or thomething like that?”

“No, not really,” Georgia shook her head. “Really, along with my gland problems and polycystic ovaries...I...I doubt there's any chance of me ever getting pregnant.”

The room fell into silence, Daph looking hopelessly between Georgia and Darwin, who both stared at the floor, trying not to relive their pain. Daph's mouth hung open, sometimes closing when she swallowed, and constantly grabbing for something to say.

“Ok...” Daph said, breaking the unpleasant atmosphere and tapping her paw on the ground next to the couch. “What about...like...can you adopt?” She shrugged.

“We've looked into that,” Darwin said, speaking up. “We've gone to agencies and...they didn't think we...”

“We were rejected,” Georgia said, flatly.

“You're fuckin' kidding,” Daph said, throwing her arms in the air. “You guyth would be mother fuckin' parentth of the goddamn *year!* What the *fuck* were they

thinking!?”

“We just work too much,” Darwin shrugged. “They didn't think our home life was suited to raising a child, especially from infancy.”

“We're trying to set aside more time,” Georgia nodded to Darwin. “Trying not to work so much at home, leaving work at work, things like that.” Georgia rubbed her forearm, looking away with more words on the tip of her tongue. “...To tell the truth, I didn't like the idea of adoption, even of a baby. It just...they'd be a stranger. They'd be someone else's.”

“Well...I mean...Georgia...” Daph swallowed, shaking her head. “...I think that's...just going to be something you have to live with, yknow?”

“That's what I thought,” Georgia nodded, looking up at Darwin and nodding. “Then we thought about surrogacy.”

“What, like, thomebody elthe carrieth the baby?” Daph said, raising an eyebrow. She shook her head. “Ithn't that the thame thing?”

“It *would* be,” Georgia said, taking Daph's hand in her own and smiling softly, “...if the surrogate were a *stranger*.”

“...Huh?” Daph blinked, looking down at Georgia's hands and glancing over to Darwin.

“...What, like...they *won't* be? You know em?” She snapped her head back to Georgia surprised. “Do *I* know em?”

“Yes...you do,” Georgia said dreamily, squeezing Daph's hands.

“...Who?”

Georgia sighed and glanced at her husband with a little giggle. Darwin sighed and pinched his brow.

“You, Daphodille,” he said. “We're talking about you.”

“You're talkin-” Daph blinked before understanding slapped her in the face and her eyes went wide with shock again. “Y-You...you want *me* to... *ME*?” She

glanced at Georgia, spluttering. “*ME?*”

“Daphodille,” Georgia said softly. “...Would you carry our baby?”

“Buh...I...duh...” Daph shook her head, her mind spinning. “You're talkin about *me* right?” She hopped to her feet, glancing between the two. “*Me,*” she said, rolling back her sleeve and flexing one of her wiry, powerful muscles, “being all,” she put two fingers on her sternum and mimed a wide, round circle over her stomach, stopping at her waist. “Am I getting thith right?”

“Pretty much,” Georgia giggled. Daph flopped back down, still gazing at the two of them in shock. She looked at Georgia and tapped her chest with a finger.

“But...like...why *me?*” Daph asked.

“Well,” Georgia began. “The way I see it...you're my best and oldest friend.” She took hold of Daph's hand again and squeezed it. “If I can't have my *own* baby...then I'd be okay with raising yours.”

“Plus, you have three older brothers,” Darwin added. “And you've lived in New York your entire life. We're pretty sure SPS doesn't run in your family.”

Daph looked between the two, her mouth still hanging open. She brought her free hand to her stomach, poking her abs softly with a finger, imagining an entire other person growing behind them.

But as she stared at the coffee table, her expression softened, her mouth closed, and a thoughtful look came to her eye. She popped another cashew in her mouth and chewed it slowly, tapping her foot on the ground as a quiet serenity filled her thoughts.

“You don't have to come up with an answer right now...” Georgia said, reassuringly. “And...and you don't even have to say yes if you don't want to! Just take a few days to think about it and-”

“Nah, I'm good,” Daph suddenly said, nodding and chewing on the cashew. “I'll do it, thure.”

Georgia stopped gripping Daph's hand, a silent moment stalling between her and her husband.

They glanced at one another, as if to confirm that, indeed, a life-changing decision had been made in the span of five seconds.

“Wh-What...um...Daph, you can...are you *sure*?” Georgia spluttered, raising her eyebrows.

“Yeah, thure,” Daph shrugged, popping open two more nuts and throwing them in her mouth.

“Why not?”

“...Just like that?”

“I mean...yeah?” Daph shrugged. “What, you fuckin' *athked* me, didn't you?”

“Well...we did, but we didn't expect you to agree...so *fast*.”

“Daphodille, you can take a few days,” Darwin added, leaning forward. “There's not any kind of rush, you can think about this. It's a big decision.”

“I know,” Daph said, standing up from the couch. “And I *did* think about it. Or like, I didn't *need* to think about it.” She un-tucked her shirt and glanced at Georgia, shrugging. “Cause it'th for you.” She glanced between the two of them and shrugged again as she began to unbutton her shirt from the bottom. “Tho yeah. Fuck it. Let'th have a baby. I don't got much elthe goin on lately.”

“You're serious...” Georgia breathed. As she inhaled, an enormous, blossoming grin spread over her face and she started to shake in excitement. Happy tears were just seconds from spilling from her eyes all over her golden fur.

“Daph...Daph, I don't know...if you know how much this means to us...You're the...Oh my God, Daphodille, you're the best friend I've ever...” Georgia paused, her elation falling away into confusion. “...Daph, what are you *doing*?”

“What?” Daph said, taking off her shirt and throwing it over the couch. She gripped her tank-top undershirt and pulled it over her head in one motion, revealing her muscular body barely hidden by her copper fur. She threw it aside and began to work on unclipping her bra. It was one of the few times she wore something other than her normal sports bras, but it was also one of the few times she went out to a nice restaurant.

“Daphodille, what the *fuck* are you doing?” Darwin nearly shouted in alarm. Daph glanced between the couple, her eyebrows raised as if they were the crazy ones. She dropped her arms from her bra clip and held them out, her tail twitching in agitation.

“*What?*” She said, defensively, pointing to the two of them. “I thought we were gonna go make a baby or thomething!”

“What, *now?*” Darwin yelled.

“Yeah, *now!*” Daph nodded. “The fuck did you invite me over for?”

“To ask you in *person!*” Darwin shouted.

“What, that'th it?” Daph said, incredulously. “You coulda jutht come over to *my* place for that! The fuck wath the dinner for? If you're gonna wine and dine me, you might ath well *fuck me* after it!”

Daph sighed and shook her head and kicked off her remaining shoe. She vaulted over the couch in nothing but her jeans and padded across the hardwood floor to the bedroom. She pushed open the door and glanced inside, turning and gesturing skeptically.

“The fuck you clean the bedroom for if you weren't gonna fuck me in it?”

“We have a housekeeper that comes on Fridays,” Georgia piped in. Darwin was too busy exhaustively burying his face in his hands. Daph raised her eyebrows and glanced into the bedroom again.

“Well...fuck,” She said. “...They do a good job.” Daph shook her head and pointed between the couple. “But...You mean that you two weren't even gonna fuck me tonight? Not even for thith?”

“We were going to go to the *doctor*. Next *week!*”

“Oh *pffft,*” Daph blew a raspberry and waved her arm. “Fuck *that*. Let'th jutht have a three-way inthtead. Get it done right here and now, yknow? It'th cheaper.”

“I mean...” Darwin sat up and shook his head. “We haven't done that since we were in *college*, Daph...”

“Then why not bring it back!?” Daph shouted cheerily. “It’th for a good cauthe, right?” She looked for Georgia to back her up. “*Right?*”

“I’m not against it,” Georgia shrugged. “...Though it really *is* up to you, honey. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“*You know you want to...*” Daph mock-whispered from across the room. “*It’th been in the air all night...*”

“I...I don’t know...” Darwin threw his hands up. “... *Right now? Really?*”

“Wait,” Daph said, pointing and tapping her foot. “...You really don’t know? What time of year it ith?”

“I don’t know...” Darwin shrugged. “March?”

“Nuh-uh,” Daph wagged her finger, grinning. “Hey, Georgia,” she added winking to her friend.

“It’th the *latht week* of March...”

“...Oh... *Ohhhhh*,” Georgia gasped before collapsing into a giggle fit, nearly rolling off the couch onto the floor. When she regained her ability to speak again, she looked over at Darwin and said, “Daph’s in her heat cycle this week.”

Darwin swallowed, a lump forming both in his throat and in his pants.

“I...” he began to say before clearing his throat. “...I did not know that.”

“But part of you diiiiiid,” Daph grinned, pointing at Darwin’s waist. He cleared his throat again and crossed his legs in his seat, looking away and flipping his tail anxiously.

“It’s okay, honey,” Georgia said, leaning across the coffee table to put a hand on his knee. “You just didn’t know, don’t be embarrassed.”

“Ok, ok, look,” Daph sighed, putting her hands on her hips. “We can do thith your way. I can get a cab and go home and rub one out by mythelf. Then, next week, we can go to the doctor and get me knocked up all fuckin’ fancy like.” She took her hands off her hips and pointed toward the bedroom.

“Or, you can think about high school biology and remember that conception is about *four times more likely* when the female is on her heat cycle. Then we can all three of us go into the bedroom and get it done *right now, tonight*, and have a great fuckin' time while we do it.” Daph shrugged, putting her hands back on her hips. “I'm leavin' it all up to you, man. But if you need me, I'm gonna be hanging out in your bedroom, with my pants on your floor, waiting to decide if I wanna take a shower or not with your fancy fuckin' detachable shower-head.” Daph did a little skip-dance on her agile feet and strode through the bedroom door, followed shortly by her pink bra flying out of it and sliding across the floor.

“She's got a point,” Georgia shrugged. “But she's right. Only if you want to.” She stood up and stretched, very purposefully raising her tail and dragging it beneath Darwin's chin as she glanced over her shoulder with half-lidded eyes. “I think I'm going to take a shower first...just to get a little warmed up.” She winked, then sauntered slowly into the bedroom.

Darwin sat locked in his chair, his crossed legs growing more uncomfortable by the second. His hands gripped the armrest like he was going to float away from it. He tried to think, but was distracted by the high-pitched female laughter coming from the bedroom. It died down, and he tried to think, but was distracted by an uncomfortable twinge between his legs. He tried to think, but was distracted by the shower turning on in the other room. Then, after all the distractions, Darwin decided that maybe this wasn't the time for thinking, after all.

“Oh fuck it,” he sighed, standing up and marching toward the bedroom, tearing off his expensive shirt and throwing it to the floor.

Chapter 2

A Group Effort

Darwin walked quickly into the bedroom, with stiff legs and a stiff cock, kicking the door closed behind him. The two other squirrels glanced back at the sound and grinned at his arrival.

“Glad you changed your mind,” Daph said, winking. She sat on the bed wearing nothing but a pair of athletic compression shorts as underwear that nevertheless hugged her thick, powerful thighs appealingly. Her breasts, only slight B-cups, fit her wiry body, with her dark nipples only barely visible in the dim lighting. She sat upright, but with her legs spread slightly apart and a hand in her lap, indicating that she was about to do some warming up whether Darwin was there or not.

The room was dark, lit only by the light of the open bathroom door across the room. Georgia stood in the doorway, looking over her shoulder. She'd quickly ditched her dress into a heap in the corner, leaving her bare back facing her husband. She flashed a smile, her tail waving seductively in the air behind her, revealing the light-purple panties she'd worn that night. Regardless of their *menage-a-trois* that evening, she'd probably been expecting some late-night attention from her husband.

“Maybe I *won't* take a shower,” Georgia said turning back and stepping gracefully back to the bed. She wasn't as cut or muscular as Daph, with soft pudge around some areas of her body, but that only made her all the more appealing to Darwin. Her tits, comfortably sized, bounced and swayed slightly with every step. She smirked, drinking in her husband's expression. Even in the darkness, she knew the way his eyes traveled.

“Ok,” Darwin said, clearing his throat awkwardly. He had been able to hide his anticipation for the most part, but not enough to stop himself from flinging the belt across the room and fumble with his button. “How are we doing this?”

“Well,” Georgia said, as she climbed onto the bed. She crawled over to Daph but kept her eyes on her husband until she leaned down and licked Daph's nipple enticingly. Daph hissed in a sharp breath and curled her toes, her tail flailing beneath her. She pulled away and hooked her fingers into Daph's underwear, tugging on the elastic. “I'd like to pre-heat this oven before we put a bun in it.”

“Holy shit, Georgia,” Daph chuckled, nevertheless completely turned on. Georgia helped remove her shorts, shifting awkwardly over the covers while she worked them down her legs. Before long, Daph's underwear lay hooked around one of her paws like an anklet and her pussy was finally open to the air. The smell of her heat burned sharp in their noses, but none as potently as Darwin's, who was all the more motivated to get his pants off as quickly as possible.

Daph leaned forward to yank the shorts off her ankle, but was pushed back by Georgia climbing on top of her like a spider. Opening Daph's legs, Georgia gracefully thumbed some hair out of her eyes, and flashed a hungry smile up at Daph before burying her face between Daph's thighs. Not one to draw things out too long, she licked apart Daph's lips with her tongue and went straight for her clit, sucking and licking the little button until Daph's silent gasps became high pitched moans and giggles.

“Oooohhh, God damn...” Daph moaned, leaning back on the bed and running her fingers through her friend's hair as Georgia kept herself occupied in and around Daph's pussy. Her pleasure was a warmth filling her blood, occasionally flaring up and making her gasp. Georgia was a sweet, caring, well-meaning, and sometimes awkward girl, but she knew better than anyone that the bedroom was her domain. And she liked it that way.

Darwin, momentarily entranced by Georgia's hungry attack on Daph's cunt, had finally gotten his pants off and freed his throbbing cock like a drowning man bursting through the surface of the water. He sighed, his hand instinctively trailing down the tight, sensitive skin, pulsing hard beneath his fingers. He climbed onto the bed next to Daph so he could look down at his wife eating her out. Daph herself glanced dreamily over at him, eyes traveling down to the rock-solid muscle nearly at her eye level. She reached over and gently wrapped her fingers around it, feeling the hot blood pulsing through it and squeezing it every so often, like testing produce at the supermarket.

“Not that long,” she breathed, between pleased breaths. “But... *thick*...” She

glanced down at Georgia, coming up from between Daph's legs for a moment of air. "I'll bet you fit him perfectly, Georgia."

"More like *he fits me*," Georgia said. She trailed a hand up through Daph's fur, stopping just below her stomach. "Don't worry...it'll be more than enough to put our baby in your tummy, Daphodille." Keeping her hand on her stomach, she went back down and licked Daph's pussy once more from bottom to top, taking time to explore the flexing muscles and breathe in the spice of her dripping, heated sex. As Georgia played with Daph's clit some more, she looked up to watch her friend's expression tightening, her teeth clenched, her eyes closing, her head lolling back, the slight bucking of her hips to indicate the incoming wave of orgasm just over the horizon.

"Not yet." Georgia stated, pulling away and leaving Daph panting. Georgia wiped her mouth with the back of her arm and plucked Daph's underwear off her paw, balling it up and tossing it over her shoulder. "Female orgasms help with conception. We wouldn't want one of those to go to waste."

"Fuck, you are really getting into thith," Daph breathed, her senses coming back to her.

"Why shouldn't I?" Georgia said, crawling forward. She leaned down and kissed Daph's muscular stomach, licking her. "You're going to be leaving tomorrow carrying my baby, after all." She chuckled, flipping her hair back as she sat up. "Sorry. That was rude of me." She reached over and gripped Darwin's cock, giving it one more pump as she looked him in the eye. "*Our* baby." Taking another deep breath, she leaned down and effortlessly swallowed nearly his entire length down her throat.

"G-gah..." Darwin moaned, as if he was about to say something, but was too distracted to

remember what it was past the first syllable. His cock was almost hurting with the pressure. He knew he could pop off at any moment, but wanted to hold on as long as he could.

"I wath thinkin about givin you one of thothe mythelf," Daph said, nodding. "But, uh..." she >opened her mouth and dragged her tongue across her overbite. "...that doethn't uthually work out so great."

While deep-throating Darwin, Georgia reached out blindly and grabbed Daph's shin, yanking her farther down the bed until Georgia's hand could reach Daph's waist. Then, without taking her attention away from Darwin's cock, she slid three fingers into Daph's pussy and effortlessly continued what she had began. Daph grunted pleurably, rocking into Georgia's fingers in a way she couldn't with her mouth. Darwin made a similar noise, leaning back and curling his fingers into his wife's golden hair as she blew him with the expertise she'd learned after four-and-a-half years of healthy marriage.

While Daph remained in somewhat uncharted territory, Georgia played her cunt like an instrument, flexing her fingers into any and all shapes to get a reaction out of her. It was hard work splitting her brain between the two of them, but rewarding. After all, neither of them bothered to look where Georgia's left hand was buried. Daph and Darwin lay nearly immobile beside one another on the bed, squirming softly and quietly while both of them were being masterfully stimulated by their very talented mutual acquaintance. Daph reached over, in a pleasure-drunk state of mind, and began to twist and play with one of Darwin's nipples. He barely noticed the contact, but he *did* notice the extra shock of ecstasy traveling down his body.

But just as the two of them reared back, tensed up, getting ready for that final moment of release, Georgia stopped.

She sat up between them, wiping her mouth off on the back of her arm and her fingers on the bedspread. Stepping off the bed momentarily, she finally slipped off her panties, which Darwin and Daph never noticed were almost completely soaked through, and tossed them away without a second glance.

“You're a...you're such a bitch,” Daph sighed, laughing. Newly naked, Georgia laughed and climbed back onto the bed between them, sitting back on her knees while both hands played over their bodies.

“Did you really think I'd let either of you finish that early?” Georgia teased. “We haven't even gotten to the good part yet.”

Taking her hands off of Daph, Georgia sat up and straddled her husband, sitting on Darwin's stomach just above his cock, already dripping in pre-cum.

“Hey baby,” she said, looking into his eyes and dropping her dominant facade for a moment.

“You doing good?”

“Y-yeah...” Darwin groaned, penis still throbbing as his impending build up died back down.

Georgia smiled warmly, gently touching his face and playfully pinching one of his long ears.

“I know it's weird for you,” she continued, her tail twitching. “But thank you. It means a lot to me.”

“I know it does,” he said, reaching up and cupping her chin in his palm. She nuzzled against his hand, then leaned down to kiss him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

She kissed him once more on the forehead before sitting up, tossing her hair back with a single motion, and putting on her sultry bedroom eyes.

“Just because Daph here is getting the baby,” she said, standing up on the bed to tower over Darwin, “doesn't mean she gets to have *all* the fun.” While Darwin still laid flat on his back, his cock stood erect and strong beneath his wife. She lowered herself down, grabbed it with gentle fingers, and directed it into her pussy as she sank down its length with a long, satisfied sigh. Darwin inhaled sharply through his teeth, then groaned contentedly. Georgia laughed deep in her throat, sitting immobile with Darwin's cock speared into her. She clenched once, making the two of them wince in sharp pleasure.

“Don't cum,” she breathed, bracing herself against his chest. “Don't cum. Don't waste it.”

Darwin said nothing, only nodding as he gripped the bedspread between his fingers. Georgia put both her arms on his chest, fingers sliding through his fur while his hot length inside of her beat in unison with the heart in his chest.

“I'm...I'm trying...” Darwin gasped, his face contorting with effort. Even without stroking, the two of them could feel his cock twitching inside of Georgia's slick pussy. His tail, half hanging off the bed, thrashed helplessly as he tried to regain some semblance of self-control. Meanwhile, Georgia watched him struggle, then slowly stood, releasing his cock from inside her with a wet *schlik* sound.

“I think you're ready,” Georgia said with finality.

Darwin gasped, breathing heavily like he'd been suffocated. The pressure inside his cock began to lessen the moment his skin hit the open air, though still slick with his wife's natural fluids. His cock visibly throbbed in the air, twitching rhythmically with the pounding of his heartbeat. Even his balls were starting to shudder from the stimulation.

But the moment of relief was short-lived. In the few seconds since Georgia had dismounted him, Daph scurried up in her place, crouched over him with fingers spreading her lower lips apart in hungry anticipation.

“Wait, wait...” Darwin interjected, holding up a hand. Daph took her hand off her pussy and braced against her muscled thighs, couching over him and waiting. He leaned his head back, waiting for his breathing to subside and some of the blood to drain from his solid rock of a penis. Daph was remarkably patient, considering the pure, animal lust in her bloodstream. She whipped her tail behind her wildly, drummed her fingers against her thigh, but said nothing in protest. Darwin could feel the heat from her sex breathing against his cock, the soft folds of her pussy literally dripping and waiting for the moment he could spear into them, finally relieving Daphodille of her seasonal heat.

“Okay,” Darwin nodded, looking up at Daph. “Okay, I'm ready.”

Daph grinned, then began to lower herself on top of his cock. She moaned softly as the head pushed apart her labia and finally slid inside her. Darwin felt the bare, wet flesh against his own, throbbing and wet and hot. He breathed deep the smell of her heat, his animal brain telling her that the squirrel on top of him was ready, willing, and most importantly, fertile.

He couldn't take it anymore. Against his judgment, the dam of his self-control burst, finally releasing the ravenous lust he'd buried inside himself the entire evening. Without needing to lean forward, he reached down with his long arms and grabbed Daphodille by the hips. Then, with a hard, powerful buck of his own hips, he pulled her down and speared his entire cock, up to the base, inside of her.

Daph shouted in a delightfully feminine moan of pleasure as Darwin's cock slammed into her, spreading her pussy wide open with his thick girth. Hormones and chemicals swam around her head.

Lights flashed behind her eyes as the sudden and violent pleasure raged between her legs. She wondered if she was going to pass out.

Darwin withdrew, hands still on Daph's hips, only to once again drill into her with another pump of his waist. She moaned, more ready for it this time, leaning back and trailing one hand down her trim stomach and the other running fingers through her hair. When Darwin pulled back out, she raised herself up slightly to counter, meeting his thrust with a downward motion of her own, taking a few more thrusts before they finally had a rhythm between them. Their sex was hard, thick, and almost angry, and the two of them loved it.

Georgia had been sitting on the other end of the bed, watching Darwin and Daph rut into each other, one hand between her legs to occupy herself. After a few minutes, as their fucking began to speed up, the smells and sounds becoming even more wet and hot in the air, she crawled on her hands and knees over to the pair, consumed by lust.

“Looks like he's finally getting into it,” she teased, running a trail of fingers over Darwin's shirtless chest. He slowed, glancing at his wife while still plowing into Daph. She leaned down and kissed him, with one hand trailing down to his nipple and twisting it. His cock twinged with the extra stimulation and he grunted, momentarily stiffening beneath Daph.

“Make sure to fill her up,” Georgia whispered into his long ear, but loud enough to for Daph to overhear. “She doesn't get to leave until I'm sure she's pregnant.” She flipped her hair and glanced over her shoulder at Daph, her eyes half-lidded and the shadow of a grin on her face. She sat up and crawled over to her, sitting up on her knees and watching as Darwin fucked Daphodille like his life depended on it. Georgia softly and delicately traced her hand between Daph's breasts, encircling one of her nipples with a finger, before resting her palm against her belly, hands riding along with her as she humped Darwin.

“I can't wait, Daph,” Georgia said, breathless. She looked down and slid her palm in a circle around Daph's stomach. “I can't wait until you're big and round...when you'll swell up so huge, swaying when you walk, bouncing when Darwin fucks you again and again. You'll be asking for it all the time, I'm sure. You won't be able to look around your belly, won't be able to touch yourself without our help.”

Georgia sighed, her hand moving even lower, right above her husband's thrusting cock, where presumably Daph's uterus was. "Ohhhhh he's going to swell you up so *good*, Daphodille..."

Crawling over toward her husband's head, she stood up on the bed, stepped over, and knelt right above Darwin's face, still facing Daph. In what must have been a very practiced position, she held it while Darwin leaned up and began to eat out Georgia's pussy while still plowing into Daph. She moaned, sighing in pleasure as she threw her hair back, his tongue lapping over her sensitive cunt. As she writhed over his face, she looked Daphodille straight in the eye while she rode Darwin's tongue.

"How does it feel to be our breeding bitch?" Georgia breathed, a soft giggle coming from her throat as Darwin's tongue slid over her clit. "You're gonna be pregnant before you know it, Daph. Darwin's sperm count is *exceptionally* high. Maybe you'll get to carry our *twins*, if you're lucky."

She gasped again as Darwin craned his neck to suck on her from beneath, one hand gripping her sizable breast. "Ohhh...You're...You're so *hard* and *slim*...I can't wait until you're *soft*...When those cute little tits of yours start to swell up with milk and your belly gets round and heavy with my baby...When you'll be so *soft* and *round* and *helpless*... Doesn't that sound so nice?"

Darwin gritted his teeth and suddenly stopped thrusting, gripping Daph's thighs while he visibly strained, his muscled tightening. After a moment, he sighed, relaxing his body, and began to thrust into Daph again. Georgia laughed and got off of her husband's face, leaning down to whisper into his ear.

"You getting there, baby?" She said, pushing his hair away from his eyes. "Flip her over. Better chance of conception."

Darwin nodded. Without pulling out of Daph, he sat up and turned the two of them around, still balls-deep inside of her. It left Daph on her back with Darwin on his knees, looming above her, her hips and legs elevated off the bed and angled down. He took a deep breath and resumed his rutting, harder and more controlled than before, slamming into her and shaking the bed with every thrust. Daph slid against the soft bedspread, bouncing against Darwin's cock, her mouth hanging open as the life was fucked out of her, making soft squeaking noises.

She had no idea how many times she'd come, or if she was just in the middle of a continuous, ten minute long orgasm.

Georgia once again crawled up next to her, laying flat on the bed and whispering directly in her ear. "You're gonna look so cute," she said. "All round and full with our baby." She glanced up at Darwin, who's eyes were closed with concentration as his tail freely whipped around behind him. "Are you ready to be fertilized, Daph? I think he's close..."

Oh god, Daph thought. This is the hottest thing I've ever done.

"I said, are you ready?" Georgia said. "Do you want him to get you pregnant? Last chance, you know. Do you want to be knocked up full of our baby, Daph?"

"... *Y-Yeth...* " Daph muttered, right before another exhausted moan came out of her.

"Don't tell *me* that, Daph," Georgia said. "Tell *him*."

"*Yeth!*" She shouted out loud. Daph wasn't typically vocal during sex, but that night was an overwhelming exception. "*Yeth yeth yeth yeth yeth!*"

"Yes what, Daph? Tell him what you want," Georgia encouraged.

"Oh *fuck...* Fuck...Knock me up, Darwin!" Daph shouted, not caring who heard them. She writhed on the bed with new energy as she screamed. "I want your fucking baby tho bad! Get me pregnant, get me pregnant *right fucking now!* "

As if commanded to, Darwin stopped thrusting, shuddering deeply in his shoulders, the drilled into her two more powerful times before a thick warmth began to flood out of his twitching cock. She felt it slide down inside, deeper than she'd ever felt before, filling every inch of her. Darwin shouted, another spurt of his cock shooting another load farther into her, even more than the first surge. He slammed into her two more times, erupting more cum with every thrust. It filled her pussy more than she thought it could hold. As she felt the thick fluid pool in her lower stomach, Daph suddenly felt her own muscles contract with a thick, meaty orgasm of her own, crying out in the bedroom alongside Darwin.

Panting, staring at the ceiling, Darwin wobbled once and put a hand to his head,

a distant expression on his face. Daph could feel him getting soft inside of her. He pulled out with a wet *pop* and fell back on the bed, his head swimming. Daph's legs fell flat as she panted as well, her paws just barely cresting over the side. But as she relaxed, she heard Georgia grunting softly as she climbed between her legs. She sat cross-legged between them, raising Daph's knees to drape over her shoulders, angling her hips downward like before.

“I've heard this helps conception, too,” Georgia said, cheerily. “I don't know if it does but...” she frowned and shrugged. “No reason not to try, right?” Daph nodded wordlessly, her head falling back onto the bedspread. Georgia ran her fingers through Daph's belly fur, imagining she could feel the warmth of her husband's seed inside, swimming eagerly toward her eggs. “You're probably already a mommy, Daph,” she said, grinning. “I'll bet you're already pregnant right now.”

“Let'th...let'th hope...” Daph breathed.

“Well...” Georgia shrugged. “We can't be sure with just *one time*, can we?” Georgia winked at Daph's expression, grinning as she patted her flat belly.

“They say third time's the charm, after all...or fourth...or fifth...”

Chapter 3

Drawing A Line

Daph sat in the tiny employee bathroom in the back of the diner, holding a small box in one hand while she sat on the toilet. She didn't carry a purse, so she instead had to hide the rectangle inside her ball of clothing when she changed into her work clothes. The minute she felt pressure building up in her bladder, she sprinted off to the bathroom with barely a word to her boss Antonio. At least all the almond milk she'd been drinking was starting to pay off.

But as she sat in the only bathroom with a lock on the door, she couldn't help but hesitate. Daph tapped the box against her other hand, stalling while she dug to the root of her anxiety. Her period was nearly two weeks late, which was the impetus for buying the test in the first place. She hadn't told Darwin or Georgia, and simply went about her days as normally as she could. But last weekend, when she'd had to suddenly lurch out of the shower to throw up in the toilet, her willful ignorance began to slip. She'd wake up tired, get sick at the smell of breakfast food, and almost choked up at a schmaltzy commercial for allergy medication.

Daph slowly opened the tab on the box, pulling out the long white-and-pink stick, cringing at it.

Was that how it was going to be? Almost a year of soft pastel colors and patronizingly handwritten fonts, treating her like delicate china? Spending half her time over the toilet and the other half in doctor's offices? Trying to keep up with all her gym buddies while waddling around in sweat pants and a mumu? The thought made her want to vomit even more than the morning sickness.

Do it for her, Daph thought. She sighed.

She jumped as a meaty hand knocked hard against the bathroom door, as if it was trying to bash its way through.

“*Daphydill,*” came Antonio's thick accented voice. “*Customers.*”

“I'm on the john!” She shouted. “Gimme a minute!” Glancing down at the test in her hand, she looked at the box and added, “Okay, more like two minuteth!”

“You have thirty seconds!” Antonio rumbled as he plodded off down the hallway. Daph rolled her eyes. She wondered if she could catch secondhand bullshit from all the smoke he blew. Uncapping the paper end of the test, she took a deep breath, held it in, then slowly let it out through her nose. It was now or never.

Two minutes after awkwardly peeing on a piece of plastic for as long as she thought she needed, Daph paced around the tiny bathroom with the test on the counter, chewing on one of her claws. She stepped on top of the toilet, then braced her legs between the tiny walls and held herself above the ground in a split. She dropped to the ground, then flipped up into a handstand, not even thinking to worry about the dirty floor of the bathroom. If she stretched, she could almost reach her paws to the ceiling. She held the position, blood rushing down into her head, until the two-minute alarm on her phone began to beep on the sink. Daph paused a moment, then lowered herself to the ground and anxiously walked over to the sink.

She picked up her phone first and dropped it into her pocket. She washed her hands next, for the first time following the forty-five second rule that her boss always harped on them about. Next, she dried her hands off with a handful of paper towels, her heart pounding in her chest harder than it did after a half-mile sprint. Then, she looked at her reflection in the mirror, staring into her green eyes, trying to take a mental snapshot of her life exactly at that moment. For better or worse, it was probably about to change forever. People always had a tough time at guessing her age, but for the first time, she agreed with them. She looked so *young*.

Taking a deep breath, Daph picked up the pregnancy test, spun it around her fingers for a few seconds, then finally held it up to her face.

Two lines.

Pregnant.

“Holy fuck,” she said out loud, her heart skipping a beat. She staggered back,

taking a series of deep breaths that only helped make her more dizzy. She held both her hands to her lower stomach, where she imagined her uterus to be. It was a fact. Daph was no longer alone in her own body. She laughed nervously, imagining hanging a 'No Vacancy' sign over her vagina.

“*Daphydill,*” Antonio shouted from the kitchen. “*Cus-to-mers.*”

“I'm comin, god damn it!” Daph screamed, wanting to punch the old fuck in the mouth for ruining her moment. The thought of putting on a face to deal with customers seemed impossible. Would they be able to tell? Did she already have a little paunch to her stomach she hadn't noticed? Did she have 'the glow' everybody always talked about it. She didn't know whether to laugh, cry, scream, vomit, or escape out the back door. Ultimately, she did none of those things, instead straightening her uniform, practicing a placid, friendly expression in the mirror, and slipping out the door with the test still in hand.

At the end of the hallway, she spied Antonio around the corner, slicing meat. The middle-aged armadillo glanced at her, then huffed impatiently.

“You take so long in there, I think you died,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, well, I'm here,” Daph sniffed, quickly stuffing the pregnancy test into her pocket. “How many?”

“Just two,” Antonio said. “But I brought them drinks myself because you take too long.”

“Oh boo-fucking-hoo,” Daph rolled her eyes, picking up a couple of menus from a table next to the kitchen door.

“I think I am putting a *camera* in there,” Antonio nodded, gesturing to the bathroom with his knife. “Just to know what you are all *doing* that take so long.”

“That'th *illegal*, dude,” Daph said, glancing over her shoulder.

“But that is how much time you waste in there,” Antonio said, gesturing emphatically. He might have had more to say, but Daph rolled her eyes and left the kitchen while he continued to babble to himself.

Combing her fingers through her hair to look a little more presentable, she

backed into the dining room, tail-first. In the left hand corner was the quiet badger that usually came in after lunch and spent a couple hours with his laptop and coffee. She had just filled him up before going to the bathroom, so she knew he was fine. Scanning over the room, her eyes fell on the couple sitting at the window-side table, one of which was kneeling in her chair and waving her entire arm excitedly at Daph. She sighed, smiling quietly to herself as she strode across the room toward them, heart still beating against her chest like it wanted to escape. The pregnancy test in her pocket felt as heavy as a brick.

“Hey assholeth,” she said to Darwin and Georgia, setting menus down in front of them. “We ran outta food. All we got left is sauerkraut.”

“Then I’ll take a plate full of it,” Georgia giggled. She took Daph’s hand in her own and kissed it, entwining their fingers together and grinning, flapping her tail excitedly behind her chair.

“Thorry Darwin,” Daph teased. “That meant we ran outta *caviar*, too.”

“What makes you think I actually like caviar?” He said, glancing up from the menu. Daph shrugged.

“I dunno. It’th jutht fancy food. You like a lot of fancy food.” Daph winked at him, then pulled out her order pad and pen from her apron pocket. “Nah, for real, what do you guyth want?”

“We didn’t really need to order anything,” Darwin said. “We’ve already eaten.”

“We just wanted to see you!” Georgia said. “We haven’t heard from you in almost a month!”

“Yeah...thorry, I’ve been buthy with work and shit,” Daph said, scratching the back of her head. “I’ve been tryin to get my free-runnin group back together. Or at leatht for thome kind of gym meetup. A lot of the founderth are all thpread out thethe dayth. *And* I’ve been tryin to get into thith acrobaticth gym in Brooklyn. It’th expensive, but it lookth fuckin dope.” Daph glanced over her shoulder toward the kitchen, then brought up her order pad again. “But I gotta get you thomethin or Antonio’th gonna give me shit for it. You want a drink?”

“I’ll just have some water,” Darwin said, pulling on his shirt collar. “It’s *hot* out there today.”

“Fuck yeah it ith,” Daph nodded, scribbling down his order. “Bout the only reathon I'm glad I'm in here right now.” She turned to Georgia and winked. “How 'bout you, thugar tits?”

“Do you have cherry coke?” Georgia said, hopping in her seat. “I don't know why, but I've been wanting cherry coke for *so long*.”

“I'll thee what we got,” Daph scribbled down. “Gimme a thecond.” She slipped the pad into her back pocket and rounded the tables, taking a second to check on the badger in the booth along the far wall. He was fine. She went behind the main counter and poured the couple's drinks, dropping a handful of cherries in a glass of Coke to make up for what they didn't have. Checking over her shoulder to make sure Darwin and Georgia were engaged in conversation with each other, Daph pulled out a stack of napkins and discreetly began to specially arrange them.

“Alright alright alright,” Daph said, bringing to drinks back to their table. “Here'th your water,” she handed the clear glass to Darwin, who nodded as he took it. “And here'th your...uhh...cherry coke.” Daph set down the soda full of cherries on the table. Georgia happily scooped up one of them with a spoon and popped it into her mouth.

“Purfecht,” she mumbled around it, giving a thumbs-up sign.

“Cool,” Daph nodded. Fishing in her pocket, she pulled out a bundle of napkins, tied together with twine into a makeshift bow. “And here'th your other order.”

Darwin and Georgia both stared at the bundle, then glanced up at her.

“We didn't order anything else,” Darwin protested. Daph clasped her hands behind her back and clicked her tongue against her teeth, beaming.

“Yeah, you did.”

On the other side of the table Georgia made a sound like a high-pitched sob, then a cough-like squeal of excitement. She had torn open the package, revealing the positive pregnancy test. Kicking her chair out of the way and gripping the test in her hand, she leapt out of her seat and into Daph's arms in a powerful hug. She gripped Daph's shoulders hard enough that Georgia lifted her legs in the air and kicked them while Daph held her entire weight in the air.

Darwin glanced between them, alarmed and confused. Daph reached down and managed to wrench the pregnancy test out of Georgia's hand and pass it to him. While Georgia screamed excitedly into Daph's chest, bursting into happy tears, Darwin simply stared at the positive result with his hand on his head, looking like the wind had been knocked out of him.

“Oh my God...Oh my God...Daphodille...” Georgia cried, her tail whipping behind her as she hopped in place. “I can't...I can't believe it...Oh my God, Daph,” She hugged her friend with a surprising amount of strength to come from the tiny squirrel. “Thank you...thank you so...this is the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me...I'm so...I'm just...I...”

“Don't thank me yet,” Daph said, leaning back to speak. “At least wait til he's out of me to do that.”

“Right...you're right...hehehehe,” Georgia giggled. She pulled away and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands, beaming at Daph with her bright smile. Walking over to her husband, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and squeezed, the two of them staring at the pregnancy test.

“You're going to be a daddy,” Georgia whispered into Darwin's ear, kissing him on the cheek.

He breathed like he was trying to say something, but no words came out. Instead, he set the plastic stick on the table and pushed it away, drinking huge gulps from his water to keep from passing out.

Georgia reached over and dragged a chair to the side of the table and motioned Daph to sit in it. Ever trying to be the coolest person in the room, Daph spun the chair around and sat backwards in it, leaning her arms against the back of the chair.

“How...How long have you known?” Georgia said, sniffing and still wiping her eyes.

“I jutht took that tetht today,” Daph said. “Though...I kinda guessed it before now.”

“And you didn't tell us?” Georgia said.

“Oh, I...I just wanted to be thure,” Daph said, shrugging. “I didn't wanna get your hopeth up if it didn't take, yknow?” She picked up what was left of Darwin's water and took a sip, then set it back down and winked at him. “Though after that night...I don't think there wath any doubt about it.” She leaned over and punched him playfully on the shoulder. “I wath probably already pregnant the minute I left your apartment, you thtud you.”

Darwin nodded wordlessly, taking a deep and shaky breath.

“Are you excited?” Georgia asked him, taking his hands into hers from across the table.

“I'm...” Darwin said, then swallowed, staring at Georgia. “...I'm a father...”

“You are, honey...” Georgia's nodded, another set of tears in her eyes.

“Fuck yeah you are,” Daph nodded, gripping his shoulder happily. “Well,” she added, “almotht. Give it a few monthth.” She grinned behind her buck teeth and shook him, excitedly.

“I can't believe it's happening...” Georgia sighed, sniffing and trying to regain her composure.

“I got a toilet fulla puke and a thore back to tell you that it *ith*,” Daph nodded, pointing down at her stomach.

“Are you okay? Oh no, I didn't think about that,” Georgia said, grabbing Daph's arm.

“Pfft, it'th nothin,” Daph shrugged. “I only threw up like...twice. Three timeth. No big deal.”

“Are you sure?” Georgia pleaded.

“If I don't work out til I puke at leatht once a month, I don't feel like I'm workin hard enough,” Daph laughed, flexing her muscles. She glanced over her shoulder once to check that Antonio was still busy doing prep in the back. Turning to Darwin, she raised an eyebrow, noting that he was still staring into his hands in shock.

“Yo,” Daph said, poking him in the shoulder. “You okay?”

Darwin looked up, his mouth hanging half-open, his long ears twitching. He glanced between the two women, from Daph's confused expression to Georgia's warm smile at his shock. Without a word, he reached over with his long arms and dragged Daphodille's chair next to his own with unexpected strength, while Daph herself simply went along for the ride. Once she was close enough, Darwin threw his arms over the confused squirrel, pulling her into a tight, enveloping hug and burying his face into her neck.

“Uhh...oh,” Daph mumbled. She patted him on the shoulders awkwardly, looking to Georgia for help, who only giggled quietly. Daph had never felt that kind of affection from Darwin and was more surprised he was doing it in public than anything else.

“Thank you, Daphodille,” he said, face muffled into her shoulder. He squeezed her harder. “I'm going to be a dad...”

“I know, big guy,” Daph said, still patting his back while being crushed by his overwhelming hug. “I know...But uh...let'th wait a couple monthth before tryin to thqueeze the baby out, okay?” She wiggled her fingers under his arms and was able to pry him off with a little effort. Darwin sniffed, blinking rapidly as he pulled away.

“I'm...I'm sorry,” he said, clearing his throat and regaining his composure. “I'm alright, I'm finished.”

“Darwin doesn't know what to do with big life changes,” Georgia explained. “You just have to give him a few minutes to process it. Remember when he almost flubbed our vows?” She laughed and reached across the table, taking his hands. “I had to mouth them out to him just so we could get on with the ceremony.”

“I mohtly remember bein' pissed off you made me wear a *dress*,” Daph grumbled.

“Are you still complaining about that? You looked *cute*, Daph!”

“I woulda looked cuter in a tux...” Daph mumbled, even softer. She reached down to her stomach and lifted her apron to scratch herself, nonchalantly.

“Oh! *Oh!*” Georgia squealed, pointing down. “Are you showing? Are you showing yet!?”

“Huh,” Daph said, looking down. “I don't really know.” Pushing back her chair, Daph stood up and glanced over her shoulder to check if Antonio was watching, then began to untie her apron. Once it was off, she untucked her shirt and pulled it up to her sternum, revealing her white tank top underneath that clung snugly to her figure. “Am I?” She asked, turning to the side.

Darwin and Georgia both leaned to the middle of the table, cocking their heads simultaneously.

“I can't tell,” Darwin frowned, shaking his head. Georgia reached over and pulled up Daph's undershirt, exposing the tan fur of her belly.

“H-hey!” Daph shouted, tail flicking in protest.

“I just wanna see!” Georgia said, running her palm over her stomach. “It's *my* baby, after all.”

“*Daphydill,*” shouted Antonio from behind the counter, making the three of them jump in surprise. He slammed his hand-towel onto the counter and pointed at her. “You are *no* to be stripping for the customers! You are to be doing that in *other* job!” He huffed and marched back into the kitchen.

“I wathn't thtripping for the... *Hey!*” Daph turned and shouted, shirt still pulled up. “What the fuck do you mean *other* job?” She balled up her fists indignantly, ready for a fight, but the armadillo was already gone.

“*Tch...*leatht now I can blame it on *hormoneth* when I yell at that mother fucker.”

“Maybe it isn't such a good idea to work in such a stressful environment anymore,” Darwin said. “Especially not while you're carrying.”

“That'th jutht Antonio, though,” Daph said, waving her arm dismissively. “Yelling at him ith more stress *relief* than anything.” She turned to the side and looked down at her stomach again. “Tho, you thee anything?”

“Hold your breath,” Georgia said, putting another hand against her. Daph obliged, taking a deep breath and holding as still as possible. Georgia frowned,

gliding her finger in a circle around Daph's belly button. "Are you pushing out?" She asked. Daph shook her head. Georgia's expression lit up like the sun as she looked down at Daph's stomach again and spread her fingers over a small, barely discernible paunch to her lower stomach. "Here! I think that's it!"

Daph let go of her held breath, the air pushing out her stomach a little farther. Darwin leaned forward and peered at her profile with one eye. He poked a finger right into the spot his wife had marked.

"Right there," he nodded. "That wasn't there a month ago."

"Yeah, you'd remember, right?" Daph winked at Darwin, who blushed and glanced away. She brought her hands to her stomach and felt the little bulge Darwin and Georgia had discovered. She nodded as well, making a clicking noise with her tongue. "Yep. That'th it alright." She frowned, pressing a finger into the soft bump. "...Thith suckth. I thought it'd be more...I dunno. That I'd look *pregnant*. I just look kinda fat."

"If that's your idea of *fat*, Daphodille, then your standards are way too high," Georgia said, helping to tug down Daph's shirt.

"Well, it ain't what I'm uthed to," she said. She crammed the tail of her shirt back into her pants, but refrained from putting on her apron before sitting down.

"This'll be new for all three of us," Georgia nodded, glancing around the table. "But we'll be with you every step of the way, Daph. You can count on that."

"Whatever. I got thith," Daph said, with mock bravado. "Girllh less badass than me have babieth every day. What do I got to be afraid of?" She grinned, then clapped Georgia on the shoulder. "But for real...thank you. Thith ith...uh..." Daph sighed, then rubbed her developing belly. "...Thith ith gonna be *weird*. I'm gonna need thomebody to lean on."

"Of course, Daph," Georgia beamed. "It's the least we can do to thank you for what you're doing."

"Don't worry about that," Daph shrugged. "Anything for you guyth."

"On that note," Darwin said, pulling out his work phone from his pocket, "we've got a plan set up, assuming that conception went as planned."

“And it *did*,” Georgia added, happily.

“Yes, it did,” Darwin agreed, in a much more matter-of-fact tone. “So, now that Daphodille is officially pregnant, we can move on to setting up a real agreement.” He pulled up a document on his smartphone, then slid it across the table for Daph to look at. “This is our official agreement for your surrogacy. I've checked with a few lawyers and all we to do is have a written agreement that you'll carry the baby to term and give over rights to us on birth.”

“*Fancy, fancy*,” Daph responded, sarcastically. She picked up the phone and scanned the document carefully.

“Take your time to read it,” Darwin nodded.

“Yeah, of courthe,” Daph snorted. “I been fucked over by too many landordth to not read a contract when I...” She trailed off, peering at the tiny screen, using both fingers to enlarge the document. After a moment of silence, she looked up with shock written over her face. “*Thirty thouthand dollarth? !*”

“Oh, right, that,” Darwin nodded. “Most surrogates charge 24,000 a year, paid out in about two thousand a month. But in the interest of you being a personal friend and your pregnancy being a bit...eh...'off the record,' we decided to add in an extra five hundred a month.”

“You mean you're gonna *pay me?!*” Daph exclaimed, pointing at the phone and glancing between Darwin and Georgia, who looked at one another in confusion.

“Um...yes?” Darwin said.

“Did...did you not know that?” Georgia asked.

“Fuck, I thought it wath like...a *favor* or thomethin...” Daph said sliding the phone across the table and bringing a hand to her head.

“I mean...” Darwin said, tapping his fingers together. “...If you'd *rather* do it for free...”

“*Hell* no, motherfucker!” Daph shouted. “*You're* the one that brought it up! I want my damn money!”

“You'll get your damn money, Daph,” Georgia laughed. “We were planning on paying you from the beginning.”

“Um...yes,” Darwin nodded. Even after five years, he never got used to Daph's more 'excited' moments.

“God damn...” Daph breathed, leaning back. “Havin your baby for thirty thouthand...I'd cut my fuckin *tail* off for thirty thouthand butt-fucking dollarth!”

“It's not just that easy, Daph,” Georgia explained. “You'll *really* have to take care of yourself. Don't do anything that could hurt the baby. A lot of this money might go toward just taking care of yourself in the later months when you can't work.”

“I wath gonna do that anyway, Georgia. You know the kinda shape I keep mythelf in.” Daph flexed her arms, displaying a pair of shockingly cut biceps beneath the soft covering of her fur.

“Keep reading,” Darwin said, pushing the phone toward her. Daph blew a raspberry and pushed it back toward him.

“Georgia can tell you I never did any of the class readingth back in high thschool. Jutht gimme the 'Cliff'th Noteth'.”

“Well...um...” Darwin cleared his throat, then picked up the phone himself and adjusted his glasses. “Alright...Well, in addition to signing over parental rights to the baby, you'll need to follow a diet and exercise regimen set up by us and your doctor.”

“I don't know if I have inthurance, though...” Daph mumbled.

“I'll take care of that!” Georgia interjected. “The hospital has a world-class gynecology program, and my friend Tara is one of the *top-rated* OBs in the *city*. She owes me a couple favors, so we can put you under our insurance. We need to.”

“Well god damn,” Daph chuckled. “I'm thtartin to feel like royalty.”

“It won't be easy, Daphodille,” Darwin said. “That's our baby you're carrying. We really need you to take it seriously.”

“Who sayth I'm not!?” Daph said, throwing her arms in the air.

“Well...” Darwin said, putting away his phone and sighing. “If you say so, Daph...”

“And I *do* fuckin thay tho!” Daph said, patting her stomach. “Thith little nut-muncher hath himthelf the betht apartment in the fuckin city right now.”

“I'll go ahead and get Tara to take you on as a patient and get you a first appointment,” Georgia continued, ignoring Daph and Darwin's exchange. “Would some time next week be okay?”

“Maybe. I gotta talk to him,” Daph gestured over her shoulder toward the kitchen. “Old bathtard wouldn't let me thkip a day of work even if my goddamn apartment was on fire.”

“Just let us know a date when you can. We really should get you looked at as soon as possible.” Georgia gripped Daph's hand again and bounced excitedly. “You'll *really* like Tara, though. She's got this really dry sense of humor and she's so smart and really discreet. She'll be perfect.”

“Can't wait to meet her,” Daph nodded. She paused, then frowned. She and Darwin glanced confusedly at each other, then at Georgia.

“Baby, what do you mean 'discreet?’” Darwin asked. Georgia paused, her mouth half open, glancing between the two of them. Her tail twitched behind her.

“Oh...I mean...” she took Darwin's hand and answered to him. “We don't know who we're going to tell yet, right? I mean, it's just so *early*. Even *Daph* just found out.”

“Oh, right, right,” Darwin nodded, glancing at Daph, who only shrugged in response. She quickly sat up straight, her ears twitching to the sound of heavy footfalls coming to the kitchen.

“Aw, fuck.”

“*Daphydill*,” Antonio shouted, once again. “You sit down and have chit-chat with customers and not even take their order!?”

“They didn't want anything!” Daph called over her shoulder. “They just wanted thome drinkth!”

“Strike *two*, Daphydill!” Antonio shouted, waving a finger. “Strike *two*!” He stomped his foot one more time, huffed, then marched back into the kitchen. Daph grumbled and rolled her eyes.

“I gotta go,” she sighed. “Once he startth pulling out the 'striketth,' then he might actually write me up.” She hopped up from her chair and picked up her apron to tie it back on. As she did, she paused with hands over her stomach, the tiny bump impossible to miss now that she knew it was there. She looked up at the parents-to-be with a soft, encouraging smile. “Truthth me, guyth. I'll take good care of your baby. You'll have him before you know it.” Daph winked, flipped her tail excitedly, then bounded off to the kitchen.

Darwin couldn't help but smile. He still wasn't entirely sure about Daphodille, but she seemed to be taking the surrogacy seriously, if only for their sake. He glanced at his wife, who still had the ghost of a smile on her face, but was idly stirring a spoon in her drink, her eyes downcast.

“Georgia?” Darwin said.

She didn't look up right away, her smile completely falling away as she spooned one of the cherries into her mouth. She pointedly avoided his gaze and stared out the window at the passing New Yorkers on the street. Georgia finally, after a long silence, looked Darwin in the eye and talked softly around her cherry.

“I wish it was me,” she mumbled. She took a sip of her drink, swallowing another cherry. “It should be me...” Georgia sighed dejectedly and looked out the window again. She put a hand to her head and shook it, as if physically casting off the thoughts. “I'm sorry...I know, this is supposed to be a good thing and I'm supposed to be happy...and I *am*...but at the same time...”

She took a sip of her drink, swallowing more than just soda as she did.

Darwin blinked, waiting quietly to see if she was finished. After a few seconds of silence, he reached across the table and pulled her hands into his, waiting for Georgia to look over before giving her a warm, confident smile.

“I know,” he nodded, rubbing her finger with his thumb. “I wish it was you,

too.”

“I mean...ugh,” she flipped her hair out of her face and gripped Darwin's hands, tapping them on the table for emphasis. “I've known for a long time I can't have kids. I've accepted it. I'm okay with it. This isn't something I should...I should still be *dealing* with...” Georgia grumbled and put her hands in her lap, looking down at the table. “I don't know. It's stupid.”

“It's not stupid,” Darwin said, reaching over to put a finger under her chin, just so he could keep looking into those beautiful, crystal blue eyes. “And...you don't *have* to be okay with it...”

Georgia smiled at Darwin, but her brow was still furrowed in worry.

“Here's what you can think about instead,” Darwin continued. “Isn't that what you tell your patients? To think about the good things in the future instead of the hard work right now?”

Georgia chuckled softly at Darwin using her own words against her, then nodded.

“I know that she...hasn't exactly won me over all the way. But Daph is a good friend. That's the thing I like most about her, that she's a good friend to you. And that baby she's got in her? That little squirrel that's going to love you so much for the rest of their life? Daph and I *both* know that it's your baby more than either of ours.”

Georgia sat quietly, taking in what Darwin said. She nodded to herself, then looked up at him. She had to sit up in her chair to reach across the table with her shorter arms, but once she grabbed hold of Darwin's shirt collar, she leaned over the table and kissed him.

“It's speeches like those that made me want to marry you,” she smiled.

Meanwhile, after checking on the badger customer and taking the orders of a few others that came in, Daph walked back into the kitchen to pass off the orders to Antonio. But as she set the tickets down on the table and walked away, she stopped. Glancing down at her stomach, at the tiny hint of a bump just below her navel, she ran a hand over it. It was just enough to fit in her palm, that tiny little bundle of cells that hadn't even had enough time to turn into a baby yet, but it

was there.

“Hey, Antonio,” Daph said, without looking up. “I’m gonna need thome time off in a few monthth.”

“Why?” He asked, suspiciously, scraping debris off the grill to prepare for the next set of orders.

“Becauthe I’m pregnant,” she said, the word seeming to hang in the air longer than normal.

Antonio stopped his prep work and looked up. She glanced at him over his shoulder, grinning happily with her hand still over her stomach. He peered at Daph, scanning her up and down with his eyes as if he could tell if she was lying just by the way she was standing. Once satisfied, Antonio huffed, then went back to his work.

“Alright,” he grumbled.

“Thankth, man,” Daph nodded, then turned to walk back into the dining room.

“*Feh*,” the armadillo grumbled, far too loudly. “As if this city is to be needing even *more* squirrels...”

Daph stopped in the doorway, one hand gripping the edge of the molding, then turned around.

“And what the fuck ith *that* thuppothed to mean!?”

Chapter 4

Back To the Grind

She'd been there dozens of times. Maybe hundreds. Maybe even thousands, for all she knew. It was her second home, her watering hole, her gathering hall. She spent more time there than her apartment, to be sure. She didn't watch many movies, she didn't go to many shows. Instead, this was her entertainment, her therapy, her daily vacation.

But why was she so afraid to actually go inside the gym?

Daph stood across the street, sharing her space on the New York sidewalk with only a pile of trash bags twice her height. Her gym bag was tightly clutched in her fist, as if she was about to throw it over the passing cars. She bit her lip nervously as she gazed through the windows into her Iron Wonderland, unable to tell if there was anyone she recognized or, more importantly, who would recognize her. Daph swallowed, the taste of the fruit & nut bar still clinging to her tongue. There was nothing she knew about shaky nerves or the jittery anticipation that came with going to the gym. Daph knew that, nine times out of ten, she would just be able to work out and exercise through the anxiety.

But this was different. A new kind of worry.

She slid her hand down to her stomach, hidden beneath a baggy shirt a couple sizes too big. In the month or two since she'd gone to the gym, she'd gotten pregnant. And, inevitably, it was starting to show. What only a few weeks ago had been a little bulge barely visible beneath her clothing had become a more defined, fuller bean-shape to her lower torso. It wasn't much, but to someone like Daph, who prided herself at keeping in the best shape possible, she might as well have painted a target on her belly.

Daph tapped her paw against the sidewalk, taking out her water bottle and squirting a stream into her mouth. Most of it fell down her chin and darkened her shirt, but she didn't notice. Frowning, she crammed the water bottle back into her

bag, hiked it up her shoulder, and took a deep breath. What no one other than her close friends knew was that Daph loved urban exploration. What this mostly consisted of was trips over the connected rooftops and crammed together brownstones in SoHo and Hell's Kitchen. More than once, Daph leapt over alleyways and between gaps in buildings in the middle of the night, one slip-up sending her careening toward the ground sixty feet below. But on occasions like those, Daph knew that there was no good in sitting still and agonizing over the fear. The only way to move forward was to suck it up, trust her instincts, and just *go*.

“Alright,” Daph said to herself, swallowing her anxiety. “Fuck it. Let'th do thith.”

Taking a determined step over the curb, she marched across the street toward the gym door, glaring at it like it was going to attack her. She felt her new, growing belly rubbing against the inside of her shirt as she walked, but she ignored it and simply concentrated on getting across the street. Before she knew it, she'd flung open the door with far more power than was necessary and marched inside.

“Yo! ” Daph shouted as she stepped over the doormat. Everyone within earshot glanced toward her, with some gym-goers taking out their earbuds to listen. She planted her paws far apart from each other and cupped her hands around her mouth. “*Who'th ready to get swole tonight?!*”

A throaty, deep chorus of roars and shouts came from the rest of the gym. Daph raised her arms in the air, cupping them to her ears and encouraging more until the entire gym cheered in unison.

She grinned, lowering her arms. If she was going to be the center of attention, she might as well own it.

“Yo! Daph!” Shouted a voice to her left. Behind the registration counter sat a thin doberman with glasses and a curly hair. Setting down his magazine, he sat up in the chair and reached over the counter toward her. She approached and they clasped arms, each squeezing as hard as they could flex.

“*Jason! What the fuck ith up, dude?*”

“Same shit, different day,” he said. “Not anymore, though. Where the fuck you been? We missed your cute little ass shakin around here.”

“Good thing *you* were here to cover for me, yeah?” Daph said, playfully grabbing Jason's muzzle and holding it closed until he shook her off. “But yknow, I jutht wanted to get out more, yknow? Work had me fuckin exhausthted, so I jutht thtuck to running in the park on weekendth for a bit.”

“We just thought you'd finally given up on us,” Jason said, sliding her a pen and clipboard from across the desk.

“Truht me, I'd drop you fuckboyth in a thecond if I thought that'd keep you away,” Daph said, signing her name on the registration board and sliding it back. She made sure to stand close enough to the table that Jason couldn't see below her chest. “Hey, doeth my card expire thoon? Look me up in the thystem.”

“Sure,” Jason nodded. He turned his attention to the computer and, after a few silent seconds of typing, shook his head. “Nah, you auto-renewed. Your membership won't expire for another six months.”

“Cool, cool,” Daph nodded. She swallowed, feeling her stomach graze against the desk beneath her. Would she still be able to fit through the front door in six months? Maybe she'd just be laughed out of the building, if she were lucky.

“What's up?” Jason asked, eyeing Daph's far away expression. She looked up and shook her head.

“Nah, it'th nothin. Jutht thtuff on my mind.” She shrugged. “I jutht got into a weird thituation lately. I wanted thome iron therapy to work through it, yknow?”

“I gotcha,” Jason nodded. “You're all set, by the way.”

“Rad. Hey, who'th here?”

“Couple guys,” Jason nodded toward the back. “Frankie was here when I came in. I think Renard is doing some training with a client tonight, but he's here. Uhh...Rick was in here earlier, but he might have left. I think I saw Melinda around, too.”

“Rad. I'll keep an eye out for em,” Daph nodded. She knocked on the counter a couple of times, then pointed at Jason as she walked toward the locker rooms. “Don't work too hard, you're thuppothted to be the *eye candy* around here.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Jason waved dismissively, picking up his magazine.

Daph crossed past the line of treadmills near the window and into the women's locker room.

Finding it empty, she sighed in relief, having a moment to herself. Flicking her tail idly, she kicked off her signature toe-shoes as she padded across the tile floor, fishing in the outside pocket of her gym bag for her keys as she reached her locker. Once she wrenched off the old, hand-me-down padlock she'd found in her mother's storage room a few years ago, she crammed her bag and shoes inside. For whatever reason, Daph liked to work out in her bare paws. She wasn't sure why, but it just felt more natural, giving her an ease of movement not even her toe-shoes could provide.

Lastly, she pulled off her extra large, baggy t-shirt and threw it into the locker before closing it. She contemplated keeping it on, but that just would have raised even more questions. Her best bet was to act natural and keep her friends too distracted to notice her bump.

Daph groaned, stretching out her neck as she backpedaled away from the locker into the middle of the room. Hopping from paw-to-paw, she breathed steadily while shadow-boxing the air as fast as she could, working to get her blood pumping. She hopped in place, shaking out her arms to limber them up and holding her breath at the very top of her lungs to absorb oxygen.

“Alright...Alright alright alright alright...” she hissed under her breath. “Yeah yeah fuck yeah...let'th go, let'th go...” She accidentally turned to the side while she stretched and caught sight of herself in the mirror, stopping momentarily to examine her reflection.

Daph was the same short, stocky, copper-red squirrel as before with the gigantic mass of her tail taking up most of her frame. But looking herself over in her tight work-out shirt, her hint of a baby belly seemed just a bit more noticeable than it had the day before. Turning to the side, she lifted her shirt to get a better look at it, her navel just barely starting to poke out beyond the waist of her pants. So far, it looked more like a chubby stomach than a pregnant one, but she wasn't sure if this was a good thing or not.

“Nah, you're good, you're good,” Daph nodded to her reflection, trying to boost her own confidence. She lowered her shirt and patted a quick drumbeat against

her stomach. “It'th not that bad, you can barely fuckin tell...you're all good...we're all good...”

She was thankful that the baby was still so small, but she couldn't help but imagine what it would be like when it *wasn't* so small...

“Hey!” called out a deep, booming voice from the bathroom door, making Daph suddenly jump and a shiver visibly travel up her tail. A thick hand, nearly six feet off the ground, entered around the corner of the doorway and knocked on the brick wall. “Yo Daph! You in there?”

“Yeah, Frankie, I am,” Daph shouted, taking a deep breath as her heart pounded in fear. “Now give a girl thome fuckin privacy, alright?”

“What the fuck you doin in there?” Frankie's voice continued, with his thick Jersey accent.

“I'm powderin my fuckin nothe, man, get the fuck outta here!”

“What, you didn't even wanna say hi ta me?”

“Cauthe I had to *miss*, Frankie! What are you, my fuckin mom?”

“Alright, *alright!*” he said. “You just coulda said somethin, is all.”

“Good to see you, too,” Daph said, with finality. She pulled up her shirt again, ran a hand through her belly fur, and sighed, pulling it down.

Do it for her, Daph thought.

Taking one last deep breath, she picked up her water bottle and hand towel and left the bathroom with a practiced swagger in her step. Standing outside the women's room, against the wall, was an enormous draft stallion nearly seven feet tall and wearing a tank top above thick muscles. He beamed at the sight of Daph, holding out his arms. She shot a glance at him and rolled her eyes as she walked past.

“What do you want, a fuckin hug?” Daph snarked, batting his face with her tail.

“Yeah, maybe I do,” Frankie said. Daph was suddenly lifted off the ground by a

pair of huge arms around her torso and squeezed. “Where the fuck you been? I missed ya!”

“*Gagh, fuck,*” Daph shouted. She kicked her legs impotently as Frankie dangled her almost two feet off the ground. She reached down as far as she could and balled up a fist to punch him in the side, aiming for one of his kidneys. She slapped against him like striking a punching bag full of meat. “*Put me down you fuckin athhole!*”

With one of her powerful legs, she kicked backward, one of her paws striking the inside of Frankie's thigh. He dropped her, wincing in pain but simultaneously laughing as he clenched his legs together and fell against the back wall. Panting, Daph put her hands to her stomach, suddenly worried that something could have happened to the baby. Fortunately, much of the force had been put on Daph's ribs and, at the very least, Frankie knew how to handle his own strength.

“*Chritht,* Frankie! Don't fuckin *do that!*” She shouted, throwing her water bottle and hitting him in the chest with it.

“Alright, *alright!*” He wheezed, holding up a hand. “Just watch out for the 'family jewels' next time, will ya?”

“They're about the only brainth you got left, anyway,” Daph said. She walked forward and picked up her water bottle next to one of his hooves, then stood and patted the side of his face with a force just below an open-hand slap. “How you been, you big fuckin meathead?” She quickly punched him in the stomach, but not hard enough to actually hurt him. “But for real, don't do that. I've been thick.”

“I'll say,” Frankie nodded, grinning. He reached forward and poked one of his fingers into Daph's belly. “You gotta lay off those peanuts, girlie.”

“I thaid *thick,*” Daph said, slapping away his hand and trying to hide her alarm at possibly being found out. “Like I've been *throwin up.* That'th why I've been gone, ya dumbass.”

“Oh, for real?” Frankie said, standing up, concern crossing his face. “Aw shit, nobody told me that.”

“It'th cool, I forgot to thay anything about it,” she shrugged. “I'm jutht...tryin to

take it eathy, yknow?”

“I gotcha,” Frankie nodded. He suddenly clapped his hands together and pointed toward the back of the gym. “Yo, Renard's here. He's been wonderin where you was.”

“I wath planning on thayin hi,” Daph nodded, glancing around the room. She spotted a short, gray rabbit stepping off one of the treadmills, her ears tied behind her head. They locked eyes and waved wordlessly at each other as the rabbit headed into the bathroom.

“You theen Rick?” Daph asked.

“Yeah, but he left bout an hour ago,” Frankie said. He thumbed over his shoulder toward the men's locker room. “I was about to head out myself, actually.”

“Good, you better hit the fuckin showerth,” Daph teased. “You thmell like a goddamn barn.”

“Hey hey, I don't hear the *ladies* complain about it,” Frankie said, flexing his arms above his head.

“Yeah, but I don't *thee* any ladieth around here, either,” Daph said, raising an eyebrow. She punched him one more time in the stomach and walked off, waving over her shoulder. “Later, big guy.”

“Later, Daph!” He called out. Before entering the bathroom, he stepped out again and cried,

“Oh, wait! I had my competition!”

“Yeah?” Daph called back, still walking backwards. “How'd you do?”

“I got second!”

“Fuckin rad!” Daph said, flashing a thumbs-up. “But if you got thecond, I'd hate to thee the fucker that got firtht!”

“Yeah...he was a fuckin beast, for real.”

“You're gonna beat hith fuckin *ass* next time, right?” Daph pointed.

“Oh, no doubt!”

“*That'th* my boy!” Daph said before turning around and heading into the back room.

The small, padded room in the back, as opposed to the strength training focus of the rest of the gym, was home to the aerobic equipment, like the elliptical machines and yoga balls. Usually, Daph only went in for the free-weights along the back wall, but in her...'*condition*'...she knew that she'd be spending a lot more time in there. It was nearly empty aside from a couple of lions near the back doing some training with a medicine ball and a gray-striped, lithe cat helping one of his clients. Glancing up, his expression lightened at the sight of the squirrel standing awkwardly in the doorway.

“Yes, just like that, *cheri*, ” he said softly to the opossum he was helping stretch out on one of the benches. “Good, good...Hold that for thirty seconds...Don't forget to breathe...”

Daph nodded to him, not wanting to interrupt his personal training session, and instead padded across the floor to the free weights across the room. Standing over the rack, she hesitated, staring down at them while drumming her fingers against her stomach. Her eyes ran over the sixty-pound weights, the limit she hoped to one day break. They stared back at her, black metal menacing her, daring her to pick them up, mocking her. Taking a deep breath, she sighed. It wasn't good for her to go that hard right at the beginning, especially now she wasn't alone inside her body. So Daph slid her finger down the rack, hovering over the twenty-pound weights and remembering how the doctor had told her to take it easy when exercising at first.

“*Ptthhhbbt*, ” Daph said, blowing a raspberry through her teeth, and picked up the thirty-pound weights.

She squatted down on the bench next to the wall, trying hard to ignore the new extra shape to her stomach as she bent over to pick up the weights. Taking a few deep breaths, Daph sat up and started an easy, warm-up set of curls. Every strain and curl brought her muscles to life with an exquisite pain, a warmth spreading through her arm. Daph grit her teeth and continued her set, her nerves finally soothed by physical strain. It felt fantastic, the way her arms moved, the weight

she fought against, the burning in her muscles that reminded her vividly that she was so, so alive in that moment.

After she finished the set, Daph let go of the breath she held, dropping the weights onto the padded floor and stretching out her arms. Glancing up, she spied the tall, lanky form of the gray cat standing above her, hands on his hips and tail swaying behind him playfully. Daph grinned, reaching up to clasp arms with him.

“Renard,” Daph said, grinning. The cat smiled back, his sharp teeth flashing beneath his exotic eyes.

“*Mon petit amie d'écureuil,*” he responded, his words gliding between his lips in a voice like silk.

“Oohhh, wow, I'm tho wet, Renard. I can't believe how *hot* you are.” Daph mocked. “Pleathe, tell me more, Frenchie.”

He bent at the waist and kissed the back of her hand, his tail just barely touching the ground.

“*Je dois utiliser la salle de bain,*” he whispered, trailing a finger down Daph's face. “*Je souhaite que vous ne préféreriez les femmes.*”

“What doeth that all mean?” Daph asked.

“It means, 'I wish you did not prefer women,' Daphodille,” Renard added with a wink.

“Well, you never know,” Daph teased. “Thometimeth I get into... *moods*, yknow?” She winked back.

“Then we can only hope I'm around to see them,” Renard said, crouching down to his haunches to look Daph face-to-face while he sat. “How are you, Daphodille? It's been too long since you've been here. It is unlike you to be away.”

“It'th been a...” Daph frowned and scratched the back of her neck anxiously. Of all her friends, Renard was one she felt the worst lying to, so she tried to think of a way around it. “I've...there'th a lot I've had goin' on the patht couple monthth. I

don't...I can't really go into it. I'm thorry.”

“Don't apologize,” Renard shrugged, smiling. “Your life is your own, and things happen. I'm just glad you are well, *mon amie*. ”

“Thankth, man,” Daph said, nodding. “I'm okay, thith ith jutht...gonna be a *big* year for me.” *In more ways than one*, Daph thought to herself, thinking of her developing belly.

“ Well, Daphodille, I can only hope that I can be there to help you through it,” Renard said, clasping her shoulder and squeezing it. Daph smiled and did the same thing with her free arm.

“A lot of it'th gonna be me on my own but...that'th cool of you,” she grinned. Taking her hands off his shoulders, she planted them on her knees and flicked her tail excitedly before changing the subject. “Hey, I've been really outta the loop, what'th been goin' on with *Urban Acrobats*? ”

“Ohhh ho ho ho,” Renard laughed, excitedly, his face lighting up. He nimbly hopped up and dropped onto the bench next to Daph, crossing his legs while effortlessly balancing on the thin seat.

Between his personal training career and Daph's waitressing, the two of them had set up an online parkour and free-running group over every social media site they could think of. Over the course of a few years, they'd amassed nearly a hundred members across the city, including most of the regulars at the gym. Some were enthusiastic and active participants, like Melinda and Daphodille herself, while others just came to meet people, like Frankie.

“We have three new members since the last meeting, and videos of the last exhibition are...er... *'going viral*?’” He said, unsure of the phrasing. Daph nodded approvingly.

“Wath I there for that latht one?”

“I...don't think so. At least, you are not on camera.”

“I'd love to get a video of my moves thometime...” Daph mused, scratching her chin. “Maybe we could tape one of our rooftop runth.”

“Eh...I'm...I believe those are *illegal*...”

“Tho?” Daph shrugged. “There'th about a bajillion thquirrelth in New York. Who'th gonna recognize me?”

“Well...eh...I suppose,” Renard shrugged, curling his tail, obviously still unsure about the idea.

He blinked, his gaze roaming around the room. It took a long time for Daph not to be offended by this habit, that it was simply a feline trait. She quietly waited for him to finish, flicking her tail and drumming her fingers on the seat. When Renard glanced back, his expression lit up again.

“But! I have not yet told you of my new plan!” he continued. “Over time, I have gotten so many messages of people that want to join our group, but don't know anything about *parkour*. I think that we are finally big enough that I think we should offer *classes*!” He nearly shouted the last word, as if he was too excited to let it leave his mouth without a fanfare.

“Classeth...” Daph repeated, tapping her paw against the ground in thought. After a moment, she nodded to herself, then turned to Renard with renewed energy. “Yeah... *yeah*! Classeth! Shit, that'th a *good* fuckin' idea!” She gasped, bringing a hand to her open mouth as the gears began turning in her head. “Oh shit...you think we could *charge* for it?”

“I don't know, maybe!” Renard shrugged. “Maybe if we ask for *donations*, instead, then people might be more willing.”

“Or.. ” Daph added, pointing. “Or...we *charge* the people who actually *take* the classeth, but everybody elthe ith jutht encouraged to donate! We can uthe the money to rent out a gym or a rec center or thomething!” She looked away, nodding to herself as she tapped both her paws against the padded floor, like she was building up energy to sprint. “Fuck...thith could really work...” Daph glanced up at Renard. “Are you gonna be the one to teach 'em?”

“Some of them, of course,” Renard nodded. Before moving to New York, he had spent much of his adolescence and young adulthood in Paris, very active in the traditional *parkour* scene there. While not quite as daring and athletic as Daph, his control over his body was mesmerizing to watch. He was an acrobat, in every sense of the word. “But *Urban Acrobats* belongs to both of us, so I think you

should teach some as well.”

“Wh-” Daph stammered. She pointed to her own chest, as if there was a different Daphodille Renard could have been speaking to. “*Me?*”

“Yes, you,” he repeated, chuckling.

“But...like...I don't know enough of my shit to *teach* it!” Daph shouted. “I juth kinda... *do* it!”

“But you're dedicated, you're fearless, and you're very talented,” Renard said, nodding. “There's a lot people can learn from you.”

“Heheheh, fuck, man,” Daph chittered, blushing and flicking her tail nervously. “You're gonna make me all embarathed and shit...”

“I have a little money saved up, so I want to start lessons as soon as possible,” Renard continued excitedly. “In a few months, I can rent out a space I found in Brooklyn and we-”

“Whoa, hey,” Daph interrupted, putting a hand on his chest. “...Be more thpecific. What'th a 'few monthth'?”

“Oh, I don't really know,” Renard shrugged. “I could say...maybe five? Six months?”

“...And you uh...want me to thtart teaching people...around then?” Daph said, nervously.

“I do...But...only if you want to...” Renard raised an eyebrow, but said nothing else.

“Oh...uh...” Daph shifted in her seat, instinctively clasping her hands over her stomach. “...Renard, I don't think I'm gonna be able to do that...I mean...not that thoon.”

“Eh...if...if you are sure, but...” he looked concerned, but mostly just confused. “...You seemed so excited for the idea and...I don't want to just do it all by myself...”

“No, no! I am excited! It's a great plan!” Daph looked down. While it looked like she stared at the floor between her legs, she was actually staring at her hint of a baby bump that Renard didn't even know was there. “But...Look...I told you this with gonna be a big year for me, yeah?” She glanced up at her friend, who gazed back at her with concern. He had no idea what was going on and didn't deserve to be so worried about her. Daph swallowed, opening her mouth to tell him *I'm pregnant*, but the words just couldn't come out. It wasn't her secret to tell, even if it was her body. She'd just have to leave him in the dark for a little longer.

“I just can't, man,” Daph shook her head. “Maybe in like...a year? It's just...I've got shit going on right now and I...” she sighed, feeling sick in her chest that she couldn't just tell him the truth.

“Daphodille,” he said, quietly, leaning closer. “...Are you ill? Is...something wrong? Are you sick?”

“No! No way, I'm fine. Or...I'll *be* fine,” Daph groaned, running her fingers through her hair and shaking her head. “Uugh...I'm sorry man, I just...I can't be open about it right now, yknow? It's hard for me, too.” She sighed, then reached over and took Renard by the shoulder, shaking him good-naturedly. “Look, this idea is too good to wait on. I wanna do it with you, but I'll have to be there in the spirit, okay? At least at first.”

“I understand,” Renard said, smiling, but without his heart in it. “I'd like to keep going, even if it's by myself but...well, we'll see.” He shrugged, then looked around the room for a moment of silence.

Catching sight of the clock on the wall, he hopped off the bench onto his feet. “I have another client coming in soon and I'll need to set up with them. Keep me informed, *oui*?”

“No doubt, dude,” Daph said.

Renard nodded, pausing like he was about to speak again, but simply shook his head and wandered off, his delicate paws lightly padding against the ground in total silence.

“...God damn it,” Daph said to an empty room after he left. She stood up and glanced at the wall-mirror next to her. Lifting her shirt, she looked at the belly

settling just above her hips and pointed at it. “You're already thtarting to be a pain in my ass.”

Sitting back down on the bench, Daph channeled her frustration into more free-weight exercises, working the anxiety out through her muscles. She huffed and groaned and gritted her teeth through at least twenty minutes of different workouts, finding herself frustrated that she was growing so tired so quickly. She figured much of her energy was going to the baby, but she didn't realize how much until she was too worn out to even lift her arms.

“Fuh...fuck...” Daph breathed, dropping the weights to the floor. She stood, arms dangling weakly at her sides. It took all of her remaining strength to put the weights back on the rack, but she did it anyway because she was the kind of girl who screamed at douchebags who didn't pick up after themselves.

Staggering across the room, Daph slumped over the water fountain against the wall and drank her fill, drowning the burning heat in her chest. After what felt like nearly a minute beneath the water, she stood up and gasped, drinking in the air just as desperately.

“God fuckin...shit...” she breathed, stomping her paw on the floor with what little energy she had left. “I jutht...I jutht fuckin *got here* man...fuck...”

She stepped to the side of the fountain, gazing quietly at her reflection. Would it be possible to work with Renard anyway? She hated disappointing him like she did. She could probably do *something* to help. Daph began to picture herself trying to hop over a railing with her swollen gut, barely making it over before panting and needing to sit down. She imagined trying to teach a room full of young athletes complex acrobatics while she was too fat and huge to walk across a room without panting. The thought mortified her, so she shook her head violently as if to physically throw off the idea.

“Hey,” came a flat voice from her left, followed by movement to the water fountain. The light gray rabbit from earlier had stepped up to the water fountain and busied herself with filling her bottle, her ears still tied together behind her head.

“Hey, Melinda,” Daph said, nonchalantly, taken by surprise that she wasn't the only one in the room. “What'th up?”

“Not much,” she said leaning over to drink from the fountain. “You haven't been around much.”

“Nah, I wath buthy. I couldn't get the time,” Daph nodded. “I wath altho kinda thick for a little while.”

“Mm-hmm,” Melinda mumbled, still drinking the water. After a moment, she sat up and wiped her mouth off on her arm. “Well, you're looking good,” she said, flatly. “Healthy.”

“Yeah...” Daph responded. “I'm feelin better.”

“I could almost say you're... *glowing*...” Melinda added.

Daph's breath caught in her throat.

“...I mean...if you want to, I guess...”

The two stood in awkward silence for a moment while Melinda quietly screwed on the lid of her water bottle.

“So,” she asked, “when are you due?”

Daph choked on nothing at all, snapping her head to Melinda. The rabbit glanced back at her with a lazy smile.

“C'mon,” she chuckled. “I've got *five* older sisters, and I knew every single time before they told me. Sometimes, I noticed before they did.”

“Mother fucker,” Daph breathed. “Is it that obviouth?”

“I mean,” Melinda shrugged and pointed at Daph's middle. “It is when you keep doing *that*.”

Daph glanced down and noticed that her right hand had been gently rubbing her bump without her even noticing it. She quickly folded her arms over her chest, feeling more exposed than ever before.

“God damn it...I don't even know why I keep *doing* it! It jutht *happenth*.” She sighed, then buried her face in her hands.

“Who's the lucky guy?” Melinda said, leaning against the water fountain.

“It'th...Ok, I can't thay anything yet,” Daph said, dropping her voice to a mumble. “It'th thuppothed to be a thecret, *ethpecially* from the guyth around here.”

“Trust me, Daph. I've watched my sisters go down that road,” Melinda nodded, gesturing toward her belly. “From the look of you, I'd say you've got maybe two, three weeks before people start asking questions. This isn't a secret you can keep for long.”

“I know...” Daph sighed, turning back to the mirror and pressing her hand to her stomach. “I jutht don't know what they're gonna thay, yknow? It'th gonna be tho *weird* to tell em...”

“But will it?” Melinda shrugged. “This isn't like high school, you know. People tend to react in ways you don't expect.” She paused to take a drag on her water bottle before adding. “And it's never as bad as you think it'll be.”

“What, the pregnancy or the reactionth?”

“Both.”

Melinda took another sip on her water bottle before slapping the cap closed.

“I've got a movie in about an hour and I want to finish my reps beforehand,” Melinda said. She reached over and gave Daph's stomach a quick rub, then smirked. “I hope it's a girl. You'd have a cute one.”

The rabbit winked, then bounded off, plugging her earbuds back in and leaving Daph alone in the room.

She glanced at her reflection once again, cupping her bump in her palms.

It's never as bad as you think it'll be, Daph repeated in her head.

Either way, it was going to a very long year.

Chapter 5

A Whole New World

“Cape Cod Tilapia Fish Barth,” Daph breathed, wrinkling her nose in disgust as she picked up the box from the shelf. She flipped it over to scan the information on the back, still not finding anything else to like. Quietly, she lifted the flap to her nose to lightly sniff, but got nothing but the smell of cardboard and glue. “What the fuck are thethe?”

Daph looked down the aisle to Georgia and shook the box over her head. Looking up from a printed web page, Georgia glanced at the box, read the name, and made a similar expression.

“*Eugh*,” she said, sticking her tongue out. “I guess that's for otters.”

“They're like...dried fish barth...” Daph glanced down at the box and winced, putting it back on the shelf carefully, like it was about to come alive and bite her. “...Do they *have* tilapia in Cape Cod? Ithn't that like...Florida or thomething?”

“It's in Massachusetts, Daph,” Georgia said, turning back to her list and pushing the cart down the aisle.

“Well whatever. They probably don't have tilapia there, either.”

“Then you don't have to buy it.”

“I'm not *gonna* buy it!” Daph said, throwing her hands over her head. She jogged a little to catch up with Georgia, her tail bouncing with each step. “Whole Foodth ith a fucked up place, man.”

“It is *not*,” Georgia protested, slapping her friend on the shoulder.

“It'th like a fuckn portal to the pantry of thome weird aunt or couthin you've never heard of,” Daph continued. “And like...she doethn't own a TV 'cauthe she thinkth it'll rot her brain and she'th got a million CDs on her wall but half of 'em

aren't even opened and like...she'll have towelth in the bathroom that thay 'Beauty is Thuffering' or thomething fucked up like that.”

“Daph, *shut up!*” Georgia laughed, slapping her with the sheaf of papers in her hand. “Whole Foods is *healthy!*”

“Uh-huh,” Daph responded, flatly. “Well, I never shopped here before and I ain't dead yet, tho maybe I'm doin alright.”

“But this isn't about just you, is it?” Georgia said, glancing at Daph. Her eyes traveled down to her stomach, which was finally beginning to take shape from some extra padding into a proper, rounded baby bump. She reached down and patted her belly, feeling some fur brush against her fingers.

Georgia sighed and tugged down the front of Daph's tanktop, which was beginning to ride up as she walked. Georgia was already starting to feel like a mom.

“I mean... *no*, but I know how to eat right!” Daph argued. “You think I'm jutht gonna cram my face fulla McDonald'th for nine monthth?”

“It's not about what we think you'll do, it's part of the contract, remember?” Georgia said, glancing at the list and eyeing the shelves as she walked. “You stick to a diet that's healthiest for you *and* our baby. It's not really up for debate.”

“But *come on*, there'th a line for thith shit, right?” Daph sighed. “Whole Foodth ith...it'th jutht *weird!* I don't wanna eat thith shit for however many more monthth I've got left, yknow?” She stopped and spun her head around, before her eyes caught on a bag on the shelf. Grabbing it, she held it up and shook it in front of Georgia's face. “Look! 'Spicy Dried Calamari Chipth?' What the hell *ith* thith?”

Glancing at the bag, Daph blinked, then flipped it over to read the back more closely. “...Okay, thethe actually look pretty good...”

Georgia, who's mood was beginning to sour, suddenly burst into giggles. As annoying as she could be sometimes, it was more often than not Daph could make her laugh at the slightest phrase or comment, making sure the two of them never stayed mad at each other for very long.

“Ith anybody lookin’?” Daph said, glancing suspiciously around the aisle.

“Daph, don't,” Georgia whispered.

“Look, jutht hang on,” Daph muttered. Lowering the bag near her waist, she quietly tore open the top and tipped it over to dump a couple of the calamari chips into her hand. Rolling the bag closed again, she popped them in her mouth and began to chew. A rainbow of expressions flashed over Daph's face, but ended in a wide-eyed and satisfied series of nods before she swallowed. “Oh fuck. I'm all over thethe,” she said, dropping them into the cart.

“I can't believe you're even *eating* these,” Georgia said, shaking her head. She picked up the bag and looked at the nutritional facts and ingredients to make sure it was safe for Daph to eat.

“Blame your weird-ass baby,” Daph said, rubbing her belly with the back of her hand. “I've been craving the motht bizarre shit lately.”

“Pickles and ice cream?”

“Try pickles and *siracha*.” Daph sighed, sliding her hand up her shirt to run her hand around the edge of her belly. “And now I want bananath with thalt on them...what the fuck ith your kid *doing* to me?”

“They already know my favorite hobby,” Georgia smirked. “Annoying *you*.” She held up the bag of calamari chips and handed it over to Daph. “Sorry, Daph. Too much processed salt in these.”

“Aw, fuck, really?” Daph groaned, looking at the bag. “C'mon, I'm the one pregnant here. Can't I have at leatht *one* weird craving food?” She paused then smirked back at Georgia, pointing at the torn seal. “But the *bag* ith already open. We've *gotta* buy 'em.”

“No we don't...” Georgia began, but stopped mid-sentence, realizing they couldn't put them back on the shelf with the bag opened. Even if they didn't rot, they'd still have to be thrown out, and the thought of wasting that much food made her sick. She frowned, took the bag from Daph's hand, and dropped it in the cart while frowning at her.

“Fine,” she said. “Maybe Darwin can eat them... But *you* can't have any. They're

bad for you and the baby.”

“Workth for me,” Daph shrugged, a cheeky smile on her face. “Ath long ath I win the argument.”

“You are a disaster,” Georgia sighed.

The two of them worked their way around the edge of the aisle. Coming out along the back wall, Georgia glanced down at her list and tapped her paw against the tile floor while chewing on her tongue.

“We can get to snack food later. Let's start with getting you some good protein.” Georgia glanced at Daph and asked, “You don't eat meat, right?”

“Not much,” Daph nodded. “I eat burgerth and hot dogth thometimes, but only if there ain't a veggie option.”

“I don't think I know a single squirrel who likes to eat meat,” Georgia pondered. “Darwin and I don't.”

“It'th jutht not in our nature, yknow?” Daph said, before quietly adding. “I mean...I didn't really have much of a choice growing up, but now that I can, yknow, *afford* shit...”

“Yeah...” Georgia nodded, quietly. The two paused, quietly reflecting on the shared difficulties of their childhoods. Georgia snapped out of it first, clearing her throat before changing the subject.

“So...okay. Then how do you get your protien? I know you need a lot to exercise.”

“I mean, yeah, but that'th mothtly for muscle growth, yknow? I do a lot of agility training, so it'th a different kind of thing.”

“Then what do you eat?”

“Protein shakes, mostly,” Daph shrugged.

“...What with it?” Georgia added. Daph blinked.

“Uh...” Daph cleared her throat. “...Nothin'.”

“So you just have protein shakes before you work out.”

“I mean, yknow...Not *all* the time.”

“Daph, what *is* your diet?”

“I mean...yknow, it'th a lotta different thtuff.” She shrugged. “Like, it'th different in the thummer and I...I mean, eating too much before you run ith really *bad* for ya, yknow?”

“Then take me through the day,” Georgia said, leaning against the cart. “What did you eat yesterday?”

“Yetherday?” Daph blinked. “Uh...like...I dunno.”

“You don't know what you ate yesterday?”

“No no, I *do*. It wath...like...a bowl of thome oatmeal with like...peacanth in it and a whey protein shake.”

“Alright, that'th not bad,” Georgia nodded. “What about lunch?”

“...That *wath* lunch.”

“...Then what was breakfast.”

“I didn't have it.”

“Daph...”

“I don't get hungry until, like, noon!” Daph defended. “I never have!”

“Then what about dinner?”

“Uh...like...thome rice...I think...” Daph cleared her throat again. “And a...like, a fruit and nut bar.”

“...That's it?”

“...I mean...” Daph shrugged. “I jutht don't get *hungry!*”

“Daphodille...You've *got* to eat more than that,” Georgia sighed. “The diet of an athlete just isn't the same as the diet for a pregnant woman.”

“I'm jutht *little!* I got a fatht metabolithm! I don't have to eat all that much.”

“This time, you do,” Georgia frowned. She held up her fingers, counting them off one by one.

“Three meals a day; breakfast, lunch, and dinner. No skipping, no exceptions. You need the full pyramid each time. We can keep it vegetarian, but you need protein, vegetables, fruits, grains, and starches every time. No running and no exercising on an empty stomach. If you feel like eating, *eat*. Have a snack, have a fiber bar, don't keep your stomach empty for too long, because it's not just *your* stomach you have to worry about.”

“Ugh...Georgia...” Daph moaned. “I barely eat that much *anyway*. Do you *know* how much weight I'm gonna...” She paused, then glanced down at her belly, rubbing a hand along its curve. “...Oh...yeah...”

“You know the phrase, 'Eating for Two?' Well, you're literally doing that now.” Georgia sighed, stepping closer and putting her hands over Daph's bump. “I know, it sucks, but it's for the baby.”

“I know...” Daph nodded, letting Georgia roam her fingers around her slight belly. She had more of a right to than anyone else. “I mean...I figured I'd have to eat more but not, like, *that* much more. I'm not uthted to it.”

“But you're not used to being pregnant, either,” Georgia countered. “This is new for all of us, remember? We're right there with you, Daph.” She grinned, looking up at her friend. Daph sighed into the blue eyes of the blonde squirrel, closer to her than even a sister could be.

Do it for her, she thought.

“Alright,” Daph sighed. “Alright. We'll make a meal plan and I'll thtick to it. I promithe.

“Thanks,” Georgia grinned. Glancing down at Daph's belly, she frowned at the

sight of her tank top riding up and revealing more of her tan fur underneath. She grumpily tugged it back down and added, "Next we'll need to get you wearing some new clothes."

"Hey," Daph pointed, giving Georgia a sharp look. "You and Darwin can tell me what goeth *in* my body, but I'm in charge of what goeth *over* it."

"You're such a diva," Georgia said, shaking her head and turning back to the cart.

"I am fuckin *not* a *diva*!" Daph shouted, jogging behind without noticing her shirt inching up her belly with each step.

The two of them argued down the aisles until they ended up in the middle of the produce section. A look of ease came over Daph as she walked around the piles of fruits and vegetables.

"Okay, that'th better," she said, picking up a potato. "Thith ithn't the weird Whole Foodth bullshit. I actually wanna eat thith thtuff."

"Good, because you're going to get *plenty* of it," Georgia said, flipping through the papers in her hand. "Pretty much anything is alright, but you *have* to wash it before you eat it." She set down the papers and pointed at Daph. "You hear that? You gotta wash all these. Too much bacteria, otherwise."

"Yeah yeah yeah," Daph waved dismissively. She picked up a banana and leaned back, setting it atop her belly. While she managed to balance it there for a couple of seconds, it toppled to the ground once she tried to motion over Georgia's attention.

"I think most of this will just be on you," Georgia shrugged. "Get a good balance of stuff, but I guess just grab what you like."

"Rad," Daph nodded. She stooped down next to the rack to pick up a green handbasket, only to make an *oof* sound as she stood back up. "Fuck...it'th already getting hard to bend over." She said, rubbing her stomach.

"Really?" Georgia asked, a smile forming on her face. Daph raised her eyebrow and lowered her hand from her middle.

“I mean...a little bit...” she frowned. “What, is that funny to you?”

“A little,” Georgia nodded. “It's cute seeing you huff around like that.”

“Well it's a lot less cute on this side of the belly, yknow,” Daph scowled, her tail flicking behind her indignantly. Georgia only continued to smile back. Turning to the rack next to her, she rooted around the piles of avocados until she found a healthy one that fit comfortably in the palm of her hand. Walking over to Daph, she held it out to her, shaking her hand until she took it from her.

“I don't like avocados,” Daph said. “I like guacamole, but not-”

“No,” Georgia said, lowering Daph's arm until her hand clutching the avocado was next to her stomach. “That's how big the baby is now. I read about it online.”

Daph blinked, staring at the leathery fruit in her hand. She rolled it around in her palm, wrapping her fingers around it and testing its weight. She then put it next to her belly, as if comparing them in size.

“...Fuck,” she breathed.

“It's scary, feeling like my baby is so far away,” Georgia sighed. “I'm scared for them and I'm scared for you, too. But just looking at you getting bigger...I don't know...” She brushed her hair out of her eyes and smiled. “It makes me feel like everything's going okay in there.”

Daph nodded, silently. She held up the avocado, bouncing it in her palm.

“It...it fuckin' blowth my mind, yknow?” Daph breathed, shaking her head. “That like...right here...” she tapped her bump with a pair of fingers. “Right in there it's like... *a person*. A *thomebody*, jutht like you or me or anybody elthe. Like, a *person* I'm gonna *meet* one day and *talk to*.” She held up the fruit in her hand and shook it for emphasis. “And that thame person it's the thize of a fucking avocado right now.”

As if outside herself, a tear fell from Daph's face, staining her fur dark. She blinked, then rubbed it away and stared alarmed at the wet mark on the back of her hand.

“Oh fucking...god damn it,” Daph sniffed, rubbing her face dry. “I didn't wanna fucking...It'th the hormoneth from your god damn baby, Georgia.” Daph rubbed her eyes in her hands while Georgia laughed beside her. Looking up, she pointed at her blonde friend and said, “You tell anybody I thtarded cryin in a goddamn *Whole Foodth*, I'm gonna throw you out a window.” Georgia only continued to laugh, then scrambled to catch the avocado out of the air after Daph tossed it to her. “Now help me finish up shopping before I get pissed off and go get a burrito inththead.”

The two of them each grabbed a basket and a handful of plastic bags, splitting up around the produce section and piling them up with different foods. Daph at first made an effort to get the kinds of foods she thought would be the most healthy, but then just defaulted to getting bags full of everything she actually liked. On the other side of the store, Georgia anticipated this and instead piled her basket full of everything on her list she figured Daph wouldn't want to pick up, but were the best sources of nutrition for the baby. Afterward, they both met up near the rack of potatoes to compare baskets.

“You did better than I thought,” Georgia nodded, picking up the zucchini and cauliflower on top. Looking underneath, she sighed, picking up three boxes of strawberries. “You don't need five of these, Daph.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Daph snorted. “You don't know my life.” She stood on the tips of her paws, leaning over to look into Georgia's basket. “...I don't even know what half that shit is.”

“It's all good stuff!” Georgia defended, sorting through the basket of vegetables. “Leafy greens are the most important!”

“I'm pretty thure half of thethe are jutht *leaveth*, Georgia,” Daph complained, picking up the basket to stare into it more closely. “Am I jutht thuppothed to throw thethe all into a bowl and chow down?”

“You can *cook them*, Daph! For God's sakes,” Georgia snatched the basket back and slung it over her arm, shaking her head. “C'mon, work with me here.”

“I *am* workin with you!” Daph shouted. “I didn't thay I *wathn't* gonna eat any of thith shit!”

Around the corner of the aisle, behind Georgia, poked the head of a young

badger woman wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a green apron. She clasped her hands together and looked sternly at Daph.

“Ma'am, could you please lower your voice?” she said. Daph spluttered, pointing to Georgia and glancing between the two of them. Realizing this wasn't the place for a fight, Daph sighed and simply nodded to the employee, who smiled and disappeared around the corner.

“You were gonna get thrown out of a Whole Foods...” Georgia snickered, like they were in elementary school again. Daph said nothing, silently chewing on her lip with her overbite before spinning on her paw and marching away.

“We could get you a cookbook sometime,” Georgia continued, walking closely behind her and continuing down her list. “I've seen prenatal cookbooks everywhere. They've got vitamins supplements in there and even tell you what kind of sweets are okay to have.”

“I'm not tho good with recipieth,” Daph said over her shoulder. “I get dithtracted staring at a book for too long, yknow?”

“Darwin's a great cook,” Georgia said. “He can teach you everything you need to know. You won't need to follow a recipe after he shows you the ropes.”

“Yeah, well Darwin doethn't even-” Daph stopped herself, both physically and verbally, halting mid-stride with a bumpy pause in her sentence. “...Nevermind.”

“What?” Georgia said, shuffling forward to catch up with Daph. “Darwin doesn't what?”

“It wath nothin,” Daph quickly said, ducking down a random aisle and glancing around at the canned foods. “Can I eat any of thith thtuff?”

“Daph, come on, don't do that,” Georgia said, taking her friend's arm and pulling her to a stop. “What were you going to say?”

Daph rolled her eyes, made a *tch* sound, and tried to pull away, but Georgia's grip on her arm restrained her. Blinking, her expression softened and she sighed, flicking her tail.

“...Darwin doethn't even like me,” Daph said, looking away and shrugging, She

buried her hands in the pockets of her sweatpants.

“What are you talking about?” Georgia sighed. “Of course he likes you. He liked you enough to *literally impregnate* you, didn't he?”

“That'th different. That wath for *you*,” Daph said. “I can tell he doethn't. It'th not like it'th *hard* to.”

“Darwin...he...” Georgia stopped, trying to come up with a way to keep the peace between her husband and best friend, but the only thing worth saying was the truth. She brushed her hair back and flicked her tail, tapping her paw on the ground a couple times to stall while she thought of the right words.

“It's not that he doesn't like you,” Georgia finally said. “It's that he doesn't *trust* you. Not yet, at least.”

“But he truthts me enough to carry hith baby?” Daph said, raising an eyebrow.

“It took convincing,” she nodded. “But that's only because Darwin doesn't know you like I do. He's a hard case to win over, sometimes.”

“But apparently not ath hard ath his coooooock,” Daph breathed under her breath.

“Daph, shut up, that was *your* idea,” Georgia snapped, stamping her paw on the tile. “He's just worried, like I am, and didn't have *eighteen years* to get to know you, okay?” She breathed, calming herself before continuing. “Darwin's trust needs to be *earned*. This is your chance to do that.”

Daph was about to argue back that she didn't need Darwin's trust, or even his friendship, but decided that this was only pride nagging at her. Of course she and Darwin were friends when they were just fuck-buddies, but now? As her best friend's husband? As an impending father to the baby Daph carried inside her? There was so much more at stake, and she'd rather have Darwin at her side than against her.

Do it for her, she thought.

“Yeah...” Daph sighed, rubbing her bump and nodding. “Yeah, okay. You're right. You know him better than I do, I gueth.”

“I do,” Georgia nodded, her expression relaxing. “And if you two just don't click...well I don't think there's anything I can do about that. But take care of yourself and take care of our baby and I know you'll win him over.”

“Understood,” Daph said. She groaned as she shook her head and continued down the aisle. “Ugh...thith ith tho much more complicated than I thought it wath gonna be. I thought I wath jutht thuppothed to get fat, make a bunch of money, then jutht pop thith little fucker outta my cooch in a few monthth.”

“Don't worry Daph,” Georgia smiled warmly, walking up beside her and laying her hand Daph's stomach. “Those are *all* still going to happen!”

After filling up baskets with enough fruits and vegetables to grow a small farm, the two opted for a cart to gather most of the other ingredients on the list, with an assurance from Georgia that she and Darwin would teach Daph what exactly to do with them all. In lieu of any meats, they gathered an assortment of eggs for protein, with Daph swearing not to eat them raw in any capacity whatsoever.

They spent at least another 45 minutes piling the cart up with organic, healthy foods to keep Daph and the baby fed for at least a month or two, as long as she kept to her diet.

Eventually, they dragged the heaving cart and baskets toward the closest open checkout counter, both of them straining with the weight, their tails drooping.

“Aren't you supposed to be the strong one?” Georgia asked, setting down her basket with a huff.

“I don't have...the energy that I...uthted to...” Daph strained, still carrying two baskets. “I'm busy...ngh...literally building a perthon over here.” Despite her protests, Daph's strong legs carried her faster to the counter and she set down her baskets first, while Georgia struggled behind her, trying to navigate a shopping cart with one hand.

“*Hoo...fuck...fuck me...*” Daph breathed, hefting up the baskets of food onto the blacktop of the checkout counter. A young lynx stood behind it, wearing hard-edged glasses and a pleasant expression on her face as she turned on the conveyer.

“Getting ready for a party?” she asked, typing in the product code for the

individual fruits and vegetables. She'd evidently been there long enough to comfortably multitask while making chit chat.

“Nah, nothin like that,” Daph said, waving a hand. “We're jutht, like, thtocking up for the next couple monthth.”

“Good plan,” the lynx nodded, glancing up with a smile.

Nearly colliding against Daph's hip, Georgia finally dragged the cart next to the checkout counter, panting as she hefted the basket onto the conveyer.

“C'mon, Hercules,” Daph teased, moving the food onto the belt while Georgia caught her breath.

“I'd rather be Athena,” Georgia breathed.

“Yeah, well, I don't know who that ith,” Daph said, finishing with the cart and moving on to the basket.

“She's another Greek god.”

“I thought they were Romanth?”

“Nope,” Georgia shook her head.

“You thure know a lotta random shit, Georgia.”

“Yeah, well, that's what college does,” she shrugged. “You learn so many little tidbits that you run out of room for everything important.”

“Isn't *that* the truth,” nodded the lynx, laughing to herself as she glanced up at Georgia.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn't know,” Daph said. “College ain't my scene, yknow?” She finished piling the rest of the groceries onto the cart and looked up at the cashier. “Do you want me to like, organize thith at all?”

“No worries, I got it,” she smiled back.

Daph nodded wordlessly, stepping back from the counter and sighing. She raised her hands above her head, clasped them together, and pivoted her torso from

side-to-side. Her hips were starting to get sore with the unfamiliar weight that was slowly growing on them, especially in the morning. Stretching longer before her jogs would alleviate some of the tenderness.

“Oh, shit!” Daph said, slapping a hand to her forehead. “We forgot thnackth!”

“I think we've already got enough,” Georgia said, gesturing to the counter strewn with produce and health food.

“Yeah, but thith ith like *healthy* junk. I gotta have thomethin to thnack on, too!”

“Fine,” Georgia rolled her eyes. “You can go pick out *one* thing.”

“Groovy,” Daph said, before sprinting off to the snack aisle they'd passed by earlier. Georgia paused, blinking at the ground, then turned to the cashier.

“Did she just say 'groovy?’”

The lynx looked up, smiled politely, and shrugged.

After a moment of silence, the clacking of her paws against the floor indicated Daph's speedy return. She skidded up to the counter and held up a bag in front of her face reading 'SQRL BLEND' with a cartoon, bright-eyed, buck-tooth squirrel on the front.

“Okay, I'm not thure if thith is offensive or not, maybe it is, but thith hath like *everything* I like in it so can I pleathe get it?”

“Where did you even find that?” Georgia said, raising an eyebrow.

“Kid'th thnack aisle,” Daph shrugged. “But it'th all *organic* and hath all my favorite shit in it!”

Georgia took the bag in disbelief, flipping it over to read the ingredients and nutritional information. As far as she could tell, nothing seemed to conflict with Daph's pregnancy diet, so Georgia shrugged and set it on the conveyer belt.

“But don't just snack instead of eating meals, Daph,” Georgia said, pointing at her.

“I won't, I wont,” Daph said, chittering in the back of her throat. “Man...you're already thtarting to thound like a mom.” Daph walked to the other side of the counter, hands above her head and tail bobbing lightly.

Georgia blinked at what she'd said, not sure whether it was supposed to be an insult or not, but smiled quietly nonetheless.

Meanwhile, the lynx glanced up at Daph while she scanned in their groceries, watching as the squirrel continued to stretch, her tank top riding slightly above her bump.

“So when are you due?” the cashier asked, pleasantly.

“Huh?” Daph blinked, jolted out of her thoughts. She dug a hand into her pocket and fished out her wallet. “Wait, thorry, what's due? How much?”

“No, no, when are *you* due?” the lynx clarified.

Daph blinked, frozen in space, the gears in her head having ground to a stop. She turned to Georgia, then to the cashier, then down to her own stomach protruding ever slightly beyond her waist. She stammered, putting a hand over her bump.

“Buh...I...wha...I'm...I'm due...uhm...you can...”

“Oh...Oh my god, I'm...I'm so sorry...” the lynx girl said, mortified. “I'm so so sorry, I thought you were...”

“No, no, she is,” Georgia interjected, nodding. She glanced at Daph, confused at her friend's shock. “...Right?”

“Oh...yeah!” Daph forced a chittering laugh, a little louder than necessary, as she patted her belly with both hands. “No, no, yeah, you're right, I'm uh...I'm like...pregnant...and everything...” She grinned behind her oversized teeth, the lynx smiling awkwardly back.

“Oh! Oh, that's good,” she nodded. “Congratulations.”

“Oh, wait, like, it'th not *my* baby,” Daph tried to clarify. “I mean...like, I gueth *technically* it ith but it'th like...not *gonna* be my baby, yknow? It'th *herth!*” Daph said, gesturing to Georgia. “It'th her baby! And I'm jutht...like...I'm helping *make*

it yknow?" She paused, then laughed again for no reason.

The cashier, much to her credit, didn't give any odd looks and instead just nodded wordlessly with an awkward smile on her face.

"Well, your total's gonna come up right here," she said, tapping a finger on the screen of the credit card reader. Georgia pushed past a frozen Daphodille to swipe her card and pay for the food, then she and the cashier began loading the bags into the cart.

"Okay! You're all set," the lynx said, unrolling their long receipt and handing it over to Georgia. "Come back and see us again!"

"I'm sure we will," Georgia smiled. She glanced over her shoulder to see Daph, still standing in place, her hand pressed against the lower curve of her belly, just barely poking out beneath her tanktop. "*Daph!*" Georgia called, snapping her friend out of her thoughts.

"Uh...Right! Yeah, coming!" Daph said, tugging down her shirt and jogging to catch up with her.

When the two of them were in the parking lot, Georgia pushing the cart, she looked up at Daph.

"What was *that* about?"

"I don't know!" Daph hissed. "I just freaked out! I didn't know what to thay!"

"I mean...you could have told her the due date?" Georgia said. "January, remember?"

"Oh...I mean *yeah* but I wath like..." Daph breathed, trying to organize her thoughts. "I thought 'If a *thtranger* could tell I wath knocked up, then now *everybody* can.' I dunno, it jutht freaked me out."

Georgia burst into a fit of giggles, stopping the cart to laugh.

"It'th not funny!" Daph screeched, flipping her tail angrily.

"It *is*, though!" Georgia said through her laughter. As it subsided, she wrapped

an arm around Daph's shoulder and pulled her into a one-arm hug. "Get used to it, sweetie," she said, then patted Daph's rounding tummy. "It's not like you're getting any smaller."

Georgia bounded off with the cart, her humming to herself while bobbing her tail back and forth to the beat in her head. Daph stood in the parking lot, hand hovering above her stomach.

"Aw c'mon, don't fuckin thay shit like that!" Daph called out, jogging to catch up to her retreating friend.

Chapter 6

Three's A Crowd

“Ohhhhh...fuck...” Daph breathed, clutching her bare breast and sighing into the air above her. “Nnng...God damn...keep going...right there...” she bit her lip, a feminine, high-pitched moan coming from the back of her throat. She ran her free hand through her hair, rocking her hips slightly. She felt her body tense, clenching slightly in preparation for the orgasm she knew was just beyond the horizon.

Sprawled out on the bed beneath her and between her legs, Darwin silently lapped against Daph's pussy, his experienced and eager tongue touching every fold and lighting her nerve endings on fire. Every time the edge of his tongue clipped against her clit, she gasped, a shock of pleasure surging up her entire body. She worried that she was wet enough to drown him if he didn't come up for air every so often. Daph sighed as his warm breath exhaled from his nose tickled against her sensitive flesh, sending another tremble up her body.

While Daph's needs were being satisfied up front, it was Georgia behind her that had staked her claim on the main event. Her legs wrapped around Darwin's she skillfully and effortlessly rode the cock speared inside of her, slowly moving up and down as if to savor it. While she didn't make as much noise as Daphodille, her wide open mouth and silent panting betrayed the ecstasy she swam in. The blonde fur of her crotch was darkened with her fluids. The two of them straddled Darwin simultaneously, who did his very best to satisfy the two desperately needy women in his life; one the love of his life, the other the mother of his child.

He did a pretty good job.

“Nng...aah..ahhhh...” Daph moaned, pushing herself above and away Darwin's face with her strong legs, holding herself there while her orgasm began to surge toward climax. But right at the edge, it fell back down, leaving her heart racing and her pussy still thirsty for more attention. Darwin had the opportunity to take

a deep breath of fresh air before again plunging his snout deep between Daph's legs.

“Fuck...oh fuck...that'th right...” Daph breathed, while she was still capable of speech.

“Yeah...right there...” She hissed, drawing in breath through her teeth as Darwin's teeth just barely nicked her clit, giving her a sensation somewhere in between pleasure and pain that she loved. Rocking her body into his tongue, she used a free hand to tweak and play with her sensitive nipples just beneath her fur. Circling them with her finger and teasing the nerves sent a feeling like an electric shock going down her body, straight down into her cunt.

While naturally a modest A-cup, the pregnancy had given Daph enough weight on her chest so that her breasts bounced and swayed as she moved. It was a new feeling, one intensely more arousing than she'd expected. She felt her tits bob up and down as she rocked, every heavy drop feeling better and better. Daph pinched one of her nipples, hard. It wasn't until her breasts had begun to grow that she wanted to play with them during sex, but now it was work just to keep her hands off of them. She wanted Darwin to take a break from eating her pussy to nibble on them, but she was already in too much bliss to say anything.

Similarly, her growing belly had become central to her arousal. Feeling it beneath her palms, the round bump growing larger by the week, could sometimes make her wet by itself. Daph could feel it moving with the rest of her body, a foreign weight rocking alongside her, the contents of her womb growing heavier and fuller as time passed. It wasn't yet as big as she wanted it to be, but it was getting there.

Darwin, who's hands had been gripping Daph's thighs, let go and slid his open palms over the belly that was only barely large enough to eclipse her view of him. Daph moaned, rocking forward and pushing her belly into his fingers, feeling him flex and massage against her stretching body. It was primal, thoughtless bliss as she felt his wide hands nearly wrapped around her entire middle, gripping it like a basketball.

“No, no,” Daph breathed, as Darwin began to pull away his hands. “Keep 'em there...yeah...”

Darwin nodded beneath her, then slid his hands up her stomach again, taking

time to pass a thumb over her flattened belly button and slowly drag his nails through her fur and against her sensitive skin. She moaned as he did, the feeling every bit as arousing as the tongue in her pussy.

“*Ooohhhhhh fuck...*” Daph sighed. “I don't know...why I like that...but I *do...*” She rocked forward, pushing out her belly even farther into his grip. The idea that he had laid claim to Daph, that the hands around her filling womb were the ones that seeded her, pushed her closer and closer to the edge. She flicked her tail wildly, clipping Georgia in the face, but she didn't seem to notice or care.

Daph flexed her bare toes on the bed, paws facing the ceiling, curling them in as she felt her orgasm boiling to the surface. She rocked harder, bringing her own hands down to grip her belly, pressing her hands deep into her pregnant body. She made involuntarily high-pitched, feminine moaning sounds, as if needfully begging her body to cum. Her labial folds burned as a deep itch inside of her flared to life that she knew was the spark of her climax. Daph rocked her belly into her hands, feeling it sway against her, rubbing her hands all over its rounding surface.

But slowly, as steadily as her orgasm came, it began to fade. Daph clenched her teeth, trying harder and harder to coax it back out, but failing. Her flesh cooled and her body relaxed as her climax never came. She sighed, frustratedly horny, and snapped open her eyes.

“Wha-” Daph breathed. “What the fuck...” She glanced down, about to admonish Darwin for stopping, but found the space between her legs empty. She blinked in the dim light, scratching her bump absentmindedly as her sex-addled brain tried to make sense of what had happened. Feeling a rough shift on the bed behind her, she turned and glanced over her shoulder.

Georgia and Darwin were lost to each other, coiled between their arms and kissing in a way that went far deeper than just sex. They rolled over the bed, Georgia still wrapped around Darwin's cock while her knees gripped his legs like a vise. He continued to buck slowly into her, but his attention was on his wife's face and the rest of her body, his hands exploring every inch of her golden curves. Even their tails wrapped around each other between their legs, as if even they couldn't bear to let go of each other.

“...Oh,” Daph mumbled, watching her friends consummate their love for one

another. She swallowed quietly, smacking her tongue against her teeth and chittering quietly to herself. After a moment, she patted her thighs and said, halfway to herself, "I gueth I know when I'm bein a third wheel here..."

Quietly, so not to disturb their lovemaking (as what Darwin and Georgia were doing was too intense to simply call 'sex'), Daph slid off the bed and onto the floor. She stretched, her legs sore from bending them for so long over Darwin's face, her belly just barely settling in the middle of her body.

She breathed out through her nose, her heart still racing from her lost orgasm, and flicked her tail, annoyed. Near the bed was a padded chair she collapsed into, still completely nude, rounded stomach settling into her lap.

From the corner of the room, Daph chewed on a nail as Georgia and Darwin went at it, not sure if she wanted them to stop or not. She contemplated going to take a shower while they continued, wondering if they'd be finished by the time she got out. Without making any kind of decision, she sat and absentmindedly watched the two fuck. Georgia was on top, biting Darwin's bottom lip as she sat up, hopping up and down on his cock and running her fingers through her hair. Darwin reached up and took both of her breasts in his hands, kneading them between his palms before he pulled her closer. She slipped off of his cock for a moment, both of them dripping with each other's fluids, as Darwin suckled on her nipples, nibbling them and circling his tongue around them while Georgia winced and gasped at the sensation.

Daph, meanwhile, watched from her chair, one hand drumming her fingers atop her belly. But the longer she watched, the farther down her hand began to crawl. Like a spider, she crept her hand down the curve of her second-trimester stomach until her fingers found the slit of her pussy, still wet from Darwin's tongue and her own arousal. She squirmed as her fingers found her clit, nestled behind her slick folds. She rocked her fingers around the opening, playing with herself to the same rhythm Darwin had returned to fucking Georgia.

With new purpose, Daph quietly stood and dragged the chair to the edge of the bed so she could get a better look, propping her legs up on the mattress and spreading them wide apart for access to her still eager cunt. With one hand cradling her belly, her dominant hand slipped between her legs and continued to play with herself while watching her friends enjoy themselves.

In a show of dominance rarely seen from the squirrel, Darwin gripped his wife by the hips and flipped her over onto her back. Gripping her thighs, he knelt above her and drove his cock back into her, the impact making Georgia suck in air sharply and moan. Holding her in place, he jackhammered into her, the slapping sound of wet skin-to-skin contact harmonizing beautifully with their uncontrolled, carnal panting. Georgia bounced against the mattress, completely surrendered to her husband's domineering cock that filled every inch of her.

On the other end of the bed, Daphodille bit her lip to keep herself quiet and not interrupt the show she was so intent to watch. Her right hand was buried between her legs, her fingers slick and wet with her own juices. Her two middle fingers stretched apart her pussy and played with her inner walls while she used her thumb to expertly spin a teasing circle around her clit. She tried to concentrate on keeping her rhythm in time with Darwin and Georgia, but it was a fight against her instincts not to go full-tilt and finish herself off.

Daph's left hand was wrapped around her stomach, her open palm rubbing its surface and feeling her hand pressed against her swelling body. It surprised her how much the simple touch by itself could turn her on and the thought of growing even bigger and more sensitive just helped her along. She moaned quietly to herself, feeling her pussy flex around her fingers, with her other hand glued against her pregnant belly.

Georgia evidently began to reach her peak, as her moaning slowly became sharp gasps each time Darwin thrust into her. She bit her lip, trying not to scream out loud as her climax began its final march toward completion. Darwin, his eyes closed in concentration, began to huff and grunt as he fucked Georgia faster and harder by the second. Then, in a move that made even Daph stop masturbating for a moment in surprise, he bent down and picked up his small wife, holding her by her thighs in the air while he fucked her. Georgia threw her arms around him, holding on while Darwin's hands gripped her ass and hammered into her with all the force left in his body.

Suddenly, with a few more slow and powerful thrusts, it was Darwin's turn to cry out weakly, his voice cutting through the ambiance of sex. Even in the dim light, Daph watched his cock throb visibly inside of Georgia, the muscles rolling and as he came for nearly ten full seconds into his wife, who's pussy drank it up happily. At the feeling of warm cum dripping from beneath her legs, Georgia gasped sharply and threw her head back, gripping Darwin's fur while thrashing

her tail against the bed as her orgasm shattered through her entire body. In a frozen moment of ecstasy, the two clung to one another desperately, posed like a masterpiece sculpture above the bed.

After the snapshot moment of bliss coming from a shared orgasm, Darwin and Georgia felt their muscles soften, their bodies falling into the warm sea of afterglow. Cum dripped down his softening cock onto the bedspread, but neither of them noticed. They stared dimly through the rising haze into each other's eyes, as if blind to the rest of the universe. Lowering her to the bed, Georgia slipped off of Darwin, her body stretched and used and full and satisfied beyond belief. As they lay against the pillows, entwined like the roots of a tree, Georgia trailed a finger down her husband's face, as if unable to believe he were real.

“Hhhnnn- *ghhhaaaaahhh...hhhaaaaa~...*” came a voice from the end of the bed. Darwin and Georgia glanced up, watching Daph grip the bedspread with her left hand while her right was gripped between her legs in the seizure of her own body's release. She set her head against the bed, her body quaking with pleasure as she came, then slowly relaxed her shoulders as it faded. With another moment laying prone against the bed, Daph sat up, pushing her hair back with her left hand and wiping off the right on the fur of her belly. Dimly, she grinned and nodded, flashing a thumbs-up to her friends. “Wow...” Daph sighed, laughing to herself. “Be thure to call me over the next time you two are

gonna fuck like *that.*”

Chapter 7

Mother Knows Best

The air was cooling off early that year, creating a rainy early September that fought to throw off the oppressive heat of August. While the leaves hadn't yet started to change, the air was finally beginning to cool, leaving much of New York to walk the streets instead of huddling together on the buses and subways. The sticky heat of summer was slowly and steadily ebbing away with the change of the season. On one of the first sunny days in two weeks, more than a few New Yorkers took to pathways of Central Park. They were finally able to get some fresh air after being cooped up inside too long.

Georgia crunched down the gravel path, wearing the squirrel-model toe shoes recommended to her by Daphodille. She wished she'd brought some kind of music with her, as the repetitive sound of her own heavy breathing was getting old. The air blowing through her fur as she ran was pleasingly cool, owing much to her continued endurance. But even her energy was beginning to run out with each step. The air in her lungs was becoming sharp and cold and her heart hammered against her chest.

Georgia glanced up at the tall oaks she passed, instinctively wishing she could climb into the shade of the branches and fall asleep.

Once reaching the shade of branches overcasting the path, she decided that she'd earned a break and slowed to a stop underneath the shadows. Georgia panted, her chest heaving. She wasn't yet coughing, but didn't want to push herself that far. Taking off her small backpack, she fished inside for her water bottle, pushing past her change of clothes, wallet, and other necessities. Finding it, she threw her head back and sucked on the nozzle long enough to cool the thirsty itch in the back of her throat.

Georgia gasped, wiping her mouth off on her arm, then took another few sips before capping the top back on and catching her breath.

Turning around, she squinted in the sunlight as she looked down the path behind her, wishing she'd remembered to bring sunglasses. Past the strollers, other joggers, and sunbathers, she had to scan the horizon for a few seconds until she spied the copper-red figure, followed by an extra-sized fluffy tail, lumbering down the path. She watched a far-away couple glance at her as she passed, which Georgia could only assume was because of the constant stream of swears pouring from her mouth. She chuckled at the thought, then stood up straight and cupped her hands around her mouth.

“Come on, Daph!” She yelled. “You can do it!”

“I know I can do it!” Daph screamed back around her heavy panting. The two had started out neck-and-neck, but Daphodille's handicap had inevitably slowed her down not long after. Ignoring Daph's snappy retort, Georgia continued to cheer and wave her on. While it took nearly a minute for her to catch up, Daph finally stumbled into the shade next to Georgia, who clapped enthusiastically as she slowed to a stop.

“I...I know I can do it, but your fat little baby won't *let me*,” Daph panted, standing up straight to keep her air flow clear. She seemed far more prepared for a long run than Georgia, wearing a pair of running tights over her muscular legs, her bare paws flexing beneath them. She used a sweatband to keep her hair out of her face with an iPod strapped to her arm, feeding music into one ear. Her belly rose and fell with her breath, just barely concealed beneath her athletic shirt. “I could...I...I could go for at *leath*t three more mileth by mythelf!”

“Don't call my baby fat!” Georgia yelled, smacking Daph on the shoulder.

“Well, they ain't *little*,” Daph sighed, leaning back and hefting her bump up with her arms.

“That's not a polite thing to call a little *lady*, is it?” Georgia teased. Stepping closer, she crouched next to Daph and whispered into her belly. “You're not fat, little girl, you're perfect the way you are.”

“Well, whatever,” Daph grunted. “Point ith, I could go a lot longer if I wanted to, with or without the baby.”

“Sure, sure,” Georgia nodded. She leaned in and pressed an ear to the side of Daph's stomach, her tail flipping excitedly behind her. “...I'm so happy I can call

her a *she* now..." She said, chittering happily.

"Yeah, it'th pretty cool," Daph nodded, taking Georgia's attention to her stomach as an opportunity to catch her breath. "Ya think we can make it another couple blockth?"

"Can *you*?" Georgia asked, standing up and looking Daph over with a raise eyebrow. "You look like you're about to drop...I mean, like, faint, not like...you know..." She giggled to herself, while Daph rolled her eyes.

"Nah, I'm good. I do thith all the time, for real. We've barely even gone a mile!" Daph paused, then added, "...I think..." She reached for her hip and unclipped her brand new pedometer. Switching it on, she frowned, flipping it around. "Aw fuckin hell, it'th thtill in kilometerth." She shrugged and slipped it back onto the waist of her pants. "Well, that wath probably a mile, anyway."

"I think you should rest a minute," Georgia said, her professional eye as a physical therapist all too aware of impending exhaustion. She dug into the backpack for the green counterpart to her own pink water bottle and handed it over. "At least drink something."

Daph panted, one hand pressed to her back to relieve some of the weight from her belly, while the other reached out and took the water. Tipping it upside down, she squeezed it over her face, only a fraction of it getting into her mouth. Her fur thoroughly doused, she shook it off and blinked the water out of her face. While squirting a stream into her mouth, a splash of it fell against the top of her belly instead of the ground, dampening her shirt. She grumbled, rolled up the shirt and squeezed the water on the ground next to her, then let go and left her furry stomach exposed to the air.

"Daph, come on," Georgia said trying to pull her shirt back down. "There's people around."

"Tho?" Daph shrugged, slapping her hand away. "I don't care, it'th fucking *hot* out here." She patted down the wet fur on top of her stomach, trying her best to dry it off.

"It's in the low seventies, Daph," Georgia said flatly. "With, like, no humidity."

"And I've got *another living perthon* inthide my body! Gimme a fuckin break!"

Daph snapped back, taking another long sip on the water bottle and filling up her cheeks before handing it back.

“Well, I can't argue with that,” Georgia nodded, smiling to herself as she put away the bottle. “Though it feels better than last month, doesn't it?”

Daph simply nodded, her cheeks still full of water and she slowly swallowed over the course of a few seconds. She held up a finger while she did, waiting until her throat was clear to start talking again.

“Oh my *fuck*, Georgia, last month with *hell*,” Daph groaned, throwing her head back. “Don't *ever* be pregnant in August, it's not worth the-” she stopped at the expression on her friend's face, paused for a moment, then grimaced at what she just said. “Oh god damn it...Fuck, I'm sorry Georgia. I put my stupid-ass paw in my mouth again.”

“It's okay,” Georgia said, waving away the thoughts from her mind. “It is what it is.”

“Well yeah, but...I still feel bad,” Daph shrugged. “I'm just stupid like that, I guess. I always do the wrong thing.”

“You're not stupid, Daph,” Georgia sighed, smiling warmly.

“I mean...I'm not really a genius, either. Not like you and Darwin, anyway,” Daph said, kicking her paw in the gravel awkwardly. She looked down at her belly, touching it absentmindedly as if to check it was still there. “Which is fine by me, yknow? Bein' smart ain't everything but...I kinda worry sometimes that the baby might...that she might get something bad from me. Like...she'll have more of *my* brain than Darwin's, yknow?” Daph blinked for a minute, looking at nothing in particular, then snapped back to her senses and rubbed her eye with the back of her hand.

“Aw fuck...no, goddamn it,” Daph grumbled as she rubbed the hint of tears from her eye. “I don't wanna fuckin...goddamn it.”

“Daph...come on,” Georgia said, gently but firmly. “Knowing me all these years, do you *really* think I would care about that?”

“I...No, not really,” Daph said, sniffing and flashing a smile. She waved her

hands around her head to emulate her racing thoughts. “Thorry, I'm jutht like... crazy emotional right now.”

“Oh, I wonder why...” Georgia giggled sarcastically, stepping forward. She cupped her hands around Daph's belly again, scratching her fur affectionately. Daph sighed at the sensation, her tail flipping happily. “Whatever comes from you into the baby, it'll be one of the thousand other good things I love about you, Daph...As long as it's not your *mouth*.” Georgia smirked, gripping Daph's belly harder and jiggling it. “The moment a single swear comes out of this little girl, I'm going to *assume* it'll be your fault.”

“You've *met* my mom, right?” Daph said, raising an eyebrow. “And with my brotherth? I didn't thtand a mother fucking chance.”

“Knowing you, she'll probably learn every cojugation of the word 'fuck' while she's still in the womb.”

“*Language*, Georgia,” Daph gasped, miming shock and putting a hand to her stomach. “There’th a *child* present!”

“I’d punch you if that wasn’t my daughter in there,” Georgia shook her head. She looked down at Daph’s belly, then side-stepped in front of her and measured it from the sides with both hands, examining it more closely. “You’re gaining really well! You’re almost twice the size of last month.”

“Bout the only time I’ll take that ath a *compliment*,” Daph scoffed. “But I been keepin to the diet and everything, like you thaid. I feel fuckin *huge*, though. I’m not uthed to eating tho much.”

“Darwin’s been teaching you, hasn’t he?”

“As much as he can, yeah. I thtill get him to box up thome for me, thince I can’t cook for shit.” Daph shook her head with a grimace. “A lot of it tathtes like fried asshole, though! Like, fuckin *awful*. Your daughter’th gonna come out of me *thwinging* cause I made her eat all thith nathy shit!”

“Well, technically,” Georgia added, after her giggling fit finally stopped, “she doesn’t really *taste* any of it.” She slid her hands down Daph’s belly and poked a thumb against her navel. “She’s getting it all through the umbilical cord.”

“Oh...yeah...” Daph blinked. She looked away, lost in her imagination as she rubbed small circles into the sides of her belly. After a moment she shuddered. “That’th tho *weird* to think about... That she’th not jutht *in* me, but... *attatched* to me...”

“The magic of pregnancy,” Georgia sighed, chuckling.

Daph scrunched up her face and stuck her tongue out.

“You look fantastic, though,” Georgia said, as she smoothed down the fur over the globe of Daph’s bump. She reached up and began to fuss with the messy pixie cut on top of Daph’s head, who spluttered and batted her hand away. “Your fur looks shiny, you arms aren’t as skinny, you just look... *healthy!*”

“Let’th hope I thtay that way,” Daph sighed. “I’m worried I’m gonna thwell up even more by the end of thith.”

“But that's why we're out here!” Georgia said, gesturing to the park around them. “You've gotta stay just a *little* on the plump side to keep the baby fed and healthy, but exercise is as important as it always was.”

“*Pfft*,” Daph waved her hand dismissively. “You don't gotta do a lotta work to get *me* out here and workin my tail.” She stretched her arms over her head and hopped in place as best she could with a belly full of baby weighing her down. “Thpeaking of which, let'th get a move on! I'm feelin better already!”

“I don't think so, Daph,” Georgia said, in the stern, matronly tone her residency at the hospital helped her master. “I think we're done for the day.”

“Wha-?” Daph breathed, stopping her warm-ups and frowning at Georgia. “Are you seriouth? We ain't barely even gone a *mile* yet!” She grumbled, tugging down her shirt over her stomach, a small circle indicating the dent of her belly button, which neither of them were quite sure would 'pop' or not.

“You're not supposed to be *losing* weight, this time,” Georgia lectured. “If you push yourself too hard, you won't be doing any good for you *or* the baby.”

“But c'mon! Jutht a couple more blockth!” Daph begged, stomping her foot in the gravel like a toddler.

“You looked like *death* just a minute ago, and you want to keep *going*?” Georgia shook her head. “You're going to have to put away your pride, Daphodille.”

“Well...It'th not jutht that,” Daph said, her voice dropping to a low mumble. “But...ugh...okay, can you keep a thecret?”

“I...can,” Georgia said, suspicious. “Depending on the secret.”

“Ugh, okay, so...thith feelth so fuckin weird but...” Daph ran her fingers through her hair and sighed, glancing around like they'd be overheard. She grimaced, as if trying to spit out words against her will. “But...I'm like...thorta... *into it*...Like...running like thith.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...I kinda *like* running while all...pregnant...and thtuff...” Daph tapped her fingers together and sighed, blushing beneath her fur. “Like...it feelth *good*...like,

better than running by myself.”

“...Really?” Georgia asked, raising her eyebrows. “I...didn't really expect that.”

“Yeah...” Daph shrugged, as if trying to withdraw her head into her neck like a turtle.

“But...well, that's good!” Georgia said, cheerily. “I...don't really *understand* but that's good!”

“Yeah?” Daph said, smiling a little. She stood straighter, letting her hand fall onto her belly. “Well, it's like...I think I'd jutht gotten so *used* to running that it got *boring*. It was thtill thomething I liked to do, but it wathn't hard anymore. But now, I'm all pregnant and shit, so that maketh it more of challenge! And just like...running and working my body while it feelth so different, it just *feelth* really good.” Daph shook her head, laughing nervously. “I don't know, I'm jutht fuckin weird.”

“You are,” Georgia nodded, grinning. She frowned, then snapped her fingers. “Okay. Let's do this. We'll *walk* for another half-mile before we go, alright? As long as you promise to pace yourself.”

“Oh!” Daph said, her face lighting up. She hopped up, her belly bouncing slightly above her hips. “Yeah! Let'th fuckin do it!”

“Don't overwork yourself,” Georgia demanded, poking Daph in the middle of her chest. “I mean it.”

“I won't, I won't,” Daph said. She shook out her legs, flexing her paws, and started up a light jog down the path.

“So are you going to keep coming out here through the pregnancy?” Georgia asked, catching up with her.

“Oh fuck yeah,” Daph nodded beneath her steady breathing. “I think getting bigger might jutht make it *better* yknow?” She slowed, visibly embarrassed for a moment, then stammered. “I-I mean...make it more of a challenge. Make it harder.”

“Sure, sure,” Georgia nodded, smiling to herself.

“And yknow what elthe I thought about?” Daph said, slowing to a walk to continue the conversation. “My *favorite* time to work out is right at the beginning of the year, like in late January and shit. Becauthe, like, we alwayth get that winter hibernation weight, right?”

“Ugh, yes,” Georgia groaned. “I hate that we still have that instinct.”

“But like, I've gotta gain even *more* weight for the pregnancy, yeah?” Daph explained. “And I *love* running and working out after I've put on weight because it jutht feelth really good and rewarding to burn it all off. Tho, like, ath long ath I promithe mythelf that I'm gonna work it all off, I can look forward to that and not worry about how much baby weight I end up with!” She held up her hands and cycled them around each other. “It's like a thelf-motivation kinda thing, both to thtick with my pregnancy diet and to work it off later. I'm really good at that thorta thing.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” Georgia nodded. “I wish I was good at making myself-” She stopped, halting in place as an odd sensation came from her backpack. She quickly flipped it off her back and pulled it open to discover it was Daph's cell phone ringing underneath a pile of clothes.

“It's for you,” Georgia said, passing it over to Daph. She frowned, taking it and looking at the caller ID.

“It'th my mom...” Daph said, confused. “What doeth she want? She never callth in the middle ofthe day.”

“Then answer it and find out,” Georgia shrugged.

Before Daph could fit her thumb underneath the phone lid, she froze, a look of horror and realization spreading over her face.

“Oh...oh my god,” Daph blinked. She looked up at Georgia. “...Did you put the ultrasound pictureth on Facebook?”

“Yeeeeeaaahhh?” Georgia said, frowning. “Why would I *not*? I made a whole gender announcement and everything.”

“But you didn't tag me, right?” Daph asked, her phone still buzzing in the palm of her hand.

“No, but only because you asked me not to,” Georgia said.

“Okay...” Daph mumbled tapping her phone with her hand. She was about to flip it open, before realization struck her. “Oh fuck...oh *fuck*...My *name* wath on the ultrathound pictureth!”

“...Oh...huh,” Georgia said, tapping her paw on the ground and rubbing her chin. “...I guess we should have cropped them.”

After ringing unanswered for almost a minute, Daph's phone fell silent as the call went to voicemail. She sighed in relief, letting her arm fall to her side and running a hand through her hair.

“I didn't want you to tag me in thothe pictureth 'cause I'm not sure if I wanna tell my gym friends or not. But-” Daph fell silent as she felt her cell phone begin to buzz and vibrate again in her grip. She brought it up to her face and stared at the screen in horror. “Fuck, it'th her again.”

“Then answer it! What are you talking about?” Georgia exclaimed, throwing her arms up.

“*I forgot to tell my mom I'm pregnant,* ” Daph hissed, as if the unanswered phone could overhear her. Georgia blinked, staring in disbelief at Daph, then burst into a fit of manic laughter.

“*What?*” Georgia cackled. “*You forgot!?*”

“I wath gonna do it thoon, I jutht kept forgetting!”

“She is going to *kill you* for not telling her!”

“*I know!* ”

“Answer it!” Georgia shouted, jabbing her finger at the phone. “If she calls you a third time, you're done for.”

“*I know, goddamn it!* ” Daph hissed. She stared at the phone, knowing she had only a few more seconds to answer it, and took a deep breath, placing her free hand against her belly as if it gave her strength. With a grimace, she flipped open the lid and answered the call, but held it open in her palm for a few seconds

without a word.

“Put it on speakerphone,” Georgia whispered. “I want to hear this.”

Daph was about to protest, but the two of them heard a faint voice come from the other end of the receiver. Rolling her eyes, Daph thumbed the speakerphone button and held it closer to her mouth.

“...Hey mom,” Daph said, quietly.

“*Daphodille!*” Came a loud voice from the other line. “*Daphodille, are you there?*”

“Yeah mom, I can hear you,” Daph said, rolling her eyes.

“*Good!*” yelled Mrs. Westinfold, her voice sounding far away. Both Daph and Georgia knew that she was likely on speakerphone as well so she could gesticulate with her hands like she did when she was angry. “*You wanna tell me why I see your name on Georgiah's ultrasound pictahs on the computah?*” Her voice had a similar rhythm to Daphodille's, but with a heavier accent and without an accompanying lisp.

“It'th a long thtory mom,” Daph said, pinching the bridge of her nose and shaking her head. “I can tell ya about it another ti-”

“*I think you can tell me about it right now , young lady!*” Daph's mom shouted. “*I already called twice today and you haven't answered me until now, so you owe me an explanation!*”

“I'm in the park, mom. I've been running today, I just didn't hear my phone-”

“*Not that! Why are there ultrasound photos on the computah with your name on em?*”

“Uh...” Daph swallowed, stalling for time. “It'th...becaughte I'm pregnant, mom...”

There was a silence from the other end of the phone, making Georgia and Daph glance at one another in worry. There was a rough sigh from the other end.

"I'm gonna need a drink," Mrs. Westin的角度 said, stepping away from the phone. The two of them could hear the sound of the refrigerator opening.

"Mom, it'th like 11:30," Daph said.

"When I need a drink, I need a drink," Daph's mom shot back, with the sound of pouring liquid behind her.

"I love your mom," Georgia snickered. Daph responded with a glare.

"Alright," Daph's mom said into the receiver. *"Now that I've got myself a cocktail, I want ya to tell me again what you just said."*

"I'm pregnant, mom," Daph sighed.

"So I wasn't hearin' things," she said, alongside the sound of ice clinking in a glass. *"Jesus Christ, Daphodille, you're twenty years old."*

"I'm twenty-four," Daph rolled her eyes. "And it'th not what you think, jutht let me expl-"

"And I saw that ultrasound pictah! That ain't a brand-new little baby you've got in there! How far along are you?"

"Like...four, five months?"

"And it only took you until NOW tah tell me?" Daph's mom complained, taking a long sip of her cocktail. *"Mm-hmm, I see how it is."*

"But you *don't!* Jutht gimme a minute to-"

"God knows I was around your age when I had Adam, but I had a husband and a home on my side. We did things the right way!"

"You have no idea what'th going on, mom!" Daph yelled into the reciever.

"I know that my only daughtah is having a baby and she didn't even think tah tell me about it! You know the neighbahs have been asking about ya in church, and now what am I supposed tah tell em?"

"You can tell 'em I don't give a fuck what they think, for one thing," Daph

snapped.

“Oh, I don't give a damn what those old bitches say, eithah,” Mrs. Westinfold said, causing Georgia to jam a fist in her mouth to keep from howling in laughter. *“But God knows I don't wanna be a liah!”*

“Then you won't have to be if you just shut up for a minute and let me talk!” Daph yelled. “God damn, mom...”

“Don't use the lord's name in fucking vain, young lady,” her mom said. With the sound of ice cubes clinking together, Mrs. Westinfold drained the rest of her cocktail in a few extra seconds and sighed, making a satisfied chittering sound, a habit picked up by her daughter.

“You really need to thtop drinking before noon...” Daph sighed.

“I've got thirty years on you, young lady. Don't tell me how tah live my life.” With a pause, she hiccupped, the continued. *“Who's the fathah? Is it anybody I know?”*

“Well uh...” Daph paused, glancing up at Georgia, unsure of how much of the truth to say. She swallowed, gritted her teeth and said. “...It'th...Darwin.”

Daph's mom choked and went into a coughing fit, pounding her hand on the counter like she tended to do.

“Georgia's husband?!” Mrs. Westinfold screamed. *“Daphodille, what the fuck were you thinking? The first shot I get at a grandchild and it'll be a bastahd out of wedlock? God in heaven, I need tah sit down.”*

“Mom, will you *pleathe* lithen to me!?” Daph yelled. “It'th not the way it thoundth! I thwear to God! It'th not even my baby!”

“Of course it's your baby, Daphodille! One of your brothahs could maybe get away with that one, but you don't have that excuse!”

“Uhm, Mrs. Westinfold?” Georgia said, leaning over the receiver. “She's telling the truth.”

There was silence from the other end, during which Daph looked up at Georgia

with unending relief and mouthed 'thank you.'

"... *Who is that?* " Daph's mom asked. "*Is that Georgia? Georgia Macintire?*"

"It's Georgia Middleeson now," she said, brightly. "Hi, Mrs. Westinfold."

"*Oh hello there, sweetie!* " she said, her voice brightening in the blink of an eye. "*I've been tellin you for fifteen years now to call me Donna, haven't I?* "

"I know, Mrs. Westinfold," Georgia responded.

"*Have you...uh...have you been there the whole time, sweetie?* "

"Yes, ma'am."

"*Then maybe you can talk some sense into my now pregnant daughtah !*" Mrs. Westinfold said in disbelief. Daph rolled her eyes and handed the phone over to Georgia completely, as if washing her hands of the issue. She sighed, tugging down her running shirt over her belly and rubbing it absentmindedly.

"Well actually, Mrs. Westinfold," Georgia explained, "Daph is telling the truth. It's not her baby, it's ours. She's a surrogate."

Another silence as Daph's mom absorbed the information.

"... *Say again, sweetie?* " she asked, after a long moment. "*My daughtah, Daphodille...she's your surrogate ?*"

"Yes, ma'am," Georgia said. "About a year ago, my OBG/YN diagnosed me with SPS. Darwin and I have been trying for a baby, so Daph was kind enough to carry for us since I can't."

"...So..." Daph's mom said in disbelief. "...*So Daphodille is pregnant...with YOUR baby? And your husband is the fathah?*"

"That's...exactly right!" Georgia said, grinning up at Daph.

"They're even payin' me, mom," Daph added. "It'th a job!"

"*You're tellin' me they're paying you tah have a baby?*"

“ Pretty much, yeah,” Daph said, nonchalantly. She sighed in the relief at getting through to her mom.

“*And Georgia,*” Mrs. Westin的角度 added. “*You're alright with this?*”

“It was my idea, actually.”

“Tho really, mom, *Georgia'th* the one having a baby. I'm jutht babythitting it for a while.” Daph said, before adding. “Um...Babythitting, but like...inthide me...yeah.”

“*I see...*” Mrs. Westin的角度 said, still processing what she'd been told. “... *And it's a girl, is it?*”

“Yeah,” Daph said, smiling to herself. “It'th a girl.”

“We just found out,” Georgia added.

“*Oh, I saw the announcement. I was just...SOMEBODY neglected to tell me that it was my daughtah that was carrying the baby.*”

“Thorry,” Daph said. “I've been busy and just...forgot.”

“*But you're stayin' healthy, are ya? You're eatin' right?*”

“Yeah, mom. Darwin and Georgia are takin' good care of me.”

“*Good, good...I got such cramps when I carried your brothahs, you wouldn't even believe.*” She paused before asking “...*Are you...ah...are you showing yet, sweetie?*”

“Oh yeah,” Georgia interjected, nodding and chuckling to herself. “She's showing alright.” Daph smiled toothily and blushed, still holding her belly in embarrassment.

“*Oh good...well...maybe you wanna come up for a visit sometime, yeah?*” Mrs. Westin的角度 said. “*Let me get a look at you or somethin'.*”

“ Yeah...that'd be really nice, mom,” Daph said, warmly.

“*Well, I've got to head out to my book club. We're starting on a short little thing*

called 'Child of God.' I don't know much about it yet, but the title sounds precious. Don't be a stranger, sweetie, alright? And...send me some pictahs sometime, won't ya?"

"Thure thing," Daph said. "Hey...don't tell the guyth about thith yet, okay?"

"Your brothahs? Oh, I'm going to tell them all about it."

Daph sighed.

"Okay, mom."

"I love you, honey. I'm sorry I got so upset. I really should have let you explain. "

"Yeah, you should have."

"Don't talk back to me, Daphodille," Mrs. Westinfolld snapped. "... I love you. And congratulations to you, Georgia."

"Thanks, Mrs. Westinfolld," Georgia said.

"You take good care of that bun in your oven, you hear me?" She snapped to Daph.

"Don't you have thomewhere to be?"

"... Oh my fuck, I'm late for book club. I'll talk to you later, goodbye!" With an awkward shuffle and a click, Daph's mom hung up.

"Fuck," Daph sighed, closing her phone and sighing. "She is *exhausting*."

"She's adorable," Georgia giggled.

"Try growing up with her," Daph added. She shook her head and put her hands to her hips. "God damn, she wore me out more than the run did. Let'th get out of here, I'm about to fall athleep on my own tail."

"If you feel like it," Georgia said, turning around and beginning to walk back the way they came. "Oh! I didn't tell you, I'm getting registered as a masseuse at work."

“No shit?” Daph said.

“Yeah! I'm taking a course to learn more about muscle stimulation for atrophied patients. You want me to practice on you?”

“Fuck yeah, I do,” Daph said. She leaned back, bracing her hands against her back and groaning. “Thtart back here, your fat-ass baby ith gonna make my thpine thnap in half.

“Hey!” Georgia shouted. “Stop calling her fat!”

Chapter 8

Perks

The diner, for once, was packed completely wall-to-wall with customers, only some of which were there to actually eat. Most simply wanted a place to duck away from the sudden and violent cold front blowing outside. As sunny as the sky was, the biting air and wind chill was too much to enjoy the sunlight, so most pedestrians began to migrate toward the closest place where they could get a warm drink or a hot meal. For some of them, it was Antonio's diner they found first.

Georgia and Darwin sat in the same seat near the window they had occupied when they first learned of Daph's successful conception. With their first impressions of an empty, quiet, old-style dive, the two of them hadn't expected anything close to the crowd that piled inside by the minute. Darwin had his glasses dangling from his fingers as he read through the menu to occupy himself, tapping his foot on the ground. He sat stiffly, as if trying to disappear into the laminated menu in front of him, his paw lightly tapping against the floor. It wasn't the kind of place he was used to, especially when it was so packed full.

Georgia sat in the opposite chair, spending much of her time looking out the window and occasionally glancing around the room for the one squirrel they were there to see. She wasn't a stranger to street-side diners. Some of her favorite hidden-gems around the city looked like a crime scene, at best. But she was becoming steadily more anxious as the crowds continued to chatter and bustle uncomfortably close together. She kept her eyes gazing out the window, a facade of calmness over her face, but her tail twitching wildly and uncomfortably behind her chair.

With a sigh, Darwin abandoned the menu to the middle of the table, not having found anything that piqued his appetite. Glancing up, he noticed his wife still gazing dreamily out the window. Her left hand drummed lightly in front of him, but her right gripped the outside edge of the table like a vice as she tried to expend her anxiety in any way she could. Darwin looked quietly at her, Georgia

not yet noticing his attention. Without a word, he slid his hand across the table and beneath hers, taking it in his palm and rubbing a small, comforting circle on the back of her hand with his thumb. Georgia glanced down at his hand entwined with hers, relaxing at the sight of his light-brown fur, a shade of which she could spot from a mile away. Looking up at her husband's face, she smiled, releasing her grip from the table, but still keeping it wrapped into a fist.

“Sorry,” she said, slightly ashamed. “I’m okay.”

“You don't have to apologize,” Darwin said.

“Okay...” she shook her head and took a deep, controlled breath. “This was my idea, anyway. I just didn't expect it to be so crowded in here.” She released her fist the thumb back her hair from her face, smiling sheepishly and looking away while she shrugged. “I’m just a little anxious, that's all.”

“We can go...” Darwin offered.

“Not yet, we still haven't seen Daph,” Georgia shook her head, emphatically.

“I thought I saw her tail sticking up out of the crowd a few times,” Darwin said, smirking.

“I'm surprised we haven't a least *heard* her by now,” Georgia said, continuing the joke with a laugh of her own. Their smiles eventually faded into silence.

“I can't believe she still works here,” Darwin said, looking around the ceiling of the diner.

“Daph has never quit anything in her life,” Georgia said. “...Even when she probably *should* have.”

“I don't think it's safe,” Darwin shook his head. “The stress on her could affect the baby.”

“She never seemed stressed about this job, even before the baby,” Georgia said, entwining a finger into her hair idly. “In some weird way, I think she likes it. The girl loves a challenge, if nothing else.”

“It's not about the 'challenge',” Darwin sniffed. “Not when she's carrying my

daughter.”

“C'mon, lay off of her,” Georgia said, dropping her hand to the table. “We've got a checkup next week with Tara. If there's a problem, she'll tell us.”

“There shouldn't even *be* a problem if she just did what the doctor told her.”

“She *is*, Darwin! She's exercising, she's sticking to the diet, she's going to checkups on time, even the ones we can't make it to.”

Darwin said nothing, frowning and flicking his ears and turned to stare out the window like Georgia was doing a moment ago. Georgia grumbled, knowing she'd have to once again fight against her husband's thick head when it came to what he actually wanted to say versus what came out of his mouth.

“You're scared...” Georgia said, gently.

“I'm not scared. I'm just...let me think of the right word.”

“No, you're scared.”

Darwin blinked, shifting in his chair, unwilling to admit weakness, but not denying it, either.

Georgia sighed, sliding her hand across the table and wrapping her pinky around his. “I'm in the same boat as you are, sweetie. I know. But the difference is that you can't bring

yourself to just trust Daph to take care of the baby, like I do.”

“...How can I do that?” Darwin said, shaking his head. “It's like...I'm leaving my daughter with a babysitter before I've even *met* her.”

“I know...I know, I know, I know,” Georgia nodded, gripping his hand with each syllable. “But what gets me through it is knowing that Daph isn't just some babysitter. I trust her, she's reliable and generous, I've known her my entire life. I believe in her and I'm trying so, so hard to get you to feel the same.”

“I can only take your word on it for so long,” Darwin said, turning back to Georgia.

“Then why don't you spend time with her?” Georgia suggested. “I don't think you two have ever hung out without me around. Get to know her.”

“I...I just don't have the time,” Darwin said, using his nails to comb through his straight hair as a nervous tic. “It's taking all the free time at I have just to spend time with you at home without coding.”

“I can miss a day or two,” Georgia said, smiling. “Think of it as spending time with your daughter, not with Daph. I mean, technically,” Georgia chuckled, “you *will* be.”

“I'll...we'll see,” Darwin said, unconvincingly. Georgia rolled her eyes and sat back.

“Do I need to *trick* the both of you into spending time together?” She leaned farther back, glancing up the nearest row between the tables. “Where *is* she, anyway? She's not exactly hard to miss anymore.”

“I haven't seen her since the last time we had her over for dinner,” Darwin shrugged, picking up the menu again.

“You'll be surprised,” Georgia said, craning her neck around people to try and locate Daph. She blinked, then turned back to Darwin. “Was that when you gave her those cooking lessons?”

“I think so.”

“That was *weeks* ago.”

“Was it?” Darwin blinked, then took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“Sorry...Time's been lost on me for a while.”

“What ever happened to working less?”

“It's a big government contract. All the devs need to work full shifts to get it done on time.” He put his glasses back on and glanced up to meet a frowning Georgia. “It'll be done by the time the baby is due!” He defended. “And even if it isn't, I applied for time off months ago.”

Georgia sighed and shook her head. Suddenly, her left ear twitched, swiveling to

the side at the sound of some very familiar laughter breaking over the sound of customers. Her head turned with it, her eyes lighting up.

“There she is!” Georgia said, brightening. Down the line of tables, next to a booth at the very end, stood Daph, chatting animatedly with a table of old dear ladies who were more than likely tourists.

While dressed in her normal work clothes from the last time they'd seen her, she also wore an apron around her neck that was draped over her belly, tenting it out far in front of her. As she waited for the old ladies to decide, she idly rested her hands on it, rubbing her stomach affectionately with a free hand.

“Oooohhhhhhhh...,” Georgia cooed, flipping her tail around in excitement. “She's getting so *big* now!”

As if on cue, one of the old does gestured to Daph's belly, to which she nodded happily and laughed. The table took turns reaching over to give Daph's stomach a pat or a rub, smiling and nodding to one another. As they busied themselves, Daph glanced around and caught eyes with Georgia. Her eyes widening, she took one of her hands off her lower back and waved. Pointing to her and Darwin, Daph explained something to the women, prompting them to glance at one another in concern and confusion. Taking the last of their order, Daph wrote it down on her notepad and chattered happily as she shuffled off down the aisle, leaving the old does to gossip amongst each other.

Daph skipped by three tables of customers that had sat down before Georgia and Darwin just to make it to their table. She stood over it and pulled out her notepad, but that was the only professional thing she did.

“What'th up, fuckerth?” Daph said, quietly. Darwin glanced up from the menu at the sound of her voice and found himself face-to-face with her protruding, healthy six-month baby bump nearly prodding him in the face. His mouth dropped open slightly as he saw her, his vision traveling up her round body until they met eyes. Daph chuckled to herself and put her hands on her hips.

“Admiring your handiwork?” Daph teased, holding her belly from beneath with one hand.

Darwin's ears twitched, his face flushing under his fur. He crossed his legs under the table in a move he hoped wouldn't too obviously draw attention to what he

was trying to hide.

“You're getting so *big Daph!*” Georgia squealed, reaching over and prodding her friend in the stomach. She stomped her paws against the floor excitedly as she pulled Daph closer to get a better feel of her baby-filled middle. “*Look at your tummy!*”

“I am, dude,” Daph said, rolling her eyes. “I have to every day. It ain't like I forgot it wath there.”

“But you look so *good!*” Georgia said, her voice rising in pitch with every word, high enough that a pair of canine customers in the doorway glanced in her direction with concern. “You look... You look like a...a...a...I don't know! *Pregnant!*” She pulled in Daph for a hug, pressing her face against her belly like a furry pillow.

“Fuck, dude, calm your titt,” Daph said, patting Georgia's head awkwardly as she tried to pull away. “I thought *I* wath gonna be the one with the crazy hormoneth.”

“Every time I see you, you're bigger than last time,” Georgia sighed, nuzzling her face against Daph's stomach. “It's how I know my baby is growing safe and healthy.”

“Or, yknow,” Daph said, sarcastically. “You could athk *the doctor* about it.”

“Not the same,” Georgia said. She put her ear against Daph's belly and began to mutter and whisper encouragements to her daughter inside.

“You thee what I gotta put up with?” Daph said to Darwin, pointing to his wife still latched around her waist. “It'th hard enough to put up with the baby on the inthide without having to keep away the mom on the *outthide.*”

“You called me ' *mom,*” Georgia breathed, her eyes closed as she continued to listen into Daph's stomach.

“The only thing you're gonna hear ith *my* fat, hungry ass,” Daph said. She pried off Georgia's arms and attempted to physically push her back into her seat. “C'mon, goddammit, visitation hourth are over.”

“Noooooooooo...” Georgia pleaded, clawing at the air in front of Daph's belly. “I want my *baby!*”

“Give it eighteen yearth and you'll be wishin' I could take her *back,*” Daph sighed. She glanced over to the other end of the table, where Darwin was still gazing into her belly like a crystal ball. “How ya doin, Daddy?” Daph nodded to him. “Thee anything you like?”

“Huh-Wha-?” He mouthed, snapping out of his trance. “Wha-Uh...Do I...?”

“On the menu, dude,” Daph said, pointing to the laminated paper abandoned on the table. Darwin blinked, then scrambled to pick it up, only to continue staring at a single spot on the page.

“...I don't know yet,” he admitted after a moment of silence, dropping the menu.

“It'th cool,” Daph shrugged, taking out her notepad and hovering her pen above it. “S'long as I have thith out, it thtill lookth like I'm working.”

“I can't get over it,” Georgia said, resting her head in her hands and gazing at Daph's stomach. “She's just getting so big, so *fast.*”

“It'th not like she'th ever hungry in there,” Daph said. “I'm chowin' down on all that health food every half hour and I'm *thtill* goin' to bed hungry. All that energy'th goin thtraight to her.”

“But you're sticking to your diet, right?” Darwin said, finally starting to shake away his surprise.

“Oh hell yeah,” Daph nodded. “I'm even goin a little *over* with snakth and thtuff. I don't think I've *ever* eaten thith much in my whole life.”

“How do you feel?” Georgia asked from the other side of the table.

“Hungry,” Daph said. “Like, all the goddamn time, fuckin' hungry. Baby keepth thtealing all my food.” She paused, scratching the side of her belly with the tip of her pen. “But yknow, other than that...not too bad. Kinda *good,* actually. All the webthiteth online talk about being pregnant like it'th the fuckin wortht thing in the goddamn world, that it'th like fuckin mithery all the time, but I'm kinda enjoyin' it. It'th weird, but it'th like a *good* weird.”

Daph ran her fingers through her hair and slicked it back, then rubbed the fur on her arms down. “All my fur and hair feelth really nice and I feel thoft everywhere. I'm not alwayth *comfortable*, I guess, but that'th kinda part of it, yknow? It'th like a little bit of a workout all the time, and I *love* working out. And...ok, yknow, I'm gonna thay it.” Daph turned to the side and pulled the apron tighter to better show the roundness of her belly in profile. “I like the belly! I think it lookth cute! I look good with it and I like havin' it!”

“You really do, though,” Georgia nodded. She reached over to try and put another hand on her stomach, but Daph calmly slid out of her reach. She pouted and dropped her hand on the table, then her eyes lit up. “Next time I'm off, we're getting you *maternity outfits!* ”

“Uh...” Daph blinked, then frowned and shook her head. “Nah. No way. I ain't wearin' that shit.”

“What's wrong with it?” Georgia protested. “There's all kinds of clothes, don't just write all of it off!”

“I *like* my clotheth. They thuit me.”

“Well, they don't suit you *anymore*, do they?” Georgia said, She quickly reached over and lifted up the apron, revealing Daph's tight work shirt just barely covering the top her bump and leaving her white belly fur exposed. Daph gasped and slapped Georgia's hand out of the way, letting the apron fall back into place and cover her.

“...Antonio didn't have any bigger sizeth...” Daph mumbled, embarrassed. She reached under the apron to pull down her shirt in a vain attempt to cover herself. “That'th why I gotta wear the apron...”

“You're too adorable, waddling around like that,” Georgia teased, setting her head in her hands again. “But we need to get you some clothes that actually *fit* that big tummy of yours.”

“Then I can jutht buy thome bigger thizes for a while,” Daph said, defensively. “I don't want to wear all that frilly bullshit with all the pink and...ugh.” Daph stuck her tongue out in disgust. “It'th jutht not my thtyle.” She paused, blinking for a second, then swallowed, lowering her tail down like she would on the rare times she was actually embarrassed. “...I'm...I'm not *actually* waddling, am I?”

“Just a little bit,” Georgia grinned. “Like I said. Too cute for your own good.”

“God damn it...” Daph swore. She shook her head and glanced at Darwin to escape from Georgia's teasing. “You figure out what you want? How 'bout a drink? Everybody wantth our shitty coffee today.”

“Oh...um...” Darwin reached for the menu again, but decided against it. “Yeah, coffee.”

“Cream? Thugar?” Daph said, raising an eyebrow.

“None, thanks. Black.”

“Gross,” Daph said, sticking out her tongue making a fake gagging sound as she wrote down his order.

“Why are you even still working here?” Darwin asked. “Part of the reason we're paying you is so you don't have to work through the pregnancy and stress yourself.”

“Trutht me, I'd be in worthe shape thitting around my apartment all the time than I am right now,” Daph said. “Every book and webthite tellth you to stay active, so that'th what I'm doin'. Thtaying active.”

“But it *can't* be worth the stress,” Darwin argued. “I'd rather you be bored and relaxed than working and stressed. It's not good for the baby.”

“Dude, who sayth I'm stressed?” Daph smiled. “Thith ith the eathiest few monthth I've ever *had* at thith fuckin job!”

Georgia and Darwin glanced at one another, then at the crowded diner around them, catching glimpses of two other waitresses slipping through the crowd to take orders as fast as they could.

“...Really,” Darwin said, unconvinced.

“No man, listen,” Daph said. She set the notepad down on the table and leaned forward as far as she could with her rounding middle in the way. “Tho Antonio didn't believe me at firtht when I told him I wath pregnant...which, yknow, ith kinda fair.” She pointed to herself with a thumb and shrugged.

“But anyway, ath thoon ath I got bigger and thtstarted showing, he and I realized the thame thing: *he can't yell at a pregnant girl!* Do you know how many people would thtraight-up boycott thith fuckin place if he got caught bossin' me around when I look like *thith!*?” She leaned back again and gestured to her gravid body. “Uh-uh, not gonna happen. Tho he'th been real fuckin' nice to me lately, lettin' me take long lunch breakth and go to the bathroom whenever I need to...Which, yknow...ith a *lot.*” Daph flicked her tail and glanced away, rubbing the side of her belly with her pen tip again.

“Maybe he's only trying to be accomidating,” Georgia suggested. “Maybe he just wants to be nice while you're...delicate.”

“It'th only 'cauthe I love ya that I didn't jutht punch you for callin' me 'delicate,’” Daph said, pointing at Georgia while rubbing her belly with her other hand. “But he let'th me get away with shit all the time, giveth me time off for appointmentth when I need em, and jutht kinda keeping hith voice down around me.”

“It...really just sounds like he's being *nice*, Daph,” Darwin said.

“Nahhhhh, he jutht knows that if he *ithn't*, he'th gonna get shit for it and lose customerth. I know where his head is.” Daph nodded, grinning slyly and tapping her head with a finger.

“If you say so...” Darwin said, rolling his eyes quietly.

“I thaw that,” Daph snapped, pointing to his face. She groaned and leaned over her belly to reach the table and pick up her notepad. “Oh! Yeah, I'm altho makin' fuckin' *bank*, too!”

“More than normal?” Georgia asked.

“*Fuck* yeah, dude! On a day like thith, I go home with like a hundred and thirty buckth in my pocket jutht from tith alone!”

“Wow, good haul,” Georgia breathed, her eyes widening. “How?”

“Everybody tith good becauthe they feel bad about makin' the pregnant girl work!” Daph said excitedly, eyes twinkling. “It'th great! I got your baby workin' *for me*, for once.”

“You don't tell lie to customers, do you?” Georgia asked, suspiciously.

“...I mean... *no*, I don't *lie* to em...but like...I play it up, yknow?” Daph admitted, scratching the back of her neck. She cleared her throat and composed herself. Spreading her paws apart, she leaned her posture back and settled slightly into her hips, pushing out her belly in front of her. She put on a weary expression and rested her arm across the top of her bump. “Hey...hey guyth...what can I get you thtarted on?” she said, her breathing labored and heavy, like she'd just come back from a long run. She pretended to scribble on her notepad, her tail drooping behind her, then mimed lumbering away with stiff legs and a sore back.

“Jesus, Daph, don't make people feel bad,” Georgia protested. Daph hopped back into her regular posture, her belly bouncing slightly with the motion.

“Oh c'mon, it'th not like I'm *tellin'* them to tip me! They do that on their own. And besideth, half the cuthtomerth in here wanna talk to me about it, anyway. Yknow what'th funny? Women are alwayth like 'Oh, when'th the baby due, are you having more than one, you're glowing,' and shit like that, but men *never* bring it up. They jutht sit there.” She mimed holding a menu in front of her face and staring stone-faced down at it. “Like they can't thee my big ass gut 'bout to poke em in the face. Still, they all tip the thame, so I'm not gonna complain.”

“But do you really need that much more money from what we're giving you for the surrogacy?” Darwin asked, awkwardly setting the menu down as he realized he was holding it exactly the way Daph demonstrated. Daph paused for a moment, frowned, then nodded.

“...Yeah, I do. Like, the surrogacy paymenth are thaving my ass, don't get me wrong. But after rent, electricity, internet, water bill, and all the food I gotta buy to keep up with my diet, it just don't always cover it all. I mean, it suckth having to work while I'm feelin' bigger than a house, but I gotta do it. Thank God Antonio's been takin' it eathy on me.” Daph glanced over her shoulder toward the kitchen, rubbing the left side of her belly again with her knuckles. “Thpeakin of which, thith might be the longetht I've ever thpent at one table. You guyth better order thtuff real quick.”

“I'll just keep it to coffee,” Darwin shrugged, glancing to Georgia who was frantically scanning the menu.

“Hang on a sec...Uh...I don't know...Is it too late for breakfast food?”

“Yeah, thorry. It ith.” Daph frowned, still rubbing the spot just on the side of her stomach. “Fuckin' hell...” She discreetly pulled her apron aside and lifted her shirt to scratch the itch directly through her fur. Daph paused, fingers pressed into the soft layer above her belly. She blinked, staring into the distance as she tenderly explored the spot with her fingers. Suddenly, her face fell open into shock.

“Ooooooohhhhhhh, ooooohhhhh ohhhh oohhh ooooohhhhh!” Daph yelled in the middle of the crowded restaurant, turning nearby heads in her direction. She beamed through her oversized teeth, her tail flicking wildly behind her and nearly hitting seated customers with it. She pointed to her belly and hopped in place on her paws, beckoning Georgia and Darwin closer. “It'th *her!* It'th the *baby!* It'th *her!* ”

“*What!?*” Georgia cried. She nearly leapt out of her chair to crouch next to Daph, hands around her stomach and probing with both her fingers and her eyes for any noticeable movement. Daph guided her hands to the spot just below the hem of her work shirt, on the left side of her belly and just barely on level with her navel. She felt the spot for a few seconds, then a squeal of excited laughter burst from her throat, her own tail fanning over the ground. “Oh my *God!* There she is! She's *moving!*”

“I thought it wath jutht an itch, but it wath comin from *inthide!*” Daph said. She took her hands off her stomach and shuddered, clenching her fists and waving them helplessly. “Ooohhhohohohoh, it'th tho *weird!* That feelth tho fuckin *weird,* dude! She'th fuckin' *moving* in there!”

“Darwin!” Georgia said, turning around and motioning to her husband. “Right here! She's *kicking!*”

“I...No, I'm...I'm okay just watching...” Darwin tried to protest, but Georgia rolled her eyes and grabbed him by the wrist. Yanking him out of the chair, she guided his hand over Daph's furry, swollen belly until he could feel the weak, tiny flutterings of movement from his soon-to-be daughter poking against the palm of his hand.

“He lookth fuckin terrified,” Daph laughed, motioning to Darwin's shocked expression. Daph tucked her hands underneath her belly and bounced it slightly, trying to entice more motion out of the baby squirrel inside. “That'th your daddy,

you little thquirt, say hi!”

“I can't believe we were here for this...” Georgia said, tears quivering in her eyes. She reached over and entwined her fingers around her husband's so they could feel their baby moving together.

Daph felt the tiny prodding against the inside of her belly with pride, thinking about how it had been her body to grow the baby inside that was now strong enough to make herself known. If it hadn't seemed real before, the moment she realized it was the baby poking her from the inside was the moment it all became something real, something tangible. She was going to have a baby, and it was more certain than ever.

Daph glanced from her stomach over to Georgia, who was nearly ready to burst into elated tears as she felt her daughter greeting her for the first time. Daph sighed, happily staring at the joy on her best friend's face.

Do it for her, she thought.

The three of them were jerked abruptly out of the moment by the sound of a camera shutter snapping closed.

In unison, Darwin, Georgia, and Daph all turned to find a chubby, shaggy dog with a fanny pack, holding a camera in front of his face. He lowered it, staring dumbly at the three of them.

“Are you fuckin' kidding me, man?” Daph groaned. “We're kinda having a moment here.”

“...Sorry,” the tourist said sheepishly, lowering the camera and sitting back in his booth. With that, the watching people turned back to their meals and drinks, leaving Daph and her friends to themselves.

“God dammit,” Daph sniffed as Darwin and Georgia withdrew from her belly and back into their seats. “What a fucking buzzkill, man.” She sighed, then shook her head and tugged her apron back into place, rubbing the spot where the baby had kicked in case she was going to move again. “Ok, I *really* gotta get back to work, but I'll let you know *ath thoon* ath she decideth to move again. Lemme grab your coffee, I'll be right back.” Daph spun in place and strode off to the kitchen, her awkward pregnancy walk gaining a noticeable spring to her step.

At the next table over, the shaggy tourist was busy fishing out onions from the bowl of soup he had ordered when he felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning, he came face-to-face with Georgia, her head cresting over the shared booth divider between them, smiling awkwardly.

“Hi...do you think there's any chance we could get that picture sent to us?”

Chapter 9

Getting Her Toes Wet

“I think half of what you're getting out of thith pregnancy is being able to take me around to do all the shit *you* wanna do,” Daph grumbled.

“It's because I know you can't run away!” Georgia said, happily, swinging her gym bag in her hand as the two walked side by side. “Or if you did, I could catch you.”

“Give it three more monthth and I'll be leaving you in the dust again, jutht like high school track.”

“By three months I won't care anymore because I'll have a *baby*,” Georgia beamed.

They walked down the sidewalk in the mid-afternoon, the sky overcast and the cold air biting at them. While Daph wore her favorite, warmest jacket, she was too big to close it around her belly, so she had to leave it open and weather the cold air against her swollen body. She was already grumpy from having to walk such a long distance from the train station, her paws feeling particularly sore beneath her heavy, pregnant body.

“Can we jutht get a cab?” Daph complained, stopping to stretch out her toes while trying to warm up her belly by rubbing with the tips of her fingers. “Thith ith bullshit.”

“C'mon, we're in Brooklyn,” Georgia said, stopping a few feet ahead to wait. “I haven't seen a cab since we crossed the river.”

“Then can we jutht find the bus or thomething? I hate thith.”

“It's only a couple more blocks, promise.” Georgia said. “You're supposed to be the athlete over here.”

“Yeah, but *I'm* the one carrying the *baby* over here!” Daph yelled, her voice echoing over the empty streets. “So *excuse me* if maybe I don't wanna...want to...ugh...” Daph shook her head and continued rubbing her belly underneath her thin shirt.

“...Couldn't think of anything, huh?”

“Shut up,” Daph huffed, re-adjusting her gym bag over her shoulder and shuffling past Georgia. “Let'th jutht get thith over with.”

In what was only a block and a half away, Daph and Georgia finally made it to the front door of the Brooklyn YMCA, with Daph panting grumpily and pushing forward to get out of the cold as soon as possible. She stood in the lobby, catching her breath as her belly rose and fell in time with her breathing.

“Fuck,” Daph said, as Georgia came up beside her. “I don't wanna work out *before* I work out, damn it.”

“What makes *that* so different from jogging?” Georgia asked.

“Becauthe I fucking *prepare* for a run, Georgia. I thtretch, I pre-hydrate, I eat a meal or at leatht a goddamn energy bar. When I fuckin get out there, I'm *ready*, yknow?” Daph huffed and fought against her sagging sweatpants by pulling them back up. “I thought we could take a cab or thomethin' when we got off the train. I wathn't ready for a fuckin' hike through Brooklyn.”

“*Fine*, we'll get an Uber back to the train station when we're done,” Georgia groaned, already fed up with Daph's complaining. She shifted her bag over her shoulder and walked to the sign-in desk to present her membership card and sign in Daph as her guest. Meanwhile, Daph floated around the small lobby, her breath finally caught up with her. She loped a small circle around the room, eyes glancing idly around as she took in her surroundings, cradling her belly as if holding it in place. As odd as it felt, it was an instinct she couldn't fight any longer. It put her at ease to have at least one hand against her swollen stomach, especially when she could notice the baby's light fluttering from inside.

Daph stopped in front of the bulletin board, her eyes filing down the fliers and announcements completely obscuring the corkboard below. She stopped, her eyes falling on a pastel-colored flier near the bottom of the board with a list of dates. She sighed, dropping her bag to her paws and pinching the bridge of her

nose. She felt someone approach her from behind.

“Alright! We're both signed in,” Georgia chirped, her tail waving behind her as she bounded up.

Daph glanced back, a dejected frown on her face, and jabbed a finger into the flier, right below the rose-colored, soft capital letters that read 'NEW SUNRISE LAMAZE WATER AEROBICS.'

“You're fuckin' joking, right?” she asked, wearily.

“Because it'll be *fun* Daph!” Georgia beamed, hoping to spread her good attitude into her dour, pregnant friend.

“Tho fun that you weren't even gonna tell me about it until we got here?” Daph said, folding her arms.

“...I mean...I *did* tell you to bring a swimsuit...”

“Becaute I thought we were jutht going to the *pool!*” Daph exclaimed, throwing her hands up.

“Don't be such a baby,” Georgia said, shoving Daph's visitor's badge into her chest. Daph winced, taking the badge and rubbing the side of her breast.

“Shit, c'mon, thethe are sensitive...” Daph grumbled and held out her arms, pleadingly. “Georgia, *pleathe*, isn't there something elthe you wanna do? I'm down for anything elthe.” She glanced at the bulletin board, desperate to find an alternative. Daph's eyes lit up as she pulled a small slip of paper off the wall and waved it around. “Look! They got yoga! I like yoga! Let'th do that inththead!”

Georgia frowned at Daph, her tail bobbing behind her while she crossed her arms and tapped her paw on the ground. Daph's put-on excitement faded, and she turned nervously back to the bulletin board. She swallowed, flipping over pages to try and find some alternative.

“Oh! Look, look!” Daph said, pointing to a flier. “There'th...uh...there'th *spin* classeth! After lunch! We should do that! That'th like ridin' a bike, right? I like biketh!” She paused, her free hand falling over her belly rounding out in the middle of her body. “Well...like...okay, I don't think it'th really, like, pregnancy-

friendly, but *you* could thtill do it, right?”

Georgia silently raised an eyebrow, still frowning.

“I'm just waiting on you to finish,” she said.

“Uh...oh...okay...uhm...uhhhhhh,” Daph stammered, turning back to the board and tearing at more paper, trying to find something, *anything* to replace the fate Georgia had in store.

“There'th...there'th a 5K next month! I can...uh...I can help you train for it! Or we could...w-we could jutht, like, get on the treadmill for a little while! Or like...there'th a...kid'th daycare group that'th coming here! You like kidth, right? You're gonna be a mom thoon, so you could like...h-hang out with 'em and...I guess...uh...” Daph's arms fell weakly to her sides as she gazed dejectedly into her friend's stoic face. Daph scowled. Bracing herself against the wall for balance, she squatted around her pendulous belly and picked up her duffle bag from ground. As she stood, her tail drooping behind her, she grumbled, “Or we could do the fucking Lamaze class...”

“I like *that* one,” Georgia said with a sardonic grin. “Let's do the Lamaze class!” Turning around, she bounded off happily around the corner with Daph grumpily shuffling along behind.

Do it for her, she thought to herself.

It took more walking to find the pool, located in its own area behind the weight room, and even more to find the locker room on the other side. Daph followed Georgia grumpily, slouched over and dragging her feet, trying not to slip into the water. They entered a nearly-empty locker room, with only a few other women getting dressed and a few more obscured in the shower. One of the women was clearly pregnant, as well, though not as far along as Daph. Georgia led the two of them down the row of lockers to the one set aside for her when she became a member of the Y.

“I can't fuckin believe you're makin' me do thith,” Daph grumbled, setting her bag on the bench and unzipping it.

“I wanted you to do two things with me for my birthday,” Georgia explained, taking her phone and wallet out of her pants and sticking them in the outside

pocket of her bag. “This was one of them.”

“Well, I'm here,” Daph said, slipping out of her toe-shoes and storing them in the locker. “Doethn't mean I gotta like it.”

“Just try to, Daphodille, I swear it'll be more fun than you think.”

“I don't even *like* thwimming!” Daph groaned, stomping her paw on the slightly wet tile floor. “I hate the water!” She reached behind her back and pulled her gigantic, fluffy tail around her hip, shaking it in Georgia's face like a pom-pom. “Thith thing weighth like *five pounds* when it'th wet, and I gotta blow-dry it for like *two hourth*.”

“I'm well aware, Daph,” Georgia said, grabbing hold of her own tail and shaking it for emphasis. “If it's that much of a problem, there's blow-driers in here for you to use.”

“I don't even wash my tail in the shower,” Daph grumbled. “I thtand to the side and stick it out of the shower curtain.”

Georgia paused, glancing at Daph's tail and wrinkling her nose.

“I thtill *brush it!* Jesuth!” Daph said, rolling her eyes. “I jutht do it, like, separately, so it doesn't get too wet.”

“A little water in your tail isn't going to kill you,” Georgia said, She pulled off her shirt and turned her back to Daph, reaching for her bra-strap. “Can you help me with this?”

“So can we jutht free-boob it in here?” Daph asked, helping undo the clip against Georgia's blonde fur.

“Sure,” Georgia shrugged. She pulled her arms out of her bra, sighing at satisfying feeling that came from freeing her chest, and stored it in the locker. “It's just like a regular gym. There's changing rooms if you'd feel better in one.

“Nah, I don't give a shit,” Daph shrugged. She stowed away her jacket in the locker and pulled off her shirt as well, revealing her flowing, pregnant curves that had been hidden away beneath her baggy clothing. The white fur of her stomach had grown out along with her belly, thinned just enough to see a little

hint of pink from the skin underneath. The bump itself was shaped roughly like an egg, with the larger bottom settled down into her hips where the baby rested, while the rest tapered off up into her sternum. She seemed just as delicate as an egg, almost fragile. Her belly button had been flattened by the pressure of the baby growing inside, smoothing out her stomach into a perfectly round surface covered in healthy, glowing fur. The thought that she would be growing even bigger in just a few months was hard to believe.

Georgia glanced back up at her friend, who stood shirtless in front of her, bashful for the first time in her entire life. Daph, blushing underneath her fur, folded her arms over her chest and glanced away, her tail flipping anxiously.

“What?” she asked, feeling exposed.

“Wow, Daph...” Georgia said, shaking her head in disbelief. “You look really, really good.”

“Hehehehe....Shut up, Georgia,” Daph said, laughing nervously. Georgia took a step forward and slid her hands down Daph's belly, who laughed again at the sensation against her sensitive body.

She stopped just below the heavy bottom of Daph's swell, kneading into her with the skilled fingers of a newly-certified massage therapist.

“Is she here?” Georgia asked, spreading out her hands to indicate a small space in the middle of her womb.

“I think tho,” Daph nodded. “It'th eathier to tell some days.”

“Has she been moving?”

“She doesn't much during the day, like when I'm out and thtuff,” Daph said. “I read online that, like, when I walk, it'th like I'm rocking her to thleep. It's why she'th so active at nighttime.”

“Is she? Can you feel her better at night?”

“Oh hell yeah, once I figured out which feeling wath her kicking and which wath just me needing to burp or thomething.” Daph smirked. “That'th harder than you think. We need to hang out one night tho you can feel her get active, it'th really

weird.”

“I'd love that...” Georgia said, dreamily. She trailed her fingers over Daph's pregnant belly and shook her head, taking a deep breath. “Damn, Daph, you look *amazing*.”

“Jesuth, Georgia,” Daph laughed, her tail whipping back and forth behind her. She glanced around nervously, in case anyone else was in earshot. “At least wait 'til we get home...”

“Maybe I will...” Georgia said, hungrily. “When's the last time you, me, and Darwin had...a night together...?”

“Man, I dunno,” Daph shrugged. “Gotta be like a month or two, at least.” She looked down at her belly that Georgia was still busy admiring. “I was definitely a lot thmaller, I remember that...”

“Then I think we should plan one soon...” Georgia said. Suddenly, her demeanor changed as she snapped her hands back to her side, adding, “... *after* the Lamaze class, of course.”

“*Uuuggggghhhh*,” Daph groaned. “Way to ruin the fucking mood, Georgia.”

“Hurry up! We've only got about ten minutes before the class starts.” Georgia said. She turned around and continued to undress, then re-dress back into her favorite two-piece bathing suit. She considered whether a one-piece might have been more appropriate, but the one she had was too cute not to wear out on every single occasion she could. Once she was dressed, she spun around to find Daph standing awkwardly in her same gray sports-bra and a pair of mesh shorts.

“...Daph, c'mon,” Georgia frowned. “Put on your swimsuit.”

“I did,” she said, gesturing to her outfit.

“That's a pair of gym shorts.”

“I know,” Daph said. “You can thwim in these, right?”

“You *can*, but they aren't a *swimsuit*.”

“Well I don't *have* a thwimthuit!” Daph said, her voice rising. “Because I don't like *thwimming!*”

“Ugh, fine, fine, it'll work,” Georgia said, waving her hand dismissively and deciding this wasn't a battle worth fighting. The last thing she did was pull out a band to tie back her hair, then secure the locker closed with a separate key she kept wrapped in her towel. “Maybe if you like it, we'll buy you a *cute* maternity suit.”

“Don't push it,” Daph warned, slinging an old bath towel over her shoulder as the two of them left the locker room.

Emerging back into the pool area, they found a group of nearly fifteen women taking their places in a rough grid, some of them still treading water and getting used to the temperature. A few simply floated neat the edge of the pool, relaxing as their faces and bellies crested over the top of the water. Predictably, many of them were stereotypical water-lovers like otters and beavers, but even Georgia was surprised at the group's variety, with a pair of cats taking their places with pool noodles near the front of the grid. What they all had in common, of course, were similarly shaped stomachs bearing the obvious signs of middle-to-late pregnancies.

The two of them walked to the set of temporary, plastic steps set up on the back wall of the pool, which most of the group had their backs to. Georgia tossed her towel onto a nearby bench, which Daph copied, and stood on the first step, gripping the metal handles and gazing into the blue water.

Steadily, she slipped one paw into the water of the second step, then followed with the second. Georgia wiggled her toes as she tested the temperature of the water. Finding it a good deal warmer than she anticipated, she took a deep breath and leapt the rest of the distance into the pool, plunging beneath the surface with a healthy splash.

After a moment, Georgia broke the surface of the water, throwing her hair back and shaking some of the water from her fur. She slicked her hair back, taking a deep breath and sighing as she leaned back and let the water carry her. She looked at Daph, who stood awkwardly on the top step, staring down into the water while scratching her belly.

“*Don't* jump in,” Georgia warned, pointing at her.

“I don't fucking *want to*,” Daph snapped back. She wrinkled her nose and wriggled her tail nervously, then took a single, agonizing step into the water. Daph pushed herself forward, the grimace on her face growing stronger the deeper she sank into the water. Finally she stood on the bottom of the pool, the water just below collarbone. She awkwardly held her arms up above the water, her fingers curled into hooks.

“*Fuck*,” she spat, slowly loping toward Georgia. “Oh *fuck*...I regret every fuckin *thecond* of thith.”

“Lighten up, Daph. You'll live,” Georgia scoffed. She spun gracefully through the water, her hands sliding under the surface like it was silk. “Take the weight off your paws, just let go...let the water carry you...”

Daph lowered her arms into the water, making a whining sound in the back of her throat as she did. She flapped them at her sides, testing their movement underwater. She did a little hop, attempting to kick her paws hard enough to keep her afloat, but she misjudged her own buoyancy and dropped straight down below the surface. Daph shot back up instantly with a splash, coughing and spitting mouthfuls of pool water out of her throat.

“It's not *acid*. Come on,” Georgia frowned.

“Thith fucking *thucks*,” Daph declared, thrashing her arms impotently. “I can't goddamn move right, it'th all thlow and heavy. I feel like thomebody shaved all my goddamn fur off, too.” She held her arm out of the water and trailed her palm down her flatted, wet fur. Daph cocked her head, running her tongue over the surface of her teeth, then grimaced and spat again. “What the fuck ith thith, *drain cleaner*?”

“When the baby's born, I'm gonna make you take her to the pool every single day until you like it,” Georgia teased, splashing water into Daph's face. Daph spluttered angrily and did the same, throwing water back into Georgia's face like she were punching her.

“Cut it *out*! Fuck!” Daph shouted, her voice echoing far and sharp in the room, nearby mothers-to-be stopping their warmup exercises to glance at her.

“You're already *wet*!” Georgia laughed, throwing another splash.

Daph reeled back to retaliate, but suddenly froze, her eyes widening. She slipped a hand under the water and held it against her belly, looking down at it through the clear surface.

“Well shit...there you are,” Daph said, feeling the enthusiastic bumps and pops inside of her that she grew to understand were the baby's movements. At times, she felt a new sensation that might have been the little squirrel turning over or twisting in her womb. “...God *damn* baby, calm down in there....At least one of us is having fun, I guess.”

“Is she moving?” Georgia cooed, her eyes twinkling.

“Like a goddamn maniac,” Daph nodded, taking her hand away to better feel the movement against her belly itself. “She never kicks that much during the day.”

“She must love the water, then!” Georgia said, grinning ear-to-ear.

“Guess so,” Daph nodded. “But like...she *is* kinda living underwater right now...”

“Not even born yet and we already have something in common,” Georgia mused, happily spinning in place. She took a deep breath and ducked underwater, holding herself there for nearly thirty full seconds. Shooting back up, she rubbed her eyes clear of water and took a few deep breaths.

“When I open my eyes down there, all I see are bellies,” Georgia commented, grinning. “It's adorable.”

“You're weirdly into this for not being pregnant your-” Daph winced at her stupid comment and quickly followed up with “Fuck...Sorry, I did it again.”

“It's okay,” Georgia said, smiling. “That's why you're here. You're my surrogate, so I get to enjoy this *through* you.”

“Right, right...I get you,” Daph said, silently understanding what made the aerobics class important to Georgia. It wasn't just for the baby or even for just the class itself. Daph was the surrogate to the entire pregnancy experience that Georgia was unable to have. It's why they spent so much time together; if Georgia couldn't live the pregnancy herself, she could at least live it alongside her closest friend.

As Daph mused on the thought quietly, the door on the other end of the pool opened, a jet-black panther woman in a red one-piece striding confidently through. She sat on the edge of the pool and hopped in with barely a ripple, leaving a towel and a waterproof clipboard on its edge. She swam to the front of the group and clapped three times in quick succession, snapping Daph out of her thoughts.

“She’s hot,” Daph muttered to Georgia, cocking her head to the side while admiring the way the one-piece clung to her toned body.

“Good afternoon everyone!” She said in a smooth voice that projected farther in the tiled room. Daph and Georgia glanced at one another, then took places in the very back of the grid. “How is everyone feeling today? Relaxed? Feeling your inner peace blossoming forth? If not, we’ll help you bring it out.” She smiled, flashing her white teeth that stood out like bright lights against her black fur.

Daph glanced at Georgia and rolled her eyes harder than she ever had before.

“I’m feeling especially blessed today because I see a few new faces in our circle,” the panther purred happily. “Of course, few of us stay in this circle for long. That is the idea after all, right?” She grinned, followed by a spattering of laughter from a few women while Daph blinked and tried to figure out what exactly was funny. “But for those new faces with us today, I’d like to introduce myself. My name is Athena Tomlin, registered prenatal nurse, yogi, and your spiritual guide through this journey of transitory existence, the middle path where one life grows and blooms forth into two.” Athena sighed, smiling quietly as she put a hand to her chest. “It fills me with such joy to see women like you, so heavy with life and possibility and hope that it almost brings a tear to my eye.”

“Georgia,” Daph whispered. “I just want you to know that if I throw up, it ain’t cause of the pregnancy.”

“*Shut up,*” Georgia hissed.

“Like most of you know, I like to start our sessions with some controlled breathing to ensure that the energy within you is flowing clearly and cleanly, both for you and the babies inside you. Now, follow along with me.”

Following a session of meditation that Georgia found relaxing and fulfilling and

Daph found pretentious and infuriating, Athena began to guide the group through a relatively standard set of water aerobics. While on the surface the exercises seemed simplistic to the eternal-athlete Daphodille, in reality, the mix of water resistance and unfamiliar strain to her pregnant body gave her an unexpected workout. She was surprised at how comfortable she was jogging in place with the water supporting her in ways her muscles weren't used to, achieving the same 'burn' she loved from working out without the outright pain that came from her pregnant workout routine. Without the constant discomfort of splashing water in her face and the spiritual mumbo-jumbo spouted off by the instructor, Daph would have enjoyed herself.

“Breathe deep...” Athena said, lifting her arms out of the water, most of the class following along. “Inhale...feel the breath fill you...feel it spread to your womb, to pass into your child, to fill them with strength... *exhale...*” With a sigh, the group fell back into the water, still breathing heavily from the workout. “We'll take a few minutes to rest, to give our bodies time to renew and grow back stronger than before, and to reflect on the change you are all experiencing to bring a new life into this world. Find your peace, then we will return.” Athena put her hands together and bowed in the water. The other women tried to replicate her motion, but found their rounded stomachs in the way of bending over.

Daph and Georgia swam to the back wall of the pool. Georgia leaned against the side, laying her head in her arms while the rest of her body floated cross-legged below her. Daph leaned backward against the wall, laying her head back to stare at the ceiling while she panted, her paws only barely touching the bottom of the pool. Between her legs, her tail floated to the surface, completely soaked and resembling a very hairy dead body.

“Okay, tell me,” Georgia said, once she'd caught her breath. “How is it?” Daph glanced at Georgia, then turned back to the ceiling.

“Okay, firth thing, you shouldn't have goddamn tricked me into comin', okay?” Daph began, pointing at Georgia. “I'm thtill pissed about that. Two, I thtill hate thwimming because I fuckin *hate* bein wet for tho long, I hate it, I *hate...* *eugh!*” Daph shook her head, splashing water around, then sighed. “And three, if this Namaste-bitch doethn't thart talkin' like a person and not a goddamn poem, I'm gonna drown mythelf in protest.” She sighed, her frustration vented, and added, softly. “But like...other than that, I'm kinda into it.”

“You are?” Georgia said, her face lighting up as she sat up in the water.

“Yeah...I guess,” Daph shrugged. “I like how it carrieth me. I don't feel so heavy while I'm workin' out. And the water maketh it real hard to move and shit, so I don't gotta do much to get a good workout.” She nodded down into the water. “Pluth, your kid ith fuckin *lovin'* it, dude.”

“Is she?” Georgia said, her eyes twinkling.

“Oh hell yeah, she'th losing her fuckin *mind* in there. Like I thwallowed a cell phone on vibrate or thomething.”

Georgia swam over and ducked under the water. Daph felt arms beneath her lift her up until she floated parallel to the surface, her paws and belly cresting over the top of the water like islands of wet fur. Georgia lifted her head from the water, while holding Daph in place, and leaned her head against Daph's belly like a pillow.

“Keep talking,” she said, petting her friend's round stomach.

“You're gonna get yourthelf a fuckin concussion from gettin' kicked in the head,” Daph smirked.

“Don't care,” Georgia said, closing her eyes and listening to her daughter squirm around excitedly inside Daph.

“But it's thtill kinda weird cauthe like...” Daph continued, looking back up at the ceiling. “I'm here doin' thith, and all thethe women around me are like... *pregnant*, yknow? It'th fuckin surreal is what it is.”

“I hate to remind you, Daph,” Georgia said. “But so are *you*.”

“Oh, yeah, I know, but they're like...” Daph struggled to find the words, so instead just gestured vaguely with her hands. “They're like *preeeegnant pregnant*, yknow?”

Georgia paused.

“...No, I really don't.”

“I mean like...yeah, I'm pregnant, but they're like...like uh...” She wiggled her fingers in the air, as if trying to grab the right words, before giving up. “Ah, you know what I mean.”

“I really don't, Daph.” Georgia said, closing her eyes and continuing to feel the baby kick. “But okay.”

“Whatever,” Daph sighed, setting her arms back against the wall. After a few more minutes,

they were jolted out of their relaxation by three sharp claps from Athena as she returned to the pool. The regulars of the class slipped back into the water to find their places while Georgia and Daph just waited to take their spots at the back.

“I hope you are relaxed and ready to continue, sisters,” Athena said, bowing. The rest of the group bowed back as low as they could with their bellies in the way, including Georgia. Daph, meanwhile, was distracted by a door opening on the other end of the pool, near the locker rooms. A group of three male employees in matching shirts emerged from the men's locker room, wheeling a cart of dirty towels behind them. Starting in the closest corner, they rounded the walls, picking up all the towels that belonged to the Y and throwing them in the basket. But what distracted Daph most of all was the enormous, muscle-bound stallion that followed behind and pushed the cart.

The class began with a set of leg-stretches, pushing them forward to almost chest-level with the water, leaving Daph standing awkwardly above everyone else. Athena didn't notice as her and the rest of the group's eyes were closed in a meditation.

“Feel your energy flowing down your legs...” She said. “As your body's energy creates the new life within you, let it also invigorate your own. Feel the essence of life flow from your womb and into your limbs, gifting you with new-”

“YO! YO, FRANKIE! OVER HERE YOU DUMB FUCK!”

The class snapped their eyes open simultaneously as the shouting amplified against the hard tile walls. Daph, meanwhile, waved her arms over her head and cupped her hands around her mouth.

“HOW'TH IT GOIN, YOU BRICK SHITOUSE?”

“YOOWOOO, DAPH!” Frankie shouted back, a towel slung over her shoulder. “WHERE THE FUCK YOU BEEN?” He paused, lowering his hands, then raised them for a follow-up question. “YO, WHY YOU IN THE LAMZE CLASS?”

“BECAUTHE! CHECK THITH OUT!” Daph splashed her way back to the stairs and clambered up them. Standing on the edge of the pool, she turned to the side to reveal her pregnant belly. Frankie's jaw dropped open as he stepped back.

“YOOWOOO! BRO, ARE YOU FUCKIN FOR REAL PREGNANT RIGHT NOW?”

“FUCK YEAH, DUDE, I'M HELLA FUCKIN PREGNANT!” Daph beamed happily as she dripped water all over the floor. “I'M ALMOTHT THEVEN FUCKIN MONTHTH, DUDE!”

“THAT'S FUCKIN' SICK!” Frankie yelled back. “CAN I TELL THE GUYS?”

“... YEAH, OKAY! FUCK IT! I GOT NOTHIN TO HIDE!”

“YO, I THOUGHT YOU WAS SUPPOSED TO EAT NUTS, NOT SIT ON EM!”

“FUCK YOU!”

“FUCK YOU AND YOUR BABY, DAPH! I GOTTA WORK, HIT ME UP LATER!”

“THTRAIGHT UP, FRANKIE! LATE!”

As the echo of her last shout died out and Frankie left the room, Daph calmly stepped back into the pool and waded over next to Georgia, who had sunk nearly completely below the water in embarrassment. Clearing her throat, Daph nonchalantly took the pose the rest of the group had been patiently holding through her entire conversation.

“...Well...” Athena said, clearing her throat. “...Let's...let's move on...”

After about half an hour of more stretches, resistance training, and exercises, the group adjourned with a 'Namaste' from Athena and a half-buried chitter of laughter from Daph. With a few disapproving glances from the other women, the mothers-to-be all filed out of the pool and went to the locker room to change,

some of whom taking a moment to shake themselves dry on the pool's edge.

Georgia was silent all the way to their locker, walking side-by-side with Daph, their wet tails dragging across the floor like mops.

“Thith ith gonna take a fuckin' *hour*,” Daph grumbled, sitting on the bench and blow-drying her tail in her hand. “We might ath well rent a goddamn room.”

“Why can't you just control yourself, Daph...” Georgia sighed, shaking her head.

“What?” Daph said, turning off the hair drier. “I hadn't theen Frankie in like five months. He didn't even know I wath *pregnant*! I had to thay thomethin!”

“Part of me was hoping you'd like this but...” Georgia sighed, disappointed. “I shouldn't get my hopes up about things like this.”

“Dude, c'mon...” Daph said, her expression falling. She set down the hair drier and rocked back-and-forth on the bench until she had enough momentum to push herself to her paws. She steadied herself on a locker, with a hand beneath her belly, her sense of balance thrown off from being in the water for so long. “I didn't *hate it*. I liked the workout part. I jutht...If I could do shit like that outthide the pool, I would.”

“I guess...” Georgia sighed. She looked up at Daph, smiling faintly. “I'll admit it was a little more...'new age' than I was expecting.”

“No fuckin' kidding,” Daph rolled her eyes.

“Yeah...” Georgia laughed, quietly. “Yeah, this was a stupid idea...”

Daph watched Georgia turn away to change out of her swimsuit, quietly folding up her damp clothing into a separate bag she'd brought and changing into her regular pants. She seemed down, more tired than she ought to be. Daph tapped her paw on the ground, her mind racing over all the things she could do to help.

Daph grunted and sat down on the bench, winded from the extra effort it took to bend over. She swung one leg over the side until she sat long-ways with the bench between her legs. The side effect was that the very bottom of her stomach touched the wooden seat, but she didn't really care.

“Okay...look...” Daph sighed. “I think I kinda fucked thith up. You were really excited but...I ruined that for ya. I feel bad about that. I'm thorry.” She rubbed a hand against her bump, feeling a soft stir from the baby. “It'th the pregnancy, yknow? I'm getting mad about shit I shouldn't be getting mad about. My brain ith like...fuckin *hormone soup*. But, yknow, I shoulda been thinking more about what you wanted. Tho...I owe you.”

Daph sighed, looking up. “You told me there wath one other thing you wanted to do for your birthday with me. What wath it? I promithe, right now, we can do it I won't complain *once*. The entire time.”

Georgia paused, her head still in the locker. She closed it slightly, revealing a blooming smirk on her face.

“You aren't gonna like it.”

“Ith it thomething you really want to do, though?”

“It would mean a lot to me but...” Georgia tapped her tail against the floor, still too wet and heavy to be held up, and smiled again. “...But you promise not to complain?”

“Yep,” Daph nodded.

“Alright...” Georgia nodded, devilishly. “I want...to take you...maternity clothes shopping.”

Daph blinked up at her friend, then swallowed.

“Cool,” she nodded. “Let'th do it.”

“You don't have to, Daph,” Georgia said.

“Yeah I do. I owe you.”

“Enough to let me dress you and your tummy up in the cutest outfits I could possibly find?”

“I guess I do.”

“And can I call you my 'Daph-o-doll? ’”

“No,” Daph said, with a wince. “Drawin' the line with that.”

“Fair enough,” Georgia said, her eyes lighting up with excitement in a way that made it all worth it for Daph. Georgia sat down across from her and began to fuss over her wet fur, smoothing it down with her hands, with special attention of course paid to her baby-full middle.

“Hurry up and dry off,” Georgia said. “I can't *wait* to see how you look in green...”

Daph sighed.

Do it for her, she thought.

Chapter 10

House Call

Georgia slapped the beside table on her side in an attempt to silence the alarm on her phone after being jerked out a perfectly fine REM cycle. She slapped her hand against the screen impotently, as if it was an alarm clock, before her reflex kicked in and she actually picked it up. While initially confused as to how her alarm could be going off that early when it was scheduled in advance to wake her up at the same time all week, Georgia was even more worried at the realization that it was a phone call that woke her up at three in the morning. A call from Daph.

“Mm...” Georgia mumbled, thumbing the answer call button on the screen.
“Hhlllo?”

“H-Hey! Georgia! It'th Daph!” came her friend's voice from the other end of the phone. It was louder than usual, with an odd cadence to her speech, as if she were talking from far away. “Were you, uh, were you athleep? I woke you up, didn't I?”

“...Yeah, I was...” Georgia said, rubbing one of her eyes and re-checking the time. She huffed angrily and fell back to the pillow. “It's almost three-thirty...”

“Yeah, okay, I guess I did. Thorry about that, Georgia! But...do you have a minute? To like...catch up? I gotta tell you how much the baby wath moving today, it wath crazy. She's really goin' to town in there, yknow?”

“Daph...I have work tomorrow,” Georgia said, letting the phone lie flat against the side of her face. “We'll talk about it later, okay?”

She reached on top of her head and took the phone away from her ear, but before hanging up, she heard Daph's voice pleading, “Wait, wait! Hold up! Hang on!” Sighing again, she brought the phone back up to her ear.

“I have work tomorrow morning, Daph...” Georgia said, firmly. “I can't talk right now.”

“Just....wait....pleathe...” Daph's voice cracked, followed by a sound that could have been either a sneeze or a sob. “I...I jutht....I really need to talk to you, okay?...I wanna....I jutht gotta hear...fuck...”

“Daph?” Georgia frowned, then sat up in bed, barely disturbing her dead-asleep husband. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I'm okay...we're okay...” Daph sniffed again, with Georgia realizing she may be fighting back tears. “But...c-c-can you come over?”

“...Now?” Georgia blinked. She glanced at her phone, checking that it was indeed as early as she thought it was.

“...Y-yeah,” Daph said, stammering. “I know, I-I know it'th really late and you gotta...you-you gotta get up and thtuff...” She paused, silence over the line, before finishing. “B-b-but I really gotta thee you, okay? I need you...And I promithe I won't do thith ever again but I jutht...I...I can't...”

Georgia heard a click as the phone was set down on a surface, with the sound of Daph swearing to herself in the background. She was about to call out, before Daph picked up the phone again.

“...I'll see if I can find a cab,” Georgia sighed, curling her tail in her lap to fiddle with it. “I'll get there as soon as I can.”

“Okay...th-thankth...a lot.”

“You're welcome,” Georgia said calmly, right before Daph hung up on the other line. She dropped her phone into her lap, its light nearly swallowed up by the fur of her tail. Taking a deep breath, she set it aside and stepped out of the warm comfort of her bed to get dressed.

Georgia only put on what she needed to keep relatively warm in the cold November night and crept silently out the front door to avoid waking Darwin. Snow hadn't yet fallen, but the outside air was still bitter and cold, the wind cutting angrily through her thin layers. She stood on the street corner, eyeing what few cars she could even see on the street at that time of night, hoping that

at least one of them was a taxi. After five minutes, she pulled out her phone in a move to gamble and call an Uber.

Fortunately, at the very last second, a yellow cab with its light on turned around the corner at the end of the block. Relieved, Georgia sighed out a plume of warm breath into the air and flagged it down, ensuring a quick trip to Daph's apartment complex.

The building wasn't far and in a relatively nice part of town, but it was an old and crumbling brownstone that hadn't received the renovations its neighbors had gotten long ago. As much as Georgia hated it and hated that her friend was forced to live in such conditions, the reality was that it was the best Daph could afford. Georgia and Darwin had floated her rent for her more than once and it was only recently that she'd begun to make enough money to pay it consistently. Georgia found herself worrying for the sake of her baby as she stood on the steps of the antiquated apartment building, hoping they at the very least had a working elevator for when Daph was too far along to safely take the stairs.

Georgia hopped up the steps two at a time, desperate to get out of the cold, and hammered the buzzing bell marked under Daph's apartment number. After an agonizing minute, a responding buzz and click announced the front door unlocked and she frantically scurried inside. Though rickety and claustrophobic, she was relieved to find the elevator functional and rode it up to Daph's room on the third floor.

She barely rapped a knock against the door before letting herself inside, embracing the warm rush of Daph's many space-heaters that did the job the sub-par insulation did not. Georgia shut the door behind her and sighed at her relief from the cold, leaning against the wall and into her fuzzy tail. Daph's apartment was barely more than two rooms large, with a kitchen in the corner of the living room and a tiny bedroom in the back. The clutter and clothes that were piled on every surface was enough to hide the carpet. The thick sofa was covered in a collection of blankets that looked more like a nest than a piece of furniture and sat across the room from an old television. Georgia was surprised to catch a glimpse of a brand-new laundry basket and vacuum in the corner of the living room alongside a few extra trashcans. At least Daph was making the effort.

Daph herself stood in the middle of the living room, evidently having been pacing back and forth. One hand was buried inside a bag of 'Sqr Blend' and

crumbs clung to the fur around her mouth.

She was wearing a pair of stained and baggy sweatpants marked with holes and tears below a long white t-shirt that was tented up by her belly. She spun around as Georgia came inside, her tail flicking anxiously, then sighed in relief at seeing her friend's face. Daph's hair was shaggy and disheveled with the rest of her fur. Most tellingly, her eyes were bloodshot and puffy.

“Yo! Hey-Hey!” Daph said, a good deal louder than she should have. She plastered on a buck-toothed grin that didn't match the look in her eyes. “What'th up, dude!? I didn't think you wath gonna make it over!”

“Hi Daph...” Georgia said, wearily. She slipped off her jacket and draped it over a chair next to the door. Rubbing her eye, she shook herself to stand in front of one of the space heaters. “What's going on?”

“I..” Daph paused, her mouth hanging open while her eyes glanced away nervously. She laughed again and shrugged, cramming another handful of nuts and seeds into her mouth from the bag.

“I had to get up 'cauthe the baby was going the fuck crazy in there, dude! I guess she getth hungry or thomethin in the middle of the night and just flipth out kickin' everywhere to wake me up and get her thomethin.” She laughed again, resting a hand atop her belly, which had grown out even larger in the past few weeks, with her navel finally starting to push out from the pressure in her womb. “She'th smart ath fuck, huh? Knowing to do that?”

“She's that strong, huh?” Georgia said, smiling drowsily despite her annoyance.

“Oh fuck yeah,” Daph nodded, her expression relaxing. “Yknow how it was, like, little poketh and wiggleth? Well now it'th like... *POW!*” Daph mimed a hard punch into her other hand, her belly shaking a little with the impact. “Little girl can punch like a boxer, dude. Thometimeth, you can thee her moving from the *outside!*”

“You'll have to show me that sometime,” Georgia smiled, unfolding her arms as the warmth began to finally creep back into her limbs. She looked up at Daph with a tired frown and shook her head. “Look...I've got work early in the morning, Daph. I'd love to talk about the baby all day, but...” she sighed and folded her arms again. “What's this about?”

Daph paused, like she'd been caught staring into the beam of a flashlight, and blinked. She swallowed, her tail flicking again. She chattered nervously in the back of her throat, then ate another handful from the snack bag.

“You uh...you ever have any of thith?” Daph asked, her cheeks full. She held it up and shook the bag in front of her face. “I thtill don't know if I should be, like, offended or thomethin', but it'th *awethome*. I love putting hot thauce on em and thtickin them in the microwave, but that'th like a weird craving, tho you might not like that...” She fell quiet at Georgia's displeased expression.

“I'm going to leave,” Georgia warned, pointing to the door behind her. “We can talk tomorrow if you really want-”

“No, no...wait,” Daph said, throwing out her hand and shaking her head. She swallowed more than the food in her mouth, then clutched it with both hands in front of her chest. Glancing down at the little bit of her paws she could see past her belly, she crinkled the bag in her hands and bit her lower lip.

Daph tossed the bag to the side and wrung her hands together. “I...I uh...” She dropped her arms to cradle her baby belly, gripping her shirt in her fists. With a few dark stains falling against her stomach, Georgia realized that Daph was crying.

“I...I had a nightmare...” Daph sniffed, her voice cracking. She didn't look up, shuffling her feet against the carpet instead and wrapping her hands around her belly in what looked like an awkward self-hug. While mostly silent, a few chokes and sobs broke through. Daph turned and waddled to the couch, dropping onto it heavily. She pulled her legs in as close as she could and buried her face in her hands, her tail shaking and her back jerking.

Georgia stood on the threshold, her mouth half-open. She'd seen Daph cry before, albeit on very rare occasions, but never like this. She was almost afraid to watch as her strong and fearless friend broke down in front of her.

It took only a few seconds for Georgia to regain herself. She crossed over to the couch and sat down beside Daph, pushing her tail out of the way first. She rested a hand on her heaving shoulder, then pulled her in for a full hug. Daph pulled herself into Georgia's shoulder, as if she'd waited years for someone to hold her that way, and freely cried into the crook of her arm. Georgia rested her head against Daph's shoulder, smoothing down her hair with her free hand like her

own mother used to do.

She couldn't help but notice that Daph was so warm, so much softer than she used to be.

They held each other until Daph's muffled sobs turned into weak sniffles and she pulled away on her own. The fur around her eyes was dark and her eyes themselves were red. She sniffed again, staring down at the couch. It seemed to take a great deal of effort to wrench her eyes up to meet Georgia's, who responded with a warm smile of her own. She thumbed a strand of hair out of Daph's face.

"...Could you..." Daph sniffed, her voice quiet. "Could you get me some water?"

"Sure."

Georgia stood, leaving her hand on Daph's shoulder as long as possible, and crossed in front of her to the small fridge in the corner. To her surprise, the inside was packed mostly full with food and tupperware containers of pre-made meals. Pinned to the outside with a magnet was a list of recipes in Daph's handwriting, some of which she recognized as Darwin's creations. On the inside door was a collection of cheap water bottles, some of which had been re-purposed and filled with other liquids.

Georgia grabbed one that looked unopened and carried it back into the living room. Daph was sitting where Georgia had left her, but sat back in the cushions, no longer slumped over herself. She stared at the ceiling, one hand gently petting the belly that filled her lap. Georgia picked up the bag of Sqr1 Blend she had dropped and pulled over the coffee table from the corner of the room. She set both down on the table and gently lowered herself beside Daph, her hands clasped in her lap.

"Thankth," Daph said, popping a few more nuts in her mouth to chew on slowly and methodically, as if just to have something to do with her mouth other than talk. She washed it down with a sip from the water bottle, which turned into a few more desperate gulps as she swallowed half of it in one breath.

"You need anything else?" Georgia asked. Daph, panting, shook her head and capped the water bottle. They sat quietly for a few more minutes before she

asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Daph looked at her stomach, feeling the few quiet shifts and pokes from the baby.

“I dunno,” she finally said. “I *don't* but...”

“You don't have to,” Georgia said, squeezing her shoulder.

“Yeah, I know...” Daph nodded. She shifted on the couch, moving into a more comfortable position for her sore back and shuffled her paws against the carpet. She took another sip of the water bottle, draining it completely, then crushed it into a small disc a fraction of its normal size and threw it across the room.

“I never have dreamth like thith...” Daph breathed, shaking her head. “I...I wath at the hoptpital. I wath...it wath *time*,” she nodded, patting her belly. “And...I dunno, it wath weird...we were like, in the lobby at firht and then we were like in the room later and I wath on the hothpital bed.”

Daph put a hand to her head. “And...and we go in and the doctor'th are like yelling and thcreaming at me to *push* and it'th like...I *can't*, I can't *do* anything, I'm jutht laying there and it hurth but I can't even *move* and...fuck...” Daph swallows and takes a deep breath.

“They thart yelling that thomething's wrong and they...I can hear *you* and you're thomewhere, but I can't thee you. And you're crying and thcreaming, like, the whole time and I can't do anything. And they...the doctor, he...he jutht thtarts pulling *pieces* out of me...” Daph's lip quivered as her eyes began to well up again. “And...and th-the doctor keepth telling me to push and I try becauthe I think that'th gonna make it better thomehow, but I can't. And he'th pulling out *pieces* of the baby f-from inthide me and you're yelling and I'm yelling and I thee like blood and feet and her *head* and the retht of the baby in a...in a *tray* bethide the hothpital bed and...and...and I...”

Daph choked another sob and wept into her hands again. Georgia leaned over and wrapped her arm over Daph's shoulders. She gently began to rock her back and forth while patting her on the back.

“It's okay...” Georgia whispered. “It's okay...it was just a dream...just a dream...”

Daph sniffed, wringing her hands together and fighting against more tears. She shook her head and wiped her eyes clear on her arm.

“I'm thorry...” Daph mumbled. “It'th...it'th thtupid...it wath jutht a dream...but it wath like...I don't know...”

“I would have cried, too,” Georgia nodded.

“It wath so god damn *intenthe*...I've never had a dream like that before...” Daph said. “It wath like...it *hurt*...like it *really* hurt in the dream. And it wath...fuck...”

“I know,” Georgia said, shifting closer. “I've had dreams like that...”

“Thankth for coming over...” Daph sniffed, leaning over to lay her head on Georgia's shoulder. She paused, then asked. “...Do you think it, like...meanth anything?”

“What do you mean?” Georgia asked.

“I mean...I don't know...” Daph shrugged under Georgia's arm. “What if it'th like...like bad luck or whatever? What if it'th like...”

“A vision?” Georgia said, glancing at Daph incredulously.

“I don't know!” Daph said. “I jutht wanna know if it'th, like, my body tryin' to tell me something. That somethin' might go wrong.”

“I'm not that kind of doctor, Daph,” Georgia said, bringing her hand up to smooth down Daph's hair. “But if dreams tell you anything, it's about what's going on in your mind, not your body.”

Daph remained silent, rubbing a crease in her shirt between her fingers.

“Are you afraid?” Georgia asked. Daph snorted.

“I ain't afraid of *shit*.”

“Clearly...” Georgia said, cutting through her friend's bravado.

Daph sat back up, laying her arms atop her stomach. She smoothed her shirt down to get a better look at her own round body, as if she were seeing it for the

first time.

“Okay...I'm...I'm not *afraid*...But I'm nervouth,” Daph said. “Like...I've never had a *baby* before...I don't know what'th gonna happen. And like...I'm not thcared for *me*...” Daph pressed a hand into her gravid middle. “I'm thcared for *her*. How do I know I'm not gonna fuck thomethin' up?”

Georgia nodded, having been quietly stewing over the same fear for months. She leaned in closer and put her own hand against Daph's stomach. Her belly was so warm on the cold night, almost hot to the touch, a tiny biological furnace hard at work making a new life. The baby began to squirm uncomfortably in Daph's womb, kicking against Georgia's palm. She smiled, spreading out her hand to make sure she felt the next movement.

“You're right,” Georgia said. “She's gotten stronger.”

“It even hurtth thometimeth,” Daph said, laying her arms aside to let Georgia have full access to her tummy. “Not a lot, but like, a little bit. It thtill feelth tho weird.” She laughed quietly as the baby began to flip over, pushing out against her belly and distorting it into a bean-shape. Georgia was mesmerized at watching the movement happen from the outside.

“Wild, huh?” Daph smiled, wiping a tear out of her eye. “She'th alwayth doin' that in the shower. I think she can feel the water.” The little squirrel kicked again, a small buldge suddenly rising up under Daph's shirt. “Thee?” Daph pointed to the spot. “Toldja you could thee it.”

“I think that's all the answer you need, Daph,” Georgia nodded, looking up at her. “She's doing okay in there. She's telling you herself, after all.”

“...Yeah...” Daph said, thinking. “The firtht thing I did after I woke up wath to check if she wath thtill moving.”

“She's fine, Daph. If you really want, we can go to the doctor's office this week to check up on her, but I don't think there's anything to worry about.” Georgia said. “I think you'd know if there was something wrong.”

“Yeah but...I don't know,” Daph shrugged. “The birth ith comin' up, yknow? I wanna jutht...be ready for it.”

“You still have time,” Georgia said. “Both of you do.”

“I guess,” Daph said, unconvinced.

Georgia sighed, twiddling her fingers in her lap. Daph mulled quietly beside her, meditating over the baby's squirming movements inside her. As an idea came to mind, Georgia smiled to herself and tapped Daph on the shoulder.

“Hey,” she said, excitedly. “We've been thinking about names.”

“Yeah?” Daph asked, her expression lifting slightly.

“I wanted to run a few by you to see what you liked.”

“Why?” Daph shrugged. “It'sh your baby.”

“We just think you have a say in it.”

“...I kinda *don't* though.” Daph frowned.

Georgia sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Alright...You can be more of a *bitch* than me sometimes and I trust you to tell me which names are stupid or not.”

“*That'th* more like it,” Daph grinned. She sat up slightly and rubbed her hands on her belly. “Maybe she can give us a hand in deciding, yeah?” She winced, then chuckled. “Or a paw...that'd work too.”

Georgia smiled, then pulled out her phone, scrolling into a page of name ideas that she and Darwin had brainstormed one evening together. She cleared her throat and started at the top of the list.

“Jenny.”

“No.” Daph shook her head. “I don't know a thingle Jenny who ain't a huge bitch. Pluth, that'th like a little girl'th name only. What kind of adult is named 'Jenny?’”

“Okay, point taken...Mary.”

“Basic ath fuck,” Daph frowned. “Next.”

“Margret.”

“Thoundth like a landlady.”

“Susan.”

“Fuck, that'th just as bad.”

“Alex or Alexis.”

“Okay, I don't *hate* that...but you gotta know that she *will* grow up to be a lethbian with a name like that.”

“Duly noted...Sarah.”

“Ugh, okay, okay,” Daph waved her hand and rolled her eyes. “Thkip past all thethe boring nameth, we both know you don't actually want them.”

“Well I *like* Sarah!” Georgia defended.

“Thure, it's *fine*, but that's the betht it's gonna be: *fine*.” Daph patted her stomach. “You gotta act like your baby ith gonna be fuckin *Prethident* one day! A goddamn *movie star* or whatever. Thomething *great!* You don't wanna go through all the bullshit of raising her jutht for her to turn out ' *fine*.”

Georgia rolled her eyes, but silently admitted that Daph had a point.

“Okay fine...uhm...Darwin really likes Abigail.”

Daph grunted and leaned over her belly to grab the bag of Sqr1 Blend from the coffee table. She popped a couple seeds in her mouth, pondered on the name while she chewed on them, then shook her head as she swallowed.

“It'th not awful but...I don't feel it.”

“My favorite is Savannah.”

“Eeeeeeeehhhh,” Daph said, wobbling her hand back and forth. “It'th...not bad, but people named after placeth are alwayth kinda weird.”

“A-hem,” Georgia said, pointing to herself.

“Oh...well,” Daph shrugged. “You got a weird name, Georgia. Thorry.”

“Thanks for the input, *Daph-o-dille*,” Georgia said, mispronouncing it like 'crocodile.'

“You want my goddamn advice or not?”

“Okay, fine fine fine,” Georgia said. “Those were all runner-ups. Darwin and I already have a name picked out that we both love. I just wanted to make sure you didn't like any others more.”

“Thweet, most of thothe sucked, anyway.” Daph shifted in her seat with a grunt. “Okay. Lay it on me.”

“... *Tabitha*.”

Daph blinked, staring dazed at Georgia like she'd been slapped. She opened and closed her mouth a few times, as if she hoped the right words would fall out on their own. With a lack of anything to say, Daph simply began to slowly nod while forcing a smile. She clenched her teeth and sighed through them, clasping her hands together.

“... *Yeah...Well...I think...that'th... hm.*”

“Daph,” Georgia said, quietly. “I'm kidding. It's not *Tabitha*.”

“Oh *thank fucking God*,” Daph breathed, sitting back in her chair. “You were gonna gimme a motherfucking heart attack.”

Georgia cackled and rocked back in her seat at Daph's reaction.

“I wath about to thay, 'I don't wanna fuckin' carry a girl named *Tabitha* inthide me for two more months.’”

“We're not going to name her *Tabitha*,” Georgia reassured her. “But we do have something picked out we both want.”

“Hit me.”

“Lilly.”

Daph looked away, thinking quietly, then nodded.

“...Lilly...Yeah...Yeah, okay,” Daph looked up. “Lilly. I kinda like that one.”

“We liked it because it she'd be named after a flower,” Georgia smiled. “Like you.”

“...Wh-” Daph stumbled, her eyes widening. “...Wh-Wait, are you...are you gonna name her after *me*?”

“Well, kind of,” Georgia explained. “We didn't want to *totally* name her after somebody, but we thought that naming her after a flower like you would be a good way to say thank you.” Georgia paused, suppressing a snicker, as she added, “But we're going to spell it correctly, at least.”

“Hey, blame my mom for that shit,” Daph snorted. Leaning over, she pulled Georgia into a thick, powerful hug, pinning her arms to her side. “I'm gonna have a fuckin *baby* named after me!”

“You're...welcome...ghk...” Georgia choked into Daph's ear. After a few more squeezes, Daph let her go and grinned.

“Oh! Wait,” Daph said, raising a finger. “You gotta atk her about it firtht.” She leaned back in her seat and pulled her shirt tight over her belly. As Georgia paused in confusion, she said “C'mon! She'th got workin ears now, you can atk her what she thinkth!”

Georgia leaned over until her face was inches away from the surface of Daph's stomach, quivering slightly with her breathing and the subtle movements from inside. Georgia laid her ear against the round surface, growing tighter and fuller every day, and whispered.

“Lilly?” she asked. “Do you want to be named Lilly?”

After a hushed moment, the baby began to squirm, then kick around wildly inside Daph, forcing Georgia to back away to keep from getting kicked in the face.

“HA!” Daph laughed, watching her stomach shift. She poked a finger into her womb. “You like that? You like Lilly?” She glanced up at Georgia and winked. “I think we got a winner.”

“I'm glad the three of us...” Georgia was interrupted by a sudden yawn that shook her entire body. “...agree.”

“Damn, it's really late,” Daph said, after catching the contagious yawn. She glanced at Georgia's phone and winced. “God *damn*, it's almost four in the morning! I'm really sorry I called you over.”

“No no, it was no trouble,” Georgia said, suppressing another yawn. “Are you feeling better? Can you go back to sleep?”

“Thanks, I feel a lot better. I'm about to crash out like a motherfucker, too,” Daph said, yawning again. “Do you wanna crash on the couch? I feel bad about makin' you come all the way out here tho late.”

“Thanks, but I should get going,” Georgia said as she stood. “If Darwin wakes up without me there, he'll have a panic attack.”

“Oh fuck, Darwin ain't gonna be mad, is he?” Daph asked, worried. “That I got you up tho late? Oh *shit*, I didn't wake him up *too*, did I?”

“You didn't, it's fine,” Georgia waved her hand. “Stop worrying and go to sleep. It'll all be fine in the morning.” She padded over the carpet and wrapped herself back into her jacket before heading out. “You and Lilly take care of each other, okay?”

The two waved at one another before Georgia slipped out the apartment door before she let out any of the heat. Daph sighed in the quiet and lay sideways on the couch, her belly nearly hanging off the edge. She stretched her legs out over the armrest and laid a hand over her stomach.

“Lilly...Lilly, Lilly, Lilly...” Daph said to herself while feeling the newly-named baby shift inside of her. It wasn't long before the both of them fell back into a deep, satisfied sleep.

Chapter 11

Cold Shower

Jason pushed open the gym door with his head turned to the floor and his ears drooping. Even with his earbuds draped over his shoulders, he hadn't gotten around to turning on any music, content to be alone with his thoughts for a little while. Shaking his head, he threw back his hoodie and stamped some of the snow from his paws, jumping up and down to warm the rest of his body.

The gym was familiar territory, somewhere he could lose himself in, but he wondered if it would be enough. Over a month since Samantha had dumped him and she still sat on his mind like a bad itch. They weren't right for each other, he was glad it was over, but he still felt stretched and weary from the whole experience.

Usually at the end of the night, the only people left in the gym were his friends. After taking a minute in the doorway to warm himself up, he glanced up to find the crowd of familiar regulars hanging around next to the bathrooms. Frankie, predictably, towered over them and leaned against the wall, doing his best to stay out of the way of traffic in and out. Renard and Rick stood across from one another in the makeshift circle of conversation, the cat and mouse juggling conversation between one another and the rest of the group. Melinda stood nonplussed as ever, sipping from her water bottle and simply content to listen to whatever was being said. The four of them stood around a familiar, red-furred, bushy-tailed figure with her back to Jason, who chattered happily and loudly alongside the rest.

“Yo! Daph!” he called out, slinging his gym bag farther up his shoulder to cup his hands around his mouth. He smiled to himself. She could be a lot to handle, but Daph was always good at getting a laugh out of him when he needed it most. Wherever she'd gone to, he missed having her around. “You wasn't gonna invite me to your little fan club, or what?”

“Oh, hey Jathon!” Daph called over her shoulder. She turned back to her friends,

snickering. “*Watch his face,*” she whispered, the rest of them suppressing laughter as well. She cleared her throat as Melanie stepped back, giving Daph room to turn around and show off her heavily pregnant body, barely visible from behind. Jason skidded to a halt, staring wide-eyed and shocked at Daph's enormous belly that seemed almost half her size.

“C'mon fucker, give mama a hug!” Daph teased, holding out her arms and waddling forward a few feet. She wore her regular sweatpants, but her tank top barely fit her anymore, stretched tight over her blooming stomach, only barely covering her navel. She grinned slyly, her shaggy hair just long enough to touch her shoulders. She threw her arms above her head and added, “I missed you, you thexy piece of ass.”

“*Daph,*” Jason breathed, pointing to her belly with his mouth hanging open like he'd just seen a ghost. “What the *fuck* happened?”

“Oh, thith?” Daph snarked, glancing down at her belly and rubbing the top of it with her hand. “I guess I thpent too much time hoppin' up and down on top of your mom'th *dick.*” Rick and Frankie responded with a simultaneous ‘ooooooooohhhhhh’ from behind while Renard and Melinda simply laughed.

“Wh- But...how...what...” Jason reeled, scratching confusedly behind his ear and glancing between Daph and her baby belly. “...Are you fucking *pregnant?*” He finally spat out, as if the thought only just came to him.

“Oh... *nah,*” Daph said waving her arm dismissively as she rubbed her lower back, grinning toothily.

“...Wh...huh...I...”

“Daph, you're gonna give the guy a fuckin' heart attack,” Frankie said. He glanced up to Jason and nodded. “Sup, bro. We missed ya.”

“Frankie?” Jason said, glancing between the others. His brow furrowed in frustration before he threw up his arms and said, “Ok, what the *fuck* is going on?”

“Nothin', man,” Rick said. “Frankie told us you was comin' back tonight.”

“So I told Daph you was gonna be here, too,” Frankie added.

“And I needed to come by and renew my card anyway, tho I figured I'd come by and show off,” Daph finished. “I'm gonna be here a *lot* in the next couple monthth, believe me. Baby weight don't fall off by itthelf, yknow?”

“So...” Jason said, rubbing his head. “So you *are* pregnant...right?”

“Yeth, Jason,” Daph sighed, shaking her head. “I'm not jutht *fat*, there'th about seven or eight months' worth of baby thquirrel in here, too.”

“*Men*,” Melinda said coyly, rolling her eyes.

“I was just *clarifying*,” Jason snapped.

“What, you want me to *prove* it?” Daph said, patting her belly.

“Uhm...” Jason stammered, feeling an odd sensation in his head. “...N-no, I believe you.”

“Heh, good,” Daph snickered, pulling down her shirt. “Lilly'th pretty lazy right now, anyway.”

“Wait, hold on...” Jason held up a hand and pointed to the group. “Did you *all* know about this?”

“Well, see, Melinda actually guessed it a few monthth in, but I asked her not to thay anything.” Daph said, motioning over her shoulder.

“I've got an eye for this kind of thing,” the rabbit smirked, wiggling her nose.

“Aw fuck, I wasn't the first?” Frankie said, slumping against the wall.

“Guess not,” Daph shrugged, then turned back to Jason. “I ran into Frankie at the Y a few weekth ago. During.... *eugh*,” Daph shuddered, “...a *prenatal water aerobicicth class*...”

“You fellas shoulda seen it,” Frankie laughed. “She looked like a wet towel wrapped around a fuckin basketball.”

“You do not like the water, Daphodille?” Renard asked, chuckling.

“Do *you*?” Daph shot back.

“I don't mind swimmin' much,” Rick shrugged. “It don't bother me.”

“Well congratu-fuckin-lationth,” Daph said, turning. “Next time you can take three fuckin hourth to dry your fur off and just *tell* me how much fun it ith.”

“Tch....I'm just sayin' ...”

“Anyway,” Daph said, turning back to Jason. “I told Frankie to jutht go ahead and tell everybody. I thought I wath gonna hide it but...” She shrugged. “Fuck it, yknow?”

“Everybody except *me*...” Jason said, frowning at Frankie, who clopped his hoof against the floor and held up his hands.

“Hey man, you was gone! I wanted to give ya some space!”

“Oh yeah, Thamantha, right?” Daph said, shaking her head. “That'th rough, dude.”

“I don't want to talk about it,” Jason said shortly, waving the subject aside as he strode forward to take a place in the circle. When Daph turned around, her belly sticking out far enough to form a 'center,' he glanced down at it and felt the odd tingle through his body again. “Yknow, I'm gonna be honest with you, Daph. You're about the *last* girl I'd ever think would have a kid.”

“I *know*, right?” Daph agreed, petting her belly again and shaking her head. “Thank God it ain't mine, I'd make the worht mom in the world, dude...”

The others glanced at one another, confused at the statement.

“...I'm uh...” Frankie said, leaning over to poke Daph in the belly. “I'm pretty sure this kid is yours, Daph.”

“...What, did I not tell you?”

“You didn't tell us anything,” Rick said. “You came in and told us to call you 'Pregasaurus Rex.’”

“Oh...I didn't?” Daph scratched her head, flipping her tail. “I coulda thworn I fuckin' did...” She snapped her fingers and pointed at Rick. “But not *one* of you

fuckerth hath called me 'Pregasaurus Rex' yet.”

“Because it's a stupid nickname, Daph,” Melinda said, calmly.

“Fuck you, you don't know shit about good nicknameth,” Daph said, punching Melinda in the arm. She wrapped her arms against her belly, which was only barely small enough to let her touch her fingers on the other side of it. “But nah, man, I'm a *thurrogate*.”

A collective breath of 'oohhhh...' came from the group.

“So it ain't even your kid?” Frankie asked.

“Well...Like, technically, yeah. Genetically she ith, but that'th only cauthe the mom can't produce eggth right.”

“But you ain't gonna *keep* it?”

“Nah. Ath far ath I'm concerned, I'm jutht borrowing her for a bit.”

“So it's a girl?” Melinda said, reaching forward and rubbing Daph's belly affectionately, smiling softly. “I told you she would be.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, all hail Melinda, the Gut Whisperer,” Daph mocked. “...Her name'th Lilly,” she added, looking down at herself with pride and rocking on her paws thoughtfully.

“She'll be adorable,” Melinda said.

“*I know*. She'th already a cute little munchkin on the ultrathound.” She flipped back her hair and nodded. “Yeah, I make a pretty goddamn good baby, if I thay tho mythelf.”

“As modest as ever,” Renard said.

“Who's the mom?” Rick asked. “Who's baby is it gonna be?”

“Oh uh, you guyth know my buddy Georgia?” Daph asked, glancing between Jason and Melinda, the members of the group that she went to high school with.

“Georgia...Macintire?” Jason asked. “Other squirrel, the blonde one?”

“Yeah! We're pretty tight. She's gonna get the baby when she's born.”

“How the fuck did *that* happen?” Jason asked, still taken off guard.

“Well, Jason,” Daph began in a patronizing tone. She reached over and patted him on the arm in a faux-matronly way. “When a mommy and a daddy love each other very much and they wanna make a baby-”

“Fuck off, you know what I mean,” Jason interrupted shrugging Daph's hand off while she chuckled. She rested her hands atop her belly as she thought, smoothing down her shirt that had begun to bunch up over her navel as she moved.

“Alright alright, you big baby. Tho like, few monthth ago, Georgia and her huthband Darwin invited me over to go out for dinner and drinkth and shit. They're both fuckin *loaded* now, by the way. She's a physical therapitth and...shit, I don't really know what Darwin doeth...Thome kinda computer shit.” Daph frowned and scratched her head thoughtfully before shaking it off and going back to the story. “Anyway, after we got to their place, they that me down and-”

“They shat you down?” Frankie interrupted, raising an eyebrow. Daph stopped mid-sentence to glare at him.

“...No, goddamn it, they *that* me...we *that* down on the couch? Okay? You get it?” Daph huffed and flipped her hair back. It was getting longer than any of them had ever seen her with. “Bathically, they've been tryin' for a long time and they found out Georgia hath can't conceive.”

“Why not?” Melinda asked. Daph grimaced and shrugged.

“I mean...I don't know if that's cool of me to thay, yknow? Let's leave it at 'she can't conceive,' alright? Tho they asked me to carry for 'em. Tho I thaid yeah.” Daph's story ended abruptly with a shrug.

“...Like...that's it?” Jason asked. “You agreed? You were cool with it?”

“Pretty much,” Daph nodded. “Me and her have been tight for like...fucking *yearth*, dude. 'Course I wath gonna help her out. The more I thought about it, I realized there wathn't even a quethion about it.” She grinned and drummed her

fingers against her belly. “Pluth, I found out later they wath gonna *pay me*, too.”

“Yoooo, you got knocked up for fuckin’ paper?” Frankie laughed.

“I wath gonna do it anyway, but yknow...” She grinned and flicked her tail. “The money don’t hurt, neither.”

“Hang on a second,” Melinda said, holding out her hand. “Is this your first pregnancy?”

“You ever thee me waddlin’ around like a blimp before now?” Daph snarked back.

“Surrogacy services don’t accept clients who haven’t carried to term before. As a policy.”

“How do you know that?” Rick asked.

“I...I just have...” Melinda’s ears drooped and she closed her eyes as she wearily shook her head. “I have...so...many...sisters...”

“Well yeah, they told me about that,” Daph said. She grinned and glanced away, rocking on her paws bashfully. “That’th why thith wath... *heh*...kinda ‘off the record...’”

“What do you mean?” Melinda asked.

“Well...yknow...they invited me over that night...and like...I wath on my *heat* cycle...” She laughed nervously, thumbing her hair out of her face.

“Yo, *fuck!*” Rick exclaimed. “You went fuckin *raw-dog* with the husband?”

The rest of the group jumped, staring at Daph with wide eyes. She looked away, still grinning. Taking a deep breath, she threw her head back and stared back at them, proudly.

“Yep,” Daph nodded. “Georgia wath cool with it though.”

“She *was?*” Melinda asked, shocked.

“Oh yeah. She and Darwin are like...kinda *thwingers* these days. Her especially.

She can...” Daph took a deep breath, shaking her head in disbelief as she ran her fingers around her full belly. “She can be *real* kinky.”

“Did she...” Jason began before swallowing an anxious lump in his throat. “Did she uh... *join in?*”

Daph glanced up and down Jason, grinning at his awkwardness.

“Wouldn’t *you* like to know, hot thtuff...”

“This story is getting crazier by minute,” Frankie said, shaking his head. “I thought the weird part was just seein’ you all pregnant and stuff.”

“What was it like?” Rick asked eagerly, his ears twitching. “Get juicy with it.”

“You guys are so predictable sometimes,” Melinda said, rolling her eyes.

“*She* brought it up!” Rick said, defensively.

“Okay, okay, listen,” Daph interrupted, making a cutting motion with her hands. “All I’m gonna thay ith thith...Turnth out that pregnancy makin’ you horny all the time...” She shook her head and took a deep breath, her eyes widening. “That shit ith *not* a myth, dude...And Georgia and Darwin have been *real* helpful about it.” Daph grinned and folded her arms. “That’th all I’m gonna thay.”

The group fell silent, each person picturing something different in their heads. As if in response to the quiet, Daph’s belly suddenly shifted in the middle of the circle as Lilly turned over and kicked out in the womb. Daph made an ‘*nph*’ sound in response, drawing the wide-eyed attention all but Melinda, who only smirked.

“Well, that’th Lilly,” Daph said, leaning back as if to present her middle and the baby squirrel that squirmed inside. “Ya never know when she’th gonna wake up.”

“That looked like a big one,” Melinda said.

“Oh yeah, she’th already thtrong ath fuck,” Daph said, watching as the baby kicked out against her tight belly again. “Real social, too. Alwayth decideth to wake up when there’th people around.”

“Fuck, that looks like a goddamn *alien* or something!” Frankie exclaimed, staring at Daph’s stomach.

“Feelth like it, too,” Daph nodded. “I never really got used to it. Pretty cool, though.”

“Hey, so I’m gonna go hit the showers, okay?” Jason said abruptly before quickly backing out of the circle and slipping past Frankie into the bathroom. Daph glanced at him in confusion before turning her attention back to her other friends.

“You guyth can feel if you want,” Daph shrugged, pointing to the area Lilly kicked the hardest.

Frankie stepped away from the wall and leaned down to rest his enormous hand over Daph’s belly, with Renard and Rick finding spaces somewhere on the side. Daph held her arms out of the way and frowned. “Fuck, form a line or thomethin, I ain’t goddamn public property.”

“Is that the baby?” Renard asked as Lilly kicked against his hand.

“Yep, that’th her.” Daph nodded. “She’th probably about to thtart beating me up ‘cauthe I haven’t fed her yet.”

“This is so fucking weird,” Frankie said, shaking his head.

“Alright alright alright, I’m gettin’ thore,” Daph said, pushing away all their hands and backing up. She sighed, tugging down her tank top to cover her furry middle. “I’m thick of talkin’ about me. What the fuck have you guyth been up to?” She turned to Renard and asked, “How’ve the parkour classeth been goin’?”

“It has been a lot of fun, but...” Renard rocked his hand in the air. “It has been difficult on my own, especially because I am still not so good with my English.” He shrugged, then smiled. “I am happy that you are having a baby. I thought that you did not like my idea and did not want to tell me the truth.”

“No, dude! It’th an awethome idea!” Daph said. “And once Lilly ith born, I wanna come back and help! I jutht...I didn’t know how to tell you guyth the truth.” Daph shook her head and glanced up, raising an eyebrow. “I thought we weren’t gonna talk about *me* anymore?”

“You goddamn vanish for six months, then come back with a fuckin’ kid inside you?” Rick grinned and shook his head. “You ain’t off the hook yet.”

“You was always the kinda girl I figured would always be in shape, so it’s real weird to think that you’re like...uhh...” Frankie blinked, scratching his chin to try and find the right words to say.

“Huge?” Daph finished, chuckling as she patted her stomach. “I mean, I’m *thupposed* to gain weight, but I’m gonna work it all off. You’re gonna thee a lot of me in here after the birth, trutht me.” Daph suddenly snapped her fingers and turned to Renard. “Actually dude, I’m glad you’re here! I wanted to thee if you could give me thome exercithe tiph I can do late-term. Y’know anything about that?”

“What, you don’t like water aerobics?” Frankie grinned. Daph shot him a look of disgust.

“The only time you’ll ever thee me back in the water ith if I’m *drowning* in it.” She turned back to Renard and continued. “I’ve been doin’ thome low-impact jogging and running up ‘til now but I’m uh...I’m kinda too big for that, lately.” She laughed, bashfully.

“Hmmm...I think I have some exercises you can do,” Renard said, smiling. “I do not know much about the body of pregnant women, but I can give you some light routine that does not stress your back or ankles.”

“Ugh, that thoundth like a dream come true,” Daph sighed, massaging her lower back.

“I didn’t wanna be rude,” Melinda said, putting in one of her earbuds, “but I’m going to go finish my reps, if it’s all the same to you.”

“I haven’t even started yet,” Rick groaned. He waved at Daph as he backed up alongside Melinda. “Congrats on the baby, Daph!...uh...Kinda!”

“I might as well go make sure Jason didn’t fuckin drown himself in the shower,” Frankie said, thumbing toward the bathroom. He made a sly face and pointed to Daph and Renard with two fingers. “You two play nice in there, ya hear me?” Daph blew a raspberry and gave Frankie the finger before the three of them parted ways.

Frankie clopped into the bathroom, his thick hooves making sounds like muffled gunshots on the tile floor. He walked up to the partition separating the locker room from the showers in the back and listened to the sound of running water to guess how many people were inside. He knocked on the wall with the back of his knuckles.

“Yo Jason!” he called out, his deep voice echoing through the locker room. “You in there?”

He heard a jump, then a shuffle of paws against tile floor.

“Uhh...” Jason stammered underneath the sound of the shower. “Y-Yeah.”

“You by yourself, bro?”

“Uh...Yeah but...hang on lemme just-”

“Cool, cool,” Frankie said, without hearing his protests. He rounded the corner as he continued to talk. “I know it’s been, like, not too long or anything, and if I’m bein’ a asshole, just lemme know. But there’s this girl I been talkin to that I think you’d really-” Frankie stopped as he saw Jason, standing naked and rigid beneath the shower, with more than just his body stiff.

“*Fuck!*” Jason shouted, turning away from Frankie and hiding his erection. “What the *fuck!*?”

Frankie noticed that the running water was set entirely on the coldest setting.

“Whooooaaa...okay,” Frankie said, holding up his hands. “...No judgement, bro but...if you’re gonna do that, use the toilets, cause jizz can block up the shower drains.”

“Wh- No! That’s not what...I wasn’t jerking off in here, okay?” Jason shivered under the cold water. “But I obviously wanted some goddamn *privacy*, Frankie!”

“We shower in here all the time, I didn’t think nothin about it.” Frankie shrugged, then made finger guns and began to back out of the showers. “But uhh...you do you, bro. Just clean up after you’re done, alright?”

“I told you, I’m *not...ugh...*” Jason sighed. Frankie, stood at the wall, one hoof

still in the shower. Jason backed away from the cold water and sat on the bench that ran along the inside of the wall. “Okay...don’t...don’t tell anybody this, okay?”

“Why would I tell anybody you was whackin’ it in the shower?” Frankie said, scratching his head.

“*I wasn’t!*” Jason yelled. He shook his head, water falling from his fur, and leaned back against the wall. “It’s...it’s Daph, man.”

“Yeah, it’s fuckin crazy, right?” Frankie nodded. “I kinda figured she was a lesbian this whole time, too.”

“She’s bi, she told me once,” Jason said. He covered his face with his hands and groaned. “But...now she’s like...”

“What?” Frankie asked. “Knocked up?”

“...Y-yeah...” Jason said, crossing his legs, his tail tucked between them in embarrassment.

Frankie blinked, the gears turning in his head. When he finally understood, his mouth fell open.

“Oooooohhhhhh...” He said. “You’re into *Daph* now that she’s all-”

“*Don’t,*” Jason snapped, holding up his hand. “...Don’t finish that.” He groaned again, slicking his wet ears back along his head. “...Yknow, I always thought she was *cute*. Kinda scrappy, loud, funny. Kinda girl that could take you in a fight, yknow? But I was never all that *into* her. And yeah, I thought she was only into girls before I asked her once. And like, I would *think* about it sometimes, but not much.” He buried his hands between his crossed legs, taking a deep breath before continuing.

“But...but seeing her tonight was like...I don’t know, she just looks so much *better* now and like...I *want* her and that feels so *fucked up* to say since she’s all, like, pregnant and stuff.” He groaned again, falling silent for a moment, before adding, “Do you think it’s ‘cause I split up with Samantha so recently?”

Jason glanced at Frankie, who was staring at him with a wide, toothy smile on

his long face while leaning against the wall.

“Nah, bro,” Frankie said, shaking his head. “I think it’s ‘cause you got a *fetish*, bro.”

“Fuck *you*,” Jason grumbled, folding his arms indignantly with his ears flattening along his head.

“It’s cool, bro! Nothin’ wrong with it!” Frankie said, holding up his hands defensively. “Everybody’s got shit they’re into, yknow? The dick likes what the dick likes. Shit, I even like it when a chick-” Frankie froze, biting his tongue. Swallowing, he grinned nervously and scratched the back of his head “Well...hehehehe...that’s kinda my business.”

“...Whatever,” Jason grumbled, turning away from Frankie.

The horse folded his arms and leaned against the wall, waiting patiently for Jason to continue. After a long silence, he decided should break it himself.

“Yknow,” Frankie said quietly, like he was talking to the air itself, “she’s probably let you fuck her if you asked...”

Jason made a wet spluttering sound and turned around in his seat.

“I’m just sayin’,” Frankie shrugged. “A while ago, she and I were...yknow, we was talkin’. Thinkin’ about hooking up sometime.”

“*What?*” Jason exclaimed in disbelief.

“This was, like, a year ago. We was both gonna go through with it but...ah, yknow,” Frankie held out his hand and lowered it down to nearly waist-height, roughly the same size as Daph. “We wasn’t all that *compatible*.” He shrugged.

“But...do you think she’d...I mean, she probably can’t sleep around all that much since she’s so far along and all.”

“Hey, ya never know,” Frankie said. “Daph’s a cool chick, she’s down for whatever if you ask nice.”

“I don’t know, man...she’d probably just be weirded out that I’m...yknow...that

I'm sorta... *into* that. And it's so soon after Samantha..."

"Bro, I'm just tellin' ya what I think," Frankie said, stepping back out of the shower. "You just do whatever it is you wanna do. Ya got no judgment from me."

Jason sat on the bench in the dark shower, listening for Frankie's hooves to clop out of the bathroom. He sighed, running the conversation over in his head, especially the question of Daph's interest. Shaking his head and growling, he stood up and washed his thoughts away in the cold shower.

After he finished and dressed for his workout, he slipped his headphones over his long ears and cranked his music up a lot higher than he normally did to blast through the ideas swimming in his frustrated head.

Soon, Jason was lost into his routine, nothing on his mind but the satisfying burn of his muscles and the adrenaline pumping through his blood. He worked through his favorite playlist nearly three times, powering through far more of a workout than he'd expected to do that night. Eventually, his endorphins began to fire right as his body began to ache, leaving him tired but satisfied.

Nearing the gym's closing time, Jason was finishing up his last rep on the bench press, his final and favorite way to end his routine. He was halfway through a third rep before he noticed someone standing above him. Trying hard not to lose his concentration, he finished his last set before slamming the bar back onto the rack and letting his arms fall to the side. Jason laid on the bench for a few seconds, catching his breath and letting his arms rest, before he sat up and pulled out his earbuds.

He froze nervously as he came face-to-face with Daph, looking over him curiously with a hand against her round middle, her fur messy from her workout with Renard. She glanced at the bar and nodded at the weight on either side.

"Impressive," Daph said. "Ith that your max?"

"No...no, not that," Jason shook his head, still panting. "My max is up to 260."

"You went up!" Daph said, excitedly punching him in the shoulder. "Fuckin' A, dude!"

Jason smiled, clenching his fist to keep from rubbing the sore spot from her surprisingly hard punch.

“I’d have offered to help thpot you but...hehehe,” Daph smiled, gesturing to her stomach. “I don’t think that’d be a good idea.”

“Y-yeah, heh, maybe not,” Jason agreed, nervously.

“You’d probably wanna *thee* the bar when you looked up, right?” Daph teased. Jason only smiled and nodded, nonchalantly crossing his legs.

“Tho Jason,” Daph began, “You doin’ anything after thith?”

“Uh...Oh...I...No, I don’t think so. I mean, I don’t have anything planned,” Jason stammered.

“Cool, cool... You thtill got that car, right? You thtill drive?”

“Uh, yeah. I do. Have it. And yes.”

“Fuckin’ rad,” Daph nodded, grinning. She took a deep breath and sighed, running her hands around and over her belly, as if measuring it, with Jason’s eyes following them all the way down. “You could probably guess how hard it ith for me to get around lately. My pawth are thore like you wouldn’t fuckin imagine, dude. I’m not used to carryin’ all thith weight in me, yknow?” She rubbed her hand under her belly, against the exposed fur beneath her too small top. “Ridin’ the thubway back home soundth fucking awful right now. You think you’d be willing to give me a ride home whenever you’re ready?”

“Hhhh...” Jason breathed, thinking that a word was going to come out of this mouth. He shook his head and took a deep breath. “Y-Yeah, sure. I don’t mind. No problem.”

“Awethome,” Daph smiled. “I’m ready to go whenever you finish up.”

“This was my last set, so I’m...I’ll be ready to go in just a second.”

“Cool, then I’m gonna get dressed,” Daph said. She turned in place, as if to walk away, but instead stopped at the side. “Oh, by the way...” Daph said, quietly, as she wrapped her tail over Jason’s shoulders like a shawl and pulled him closer.

She stared into his eyes, half-lidded. “If you want to stop by your place on the way...I won’t mind...”

Jason, completely frozen in place, gazed back into Daph’s eyes like he was hypnotized. He nodded, silently.

“Don’t bother with a shower,” Daph added, pressing her hand into her taut belly. “Jutht a waste of time...”

She stepped away, pulling her tail back, and walked away as gracefully as she could for a woman nearly eight months pregnant. Though, in the back of Daph’s mind, she knew that was a good thing.

Nearing the doorway of the women’s locker room, Daph gazed across the gym floor and met eyes with Frankie, who was racking his weights. She grinned, gave him a nod, and then a wink, before sauntering into the locker room.

Frankie laughed to himself, shook his head, and continued to pack up for the night.

Chapter 12

Throw a Dog a Bone

Daph followed Jason from his car into his apartment building, ambling slowly up the stone steps with a hand under her heavy stomach. She was content to watch Jason's fit, tight ass in front of her as they walked, his tail furiously wagging despite his attempts to play it cool. The building was old, but well taken care of, with a new coat of paint on the stairwell and new buttons fitted into the elevator (which Daph was relieved to find working for the sake of her sore paws and back).

They stood outside Jason's apartment and stopped. He stood next to the door with his hands in his pockets, rocking on his paws for a moment as if giving Daphodille a chance to leave if she wanted to. She drummed her fingers against her belly, her tail flipping behind her in the awkward silence.

"...So, uh," Daph said. "We goin' inthide tonight?"

"...Oh!" Jason snapped out of his train of thought and chuckled, his ears flattening down in embarrassment but his tail still wagging as enthusiastically as ever. Digging into his gym bag, he fished for his keys and fit them into the lock, missing the hole a couple times in excitement. Daph wondered if that would be a preview of coming events and made herself giggle at the thought.

In an awkward, gentlemanly gesture, he opened the door and stepped aside, gesturing Daph to go ahead of him like an usher in a movie theater.

"Ain't you polite?" Daph teased, waddling past him and resting her fingers ever so delicately against his stomach, feeling muscles beneath his shirt. She grinned to herself and licked her lips in anticipation.

Jason's apartment was roughly the same size as Daph's, but made far better use of space. In the past, he'd talked at length about Samantha's neat-freak tendencies and wondered if she was the contributing factor to his neat living

space. There were a few posters on the wall of New York sports teams, a framed basketball jersey from a team she'd never heard of, and a small, but modern television across from an expensive-looking couch. It took all her energy not to drop her pregnant body down into it and groan in relief, but she resisted. She was trying to be sexy, after all.

"Nice place," she nodded, glancing around the room.

"Thanks," Jason said behind her, as he closed the door. "Sorry it's not so...clean right now. I didn't expect...uh...visitors." He shifted in place, his tail beginning to slow down. Daph glanced at the 'mess' that amounted to a plate and a cup on the coffee table and a pair of socks and gym shorts at the foot of the couch.

"It's fine," Daph said, smirking. "You should thee *my* place."

"Haha...yeah," Jason said, immediately wincing at the stupid response. He watched Daph meander around his living room, picking up random objects and just for something to have her hands around. His eyes naturally began to trail down to her belly, so round and perfect against her body, swaying ever so slightly as she moved and even bouncing a little with her step. He could scarcely believe a girl Daph's size carrying so large, and even getting bigger over the coming month. He wondered if her tits had gotten the same treatment.

Jason swallowed nervously as he felt his pants tighten, hoping Daph wouldn't notice. How was he so turned on without her even being undressed yet?

"S-S-So you, uh," Jason stammered, gesturing to the kitchen. "You uhhh, you want anything to drink? Can I like...get you anything?"

"Well, I can't really drink the hard thtuff right now," Daph said, shrugging as she clutched her belly. "But water would be cool. I'm thtill worn out from Renard'th workout."

"Oh yeah?" Jason said, quickly bounding into the small side kitchen to hide himself and his eager erection. "What were you doin'?"

"Just thome easy cardio thtuff, y'know," Daph said called, shrugging. "I mean...it wathn't *that* easy...Nothin' really ith when you're *thith big*." Daph bit her tongue to keep from giggling as she waited for Jason's response.

There was a long silence before he responded with another canned, ‘Oh yeah?’

“Totally. I’m probably gonna bounce back once I have the baby, but I gotta try and get thome work in while she’th thtill in me, yknow?” There was a long silence from the kitchen, before Daph added in a sly voice, “Though, *some* workouts are more fun than otherth when you’re ath big ath I am...”

“I don’t have any filtered water or anything,” Jason spluttered. “Is tap okay?”

“No worrieth, hot stuff,” Daph teased. A thought suddenly came to mind and her smile fell from her face. She glanced around, chewing on the tip of her finger and thinking. “Hey, uh, Jason?” she called out. “You got a bathroom I can use? I uh...I wanna ‘freshen up.’”

“It’s the door right next to the bedroom. He-Help yourself.”

“Cool, cool,” Daph said shuffling over the carpet toward the door. “Be a Good Boy and don’t run away on me.”

“I won’t,” Jason said flatly from the kitchen, taking far too long to pour Daph a cup of water.

Daph clicked the bathroom door shut and locked it for the one moment that evening she wanted some privacy. She pulled aside the shower curtain and squatted down next to the faucet, as she was finally too pregnant to bend over fully. She took a few moments to turn the shower on and pull the curtain closed. However, instead of undressing, she sat on the toilet lid and pulled out her phone.

Finding the number she needed, she turned up the volume to hear beneath the running water and waited for an answer.

“*Hello?*” Georgia answered. Daph rolled her eyes, knowing full and well that Georgia had Daph’s number in her contacts and could have just checked to see who it was.

“Yo, Georgia, it’th me.”

“*Hey Daph! How’s it going? Is Lilly treating you alright?*”

“Yeah, she’th been fine. Th’till kicking around. But listen, I gotta-”

“ *What’s that sound?*” Georgia asked. “ *Are you in the subway?*”

“No, it’th the shower, I’m in the bathroom.”

“*Ugh! Daphodille, gross! Stop calling me from the toilet!*”

“I’m *not!* I’ve jutht got the shower on! Jutht listen, I don’t got a lotta time.”

“*Okay...*” Georgia said, suspiciously.

“So I’m pretty thure I’m gonna get thome dick tonight, right? I’m over at hith place right now and I need to athk if...” Daph rested her hand against her belly, feeling Lilly barely shift inside of her. “Like, I gotta know, ith it *safe?* Like, can I th’till do that?”

“*Wait wait wait,*” Georgia said, her voice growing clearer. “*First of all, who is ‘he?’*”

“Jason?” Daph said. “Remember, from high th’chool?”

“...*I think,*” Georgia paused.

“We go to the thame gym, he’th in Urban Acrobats.”

“*Wasn’t he on the football team or something?*”

“Running back, I think.”

“*Oooohhhh...*” Georgia breathed, suddenly remembering the doberman from her high school fantasies. “...*And he... wants to? Even though you’re...um...you’re so...*”

“What, three trimeth’erth full of baby about ready to drop?” Daph chuckled.

“That’th the thing, I think he’th *into it.*”

“*Really? And...is that okay? Is that not weird to you?*”

“He’th trying to pretend he’th not. It’th kinda flattering, actually,” Daph said, thumbing her hair out of her eyes. “And if it’th weird enough to get me thome

cock, I'm down for it."

"I mean...Daph...as much as I want to tell you to go for it, you've gotta think about this."

"I know, I know. That's why I called you." Daph groaned, chewing on her finger again.

"Is he clean?"

"He split up with his girlfriend about a month ago, and even before that with always complaining about not getting any. So he's probably clean."

"Well...okay, hold on," Georgia said, her voice growing distant as she turned on the speakerphone and set the phone down. Daph heard a clattering of keys on a keyboard.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking up if it's actually safe or not. Darwin was worried about us sleeping together again because we weren't sure if sex is safe in the third..." Georgia fell silent, then responded with a surprised, *"Huh."*

"What?" Daph asked, pressing the phone into her ear eagerly.

"According to Google..." Georgia said. *"... Sex during third trimester is...totally fine."*

"Fuck..." Daph blinked, before grinning to herself. "Fuck, really? It's okay?"

"It says just to listen to your body and stop if anything feels wrong but...other than that, you can go to town." Georgia said. *"But Daph, please promise me you'll be careful. Just be safe. Text me where you are if you need any help."*

"Yo, totally, totally," Daph said, bouncing her legs happily. "Fuuuuuck, I'm 'bout to take that knot like a *champion*, dude!"

"One more thing," Georgia said. *"Remember when Darwin was embarrassed to admit he was into being dommed?"*

“He thtill doethn’t know I know about that...” Daph said to herself.

“*Well, do me a favor for Jason’s sake.*” Georgia said. “... *Play it up. Let him know it’s alright. Nobody should be ashamed of their kinks.*”

“Roger that,” Daph said eagerly. “Awwww man, I’m gettin’ wet jutht thinkin about it...Or...maybe I jutht gotta piss...I think I jutht gotta piss, actually.”

“*Aaaaand with that,*” Georgia said, “*I’m hanging up. Have fun and be safe.*”

“Fuckin’ A.”

Outside the bathroom, Jason had finally emerged from the kitchen with a glass of water in one hand and the other in his pocket. He’d finally managed to regain his composure and clear his head.

He’d decided not to force the issue, to let Daph back out if she wanted. She wasn’t his plaything to explore his new fetish, she had every right to say no if she wanted to. As much as Jason wanted to explore every inch of her swollen, heavy, pregnant body, she might not feel the same way.

With a click, Daph exited the bathroom, curiously looking as dry as she did when she went inside. Catching his glance, her eyes twinkled and she grinned toothily at him.

“Finally found that glass of water?” she teased.

“O-oh, yeah,” Jason said, rubbing the back of his head and smirking. “Sorry, I got distracted in there by...uh...by some stuff I had to...”

Daph, as quickly as she could move, crossed the room and stood directly below Jason, very distinctly pressing her pregnant belly into his crotch as she grinned up at him. His breath caught in his throat as he felt all the blood from his head yet again rush back into his cock.

“*Dithtracted*, huh?” Daph said, raising an eyebrow, clearly feeling Jason’s erection begin to prod into her stomach. She reached over and took the glass from his hand. “That couldn’t have been *my fault*, could it?” She shifted, sliding her belly over his cock as it hardened, as if she were using it to scratch an itch. In many ways, she was.

“Thankth,” she said, tilting her head back and gulping down about half the glass of water. Smacking her lips, she sighed and winked up at Jason. “You don’t know how *tired* I am when I’m thith *full* and *huge*...” Daph slid her free hand over her belly, grinding it even harder into Jason’s nearly diamond-solid member.

Looking up into his eyes, she very deliberately took the half-full glass of water and dumped it over her chest and belly, soaking her tank top completely through.

“Oopth,” Daph said, nonchalantly. “Guess I better take thith off.”

Backing away, Daph slipped her fingers beneath her tight undershirt and peeled it off her wet body, revealing her white-furred underbelly that swelled out from her middle into a perfect sphere, all centered around her navel, popped into an outie from the pressure of her growing womb. Jason stared at her body, perfect and round and full, his eyes traveling up and down and nearly drooling while his cock visibly tented out his gym shorts. Daph laughed, looking down at herself and sliding her hands over her belly.

“Wow, even thethe got wet,” Daph said, motioning to her sports bra. She slipped a finger beneath a strap, then glanced up at Jason to wait for his response.

As his eyes fell onto her finger in her bra, his eyes widened slightly and his tail began to wag furiously behind him while the rest of his body remained still. He swore he could feel his erection throbbing, as if trying to angrily tear itself free from his pants.

Smiling at his excitement, Daph tucked in her head to make room for her bra as she pulled it off in a single, practiced motion. Her breasts spilled out, as heavy and full as the rest of her body, and rested against the upper swell of her body. Her nipples stood out farther than normal, the skin color dark against the lighter fur around them. Daph sighed, slipping her hands beneath her tits and bouncing them in her hands.

“That actually feelth really fuckin good,” she said, dropping her sexy demeanor and simply let her breasts breathe for a moment. She glanced at Jason, who still stared dumbly at her with his tail thwapping against the back of his pants. Daph smirked, turned in his direction and put her hands on her hips to show off her pregnant body. “I look pretty good, huh?” she said, rocking her hips and swaying her freed breasts from side to side. “I feel pretty good, too. I’m like, achey and

thore a lot, pluth I get indigestion like a motherfucker, but I've just kinda had *fun* bein' pregnant, yknow? It'th weird."

"Y-yeah..." Jason said, stammering. "You...uh...you look..." He bit his tongue, shifting in place while trying to find the right words. "...Really good." Daph smirked and shook her head.

"Itth that all?" She asked. "C'mon, it'th okay. You can thay what you really feel. It'th jutht the two of uth..." She blinked, then looked down at her belly and chuckled. She ran a finger down from between her breasts to her navel, then teased a circle around it. "Thorry, *three* of us here..."

"I...I uh..." Jason swallowed, trying to think behind his swimming brain and throbbing hard dick. Finally, he surrendered to his instincts and let his mouth say what it wanted to. "I want to feel your belly rocking under my hands while I fuck you so hard you won't even be able to beg for more."

"*That'th* more goddamn like it, dude!" Daph said, clapping her hands and laughing. Making a show of it, she cradled her hands under her belly and groaned while she lowered herself onto the couch.

Jason strode forward, pulling off his shirt at the same time and throwing it to the ground somewhere. He was about to drop onto the couch next to Daph, before she held up a hand to stop him.

"Whooooaaa, down boy," Daph said as Jason stood above her. "Lemme get a look at *you* now..."

She reached up with her left hand and gripped the shape of Jason's cock beneath his pants, squeezing it beneath her fingers. Jason sharply pulled in breath at the sensation before grunting in the back of his throat.

"Mmm...I like the thound of that," Daph said, looking up at Jason with a sly expression. "Yknow...I ain't normally all that shy, but...I gotta admit, I've never been with a dog guy before." Daph's fingers continued to explore the shape beneath the fabric, painting herself a mental picture. "Ith...ith it true what they thay about... *the knot*?"

"See for yourself," Jason said, his turn to be sly.

"Oh you're a fuckin *teathe* now, huh?" Daph said. She shifted in her seat and reached over to grip Jason's waistband with both hands and pull his pants down as fast as she could. His erection caught on his pants long enough that when it was finally pulled free, his cock bounced up and down a few times before resuming its position.

"Oh *fuck* yeah..." Daph breathed, her fingers playing along the hot, bare flesh. Jason sighed at the sensation of fingers against his freed cock, his tail beginning to wag again as he laid his head back.

"That'th what I wanted to thee..." Daph said, wrapping her hand around the thick, round knot at the base of his penis, throbbing in her grip to the beat of his quickening heartbeat. "God *damn*, I can't wait to feel that fuckin' thing inthide me."

"Wh...What are we waiting for?" Jason sighed.

"Hey dude, gimme a fuckin' minute to play with it," Daph said, squeezing his cock in her hands. "You'll get your fuckin' chance, alright?" She reached between his legs with her right hand and cupped his balls in her palm, hefting them slightly and fondling them until Jason began to pant. "Mmf, thethe are real nice." She said. "If I wathn't already knocked up, you'd put a litter in me for thure, dude...Shame they ain't ever been put to use." His erection twitched in her hand and he grunted again.

Daph smiled. He liked it.

“Yeah...I’ll bet any good bitch would be over the goddamn moon to get theeded full of your pupth,” Daph said, leaning forward so her breath fell against his sensitive skin. “I know I would...”

“Daph,” Jason said, strain in his voice. “Daph, please let me fuck you.”

“You can fuck me when I’m good and ready!” Daph shot back, tugging on him. She shook her head and teased her thumb over the head of his cock, making him shudder. “Trutht me, you’ll thank me later for getting you all worked up.”

“You’re...you’re gonna make me finish early,” Jason grunted.

“That’th up to *you*, stud,” Daph said. She let go of his balls and gripped his length in both hands, stroking it up and down. She sighed to herself, frowning. “Okay, jutht tho ya know,” Daph said, looking up at Jason, “I totally, abtholutely, one hundred percent want your cock in my mouth right now, but uh...” She made a grimace to emphasize her overbite. “That probably ain’t gonna happen.”

“I was with a rabbit girl once,” Jason said, breathlessly. “She could...she kinda did it from the side, into her cheek. It was great.”

“*Really...*” Daph said, cocking her head at Jason’s dick. She opened her mouth as wide as she could, testing whether she could angle it behind her front teeth somehow. If she tilted her head all the way over, she could maybe fit the smallest part of him into her mouth, but it would still leave it resting against the side of her teeth, which couldn’t have been comfortable. “I think your rabbit girl wath a lot more talented than me, dude.”

“It’s okay,” he sighed, rocking his hips a little to gently thrust into Daph’s grip. “You’re doin’ fine already.”

Daph frowned, her hands still wrapped around Jason’s cock. Deciding on a compromise, she stuck her tongue out as far as it would go and licked him from the base of his knot all the way up to the tip, feeling the salty taste of pre-cum dot against her tongue. Jason’s body shook, his leg involuntarily kicking against the ground.

“Oh *-hoh!* Fuck...” He exclaimed, surprised. “That...that wasn’t too bad.”

“Happy to pleathe you,” Daph snarked. She smacked her tongue against the top

of her mouth, milling around the taste. “Cum alwayth tasteth *kinda* like snatch, but jutht a *little bit* different.”

“Yknow...I know you...told me you were bi but...” Jason began, but his breath caught in his throat as Daph licked his cock again, this time dabbing it a little more in the fluid leaking from his tip.

“But what?” she asked.

“But I...I always got the idea that you liked chicks more,” Jason finished.

“Well...yeah, moht of the time,” Daph shrugged, switching hands to continue to stroke him while she talked. “But I’ve got thith weird *cock thirst* ever since I got pregnant. It’th like thome kinda biological, hormone thing. I feel like I *need* dick the more pregnant I get, and I’m horny like all the time.”

“That’s... *really* hot,” Jason said.

“I *know*, right?” Daph grinned. “Maketh me happy there are guyth like you into my bloated ass, yknow?”

“Don’t say that,” Jason said. “You look amazing. Like a...fuckin’ goddess or something.”

“Aw, dude,” Daph said. “You’re gonna make a pregnant girl blush.”

As Daph continued, to play with Jason’s cock in her left hand, she slowly trailed her right hand down her belly, rubbing the sensitive skin beneath her fur, following her swell all the way down between her legs. Unfortunately, she found she couldn’t reach all the way around her baby bump to where she wanted her fingers the most. She tried from the side, getting a little closer, but finding she couldn’t reach past her belly.

“Hey, uh,” Daph said, looking up at Jason. She tugged on the waist of her sweatpants and smiled, bashfully. “Can you gimme a hand down here?”

Jason nodded, lifting his leg and kicking off his pants and underwear from around his paws.

Daph reached out with her strong legs and kicked the coffee table as far away as

she could, then sat back and spread them out wide. As Daph let go of his cock, Jason crouched down between her legs and below her belly, helping her to pull off her pants and soaked underwear and throw them into the corner of the room. The hot, spicy scent of her aroused cunt filled his sensitive nostrils, making him all the more eager to plunge his cock into. But before he could do anything, Daph leaned forward as far as she could and gripped Jason by one of his pointed ears.

“You think I look like a goddess?” she said, smirking and staring into his eyes. “Then worship me like one.”

Jason grinned hungrily, baring his sharp teeth that by themselves sent an ecstatic shiver up Daph’s spine. She shifted, moving her tail out of the way to give the doberman full access to the slit between her legs, already wet in anticipation. Jason went down, disappearing behind the horizon of her belly, his tail wagging excitedly and making ‘thwap’ sounds against the back of his legs. Daph leaned her head back on the couch, letting loose a relaxed and contented sigh. She felt Jason’s head and ears pressing against the bottom of her stomach, his hot breath tingling against the tender flesh of her pussy.

After a few minutes of awkward silence and movement from below, Jason sat back up, his hair and fur messy and his nose wet.

“Daph, I uhhh...” he said, laying a hand atop her belly. “I...can’t reach.”

“Huh?” Daph raised an eyebrow. “...Oh! Ohhh, okay. Thorry, heheheh.”

With a few grunts, Daph shifted farther back on the couch, with her head pressing halfway down the couch cushions and her body weighed totally down by the girth of her belly. She reached below and tried to shift her stomach up and out of the way, but only finding a flurry of kicks in protest.

“Alright, chow down,” Daph groaned, unwilling to admit how uncomfortable she was. Fortunately, in just a few seconds, the soreness of her position gave way for electric pleasure as Jason began to lap smoothly against her pussy. She sighed, deep in her throat, her hands gripping her tits and rubbing circles around her nipples for extra stimulation. Jason’s tongue was so smooth and soft against her, and big enough to stroke every inch of her pussy with each lick.

“Hhha...hhhhhigher...” Daph moaned. “Higher up. On the clit.”

Jason obeyed, his velvety tongue sliding against Daph's clit and making her sharply gasp at the sensation.

"Oh fuck...yeah...yeah, keep doing that..." Daph moaned, wiggling her hips to better angle herself for Jason's mouth. He complied wordlessly, focusing on her button and sliding his tongue in and out of her labia every so often just for variety. He even puckered his lips and sucked against her clit in a sensation that was almost too much for Daph to handle. His variety and rhythm left something to be desired, but his eager energy made up for it.

Just as Daph was getting too sore to enjoy being eaten out, Jason pulled away from between her legs. He crouched on one knee above her, staring into her eyes with a sharp, determined expression.

Gripping the sides of her belly to hold it in place, he slowly thrust forward beneath her, angling up just slightly to align his cock directly above her cunt. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite enough, with the angle and Daph's size keeping Jason from penetrating. Daph felt the tip of his dick nudge against her from beneath and sighed. She let him try a few different angles and even a few more desperate thrusts before shaking her head.

"That ain't happenin, dude," Daph said. "Not like thith, anyway. A for effort, though."

"Okay," Jason panted, pulling away to sit back on the carpet, his cock as hard as ever. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Daph said. She grunted, trying to shift up around her belly, but found herself unable to stand. Holding a hand out to Jason, he wordlessly stood and helped her to her feet, taking the initiative to hold her middle steady in his hand as he did. Daph ended up standing a few inches away from Jason, face-to-face with his broad chest. Without looking up, he gripped his cock in her hand and pressed it into her belly, grinding into it.

"I'm about ready to thee what you can do with thith thing," Daph said, sliding her hand from his dick and walking around him toward the open bedroom door, making a point to shake her hips as she walked. She didn't know for sure, but she could guess at what his eyes were on.

"Yeah...yeah, me too," Jason said. "Hey, do you want me to like, get a condom?"

Daph made it to the door of the bedroom before she stopped. She wiggled her tail and stood to the side, framing herself in the doorway. Glancing up at Jason, she ran a finger all the way down her pregnant belly, making sure she had his attention.

“Why?” she asked, winking slyly before slipping into the bedroom.

It took Jason all of his self control not to sprint through the door and immediately mount the heavily pregnant squirrel and to instead walk calmly into the bedroom after her, his erection solid enough to remain still in place as he moved.

As he crossed through the doorway, he watched Daph awkwardly climb onto the bed with a few groans of discomfort. Part of him wanted to help her, but he was too transfixed on watching her from behind, her tail flagged up as if to show off her slick, dripping pussy between her legs, right above the swollen, pendulous bulge of her belly that was just big enough to graze against the sheets as she moved on her hands and knees. He wasn't entirely sure which of these turned him on more, and for the first time that night, he was okay with it.

Once Daph was finally all the way on the bed, she flipped onto her back, reaching above her head to grab a few pillows to stuff under her head and back. With a grunt, she pushed herself up on her elbows to look over her belly and grinned. She reached over a hand and teased him with a hand under her stomach.

“Do me a favor,” she said, “*don't* go eathy on me.”

Jason bounced forward and leapt onto the bed, bouncing the two of them on the mattress. Daph gasped and gripped the bedspread for stability.

“Whoa, fuck,” she said. “That ain't what I had in mind for ‘shakin’ the bed.’”

“Sorry,” Jason quipped, his tail still wagging furiously. He crawled forward on all fours over to Daph, eyes roaming along every inch of her soft body. She still had the muscles she'd always worked so hard to maintain, but they were beneath an appealing layer of baby weight that made him want to sink his hands into her soft body. Sitting up on his knees, he gripped Daph by the hips and pulled her closer to him before doing what he'd been waiting for all night.

Leaning over, Jason licked a straight line over Daph's belly, trailing from right

above her pussy to her navel, feeling her taste and scent on his tongue alongside the firmness of her bump and the round curves against his palms. On closer inspection, he noticed a slight pink tinge to her white belly fur, the color of her skin underneath. Daph squirmed at the sensation, kicking her paws against the mattress.

“*Ohhhhhhhohohoho...ohhh my god,*” Daph laughed, her stomach bouncing appealingly below Jason’s face. “That wath...*I liked that...*” Jason laughed at her reaction, then readjusted his grip on Daph’s hips.

In one, smooth, effortless motion, Jason pushed forward and slid his cock inside of Daph, the two of them gasping quietly at the sensation, the entire world seeming to fall silent.

He hilted inside of her up to his thick knot, then pulled out up to the tip, taking only a moment to thrust back in again. Daph let out a pleased squeak from the back of her throat, a noise that took Jason off guard for a moment before he decided that it was a good thing and kept going. He started slowly, trying to set his own pace and enjoying the hot flesh around his cock while Daph squirmed and moaned pleasantly beneath him. She even made a few chittering sounds that made Jason stop for a moment.

He continued to thrust and fuck her, feeling the tingling buildup slowly building up in his cock. Jason found his favorite sight to be Daph’s pregnant body bouncing with the rhythm of his thrusts, her round belly shaking and bouncing up and down as he fucked her harder and harder with each passing second. He mindlessly picked up the pace, his sense of self lost in the primal act of mating. He’d never had sex without a condom before, the wet sensation of flesh-on-flesh better than he could have ever imagined. He almost wanted to growl hungrily, but was afraid that might scare Daph.

Daph herself was totally lost to the pleasure under him. She thrashed her arms around, sometimes gripping the bedsheets, sometimes playing with her breasts, sometimes reaching down and gripping Jason’s wrists as if to keep him inside of her as long as possible. Her long tail thrashed behind them, most of it falling off the bed entirely. A few times, her tail whipped up and entwined with Jason’s, which still wagged ceaselessly. She sometimes pulled in her legs, bending them at the knees to give Jason’s cock more room to plunge into her farther and farther.

Then, after a few minutes, Daph unexpectedly reached down and grabbed Jason's wrists, pulling them from her hips and planting his hands directly atop her belly, guiding his palms around her full, gravid middle. He felt her body rock and sway beneath his hands with every thrust.

"...Harder..." Daph mumbled, her hands splayed out beside her and her eyes clenched shut. "Ha-Harder..."

"I...I might...hurt you."

"Good."

At her demand, Jason withdrew his cock and pierced it straight into her cunt with a hard, stabbing motion. Daph threw her head back, unable to arch the rest of her body from her belly's weight, and cried out loud. Jason repeated this a few more times, her body rocking harder than before beneath his hands, her pants becoming moans with each thrust.

Suddenly, beneath his palms, Jason felt a sudden flurry of activity deep within Daph's womb. Her stomach shifted visibly beneath him and he felt something kick out against his hand. Stopping quickly, he pulled his hands away and stared down at her stomach.

"Hwh...What?" Daph breathed, cracking her eyelid open.

"I...I don't..." Jason breathed. "I don't know how to feel about that."

"Well figure that out later and keep *fucking me*," Daph groaned, lying back. She shifted, then flexed her toes and groaned. "Fuck...my legth are going numb..."

"Do you want to stop?"

"God damn, *hell* fucking no," Daph swore. She sat up and pulled herself off of Jason's slick cock, shuddering at the sensation. Taking the pillow, she crammed it under her head and leaned over on her side, letting her belly lay on the bedspread in front of her. "Like thith," she said, lifting her leg to present an unobstructed view of her pussy. "Keep going. I want that knot of yourth thith time."

"I think it might be too big," Jason said, sliding up beside Daph and holding her

leg up in his hand by the thigh.

“I can handle it. Besideth,” Daph added, looking over her shoulder and patting her gravid belly, “I’m gonna need the practice.”

Jason slid in closer to Daph, moving her tail out of the way to spoon in closer to her back. Then, after a few seconds of getting the right angle, he slid easily back into Daph’s stretched pussy, still slick and wet as before. It only took him half the time to get back up to full speed, the two of them shifting and moaning and humping into one another so perfectly it was as if they were connected. Jason let go of Daph’s leg and laid it instead over her belly, circling her navel with his finger like he’d seen her do idly that night. He felt the baby shift inside of her again, but it somehow made him want to fuck her even harder with some primal instinct not even he was truly aware of.

“I’m...uggghh...” Jason tried to speak through his grunts. His cock was almost sore with the pressure he felt building up inside him. He knew it was a matter of seconds before he couldn’t hold it any longer. “I’m close...I’m getting close.”

“Kn-Knot me,” Daph moaned. “Do it. I want it.”

“Just...hang on...”

“Fuck...I want it...I fucking want it so bad, Jason.”

“Ok...give me a minute...”

Unwilling to wait a minute, Daph reached back behind her and grabbed Jason to hold him steady, waited for him to thrust into her one more time, then pounded her hips as hard as she could straight onto his cock, forcing the thick knot to plunge into her. Her head swam with ecstasy as she felt her pussy stretch wider than she’d ever felt before to fully swallow Jason’s length. It hurt just enough to give her pleasure some texture to it and send it shooting up her spine like electricity.

Jason, initially shocked by the motion, felt relieved to finally have his entire cock inside of Daph, every tiny movement inching him closer and closer over the edge. He continued to thrust with the little room he had left to move, but he couldn’t take it any longer. Clenching his jaws, Jason gripped Daph’s shoulder and held on tight as his cock twitched a few times, then erupted inside of her into

a torrent of cum, his tip firing off load after load until he felt like his entire spirit was exiting through his penis. Daph felt the warmth pooling inside of her and moaned, cumming for the first, but far from last time, that night. It filled every inch of her, hot and heavy, seeping into every fold.

As his ejaculation finally slowed to a trickle, she and Jason collapsed onto the bed, leaning against one another, panting and groaning and even chuckling. Daph tugged on the cock still buried inside her and found it completely stuck in place.

“God damn...” she breathed, pulling on it again. “It’th like a goddamn *seal*.” Daph glanced over her shoulder and smiled at Jason. “Good thing I’m already pregnant, huh?”

“Why...why do you think...” Jason panted, still fighting to regain his energy. “Why do you think canines have the highest population in the US?”

“...Huh,” Daph said, thinking. “I guess now I know.” She pulled against his knot again, more testing it then trying to pull herself free. “...Now what?”

“That’s the problem with it,” Jason mumbled. “You’ve...you gotta wait for it to go down.”

“...How long doeth that uthually take?”

Jason shrugged. “Depends...”

“Well fuck,” Daph snorted. “Dog cockth are really made for breeding, huh?”

“Mmm...” Jason mumbled in agreement.

“That’th kinda hot, in a way,” Daph continued, laying her head back down on pillow with her arm over her belly. “Like, you can’t *help* but get pregnant, yknow? Kinky.”

Jason didn’t respond.

“I liked when you licked my belly right before you put it in,” Daph said, smiling to herself. “That was a really good-”

She was interrupted from a soft, deep snore from Jason's nose. Daph craned over her shoulder to get a look at Jason, who had very quickly fallen deep asleep. She flopped down on her side, thought for a moment, then tugged against the knot inside of her, still holding her in place.

"Fuck," Daph said to herself, "...I wish I had my phone."

Chapter 13

Quality Time

“Do you need help with that?” Georgia asked, concernedly watching her husband struggle to walk down the hallway with the heavy suitcase over his shoulder.

“I’m fine,” Darwin said, shortly and with noticeable strain in his voice. While his arms were naturally muscular enough to easily heft the bag, his long, skinny legs proved less adept at holding weight for a long period of time. He clenched his teeth with every step, his tail whipping back and forth as he struggled for balance.

“Are you sure?” Georgia asked for the third time, anxiously watching his knees shake.

“He doethn’t wanna look like a wimp in front of you,” Daph said, under her breath but loud enough for Darwin to pick up. She walked between the two of them, waddling slowly down the hallway and arching her back to better carry the heavy load of her now full-term pregnant belly. Georgia walked slowly behind her to be able to catch Daph if she fell or stumbled, but she wasn’t going to tell Daph that.

“Why did you...why did you pack...so *much*?” Darwin gasped, glancing back at Daph.

“You wanted me to thtay for a whole *month*, right?” Daph said. “I need a month’th worth of thtuff! I don’t wanna be runnin’ back and forth between my place and yourth.” Daph hiccuped as Lilly kicked her. She rubbed her stomach, adding, “If I gotta carry *your* luggage for nine monthth, then you can carry *mine* for ten minuteth!”

“You don’t have to...nnggh...yell,” Darwin said, straining to switch the bag to his other shoulder.

After a long trek from the elevators, leaving both Darwin and Daph equally exhausted, they finally made it to the apartment door. Georgia quietly slipped between them and unlocked the door, holding it open for the two of them.

“Women and children first,” Daph called out, hefting back onto her paws and shuffling quickly inside before Darwin could get a chance. Without a word, Georgia leaned over and picked up the suitcase from the ground near Darwin’s paws, gritting her teeth to carry it the few feet over the threshold. Huffing, she dropped it next to the coat rack behind the door, just as Darwin regained the energy to walk inside himself and shut the door behind him.

“I need some water...” Darwin grumbled to himself as he stumbled into the kitchen. Daph stood in the living room, glancing around the room and eyeing the few changes that had been made.

“The more like forever since the last time I was here,” Daph said, her hands around her belly. She winced as Lilly kicked again, harder than before, and looked down at herself. “Welcome home, Lilly. Maybe now you won’t get mad and kick the shit outta me when you get woken up by the EL-train.” Daph made another face as the little squirrel moved again, then sighed. “But you’re gonna kick the shit outta me anyway, aren’t you?”

“We still have to baby-proof the outlets and sharp corners,” Georgia said, standing next to Daph and pointing to the edges of the tables and chairs.

“You might as well put down those mattresses while you’re at it,” Daph nodded. “If she’s anything like I was, Lilly’s gonna find a way to climb everything in sight. My mom spent more time pulling me off the ceiling than she did the floor.”

“That’s...” Georgia paused, scratching her chin as she looked away. “That’s a good idea...”

“You got a baby room?” Daph asked, craning her neck around the living room.

“Sort of,” Georgia said, pointing to the bedroom door. “We’ve got a crib set up in there for now.”

“Leaving you won’t be far,” Daph said. She huffed and waddled around the couch toward the doorway. Georgia giggled to herself at how the heavy pregnancy had

weighed down the usually fit and muscular squirrel. As she made it to the doorway, she leaned in and glanced around, her eyes falling to the small white crib set up next to the bed.

“Well how about that, Lilly?” Daph said to her belly. “You’re gonna be thleeping right next to where you were *conceived!*”

“*Daph,*” Georgia said, embarrassed.

“When your mommy and daddy wanted a baby, they brought me in there and plugged me so fulla cum I couldn’t *help* but get knocked up.”

“Daph, cut it out,” Georgia said, jogging around the couch and taking Daph’s arm to pull her away from the bedroom.

“And maybe, if they’re really nice, your mommy and daddy will fuck me a few more timeth before you’re born!” Daph continued as Georgia tried to drag her away. “Becaute all the hormoneth from carrying you are making me so horny I can’t *thee straight.*”

“*Stoop!*” Georgia cried, but laughed despite herself. “I swear to god, Daph, if Lilly’s first word is ‘fuck,’ I’m suing you for pre-natal child abuse.”

“Alright, alright, I wath fuckin’ around! Well...only a little,” Daph shrugged and shuffled over to the couch. “Tho I get to crash here?”

“You can sleep in the bed,” Georgia said, walking up beside her. “I figured Darwin and I could swap out sleeping on the couch.”

“Are you kidding?” Daph said, turning to Georgia and raising her eyebrows. “I wath lookin’ *forward* to sleepin’ on thith couch again!” Daph turned to the back of the couch and made a short hop, sticking her leg out as she tried to climb over it. She bounced a few more times in place, trying to boost herself up and over.

“Please don’t,” Georgia said, flatly. Daph stopped, panting and rubbing the sore spot on her belly that had bumped up against the hard wooden furniture.

“I can’t wait until I’m gonna be able to move again,” she mused, taking the time to slowly walk around the couch and flop heavily into it. Daph sank into the cushions and moaned in ecstasy, kicking up her paws and sliding onto her side.

“It’th like a *cloud*...”

“Is that comfortable?” Georgia said, eyeing Daph’s belly that protruded off the edge of the couch.

“Yeah...but...ok, hang on,” Daph said. She reached far ahead and pulled a cushioned footrest closer, sliding it under her belly to keep it properly elevated. She sighed and pulled her legs in closer while rubbing her stomach contentedly. “Mmmmm...that’th better.”

“I’m happy we could make you so comfy,” Georgia said, rolling her eyes.

“That’th what you wanted me here for, right?” Daph asked, looking up at Georgia. “You jutht want me to take it eathy until I have the baby?”

“That, and we want to be able to keep a watch on you for when it happens,” Georgia said, sitting down on the coffee table across from the couch. “Either Darwin or myself will be here if you go into labor. And if we’re not, we’re a phone call away.” Georgia reached over and stroked Daph’s baby bump affectionately. “We just didn’t want you halfway across town in case something goes wrong.”

“Tho bathically,” Daph responded, “I can kick it here and relax ‘til my body feelth like squirting out Lilly?”

“In so many words...yes.”

“Got it,” Daph said, flashing a thumbs-up. “Be lazy and pregnant ‘til I ain’t pregnant no more.”

“I’m glad we understand each other,” Georgia nodded. She trailed her hand over Daph’s stomach until her fingers brushed against her popped belly button, so prominently visible beneath her shirt. “I was waiting for this to happen,” Georgia mused, pinching the outie and making Daph squirm. “It’s so cute on you.”

“It’th fuckin weird, ith what it ith,” Daph shuddered.

“It’s just because you were so skinny before you got pregnant,” Georgia said.

“Thtill weird,” Daph sniffed. She reached up and grabbed Georgia’s shoulder,

bracing against her to heft her heavy body up to a sitting position. Once she was upright, Daph said, “Hey, yknow what elthe ith fuckin’ weird?”

“What?”

“My boss, Antonio? He gave me *the whole month off!*” Daph said, shaking her head in disbelief. “He like, he thaid he wath gonna take me off the thchedule ‘til I had the baby. Ithn’t that *fucked up?*”

“I...” Georgia blinked. “...I think that’s called maternity leave, Daph.”

“Nah, dude,” Daph said, shaking her head again with a knowing look in her eye. “No way. I know what it ith. He jutht knowth that if I go into *labor* in hith store, then people ain’t gonna want to *come* anymore! Becauthe the whole neighborhood ith gonna know that’th the store one of the waitresses had a baby in, yknow?” Daph chuckled. “That’th why he wanted me outta there, thee?”

“I...I think he might have just been giving you maternity leave.”

“Naaaahhh,” Daph frowned. “I know how he thinkth.”

“If you say so...” Georgia said, raising an eyebrow. She suddenly gasped, then clapped her hands together and stood. “Oh! That reminds me!”

Georgia hopped up from the coffee table and skipped to the kitchen, sticking her head through the doorway.

“You’re taking a *long* time to get a drink of water, babe,” she said to Darwin, who was busy watching a pot of noodles soften on the stove.

“I thought I’d get dinner started,” he shrugged.

“Well put mine away, I just remembered some stuff I wanted to pick up tonight from the store.”

“I can do it,” Darwin said, setting the spoon down and stepping forward before Georgia stopped him.

“You’re tired and in the middle of cooking. I can go on my own.”

“But wh-”

“But *what?*” Georgia interrupted with a smile. “I’m just going to the store. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

Before Darwin could respond, she hopped forward and pecked him on the cheek, then bounded out of the kitchen.

“I’m going to the store,” Georgia said to Daph, passing her on the way to the coat rack.

“Cool,” Daph said. “Lilly’s hungry for more of that squirrel snack pack.”

“I think *you’re* hungry for that squirrel snack pack,” Georgia responded, raising an eyebrow.

“Well you don’t know that she’th *not*,” Daph responded.

“I’ll be back later,” Georgia said, slipping on her jacket and opening the front door. “Don’t go into labor while I’m gone.”

“No promiseth.”

With a quick latch of the door and a passing giggle, Georgia was gone.

Daph sat awkwardly on the couch, feeling oddly out of place without Georgia there beside her. The atmosphere had changed, like the sun had very quickly and unexpectedly set. She kicked her paws against the carpet, drumming her fingers against her belly idly. Lilly shifted, pushing out her leg as if she were as bored as Daph was. She cleared her throat, then hiccuped again when Lilly bumped against her diaphragm.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Darwin stirred a wooden spoon into the pot of noodles on the stove, watching them cook and soften with his eyes glazed over. Realizing he wasn’t making any difference, he set the spoon down and leaned against the opposite wall, sighing and flicking his tail. He’d planned out an entire meal for himself and Georgia with a new alfredo recipe he’d wanted to try out, but with no one there with him but Daph, the wind had been taken out of his sails. He wasn’t even sure what she liked to eat, beyond her prenatal diet.

Bored of just sitting on the couch with nobody but Lilly for company, Daph groaned to her paws and waddled across the room to the corner where Georgia had dropped her suitcase. She was far too big to even bend over anymore, so Daph had to brace a hand against the wall for balance as she squatted down to open her bag, relying almost entirely on the strength of her thighs to keep herself standing. After a few close calls, her knees became too sore to keep up the awkward position, so she stood and dragged the entire bag to the couch.

Darwin stared at his phone, scrolling through old emails and finding himself wishing he had a project to work on. The firm had approved his time off for paternity leave for the next few weeks and although he hadn't started it yet, he was given lighter projects to work on in anticipation of his absence. As easy as the workload was for free time, he felt lost and listless without something to put his hands to, doubly so when Georgia wasn't there to occupy the rest of his time.

One of his ears perked up at the sound of faint music coming from the living room. Truth be told, he'd almost forgotten that Daph was there to begin with. Darwin glanced at the stove, nothing cooked but the pot of noodles that he still hadn't figured out what to do with. As awkward as it was, he figured he should at least try to be a good host.

Drying his hands on a bundle of paper towels, Darwin padded out of the kitchen in his bare paws, his nails clicking against the hardwood floor. Looking over the couch, he found Daph settled deep into the cushions, with an e-reader in her hands and an extra-sized pair of headphones stretched over her belly and playing music into it from an iPod. Darwin sat on a chair facing the couch, patting his hands against his thighs and faking a relaxed sigh, which Daph glanced up at. She smiled politely, a dim shadow of the genuine, toothy grin she usually sported.

"Is that a Kindle?" Darwin asked, trying to find some way to break the silence.

"Mm-hmm," Daph nodded, setting it down atop her stomach like a shelf.

"It looks new."

"It is," she said. "Well, kinda. I got it a couple monthth ago."

"I didn't know you-" Darwin began, but then bit his tongue when he thought about what he was saying. "Nevermind."

“What?” Daph asked, chuckling. “You didn’t know I read?”

“Well, I just...” he shrugged, folding his arms. “It just doesn’t seem like something you’d spend your time on.” He scratched his head, then added, “You seem more active than that, is what I meant.”

“It’s cool,” Daph said, smiling genuinely. “I don’t read books or nothin. Mostly fitness advice, magazine articles, stuff like that.” She picked up the Kindle and waved it in her hand. “I got this though I didn’t have to carry around all the pregnancy health books I’ve been reading.”

“...You’ve been reading those?” Darwin asked, surprised.

“Parts of ‘em. I get bored when they talk about all the science and biology shit, but I like checking the weekly pregnancy calendar.” She smiled and patted her tummy. “It’s really cool to learn about, like, what’s all going on inside me right now.”

“That sounds interesting,” Darwin nodded.

“Yeah.”

They fell into an awkward silence again, both of them trying to find a way to advance the conversation. Daph gave up first, turning back to her Kindle and continuing to read. Darwin swallowed, drumming his fingers on the side of the chair. Daph re-read the same paragraph twice, finding it hard to concentrate on both the book and Darwin at the same time.

“Did...uh,” Darwin said, starting the sentence without fully knowing what he wanted to say. He pointed at the iPod next to her on the couch. “Did you get that with it? With the Kindle, I mean.”

“Oh, yeah,” Daph said, lifting up the music player. “I got it around Christmas as a gift to myself.” She glanced up, worried, and said, “Shit, is that okay? I bought it with money you guys gave me, should I not have spent it on stuff like this?”

“That’s alright. It’s your money,” Darwin said.

“Okay...I just kinda figured, like...I wasn’t supposed to use it on anything *but*

the thurrogacy, yknow?”

“We just want you to take care of yourself while you’re carrying. The money’s there to help you do that.”

“I am!” Daph said. She flipped through the Kindle screen and held it up to face Darwin. “I got like three different pregnancy fitness bookth for exercithe and diet thtuff. And I’ve been *doin’* em, too.”

“I believe you, Daph,” he assured her.

“Okay...I mean, I don’t want you to think I’m like...jutht fuckin’ around, yknow?” She thumbed hair out of her face and shrugged. “I’m really tryin’.”

“I know you are,” Darwin said, puzzled. She didn’t seem like herself.

“Okay...” Daph said, nodding again and falling silent, her eyes glancing away.

Darwin frowned, unsure what to think of the moment of vulnerability he’d glimpsed from the normally unflappable Daphodille. Was she nervous to be around him? Wasn’t he just as nervous to be around her?

Daph swallowed, taking refuge in the screen of her Kindle, with the only sound coming from the headphones playing muffled music into her womb. She’d never felt so anxious and unsure around someone before, let alone her best friend’s husband, someone she’d known for years. Could it just be hormones addling her brain, or was it something more than that?

“So...the music,” Darwin said, desperate to break the silence. “Does that really work?”

“Huh?” Daph said, snapping out of her thoughts. “What, on the baby?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh fuck dude, like a charm,” Daph said, happy to be changing the subject. She held up the iPod for emphasis. “I got it mothtly for running, but I wanted to try thith out too and thee what would happen.”

“...Are you *still* running?” Darwin asked in disbelief. Daph snorted laughter.

“Not *anymore*,” she said, gesturing to her heavy middle. “But I wath up until December.”

Darwin nodded.

“Anywayth, I got thith for running, but I wanted to try out playin’ muthic for Lilly to thee what would happen.” Daph sighed and shook her head. “She’th big enough now that I can feel, like, *every* movement she maketh. And when she kickth, it *hurts*. Like, it actually fuckin’ hurts. And you can’t jutht reach the fuck in there and get her to cut it out. So when she get’th cranky or too active and I’m thick of it, I jutht put on her playlist and...” She held up her fingers and snapped them, loudly, “...she’th *out*.”

“How did you figure that out?”

“Eathy,” Daph grinned. “I jutht found whatever muthic putth *me* to thleep.” She picked up the iPod and glanced at the screen, nodding. “The real winner ith a bunch of old piano muthic by thith guy Choppin,” she said. “I found a CD of hith online and it knocked *both* of uth the fuck out.”

“You mean Chopin?”

“I guess,” Daph shrugged. “I dunno.”

They fell silent again, with Daph rubbing the sides of her belly while Darwin craned his long ears to listen in to the muffled music she was playing for his soon-to-be daughter. While normally a fan of classical music, even he had to admit that her choice was particularly...dry.

“Hey,” Daph said. “Can I athk you thomethin?”

“Sure.”

“What do you do?” Daph asked, raising an eyebrow. “Like, where do you work?”

“Oh? I’m a software engineer,” Darwin said, frowning. “You didn’t know that?”

“I figured it wath thoething with computerth but, like, I didn’t know for thure.”

“I work for a firm that makes software and operating systems for the computers in airplanes,” he explained.

“Wow,” Daph said, raising her eyebrows. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“Doeth it pay a lot?”

“Pretty well.” Darwin nodded.

Daph nodded silently. Sighing, she slid her hands down her belly and bounced her leg restlessly, staring off into nothing. Darwin similarly cleared his throat and glanced at his hands, his fur still dusty with flour from handling the uncooked noodles. He flicked his tail, then glanced up and looked at anything but Daph.

“Rough weather outside,” Darwin said, nodding.

“Yeah.” Daph agreed. “Cold ath shit.”

It took a few more seconds of silence for the two of them to notice the music had stopped. Daph re-adjusted the headphones to more comfortably fit over her stomach, then picked up the iPod to start the playlist over. Once it was playing again to the baby in her womb, Daph went to set the music player down again, but stopped. She bounced it in her hand, staring past it and setting her jaw in frustration for something. When she dropped the iPod back on the couch, she looked up at Darwin with an exasperated expression.

“Alright, fuck it,” Daph said, throwing her arms out. “If I don’t thay thith, it’th gonna fuckin’ eat at me all night.”

“What?”

“Ithn’t it, like, kinda fucked up that we bathically know abtholutely *nothing* about each other?”

Darwin blinked, then started to laugh. “What?” he said, shaking his head. “Of course I know you, Daph. We’ve know each other for about six, maybe seven years.”

“But in that much time, how well do you *really* know me?” Daph pressed. “I mean like...what do you know about me that Georgia didn’t jutht *tell you* about me?”

Daph’s last sentence struck a chord. Darwin blinked dimly while Daph watched him intently, waiting for an answer. He opened his mouth a couple times, but nothing seemed to come out. As far as he cast his mind back, everything he knew about Daphodille was from a fact or observation given to him by his wife.

“Yeah,” Daph nodded, sitting back into the couch. “It’th like...” She picked up her Kindle off her belly and shook it. “It’th like you jutht read a *book* about me, right? ‘Cauthe that’th how I feel about you. I mean, fuck, I didn’t even know what your *job* wath!”

“It is...I guess it has been a little awkward,” Darwin said, scratching the back of his neck.

“Seriouthly, it’th like...when have we *ever* been alone together?” Daph shook her head in disbelief. “We don’t even *fuck* without Georgia around.”

“I suppose she’s just been our common element,” Darwin said, scratching his chin. “Maybe we just never felt the need to connect to one another if we assumed Georgia was going to be that link.”

“And ithn’t that fucked up? It feelth like the only thing we got in common ith *her*. And for real, dude? I’m not even really thure if I *like you* yet. That’th how fuckin’ little we know each other.”

“Does it really matter anymore whether you like me or not?” Darwin said, defensively.

“*Yeah*, dude! It matterth cause I wanna make thure Georgia married a good guy, yknow? *Plus*,” Daph added, pointing at Darwin, “I’m about to give birth to your fuckin’ *child*. I figure we should at *leatht* be friends.”

“But do we?” Darwin asked. “It’s not your baby, after all.”

“No, you’re right, but I’m gonna go through all the fuckin trouble to have one, I wanna make goddamn thure she’th not going to thome *asshole*, yknow?” Daph shook her head and leaned back. “I don’t know, dude...If we’re gonna be

honestly, I've felt weird around you for a long time, now. Especially since I got, yknow, fuckin' *knocked up* by you."

"...You have?" Darwin said, surprised and even slightly hurt.

"Mm-hmm," Daph nodded, cradling her belly and shifting in her seat. "Like, I didn't really know how to feel about you for a long time, cause I only had Georgia's word to go on. She has a goddamn million nice things to say about you, but to me, you were always kinda...I dunno, cold?"

Uptight? Basically, the only thing I knew for myself was that you were a good *fuck*. I knew more about your cock than your personality." She looked down at her belly, feeling a soft, sleepy nudge from inside. "And then we got me pregnant with your baby and I was like... 'I barely fuckin' know this guy and now I've got this *kid* in me.' I thought it'd be a good reason to get to know you better but that just...didn't happen."

"You talk as if I'm some kind of stranger, though," Darwin countered, holding out his hands. "Even if we didn't *pow-wow* every single night, you can't go six years of knowing somebody without picking up who they are on *some* level." Darwin sighed and dropped his arms to his knees. "I might like you more than you think I do, Daphodille."

"You got a point," Daph nodded. "Your Georgia's husband, and that gets you a *whole* lotta brownie points 'cause I trust her. But she's dated assholes in the past."

"But do you *really* think I'm an asshole?" Darwin said, his voice rising. He pointed to his chest and sat up a little. "Do I...do I really come off that way?"

"Not really. Maybe kinda like you got a thick up your ass when you're uncomfortable. But not all the time, nah." Daph paused, picking at her fingers anxiously as she tried to consider what to say. "But...ugh...I think it's that...you kinda *thru* me, dude."

"I...I scared you?" Darwin repeated, his voice softening. "Did I...am I like that?"

"I dunno, maybe not scary but..." Daph groaned and leaned her head on the back of the couch. "Fuck, talking it hard..."

“Intimidating?” Darwin offered. Daph snapped her fingers and pointed at him.

“Yeah, intimidatin’. Like you thaid, the only thing we had in common wath Georgia and...”

“I didn’t mean to be like that,” Darwin said. “I didn’t know you thought of me that way.”

“It’th not that you thcared me, it’th that...you were just tho *different*.” Daph shook her head. “Me and Georgia, we grew up really thimilar. We were both from broke familieth and we didn’t have a lot of money. My dad died when I wath a kid and Georgia lost her mom. We didn’t have a lot goin’ for us but each other, and for a long time, that wath okay. She wath alwayth so goddamn smart, though, and I knew she wath gonna do awethome things when she grew up.”

“Has she met your expectations?” Darwin asked, smirking.

“Oh *fuck* yeah,” Daph nodded. “I’m impressed by Georgia every fuckin’ time I thee her. But dude...you didn’t grow up like we did. You ain’t got the thame kinda patht we do. Which ith good!” Daph added reassuringly as Darwin began to frown. “I don’t wanna wish those timeth on any kid. But there’th a kind of bond she and I got from growin’ up like that and...I wath afraid you were gonna take that away. That when she married you, that she’d thee how good her life could be and would wanna cut thingth out of her past.” Daph shook her head. “Fuck, I hope I’m makin’ sense.”

“I follow you,” Darwin nodded. He sat forward in his chair, tapping his fingers on his chest. “But did you ever realize how much *I* was intimidated by *you*?”

“...Really?” Daph blinked. She glanced around, as if she was being pranked.

“Georgia and I met when we were freshmen, but how could I *possibly* compare to the years of history you had?” Darwin said. He stood up from the chair and crossed over to the couch, sitting next to Daph with a cushion between them. “You’ve got all these stories, all these inside jokes, so much of a connection for each other. Sometimes, it seems more like she’s married to *you* than me!”

“What...” Daph said. It was her turn to laugh, her belly shaking and nearly jostling off the headphones. “Are you for real?”

“I’m serious!” Darwin shouted, feeling himself growing unexpectedly angry. “There’s this...there’s this...this *wall* that I feel around Georgia whenever you’re together! This impenetrable goddamn force between the two of you that I can’t even *hope* to get through. And it’s based on all this history you two share that I haven’t had the time to build yet, so even though I love Georgia so much, when you’re around, I constantly feel like an *outsider* to my own *marriage*!” His flare-up of anger quickly burned out, Darwin dropped his arms to his sides and looked away. “...I don’t understand.” He added, shaking his head. “I don’t understand it.”

Daph remained silent, a hundred thoughts of what to say next clashing together inside of her head. She swallowed, waiting for what felt like the right moment to speak.

“...You know that ain’t true, right?” Daph said, gently. “Like...you know how much Georgia loveth you, don’t you?”

“I...” Darwin clenched his teeth, then sighed. “...I do. I hope so.”

“She thaid ‘yes,’ didn’t she?”

“...She did.”

“I mean, me and Georgia have been friendth for a long time, yknow? But we’re *friendth*. Even if we’re betht friendth, you’re a couple, you’re *married*. We don’t have to like...we don’t gotta fight over Georgia, do we?”

“I don’t want to,” Darwin said. He exhaled heavily through his nose, like he was blowing out steam, his tail shaking behind him. “But...I’ve told Georgia things about me nobody knows, personal things. Things important to me. And lately I’ve been thinking, ‘Would she tell Daph? What does Daph know? What could she tell other people?’ And that *terrifies* me.”

“...Dude, I don’t tell people’th thecrets like that,” Daph shook her head. “I’m not that kinda person.”

“But how do I *know* that? The only things I know about you are what Georgia tells me.”

“I kinda soundth like you got a lotta trust issueth to work out with her, dude.”

“It’s...it’s not about *her*. I’m not a monster, I can’t expect Georgia not to tell things to her friends, but I *know* all of her other friends. I *trust* them. But I don’t *know* you, Daph. You’re this person that, through Georgia, is so intimately close to my life that you might know more about me than even my own *wife*, and I know fuck all *about* you!” Darwin paused, and then gestured to Daph’s stomach. “Oh, don’t even forget about *this!*”

“Hey man, thith is a thurrogacy job,” Daph said, pointing at him.

“We both know you’re more than just a surrogate, Daph. At least to Georgia. And *that’s* the cherry on top of this fucking dysfunctional little sundae. Somehow, you ended up *nine months pregnant* with my own *daughter* without us even getting to *know* one another!” Darwin tensed for a moment, holding his breath, then sighed, his short-burst frustration fading away. “This...this isn’t how I wanted my life to go...”

Daph looked at Darwin, despite his own gaze drifting away from hers. For whatever reason, this was something important to him, but she didn’t know why, ultimately proving his point. Despite the music playing into her womb, Lilly turned around and roughly began kicking in a flurry, as if trying frantically to keep her father and birth-mother from fighting. Daph rubbed her swollen stomach, feeling Darwin’s baby having grown so strong inside of her. She’d thought for so long that it was only Georgia she was carrying for, so easily forgetting about Lilly’s father.

Do it for her, Daph thought to herself.

“...Well, uh,” Daph said, after an uncomfortable silence. “...We could alwayth thtart now, can’t we?”

Darwin glanced up from staring between his knees and frowned at Daph, gesturing to her baby-heavy middle.

“I think it’s a little late for that.”

“Better late than never, though,” Daph shrugged. The two of them paused before Daph chose to break the silence first. “How did you propose to Georgia?”

“What?” Darwin asked.

“I wanna know. What’d you do?”

“You probably already heard all about it,” Darwin shrugged.

“Not really,” Daph said, smiling. “I didn’t care about that romantic shit at the time. But now I do. Tell me about it.”

Darwin glanced up, squinting suspiciously across the couch at Daph. He sighed, then leaned back into the cushions with his hands clasped in his lap.

“About three years ago...maybe two. I don’t remember exactly. This was when Georgia was doing her residency at the ER. I graduated a semester ahead of her and was working a couple IT internships at the time. Only one of them was paid, so we didn’t have a lot of money to go on, even with our shared income. It was a low point for both of us, but I still wanted to propose. I’d wanted to for months at that point and I just couldn’t figure out the best way to do it. One night after I got paid, I was browsing through Amazon looking for ideas and there was just this... *perfect* ring on sale that I just had to have for her.”

“Hold the fuck up,” Daph said, holding up her hand and smirking. “You tellin’ me you ordered her fuckin engagement ring off Amazon?”

“It was on sale!” Darwin defended, sending Daph into a cackling fit of laughter. “We share a Prime account! It was...It was a *nice ring!*” Darwin rolled his eyes after Daph’s laughter fell into snickers. “*Anyway...* it took a couple weeks to get to our apartment and I just planned to keep it hidden somewhere until the moment was right or I figured out what to do next. But one night, I was doing some coding work at home and forgot to check the mail, so Georgia came home from the ER with the package in her hand. She knew it was jewelry, but not exactly what it was. I tried to lie and say it was for my mom, but all that did is start an argument about saving money.

“For some reason, as soon as she left, I kind of panicked and thought ‘Now now, it has to be now! Right now!’ I ran after her before she got in the shower and made her open it. The ring didn’t even come in a box, it was in bubble wrap, but it looked so perfect in her hands when she unwrapped it. She just stared at it until I told her that I lied and it wasn’t for my mom. I think she started crying before she could say anything and just hugged me. Funny thing is, she never actually said ‘yes.’ She didn’t really need to.”

“Aw fuck, dude,” Daph said, unexpectedly thumbing a tear out of her eye. “Your romantic bullshit ith makin’ me all hormonal.”

“She told me later that was the night a patient had died and she thought it was her fault,” Darwin added, smiling at the memory. “And said that proposing was probably the only thing in the world that could have made her happy again.”

“Thank fuckin’ god she ain’t workin there anymore,” Daph sighed, shaking her head. She grunted, shifting in her seat and pulling her legs up onto the couch, crossing them so that her heavy belly sat in the middle. She absentmindedly played over it with her fingers while saying, “Okay, now do me.”

“Do what?”

“Athk me a quethtion,” Daph said.

“Um...uhh, okay. What’s it like being pregnant?”

“It’th like bein’ a living fishbowl with a thquirrel inthide it,” Daph said flatly. “C’mon, deeper than that. What’th thomethin’ you alwayth wanted to athk me but never have?”

“Oh...well,” Darwin thought for a minute, then shrugged. “I guess...how did you and Georgia become friends?”

“Hoohohoh...oh fuck,” Daph chuckled, looking away. “God damn, thith wath a long time ago. And a lot of it wath, like, little kid logic goin’ on. But okay. My family’th been in New York for, like, ever. Georgia and her mom moved up from, well, Georgia when she wath maybe five or thix, so she didn’t thtart school until she wath in like thecond grade. So, okay, yknow Georgia’th blonde becauthe she’s technically albino, right?”

“I think she’s mentioned it before,” Darwin nodded.

“Right. Well, she kinda had to grow into that as she got older and became the fuckin hottie she ith now. All the other thquirrelth in our class were like you and me. Brown and black eyeth, earthy fur colorth, normal shit, right? Tho Georgia cometh into class and everybody’th all like, ‘What the fuck?’ Cauthe here’th thith tiny ass little thquirrel girl with bright *blonde-ass* fur and bright *blue-fuckin* eyeth.

"And her fur didn't grow in right until she hit puberty, tho it wath all patchy and weird like she fought a fuckin' buzzsaw and lost. She didn't talk a lot becauthe she went from, like, the buttfuck nowhere South to motherfuckin Brooklyn in jutht a few monthth and wath in culture shock the whole time. But we wath at that age where you try to make friendth with everybody, yknow? She just didn't know how to fit in and everybody thtopped tryin.

"Then in like third or fourth grade wath about the time kidth thtstarted to turn into *assholes*, yknow? And Georgia thtuck out like nobody elthe did and she got picked on a lot. But thee, me? I was an asshole too, but I wath the bitch that wanted to *fight* everybody. So I was thith buck-toothed little dyke-in-training that saw Georgia getting shit from other kidth and that shit *pissed me off*. I got tho many goddamn noteth sent home for fighting all the shitheadth that were pickin' on her, but I never thaid it had anything to do with Georgia becauthe at firtht, it didn't! I wath jutht fighting the kids that made me mad! But Georgia thought I wath fighting the bullies *for her* and...well, I guess that became *true*."

Daph put a hand to her head and blinked, dizzy. She took a few deep breaths, pressing her other hand against her belly.

"Daph?" Darwin asked, concerned.

"I'm good," she waved back, stretching out her legs again. "Just...talkin too much. My lungth are all squished. Ran outta breath." She took a minute to catch her breath, then continued. "So ever since I thtstarted doin that, Georgia would help me with school and shit becauthe I wath dumb ath hell and couldn't figure it out. She wanted to do thomething for me for thtopping people from picking on her and it just worked out that we became friendth.

"Thee, Georgia'th mom wath really sick when she was a kid and her dad worked all the time, so a lot of timeth, Georgia would jutht come over and thtay at our apartment in the afternoon after school. I think my mom loved it becauthe she got to pretend she had an extra daughter around the houthe." Daph sighed, rubbing her belly idly while she frowned, thinking back. "Yeah," she nodded. "That'th about it."

"And you've been friends ever since?" Darwin asked.

"Well, not the whole time," Daph said. "We kinda drifted apart in middle thchool and thome high thchool, but eventually we became friendth again before we

graduated. She went to college on a full-ride. I didn't. Then you came into the picture and, well..." She pointed at Darwin, pointed around the apartment, and finally pointed to the baby in her belly before adding, "you know the rest."

"I think I do," Darwin said. He pulled his legs up onto the couch, feeling more comfortable now that he was finally finding some reliability with Daph. "Your turn."

"Okay, cool," Daph nodded. She hiccuped as Lilly kicked her in the chest. She rubbed her belly and asked, "You excited to be a dad?"

"...I don't know yet," Darwin said, sighing.

"You don't know?" Daph repeated, frowning. She grunted as Lilly kicked her, then giggled. "Well dude, you don't got a lotta time left."

"I know," Darwin sighed, picking at his fingers. "It just doesn't feel *real* to me yet. I don't know if it will until the baby's actually born. But I can't...I can't make up my mind how I feel about it." He frowned, then glanced up at Daph. "A big part of it is that, frankly, you aren't my wife. Even if I know in my head that that's my daughter inside you, I just wish it was Georgia carrying her."

"Dude," Daph shook her head and sighed. "I've, like, actually had a pretty easy time being knocked up, but I wish every fuckin' day that it wath Georgia inthtead of me. She'th the one that deserved it." Daph frowned, reaching down to tug her shirt more fully over her round belly. "Yknow, I think that'th why she'th been hangin' out with me tho much."

"Why?"

"I mean, I ain't a shrink or nothin', but I think Georgia'th jutht trying to live the whole 'having a baby' experience through me, yknow? She wantth to be close to Lilly ath much ath she actually can without, like, actually carrying her. It'th why I don't let anybody but her touch my gut without asking." Daph paused, before adding, "And that meantth you, too."

"Huh?"

"C'mon, dude!" Daph said, beckoning Darwin over from across the couch and patting her stomach. "I can't spend ten minuteth with Georgia without her

crawlin' all over my belly to feel Lilly moving, but you ain't even asked to yet! Come say hi to your fuckin' baby!"

"...I uh..." Darwin hesitated. He flexed his toes anxiously, his ears twitching. "I don't know..."

"It's your daughter, dude," Daph said. She pushed herself up and shifted on the couch until she sat with her back to the armrest, presenting her belly to Darwin.

"I know, but..." Darwin hesitated, but Daph answered before he could.

"...but I ain't Georgia."

"Yes..."

"I know, I know, it ain't the best of circumstances," Daph sighed. "We all wish it was different, but this is *thtill* your daughter in here, yknow? Do you really want your first impression of her to be...fuckin' *thcreaming* and covered in *womb goo*?"

Darwin recoiled at the term 'womb goo', making Daph burst into laughter, her round stomach shaking as she cackled. She pulled off the headphones and turned off the music, dropping the iPod to the carpet below.

"C'mon! Introduce yourself!" she said encouragingly, beckoning him closer.

Darwin swallowed anxiously, glancing around the room as if he were committing some kind of crime or offense. Without standing, he shifted down the couch closer to Daph, who tucked her legs beneath her to give him more room. He took a deep breath and reached out a hand, leaving his palm hovering just inches above Daph's stomach.

"I ain't gonna pop, dude," Daph smirked as she watched him hesitate. "Not yet, at least."

"I know, I'm just..." Darwin sighed, then took a deep breath. With that last inch feeling a mile long, he reached forward and pressed his hand against Daph's belly. It was unexpectedly tight and almost hard to the touch, but also deeply warm from a source of heat coming from deep inside; whether it was from Daph's body herself or Lilly, he wasn't sure.

He held his palm in place for a moment, not sure of what to do next. Daph rolled her eyes, took hold of Darwin's wrist, and dragged his hand up her stomach and next to her ribs. They both waited with bated breath for a few moments. Daph frowned. Cupping her belly with her hands, she applied pressure to a few points, then shook her body sharply.

"Come on, thleepy, wake up," Daph said. "Thith is practice for when your parentth need to wake you up for schoo-"

She and Darwin both jumped as Lilly sharply kicked against the top of her cramped living space and just barely grazed against the tips of her father's fingers. Darwin gasped, his breathing turning into breathy, nervous laughs.

"That...that was her?" He said. Daph glanced up at him incredulously.

"Oh, nah. It'th the *other* baby I forgot to tell you guyth about," Daph said, flatly.

"Then that was...her paws?" Darwin asked, moving his palm directly over where he'd felt Lilly touch his fingers.

"Yep."

"So she's upside-down?"

"Oh hell yeah," Daph nodded, rubbing the bottom of her stomach. "She's been movin' head-down all month. She'th 'bout ready to get outta there."

"She's...so *strong* now..." Darwin shook his head in disbelief. "The last time I felt her, it was like..."

"It felt like little bubbleth or thomethin'," Daph nodded. "But now she'th kickin' ass with the bethth of 'em. And I'm her firtht goddamn punching bag, too..." Daph made an *oof* noise as Lilly kicked again. Darwin grinned despite himself, resting his other hand against Daph in an attempt to feel exactly where Lilly was moving. As he slid one of his hands down, he felt an odd sensation against his palms. There was a strange sliding movement the he wasn't quite sure he was imagining or not. He pressed his hands harder into Daph, trying to discern what the light movement was.

"Gentle, dude, gentle," Daph said, easing his hands off of her. "I ain't

toothpathte.”

“Sorry,” Darwin said, cocking his head, then pointed to the middle of her belly. “What is that?”

“Oh, you can feel that?” Daph said, sliding her hands next to his to feel alongside him. “I only thtarded to pick that up in the latht month. Yknow what I think it ith?” Daph glanced up, a twinkle in her eye. “Her *tail*.”

“Really?” Darwin glanced down, trying to imagine the little movement to be Lilly’s tail brushing up against his fingers.

“I mean, I don’t know for thure but,” Daph pointed to the top of her belly and slid a finger all the way down, “if her feet are here, and her head ith down here, then that’d be her tail, right?”

“Do you think we’d be able to feel it, though?” Darwin pondered. “Would it be big enough?”

Daph sat up and reached behind her, pulling her enormous, bushy tail into view and shaking it like a cheerleader’s pom-pom.

“Have you theen thith fuckin’ thing?” Daph said, then pointed to Darwin’s. “Yourth ain’t exactly little, either. She’th gonna come outta me weighing three poundth extra jutht with her tail.”

“You’re probably right,” Darwin nodded, taking note of his own appendage. They fell quiet, Daph relaxing while Darwin prodded his fingers around her belly.

“Hey,” she said, after a while, “you should talk to her.”

“I should what?”

“Talk to her!” Daph said. “Her ears work, yknow.”

“Why?”

“Beeeecauuuuthe,” Daph said, drawing out her words as she dug underneath her body for the Kindle. Fishing it out, she held it up and continued, “the bookth

that a lot of early bonding cometh from in the womb and that babieth can learn to recognize their parent's voice." Daph shrugged and set the Kindle down. "I mean, I used to talk to her when I wath alone, but when I read that, I kinda thtopped becauthe I don't want her to be born knowing my voice more than Georgia'th. And she probably doethn't know yourth at *all* yet, so you got thome catching up to do."

"...Huh," Darwin nodded. "That makes sense."

"She'th probably got a pair of *thethe* big fuckerth, too," Daph said, reaching up to pinch the hair tuft atop Darwin's long ears. Darwin batted her hand away, making Daph giggle. He rolled his eyes, then lowered his face closer to Daph's stomach, the round surface just barely inches away from him. As she noticed this herself, Daph lifted her hands above her head and lurched her body forward, bumping Darwin in the nose with her belly.

"*Hey*," he protested, rubbing his face. Daph only smiled toothily. He shook his head, then moved to the floor below the couch to get near her stomach. He swallowed, trying to imagine that he wasn't talking to Daph's bellybutton inches from his eye, but to the person behind it. He cleared his throat and said stiffly, "Um...hello. I'm...I'm Darwin. I'm going to be your father."

"The fuck ith thith, a job interview?" Daph shook her head. "You're her *dad*."

"Give me a minute, alright? This is weird," Darwin said, shaking his head. He sighed, then leaned in closer, imagining his words going inside. "...Lilly? Can you hear me?" He paused, then wondered why he was waiting for a response. "...It's your dad...You haven't met me yet and...well, I haven't really met you either. But...but I really can't wait to see you, baby girl. And your mom...she isn't here right now, but I know she's excited, too. Daph's done a really good job of taking care of you, but it's almost our turn and we can't wait." He paused, waiting for the words to come. Daph giggled and shifted in her seat.

"She'th moving," she said. "Keep going."

"Okay...um," Darwin swallowed. "Well...we can't wait for you to grow up with us and...to teach you things and to watch you go to school...and Georgia really wants to teach you how to swim and how to climb and I...I just want to hold you and take care of you and watch you sleep. Lilly...I hope you can hear me." Darwin closed his eyes, imagining he was talking directly to his unborn

daughter. “And I’m...really scared, too, because I want to do a good job and I’m going to do my best, but as long as your mom is around I feel like I’m going to be okay because she...she’s going to be so much better at this than I will. But I’ll love you and I love you right now and I won’t ever stop loving you because you’re going to be our baby girl.”

Darwin leaned back, his head falling against the couch. He didn’t realize how much he wanted to say until it came pouring out of his mouth. He opened his eyes, feeling them wetter than they were when he closed them.

“So,” Daph smiled as she asked again, “you excited to be a dad?”

“...Yeah,” Darwin nodded, wiping his eye. “Yeah, I am.” He sniffed, then rubbed his face clean and glanced up at Daph. “It’s my question next, right?”

For hours, the two of them chatted on the couch, telling stories of their childhoods, their newly-beginning adulthood, and reminiscing on the few stories they shared together. They talked about their plans for the future, the things they believed in, the things that made them angry. What they shared, what they didn’t share, and why. They talked about Lilly, what she would be like when she was born, what she was already like inside of Daph. They talked about Georgia, what they both loved about her, the way she had brought them together, and ideas of how to thank her for it.

Around 12:30 in the morning, Georgia nonchalantly unlocked the door and stepped inside, grinning smugly as she found Darwin and Daph chatting on the couch. The two of them glanced up at the door in surprise, as if they’d forgotten Georgia even lived there. Darwin dug out his phone and stared wide-eyed at the time.

“Have fun?” Georgia said, brightly.

“Where have you *been?*” Darwin exclaimed. “You left *four hours ago.*”

“Oh yeah, I did,” Georgia said, shrugging. “I went to go get groceries...then I decided to get dinner and have a cocktail or two. Then I decided to catch a movie down at the IFC Center in SoHo. Then I stopped and got some *ice cream* on the way back.” She grinned, then clapped her hands together in mock frustration. “And oh darn it, I *guess* I forgot those groceries *after all*. Well, at least you two got to hang out without me for a little while.”

“...Wait,” Darwin blinked, then pointed between himself and Daph, “...do you mean you-”

“Oh whatever do you mean, sweetie?” Georgia grinned. She hung up her jacket behind the door, then scurried off into the kitchen, stopping to peck a confused Darwin on the cheek. “I wonder if we have any *pretzels* left!”

Daph and Darwin glanced at one another. Daph only shrugged, well used to Georgia’s rare schemes of social subterfuge.

“You married her, dude,” she said. She paused, rubbed her nose casually, then glanced back him with a soft smile. She reached out one of her legs and kicked him gently on the shoulder. “I’m glad ya did, though.”

Chapter 14

Parental Guidance

While Darwin carried most of the bags down the hallway, Georgia insisted on helping, struggling with paper grocery bags full of snacks and finger food. She quietly regretted it as she hefted them along, wishing she'd just asked her husband to carry them, but didn't want to back down from her word.

"You think we have enough food?" Georgia groaned sarcastically, re-adjusting her grip on a bag of four cups of salsa and three bags of tortilla chips.

"It's a party, you're supposed to over-prepare," Darwin said, glancing back. "...Do you want me to get those?"

"You're the one that ran us out of the house today," Georgia complained. "What are we doing with all this if the party is this weekend?"

"Do you want to be running around an hour before people get here trying to get everything together?" Darwin shook his head. "I'd rather get everything a week early than cut it close."

"I don't know, it's just a weird occasion," Georgia said, flicking her tail to retain balance. "Why didn't we just have a New Year's party?"

"Because *everyone* has a New Year's party. You're always obligated to go to so many, it would just be a waste of time to try and get everyone together." Darwin shrugged. "I just really wanted to see our friends before Lilly is born. We aren't going to have much time once she is."

"And you said Daph's going to be gone?" Georgia asked, concerned.

"Yeah, she had things to work out at her place this week." Darwin said. "Yknow. 'Thtuff.'"

"Don't make fun of her lisp," Georgia said, standing on one leg and kicking

Darwin in the thigh. “She hates that.”

“Sorry.”

“I just hate that she won’t be around. What if something happens and we’re distracted by the party?”

“Then she knows to call us. Just keep your phone on if you want, but I think everything will be fine.”

“Ugh, fine,” Georgia conceded. She quietly huffed along a few feet behind Darwin, doing her best to keep up with his long, effortless strides. She wondered whether Lilly would inherit any of her father’s natural size. He was certainly the only *tall* squirrel she’d ever known.

The two of them lumbered up to the apartment door. Georgia groaned and set the bags down, taking the opportunity to stretch out her back. Darwin pulled set down a bag and knocked on the door with his knuckle four times in a pattern. Georgia glanced up at him.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Checking for burglars?” he said, grinning cheekily. Georgia rolled her eyes.

“I’m probably going to get in the bath,” she grumbled, picking up the grocery bags. “I feel gross and my paws are about to fall off. Maybe I should be like Daph and stop wearing shoes. Seems to work out well for her.”

She grunted and hefted the bags up and followed Darwin inside, only noting for a moment that he had somehow opened the door without his keys.

Georgia was nearly blown off her paws with a cacophony of cheers and applause from inside her apartment. She had to blink away the shock from the unexpectedly bright lights and wait for her vision to fade back in so she could see more than a blur of colors and shapes. The apartment was packed with familiar faces, from college friends, high school buddies she’d lost contact with, to more recent work-friends. Even some distant cousins and a few of Darwin’s friends filled out the rest of the apartment.

Her wide eyes traveled up the walls, following the lines of decorations,

streamers running along the walls, balloons littering the floor, and even a few helium ones bumping up against the ceiling all in a bright, pastel pink. The centerpiece of the decorations was a wide, paper banner that hung from a light fixture with bold, cursive letters reading out “IT’S A GIRL!”

In the center of the room, planted on the couch, sat Daphodille, grinning toothily with her hands over her belly. With the help of the women sitting beside her, she grunted to her paws and threw out her hands in a grand display.

“Thurpri- *oh, fuck-*” Daph swore, her heavy body teetering in place as she lost her balance, kept upright by the worried intervention of other party guests there to catch her. She took a deep breath, re-composed herself, then smiled and started over. “*Thurprise! We fuckin lied! The party wath today and it wath for you!*”

Darwin leaned over and took the grocery bags from his stunned wife, kissed her wordlessly on the top of the head, and strode off into the kitchen with her friends patting him on the back and congratulating him as he did. Georgia fielded a couple friendly hugs and greetings from old friends herself, but was still too stunned to think straight.

“Daph...did...did you do this?” she asked, breathlessly.

“Darwin, too. We had the idea a couple weekth ago. He got in contact with the guests and I did a lot of the idea thtuff.” Daph braced her hands against her back and lumbered around the coffee table. “Alright, alright, wide load, move your asseth,” she said as she shuffled past the other couch occupants.

“C’mon! Sit down!” Daph said, gesturing to the empty seat in the center of the room and grinning.

Georgia approached the couch, but stopped in front of Daph after noticing her outfit. Daph wore a pair of loose, white slacks with frills near the bottom and a green, flowing maternity blouse with short sleeves. Her hair was brushed and styled, with even a little bit of gel or product in it to keep its shape, likely put there by someone other than her. When she peered closer, it even seemed like Daph was wearing eyeliner and makeup. Daph grinned and gestured to her outfit.

“Ith thith good?” she asked, seemingly more self conscious than her usual

confident self. “You seemed to really like it when we went shopping that one time...”

“You look amazing, Daph,” Georgia said, swallowing a happy lump in her throat as she pulled on and felt the fabric around Daph’s belly. “I love it.”

“I figured I should at least wear thith kinda thing once, yknow?” Daph shrugged. She tugged the bottom of the blouse down instinctively, but found she didn’t need to. “It’th cool to finally wear thomethin’ that coverth up my fat ass, though.”

“You’re not fat,” Georgia said, smiling. “For once you actually look...pregnant.”

“That ain’t much better, dude,” Daph said, rolling her eyes. She grabbed Georgia by the shoulder and pushed her gently toward the couch. “Sit down! Relax! It’th a party!”

Georgia stumbled forward and flopped down on the couch, taking a moment to greet her two friends beside her, each of them gripping cocktails. Before Georgia could get up to go make herself one, Daph stood up in the middle of the room and began clapping her hands to get everyone’s attention.

“Okay! Listen up for a thec!” She waited for the room to quiet and all eyes to turn to her, her hands on her hips and her tail twitching impatiently. She sniffed, as if to test that the room was as quiet as she wanted it and continued.

“Cool. There’th some thtuff I wanted to make clear before we got into the thwing of it, yeah?”

Daph nodded. “Thome of you don’t know me. My name ith Daphodille, I’m an old friend of Georgia’s thince elementary thchool. I am also the gestational thurrogate for her and Darwin’th daughter, though as you can probably tell,” Daph turned to the side to show off her full-term belly, “I probably won’t be for much longer.” A spattering of laughter followed. Daph cleared her throat and turned forward, wrapping her hands around her belly to frame it.

“Thith right here ith Lilly,” Daph said. She looked down and shifted her stomach, adding, “Thay hi, Lilly.” Daph suddenly coughed, then patted her belly, muttering, “Don’t get too eager...” She shook her head and continued. “So yeah. Thith is Lilly, Georgia’th daughter. She’th right here, she loveth attention, if you

wanna come cop a feel, I don't mind. *But*. Thith is *not* my party. Thith is *not* my baby. It's *Georgia*'th. *She*'s gonna be a mom, not me. I'm gettin' paid for thith, so don't congratulate me for shit, alright? Is all that clear?"

The silence of nodding followed. Daph raised an eyebrow, then cupped a hand around her ear.

"Oh, thorry, I guess I must not have heard, *Ith all that clear?*"

A chorus of 'YES' rung out around the apartment. Daph nodded, pleased.

"Alright. Cool." Daph winced and stretched her back out as best she could, the red fur of her underbelly just barely poking out beneath the blouse. "Now thomebody get me a god damn chair before I break my fuckin thpine."

Once another party guest gave up his seat for Daph, the party commenced. Georgia fielded congratulations, well wishes, and catching up with friends she hadn't seen in a while. Daph sat by quietly, adding to the conversations when she could, but was simply content to let Georgia have her day. Daph mostly piped in to aggressively remind people that, though she was carrying the baby, it was Georgia who was the mother. Most of her female friends and even a few of her male friends made a pilgrimage over to Daph's chair to feel the baby. She was happy to guide their fingers over her belly to more clearly feel Lilly's hard kicks and punches, noting that they were slowing down the closer she got to her due date. While managing to keep most of the conversation about her, Georgia noticed that Daph was enjoying all the attention, despite herself.

"Now, I don't want to seem to *eager*," Georgia said, some time after her second cocktail had loosened her tongue a bit. "But...aren't there *gifts* at a baby shower?" As a few of her friends stood up and moved to the bedroom, Daph held up a hand and called after them.

"*Whoa whoa*, hold up," Daph said. "We thtill got a couple guests comin' and I don't wanna get thtarted 'til they get here."

"Hey, it's *my* party, Daph," Georiga teased.

"And you're the only mom who can get fuckin' drunk at her own baby shower," Daph shot back. "Don't complain." A few of Georgia's friends glanced nervously at one another, unsure of how to treat the joke, before Georgia herself

burst into laughter.

“For real, though,” Daph continued, “I wanna wait ‘til they’re here. Trust me, you’ll be glad.”

After a few more minutes of chatter, there was a series of sharp knocks on the front door, just barely loud enough to cut through the conversation. Darwin, who had set down a refreshed plate of finger-foods he’d made, stood up and wiped his wet hands off on his pants.

“I’ll get it,” he said, heading to the door. Daph smirked and checked the time on her phone.

“If that’s the who I *think* it is,” she said, “then she’s exactly as late as I thought she’d be.”

As Darwin opened the door, a high pitched, delighted noise came from the woman standing in the doorway.

“*Dahwin!* How are yah, sweetie!? It’s been fuckin’ *ages* since I seen yah!”

Georgia leaned around her friends to catch none other than Daph’s mother Donna Westinford pulling Darwin into an awkward, one armed hug around his waist, her other hand gripping a white Starbucks cup.

“Hi Mrs. Westinford,” he said, awkwardly patting her on the back without mentioning that they had only met once before.

“You invited your *mom?*” Georgia breathed, surprised.

“She woulda beat my ass if I didn’t, you know that,” Daph sniffed. “Plus...I mean...she’s *kinda* got a grand-daughter comin, right?” Daph gestured to her belly and shrugged.

“Oh my gawd, the traffic on the way heah was *awful*, ” Donna moaned, the gray squirrel padding inside. The long, floral dress she wore and the big sunglasses did little to hide the age evidenced by the white fur along her muzzle, but she was elegant as ever. She caught sight of Georgia on the couch and gasped like she’d just seen a ghost. “Oh my *Gawd*, Georgiah! Oh, you look so *good!*”

Donna quickly scurried around the coffee table, setting her Starbucks cup down on the surface, and bending over to embrace Georgia in a rare two-armed hug that she only used on special occasions.

“It’s good to see you, Mrs. Westinford,” Georgia said, smiling.

“Didn’t I tell ya ta call me Donna, sweetie?”

“I know but...it’s too weird. I can’t call you anything else.”

“Oh nonsense, you’re a gawd damn beautiful young woman now,” Donna said, squeezing Georgia more tightly for a few seconds before letting go. She pinched her cheek like she used to do decades ago, and smiled. “I’m so happy for you, sweetie.”

“Party thtarted at six, mom,” Daph said, smirking. Donna tucked her glasses into the collar of her dress and rolled her eyes.

“Well *hello to you too*, young lady,” Donna sighed, without turning around. She adjusted the gift bag slung over her shoulder. “I was gettin’ some gifts togethah before the party, so *excuse me* if I can’t make it *exactly* when-” Donna froze as she glanced over her shoulder and caught sight of her daughter, smiling bashfully in the chair with a hand over her heavily pregnant belly.

“Hey mom,” Daph nodded, blushing quietly. Donna stared at her silently for a moment, as if it was the first time they had met.

“Daphodille...” she finally said, her voice soft. She took a deep breath and put her hand over her chest. “Oh my gawd...look at you...”

“Shit mom, c’mon...” Daph mumbled, scratching the back of her head. “There’th people around.”

“I’m sorry, you’re just...” Donna took a shaky breath and let it out, smiling at her daughter. “Ya look good, Daphy.”

“Thankth,” Daph said. “Do ya have to call me ‘Daphy?’”

“Yes I do,” Donna said adamantly. Daph rolled her eyes, letting her mom have that small victory. She braced against the arms of the chair she sat in and hefted

herself up to her paws. Donna stepped back away from Daph's unexpected size, her eyes wide. Daph re-adjusted her maternity blouse and pulled her mother into a sideways hug.

"It'th good to thee you," Daph said, burying her face into her mother's fur. She wondered to herself if Lilly would have that same feeling with Georgia when she was born. Would she feel that same warmth, that same familiar sensation with her, even though they weren't related by blood?

"You too, nutmeg," Donna said, using an old nickname. She pulled back and looked proudly into Daph's eyes, then her view migrated down to the round mass of her belly. Donna sniffed and wiped one of her eyes dry before laying a hand on her daughter's belly and rubbing a small circle over its surface. "I just wish I coulda seen you before you were so..."

"Far along?" Daph suggested.

"*Huge*," Donna exclaimed, glancing up with alarm at Daph's face. "I mean, my *gawd*, what have they been *feeding* you?!"

"*Mooooom...*" Daph groaned, her tail drooping in embarrassment.

"I *mean* it! You look the size of my sistah Josephine right befoah she had the twins. Are ya sure there's only one of 'em in there?" Donna boldly held her hands out and measured the circumference of Daph's gravid stomach. "You're a damn sight biggah than I was with you or any of your brothahs."

"We're thure, it'th...it'th just one..." Daph muttered as her mother stretched her hands over her belly, catching glimpses of Georgia and her friends giggling. "Cut it out, thith ith *embarrassing*..."

"*Embarrasin*'?" Donna repeated, cocking her head and raising her eyebrow. "You invited me heah, sweetie, so *forgive me* if I want some time to look at you befoah...befoah you..." Donna held her hard expression, but her lip began to quiver despite herself and her eyes welled up with tears. Dropping the gift bag on the coffee table, she threw her arms around Daph, leaning over her protruding stomach, and squeezed far harder than she seemed capable of.

"*My little girl is havin' a baby*," Donna wailed, her gray tail flapping wildly behind her and nearly batting other party guests in the face. Daph glanced to

Georgia, terrified, her hands held out to the side helplessly. Georgia only smiled warmly and shook her head. Glancing around, she awkwardly patted her mother on the back, who responded with another hard squeeze. Only after a few minutes did she let go, wiping her eyes dry with her palm.

“I’m sorry,” Donna said, smiling proudly.

“It’th okay.”

“I’m a very emotional woman, you know that.”

“Yeah, I know. It’th fine.”

“I just nevah thought...” Donna sniffed, another wave of emotion cresting the surface. “I nevah thought I’d see the day you’d be...” She shook her head and finished her sentence with a gentle, three-finger touch to Daph’s belly.

“Yknow...mom...” Daph said, taking her mother’s hand and looking her in the eye. “Thith isn’t my baby, remember? I’m not gonna keep her. It’th Georgia’th.” She nodded toward the blonde squirrel on the couch. “Her and Darwin’th baby.”

“I know...I know...” Donna said, nodding. “I gotta admit, I didn’t really undahstand it at first. Havin’ somebody else’s baby... But...when I was able to sit down and think about it...talk to Pastah Mulligan about it all...” She leaned forward and kissed Daph between the eyes, instinctively running her fingers through her hair. “It’s a wondahful thing you’re doin’, nutmeg. I’m proud of you.”

“Shit...” Daph said, bashfully glancing away. “It’th not that big a deal.”

“I love ya, Daphy, and I want you ta live the life you wanna live,” Donna continued. “But ya know...every mothah wants ta see some grandchildren. But if this is the closest I’m gonna get, then I can live with that.” She took a deep breath and sighed before composing herself. She patted Daph on the stomach one last time before finishing with, “There. That’s my speech for ya.” She cleared her throat and stepped back to address the room. “Now can *one* of you kids pull up a chair for an old broad like me?”

Darwin found an extra, unoccupied seat in the bedroom and quickly scurried into the living room with it, setting it beside Daph’s chair. The two of them sat in it

simultaneously, Donna helping her pregnant daughter sink gingerly into the cushion.

“We can make room here,” Georgia said, sliding to the side of the couch to free up a seat before Donna waved away the suggestion.

“If it’s all the same ta you, sweetie,” she said, leaning over to place a hand atop Daph’s belly, “I’ll be fine just right heah.”

Daph sighed, rolling her eyes but ultimately conceding defeat to her mother’s fawning. She jumped in her seat with a hiccup as Lilly kicked hard, her entire belly bouncing slightly with the impact. Donna gasped, pulling her hand away to stare wide-eyed at Daph.

“Oh my *gawd*, was that the *baby*?” Donna squealed, leaning over to put an ear to Daph’s stomach. “It’s a little girl, ya say?”

“Don’t athk me about it,” Daph grumbled, gesturing to Georgia and Darwin. “Talk to *them*. ”

“And why *can’t* I talk to you about it?” Donna asked, defensively.

“Cauthe it ain’t my baby! Talk to them about it!”

“Ugh... *fine*...” Donna flipped her hair over her shoulder and slowly turned to face Georgia. “So it’s gonna be a little girl, then?”

“It is,” Georgia said, happily squirming in her seat. “We’ve decided to name her ‘Lilly.’”

“Oh gawd, that is just *precious*,” Donna sighed, putting a hand to her chest. “I love her already.”

“She’s due February 24th, or sometime that week,” Georgia continued. “Not much longer now.”

“I figured we’d better have the shower pretty soon,” Daph added, chuckling. “Otherwithe it’d jutht turn into a birthday party. I dunno how much longer I can hold her in.”

“A word of advice, sweeties,” Donna said knowingly, pointing between both Daph and Georgia. “That baby is gonna come outta there when she’s good and ready, not when *you* want her to. I sweah to gawd, Daphodille and every one of her brothahs was at *least* a week ovahdue, every one of ‘em.”

Donna nodded to herself and patted Daph’s belly. “If you’re anything like me, expect that little girl to be a *little* too comfortable.” She continued to rub Daph’s tight stomach before glancing down pinching the fabric on her maternity blouse. Donna slid it between her fingers and glanced up to Georgia. “This is nice...how’d you manage to get my daughtah into *this*?”

Before either Daph or Georgia could answer, they were interrupted by another knock on the door, this time soft and polite. However, instead of Darwin quickly approaching the door, he instead and turned to nod to Daph, then glance to Georgia. Daph looked stared her down with a serious look in her eye and gestured toward the door. Confused, she stood and walked around her chatting party guests, padding softly over the coffee table. As she passed Daph’s chair, the red squirrel held out an arm to stop her.

“...Look,” Daph muttered, after pulling Georgia down to her level to speak quietly. “I...wathn’t actually sure if he wath gonna come. If you don’t wanna thee him, thay it wath a delivery guy or thomethin’ with the wrong address. We won’t blame you.”

She squeezed Georgia’s hand compassionately, nodded, then let her go without a word, turning back to her mother to finish the conversation. Darwin, however, watched his wife intently as she approached the door, his tail flicking with quiet agitation.

Georgia turned the knob quietly and opened the front door. On the doorstep stood an older, black-furred squirrel with specks of white dotted throughout. He clutched a worn baseball cap in his hands, wringing it anxiously. While his clothes seemed new, he wore them beneath a tattered, faded jacket that he seemed to be hiding inside of like a shell. He stood slumped over, as if he couldn’t support his full weight on just his legs, his tail drooping heavily and nearly parallel with the floor. His face seemed far older than his age, with eyes large and wet as he stared at Georgia like he was looking into the sun.

“...Georgia...” he breathed in almost religious reverence.

“...Dad,” she responded, her voice low and dry.

“I...I wasn’t...” he swallowed, gripping the hat harder in his palms. “...I wasn’t sure that this...that this was the right place.” He tried to smile, the corners of his mouth seeming to crack like stone. “It was...it’s so *nice*...”

“Well,” Georgia said, her arm still holding the door open and barring entrance. “You found it.” Her voice was quiet, yet solid. Her father swallowed again, smoothing down his dark hair with a hand.

He paused, expecting Georgia to speak. She didn’t. She was waiting.

“...I...Last week...he called...I mean, Darwin. Your husband, I mean.” He took a shaky breath. “He told me that...you were...going to have a baby, that...I mean, your surrogate was...”

“I’m surprised you knew who he was,” Georgia said, coldly. “After all, you weren’t *at* the wedding.”

“...I know...”

“...If you’re going to ask for anything, you can just-”

“No, no, I’m not...” he shook his head furiously. “I swear, I’m not. I...I don’t want anything.”

“We both know that’s not true,” Georgia said, cynically. Her father down looked at his paws, twisting the hat in his hands. He opened his mouth to speak, then silently closed it. He repeated the motion a few times, like a dying fish.

“I...I’ve been...going to meetings,” he said, quietly. “G-Group meetings about...well, how I was hurting myself...and other people. I haven’t had a drink in...in four months and s-seven days. I’ve been seeing a doctor, once a week, to help me sort of...c-count the days back and find out where...where everything went wrong. Where I stopped...being able to take care of myself.” He looked up at Georgia.

Her face was a solid, unreadable mask, but she was still listening.

“You...Georgia...you were...” he gulped, then breathed the words like he could

only get them out in a single breath. “You were the only good thing I ever did. And I was barely ever there for it. I ...thinking about you used to be the only thing that made me happy, but now it just hurts because now I know what I did in the past and the only thing I want now is to make things good again.” He panted, as if exhausted, then added. “Good...like it was before Charlotte died...before your mom...” He slumped over, his eyes glued to the floor.

Georgia blinked down at her father, her arm still gripping the door frame. Behind her, she heard the gentle, padding footsteps she recognized so well from countless days and nights by their side. He rested his hand on her shoulder, gently squeezing it to let her know he was there. Georgia imagined she could feel her husband’s soothing touch somewhere much deeper than her skin. It calmed her, steadied her waters, and made her stronger than she could have been. With his help, she was strong enough to let go of the door and push it aside, strong enough to step forward and lift her father to his paws, and strong enough to look him in the eye and smile.

“I think it’s too late for you to try and be a good father,” Georgia said, “...but maybe you can still be a good grandfather.”

His eyes widened, a wave of shock passing through him. A weak smile began to blossom on his face as he took Georgia’s arm in his hand and eagerly nodded.

“I...I’ll...I’ll try,” he said, swallowing.

Taking Darwin’s hand in her own, Georgia stepped aside, letting her father cross through the doorway. He gazed in awe at the decorations and his eyes began to quietly tear up at the sight of the banner hanging along the ceiling. A few of the party guests, the friends unfamiliar with Georgia’s family, glanced to her with raised eyebrows at the out-of-place guest. Georgia took a deep breath and smiled, Darwin’s arm wrapped around her shoulder.

Georgia’s father shuffled forward, glancing around the room like he was in a grand palace, before his eyes fell on the yellow chair across from the couch and he came face-to-face with Daph.

“D-Daphodille?” he said, his eyes widening at the sight of her pregnant belly. She grinned back at him and gave a little wave.

“Hey Mr. Macintire,” Daph said. “Glad you could make it.”

“You’re the surrogate?” he said, pointing in shock. Daph patted a drum beat against her belly.

“Nine monthth in and goin thtrong, dude,” she said, winking. Donna reached over and stopped her daughter’s hands.

“Don’t be rough,” she scolded before turning around and gasping at the man standing above her. “Roland Macintire? Oh my *gawd*, I haven’t seen ya in *yeahs*! How’ve you *been*?”

“Oh...uh...well,” Roland wrung his hat in his hands and shrugged. “Ups and downs. You know how it is.”

“Sure, sure,” Donna nodded. She stood up out of her chair and shook his hand. “Can I get ya somethin’ ta drink?”

“Um...sure,” he stammered. “But...just...some water. Or a soda. I don’t really...anymore...”

Donna glanced him up and down, well aware of his reputation, then grinned and slapped him happily on the shoulder.

“Glad ta heah it, Roland,” she said, winking as she turned and sauntered off into the kitchen.

Roland found a chair in the corner of the room and sat next to the couch, seeming uncomfortably out of place yet with a happy twinkle in his eye. Georgia sat on an empty space on the couch closer to Daph and sighed.

“You okay, dude?” Daph asked, leaning as far over her belly as she could.

“Yeah, yeah,” Georgia nodded. “Just...it got heavy for a few minutes.”

“Yeah?” Daph nodded, then smirked. “I know how to change that.”

“What?” Georgia asked. She blinked dimly at Daph before her eyes widened in realization. “*Presents?*” She sat up and found Darwin across the room talking to a few of his college friends. She motioned wildly for his attention. “*Presents? Is it time for presents?*”

Darwin rolled his eyes, smiled, then nodded wordlessly. Georgia gasped and hopped up and down on the couch like a little kid.

“Yo!” Daph shouted, cupping her hand around her mouth. She never missed an opportunity to yell when she had the chance. “We’re doin’ *presentth!* Gather ‘round, fuckerth!”

Within a few minutes, the eager crowd of party guests had gathered around the couch, most of them carrying pink-wrapped boxes and gift bags, each taking their seat around Georgia and Darwin.

Over the next half hour, they happily tore open box after box of baby items, from diapers and toys to packs of baby bottles and pacifiers. Those that were already parents gifted bags full of hand-me-down clothes and promises of parenting advice when they needed it.

Donna’s bag included a collection of baby toys, clothes, and other trinkets from Daph’s infancy. The only thing out of place was a lone block of wood, which Georgia pulled out of the bag with a confused expression.

“Trust me,” Donna said, leaning over and rubbing a circle over her daughter’s belly. “With a squirrel baby, they’re gonna need somethin’ *tough* ta chew on.”

As more gifts were opened, more guests had to say their goodbyes, congratulating the two expecting parents and wishing Daph the best of luck with the impending birth. Toward the end of the stack, Daph presented them with a gift of her own.

“You didn’t need to get us anything,” Georgia said, the huge box on her lap nearly eclipsing her face from view. “You’re already giving us *the baby.*”

“Well, yknow,” Daph waved her hand dismissively, “I’d woulda felt left out otherwithe.”

Georgia tore open the wrapping paper, revealing enough of the box for her to gasp in shock and flip it over to hide it. Those that saw gave a simultaneous ‘*Ooooooohhh,*’ and burst into fits of giggles.

Georgia chuckled and shook her head at Daph, blushing furiously beneath her blonde fur. Daph, totally unapologetic, smirked, then winked and flashed finger-

guns at the couple.

“That’th a little thomethin for *after* the baby goeth to thleep...” Daph said, slyly.

After finishing up the gifts, Darwin emerged from the kitchen with a huge cake in the shape of a tree, which the remaining guests quickly devoured most of in a matter of minutes. As the sun began to set, more and more guests left with tearful goodbyes and congratulations. By ten o’clock, those that were left piled comfortably around the couch in sleepy conversation.

“I always knew you two would be the best parents,” said Veronica, a white husky from Georgia’s college graduating class. “You just...I don’t know, you just always *clicked* so well. You’re like...the kind of couple I could see being married for, like, the rest of your lives.” She sighed, kicking her paws up on the coffee table. “When I get married, I’m gonna be like ‘I want a marriage like Georgia and Darwin have. They’re perfect for each other.’ That’s what I want.” She was nearly finished with her third cocktail, but the alcohol didn’t make a difference. That was how she always talked.

“I’m just so excited to see the baby,” said Stephanie, a petite cow in a yellow sun dress that had been Georgia’s roommate once upon a time. “Squirrel babies are just so *cute*. I love the way they have those *giant* tails that they can just wrap up in like a *blanket*.”

“It’s all in tha fur, sweetie,” Donna added. “All my kids were full-breed squirrels and lemme tell ya, they *grow into* bein’ cute. They don’t start out that way.”

“Great thtory, mom,” Daph said, rolling her eyes. “Just tell ‘em all how *freaky* Lilly’th gonna look once she’th born.”

“I’m bein’ *honest*, nutmeg,” Donna said, shaking her head. “I’m tellin ya all the things I *wish* I’d been told when I had you and your brothahs.” She tapped Daph on the shoulder and leaned over into her ear. “By the way, nutmeg, if you get a chance, try to use the toilet *before* you go into labah.”

“...Why would I need...” Daph quickly gasped and stared at her mother in horror. Donna shrugged.

“Childbirth’s a miracle,” she said, “...but it ain’t a *pretty* one.”

“Yknow, I just thought of something,” said Christie, the orange feline from Daph and Georgia’s high school class. “Have you picked out godparents yet?”

“...Did we need to?” Georgia asked, glancing at Darwin and shrugging.

“I guess not, but it’s something special. Like having a ‘best man’ and a ‘bridesmaid,’ but for your baby. Sort of.” Christie shrugged. “I’m my niece’s godmother, technically.”

“Well...I can’t think of who I’d...Oh. Wait.” Georgia turned and glanced to Daph, who was continuing to bicker quietly with her mother. “Hey. Daph.”

“Yeah?”

“Wanna be Lilly’s godmother?”

“Thure,” Daph shrugged. She sat up and asked, “Wait, doeth that mean she can call me ‘Aunt Daph?’”

“I think so.”

“Oh, then *fuck* yeah!” Daph nodded, patting her belly. “You hear that, thquirt? I get to be your *Aunt Daph* now!”

“Now hold on a minute,” Donna said, holding out her hand, “...would this make me a *grand-godmothah*?”

“Probably,” Georgia shrugged.

“Can I play with the baby whenever I feel like it?” Donna said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“Done,” Donna said, sitting back and snapping her fingers. Daph glanced at her mom incredulously.

“Who thaid it wath *your* decision?”

As Daph and Donna continued another round of bickering, Roland quietly crept behind the couch and leaned over toward Georgia’s ear.

“Could you...come with me to the door? I have something for you.”

Georgia glanced at Darwin, then stood and followed her father quietly to the front door. Once they were out of earshot, he reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a brown paper bag, tied together with twine.

“I wanted to wait until you were alone to give you this,” he said. “But I have a night shift starting soon and...I have to go. But...well...I...” Roland cleared his throat and handed the parcel over to Georgia. She eyed him suspiciously, then quietly undid the string and opened the bag. Inside was a small bundle of Polaroids, a few pairs of earrings, blue ring box, and a pendant on a thin silver chain.

Out of all of these, Georgia recognized the necklace most clearly, having seen it constantly around her mother’s neck when she was younger.

“These were things of Charlotte's that I...kept, over the years. Mostly things I didn’t...um...sell when I was out of...when I was low.” He swallowed and glanced down at his paws again. “I don’t know if...they’re such a good gift, but I didn’t feel right having them. I think...I think they’re better off with you.”

Georgia swallowed a lump in her throat. It seemed like she’d opened a bag full of ghosts, trapped behind a bow of twine for decades. She felt her mother, long dead, on every mote of dust, on every color faded with age, on every glint in the light from her jewelry. Georgia had been too young to remember her mother as a memory, but she existed as an emotion. A collection of feelings she’d discover waking up from a dream or thinking she heard a strangely familiar voice in a crowd.

“I...I have to go,” Roland said, quietly. He finally stopped wringing the hat in his hands and actually placed it on his head, between his ears. He looked pleadingly into Georgia’s eyes with a weak smile. “...Did I do okay?”

Georgia, a well of emotion surging up inside of her, looked up at her father and, without another thought, leaned into him and kissed him on the cheek. He wrapped his arms around her in the way she imagined he did once upon a time. She pulled away, sniffing tears from her eyes, and smiled.

“It’s a start,” she said. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will,” Roland said, for once sounding like he meant it. They gave one another one last hug before he let himself out.

Georgia stood for a moment before the closed door, then padded back to her seat on the couch. She flopped beside Darwin and leaned her head into his shoulder, wiping the wetness from her eyes.

“Georgia?” Stephanie asked, leaning over with a concerned expression. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah...yeah, I’m good,” Georgia said. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes clear before sighing. “What’d I miss?”

“We were, like, talking about how *weird* it is to think that, like, *Daph* is like *pregnant* right now,” Veronica said, lolling over the back of the couch as she spoke.

“She’s about the last girl I’d ever expect to see knocked up,” Christie said, shaking her head.

“Nine monthth ago, I’d have agreed with ya,” Daph nodded. “But, yknow, shit changeth.”

“Yknow, my sister actually thought about using a surrogate when they were having problems conceiving,” Christie said. “What agency did you use?”

Georgia blinked dimly at the orange cat, then glanced at her husband, who looked equally dumbfounded at the question.

“*Hearbeats*,” Daph said, without missing a beat. “It’th up on 51st and 8th. Real professional and clean. We were in and out in like an afternoon.”

“Did they let you carry if you hadn’t been pregnant before?”

“Well, they didn’t *like it*, but they had, like, liability waivers you could thign and they’d help you out with a private thurrogacy. We didn’t think there wath gonna be any difficulty, tho we jutht went for it.” Daph shrugged, nonchalantly. She caught Georgia’s stunned gaze from across the room and shot her a quick, confident wink.

“So, like, Daph...Like, I *have* to know...” Veronica said, sitting up and setting her empty glass on the table. “...What’s it *like*? Being, like... *pregnant* and all that?”

“I can’t wait until I can have a baby,” Stephanie sighed. “You’re lucky to get to try it out before having one of your own.”

“Yeah, what’s it been like?” Christie said, crossing her legs. “I’m curious.”

Daph blinked dimly, her hand slowly rubbing her belly. She glanced down at herself, lost in thought.

“...It’th been...”

Daph fell quiet, still watching her own body. The group glanced awkwardly at one another.

“...Daph, sweetie?” Donna said, nudging her. Daph snapped back into herself and looked around.

“Huh...Huh? Oh! Yeah! Right,” Daph sighed, and looked down at herself. “It’th been...fuck man, I can’t even dethcribe it. It’th like, you’re kinda thore a lot and you...like your body doeth thingth that you don’t expect it to do and it’th like...you feel like you’re a *part* of thomething, yknow? Like, you’ve got thith *perthon* inthide of you and they count on you. And...and...fuck, dude.” Daph sighed, giving up on her attempts to explain it.

“Was it hard?” Christie asked.

“Yeah, thometimeth,” Daph said. “But yknow what helped? Whenever thingth would get *really* hard, like real shitty, I’d jutht thtop and think to mythelf...” She glanced up at Georgia and Darwin, “...‘Do it for Them.’ And that made it a lot eathier. Jutht thinking about how it wathn’t about me, yknow?”

Daph groaned and threw back her head.

“Man, shit, I don’t know! I don’t know how to dethcribe all thith feeling shit!”

“That’s so sweet though...” Stephanie said, smiling warmly.

“Yeah, I guess,” Daph shrugged. “Whatever. Yknow what *elthe* is thweet

though?” She glanced at Georgia and licked her lips. “Fuckin’ *cake*. Georgia, come help me get another piece.”

Donna helped Daph push herself to her feet, who then waved away her mother’s attempt to help her walk. She waddled heavily beside Georgia into the small kitchen, cradling her hands under her belly.

After Georgia helped pull the leftover cake out of the refrigerator, Daph glanced around and made sure she wasn’t in earshot of the others before she began to whisper.

“Hey,” she said. “Tho...like...I kinda realized thomethin’ and it’th kinda...kinda *weird*, but I...I kinda wanted to get it off my chest, yknow?”

“Um...okay...” Georgia said, continuing to cut a slice of cake.

“The thing ith...” Daph said, pausing to stand up and rest her hand atop her round stomach. “...I think I fuckin’ *love* thith...”

“What, the party?”

“No, dude,” Daph hissed, then rubbed her hands down her gravid middle. “*Thith*. I...I think I love ... bein’ *pregnant*.”

Georgia stopped cutting the cake, glancing blankly to her friend. She slowly dragged her gaze down to her pendulous belly, then scrolled back up to her face.

“What.” Georgia said, flatly.

“No, I...I think I *mean it*,” Daph continued. She wrapped her hands around her stomach and squeezed in with a quiet, contented sigh. “I jutht...like, it thucked at firht when it wath just throwin’ up all the time but ever thince I really thtarded to get big...I just...I feel *good*. Like *really good*, *all* the time! I feel the thame kinda way I do when I work out, but like *every day*.” Daph ran her fingers through her head and exhaled, taking a deep breath before continuing. “I jutht feel really healthy, food tasteth better, my body feelth stronger, and god damn, *sex* is outta thith fuckin’ world, dude.”

“Really?” Georgia responded, more interested than anything else. She put her hand against Daph’s belly, feeling her tight body beneath the smooth fabric of

the blouse. “Even now?”

“Oh my god, *ethpecially* now!” Daph exclaimed before dropping her voice down to a whisper. “I feel, like, thlow and big and thore a lot, yeah, but I altho feel...I don’t know... *powerful*.” She clenched her fists in the air, her arm muscles still as toned as ever beneath the baby weight. “I feel Lilly inthide me and how thtrong she ith and think ‘fuck, I did that, that wath me!’

“Yknow, when I got pregnant, the only thing I wath really afraid of was the way it might change me. And not like thith,” she added, gesturing to her bump. “I mean like...my brain, my personality. I look up a lotta baby thtuff, yknow. Thtuff for like expecting moms and shit. But all of it just...I don't know. It doethn't feel right. It'th so...thoft. So delicate and weak. I wath so afraid that being pregnant was gonna take away my thtrength, to make me less than I was before.”

She grinned.

“But yknow what happened?” Daph said, leaning forward a little. “Nothin. Nothin happened. I thought about it more, and I got mad becauthe, fuck, who'th gonna tell me that bein' pregnant maketh me weak? In fact, I feel thtronger!” Daph punched her hand into her fist, the impact making her belly shake just slightly below her. “Who the fuck thayth I gotta be a fuckin' wimp if I'm gonna have a baby? I feel thtronger and more powerful than I ever have before *becauthe* I’m gonna have a goddamn baby.”

She fell silent, panting as she caught her breath.

“...Wow,” Georgia said. “You’ve...thought about this a lot.”

“That’t h how I knew about *Heartbeats*,” Daph said, lowering her voice to a mumble. “I...I think I wanna do it *again*.”

“What, be a surrogate?”

“*Yeah!* The doc, your friend, thaid I had, like, no complicationth at all, I’ve got a good body for it, and I jutht...I jutht fuckin’ *love* the feeling of it. I feel like I’m the best version of mythelf, yknow? Ath good ath I feel after I run or I exercise.” She swished her tail enthusiastically, grinning brightly. “I think...I think I’m gonna have Lilly, get back into shape and...and do it *again!*”

“And to think,” Georgia snorted, “after twenty years, I thought I had you totally figured out, Daph.”

“I can’t say I ain’t surprised, myself,” Daph nodded, feeling her belly and smirking. “Though...don’t tell anybody else, okay? They might think it’s a kinda weird sex-thing, yknow?”

“Is it not?” Georgia asked with a smirk. Daph rubbed the back of her neck and glanced aside.

“...No...I mean...not *all* of it...”

“How about you finish up *this* pregnancy before you think about any others,” Georgia said, shuffling past Daph and rubbing her stomach once more.

“No problem,” Daph said, drumming against her round belly. “She’s about done in there, anyway.”

Georgia followed closely behind Daph, who waddled back into the living room, her arms holding her baby belly and her face beaming. As the conversation began to wind down, Veronica, Stephanie, and Christie all left one after another, leaving Donna as the only guest left.

“Try to use that cream I toldja about, nutmeg,” Donna continued to chatter as her daughter sleepily dragged her to the front door.

“There, mom.”

“Thankfully, ya inherited ya fathah’s thick fur, so ya won’t have the stretch mark trouble I did after I had ya brothahs.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t forget to call me after the birth, I’ll come right away, and make a reservation at the hospital as soon as ya can.”

“We already did that, mom.”

“And don’t forget, you can argue and scream all ya want ‘til the doctahs put you in a private suite. I won’t have you givin’ birth to my grand-dauh- I’m sorry, my

‘grand-god-daughtah,’ in the back of a god damn taxi cab.”

“Goodnight, mom,” Daph said, dropping her mother next to the door and blinking at her with sleepy eyes.

“Oh, and remind me to let Georgia know of a *fantastic* orthodontist I know who can help if the baby comes out with...” Donna waved her hand vaguely and gestured to Daph’s overbite, “...a little ‘extra’ to her smile.”

“I will, mom.”

“He specializes in squirrels, ya know. They didn’t even *have* those kinda procedures when *you* were born, nutmeg.”

“Goodnight, mom.”

“And *don’t forget* now...” Donna said, slyly. “Think about havin a few kids of your own, now that ya got ta try it out.”

“Okay, mom.”

“I’m serious! I’m sure there’s a nice young man out there who’d...” she paused at the grimace on Daph’s face before backtracking, “...or a nice young *lady* who would *love* to start a family with you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Daph blinked. “Goodnight, mom.”

“Oh, and one more thing...”

As Daph unsuccessfully tried to usher her mother out the door at a timely pace, and Darwin busied himself with washing dishes in the kitchen, Georgia sat quietly in the bedroom. In the light of the cracked bathroom door, she looked over her mother’s pendant in her hand, trailing the thin chain between her fingers. It was a tear-drop shaped stone set into silver, a teal color with veins of navy streaked across its surface. The metal was tarnished in places, but the stone seemed ageless.

As she turned the pendant in her hand, Georgia noticed a small tab on one side of the necklace.

She blinked at it, running her finger against it. After all those years, what she'd remembered as a pendant or a simple charm was actually a locket. Gingerly, as if she was afraid she'd break it, she thumbed open the latch, opening it.

There was no picture behind the stone. Instead, pinned to the back of the locket, was a tiny clipping of familiar, blonde fur.

Chapter 15

Gratitude

Barely an hour or so after the baby shower had officially ended, Georgia padded out into the living room, toweling off her damp fur after her shower. Darwin had been cleaning up in the kitchen, bagging trash, washing dishes, and storing away leftovers. Fortunately, it had been an easy task for her to pull him away from chores and to properly ‘thank him’ for putting the party together. Within twenty minutes, Darwin’s balls were thoroughly drained and he was fast asleep.

Sitting nearly immobile on the couch was Daph, dressed down to her more familiar sweatpants and tank top as she was getting ready for bed. Her tail drooped over the back of the couch as she sat on the middle cushion, staring straight ahead. Georgia blinked, her ears twitching as she heard a sound not unlike an old radiator or a broken fan. She leaned over the couch only to find Daph fast asleep, her head cocked slightly to the side, as she gently snored through her overbite. Her hands rested atop her belly and she was so bottom-heavy that she hadn’t fallen over after passing out.

Georgia snickered in the quiet, gently lowering herself to the floor to lean against the side of the couch. She watched Daph sleeping, her eyes inevitably traveling down the slope of her pregnant bump.

She cocked her head, noticing small shifts against Daph’s gray tank top. Even though, Daph was asleep, Lilly wasn’t. Georgia reached out, trying not to wake Daph, and rested her hand against her stomach, feeling her soon-to-be daughter impatiently struggling in her friend’s cramped womb. It was strange to have what felt like a private moment with Lilly before she was even born, but she couldn’t wait to hold the little squirrel in her arms.

As Georgia’s hand shifted, Lilly kicked straight up especially hard, seemingly directly into Daph’s diaphragm. She made a strange sort of hiccup-cough and immediately snapped her eyes open, blearily staring around the apartment like she didn’t know where she was. She balled up her fists and rubbed her eyes.

“Aw fuck,” Daph mumbled, “did I fall asleep?”

“Looks like it,” Georgia said, leaning her head against the couch. “You can go back to sleep, if you want.”

“Nah, not yet,” she said, sniffing and rubbing her face with the back of her arm. “I wanted to read more. I’m almost at the end of the pregnancy bookth.”

“And I could probably guess what *those* chapters are about,” Georgia nodded, rubbing Daph’s belly soothingly.

“Mm-hmm,” Daph nodded, sighing comfortably as Georgia began to knead her finger’s against her tight, sore belly. “I wanna know what I’m gettin’ into.”

“Are you nervous?”

“I dunno...kinda,” Daph shrugged. “Pain don’t thcare me all that much but...I don’t wanna fuck it up.”

“People have been giving birth since the dawn of time,” Georgia said, reassuringly. “If they can do it, so can you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Daph nodded, grinning softly. She shifted in her seat to look around her gravid stomach and see Georgia. “Yknow, I...I think I might be...kinda...um...lookin’ forward to it, a little.”

“*Really?*” Georgia said, smirking. “Is that so?”

“I mean...well...it’th gonna be cool to be not tho huge anymore,” Daph said, bashfully. “And I’ll get to work out the way I want to and burn off all thith extra weight.”

“Is that all?” Georgia pried, slyly raising an eyebrow. Daph snickered, glancing away. She held her belly in both arms, the baby kicking excitedly behind it.

“Well...yknow,” she said, “then I could...work on gettin’ pregnant *again*...”

Georgia laughed in response, hopping up on the cushion beside her pregnant friend.

“Shut up...” Daph said, frowning indignantly, hair falling over her face.

“It’s just cute,” Georgia said, smiling. She reached out with a finger and thumbed aside Daph’s hair out of her eyes. “You’ve been growing it out. I don’t think I’ve ever seen your hair this long.”

“Maybe thometimeth I wanna feel like a girl, yknow?” Daph said, tucking her hair behind her ear.

“You don’t already?” Georgia said, giggling and patting Daph’s tummy. “You’re the most feminine you’ve ever been, Daph.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Daph said, sniffing and looking away. “I thtill kick ass though.”

“Nobody said you didn’t,” Georgia giggled.

The two of them feel quiet, listening to the warm silence around them. With both their hands over Daph’s belly, the two of them simultaneously felt Lilly kick and squirm around. Georgia glanced at Daph, then trailed her finger down the roundness of her stomach to reach toward Daph’s legs.

“So...” Georgia said in a low, sultry voice. “...You like being full with our baby?”

Daph glanced over to Georgia, a similar look in her eye.

“It’th had it’th momenth,” Daph said. She shifted back in her seat, pulling her stomach to the side to give Georgia better access to between her legs. Georgia, however, continued to tease, simply circling her finger against the exposed fur of Daph’s underbelly.

“Oh really?” Georgia smirked. “So you liked being our little breeder?” She pinched a tuft of fur on the bottom of Daph’s belly and pulled on it. “You liked getting so... *round* and *huge* for us?” Georgia bit her lip and sighed, sliding her hand underneath Daph’s shirt run it through the fur of her warm, round baby bump. “I swear, I got wet every time I saw you waddling around here, so huge and heavy and *filled* with our daughter.”

Daph paused, then raised an eyebrow at Georgia.

“...Really?” she asked, breaking the scene.

“...I mean...not really,” Georgia shrugged. “It’s fun fucking you when you’re so big, though.”

“Jesus fuck, you are kinky. Ith there anything you’re *not* into?”

“No,” Georgia grinned. “I’m into *everything*.”

“Damn, dude. Whatever happened to the thkinny little bookworm from high thchool who didn’t know what a penith looked like until she looked up on Google?”

“Whatever happened to the fit, agile, muscular jock from the track team?” Georgia countered, kneading her fingers into Daph’s belly until she squirmed. “My husband’s cock plumped her up very, *very* nicely with a chubby little baby...”

“*Mmf*,” Daph breathed, biting her lip and pushing her stomach out into Georgia’s palm. “That...that wouldn’t have turned me on a few months ago.”

“Because a few months ago, you didn’t realize how *good* it felt...” Georgia breathed into Daph’s ear. “You didn’t pay attention to how good it felt to be so *round* and *heavy* and *full* with another life...Doing what your body was *made* to do...” Georgia finally slid down between Daph’s legs and pressed a finger into her vagina. “Putting that tight little *pussy* of yours to real *use*...”

Daph winced as Georgia began to tease her cunt from outside her pants, pushing her fingers farther. Georgia felt fluid seeping through already. Daph was getting wet within seconds.

“You like this?” Georgia teased. “You’re already dripping...”

“It’th...it’th the pregnancy, dude,” Daph breathed, squirming in her seat. “I got, like, a low-burn heat goin’ on at all timeth.”

“I’m glad...because I haven’t *thanked you* yet for putting this party together for me.”

“...Ok, wait,” Daph said, pulling away slightly and glancing at Georgia. “Look,

I'm pretty goddamn horny, like, all the time, alright?" She placed her hand against her full-term belly for emphasis. "But I'm probably gonna pop the *inthead* I get a cock up in there. As much as I want to..."

Daph stopped talking at a new fit of giggles from Georgia, who shook her head emphatically.

"Darwin's already taken care of," Georgia said, sliding in closer. "And I'll make sure I stay *nice* and *gentle* with you, you big pregnant cutie."

"Thotp callin' me cuuuuooohhh..." Daph began to complain before her words melted on her lips as Georgia effortlessly slipped her hand beneath her waistband and slid her finger's into Daph's wet folds.

"What was that?" Georgia said, sliding her fingers between the thick lips of Daph's pussy. "Don't do what?"

"C-Call me whatever you wh-what," Daph conceded, leaning back. "Jutht don't thtop."

"Why would I stop," Georgia said, lightly pinching Daph's clit to make her gasp, "when you make cute noises like that?"

"You're...you're gonna have to do moht of the work," Daph said, her head laying on the back of the couch and rubbing her hands over her belly. "I don't think I can even reach down there anymore..."

"I was planning on it," Georgia said. She leaned in and pecked Daph on the cheek, then led her kisses all the way down her belly. "Every baby mama should be pampered sometimes...especially when she's too swollen and full to do it *herself*."

Georgia slipped off the couch and onto the ground. Crossing her legs, she pushed the coffee table away and began working at pulling Daph's sweatpants off. It was a fight against Daph's widened birthing-hips to get them off, but she worked dilligently until she tossed them away like the wrapper of a delicate treat. She wasn't wearing panties. A head start. Daph looked so enticing, lying on the couch so helplessly swollen and full, her legs bare and wide apart, a bead of fluid glistening between the lips of her pussy. She looked as ripe and round as a perfect fruit, and just as juicy.

Having learned her lesson with Jason, Daph leaned back on the couch, spreading her legs apart as far as they could go to give Georgia full access to the slit between them. But Georgia wasn't like Jason. Georgia wasn't one to dive in eagerly, lapping up her sex like she was starving for it. Georgia ate pussy like opera; delicately, teasingly, a performance beginning slowly and carefully to make the crescendo that much louder. Georgia liked to play with her prey, spreading Daph's lips apart just to expose her flesh to the air, giving her cunt a taste of pleasure with a small lick before letting go. She crouched on her knees at the altar of Daph's pussy.

"I remember nine months ago," Georgia mused, sliding her fingers carefully between Daph's labial folds while she moaned somewhere above the pregnant belly blocking her view. "I remember Darwin seeding this cute little cunt of yours so full you couldn't *help* but get pregnant..." Georgia leaned in and suckled on Daph's clit for a moment, making her legs shake and her breathing grow sharp. "Open up like you did then...like you're getting bred *all over again*."

"*Ahh!*" Daph shouted as Georgia leaned in to lick the inside of her sensitive walls, her nerves on the verge of exploding. "Fuh... *fuck*."

"*Shhh...shshshsh*," Georgia muttered, reaching up to wrap an arm around Daph's gravid belly. "Not so loud. You'll wake the baby..." She circled her finger again around Daph's navel and poked the drum-tight skin around it. "You don't want to feel all that *kicking* and *squirming* in your belly while I eat you out, do you?"

"God fuckin' *damn*, Georgia," Daph breathed, astounded at how horny she was becoming just by the thoughts Georgia put into her head. She giggled, then dove back into eating Daph out. She rocked gently into Georgia's skilled mouth, her tongue pushing deeper and deeper into her with every second. She felt Georgia's breath against her clit, soft enough to barely feel, but sharp enough to push her farther and farther to the edge.

Daph brought her hand to her breast, squeezing it and playing her thumb around her nipple. Her tank top was already stretched beyond decency by her pregnant stomach, so it didn't take much effort to loosen the top as well. Eventually, as Daph was lost in the pleasure of a skilled tongue against her pussy, she rocked in place just hard enough to cause her left tit to spill out of the top, rocking freely

on her chest as she moved.

Taking advantage of the situation, Daph closed her eyes and held her breast in her hand, kneading it like soft dough while Georgia ate her out from below. Her nipple was hard against her palm, almost throbbing with sensitivity. Every time she pinched and tweaked it, she felt a sharp, electric tingle in her sex, further adding to the overwhelming euphoria coming from Georgia's attention. Her breast felt hot, like it was overheating along with the rest of her body. She loved the way her belly rocked heavily against her body when she moved, and even a few kicks from the baby did little but excite her even more.

Then, suddenly, Daph gasped sharply as the burning sensation in her breast finally yielded to what felt like a 'pop' as pressure was suddenly released. She felt a warm liquid pooling against her palm and she pulled away her hand with a yelp, her first instinct to expect blood.

Georgia pulled away from Daph's pussy, catching her breath, and stretched up to look over the mound of stomach in her way. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of Daph's exposed tit emitting a stream of off-white milk and dribbled over her fur and onto her shirt. Daph, staring at her hand in shock, glanced at Georgia with her mouth wide open.

"*Daphodille...*" Georgia breathed as she wiped her mouth off and began to climb onto the couch. "You've been holding out on me..."

"Jethuth...that'th...a lot," Daph said, still dumbfounded. She felt pressure building up inside her chest again, despite the milk still dribbling onto her belly.

Daph gasped as Georgia reached over and took her tit in her hand, weighing it and measuring it by sight.

"I thought you used to be pretty *average* before, Daph," Georgia cooed. "But I think you've finally got yourself a pair of *knockers* to be proud of." Georgia giggled at her use of the word, then reached down to begin pulling off Daph's tank top. "C'mon, get this off. I wanna see what those milk bags of yours can do."

In little position to resist, Daph tucked her free breast back into her shirt before taking the rest of it off, leaving her clothed in nothing but her fur, her heavy tits sagging with milk she hadn't noticed was there before.

“Holy fuck...” Daph breathed, cupping her breasts in her hands and weighing them. “That’th...I *forgot* thith would happen...”

“The more you know, huh?” Georgia said. She took one of Daph’s tits in her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, putting more and more pressure on it until a tiny jet of milk shot out into her palm. She giggled, the licked the warm liquid from her hand. “You’ve got a lot of pressure built up. I know at least my baby won’t go hungry any time soon.” Georgia shifted to her knees and leaned over Daph’s leaking nipple. “At least, not with a milk-machine like *you* around, Daph.” Georgia opened her mouth and hungrily lapped up the droplets of breast milk that clung to Daph’s fur. Daph stared at her, wide-eyed, before she looked up again and grinned, licking her lips. “But...I think a *taste test* wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

“Are you fucking theriouth?” Daph said.

“Serious enough to do *this*,” Georgia said, winking. She lunged forward and latched onto Daph’s nipple, sucking carefully but firmly against it. Her lips totally enveloped the areola, not leaving a single inch of skin open to the air. She suckled hard, making Daph shiver in what she wasn’t sure was pleasure or not. Then, suddenly, Daph felt the pressure subside, along with a firm tugging sensation as she began to release milk into Georgia’s mouth. She leaned her head back, letting Georgia suck and pull as much milk out as possible, feeling it all slide out in the most bizarrely relaxing sensation she’d ever felt. Georgia’s hands roamed around Daph’s body while she drank, softly prodding and massaging her to keep her relaxed. And the more Daph relaxed, the thicker the milk flowed.

“God damn...” Daph breathed, using her hands to push against her tit and squeeze out more milk. “It...it feelth tho... *good*...”

After a few more tugs, Georgia let go with a satisfied sigh, licking her lips and gazing up at Daph.

“You taste pretty good,” she giggled.

“Leave thome for Lilly, will ya?”

“C’mon, look at these,” Georgia said, grabbing Daph’s tits and shaking them. “They’ll fill back up again in a day or two, I’m sure of it.”

“That...fuck...” Daph sighed, sinking into the couch. “That felt *really* good.”

“Did it?” Georgia said. She stood and walked around Daph, making sure to trail a finger across her belly, as she swapped to the right side of the couch. She hefted Daph’s tit in her hand and licked her nipple, sending another shock of pleasure through her body. “Then we don’t want to leave this girl all heavy and sore, do we?” Before Daph could answer, Georgia latched on again, more ferociously sucking on her nipple.

Daph bit her lip, trying to relax so the milk would flow easily, but too sexually excited to do anything but tense up. Then, right as she felt the first stream dribble out, Georgia wrapped her arm around Daph’s belly and slid her hand all the way back down to her pussy. She gasped, the mingling sensation of her sex being played with and her breast being literally milked almost too much for her mind to process.

She moaned, dropping her head back and breathing hard through the relaxing pleasure of being milked and the stimulating euphoria of being fingered. Daph didn’t dare move from her spot, too afraid that Georgia would stop. Her chest heaved with her panting, her eyes rolling up into her head as she felt her long-edged orgasm creeping to the surface, closer and closer by the instant. She could feel it, just there, just barely out of reach. All she needed was more, something more to pull her all the way into climax. She was running out of time, she was running out of milk. She tweaked her free nipple on her left breast, but found it empty and worthless. Daph held her hands against her belly, a high-pitched series of sounds coming from the back of her throat as she tried desperately to work her orgasm to the surface. It was so close, so dangerously close. She had seconds at best to grab it, to pull on it, to finish the job.

Then, suddenly she felt a flurry a movement in her womb as Daph’s accelerated heartbeat spread to Lilly, who kicked out and flipped in her belly. It was that sensation that pushed her over the edge. With a gasp, Daph finally came like an explosion, her entire body tingling in euphoria, feeling the milk in her breast pushing out just as hard. Her climax hit her like a tsunami, crashing wave after wave of iridescent pleasure through her mind until Daph’s vision went blurry. She was alive, more real and present and full of life than she’d ever felt before. With the orgasm, the stirring of the baby in her womb, and the milk flowing from her breast, she touched something hallucinatory, a sexual nirvana. For a single instant, Daph felt like the entirety of the universe flowed through her.

As Georgia emptied the milk in Daph's breast, she detached and looked up at her friend, panting happily as she wiped her wet fingers off on the couch. Daph slid down from her sexual high and didn't speak until she felt her body beneath her again.

"That..." she breathed, like a prayer, "...wath...the weirdetht fucking orgasm I've ever had."

"For your sake," Georgia said, "I only hope it's the weirdest 'for now.'"

"Me...me too..." Daph blinked slowly. "...I think I'm going to fall asleep now." She closed her eyes and gently fell away from Georgia.

"No, no," Georgia protested, catching Daph and pulling her over. "Sleep on your right side, your right side."

"Mmm..." Daph mumbled, only barely coherent. When she flumped her heavily pregnant body down onto the couch cushions, she fell asleep almost the instant her head hit the throw pillow. Georgia chuckled and tucked Daph into her blankets, better adjusting her head above the pillow. She thumbed hair out of Daph's sleeping face, once again snoring through her teeth, and smiled. Georgia leaned over Daph's belly and put her ear against it, listening for the faint, second-heartbeat from the baby inside.

"See you soon, Lilly," Georgia cooed, patting her friend's gravid swell.

She stood and walked around the couch, finding herself alone in a quiet apartment. She glanced at her hand, still wet with Daph's fluids, and sighed. Georgia then padded toward the bathroom, pulling off her pajamas for yet another shower before heading to bed.

Chapter 16

Labor of Love

Darwin walked groggily into the living room, toothbrush half hanging out of his mouth. While he'd been moments away from falling asleep, he'd noticed the kitchen light on from under the bedroom door and suddenly remembered he'd forgotten to turn the dishwasher on after loading it. He shuffled past Daph, who was bent over something on the couch, and rounded the corner lazily into the kitchen.

He kned the dishwasher door closed all the way, then thumbed the button to start the wash cycle. Instead of going back into the bathroom, he held the toothbrush in his mouth and finished brushing his teeth over the kitchen sink, spitting it out as directly onto the drain as he could aim. Darwin straightened up and stared lazily at the wall behind the sink, his ears twitching. He yawned minty-fresh breath into the air and shuffled back out of the kitchen.

One of his long ears caught the sound of a door shutting. Daph huffed as quickly as her pregnant body could move across the floor with a handful of towels toward the couch. As she neared it, she caught sight of Darwin in the doorway and stood frozen under his gaze.

“Uhh...hey,” he said, curiously. “...Are you okay?”

“Yeah!” Daph said, a little too loud to come off as calm. “Nah, it's...I'm good! It's cool! I jutht thpilled a drink and I didn't want it to thtain or nothin'.” She dropped the towels and grunted as she bent over as far as she could over her belly, reaching down to towel off the spilled liquid from the cushion.

“I can do that,” Darwin said, putting his toothbrush back in his mouth and holding out his hands for a towel as he approached.

“No,” Daph said, forcefully. “Uh...Nah, no, it'th fine. I got it. Go to bed, you're tired. I feel bad about-” Daph stopped, her eyes growing wide as she stared

somewhere past Darwin's hip. She brought a hand to her belly, prodding it with her hand and feeling over its surface. Her eye twitched slightly as she gritted her teeth for a few seconds, then sighed quietly.

"Oh," she said to herself. "Oh.... *Oooohhh.*"

"...Daph?" Darwin asked, taking the toothbrush out of his mouth.

"Heh...hehehehehe..." Daph chuckled, as if Darwin wasn't there. She glanced up and smiled, awkwardly. "Okay, tho what I thought what happened wath that I jutht pissed on your couch and I didn't want you to know that," she said softly. She squatted slightly and dabbed a finger to her inner thigh, bringing it up wet. She stared at it with the same half-smile on her face, then glanced at Darwin, her tail twitching.

"Yeah, okay," Daph said, nodding. "Yeah. My water jutht broke, dude."

Darwin paused, like the moment after being pricked with a needle before it began to bleed. He froze in place, toothbrush gripped in his hand like he was trying to snap it in half, before the wave of panic overcame him.

"What," he said, flatly. His tail stood straight on end as his heart began to pound against his chest. "*What?!*" he shouted, staggering in place. He stammered a few times, grabbing the hair on the top of his head, before finally saying, "Are-are-are you s-sure?"

Before Daph could answer, her eyes went wide again and she gripped her belly through her tanktop, closing her eyes and wincing.

"*Yep,*" she groaned, loudly. "*Pretty...pretty mother fuckin' sure, dude.*"

In the commotion, Georgia had woken from her half-sleep and groggily walked outside in her pajamas.

"What's going on?" she grumbled, more frustrated than alarmed.

"Lilly'th makin' her ethcape," Daph said, holding up her wet hand. Georgia, still half-asleep, shook her head and shrugged.

"I don't know what that's supposed to-"

“*Her water broke!*” Darwin shouted, his blood running cold and hot at the same time.

“What. *What. What?*” Georgia exclaimed, instantly waking up. She shook her head and glanced between Daph and her husband. “Now? *Right now?* ”

“Right fuckin’ now, dude!” Daph shouted, shuffling carefully around the couch with her legs spread out to keep the amniotic fluid from soaking even more into her sweatpants.

“You aren’t *due* for another *week and a half!*” Darwin screamed, gripping his ears in his fists.

“*Well tell that to your fuckin’ daughter, okay?*” Daph shouted back. She leaned against the far wall of the apartment and took deep, controlled breaths while soothingly rubbing her hands over her stomach.

“But your *mom!*” Darwin continued to argue. “She-She-She-She said that you probably wouldn’t...you wouldn’t...”

“Okay, look,” Daph said calmly, holding out her hand. “You ain’t learned yet that you gotta listen to maybe half the shit my mom actually sayth.”

“*Not the time,*” Georgia shouted, her voice cutting through the tension like broken glass. She pointed to Darwin. “Get dressed. We need to go *now.*” She pointed at Daph with the same authority. “Put on some shoes and just stay calm. Don’t push yet. Keep breathing.”

“On it,” Daph said, giving a thumbs-up and grimacing through another contraction.

Georgia followed Darwin into the bedroom, throwing her own pair of winter shoes on and a jacket over her pajamas. Darwin panicked, pacing in place in the middle of the room. Before she even bent down to tie her boots, she reached forward and grabbed a fistful of Darwin’s tail, yanking it back to get his attention. As tall as he was, Georgia pulled him down to eye-level and held him there.

“Stay. Calm.” Georgia said, her ER instincts kicking in after years of dormancy. “Everything will be fine if we stay calm.” She held him for long moment, staring

into his eyes. Her vision softened and she smiled warmly. Letting go of Darwin's collar and tail, she caressed his cheek with the back of her hand. "...We're going to get our baby."

Darwin blinked, the moment of calm overtaking him. He smiled, despite his fear.

"Okay," he nodded. "Okay. Okay. I'm ready."

The two of them ran in a flurry around the bedroom, grabbing anything and everything they thought they'd need for the trip to the hospital. More than once they ran headlong into one another before ignoring it and continuing on.

"Thith ain't getting eathier with *time*, goddamn it!" Daph shouted from the living room.

"We're coming! We're ready!" Georgia shouted, exiting the bedroom with Darwin not far behind. Daph stood next to the doorway with a new pair of pants on, her usual ratty tank top, a New York Yankees baseball cap, and a down jacket. One hand clutched her belly for solidarity while the other held a grocery bag.

"What is that?" Georgia pointed to the bag.

"It'th my shit," Daph said, holding it up.

"Why didn't you- Nevermind," Georgia said, shaking her head violently. Stepping past Daph, she opened the door and held it open. "Go ahead," she said, gesturing to her pregnant friend. "I'll be right behind you."

The three of them piled out in the hallway, with Daph slowly leading the way as she waddled uncomfortably down toward the elevators. Darwin and Georgia followed closely behind, both at the ready to catch her if she tripped.

"Fuck," Daph said, stopping. "How the fuck are we gonna *get* to the fuckin' hothpital?"

"Subway," Georgia said, before Darwin could answer. She nudged Daph forward and added,

"Keep walking."

“*Thubway?*” Daph shouted, glancing over her shoulder as she walked. “Are you fuckin’ *kidding me?*”

“It’s 1:45 on a Sunday night,” Georgia said. “We won’t be finding any cabs.”

“Fuck that, *call one*. I ain’t ridin’ on the goddamn train while I’m in fuckin’ labor, dude.”

“Take too long,” Georgia snapped. “Subway is the fastest way.”

“The closest thtop is *three blockth* from the hothpital! I’m gonna *walk* the baby out before I fuckin’ get there! A cab would take us to the front fuckin’ door!”

“What is *wrong* with you two?” Darwin interjected. “*Call an ambulance.*”

Georgia and Daph glanced at Darwin simultaneously.

“Do you have any idea how much a ride in an ambulance costs?” Georgia asked, incredulously.

“*Thomebody* grew up a rich kid...” Daph snickered before another contraction hit her. “Ow...”

Down the hall, down the elevator, and out the front door, the three of them found themselves standing on the nighttime sidewalk, staring down an empty street.

“Subway entrance is this way,” Georgia said, starting to walk.

“Yeah, okay, fuckin’ sure,” Daph argued. “Maybe if we run into those break dancing kidth, one of em can *kick Lilly* outta me!”

“This is our *best option!*” Georgia shouted.

“I don’t care, you ain’t gonna fit my fat, pregnant ass onto the subway if-”

“Taxi! Taxi taxi taxi taxi taxi taxi!” Darwin shouted, pointing up the street. A yellow cab with its light conveniently on rounded the far away corner at a leisurely pace. Daph spun around and pointed to Georgia.

“You! Go thtop it!”

“What!?”

“The cabth always thtop for small women! Do it!”

Georgia rolled her eyes and walked a few feet into the street, holding out her hand and waving it frantically. After a few seconds of baited breath, the three of them sighed when the taxi turned on its blinker and rolled to a stop in front of them.

The driver was a scruffy looking jack-russel wearing a Red Sox baseball cap. At the sight of it, Georgia quickly snatched the Yankees hat from Daph’s head and threw it as far as she could behind them.

“Hey, what the *fuck*?”

“Thank you so much for stopping!” Georgia chirped happily, opening the door and climbing inside. “You’re literally a life saver.”

“Sure, sure,” the cab driver said in a heavy Boston accent, chewing on a toothpick. “Where you headed?”

“Lenox Hill Hospital. As fast as you possibly can,” Georgia said, helping Darwin pull Daph in. She breathed quickly and sharply as she fell into the middle seat. She leaned back with her hands around her belly and sighed.

“Fuck...that wath a big one,” she mumbled.

Darwin quickly clambered inside, adjusting his glasses, and slammed the door shut. He was the only one to put his seatbelt on. The driver paused, glanced in the back seat through the rear view mirror, then turned around to stare wide-eyed at Daph, looking her up and down.

“Whoa, hold the fuck up,” the cabby said, glancing at Georgia. He pulled out his toothpick and pointed to Daph with it. “Is this bitch pregnant?”

“Wh- Yes!” Georgia said, incredulously. “She’s in *labor*. It’s why we’re going to the hospital!”

“Nah. Na-ah. No way,” the driver said, shaking his head virulently. He leaned over and popped open the door next to Darwin, pushing it all the way out. “I

ain't havin' no bitch give birth in the back of my fuckin' cab. Find another."

"Wh- *What?*" Georgia shouted, staring at the driver. "You- You can't be *serious!*"

"Yknow who's gotta clean all that shit up when she gets all that shit all over my seats?" The driver jabbed a thumb into his chest. "*Me*. I don't let people puke in here and I don't let people give no fuckin' birth in here, neither. Go bother somebody else."

"You...you goddamn *psychopath!*" Georgia screamed, kicking the floor of the car. "She's going to have a *baby* for Christ's sake!"

"Yeah? Well I gotta fuckin' *heart condition*, lady. I can't handle that kinda pressure. Now get outta my cab."

"Just...please..." Darwin said, leaning forward and gripping the seat. "Sir...make an exception... just this once...she'll...she'll hold it in?"

"I *did* make an exception," the driver said, holding up a finger. "*Once*. Yknow what happened? I spent three days cleanin' up fuckin' slime outta my back seat. Uh-uh. Not again."

The driver put both hands on the wheel and stared straight ahead, putting the toothpick back in his mouth. Georgia and Darwin glanced at one another. With a defeated look in his eye, Darwin shook his head and stepped a paw out of the cab.

"Wait," Daph said, grabbing him. She winced as another contraction washed over her, but she held it together. Leaning down, she just barely reached her grocery bag of 'her shit.' Reaching inside, she pulled out a small, new wallet that neither Darwin nor Georgia had ever seen. Holding her fingers on either side of her front teeth, she blew an impressively loud whistle at the driver.

"Yo!" she shouted. "Take a look at thith, you dipshit paddy son of a bitch." To the shock of everyone in the car, including the driver, Daph pulled out a folded handful of fifty dollar bills and held them up to the rear-view mirror.

"Half a grand sayth you can get us to the hothpital before I have to thqueeze thith little fucker out all over your back seat," Daph scowled. She fanned out the

bills to show the transfixed driver. “Every time I get a contraction, I take one away.” Daph sniffed, then folded the money back into her palm. “Whaddaya thay?”

The driver paused for just a moment before slamming his seatbelt on and hitting the gas so hard the car door on Darwin’s side slammed shut with the momentum.

Darwin sighed in relief, letting his head fall against the back of his seat. Daph continued her slow, relaxed breathing, tucking the money into her jacket pocket. She rested her hands over her belly as it rose and fell slowly with her breathing.

“Are you alright?” Georgia asked softly.

“I think so,” Daph nodded. “I...I wath getting those ‘Braxton Hickth’ lately but...thethe are a *lot* more intenthe...”

“You’re doing fine, just keep calm. You can do this,” Georgia said reassuringly. Daph turned and smirked at her.

“Shit, I know that,” Daph said, confidently. Georgia smiled back, her friend’s bravado calming her own nerves.

After swerving around slow-moving cars and other cabs, the driver took a sharp corner without even hitting the break, causing the Daph and Georgia to slide into one another while Darwin remained in place by his seatbelt.

“*Hey!*” Darwin shouted in protest. “Slow down! Be careful!”

“Don’t listen to him!” Daph yelled, wincing in pain. “You keep doin’ what you’re doin’!” She clenched her teeth and balled up her fists over her belly. Georgia took one of Daph’s hands, squeezing it comfotingly to let her know she was there. After a few seconds of silent straining, Daph gasped as the contraction abated, shaking her head and exhaling sharply.

“Fuck...” she breathed. “That wath a big one...”

In front of them, the driver glanced over his shoulder in alarm, catching Daph’s eye.

“That one didn’t count,” Daph reassured him. “You’ll thtill get your money if

you punch it.”

He nodded wordlessly, then turned back to the road.

“...Why did you bring all that money?” Georgia whispered.

“Ya never know who you’re gonna have to bribe, yknow?” Daph shrugged. Settling more comfortably in her seat, Daph reached behind her and into the plastic bag, retrieving her Kindle and setting it atop her stomach. She flipped on a light in the back seat and turned the e-reader on to read one of her pregnancy books, flipping all the way to the last chapter on labor.

“...Yo,” the driver said, glancing into the back seat as he saw the light turn on.

“...Is that a Kindle?”

“Yeah,” Daph nodded, holding it up for him to see.

“I always wanted one a those,” he nodded. “I read a lotta military books, yknow what I mean? Lotta true crime and shit. And, uh, yknow,” he shrugged, then added in a quieter voice, “...some poetry, too.”

“You get me to the hothpital in time, you can buy one for yourthelf,” Daph said, patting her pocket full of cash. She turned to her Kindle and began scanning through the pages of labor, with Darwin and Georgia glancing over her shoulder.

“Wait,” Darwin said, pointing to a bullet point on the page. “It says there that we’re supposed to wait at least 12 hours after your water breaks.”

“That’th only if contractionth haven’t thtarted yet,” Daph explained. “Trust me, they thtarted.”

“All this is telling you to do is relax,” Georgia said, scrolling through the pages. She sat back, chewing on her finger nervously. “Maybe we should have just waited at home for a little while...”

“Look, I can relax all I goddamn want in the hothpital with fuckin’ doctorth and shit around,” Daph argued. “I can tell, Lilly ith comin’ out *tonight*. I can feel it.”

“Well, Daph, I *am* a doctor,” Georgia shrugged.

“And how many babieth have you delivered?” Daph said, raising an eyebrow.

“...I mean, the point is that you wouldn't be *totally* helpless or anything even if we did go back-”

Daph suddenly clenched her teeth and groaned at another contraction. She shook her head.

“Let'th finish thith once we're at the hothpital,” Daph grunted. Once it passed, she sighed, leaning back in her seat. The fatigue was starting to get to her. “Hey! You're down to 450, now!” she yelled to the driver.

“Hey, I'm breakin' every goddamn law in the fuckin' state of New York just to get you there on time, alright?”

“Then why the fuck ain't we-” Daph stopped as the cab passed through an intersection and she caught a glimpse of the street signs. Her jaw dropped open and she threw her arms out. “*What the fuck are you doin' on 1st Avenue!?*”

“There ain't as much traffic here! I'm gonna cross over when we get to 77th-”

“Don't fuckin' do that! Get onto Park Ave right now!”

“There's too much traffic on Park! Besides, there's too many stoplights! This is faster.”

“There ain't traffic on *Park*! Not thith late at night! You drove us all the fuckin' way over onto 1st jutht cauthe you thought-”

“*Hey*, you don't like the way I do my fuckin' job, then you can fuckin' *walk*, a'ight?”

“Daph, you need to relax,” Georgia reminded her. Daph made a dissatisfied ‘*tch*’, then folded her arms grumpily.

“Maybe we *shoulda* taken the thubway...” she grumbled.

After a few more minutes that felt like an eternity, the cabbie took another few sharp turns that nearly scrambled the passengers in the back seat. Then, all of a sudden, they found themselves skidding to a stop outside the front entrance of

the Lenox Hill Hospital.

“Oh, oh *fuck!*” Daph said, glancing out the window. “We’re...we’re here!”

“See? What did I fuckin’ tell ya?” the driver said, leaning over the front seat and smirking at Daph. “1st is fuckin’ empty on weekends.”

“I thtill think we shoulda started on-” Daph winced as another contraction hit her. “Nngh...Nevermind.” Daph pulled out the balled-up fifties in her pocket and slapped them into the driver’s hand. “You’re a fuckin’ lifethaver, dude. What’th your name?”

“Name’s Micky,” the driver said, happily pocketing the money.

“Rad. I’m gonna name the fuckin’ baby after you,” Daph said, sliding toward the open door Georgia held open for her.

“Wh...What? For real?!” the driver asked, excitedly. Daph paused right on the edge of the seat.

“...No, not really.”

Not waiting around for the protest of the driver, Daph hefted her sore, heavy body out of the cab with Darwin and Georgia’s help. She stretched, her tank top riding up over her stomach, and sighed.

“I can’t wait ‘til I can move around again,” she said. Glancing between the two worried parents, she grinned excitedly. “Alright. Let’th hit it.”

Darwin and Georgia followed Daph inside the sliding doors of the hospital. She felt another contraction, stopping in place to ride it out.

“I’m...I’m okay, I’m okay,” she nodded, standing up straight once it had passed. “...We should probably get a room thoon, though,” Daph said, sounding worried. “I think she’th thtarting to move... *down*.”

At that, Darwin let go of Daph and jogged ahead to the reception desk. Behind it, the receptionist was busy talking on the phone and jotting down information on a notepad.

“Yes, sir, we take most forms of insurance,” the disinterested mouse woman said. “...No, I don’t know if we can take two for a single patient...No sir, I’ll have to check with my supervisor about that.”

“Excuse me,” Darwin said, gripping the desk like he was going to rip it out of the ground. “Excuse me, ma’am.” The receptionist held up a finger to Darwin, still talking on the phone.

“...No sir, I’m not sure if we take out-of-country insurance...I don’t know that provider...I’ll have to check that with our records, but that department isn’t open until the morning.”

“*Ma’am*,” Darwin hissed, desperately. “*Please*.”

The woman turned to Darwin, with one hand over the receiver, and shot him a look before turning back to her computer screen. Darwin ground his teeth together, his blood pressure reaching its peak.

“...You could try calling back in the morning...Yes sir, our insurance department. They open at 9AM on Mondays and take calls through most of the day...Yes sir, on our website.”

Daph and Georgia walked up beside Darwin, who was desperately pulling on his ears and waiting for the receptionist to get off the phone. Daph glanced between the woman and Darwin, then balled up her fist and slammed it down onto the desk with the force of a brick. The sound jolted the woman out of her dazed expression as she turned to stare at Daph.

“YO!” Daph screamed at the top of her lungs. “I’M. IN. FUCKING. LABOR.”

The receptionist blinked, her ears twitching, then pulled the phone back to her ear.

“Sir, I need to put you on hold,” she said quickly before dropping it to the desk. She stood up and smoothed out her shirt and crossed over to the computer. Catching sight of Daph’s belly, she stared at her wide-eyed and picked up a phone next to her. “Why didn’t you go to the Emergency Room entrance!?”

“No time!” Georgia said. “Get us a room as soon as you can. My name’s Georgia Middleston, I work in the physical therapy department here.”

“We have a patient here in labor,” the receptionist said into the phone. She paused, then glanced up at Daph. “How long have you had contractions, honey?”

“Bout...45 minuteth?” Daph said. “They ain’t thlowin’ down, neither.”

“Her water broke at the apartment. We got here as fast as we could.”

“They say her water’s already broken,” the receptionist said into the phone. She listened, nodded a few times, then said ‘Okay’ and hung up. “They’ll be down in just a moment. Stay as relaxed as you can.”

“I’m workin’ on it,” Daph nodded.

“One of you will need to stay and fill out information.”

“I’ll do it,” Darwin quickly said.

“No, I will,” Georgia protested, grabbing a pen from behind the desk. “I work here, I can get it done faster.”

“But I can stay-”

“No buts, I’ll take care of it,” Georgia said. She reached over and took her husband’s hand. “Just take care of Daph, okay?”

“Who the fuck sayth I need to be taken care of?” Daph interjected before having another contraction that she groaned through. Darwin glanced at his wife for a

single moment before taking Daph by the shoulders and leading her over to the nearest set of benches.

“You’re okay, just keep breathing,” he said, walking her forward gently. “Stay relaxed.”

“You talkin’ to me or yourthelf?” Daph said, groaning as she waddled slowly beside him.

“Maybe you should save your energy for the birth instead of being a smartass.”

“Nah dude,” Daph said, chuckling. “That shit’th in my blood.”

They made to the benches, where Darwin took a seat and held out his arm to help Daph into hers. She stood up straight and shook her head.

“Nah, I’m cool,” she said. She threw her arms over her head and pulled on them from the elbows to stretch them out. “I wanna get warmed up firtht.”

“Warmed up?” Darwin repeated, watching Daph stretch out her legs while holding onto the back of the bench.

“You alwayth gotta thtretch before a workout, dude,” Daph explained, taking deep breaths while holding her position for a few seconds. “Otherwise, you’re gonna fuckin’ hurt yourthelf.”

“Well...I mean...” Darwin stammered. “I don’t think you’re going to be able to stretch the muscles you’ll be using for giving birth.”

“Not true!” Daph said, standing up and gesturing to her belly. “It’th mostly abdominal muscleth that do the pushing, while you can stretch out and prepare the vaginal muscleth through kegals!” She set her jaw and flexed muscles somewhere between her legs. He cleared his throat and blushed, batting his tail awkwardly.

In what seemed like no time at all, a group of three nurses came rushing out of a nearby elevator, pushing a wheelchair. They stopped right near the two of them next to the bench.

“Are you the patient in labor, ma’am?” One of them asked Daph.

“Nah, not me,” she said, sarcastically, then gestured to Darwin. “I think he’s having contraction, though.”

“Daph, just get in the wheelchair,” Darwin said, wearily.

“Hey, can I walk instead?” Daph asked the nurse, shaking out one of her legs. “I wanna get all limbered up.”

“Daph...please...” Darwin begged, gesturing to the chair. Daph was getting ready to argue, but another contraction hit her and she clenched her stomach uncomfortably.

“Alright....Okay...wheelchair...thankth....” Daph groaned, gingerly lowering herself into the chair. Once she was in, the nurses wheeled her around and pushed her as quickly as they could safely move toward the elevator.

“I’ll text you which room we’re in,” Darwin whispered to Georgia as they passed, unable to stay and wait for a response.

From the elevator to the sixth floor, it took all the energy in Darwin’s long legs to keep up with the experienced nurses, who navigated the winding halls of the maternity ward as quickly as they could push the wheelchair. In a matter of minutes, the group skidded to a halt outside an open room.

“Fancy,” Daph noted as she pushed herself out of the chair. As they entered the room, one of the nurses handed her a folded medical gown in a plastic bag and gestured to the bathroom in the corner.

“You’ll need to get changed into this as soon as you can,” she said. “Let us know if you need any help.”

Daph nodded and winked as she waddled into the bathroom. Darwin paced next to the bed while the nurses set up clean sheets and adjusted it to the right height. While Daph was still in the bathroom, a group of more nurses and a tall, deep-voiced panther walked into the room, all wearing scrubs and face masks. The panther approached Darwin and spoke calmly.

“Mr. Middleton? I’m Doctor Merrick, I’ll be the obstetrician this evening helping with your wife.”

“Oh, she’s not my wife,” Darwin clarified. He cocked his head to the side, then asked, “Wait, we were supposed to see Dr. Hartsfield. Tara Hartsfield? She was our obstetrician.”

“Dr. Hartsfield is off until next week, I’m afraid,” Merrick said, clasping his gloved hands together. “I know how it is, you put your trust in your doctor and it’s hard to adjust to someone else. But Tara and I have worked together for many years and I’m equally as qualified as she is. You won’t have anything to worry about, I promise you.”

“Um...okay...Sure,” Darwin nodded, trying to convince himself.

In split second of silence, the sound of the toilet flushing caught the room off guard. In an instant, Daphodille slammed open the bathroom door, wearing nothing but her medical gown, and stepped out into the room. She clapped her hands together and yelled what sounded like a powerful battle-cry.

“*ARE YOU MOTHER FUCKIN’ READY?*” She yelled to no one in particular. “*LET’TH GET PUMPED. I’M READY, ARE YOU READY?*” She waddled over to Darwin and flexed her arms, yelling up into his face. “*LET’S GO, ARE YOU PUMPED? I WANNA HEAR YOU SCREAM!*”

“...Um,” Darwin blinked, glancing around the room for assistance. Daph yelled one more time before she clapped her hands again and stepped back.

“Jutht getting mythelf *psyched up*, yknow?” Daph said, grinning toothily. She punched her fist into her hand and flexed her muscles to get her adrenaline flowing. “*AL-RIGHT! Let’th fuckin DO THITH SHIT!*”

“Uh...” Merrick said, “well, I uh...can’t fault your enthusiasm.” He stepped forward and patted the bed. “Can you get up here yourself, Ms. Westinfold?”

“I dunno, let’th thee,” Daph said. She walked to bed, gripped the sides, and barely managed to clamber atop the mattress on her own.

“If you can put your legs up in these, that’d be great,” the doctor said, referring to the leg stirrups that the nurses had just finished setting up.

“I’m lucky I ain’t that modest, I guess,” Daph shrugged, leaning back and spreading her legs apart as the nurses helped her rest them in the stirrups, giving

the nurses and doctor a clear view between her thighs.

“Um...doctor?” a nurse said to Merrick, trying in vain to push aside Daph’s tail as it brushed against her face.

“Oh, right,” the doctor said, gesturing to the bottom of the bed. “There’s a tail restraint down there.” The nurse crouched under the bed and unlatched a padded restraint on the bedframe between Daph’s legs. She pulled her tail back and tied it in place to keep it out of the way.

“Damn, that’th pretty fancy, too,” Daph said, pulling her tail lightly against the strap. She furrowed her brow and glanced up at Merrick. “Wait, ‘doctor?’ Where’th Tara?”

“She’s not here,” Darwin explained. “But Dr. Merrick is just as qualified. He’ll take care of you.”

“Dr. Merrick?” Daph said, glancing up at the panther and frowning. “Well...I guess I ain’t got a choice, do I? Take care of me, doc. Thith ith a firtht time for me, yknow?”

“You’re in good hands, Ms. Westinfold.” He set down the clipboard in his hand and walked around to the foot of bed. Turning on a hanging light, he pushed back Daph’s medical gown in order to get a clearer look between her legs. She jumped slightly as she felt a pair of warm fingers pull apart her sex to look more clearly in her birth canal.

“How long ago did your water break?” the doctor asked.

“Like an hour ago,” Daph said, trying to crane her neck to look over the mound of belly in her way. She felt an impatient jab from Lilly up into her ribs. “C’mon dude, be patient in there,” Daph added, whispering to her stomach.

“You’re already about seven to nine centimeters dilated,” the doctor explained. “From the looks of this, you’ve probably been in labor for the past few days.”

“...What, for real?” Daph blinked.

“Did you notice any pains? Any contractions before tonight?”

“I guess, but I thought they wath just, like, Braxton Hickth or whatever.”

“Braxton Hicks are supposed to feel like small pinches,” the doctor explained. “Not full contractions.”

“...Oh,” Daph said, before chuckling to herself. “I mean, they didn’t hurt, tho I figured it wath okay, yknow?” She shrugged, grinning.

“You’re lucky you got here in time,” Dr. Merrick said, standing up straight. “You’re only a few more contractions away from being able to push, I’d say.”

“Oh fuck, really?” Daph said, nodding. “Alright, cool. I’ve been wantin’ to all night, but I figured it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Just let us know when you feel another-”

“Mmmf...I think I got a live one, doc,” Daph winced, clenching her fists on the bed. She grit her teeth and threw her head back as another contraction slowly crept into her. The cramp in her belly felt stronger than ever, as if her body had been waiting for her to finally get to the hospital for her labor to begin in earnest. She let out a pained sound as the cramp spread over her entire body, stopping between her legs. She could barely feel the nurses and doctor prodding at her sex. She managed to ride it out and fell back to the bed, panting.

“H-Holy fuck...” Daph breathed. “That...that wath a fuckin big one...”

“You’re almost ready,” the doctor said. “I think you’ll be ready to start pushing with the next contraction.”

“What, already?” Daph said. “But we jutht fuckin’ got here.”

“And you’re almost ready to give birth,” Merrick said. “I think you’ve got a very impatient baby on your hands.”

“Fuckin’ apparently,” she sighed. Daph glanced up at Darwin. “I’m gonna blame *you* for that one.”

The two of them waited with medical staff, trying to stay as calm as possible. The tension in the room was rising steadily as the nurses and doctors continued to prepare. Over the course of the next few minutes, Daph calm demeanor began

to slowly fall away as the reality crept into her.

This is it, she thought, her mind reeling. This is happening. Right now. I'm about to give birth.

She glanced up at Darwin, finding him on his phone across the room, his tail bobbing back and forth anxiously. She did the same with her own, but found she couldn't move it very easily with it tied under the bed. Daph's heart began to beat faster, her breathing speeding up. She felt what must have been the worst kind of performance anxiety. Daph wished Georgia was there, more than anything, to bring the sense of calm to the situation that she knew she couldn't give herself.

Deep in her body, she felt it. It was coming, building up from deep in her muscles, a preliminary tightness along her back.

"Okay..." Daph nodded, holding her belly with both hands. "Okay, thith ith it. There'th another one coming."

"Alright," the doctor said, taking place to monitor between Daph's legs. "When you feel like you need to, I want you to push as hard as you can with your stomach muscles." He said. "Are you ready?"

"I...I think...I don't..." Daph glanced up at Darwin, pleadingly. "Where ith..."

"I texted her the room number," he said, closing his phone. "But she hasn't responded."

"I don't...Should I wait?" Daph asked, starting to panic as she felt the contraction growing stronger by the second. "Should I wait for her? I dunno."

"No, don't wait," doctor said, forcefully. "When you feel it, you need to push."

"Okay...okay..." Daph nodded, setting her jaw. When the contraction finally reached its peak, when cramping pressure was too much for her to handle anymore, she grabbed two fistfuls of the bedsheet and pushed as hard as she could. Spittle flew from her mouth as she groaned, flexing her entire body to push against the contraction with all her strength. Just as she started to feel ridiculous, she felt a tiny shift somewhere deep down in her belly. It was nearly indiscernible, but she could tell: something had moved.

Daph fell back onto the bed, taking deep, filling breaths as the contraction ebbed away like the tide, leaving her muscles tingling from the effort. In a very abstract way, it wasn't dissimilar to lifting weights, just with muscles she didn't even know she had.

"Wath...wath that good?" She breathed, trying to look over her belly. "Did I do that right?"

"You did excellent," the doctor said, smiling behind his mask. "Get ready. Your contractions will be coming faster than before and you're going to need to push even harder."

"Okay," Daph nodded. A nurse stepped into view beside her.

"We can give you some drugs for the pain, if it's too much," she said. Daph thought for a moment, then clenched her teeth and sat up straighter.

"Nah," she said. "I got thith."

"Um...Daph," Darwin said, leaning. "Are you sure?"

"Like I thaid," Daph said, determined. "I. Got. Thith."

"No one is going to think you're weak if you need help with-" Darwin began, but Daph shook her head and glared at him.

"That'th not true," she said, coldly. "*I will.*"

Daph took a deep breath and sighed, resigning herself to stay strong. As afraid as she was without Georgia there, she knew this was something she had to do. She needed to see it through until the very end.

"...I'm going to go look for her," Darwin said, checking his phone. He nodded to Daph. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"Okay," Daph nodded. "It'th not like there'th anything important goin' on right now."

"Ha. Ha," Darwin mocked before he quickly scurried out of the door and down the hallway.

She felt another contraction coming on and settled into the bed. Daph caught the eye of the doctor and nodded, wordlessly. The pressure built up inside of her, nearly ready to burst out, and she held onto the bars on the side of the bed. She took a few deep breathes, getting ready to exert herself.

Suddenly, right before Daph began to push, the door to the room flung open with Georgia speeding inside, winded but with a bright smile on her face. Daph wanted a moment to sigh in relief, but her body had other plans. As her contraction fully took hold of her, she clenched her teeth and pushed, acting on exactly what nature was telling her to do.

“Who are you?” Dr. Merrick said, in his deep voice, staring daggers at Georgia. “You can’t come in here!”

“No, wait, please, I’m with-” Georgia began before two of the nurses began to gently but firmly push her toward the door.

“No one but family allowed,” one of the nurses said. “Ma’am, you need to leave. You need to leave, right now.”

“Wait, no, just hang on,” Georgia pleaded, trying to stand her ground but not fight against the nurses. “I need to explain.”

“You can’t *be* in here, ma’am,” the doctor shouted.

Daph, still in the middle of pushing through her contraction, tried to speak, but the only thing that came out of her mouth was a strained, painful shout. She felt the same shifting sensation inside of her, something very very large moving through her at a painfully slow pace.

“Nnnnn...gaaahh...No....” Daph tried to speak, but couldn’t through the strain of the contraction.

“Please, *please*, just let me *explain!*” Georgia shouted, tears in her eyes as she was nearly forced out of the delivery room.

“I don’t have time for this...” Doctor Merrick grumbled. He stood up from between Daph’s legs and marched over to the doorway, looming over Georgia.

Daph frantically glanced around, trying to do something, but could barely think

through the birthing pains that wracked her body. At the last second, she spied a cheap, clear vase of fake flowers sitting on the table next to the bed. In a flash, she grabbed hold of it and spiked it onto the hard ground, shattering the thin plastic with a loud *crack*. Merrick and the nurses paused just long enough in the disturbance for the wave of Daph's contraction to begin to subside.

"FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU! SHE STAYTH! SHE FUCKING STAYTH!" Daph screamed, pointing at Georgia while glaring daggers at the doctor. *"SHE STAYTH OR I FUCKING WALK, GOD DAMN IT! LET HER STAY!"*

"We can't let anyone but family-"

"FUCK YOU! SHE IS FAMILY!" Daph yelled, glaring at Merrick.

His dark eyes, face unreadable beneath the mask, glanced between the two squirrels. He sighed, then stepped aside and opened the door.

"Fine," he grumbled, padding back to his stool next to the foot of the bed. Georgia, her eyes wide, scurried next to Daph and ginned, taking her hand.

"I'm sorry, I had to fill out so much paperwork and I didn't know which room to go to because I forgot my phone and I had to go back down to the receptionist so she could tell me," she stammered breathlessly. "How are you? How's Lilly?" She rested a hand over Daph's belly.

"Thill in there," Daph breathed. "But if I do my job right, not for much longer."

"Have they told you to push yet?"

"Oh yeah," Daph chuckled. "I've been pushin' alright."

"Good! That's good!" Georgia smiled, brushing Daph's hair out of her face. "We'll be right here with you, don't worry. You're doing great."

"Don't...don't tell me what I already know," Daph said, grinning wearily.

Behind them, the door flung open again with Darwin slipping back into the room, completely out of breath. As soon as he and Georgia caught eye with one another, they bounded forward and embraced each other, like they hadn't met in years.

“Do you know her, Mr. Middleson?” the doctor asked, authoritatively.

“What?” Darwin said. “Yes. This is my *wife*.”

Merrick blinked, glancing between them in confusion.

“Daphodille is our surrogate, doctor,” Georgia explained.

“...I....oh...” Merrick cleared his throat and composed himself. “I...I wasn’t...I didn’t know that.”

“Tara knew that...” Daph grumbled from on her back. She sat up, quickly motioning for the doctor. “Fuck, fuck, okay, here cometh another one.”

Merrick sat back in his seat while Georgia and Darwin rushed to Daph’s side. She held out her hand for Georgia to take, gripping it instead of the side of the bed, and clenched her teeth to push again.

Daph roared as she pushed harder than she ever had in her life, bearing down her entire body to push the what felt like an impossibly huge baby through her birth canal.

“C’mon Daph...just keep going...” Georgia said, encouraging her while trying not to wince as the squirrel’s strong hands clenched like a vice around her fingers. “You can do it! I know you can, you’re stronger than anyone I’ve ever met!”

“Don’t give up,” Darwin said, leaning over his wife. Daph turned to look at them, pushing harder and harder with each second. Then as soon as it arrived, the contraction faded. Daph fell back onto the mattress, panting.

“That...” Daph breathed, pointing up at the two parents. “That...that ain’t gonna work.”

“What?”

“You gotta...you gotta be *mean*,” Daph said. “*Louder*. Like you’re *thpotting* me. Like I’m workin’ out.” She nodded. “That’th how I get motivated. I jutht gotta get pissed off enough that I work harder. That’th how I exercithe.”

“You...you want us to...” Georgia glanced at Darwin, then shrugged. “I mean...we can try.”

“It’ll help me...” Daph breathed. Her eyes widened and she propped herself up on her elbows. “Okay, here’th your chance!” As Daph pushed, Georgia and Darwin glanced awkwardly at one another, unsure of what to say.

“Uhh...Y-You loser!” Darwin yelled out. “You call that pushing? Even...Even my grandmother could do better than that!”

“Louder,” Daph groaned. “*Meaner.*”

“*WHAT DO YOU CALL THAT, YOU LITTLE PANSY?*” Georgia suddenly screamed, a surprisingly powerful shout coming out of the little squirrel. “*YOU’RE GONNA PUSH LIKE THAT, YOU PUSSY? YOU DON’T DESERVE TO REPRODUCE YOU FUCKING WASTE OF SPACE. LET ME SEE YOU WORK, YOU LITTLE RODENT!*”

Surprisingly, the verbal abuse seemed to work. Daph’s face contorted into a scowl and she was able to push harder and stronger with the reverse-motivation from her friends.

“*Y-YOU THINK YOU CAN HAVE A BABY WITH THAT KIND OF EFFORT?*” Darwin joined in, clenching his fists. “*YOU DON’T DESERVE TO HAVE OUR KID! PUSH HARDER!*”

This went on for at least an hour, Daph pushing herself unassisted through the pain of labor with nothing but her friends to back her up. She gritted her teeth and pushed, harder and harder each time, feeling the baby moving down through her, inch by inch, closer to the exit. In between contractions, she practiced kegals, trying to make herself ready for when Lilly finally crowned.

Nearly exhausted, Daph fell to the bed after a contraction, her head swimming, her eyes glassy.

She felt a metallic ringing in her head, signaling that she was about to pass out. In her last few seconds of consciousness, she caught sight of Georgia, staring terrified at her.

Do it for her, Daph thought to herself.

Her eyes drifted over to Darwin, hand against the wall like he was having trouble standing on his feet.

Do it for them, Daph thought to herself.

Turning over, she looked at her belly, imagining the little girl she'd spent so long growing inside of her, stuck in her birth canal, terrified, wanting nothing but to exist in the same world as the parents who loved her so much.

Do it for her.

Daph clenched her teeth, dredging a surge of strength from somewhere deep inside of her, and began to push. The contraction was strong, insurmountably powerful, but she was stronger. Instead of riding it out, she pushed through the birthing pains, pushed through the strain, pushed through cramps, and pushed through her own fear.

Something gave way. Something inside her lurched forward and slid against her sex, spreading it apart. With one more push, she felt something spread her lips apart.

The delivery room fell silent other than the sound of a small, gurgling, high-pitched voice wailing out from between Daph's legs. Her eyes opened wide, staring at the ceiling, shock preventing her fatigue from taking her into sleep.

"Holy fuck," she said, listening to the crying coming from between her legs. "Oh...oh my god...fuck, fuck, shit..." She listened to the sound of the baby she'd held inside her for so long, taking her first breaths of the sterilized hospital air. Georgia and Darwin listened to their daughter crying, completely transfixed at the sound, tears welling in their eyes.

"That'th...that'th her..." Daph said to herself, chuckling. "That'th Lilly...that'th fuckin' Lilly..."

She laughed again, her voice mingling with that of the baby she was halfway through giving birth to, the two sounds remarkably similar.

Newly energized, Daph felt another contraction hit her, but powerfully screamed as she pushed past it. She felt soft, experienced hands around her labia, pushing her folds aside to delicately take hold of the baby. Once her shoulders were clear,

Dr. Merrick firmly pulled the baby in tandem with Daph's contractions.

In a single instant, the baby was out. Lilly was born.

The doctor held the tiny, wailing, oak-brown squirrel in his hands, umbilical cord still trailing into the Daph. A nurse caught her in a clean towel, wrapping her up as her small hands grasped impotently at the air. Her long tail, still hairless, was curled up next to her. Once the nurse clamped closed the umbilical cord, she snipped it with a pair of sterile scissors, then passed on the baby to Darwin.

He stared down at the little squirming bundle in his hands, blinking, before tears rolled down his eyes. He handed Lilly over to Georgia and stumbled near to the wall, crying in joy and nearly unable to stand. Georgia looked over the scrunched face of her daughter, chubby and full and healthy and perfect.

She felt the moment stick in her mind, knowing deep down that she'd never forget that sight for the rest of her life.

"Look..." Georgia said, bringing over the baby to Daph's end of the bed. "Look...Daph...you...you did it." She grinned, tears flowing down her face. "It's Lilly."

Daph looked over, blinking wearily, then grinned.

"Cool," she mumbled. "I'm a...godmother..." She glanced up at Georgia. "Tho...did I do good?"

"Yes," Georgia smiled. "You did great."

"Fuck yeah," Daph said, raising a fist into the air. She reached over and bumped it against Georgia's knuckles. Then, after pausing, she reached over and tapped her fist gently to the back of one of Lilly's tiny hands.

"Okay..." Daph said, blinking. "I think I'm gonna take a nap now..." She flashed a thumbs-up to Georgia before turning over and instantly passing out from fatigue.

Georgia's stepped back from the nurses and doctor as they checked on Daph, looking down that the baby in her arms. In a private moment, without anyone else to see, Lilly slowly opened her eyes, looking up at her mother.

Against all odds, and in contrast with the dark fur around them, Lilly's eyes were a bright, clear, and solid blue.

A few days later, after visiting a restless and impatient Daph in the hospital, Georgia walked down the hall toward the room with the newborns. She went to the large window looking over the many babies of a thousand colors and species, and found Lilly in the middle, wriggling on her back in a pink onesie. Catching sight of one of the nurses, Georgia motioned her closer and pointed her toward the door.

After explaining her request, the nurse nodded and took the pair of scissors into the back. After washing them with sterilizing soap, she carefully and gingerly stood over Lilly and clipped a tuft of fur from her body, then carried it back to Georgia. After thanking the nurse, she stood to the side and opened the her mother's locket from around her neck. There, alongside the identical strands of blonde fur, she tucked Lilly's into the other side, pinning them in place.

Georgia sighed, satisfied, then closed the locket. Glancing up to take one last look at her baby, she slipped the locket back under her shirt and padded off silently down the hospital hallway.

Bonus Chapters

Brotherly Love

At six in the afternoon, dead in the middle of a warm and lazy Sunday afternoon, Daph was lounging around her apartment after spending most of the morning digging through closets and dusting off everything in sight with a paper towel and a bottle of Windex. She'd read about the 'nesting instinct' a couple times online and in the books Georgia had gotten for her, but never thought it would effect her very much. Daph's apartment was constantly in a state of 'stylishly shabby,' with clothes, blankets, books, and magazines piling up on every surface, but that just made it all the more comfortable for her. When Georgia was feeling nice, she liked to call Daph's apartment 'lived-in.'

Of course, now roughly six months pregnant and with a flood of new hormones coursing through her veins, Daph woke up one morning and found she couldn't stand the mess anymore. She dug through the bathroom and hall closet for any unused cleaning supplies her mother might have pushed on her, carried around a full roll of paper towels, and set to work tidying her place up. Daph tossed boxes full of magazines into empty closets and dropped trashbags full of dirty clothes next to the door to get washed later on. She cleaned in a frenzy, sucking down bottles of water one after another; her mid-sized baby bump was only just starting to get in the way of her movement, making her worry about how much she would be able to do once she got even bigger.

Only after stopping to eat a sandwich around three did Daph actually look around her apartment. It wasn't exactly spotless, but a wave of relief passed over her as she strode through the cleared middle of the floor and flopped onto her couch, one hand idly rubbing her protruding belly.

The baby had been woken up from all the activity and was fluttering wildly

inside her, a feeling like she'd somehow swallowed a group of butterflies.

"If I keep thith up, maybe your mom will let you come over without wearing a fuckin' hazmat thuit," Daph said to the baby, patting her stomach as she finished her sandwich and stood to finish organizing the bedroom closet.

Half the benefit of her nesting instinct kicking in was that Daph found a pile of boxes full of leftover remnants of her childhood, dropped off by her mother a few years ago. Her cleaning forgotten, Daph sat on her knees and rummaged through the boxes, smiling at the toys and books that somehow survived through the years. There were even a few smaller boxes of baby toys, teething rings, and stuffed animals that Daph looked at with a curious frown as she quietly stroked her own pregnant belly. She buried them back in their box and set it on the bed, intending to give them to Georgia the next time they met.

"Nooo....No way..." Daph muttered under her breath as she pulled out a familiar box and heard the clunky rattle of VHS tapes inside it. "No fucking *waaaaayyyy!*" She pushed aside the clutter on the floor and tore open the box, giggling wildly and flicking her tail excitedly at the sight of two dozen black, un-boxed VHS tapes. "I thought Mom god rid of thethe!"

With a slight grunt, Daph, carried the box into the living room and dropped it next to her on the couch, but just as quickly as her smile came, it faded as she glanced at her television across the room.

"Oh...right," she sighed, frowning at the incompatible DVD player. Daph tapped her paw on the ground, her nails clicking against the wood, and rubbed her belly like a worry-stone. Slowly, a plan began to formulate in her mind as an excited grin slowly crept onto her face. "Yeah...Yeah yeah yeah yeah!" With an excited clap of her hands, Daph scurried into the bedroom, stuffed her phone and keys into her pockets, and threw on a loose t-shirt that only barely hid her bump beneath it before quickly hurrying out the door.

Roughly an hour later, Daph rushed back inside, panting, with two plastic bags clenched in her fists, one far bigger than the other. The smallest she dropped on the couch beside the tapes, and the biggest she carried to the television, tearing away the plastic to reveal the matte-black rectangle of an old VCR she picked up at a pawn shop a few blocks away. With the money Darwin and Georgia were paying for the surrogacy, Daph finally had enough in her bank account to afford

a little impulse buy every now and then.

After struggling with the cables for far longer than she expected to, Daph finally plugged the ancient machine up to her modern television and switched the channel over to the input. Before watching anything, she snatched her second plastic bag from the couch and carried it into the kitchen, dumping the popcorn bags and snacks on the newly-cleaned table, along with a bottle of iced tea (soda was bad for the baby). After returning with a hot bowl of popcorn and an Almond Joy, Daph snatched a VHS at random from the box and fed it into the machine. After a few seconds of biting her lip, the crunchy guitar riff of the ‘Wrestlemania’ theme song filled her apartment as the blurry picture came to life on screen.

“*Fuck yeah!*” Daph shouted, cramming a handful of popcorn in her mouth and settling back on the couch.

With a free day ahead of her, Daph did nothing else but watch through three tapes in a row, pulled out at random to keep at least a little surprise intact. She bunched a stack of throw pillows under her head and nestled one against her side to keep her belly elevated while draping her legs and tail over the armrest. Most of the tapes were of events a little before her time, but the nostalgia of the well-worn videos was intimately familiar.

“Wonder if your mom would let me get you into the the,” Daph wondered out loud as the baby nudged her gently from inside, just as the Ultimate Warrior began lifting Hulk Hogan above his head.

“She’d probably want to get you into fucking...dolla and thuff.” She frowned in thought, tapping her paw on the edge of the couch, then shrugged and poked her finger into her stomach, just above where the baby nudged her. “Eh, whatever. You’re *her* baby, after all.” Daph sat up just in time to watch Hulk Hogan get slammed onto the mat with a loud *bang*, wincing through her teeth. “God *damn*, that lookth like it hurt...”

Toward the end of the video, before she’d picked out the next one, Daph’s ears wiggled at the sound of a faint knocking. She sat up, glancing around for the source of it, but didn’t hear it again over the sound of the nearly two-decade-old Wrestlemania crowd. Assuming it came from one of her neighbors, she turned her attention back to the TV. Only once the sound of the cheering crowd died

down did Daph hear the knocking again and realize it was coming from her own front door.

“Hang on!” she cried out, quickly pushing aside the bowl of popcorn and rolling off the couch. She wobbled, feeling lightheaded for a moment, before hurrying to the TV and turning the volume down. “Thorry! I’m turning it down!” Instead of a reply, another, harder knock pounded against the door as whoever outside began rapping their knuckles against it. “Okay, I’ll turn it off! Thorry! Jethuth!” Daph shouted back as she crouched and hit the stop button on the VCR. In the silence that followed, another impatient knock rattled against the door, making her huff and march toward it.

“Hang on! I’m coming!” Daph yelled. Before opening the door, she stood on the tips of her paws and peered through the peephole (noting to herself that her belly was big enough to touch the wood as she did so). Whoever stood outside was tall enough that all Daph could make out was the forest-green of their shirt. She paused for a moment, hesitating to open the door without knowing who was on the other side, before she carefully unlocked the deadbolt, but kept the chain closed as she cracked open the door.

Standing in the hallway was a gray squirrel wearing a blue baseball cap turned backward, a pair of cargo shorts, and a green t-shirt pulled tight over his broad chest and wide shoulders. As they met eyes, he grinned with a slightly crooked smile and flicked his tail.

“*Hey*, there you are!” he said in a loud, enthusiastic voice that echoed down the hall.

“*Drew?*” Daph gasped, staring up at her older brother like he was an alien. She hadn’t seen him in nearly a year and a half, so he might as well have been. While his face was mostly the same, he was thinner and more toned than he had been the last time they’d seen one another, his fur longer and a little more scruffy.

“I hoped you were still livin’ here,” he said, glancing at the number above her door. “It was gonna be super fuckin’ awkward if you weren’t.”

“How did you even get in here?” Daph asked, glancing at the stairs behind him.

“Somebody propped the door open with a brick,” Drew shrugged.

“Goddamn it, not again.”

“Hey, it’s the city, what can ya do?” Drew shrugged, the strap of his backpack falling off one shoulder. He rocked in place for a minute, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “So uh... You gonna let me in or what?”

“*Oh*. Uh, yeah. Totally. Hang on a thecond.” Daph pushed the door shut and unhooked the chain, but didn’t open the door right away. Stepping back, she placed a hand over her belly, glancing down at herself. Did he know already that she was pregnant? If he was in town, their mother wouldn’t have been able to keep her mouth shut, so why hadn’t he said anything about it? If he *didn’t* know, there was no way to hide it; even her biggest shirts weren’t enough to disguise the obvious lump to her stomach, and she was practically falling out of the one she was wearing already.

“*Daph?* ” came Drew’s voice, muffled from the other end. “*You okay?*”

“Yeah, just a thecond!” she called back, rocking in place anxiously. “Lemme clean up a little!”

“You don’t gotta do that, it’s fine!”

“Well...okay,” Daph said, taking a shaky breath as she smoothed her shirt down over her pregnant belly. She unlatched the door and let it swing open, taking a deep breath as she and her brother got a full look at one another. He grinned and gave her a once-over, eyes lingering on her belly for a moment, before he strode inside and wrapped her in a one-armed hug and affectionately ruffled her hair with his palm.

“Why’d you even need to clean?” he asked, stopping in the middle of her living room and setting his backpack on a nearby table. “It looks fuckin’ great in here.”

“Yeah, well...” Daph said, shrugging bashfully as she pushed the door shut behind her. “I gueth it’th like that ‘nesting inthtinct’ kicking in.”

“What is that, like a period thing?” Drew asked, hooking his fingers into his belt loops and peering around the living room. “Wish I got that, my place is a fuckin’ wreck.”

“A period...” Daph cocked her head to the side, frowning. “Uh...not really.”

“Glad you keep the place lookin’ nice, though,” Drew nodded as he stuck his head into the kitchen. “You live in a pretty weird part of town, but this is a nice-ass place, dude.”

“You shoulda theen it thith morning,” Daph snorted, crossing her arms. Georgia’s baby nudged her again, as if to remind her she was still there. As Daph sighed again and touched a hand to her belly, Drew glanced back at her with raised eyebrow.

“You bulking up for winter?” he asked, gesturing to her stomach. “Once Spring hits, try playing soccer. All that weight just falls off, I swear to god.”

“Uh...I...no, thith isn’t-” Daph began, but her brother shook his head and held out a hand.

“It’s cool, no judgment. We aren’t built for the cold, y’know? I keep my fuckin’ heater on year round out in the park.”

“Well...actually...um...” Daph swallowed as she cradled her belly in her hands and took a deep breath. But before she could speak, Drew glanced over his shoulder at the television and gasped.

“Dude! You’re watching Wrestlemania 3?” he said excitedly, his tail twitching. As he moved to the couch and noticed the box of tapes, his jaw dropped open as he snatched one out and stared at it. “*Are these my old tapes?*”

“Yeah!” Daph said cheerily, happy to be changing the subject. “I found ‘em in the closet today! I gueth mom thought they were mine.”

“They can be both of ours,” Drew said, dropping onto the couch and sifting through the tapes. “Holy shit, I haven’t seen these in fucking *years!*”

“Me either! I wath gonna thpend today watchin’ some.” Daph hesitated and pulled her shirt down over her stomach before scratching the back of her head. “If you don’t got anywhere to be, you can chill here for a bit...”

“Why’d you think I came by if I didn’t wanna hang?” Drew asked, flashing her a grin. He hefted the box of tapes and set them on the ground to make room for his sister before settling back and stretching out his long, thin legs across the carpet.

“You wanna finish thith one?” Daph asked as she moved to the VCR. Drew nodded, so she tapped play with her paw before heading back and sitting awkwardly next to her brother. It felt so normal and familiar to be sitting next to him again, but with the addition of her ‘passenger’ (that Drew was apparently oblivious to), she found it almost impossible to get comfortable again.

“Wait, is this three?” Drew asked, sitting forward as the two wrestlers circled one another in the ring.

“This is six,” Daph said. “Three had Andre the Giant.”

“*Oh yeahhhhh!*” Drew said, nodding quickly. He pulled his legs back in and sat up for a moment to pull his tail out from underneath him, letting it settle between them on the couch. It was just as long as Daph’s, but he kept the naturally bushy fur trimmed for playing sports and climbing, making it appear much smaller. His gray color was almost exactly the same shade as their father’s, which was all Daph could remember about him.

“Hulk Hogan’s an asshole now,” Drew said with a sour frown. “I mean, I guess he was always an asshole but that didn’t really matter when he was in the ring. He was the fucking *man* when I was little.” He glanced between Daph and the television, an eyebrow raised in thought. “I don’t think you were even born yet when this came out.”

“No, I wath born, but I wath like...two,” Daph said. “I thtill watched thith tape enough times to know it all by heart.” She turned away from the screen and looked directly at her brother as she held up a hand and silently counted down from five. As she retracted her last finger, she pointed at the screen and said, “Elbow drop.”

A moment after she spoke, Hulk Hogan dropped the Ultimate Warrior to the mat, then fell on his stomach elbow-first, eliciting a huge reaction from the crowd.

“Impressive,” Drew nodded, taking off his hat to scratch between his ears. He turned back to the screen and said, half to himself, “I always thought it was weird Adam and Elliot didn’t really get into wrestling, but *you* did.”

“Why not?” Daph said, picking up the popcorn bowl she’d set on the ground and munching on a few kernels. “It’th big and it’th dumb and it’th loud and it’th fun as hell.”

“Oh yeah, for sure, but that’s not the thing you expect your little sister to like,” Drew said.

“Yeah well,” Daph shrugged, outwardly nonchalant but quietly anxious, “I do a lotta shit people don’t expect.” She stalled for time as she reached across Drew for her bottle of tea, then chugged the rest of it and crunched the bottle flat on her thigh.

“You see either of them lately?” Drew asked about their other two brothers.

“Nah, they don’t really come into town anymore,” Daph shook her head. “Adam thtill lives in Philly and Elliot’th off in...fucking Thailand? Who knowth anymore. But they both use Facebook all the time, so Mom keepth ‘em posted on stuff.”

“Shit, I haven’t been online for like...years,” Drew said, shaking his head. “I don’t miss it, that shit always stressed me out.” He glanced aside at Daph and gripped her shoulder affectionately. “What about you? What’s been goin’ on with you?”

“Oh. I mean. Y’know, not much,” Daph shrugged, swallowing a lump in her throat. As she shifted in her seat, she became uncomfortably aware of the bulge around her stomach that settled in her lap. “You see Mom yet?”

“Uhh...No,” Drew said, laughing anxiously. “She doesn’t know I’m in town yet. I was afraid she’d try to make me go to church with her or something. I’ll see her tomorrow.”

“Oh...cool,” Daph said, nodding to herself. “I mean, I’d do the thame thing. I do go to mass thometimes to make her feel better.”

“I’m really glad you still live in town,” Drew said. “It makes me feel better that one of us is close by her.”

“I love the city, I wouldn’t wanna live anywhere elthe.” As Daph said ‘city,’ her tongue made a whistling sound through her front teeth, to which Drew started laughing as he pulled Daph into another side-hug and squeezed her shoulders.

“You’re so fucking cute,” he snickered as Daph wiggled in his grip before elbowing him in the side.

“Eat a dick.”

“I plan on it,” Drew responded, wiggling his eyebrows. “I only just got into town.”

“Jethuth Christ,” Daph sighed, but she smirked as she sat back into the couch. Finally, she was starting to relax. “So how’th it been out in woodth? You thtill like being a park ranger?”

“Shit, half the time it doesn’t even feel like work,” Drew sighed as he leaned back in the chair. “I love it, though. I wish I could stay out there year-round, but I gotta socialize every once in a while so I don’t go crazy.”

“*More* crazy,” Daph corrected him. The Wrestlemania tape continued playing on the television, but the two of them were barely watching it anymore.

“True,” he agreed. “But I can’t drink out there. That’s the worst part about it. I don’t even wanna get shithoused or nothing, I just wanna get a little buzz going in the evening, y’know?”

“Uh-huh,” Daph nodded, wondering if she was getting into dangerous territory. “I don’t...really drink all that much.”

“You drink a *little*, right?” Drew said, sitting up. “I really wanted to go get a beer if you were in town.”

“I uh...I can’t really...” Daph swallowed as the truth clung to the tip of her tongue, but what came out instead was, “I got work tomorrow.”

“So? Just one drink. I’ll buy. We’ll even get something to eat.”

“I really can’t, dude. I’m thorry.”

“Why? You got a marathon coming up or something?” Her brother conspicuously glanced down at her pudgy sides, his mouth curling into the ghost of a frown.

“I...I can’t drink. Right now. Because.” Daph’s heart pounded in her chest as she wrung her hands together in her lap, just a few inches away from the baby growing in her womb. She’d told everyone from her friends to her coworkers

easily enough, so why was it so hard to get the truth out to her own brother?

“Because?” Drew repeated, shrugging. “If you don’t wanna drink, that’s fine. I just wanted-”

“Because. I. Am. Puh.” Daph hesitated and took a breath. “Puh. Re. Ga. Nent.”

Drew didn’t freeze dramatically, but he stopped in place like someone had just hit his pause button. He cocked his head to the side and opened his mouth slightly.

“...What?” He said, speaking like the word was being pushed out of him.

“I. Uh.” Daph swallowed again and shifted to the side to give him a better look at her stomach.

“Pregnant.”

Drew kept his gaze locked onto her face for a moment, then pulled his attention down to his sister’s middle, which he seemed to just realize wasn’t just chubby, but distinctly rounded.

“With like...” Drew said, trailing off. “...A baby?”

“Yeah...” Daph said, before furrowing her brow and staring at him. “*Yeah* with a baby, what the fuck elthe would I be pregnant with?”

“I don’t know! I just meant like...” Drew trailed off and did a double-take between Daph’s face and her stomach. He then shook his head violently, his hat falling off his head, as he raised his arms in the air. “*What the fuck?*”

“Uh-huh,” Daph nodded, sighing dejectedly and resting a hand on her belly. “That’s...pretty much what I’ve been up to.”

Drew hopped up from the couch and strode into the middle of the floor, his hands on his head. He turned in a circle for a minute, then sat back down, blinking like he’d just woken up with a spotlight in his face.

“You alright?” Daph asked. Drew had always been a bit of a drama queen.

“Uh... Yeah. Yeah. I uhh...” Her brother scratched between his ears and put his hat back on. “Sorry...It’s a lot to process...”

“Is it?” Daph asked. “I’m not *dying* or anything.”

“I guess,” Drew said. He paused, then raised his hands and added, “Which is *good!* Obviously. Just...y’know. Big news.”

“Mom already knows. I kinda thought she wath gonna tell you.”

“I live in the goddamn forest for half the year. No internet, no phone.” Drew glanced down at her belly again and dreamily reached his hand out toward it. Just before his fingers brushed her shirt, he jerked his hand back and glanced up at his sister.

“It’th fine,” Daph shrugged. “Go for it.”

“N-No, I was just gonna...uh...” Drew anxiously twiddled the fingers of his hand as it hovered between them before awkwardly clearing his throat and putting a hand on Daph’s belly.

“What the fuuuuuuck,” he breathed, spreading his fingers out over his sister’s pregnant middle and moving his hand from side-to-side, as if measuring it. Daph sat back and watched Drew’s face as a hundred different emotions flickered over it like a dying lightbulb. She was so selective about who could touch her belly, but figured it was the best way for her brother to wrap his head around the situation. With the heel of his palm touching her right side, the baby wiggled softly inside Daph.

“*Ooohhh my God,*” Drew screamed as he withdrew his hand to his chest and leapt from his seat on the couch to the armrest, his eyes pinned wide open in shock. He flapped his hands in front of his chest in a panic. “*Ohhh my Gooood,* I felt it *moving!*”

“Drew, c’mon,” Daph said, frowning. She rubbed the side of her stomach as the baby nudged out, so softly she could barely feel it. “Chill the fuck out, it’th just a baby.”

“But it’s not like.... *out yet!*” Drew shouted, his tail twitching wildly behind him off the couch. He put his hands on his head, then slid them down his face,

pulling his eyelids down as he did. “*What the fuuuuuck, dude.*”

“It’th not an *it*, okay?” Daph snapped. “It’th a *girl*. *She’s* a girl.” She scowled at her brother, more irritated at his rudeness toward the baby than his overblown reaction at her pregnancy.

“Okay...Okay, then I felt *her* moving,” Drew said. He didn’t move from the armrest, but he seemed to be calming down, as if finding out the baby’s gender was enough to convince him that it wasn’t an alien inhabiting his little sister.

“Okay. Sorry. Am I freaking out?”

“Yeth,” Daph huffed, frowning. “You’re freaking out.”

“’Kay. Sorry.” Drew nodded, rubbing his hands together and glancing around the apartment. Carefully, he slid down from the armrest and sank back down into the seat next to Daph, but kept his hands pinned at his side. He swallowed anxiously and stared at her, but seemed to be resisting the urge to stare at her belly again. Daph rolled her eyes and pushed herself to her paws.

“Okay, here. Look.” She stood in the middle of the room and turned to the side, showing Drew her profile as she pulled her shirt tight to outline the rounded shape of her belly, protruding out just a few inches farther than her toes. She then pulled her shirt up to her chest, exposing the shaggy white fur of her bump that seemed to glow in the dim light of her apartment. “Thee? There it ith. It’th not that big a deal.”

Drew sat on the edge of the couch, his hands clasped between his knees, and stared at Daph’s belly with his head cocked to the side and his jaw slack. After snapping his jaw shut, he shook his head and blinked like he was just waking up from a deep sleep.

“Yeah...Okay, sure. Sure. It’s uh...uh...” Drew scratched behind his ears again before climbing down from the couch and shuffling across the carpet on his knees, his head almost at the height of Daph’s chest.

“You’re not gonna freak out again, are you?” Daph asked as Drew hovered his hand above her belly.

“No.” He glanced up at her face, then back to her stomach before biting his lip.

“Okay, I’ll try not to.”

“Jethuth Christ,” Daph groaned as she tucked her hands behind her back. “Get it outta your thystem, then.”

Drew sighed, making Daph squirm as she felt his breath against her sensitive belly, before gently resting his hand on his sister’s baby bump again. As his palm slid over her fur, the baby moved again just beneath his fingers. Drew shuddered, his tail going stiff behind him, and he clenched his teeth.

“Hooooly shit,” he said, walking his fingers across Daph’s belly to find where the little squirrel was moving inside her. “That’s...that’s so fucking *weird*.”

“Yeah, imagine being on *thith* side of it,” Daph said. “You get used to it, though.”

“God damn, Daph. You’re like...you’re gonna have a *baby*.”

“Lookth like it.”

“And if it’s a girl...that’s like...” Drew paused to think, then glanced up at her. “This is my *niece*, right?”

“Well...uh...Not really.” Daph scratched the back of her head. “Thing ith, the baby ithn’t really *mine*. ”

Her brother blinked up at her for a moment, chewing on the inside of his cheek. Drew opened and closed his mouth a few times, as if a dozen completely thoughts were failing to reach his tongue.

“I...um...How...does that work?” he finally said as he gestured to his sister’s belly.

“I’m a thurrogate. I’m jutht carrying the baby for someone elthe.”

“And...this is something you *wanted* to do?” Drew asked, a skeptical look on his face.

“I mean...it’th for a friend. They asked *me*, yknow? They needed help.”

“That’s a *big* thing to ask help for,” Drew said, glancing back at her belly. He put his hand underneath her bump and lifted, as if trying to measure her weight.

“*Thtop,*” Daph snapped, slapping Drew on the back of her head. “That feelth *weird.*”

“Sorry,” he said, wincing as he rubbed the spot where she’d hit him. Drew leaned back on his knees, his arms folded over his chest as he continued to stare at Daph’s belly. “So who’s the dad?”

“I...uh...” Daph stalled by rolling her shirt back down and smoothing it out over her bump. Drew raised an eyebrow as Daph rocked in place in the middle of the floor. “I don’t...he’th the huthband of the friend who asked me to carry.”

“So...like, do I know him?” Drew shrugged. “Like, can I go on Facebook and look up the dude that knocked up my sister?”

“I gueth!?” Daph threw up her arms, rocking her weight anxiously from one leg to the other. “I just...I don’t know if it’th okay to say...”

“Why not?” Drew asked as he stood up and moved to the couch. “Is it some kinda secret?”

“I...not really, but it’th...” Daph glanced down at her stomach and chewed on her tongue, cradling it in her hands as she felt Georgia’s baby wiggling.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Drew said, holding his hands out. “I didn’t know it would be an issue, I shouldn’t have asked. I’ll drop it.”

“I dunno if it’th okay to break their privacy, y’know?” Daph shrugged as she wrung her hands together. “They’re payin’ me and all, tho like...I guess they’re kinda my ‘clients’ or thomething like that.”

“Whoa, hang on,” Drew said, sitting upright. He poked a finger into his sister’s belly, then held it in his fingers like a basketball. “You’re getting *paid* for this?”

“Yeah,” Daph answered with a wide grin. “Ithn’t that fucking cool?”

“How much are you making?”

“Like thirty grand.” Daph held up her hands and spread them apart. “Y’know, thtretched over the whole pregnancy.”

“*Thirty grand?*” Drew shouted, his ears standing straight up. “Holy fuck, that’s like a whole second job. And you don’t even have to really *do* anything!”

“Hold up, it’s not like that,” Daph said, raising a hand. She winced, her back and legs getting sore, before shuffling past Darwin and flopping back into her seat on the couch, her belly pushing out from under her shirt as she did. “I gotta stick to a diet, get a lotta exercise, got to doctor’s appointments all the time, keep my blood pressure down, all this shit.”

“I guess, but you’d be doing half that shit anyway, right?” Drew said as he turned around on his knees to face her while still sitting on the floor. “Besides, most chicks have kids for *free*. And you won’t even have to take care of it when it’s born!”

“*She*. Not it, *she*.” Daph frowned and shot Drew a look before glancing down at her belly and shrugging as she gave it an affectionate pat. “I’m not saying it’s not an awesome gig, just that I’m not doing *nothing*.”

“Alright, alright, I get it,” her brother sighed as he climbed to his paws.

In the moment of silence before either of them spoke, a loud gurgle issued out from Daph’s stomach at the same time the baby visibly turned over inside her. Drew grimaced at the sight as Daph blushed underneath her fur and flicked her tail.

“Was that *you* or the *baby*?” Drew asked, pointing at his sister’s stomach.

“Uh...I’m not there,” Daph answered. “But...you still wanna get that drink? ‘Cause I’m fucking starving.”

“I think I need a drink *now* more than *before*,” Drew said, pulling off his hat to smooth back his hair.

“As long as they got food, too.” Daph wiggled in her seat, braced her arms against the couch, then pushed herself to her paws with a lunge and a quiet ‘*hup*.’ “Lemme just change into a shirt I’m not about to fall out of.”

“Shit...” Drew breathed as he looked down at his gravid sister. “You really *are* fucking pregnant.”

“Uhh...yeah. Like, really obviouthly.” Daph said, throwing her hands up.

“I know but...uh...” Drew rubbed the back of his head. “I don’t spend a lotta time around girls, y’know?”

“No kidding,” Daph snorted before shuffling into the bedroom for a new outfit.

The two of them left the apartment a short while later after Daph had changed into a pair of jogging pants with a stretchy, elastic waistband and an extra-large Yankees jersey that served well to cover her bump, if not exactly hide it.

“Shouldn’t we take the elevator?” Drew said as Daph headed to the stairs.

“We’re only on the third floor, it jutht takes a...” She paused as she noticed Drew’s eyes flick to her stomach. “Oh c’mon, I’m fine. I haven’t done shit today, anyway. I could use the exercithe.”

Drew tapped his paw on the floor before shrugging and following Daph down the stairs, his long legs letting him easily catch up with his sister. As they descended, she became aware at how uncomfortably close her brother was walking next to her and how he slowed his steps to stay behind her.

“*Drew.*”

“What?”

“Get off my ass, I can walk down my own goddamn stairth.”

“I know, I know...but I figure your balance is probably all thrown off now.”

“I can thtill *walk* by mythelf.”

“Okay, okay, just trying to be helpful. They’re pretty hard stairs.”

Daph rolled her eyes and took a few extra steps down to put distance between her and Drew, while silently hoping he didn’t see her nearly trip on the landing.

“Ugh, smells like trash,” Drew said, wrinkling his nose as they exited the apartment building.

“It always thmells like trash,” Daph shrugged. “It’th six-thirty on a Sunday, what

do you expect?”

“It’s so much *stronger* now after living out in the park for so long,” Drew said, rubbing his nose and sniffing. “Shit, I can’t deal with this city sometimes.”

“Don’t be tho prissy,” Daph said. However, as she walked and passed a pile of garbage set next to the curb, the scent of rotten meat caught her nose, her sense of smell already sensitive by pregnancy, and she glanced at her brother with a grimace. “Okay, maybe it’th pretty bad today.”

“Where are we headed?” Drew asked, staring up at the buildings above like it was the first time he’d ever seen them.

“There’th a Mexican place a few blockth away. I figure they could make you a margarita or thomething.”

“Ooohhhhh *shit*,” Drew said, hopping excitedly as he walked. “Fuck, I would *kill* for a margarita right now.”

“Yeah, me too,” Daph mumbled. She’d never been much of a big drinker, even before getting pregnant, but she was starting to miss it. The phrase ‘you don’t miss something ‘til it’s gone’ came to mind.

Drew kept at her side, slowing his gait to keep pace with his sister’s slower pace. He glanced down at her with a curious expression as they walked. Daph felt her eyes on her and met his gaze just as he smiled.

“What’th your problem?” she asked, accusingly.

“You’re walking funny,” he snickered.

“...I am?” Daph slowed her walk, which until then had felt perfectly natural.

“Yeah. Like, you’re leaning back and kinda wobbling.” Drew leaned his torso back and bent his legs slightly as he mimicked his sister’s pregnant waddle.

“Fuck *you*, it ith *not* that bad!” Daph yelled at him. She pinned her hands on her hips and gestured to her protruding stomach. “*You* try walking normal with all *thith* hanging off you.”

“I’m just fucking with you, Daph,” Drew chuckled. “It’s cute. Really.”

“Whatever,” Daph sniffed, flicking her tail indignantly as she turned on her heel and continued down the empty sidewalk, but was far more aware about how she was walking.

The restaurant was down a smaller side street and sat between a locksmith and a cigar shop. From the outside, it looked run-down and unassuming, but Drew was surprised to find the inside a vibrant mass of colors and Mexican-style decorations hanging from the walls and ceiling, a drastic contrast to the gray and black city outside. A short-furred canine girl, likely only a year or two out of high school, stood behind the register and glanced up from a nearby computer screen. She gave Drew a polite smile, but her eyes lit up in recognition at Daph.

“Oh! You’re early!” she said brightly as she pulled a menu from the box next to the register. After glancing between the two squirrels, she asked Daph, “Two this time?”

“Yeah, for once,” Daph nodded. She rested a hand on her belly and added, “Well I guess *three*, technically.”

“I guess so!” the server smiled as she led the two of them toward a free table in the middle of the room. Daph pulled her chair far back from the table so she could sit without bumping into it as Darwin flopped into the seat beside her. The girl put her hand on her hip and pointed at Daph. “Your usual, right?”

“Probably,” Daph shrugged before gesturing to Drew. “I know he wants a margarita.”

“I’ll let your server know,” the girl said cheerfully as she shuffled back to the kitchen. Drew noticed his sister staring as she left.

“So...” he said, leaning on the table. “You come here a lot?”

“Uh...yeah. Usually late.” Daph scratched behind her ear. “I get...cravingth.”

“For the food? Or...” Drew glanced over his shoulder at the canine girl, who was standing in the doorway of the kitchen.

“Well...she’th cute, but too young,” Daph said under her breath. “And yknow...”

baby getth in the way.”

“I figure that’s probably gonna make dating hard,” Drew said, but blinked at the slight smile on Daph’s face.

“You’d be thurprised…”

As Drew looked at her curiously, movement caught the corner of his eye. Glancing up, he found himself staring eye-to-eye with a tall, enormously muscular bull with thick stubble on his chin, his work shirt stretched tight across his chest. He smiled gently down at the two of them, apparently blind to Drew’s slack-jawed stare.

“How you guys doin’,” he said in a deep, but soft voice. “I’m Fernando, I’m gonna be takin’ care of you this evenin’. Get you started with some drinks?” He glanced at Daph first, his eyes inevitably flicking to her belly.

“Water for right now,” Daph said. She glanced at her brother out of the corner of her eye and found him still staring up at the bull. She kicked him under the table hard enough to snap him back to reality.

“O-oh, uhh…” Drew swallowed and glanced down at his menu. “M-margarita.”

“We got a few kinds, you in the mood for somethin’?”

“L-lime would be great,” he said.

“Water and a lime ‘rita,” the bull said with a quick nod. “Gotcha. Be back with those in a sec.”

He flashed a quick smile to the two siblings before quickly heading back to the kitchen, his hooves making heavy clapping noises on the floor. The moment he was out of sight, Drew turned to Daph with a wide-eyed, slack-jawed look on his face.

“Gaaaa-aaaayy,” Daph said under her breath with a smirk.

“I fucking *hope* so,” Drew breathed. “Because god *damn*.”

“He’th new, I haven’t seen him before,” Daph said, shifting in her chair to take

pressure off her lower back. She wished the server had given them a booth to sit in, but was also worried she was too big to get in and out of one comfortably.

“Yeah? Well...” Drew paused to glance over his shoulder, sitting up to see if he could get a peek of Fernando from the window looking into the kitchen. “Maybe we should eat here more often...”

Drew flipped open his menu and scanned his eyes over it for only a few seconds before getting distracted and letting his vision drift around the room.

“So what you been up to?” he asked Daph. “Y’know, besides... *all that.*” He raised his hand and gestured vaguely toward her belly.

“Eh, y’know,” she shrugged. “Not much. Thtill working at that thtupid diner.”

“You’re still working? What about the thirty grand for getting knocked up?”

“It’th not as much as you think it is, ‘specially when it’s paid out a little at a time,” Daph explained. “I don’t mind though, it’th been pretty easy. I got a good excuse to get off my pawth whenever I need to.”

“I wish you didn’t have to, though,” Drew said with a frown.

“I’m not made of glass, dude. Like you thaid, I don’t really have to *do* anything. It’th like having a thecond job that takes care of itself.”

Before Drew could respond, Fernando returned, clutching a glass of water that looked like a teacup in comparison to his massive hand. In his other, he carefully pinched the stem of a gigantic, neon-green margarita glass, rimmed with rock salt around the rim. As he set the drink down in front of Drew, a thin, rainbow-colored bracelet slipped out from under the bull’s watch. At the sight of it, Drew flashed Daph an ecstatic grin.

“O-kay, you guys know whatcha want?” Fernando asked, putting his hands on his hips. As the bull’s shirt pulled tighter across his beefy chest, Daph could almost *hear* her brother’s heartbeat from across the table.

“Try your margarita, Drew,” Daph said. “You theem pretty *thirsty.*”

Drew shot a look at his sister, but their waiter didn’t seem to notice the

innuendo.

“I alwayth get the thame thing,” Daph said to Fernando. “Two enchiladas, one bean and one cheethe, covered in hot sauce and as *much* guacamole as you can fit on the plate. Oh, and add a thide of nachoth with jalapenos.” She rested a hand on her belly and licked her lips as her gaze drifted off into the distance. “I... *might* want more after that, but get back to me...”

“I think I can manage it.” Fernando turned to Drew, who was sipping his margarita through a straw and gazing at their waiter’s thick biceps. “What about you?”

“O-oh...shit, I didn’t even look yet,” Drew stuttered as he flipped open his menu and held it in front of his face.

“No rush, bro,” the bull said with a smile. Drew let out a faint giggle before loudly clearing his throat to disguise it. Fernando stood above them in an awkward silence for a few minutes, twiddling his thumbs together. As Daph grunted uncomfortably and shifted in her chair again, the bull glanced down at her with a warm smile.

“You guys must be excited,” he said.

Drew glanced up from his menu and exchanged a confused look with Daph.

“Uh...I guess?” Daph answered, but wasn’t sure what she was agreeing to.

“When are you due?” Fernando asked.

“I thtill got about three months left, I think,” Daph said with a hand on her middle. She and Drew suddenly realized the bull’s implication an exchanged a quick glance, both their faces wincing in disgust. They quickly jabbed a finger at one another and shouted in unison up at Fernando.

“*Brother.*”

“*Sister.*”

He blinked down at them in a moment of confusion before slapping a hand to his forehead.

“Oh!” Fernando laughed as he held out a hand. “Oh my God, my bad, my bad! I just kinda assumed...Sorry guys, didn’t mean to make it weird.”

“It’s all good,” Drew said as he smiled up at the waiter. He maintained eye contact as he handed over the menu. “Y’know, I can’t really decide what I want. What’s *your* favorite thing on the menu?”

Daph sighed exasperatedly and turned her attention to her water. The baby kicked her softly, as if she was fed up with Drew’s flirting, too.

“Hmmm...I think I can figure something out,” Fernando said as he took the menu back and flashed another smile before heading back to the kitchen.

“*That* was fucking weird,” Drew said. “That’s never happened before.”

“Yeah, I know,” Daph nodded. “Most people assume I’m way younger than I am.”

“You remember the last time I came up and we tried to go to that club?” Drew said with a smirk. “And they didn’t wanna let us in because they thought you were my little *brother*?”

“*Yeeahh*, what the *fuck*!” Daph snickered. “I guess I just got a haircut or something?”

“Maybe, who knows?” Drew shrugged. He leaned over the table slightly and reached over with one of his long arms to poke his sister’s baby belly again. “Though I’m pretty sure nobody’s gonna be mistaking you for a *boy* anytime soon.”

“...No, I guess not,” Daph said, rubbing her stomach thoughtfully.

“Fucking wild, dude,” Drew said as his gaze lingered on his sister’s stomach. He turned back to his margarita and rotated the glass counter-clockwise so he could lick a mouthful of salt from the rim before drinking more of it. “*Mmm*. That’s *awesome*. Here, taste some.” Drew pushed the hot sauce and salt shakers to the side as he slid the glass across the table to Daph.

“Are you serious?”

“You don’t have to drink it, just put it on your tongue and swish it around. Taste it.”

“I’m not gonna do that. Geor-” Daph suddenly caught herself about to say Georgia’s name and quickly amended the sentence. “The parentth would kill me if I even *looked* at that thing too close.”

“...Yeah, okay. You’re right,” Drew nodded as he pulled the glass back toward him. The drink was half-empty and her brother was already buzzed. He took a sip from the straw and shuddered as he smacked his lips. “God, I love tequila but it goes through me like a fucking hose. Be right back.”

Drew hopped up from his seat and headed toward the bathrooms, his short tail bobbing behind him as he left. It was the first time since he arrived that Daph had a moment to herself, and she realized with surprise just how anxious she felt. Her shoulders were tense, she was fidgeting in her chair, bouncing her legs beneath the table, and her knuckles were getting sore from how hard she wrung her hands together. She was obviously happy to see Drew; of her three brothers, he was the youngest and closest to her age, meaning the two of them grew up close, but beneath that happiness was an unexpected tension that centered around her pregnancy. Daph sipped her water quietly and wrapped a hand around her belly, feeling for the first time in months that the baby in her womb was a secret that had been discovered.

“*Hooo*, shit,” Drew sighed as he dropped into his chair. “I’m surprised I wasn’t pissing *green*. Isn’t that a pregnancy thing? Having to pee a lot? Does that happen to you?”

“Uh...Yeah, thometimes,” Daph nodded. She thumbed hair out of her eyes and faked a smile at her brother to hide the moment of insecurity she’d just had. However, it had the opposite effect on Drew; at her forced grin, he stopped drinking and frowned at her curiously.

“Hey...are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Daph said, bouncing her leg under the table. “Why?”

“You seem...on edge.” He stared at her for a moment before sitting up in his chair. “...Are you not happy to see me?”

“Wh- No! Dude, of *courthe* I’m happy to thee you,” Daph blurted out, reaching across the table.

“I mean, I just dropped in on you outta nowhere and figured it’d be okay,” Drew said. “If it’s not, I can go. I don’t mind. We can get together another time.”

“Drew *no*, I don’t...it’th not that...I’m...” She clicked her tongue against her teeth and sighed, running a hand through her hair. “Sorry...It’th not that I didn’t wanna thee you but...I do feel weird about it.”

“Why?”

“I...I think I feel weird about you seeing me...like *thith*,” Daph sighed, smoothing her hands over her protruding belly.

“Really? You do?” Drew blinked at her in surprise and a little hurt. “I...I’m sorry, did I do something or-”

“No, no, it’th not you. But...if you didn’t show up today...I wathn’t sure I wath gonna tell you about it, either.” Daph chewed on her tongue and glanced up at Drew, seeing the concern written in his eyes. “Okay...I know it’th thtupid but...y’know when we went that club last time and they thought I wath your brother...is it weird that I kinda liked that?”

“What do you mean?” Drew asked.

“It’th like...I always really liked the relationship we had, y’know? We both liked wrestling and sportth and running and climbing and fighting and shit like that. I liked that we had a lot in common. When we were kidth, I alwayth wanted to do *boy thtuff* with you because I thought that’th what you wanted, so I’d act more like a boy around you. I guess that feeling never really went away...”

Before Drew could respond, Fernando returned with three plates and a grin. He set the enchiladas and the nachos in front of Daph before sliding over a sizzling fajita in front of Drew.

“This is my *favorite*,” Fernando said to him. “It’s got really lean meat and a lot of protein, but doesn’t sit to heavy in your stomach. Let me know what you think, okay bro?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Drew said with barely a side glance to Fernando, his attention still turned to his sister. The bull blinked awkwardly, glancing between them, before clopping away. “So you’re saying, when we were little, you thought I didn’t want to hang out with you unless you acted like a boy?”

“Sort of,” Daph said, pausing to lift one of the nachos to her mouth. She chewed on it for a moment before muttering to herself, “Thith ith really good...”

“But that was when we were kids. Do you really think I’ll think less of you just because you got pregnant?”

“Not *less* of me but... *different*,” Daph shrugged, looking down at her stomach. “I was thcared that thingth wouldn’t really be the thame with us anymore. That you’d treat me different.”

“Daph, c’mon, I wouldn’t do that.”

“But you already *are*. You keep acting like I’m gonna fall over and fuckin’ *break* at any thecond.”

“I’m just worried about you, okay? You got a kid in you, you got more to take care of.”

“But you *know* how much I hate when you fuckin’ *baby* me like that!” Daph huffed. “You and mom and Adam and Elliot alwayth treat me like that and I can’t *thtand* it. I know I gotta be careful right now and I *am*. You don’t gotta act like I’m a fuckin’ *bomb* you gotta keep from going off.”

“Your my little sister, Daph. My *pregnant* little sister. I can’t help that I feel like I need to look after you.”

“I’m altho a fuckin’ *adult*, okay? I can take care of mythelf. You don’t gotta *babysit* me anymore.”

“I didn’t think you...” Drew trailed off into silence while chewing on his lip. After a sigh, he said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel like that. I just wanted to help because you’re having a baby and you’re my sister and I love you.”

As Daph listened to her brother’s apology, her vision blurred as her eyes

suddenly got misty. She sniffed and quickly snatched her napkin from the table to dry her eyes, turning away from Drew.

“Fuck...shit...thorry...” she huffed. “I just... *ugh*... My emotionth are all over the place. One minute I’m pissed off, one minute I’m crying...”

Daph felt an arm around her shoulder before turning around as her brother squeezed her. Just as she was starting to get her sudden tears under control, they came back stronger than before. Instead of pulling away, she leaned toward Drew and let him pull her into a hug, still sniffing into his shirt.

“Listen to me,” he said. “I’ve already *got* brothers. I’m *good*. I’ve got that *covered*. But I only have *one* little sister. You don’t need to act any kind of certain way for me to like you, okay? You wanna watch wrestling and kung-fu movies, fine. You wanna have a baby, that’s fine too. I love you either way. I was... *surprised* to see you knocked up, but that’s all I was. Surprised.” He took one hand away from Daph’s shoulder and patted her round stomach. “This is a good thing. I’m happy for you. Even if she’s only my *sort-of* niece, I’m excited for you and whoever the parents are.”

Daph sniffed and nodded, pulling away from Drew’s chest to look down at his hand on her belly. The baby wiggled underneath his palm, but he didn’t pull away or jump again. Instead, he slid his hand farther down her belly to better feel where the little unborn squirrel was kicking.

“Hey...you remember Georgia, right?” Daph said.

“Of course I remember Georgia,” Drew said, raising an eyebrow. “She practically lived with us when we were kids.”

“...The baby is hers,” Daph said, quietly. “Her huthband, Darwin, is the father, but I’m having the baby for her.”

“*Georgia?*” Drew exclaimed, sitting back in his chair. “This is *Georgia’s* baby?”

“They needed thomeone to carry for ‘em,” Daph shrugged. “How could I say no?”

“Holy *shit*,” Drew said. He shook his head in disbelief, but smiled. “Well, that’s better than if it was some rando’s baby, right?”

“I wouldn’t do it if it wath anybody elthe,” Daph said, rubbing her stomach. She sat up and jabbed a finger into Drew’s chest. “But that’th why thith baby is *not* your niece. She’th *Georgia’th daughter*, no matter what.”

“C’mon, Georgia likes me, doesn’t she?” Drew smirked. “She’d let me be an *honorary* uncle or something, right?”

“You’d have to ask her,” Daph said as she shook her head. “I vote ‘no.’”

“That’s not fair. Feel that?” Drew leaned over and touched Daph’s stomach again, just as the baby began to flutter and kick. “She already likes me, see?”

“She’s jutht hungry, don’t get your hopeth up,” Daph said as she swatted her brother’s hand away and unwrapped an enchilada from its tinfoil wrapping.

“You’re hungry, I’m sober,” Drew said as he pulled his margarita closer, licked more salt from the rim, then slurped half of it down in a single gulp.

“You thuck dick like that?” Daph asked after swallowing a mouthful of guacamole.

“Better believe it,” Drew said with a sly wink. “So how about, after this, we go get you some pickes and ice cream of whatever, then we go back to your place and finish watching those Wrestlemania tapes.”

“Will you be drunk?”

“Oh hell yeah,” Drew nodded. “Drunk enough for the both of us.”

“I’m cool with that,” Daph nodded as she sat back and patted her belly. “But too much wresting expothure and Georgia’th baby might be born with a theme song.”

“That would be *awesome*,” Drew laughed as he spooned the contents of his fajita into a tortilla.

“You got the bill, right?” Daph asked as she stuffed another handful of nachos in her mouth. “Cause I’m eatin’ for two and I can already tell thith ain’t gonna fill me up.”

“Go for it,” Drew nodded as he shoved the fajita in his mouth. “You already ate like that *before* getting knocked up.”

“Keep it up and you’ll get to tell people you got your ass kicked by a pregnant chick.”

“I don’t need to fight you, all I gotta do is out-waddle you.”

Daph snorted and shook her head as she took another bite of her meal, quietly satisfied in the knowledge that, no matter what changed, her brother would always be her brother.

The Morning After

Before going to bed at night, Jason made a habit of pulling the blinds shut so that the sun wouldn't get in his eyes in the morning as it rose between the buildings. Because of this, he woke up confused and groggy as the morning sunlight glared down at him from the window. The doberman blinked uncomfortably and rolled over to put his back to the window, squeezing his eyes shut to try and dispel the halos in his vision. Unfortunately, even with the pillow pulled over his head, once he was up, he wasn't going back to sleep. It just wasn't how his body worked.

With a disappointed huff, Jason opened his eyes and blinked away the groggy blur. With his half-asleep brain, he couldn't help but notice that something felt 'off,' but he couldn't put his finger on why. He was lying on the right half of his bed instead of the middle, which had been his habit since Samantha had broken up with him, and the bedspread was balled up at the foot of the mattress. He was also naked beneath the sheets, something he wasn't prone to doing. It wasn't until he heard the groan of the pipes and a toilet flushing did he finally put two-and-two together and remember that he wasn't alone in his apartment.

From outside the door of his bedroom, Daph shuffled in with her cell phone in her hand. Her short hair was messy and untamed, along with bushy fur of her tail bobbing behind her with every step. She was wearing nothing but one of Jason's t-shirts, stolen from a drawer, that barely even fit over her rounded, pregnant belly. Just the sight of her made his ears perk up.

"Hey," he said, his voice still low and groggy. Daph glanced up from her phone and met Jason's eyes before grinning back at him with her distinctive, buck-toothed smile.

"Hey," she responded as she waddled to the other end of the bed and plugged her phone back into the charger. "Didn't know you were up."

"Just now," Jason groaned, stretching under the sheets and lazily wagging his tail. He suddenly sat upright and tried to lean around Daph to check his clock.

“Fuck, what time is it?”

“It’th like seven in the morning,” Daph said reassuringly as she dropped onto bed with a huff. “It’th still early.”

Jason sighed in relief and dropped back to his pillow. He didn’t need to be at work for at least three more hours. He glanced to the side again and watched Daph at the other end of the bed. She sat with her back to him, typing on her phone with both thumbs. Her tail curled up just enough to hike up Jason’s shirt and reveal she wasn’t wearing anything underneath. As he sat up and craned his neck to get a better look at her ass, he unexpectedly caught a face-full of copper-red fur as she accidentally batted him in the face with her tail.

“*Hey,*” Jason spluttered and spat as he pushed it out of the way. Daph glanced over her shoulder with a grin and began playfully bouncing her tail off his face.

“Oh, *sorry*. Wath. I. Bothering. You?”

“*Stop!*” he shouted as he gripped her tail in one hand, surprised at how much of it was just puffy fur. Daph tugged in his grip before yanking her tail back with her hand and throwing it around her neck like a boa. She set her phone down on the bedside table and flopped onto her back, her belly rising above her like a sloping hill. She threw her arms over her face and stretched with a loud and satisfied groan, flexing the long and flexible toes at the end of her paws. Jason watched as his shirt rode up over her round middle as she stretched and was almost disappointed when she tugged it back down again.

“You have fun last night?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Hell yeah,” Daph answered with a deep sigh before rolling onto her side to face Jason. He liked the way the weight of her belly shifted against her. She gazed up at him for a moment with her expressive, green eyes before lightly punching him in the shoulder. “I gueth you’re a pretty good fuck.”

“Glad you think so,” he smirked. “When did I fall asleep?”

“Like, around ten. Right after you came,” Daph said. “You were out like a fuckin’ light, too.”

“Sorry, that happens sometimes,” Jason shrugged, pulling the sheets closer to his

chest. “When I get too relaxed and all.”

“I figured,” Daph shrugged. She reached down and slid her fingers over Jason’s bulge beneath the sheets, making him shudder. “Took your *dick* longer, though. I wath stuck on you for like twenty minutes.”

“Yeah...yeah that uhh...happens,” Jason said, grinning sheepishly.

“It wathn’t a problem ‘til I had to pee,” Daph said. She slid her hand over her belly and glanced down at herself. “And when she thtarded kickin’ me in the bladder, too.”

“That happens?”

“All the fuckin’ time,” Daph rolled her eyes. “It’th like...I gotta be near a toilet all the time jutht in case the kid’th gonna be like...” She turned over and mimed a kick into the air, “*Pow* all up inthide me.”

“Well...uh...” Jason shifted again and smirked. “Sorry you got stuck on my dick.”

“I gueth I can forgive you,” Daph said, exaggeratedly rolling her eyes. “Jutht don’t let it happen again.”

“Will there be an ‘again?’” Jason asked, coyly. Daph scratched the top of her head, then shrugged.

“We’ll thee,” she said.

“You’re playing pretty hard-to-get for a girl that’s already bottomless in my bed,” Jason added with a smirk.

“Hey, jutht cause I got knocked up for money doethn’t mean I’m *easy*,” Daph said, poking Jason in the chest.

“It wasn’t just for money, was it?” Jason said, daring to reach over and lay a hand on her belly. “You and Georgia were always close.”

“I mean...no, but the money *helpth*,” Daph shrugged, moving slightly to give Jason a better angle to touch her stomach. The doberman didn’t want to make it

awkward, so he pulled away and stretched again, feeling one of his legs slip free.

“I was so out of it I forgot you were even here,” Jason said.

“Really?” Daph snickered. “Did I fuck your brainth out that much?”

“I guess you did,” Jason said. He turned on his side again, propping his head up on his arm, and gazed down at Daph for a moment, trying to picture the squirrel in his bed alongside the scrappy, foul-mouthed tomboy he’d grown up with.

“What?” Daph asked, furrowing her brow.

“Nothing,” Jason said. “I just...I kinda never really expected us to end up like this.”

“Why not?” Daph responded, with the hint of a frown.

“I mean, I thought you more into *girls* for one thing,” Jason shrugged.

“Eeehhhhh...” Scratched her chin and chewed on the inside of her lip for a moment before raising her hand up and rocking it back and forth. “Like...kinda? I get into *moodth*, y’know?”

“You mean like a *craving*?” Jason added with a sly eyebrow wiggle.

“Like... *yeah*, actually. Kinda,” Daph nodded. She rolled onto her side with a slight grunt and rested her hands atop her belly, absentmindedly tapping her fingers on it. “It’th like...I prefer girlth most of the time, but then thometimes I’m like ‘Whoa, I could really go for thome dick right now.’”

Jason chuckled, making Daph jerk her gaze back toward him.

“What?”

“It’s just funny,” he smiled. “Like you get up and go ‘hmm, I think I kinda feel like some penis today.’”

“That’th what it’s like!” Daph said, slapping her hand on the mattress between them. She suddenly jumped before rubbing three fingers on a spot just below her left ribs. “Oop, I think I woke the baby up. Thorry, kid.”

Jason shifted across the mattress, freeing one of his legs from the sheets, and gingerly rested his palm just an inch beside hers. A little wiggling feeling nudged against his fingers, but it was too faint for him to tell for sure whether it was the baby or just his imagination. Then, a second later, a distinct lump thudded against the inside of Daph's belly, making her jump.

"Whoa, shit!" she laughed. "Kung-fu kick!"

"Here's another thing I...uh..." Jason hesitated as he felt Daph's baby turn under his palm. He picked his hand up and poked a thumb into her middle, soft and warm but with a firmness beneath the fat. "Didn't expect."

"Yeah, I'm with you on that one," Daph shrugged as she patted both hands on either side of her belly. She shrugged with a nonchalant click of her tongue and tucked her hands behind her head, pulling Jason's shirt farther up to expose her upper thighs and the bottom curve of her belly. The tan fur there reminded Jason of coffee after pouring extra cream in it. "But y'know, it's not like... a *bad* thing, is it?"

"No, no way," Jason responded while shaking his head. He glanced up to Daph's face while absentmindedly still rubbing her belly with one hand. "But it's already weird enough to see a friend of mine having a baby without ending up in *bed* with her the same time."

"Uh-huh," Daph said, glancing down distractedly before meeting eyes with Jason again and stifling a giggle.

"Y'know, I've just got this sort of... *image* of you in my head, what it was like when we were kids, and now...I mean, it's not a *bad* thing, but I guess I'm still trying to process it..."

"Mm-hmm," Daph said, shifting slightly on the bed and biting her lip.

"I guess I never really saw you as a *woman*, just as 'Daph.' And being close to you sorta...opened me up to this new possibility..."

"Hey, Jason?" Daph interrupted with a breathy groan. "I get you wanna talk, but I'm gettin' kinda mixed messageth, here."

Jason cocked his head to the side and saw that, without realizing it, his right

hand had been slowly migrating down Daph's rounded belly, his fingers just a few inches away from the space between her thighs. The doberman blinked, then quickly jerked his hand back and buried both his hands under the sheets while tucking his tail between his legs. Daph burst into a fit of laughter, her high voice chattering as Jason blushed beneath his fur and pinned his ears back.

"S-Sorry," he mumbled, swallowing a lump in his throat.

"About what?" Daph asked, still snickering. "We already fucked, didn't we?"

"I know...but now I feel..." Jason swallowed again and bit his lip as his eyes traveled from Daph's face to her rounded, heavy pregnant body, bulging out and barely concerned beneath his borrowed shirt. As she cocked her head and flicked her tail curiously, Jason blushed underneath his fur and felt a slight chubby start to tighten between his legs. With a groan, the doberman flipped onto his back and folded his pillow over his eyes.

"I'm such a creep," he mumbled under his breath.

"Who the fuck'th callin' you a creep?" Daph responded. She huffed and sat upright, crossing her legs as the weight of her belly settled down in her lap. "You theemed pretty into it last night."

"Well, I was kind of thinking more with my *dick* than my *head*, y'know?" Jason said, his eyes still covered. Daph looked down at him with a curious look on her face before it descended into a scowl.

"Oh. Okay. I get it," she said, bitterly. "Tho we were *all good* the night before, but now that you wake up and thee me in the light of day, you thuddenly decide you made a *mistake*. Do I fuckin' got that right, *Jason*?"

"No!" Jason said, bolting upright in bed and tossing the pillow aside to look Daph in the eye. "No no no no, that's not..." He scratched behind his ear while the pregnant squirrel stared at him accusingly, her tail flicking back and forth behind her like an angry metronome. "I swear, it's not about you. You're sexy, you always have been. It's just...like..." The doberman pinned his ears back and started making vague hand motions toward her belly.

"What is thith?" Daph asked, mimicking his signs. "I don't know what 'thith' means."

“Ugh, okay. I just feel weird that for like twelve years, I never really thought you were my *type*, but as soon as you get...uhhh...” Jason gestured again at her belly, her navel just a few inches away from touching his leg. “*Like this*, you suddenly turn me on for like...the first time ever.”

Daph clicked her tongue against her teeth and raised an eyebrow.

“And that’th a problem?” she asked.

“I...I don’t know,” Jason said, rubbing his hands together in his lap. “But it makes me feel like...such a disgusting creep. Like a pervert or something.” He shrugged and looked down at his hands in his lap, swallowing a lump in his throat.

Daph chewed on the inside of her lip, her arms folded above her belly as she stared at Jason. She shifted on the bed and sat on her knees, nearly at eye-level with the doberman, before reaching out and tucking a finger under his chin to raise his head up.

“Hey, Jathon?” she said quietly as they looked eye-to-eye. As he held her gaze, Daph lowered her arm, took a deep breath, then balled her right hand into a fist and punched him in the stomach.

“*Ghuck*,” Jason gasped with a wet choke as the air was knocked out of him. The squirrel could always punch deceptively hard. “*Whugh?*”

“*Cut that shit out*,” Daph barked at him. She rolled her eyes and shook her head before jabbing a finger into his chest. “You alwayth do this. God, anybody elthe wath talking about you like that, I’d kick their ass, alright? So thtop it.”

Jason blinked at her like he was staring at the sun, his brain trying to process her backhanded words of encouragement moments after being sucker-punched in the stomach.

“Uhh...o-okay,” he answered. Daph sighed again and sat back, scratching the side of her baby belly.

“Like, dude, do you really think I woulda tried to fuck you if you were thome kinda weird, sex-offender motherfucker?” Daph threw her hands up and shook her head. “’Cause you’re *not*.”

“...Thank you?” Jason responded with a dry cough.

“Jethuth, it’s like putting yourself down all the time ith an insult to *me*, y’know?” Daph panted and wobbled slightly, feeling lightheaded. “*Whoo... see? Now you got me all worked up firtht thing in the morning.*”

Jason couldn’t think of any way to respond aside from a confused shrug. Daph rolled her eyes as she smirked and reached over to affectionately scratch behind his ear.

“You aren’t a creep or a pervert or anything like that, dude. What you got ith a *fetish*. A kink. Everybody’th got a kink thethe days. Hell, even Frankie liketh it when he’s with a girl that...” Daph paused, then bit her tongue and muttered, “Well, he didn’t want me to talk about that one, but you know what I’m tryin’ to thay.”

“Yeah, he told me the same thing,” Jason nodded while he still fiddled with his fingers in his lap. “But I can’t help feeling... *weird* about it.” He leaned back as Daph moved and quickly said, “Don’t hit me again.”

“I wathn’t gonna hit you,” Daph said as she scratched the side of her belly. Instead she sat up on her knees and gripped Jason’s shoulders, then leaned forward far enough to press her belly into his lap.

“Well, how do you feel when I thay I kinda *like* it?”

“I...I uh...” Jason stammered as Daph’s face hovered a few inches away from his own. He could feel himself getting hard underneath her belly and knew she must have felt it, too, from the way she giggled. “I guess that’s a good thing?”

“Look, bein’ pregnant ith fuckin’ weird, okay?” Daph said, leaning back a little to look up at Jason. “And a lot of it ith how people treat you different. Everybody’th all *soft* and *gentle* around you. ‘*Oh, let me get the door for you, how far along are you, are you excited for the little one?*’” Daph made dainty hand motions to go along with her mocking tone before scowling. “But maybe I don’t wanna be *soft* and *gentle* all the goddamn time. Maybe I wanna get *fucked* once in a while, maybe *more* than once in a while. The baby didn’t get there by herthelf, y’know?”

Daph leaned against Jason and put pressure on his shoulders, guiding him to lean

back on the bed. As he stretched out his legs, she crawled over them and sat straddling his knees, her tail curled up behind her. Most of Jason's body was still underneath the bunched-up sheets, but through them he could still feel the wet heat from between Daph's legs, suddenly remembering she wasn't wearing anything beneath her baby bump.

"I like that me being knocked up turnth you on," Daph said as she sat back and rubbed her hands over her belly. "Cause I don't wanna feel *thoft* and *gentle*. I wanna feel *sexy* and *powerful*, and nobody wants to treat me like that except *you*." She leaned forward and very deliberately pushed her bulging stomach against Jason's gradually hardening cock, smirking as she watched his bewildered expression.

"Uhh...Y-yeah. Okay," Jason stammered, his mind clearly somewhere other than the conversation. He licked his lips and forced himself to tear his eyes away from the enticing sight of Daph's fertile stomach. "Hey...do you wanna have sex again?"

She blinked at him, then snorted and shook her head.

"Guyth are so dumb sometimeth," she said as she leaned back and pulled off Jason's shirt in one, fluid motion, her fecund belly and soft breasts spilling out of it. The doberman tried to move, but Daph put her hand to his chest and pushed him back. "Uh-uh, I'm in charge thith time."

She reached underneath her stomach (below where she could actually see) and pulled at the sheets until finding the firm, hardening bulge underneath it. With a smirk, Daph rocked to the side and tore the sheets away from Jason's hips, revealing his already hard cock to the open air of the bedroom as it throbbed faintly just below his navel.

Daph crawled forward, further pinning Jason to the bed underneath her late-term belly. As she sat up again, early-morning sunlight from the window cast itself over her bare body. The beauty of it made Jason wonder why he'd ever been insecure in the first place about being turned on by something so perfect and so natural. The squirrel noticed the glazed look on his face and laughed again before picking up one of his limp arms and guiding his palm over her belly.

Daph leaned forward, putting weight on her knees, and grinded against Jason's stomach, her breasts hanging heavy from her chest and bobbing with her

movement as he pinned both hands to her plump belly and held her steady. She seemed to be struggling a bit to keep her balance as she crawled back, but a satisfied grin bloomed on her face as the tip of Jason's cock touched the lips of her pussy.

"*There we fuckin' go...*" she breathed, sitting upright on her knees as high as she could and reaching beneath her belly to hold the doberman's erection upright as she prepared to sink onto it.

"Hang on, be careful," Jason said. "Don't forget about the knot."

"I'm thtill pretty loose from last night," Daph said, licking her lips. "Don't worry, I'll be *thoft and gentle*."

With Jason's cock aligned straight up and pointing right between her legs, Daph took a deep breath and slowly descended, feeling every inch of penis part her open just a little bit wider than the last. A shudder of pleasure went up her spine and Daph bit her teeth as she moaned in the back of her throat. The extra weight of her pregnancy made it difficult to hold herself upright, but it also meant that Daph sat heavier on Jason's cock, burying it deep inside her. With a slight twinge of pain, she encountered the hard knot at the base of the doberman's erection and took a few deep breaths before letting go completely and letting herself fall on it, where it pushed its way inside her with a soft *pop*.

"*Oohh fuck...*" Daph breathed with a slight wince, followed by a giddy laugh as she rocked softly on Jason's cock, her hands playing with the darkened nipples of her breasts.

"You okay?" Jason asked, his head already swimming from the feeling of being hilted completely inside Daph.

"Yeah...yeah, I'm good," Daph panted before she rocked back with her hands on her belly.

"*Really good...*" Jason reached out and gripped onto her hips.

"You want me to-"

"Wait a thecond," Daph said, pulling his hands away and simply rocking from side-to-side, as if testing out how his erection felt inside her. "Thith is really new

to me...I didn't know being pregnant would make it feel tho different." She rocked forward a little and made a high-pitched gasp before biting her lip. "Ahh, God, it feels so...holy fuck..."

Jason leaned back and gazed up at Daph with half-lidded eyes, her ample belly filling most of his vision as the weight of it sat pleasingly on his torso. While the two of them were joined pelvis-to-pelvis, he took his hands off his chest and smoothed them over Daph's stomach, massaging his fingers into her soft, firm middle. She'd always been such a toned, muscular girl, but Daph carried the extra baby weight very well, which only made her that much more appealing underneath Jason's hands.

"Yeah...yeah, I like that," Daph said as she reached down and guided Jason's hands to roam her globe of a baby belly. "Keep doin' that." As he did, she took one of her hands off of his thigh and massaged her breast in her palm, pinching and teasing her nipple in exactly the way she liked. She rocked atop his cock lazily, panting through her open mouth with every movement and making faint, high-pitched little groans in the back of her throat. As Daph pleased herself on top of him, her belly bobbed forward toward Jason's face, the stretched navel just inches away from tapping the tip of his nose if he leaned forward the right way.

"You want me to-" Jason began before Daph shook her head, her already messy hair falling over her eyes.

"No...no, let me handle it..." she breathed, leaning back with her hands on his shins and rocking her hips like a dancer around his cock. "Fuck...fuck, I'm close already..."

"Take your time," Jason moaned, leaning back into the pillow and resolving to let Daph do what she wanted with him while he simply enjoyed the view.

"*Mmph...Ride 'em, cowgirl.*"

"Shut the fuck up," Daph gasped with a breathy chuckle as she squeezed her thighs around Jason's hips. He could feel her pussy clenching his erection from the inside; he must've still been half asleep, the only explanation for how he could have lasted that long. Neither of them fucked with even half the hungry intensity of the night before, but with a lazy, relaxed pace that suited the early morning sun casting light through the window. It wasn't a race to the finish, but

a slow build, a walk rather than a sprint, which was something Jason didn't even know Daph was capable of.

When she leaned forward and held herself up with her muscular arms on either side of Jason, he was able to freely stroke the gravid belly pressing down on him, feeling the drum-like tightness just below a few inches of extra fat and soft fur. He could feel the baby shifting inside her, excited by her surrogate mother's elevated heartbeat, but Daph barely seemed to notice. Her eyes were half-closed, glazed over as she was lost in pleasure, scrunching her face up every few seconds and stopping as if to stave off her orgasm for just a little bit longer. Jason himself was ready to blow at any moment, but was doing his best to hold off for her sake.

As Daph bounced on top of Jason, she braced her arms against the wall above his head for extra leverage. With his hands free, the doberman reached up and took both of Daph's breasts in his palms, kneading them gently like dough and feeling her stiff nipples flick between his fingers. She gasped and shuddered in response, her tail whipping in the air behind her as she bit her lip and moaned. Her breasts were obviously sensitive, so Jason did his best to give them the attention they needed without making them too sore. On the right, he gently played his finger around her nipple, pinching and tweaking it every so often just to feel Daph flinch. On the left, he cupped her entire breast in his hand, squeezing and massaging it more forcefully. But after a few minutes of attention, Daph suddenly stopped and winced just as Jason felt liquid pooling in his palm.

"Wh-What wath that?" Daph panted. Jason quickly jerked his hand away, afraid that she was bleeding, but instead found a dribble of off-white milk trickling from her breast and dripping against his dark fur. As Daph pushed herself upright and watched with wide-eyes as a line of breastmilk trickled down her belly, Jason curiously glanced at the drops that had pooled in his palm, cast a glance at Daph, then licked his hand clean.

"Hmm," Jason said, smacking his lips while Daph stared at him in shock. "Kinda nutty."

"Oh ha-fuckin-ha," she huffed, covering her hands over her chest bashfully. "I didn't know thith could happen..."

"Me either," Jason said with a slight hesitation. He swallowed, then added in a

quiet voice, “But...I kind of hoped it would.”

The squirrel blinked up at him for a moment before a new smile blossomed on her face. She trailed a finger down the line of milk that dribbled over her belly before holding it out for Jason to lick clean. He did so hungrily, then continued to suck on her finger as he squeezed Daph’s hips and thrust straight up into her cunt. She shouted with something between a gasp and a squeal of delight as she rocked in time with Jason’s thrusts and worked up a rhythm again. After the first leak, Daph’s breasts continued to dribble milk as she and Jason continued to fuck, issuing from the right breast as well as the left. The way it trickled down her swollen, late-term belly just made her seem all the more fertile and ripe.

“Daph...” Jason groaned, feeling an intense pressure building up in his cock. “I don’t...I don’t think I can hold on anymore...”

“Me either,” Daph shook her head, her face tilted back to stare at the ceiling. “Jutht let it happen.”

“Okay...okay...” Jason said, breathing heavily as he leaned his head back into the pillow and shut his eyes, trying to make the moment last as long as possible. But even with his eyes closed, he could still hear Daph as she approached her own orgasm with the same cues she’d made the night before: her breathing got faster, shorter, harder, mingled with quiet moans in the back of her throat.

That, combined with the wet sound of sex between their legs was too much for Jason to handle. Finally, mercifully, he clenched his hands on the bedspread and let go.

He came like a cork being popped from a champagne bottle, his cock firing stream of cum straight up and deep inside Daph. Jason opened his mouth and gasped, arcing his back as he writhed underneath the heavily pregnant squirrel and emptied his balls into her. As she felt the warmth of his cum filling her, Daph also finally fell over the edge, clenching her teeth and rubbing her hands from her rounded belly, over her leaking breasts, and to her messy hair as she hit climax just as hard, moaning in deep satisfaction.

Once they were both finished, neither of them moved away from the other right away. Daph sat atop Jason, her hands resting on her belly, and giggled happily in the afterglow of her orgasm. Jason smiled back just as happily, but more drained. He could feel his own cum leaking out from Daph and over his balls, but even

that felt good in a strange way. Both of their bodies were electrified, their nerves tingling with the aftermath of their early-morning orgasms.

“Uh...Sorry,” Jason said as Daph tried to sit up, but couldn’t quite pull off of his knotted erection. “I think you gotta wait for me to get soft again before-”

He blinked in sudden surprise as Daph pushed herself up and off his cock with one, hard pull, making a faint, wet *pop* sound as she slipped free of his knot. Jason’s slick penis fell against his stomach and Daph made another satisfied groan before climbing off of him and flopping down on the bed next to him.

“God damn,” she panted, her hair falling over her eyes. “I wanna wake up like that every morning.”

“Me too,” Jason said, breathing heavily. He leaned over on his side and stared at Daph, letting his eyes trail over her changing body. Along with the more obvious marks of pregnancy, her wider hips, soft layer of baby-weight, and bigger breasts gave her such a pleasingly feminine shape, which might have been part of what attracted Jason to her. He reached over and stroked her belly, smoothing down her fur, and felt the thumping of the baby she carried. “She’s all over the place in there, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” Daph smirked, poking a finger into her stomach. “She’s more riled up than I am.” She shifted and winced slightly as she rubbed her thighs together, feeling Jason’s semen still pooling between her legs. “Fuck dude, if I wathn’t already knocked up, you woulda put a puppy in me for thure.”

“Well, maybe we can work something out one day,” Jason said, causing Daph to raise an eyebrow.

“Really?”

“Maybe. Who knows?” Jason smirked lazily and shifted back down into his pillow, reaching over to stroke Daph’s hair out of her face. “So...where do we go from here?”

The squirrel blinked at him with a puzzled expression, then nodded with a look of understanding and gave him a friendly smile as she reached over and stroked a gentle finger down the side of his face.

“Jason,” Daph breathed. “...I don’t wanna date you.”

“...Oh.” The doberman paused, glancing away. “Oh. Uh...Okay.”

“No, dude, come back here,” Daph sighed as she grabbed Jason’s muzzle and forcibly turned his gaze back to meet hers. “Be real, you don’t wanna date me, either.”

“How do you know that?” he responded, frowning.

“Cauthe think about all the other girlth you dated,” Daph explained as she raised her hand and counted on her fingers. “Thamantha, Julia, Yvonne, Maria. They were all, like, *women* y’know? Dresseth and jewelry and pretty muthic and shit like that. You’ve got a type, dude. And I’m not really it.”

“It isn’t about *type*, Daph,” Jason said. “C’mon, we can’t have sex like that without *something* between us.”

“I know, becauthe I *do* love you, Jason,” Daph said, smiling as she shook her head. “But not like that.”

“Now *you’re* the one giving mixed messages,” Jason frowned. “You’re naked in my bed telling me you don’t like me that way?”

“Look...Jason,” Daph sighed as she rubbed her hands over her belly. “I’m, like, *very* pregnant, okay? I’ve got tho many hormoneth going off in my head I can barely think, but I’m tryin’ to keep my cool and tell you what I think we’ve *both* known for a while. We make good friendth, but we’d make a bad couple.”

“You’re still thinking about high school,” Jason said. “It won’t be like that this time.”

“I think it’ll be *exactly* like that,” Daph said. “We didn’t talk for *yearth* after high school. What if we date and it getth bad again? I don’t wanna hate you again for thtupid shit.”

Jason huffed before turning over and staring at the ceiling. Though, as he did, he remembered why Samantha had broken up with him in the first place: there were times when he was too strict, too uptight, too stubborn. And for her, those times came too often. The more he thought about it, the more clearly he could think

about Daph before she was pregnant, before he'd actually been attracted to her. He cared about her, of course, just as much as she did for him, but if he weighed the two outcomes, Jason decided that he valued the squirrel too much as a friend to risk hurting their relationship with a failed romance, especially if it was one Daph didn't want in the first place.

"Okay," he said after a long silence. "Okay. You're right. I think...maybe we should just keep things how they are, like you said." Jason turned over and shrugged as he looked Daph in the eye. "Maybe I'm just thinking more with my dick than with my head, again."

"I mean, I do that too," Daph shrugged. "Minuth the dick, I guess."

"So...I guess that makes this a one-time thing?" Jason said, glancing down at Daph's pregnant body.

"Hey, I didn't thay *that*," Daph said with a twinkle in her eye. Jason raised an eyebrow, but couldn't help but quietly wag his tail. The squirrel pushed herself up on her elbow, trailing a free hand over her belly. "Like I said, bein' preggerth ith like a hormone flood all the goddamn time. Thometimes I'm pissy and wanna be alone, but other timeth I get so horny I wanna jump the firtht person I see on the train. And when that happenth...it might be a good idea to have a guy around that's into me being... *big*." She patted her gravid belly again and giggled to herself.

"Well...I can't complain about that," Jason nodded with a sly grin. "I think we can work out an arrangement." He paused as he glanced at her belly, measuring her size with his hand. "Though looking at you, I don't think we have much time left to follow up on it."

"I've been thinkin'," Daph said pausing to scratch the top of her head. "Thinkin' that...maybe thith won't be the last time I get pregnant."

"Really?" Jason asked, sitting up.

"What, gettin' excited already?" Daph said, blushing slightly.

"I mean...I'm just...kind of surprised you want a baby at all."

"Well, just becauthe I'm *pregnant* doethn't mean it'll be *mine*, y'know?" Daph

said cryptically as the baby pushed out a paw from inside her. “I thtill gotta look into stuff, but...yeah, I’m thinkin’ I might not mind doin’ thith again.”

“If that’s what you want,” Jason said as he scratched his chin, “then...I don’t think I’ll mind giving you some ‘relief’ when the time comes.”

“Yeah?” Daph glanced up at him with a bashful smile. “Well, no guranteeth or nothin’, but...depending on how thingth go, you might not have to wait too long to thee me with a baby belly again.”

“I think I’d like that,” Jason said, glancing down at her pregnant body hungrily. Maybe he was still disappointed at her rejection, but the doberman was starting to feel like he’d just gained consolation prize.

“Cool,” Daph said as she crawled to the other end of the bed, still dripping remnants of Jason’s orgasm. “Maybe we can write up a contract or thomething.”

“For what, exclusive pregnancy fucking rights?” Jason said as he sat up from his side of the bed.

“No, I jutht wanna officially own your dick,” Daph teased as she stretched, her round middle

shifting as she did. “I’m gonna take another shower. Go cook me thomething. I’m hungry for two.”

“What am I, your butler?” Jason said as he followed her out of the bedroom.

“Well, if you were a girl, you’d be my *bitch*,” Daph said before slapping the doberman on his ass. “C’mon, make me thome eggth and I’ll let you eat me out again.”

Last Call

“Hhhhhhhhaaaaaaahhhhhh...” Daph sighed, exhaling for as long as she could hold it before her sigh ended in a throaty, deep groan. She paused to pull her plastic gloves tighter down her wrist, then took a deep breath, held it, and sighed again. “Hhhhhhuuuuuuuhhhh...”

“Stop breathing on food!” Antonio snapped from the other end of the kitchen as he scraped the griddle clean with a metal spatula, his sleeves rolled up to his shoulders. Daph could never decide if Antonio’s arms were especially buff or just fat. “You spread *disease!*”

“It’s *my* thandwich, Antonio!” Daph shot back at him, rolling her eyes where he couldn’t see. “I’m not even sick!”

“I don’t care,” he said, rolling the ‘r’ with his heavy accent. “You get sick, you breathe on food, we shut down my restaurant and is *your* fault.”

“It’s just a thtupid diner, anyway...” Daph muttered under her breath.

“What was that!?” Antonio shouted, his tall ears swiveling on his head in her direction. The armadillo’s hearing was incredible.

“If you want me to make the fuckin’ thandwiches, how am I thupposed to not *breathe* on ‘em!?” Daph shouted back, turning around to fold her arms and face him with a sour expression, though it was hard to be too intimidating while eight months pregnant.

“I don’t care. You wear mask, you cover mouth, you hold breath, I do not *care*, Daphydill.”

“Tho I’m thupposed to *not breathe*?” Daph asked, throwing her hands up in an exasperated shrug.

“Yes, that’s right,” Antonio said as he dismissed Daph with a wave of his hand and turned back to cleaning the griddle while mumbling under his breath. Daph’s

hearing wasn't nearly as good as his and she couldn't make out everything he said, but it took her a moment to realize it wasn't in English.

The squirrel rolled her eyes and scratched the side of her belly with her thumbnail before turning back to making her dinner for that evening.

“Okay okay okay okay...” she mumbled under her breath while gazing down at the two halves of bread on the counter below her. Sandwiches were the only thing the servers were allowed to make and with no one there but her and Antonio, all sandwich orders became her responsibility. Fortunately, Daph took full advantage of the fringe benefit of being able to make whatever the hell she wanted for herself when there weren't any orders up.

She licked her lips as she stared intently down at the bread, her hands rubbing her pregnant belly like it was a crystal ball. Her cravings weren't usually intense, but rather specific, strange tastes she'd find herself in the mood for every once in a while. It was like trying to pick up on what her body told her to eat was the closest thing to a conversation Daph could have with Georgia's unborn daughter.

“Baaaaaaaaa-nana pepperth,” she mumbled under her breath, reaching over to the bin to pinch a handful of sliced, yellow peppers between her fingers and gently draped them over the bread. When it was an order for a customer, she usually just threw everything together as fast as she could get her hands on it, but for her own meals, Daph liked to take her time and lay everything out exactly where she wanted it.

“Dijon mustard,” she muttered to herself as she picked up the bottle and squeezed a dollop on both slices as she patted her belly beneath her apron. “Good choice, Lilly, good fuckin' idea.” Even inside her work clothes, Daph's stomach protruded far enough out in front of her that her belly was just a few inches above the cutting board. In order to see both halves of the sandwich around herself, she was forced to spread them apart on either sides of her rounded middle.

“Okay, what's next....gotta get some greenth...oh *sprouts!*” Daph hissed under her breath as she snapped her fingers and reached for the bin just barely within reach, holding her long tail far out behind her for balance. But as she pinched a handful of the sprouts, she hesitated before quickly remembering her diet and dropped them back in the bin. “Fuck, that'th right, can't eat thothe right now...”

Daph rocked back in place, wincing as she stretched her sore back, then shrugged and sprinkled lettuce onto her sandwich-to-be.

“Italian fuckin’ theasoning mother fucker,” Daph sang to herself as she turned the brown bottle upside-down and dribbled the mix of olive oil and seasoning onto the bed of lettuce. “You’re gonna be a New Yorker, Lilly, tho it’s my job to make thure you love Italian food *before* you come outta there.” She jumped a little as a tiny paw jabbed one of her lower ribs. “Hey, don’t gimme that shit, you’re gonna love it.”

Daph shuffled along the counter to the bin of vegetables on the other end and plucked an avocado from the rest of them. Normally, Daph thought they were disgusting, but Lilly apparently disagreed. With a knife, she chopped through the hard outer skin and cut it in two halves around the thick core, which she carefully plucked out.

“Kobe,” she muttered to herself as she turned and tossed the avocado core toward the nearby trashcan like a basketball, only for it to hit the brick wall behind it with a loud *crack* and bounce back, rolling against her paw. Daph quickly snapped her head around, but thankfully found Antonio was busy counting inventory in the walk-in freezer across the kitchen. She sighed and rubbed a hand over her belly, gazing down at the floor and dreading the strain it would take to bend down. Daph glanced over her shoulder one more time to make sure her boss wasn’t looking, then discreetly kicked the avocado core underneath the table.

With Antonio out of the room and busying himself with filling out the day’s stock-sheet, Daph entertained herself by constructing the most elaborate and bizarre Frankenstein sandwich that had ever been made in the diner (though she had to double-check to make sure everything fit on her pregnancy diet). As she at last gently draped a few handfuls of fresh, leafy spinach on either sides of the sandwich, Daph stepped back and scratched her chin before idly patting her pregnant middle as if for inspiration.

“Ith that it?” she asked herself, tapping her paw on the floor and flicking her tail. “I dunno...I thtill think it needs somethin’ to like...tie it all together...” Daph suddenly gasped, her long tail twitching behind her as a bright twinkle of inspiration glinted in her eyes.

“*Yeth yeth yeth yeth,*” she muttered excitedly under her breath as she squatted to reach the cooler beneath the cutting board and returned with a half-full jar of peanut butter, mostly used for customers’ picky children that didn’t want to eat anything else on the menu. Daph’s mouth watered as she bit her bottom lip and slathered her sandwich in enough peanut butter that it would act like a glue to hold the entire monstrosity together. After she finished, Daph huffed and took a knee so she was eye-level with the cutting board, then slowly pressed the two halves of the sandwich together with the precision of a surgeon.

“*There,*” she whispered with a sigh of relief as the peanut butter oozed between the spinach, but succeeded in holding the sandwich together. Daph grunted as she braced a hand against the counter and pushed herself to her paws, wobbling in place as she regained her already tentative balance that her pregnancy was throwing off. Lilly turned over in the womb as Daph stood and she could feel her belly warp and shift around the growing baby squirrel inside of it.

“*Ugh, shit,*” Daph said, poking a finger into her middle. “Don’t do that when I’m on a full stomach. I already meant two months throwing up ‘cause of you.” With her dinner fully prepared, Daph carefully rolled it up in sandwich paper, closed it with a few strips of tape, then wrapped it in cellophane before dropping it in a to-go bag along with some chips before stashing it in the cooler for after work.

Across the room, Antonio shuffled out of the cooler with a shiver before hanging up his coat on a nearby hook. Not even Daph found it very cold in there, but as a New York native, she might have had a greater tolerance for the cold than someone from...wherever Antonio was actually from. He glanced over at Daph with a sour look as she leaned against a nearby chair and rubbed a sore spot on her belly where Lilly had been kicking her for the past hour.

“I do not pay you to stand around,” he grumbled, waving his hand dismissively in her direction.

“Kay,” Daph said before turning the chair around and sitting down with an obstinate scowl.

“That is *not* what I am meaning,” Antonio sighed.

“What d’you want me to do, Antonio? There’s nobody fuckin’ here,” Daph sighed, gesturing to the empty seating area. It was rare to find a diner

completely devoid of customers, but there was usually a specific time of day at a specific time of year where Antonio's restaurant was filled with nothing but dead air.

"That does not mean the people are not coming," Antonio said. "You need be ready to greet customers."

"We close in two hourth, dude, c'mon," Daph groaned, slumping in her chair. She clasped her hands over her belly and tapped her paw impatiently on the floor. "Y'know, it'th fucking bullshit you're makin' me come into work by mythelf when I'm pregnant. I give birth in like a *month*. You're lucky I don't call the...uh...the fuckin'... *Better Buthiness Bureau*."

"Yes, you have told me this," Antonio sighed as he leaned over a prep table. "Many times." He huffed indignantly and pointed at her belly. "You want have baby, fine. Have baby. But when you here to work, you *work*."

"Then where'th Ursula? She'th usually here this shift, too."

"She have family emergency," Antonio said. "I give her day off."

"Yeah, well, you work me too hard and we'll *both* have a 'family emergency'," Daph said ominously as she patted her round belly. The armadillo frowned with a strange expression on his face as he stared at Daph's pregnant middle with a look close to something like fear. The squirrel shifted in her chair and felt uncomfortable being stared at, but she didn't want to give Antonio the satisfaction of thinking he won the argument, so Daph remained stubbornly where she was.

"Daphydill," Antonio said after a long silence. "When do you...eh...when are you having the baby?"

"Due date's in a month, dude," Daph said, holding up a finger. "If she doethn't end up coming early. Firtht pregnancies are hard to predict, so you *never know*." She crossed her legs and gazed up at Antonio with a raised eyebrow. If the upcoming birth was going to stress her out, then it might as well have the same effect on her boss. He stared back at her, his eyes locked onto hers, before turning away and scratching his chin, lost in thought. Daph cocked her head to the side and flicked her tail curiously, but was distracted a moment later once Lilly pushed a paw up into her surrogate mother's ribs and wouldn't move it.

“Alright, Daphydill. Alright,” Antonio said after a long silence. “You win.” Daph was too busy trying to coax the baby in her belly to move her leg and wasn’t quite paying attention until she heard her own name.

“Huh?”

“I make deal with you,” Antonio said. “You stay one hour. If no customer, we close early.”

“Shit, for real?” Daph responded, sitting up in her chair.

“Is slow day,” the armadillo nodded, almost solemnly. “And you, you are with child. Rest is good.”

“Fuckin’ A it is,” Daph nodded enthusiastically before stretching out one of her legs and wiggling her paw at the end. “The baby’th made my ankles thwell up like goddamn water balloons and I don’t even wanna thtand up at the end of the day.”

“Mm,” Antonio nodded, twiddling his thumbs on the table. “And after today, you go and do not come back until-”

“Whoa whoa whoa, hold the fuck up,” Daph interrupted him with a look of shock on her face. She leaned forward and hefted her pregnant body upright and marched toward Antonio with a scowl. “Are you motherfucking *firing me*? Becauthe of *this*?” She jabbed a finger into her belly hard enough to poke Lilly and make her squirm. “That’th illegal as *fuck*, dude. I thwear to God if you even-”

“No! No no no, I do not mean this!” Antonio quickly said, waving his hands in the air. “I do not fire you! What I mean is...ahh...I mean is that you...you go, have rest, then you give birth, then come back after you have baby. Is called... ahh...I do not know the word.”

Daph blinked at him with a confused frown before she finally understood what Antonio was trying to say. She rocked back on her paws and gave her boss a smug, self-satisfied grin.

“Okay, okay...I getcha,” Daph nodded as she put her hands on her hips. “You’re tryin’ to get me outta here in case my water breakth on the clock ‘cause you

know that'th gonna drive away customerth, huh?"

"I...I do not know," Antonio responded, more confused then before. "I do not think that is what I mean."

"Sure, sure...Whatever dude," Daph said with a conspiratorial wink. "So you're jutht gonna *happen* to give me the month of my due date off? And then jutht *happen* to put me back on the schedule after I have the baby?" She stepped back and drummed her fingers on her belly while nodding with a knowing look on her face. "Nah, I know what thith ith about. You know if I go into labor, the whole fuckin' neighborhood ith gonna know that *you're* the guy that worked a pregnant waitress too hard until she gave birth."

"I...what?" Antonio said with a confused shake of his head.

"You'll get motherfuckerth picketing down the block for me, too. I know where your head ith, dude," Daph nodded while tapping a finger against her temple. "But it's thmart, y'know? I'll give you that. Thinkin' ahead."

"I...Uhh..." Antonio blinked, feeling like he just missed an entire conversation Daph seemed to be having without him. Instead, he relied on his old back-up tactic from when his grasp of English was much weaker. He nodded, flashed a quick smile, then gave the squirrel a thumbs-up. "Okay!"

"Glad we underthtand each other," Daph said, smiling beneath her overbite. Antonio scratched his head in puzzlement as she strode away with a skip in her step for her sixth bathroom break in the past hour.

Daph hurried to finish little prep-work was left for when the diner opened the next morning, working harder and faster in fifteen minutes than she had in an entire month. She still had a sprinter's endurance on her side, but the pregnancy was far enough along to take more of a toll on her body, so more than once Daph had to rest in a chair with a glass of water after getting dizzy from low blood sugar. Once she was finished with prep, she used her chair to prop open the door between the dining room and the kitchen and sat in it with one eye on the clock, counting down the minutes excitedly while poking at Lilly to amuse herself.

"Yo, Antonio!" Daph called after nearly an hour had passed. "I don't think we're gettin' any more cuthtomers tonight!"

Antonio poked his head through the prep-window behind the front counter and frowned, pinning his long ears back against his head.

“Do not be so sure,” he said warily.

“Well, I’m pretty thure there ain’t anybody in here,” Daph said, gesturing her hand broadly to the empty dining room. She gripped the seat of her chair and used her legs to push herself back into the kitchen without standing up, forcing the wooden legs to scrape against the tile floor with a deafening screech. Daph didn’t seem to notice as she rocked out of the chair and stretched her back, pushing her belly far out in front of her.

“Look, you wanna hang out here and waste electricity, right on,” she told Antonio before sliding her hands over her belly. “But I gotta get ready for when Georgia’s little girl decideth to show up and I don’t think ten more minuteth in here ith gonna make any-”

Daph froze mid-sentence, her ears twitching atop her head, as the sound of the tiny bell above the diner’s front door chimed. A look of abject horror spread over Daph’s face while a gleeful smirk took over Antonio’s as he glanced through the prep-window.

“I am. Going to. Jump off. The fucking roof.” Daph mumbled to herself in total despair.

“Not until shift is over,” Antonio said as he reached below the table and passed Daph two laminated menus. “We have customers, first.”

The menus felt as heavy as stone tablets once Daph took them. Antonio dutifully slipped on his apron and tied it behind his hard back as he strode to the griddle and turned it up. Before exiting the kitchen, Daph peeked through the window and spotted the two middle-age women sitting in a booth at the far-end of the dining room. The raccoon and the cow were both chatting and giggling to one another across the table, the pair of them wearing matching Statue of Liberty t-shirts while the raccoon wore an ‘I Heart NY’ hat.

“Fuck,” Daph swore under her breath. “Tourithts.”

She tossed the menus onto a nearby prep table and wearily tied her apron around her waist. Her belly had gotten too big for the straps to reach around her middle,

so she was forced to tuck the fabric just below her stomach, making the dirty stains of food on her work clothes all the more obvious. She was painfully aware at how her apron pulled her uniform tight against her pregnant stomach, putting strain on the buttons, but there wasn't anything she could do about it. As Daph picked up the menus, she straightened her hair with her nails and flashed a forced, pained smile into her reflection on the metal table before marching into the dining room like a prisoner heading to the electric chair.

"Hi how's it going my name's Daph I'll be your server tonight what can I get started for ya," she said all in one breath as she passed the customers their menus and flipped open her notepad in her free hands. There wasn't anything particularly exotic on the menu, so she hoped the two would order something simple right away without even bothering with the menu. Unfortunately, she didn't seem to have that kind of luck as the two women immediately picked up and began flipping through the menus.

"Oh my Gosh, I would *love* a reuben," the raccoon said to her friend without acknowledging Daph. "I've been dying for one of those since we landed."

"Isn't cheesecake supposed to be famous in New York?" the cow asked, having already flipped over to the back page to read the desserts. "It's a New York thing, right?"

"I have no idea!" the raccoon answered. "No reason not to try it!"

"Maybe I can start you out with something to drink," Daph said flatly, trying to coax the women's conversation into an actual order so she wouldn't have to just stand there waiting on them.

"Oh, right right, yes yes yes," the raccoon said first, scanning the menu. "Do you have any pop?"

"Uh...I guess?" Daph answered, her eyes narrowing. "We got Coke products."

"Then that would be great," she answered with a smile. Daph hesitated, trying to decipher what the woman actually wanted, before shrugging and scribbling down on Coca-Cola on her notepad.

"I would love a cup of dark-roast coffee," the cow said. "With two sugars."

“Uh...Okay,” Daph said as she wrote down the order while thinking to herself, *It’s almost eleven, who the fuck is drinking coffee this late?* She held her tongue and tucked the notepad into her apron. “I’ll be back in jutht a minute with your-*hykk!*” Daph suddenly jumped with an unexpected hiccup as Lilly turned over in the womb and kicked a paw straight up into her diaphragm. The customers blinked at her in surprise as Daph instinctively rubbed her stomach, then glanced down at her belly and passed one another a knowing smile.

“Be right back,” Daph said flatly before marching back into the kitchen, her tail twitching indignantly behind her. Once she was out of earshot, she groaned as loud as she could and shuffled over to the drink station. The Coke was easy enough, but the coffee maker had been cleaned and closed down hours ago, forcing Daph to fish out a new pot, open a whole new bag of grounds, and start a brand-new batch she would have to clean up all over again just for the sake of a single customer.

“What do they want?” Antonio asked as put on a pair of rubber gloves.

“Don’t know,” Daph grumbled as she watched the coffee machine slowly dribble liquid into the pot. “They’re still lookin’.” Lilly was starting to get active, likely in response to Daph’s hunger, and began uncomfortably nudging either a paw or a fist (she could never tell which) toward her pelvis. She shuffled in discomfort and tried to rub the baby through her stomach.

“I know, I know,” Daph mumbled, stroking her belly distractedly. “I’m hungry, too. But we can’t eat until *after my shift.*” Daph shot a scowl at Antonio, silently blaming him for the hungry baby that was beating her up from the inside. The armadillo glanced back at her, but she quickly turned her head back to the coffee machine before he noticed. Once the pot was full enough for a single cup, Daph poured it into a clean mug and put it on a small plate, along with a spoon and some creamer packets.

“Jutht hang in there,” she muttered to the baby. “Only an hour left to go...”

“What was that?” Antonio said in an accusing tone.

“I wathn’t talkin’ to *you,*” Daph snapped back as she carried the soda and coffee into the dining room.

The raccoon and the cow were chatting enthusiastically back-and-forth while

scrolling through photos on a digital camera. When Daph reached the table, she got there just in time to spot a picture of the two of them rubbing the balls of the Wall Street Bull and were thankfully too distracted to see her rolling her eyes behind them.

“Gotcha a Coke,” Daph said as she leaned over the table to hand the raccoon her drink. She could feel her protruding belly touching the tabletop as she did, something it hadn’t done a few weeks ago. “Aaaaand coffee.” She carefully set the dish and mug down in front of the cow and slid it closer to make sure it wouldn’t spill. If working as a waitress did Daph any good, it made her very good with her hands.

“Thank you, sweetie,” the raccoon said with a strange, patronizing softness to her voice that hadn’t been there the first time. Daph watched as the woman’s eyes inevitably turn down to her belly, so she quickly took out her notepad and asked for their orders in order to change to subject.

“Oh, I think I’ll have a...hmm...” She scratched her chin and flipped open the menu before pointing a clawed finger at a tuna-salad sandwich meal in the middle of the page. “*This one!*”

“Ooo-kay...tuna thalad thandwich,” she mumbled as she scribbled it on her notepad. The raccoon giggled at her lisp and Daph had to fight the urge from throwing down her notepad and dragging the woman outside by the tail.

“How about you?” Daph asked the cow. She blinked dimly at her, as if she forgot she were supposed to order something, then quickly snatched her menu from where Daph had set it on the table and buried her face in it.

“Margaret,” the raccoon said to her friend with a raised eyebrow.

“Give me a *second*, Debra!” the cow said as she flipped through the menu.

Lady, you had fifteen minutes to look, Daph wearily thought to herself. Just pick something and let me go home.

“Sorry sweetie, she’s hopeless without caffeine,” the raccoon woman, apparently named Debra, said to Daph. “I’m sorry we came in so late, but this was the only place we could find open.”

“No problem, we’re thtill open for...” Daph sighed and clenched her fists around her notepad, “... *another hour.*”

“That’s good to hear,” Debra said. “Wouldn’t want to overwork you.” The raccoon glanced again at Daph’s belly before, without warning, reaching out and pressing her hand flat against it. Daph shuddered at the unwanted touch, her tail twitching violently behind her, but couldn’t say anything in response. If she was caught yelling at a customer at the end of her shift, Antonio might force her to stay even later. Daph had no choice but to sigh and put up with stranger’s hands poking and prodding her baby bump like she were an exhibit at a museum.

“How far along are you, sweetie?” Debra asked.

“’Bout eight months,” Daph answered, flatly.

“Oh wow,” Debra gasped, thought it sounded oddly forced. “You’re just about to *pop* then?”

“I gueth. I’m due in almost two weekth.” Daph paused, then added pointedly, “Thith ith my *last shift* before I get thome time off, too.”

“Good for you,” Debra said, patting Daph’s belly while apparently not taking the hint. “I was on bedrest for a whole *two months* with my baby boy. My Arnold was such a *dear* taking care of me. Do you remember that?”

“Uh-huh,” Margaret said, still distracted by her menu.

This isn’t a fucking five star restaurant, Margaret, Daph thought as she silently glared at the cow.

“And you’re tight as a *drum*, too!” Debra said while poking Daph’s belly. “Not much room left in there!”

“Uh-huh,” Daph sighed, still staring at Margaret and waiting for her order.

“Oh, I remember my first pregnancy,” Debra sighed as if talking to herself. “It was hard, naturally, but so *rewarding*, too. And getting to meet my little man at the end of it made it *all* worth it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“This is the easy part, sweetie, I hope you know that,” she giggled while playfully tickling Daph’s belly. “Motherhood is such a blessing, but it’s a whole new job, too. One you don’t get any days off from. No way to call out sick from a dirty diaper!” Debra laughed loudly at her own joke, grabbing Daph by the elbow.

“Uh-huh,” Daph said, re-considering her plan to jump off the roof.

“Oh!” Debra gasped, recoiling her hand for a moment as Lilly squirmed and kicked just next to her palm. Unfortunately, this only made her more enthusiastically barge through Daph’s personal space as Debra held both hands to the squirrel’s stomach and felt for more movement. “He’s a *strong* one!”

“*She*,” Daph responded, unable to stop herself from correcting the woman, even if it was just going to invite more one-sided conversation.

“Oh, *she*!” Debra nodded, rubbing the spot on Daph’s belly where Lilly had kicked her. “Even better. Now, is the father a squirrel as well or...”

“Yeah,” Daph nodded, taking a moment to glance at Debra before glaring back at Margaret, who had been gazing intently at the menu for what felt like an hour. On the outside, she was as calm and disinterested as she could manage, but in her mind, Daph was seething with anger.

WE HAVE SANDWICHES. WE HAVE SOUP. WE HAVE SALAD. JUST. PICK. SOMETHING, howled the voice in the back of her brain.

“Now, I can’t help but notice I don’t see a *ring* on your finger,” Debra added with more than a hint of judgment. “Do you need to take it off for work?”

“Oh...No, I don’t got a ring,” Daph said to the raccoon. When a slight frown crossed Debra’s face, she couldn’t help but respond with a sly, devilish smile of her own. Daph slipped the notepad into the back of her apron, along with the pen, then cradled her gravid belly proudly. “Actually, me and the dad aren’t really married.”

“...I see,” Debra said, her smile forced. “Well, I supposed there’s always after the baby is born. Weddings are so *expensive* these days.”

“Nah, we aren’t gonna get married,” Daph said, as casually as if talking about

the weather. "See, the dad is my betht friend's huthband."

This, aside from everything else, was what made Margaret finally look up from the menu, a look of horror crossing her face. Debra's expression drooped similarly into a kind of disgusted fear. The two glanced at one another silently while Daph had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

"Oh..." Debra said as she pulled her hands away from Daph's belly, as if the squirrel was infected with a disease. "I...I see."

"Yeah, we hooked up once and I gueth he knocked me up pretty good," Daph said with a nonchalant shrug. "He'th payin' me money to 'take care' of it, yknow, but hith wife already knowth all about it. It ain't enough to live on, though, so I gotta keep this thtupid job for right now. I'm thure I'll get some more outta him later." She reveled in the look of terror that flashed over the women's faces. None of it was a lie, she just didn't specify what she meant by 'take care.'

"Um...oh...alright then," Debra said, turning away from Daph and crossing her arms over the table.

"Oh! There she ith!" Daph said, jumping as Lilly kicked her in the side and giggling. "Oh man, she'th almost as strong as her *dad* was."

"*I'm ready to order*," Margaret snapped as she slammed down the menu onto the table.

"You sure? I can give you guyth a few more-"

"Caesar salad, please," the cow interrupted while handing back the menu. "With blue cheese on the side."

"Good choice," Daph responded as she scribbled the order on her notepad. She then put her hands on her hips and leaned closer to the two women. "Y'know, I know it'th a little *weird*, but my *breastmilk* kinda tastes like blue cheethe. Isn't that crazy?" She paused to finish writing, then added, "The father thinks so, too."

"Uhhhhh..." Debra breathed wordlessly, her voice cracking slightly.

“C-caesar salad,” Margaret repeated. “...No blue cheese.”

“Gotcha! Be back in a minute!” Daph smiled and flicked her tail happily before turning and waddling out of the dining room and toward the kitchen. Just as she slipped through the door, she heard the two women start to whisper and mutter frantically to one another.

“You take too long,” Antonio frowned.

“Blame them,” Daph said as she tore off the notepad page and pinned it to the line above the sandwich counter. As she pulled on another pair of gloves, she said, “Tuna thalad thandwich and a salad. I got it.”

“Hmm...fine,” Antonio said with a suspicious frown as he turned off the griddle. “I will finish clean.”

“You do that.”

Daph finished making the women’s order in record time. She didn’t even like tuna salad, but had to admit that the sandwich smelled delicious to her, though the pregnancy hormones soaking her brain probably had a lot to do with it.

“Here ya go!” she chattered happily while handing the customers their food. “Can I getcha more coffee?”

“No, thank you,” Margaret said without looking up from the table.

“Y’know, that tuna thalad reminds me of the time-”

“We’re alright here thank you,” Debra quickly interrupted.

“Kay! You guyth need anything, jutht yell,” Daph added with a wink before hurrying back to the kitchen.

She and Antonio finished up the remaining cleaning and prep while glancing through the prep window every so often to check on their only customers. For how long it took Margaret and Debra to order, it took only a fraction of the time for them to scarf down their meals. They finished by the time Daph was done cleaning the coffee pot and were already glancing around for her.

“All done?” Daph asked as she approached their table and picked up their empty plates. Debra wordlessly slid over her platinum credit card alongside it. “No room for dessert? We’ve got some famous New York *cheesecake*.”

“We’ll take the check,” Margaret said, glancing with one last look at Daph’s belly, only a few inches away from her face.

“Gotcha,” Daph nodded as she swiped up the card and took it and the plates back to the kitchen. She dumped the dishes into the sink before running the card through the register and returning to the table with the receipt. “You guys can take care of that whenever you-”

Before she finished talking, Debra quickly scribbled her signature on the receipt before she and Margaret bolted up and hurried to the door.

“Have a good night!” Daph shouted back at them while waving. As the door shut, she added, “You fuckin’ bitcheth!” With a sigh of relief, she waddled to the front door and locked it while flipping the sign around to ‘CLOSED.’ Her paws were more sore than if she’d been running and standing so long while so late-term was killing her hips. To add to it, Lilly was more hungry than ever and was aggressively kicking her surrogate mother as if goading her for food. On the way back to the kitchen, Daph glanced at the receipt, then blinked at it in surprise.

“Oh, fuck *you*,” she swore under her breath, resisting the urge to crunch the paper in her fist.

When she entered the kitchen, she handed it to Antonio and said, “Look at this shit.”

Her boss set down the broom he was sweeping with and held the paper close to his face with both hands. Daph pointed just above Debra’s signature, where she had written ‘*Seek Jesus*’ in place of a tip.

“...What a bitch,” Antonio nodded in one of the rare moments he and Daph agreed on something.

“*I know!* Can you believe that shit?” She huffed and rubbed her belly, sore from Lilly’s incessant kicking.

“Some people, they do not know...ahh...how to *be*,” Antonio said. Daph

nodded, not entirely sure what he meant.

“So what’th left?” Daph said, huffing as she untied her apron. “I thtill gotta clean the cutting boardth.”

“Ehh...” Antonio scratched his chin, then shrugged. “I take care. You go home. Rest for baby.”

“Oh *fuck*, you mean it?” Daph gasped, her eyes lighting up. Her boss rarely, if ever, let her go home even five minutes early.

“You work hard today. Go.”

“Hell *yeah* I did,” Daph said as hurried to the cooler and took out her Franken-sandwich from underneath. “Thankth Antonio, you’re finally cool today.”

“Good luck with baby,” the armadillo waved. “Get rest.”

“You jutht want me outta here so I don’t squirt her out all over your floor,” Daph shouted as she left the kitchen and waddled to the front door. “Later, Antonio!”

“Goodbye, Daphydill!”

As Daph left the diner with a happy skip in her (otherwise heavy) step, Antonio locked the door behind her, then headed into the office and sat down at the computer. He logged onto his regular translation website and typed a string of text from his native language. Once translated into English, he squinted at the screen and followed the words with his finger.

“Ma...ter...nity...” Antonio read out loud. “Maternity leave...huh.”

The old armadillo scratched his chin again, then shrugged and took the schedule off the wall, crossed out Daph’s hours for the rest of the month, then wrote ‘maternity leave’ beneath it in big, blocky letters.

