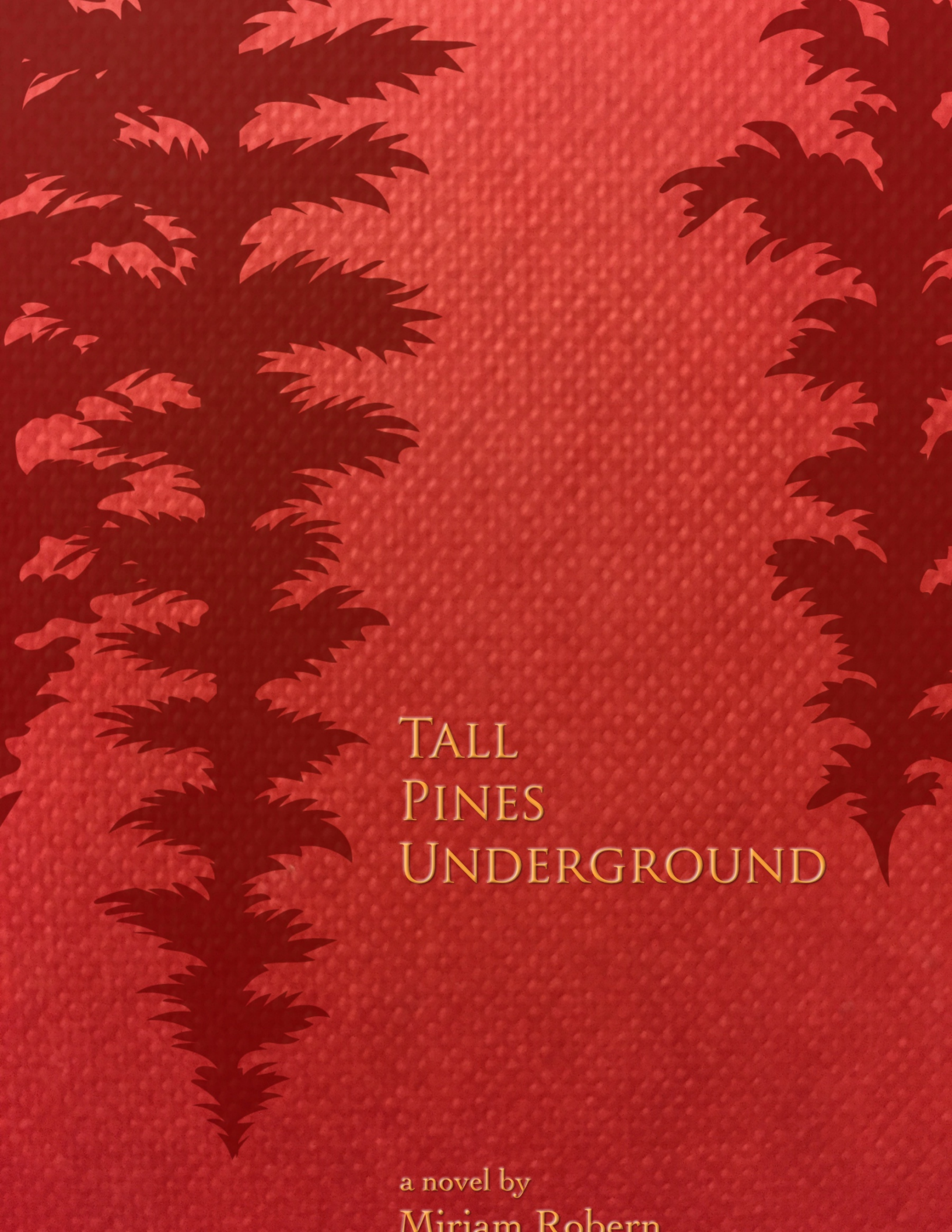
Tall
Pines
Underground
a novel by
Miriam Robern

# 15. Out of Control

"Susan!" the Director's voice, jovial and only the slightest bit breathless, split the mountain air. He tromped up the crumbling path, waving to get my attention, and grinning ear to ear. My work crew looked up from the trees they were hacking apart, uncertain at the Director's intrusion but happy for any interruption.

I handed my hacksaw off to a worker without one–they'd been clearing the work area of chunks and branches in the absence of a real tool–and strode downhill to meet Cole. "Director."

"Greg, call me Greg," he told me, hands on hips and still grinning. He looked me over, a quick flick of his eyes up and down. We were an hour into lumbering, so I was already sweaty and disheveled, a handkerchief wrapped around my hair and suited up in the sturdiest clothes I owned. But these clothes had been clean this morning, and I had showered the evening before. I presented a very different picture than the last time we'd talked, when I was a bedraggled poolie. His chin dipped down and up, the barest nod I had ever seen, but his smile reached his eyes. Apparently I cleaned up well in his estimation.

"Yes, of course. Greg," I agreed, trying to cover the sudden flush of heat across my face. Stupid. Dimly I wondered if he played everyone like this. "What can I do for you this morning?"

"I need to borrow your crew," he answered nonchalantly. "We're rolling out polypropylene and the more hands, the better. That's not stuff we can replace if we tear it."

"For a walipini?" I asked needlessly. The greenhouses were roofed with great sheets of polypropylene–tough, clear plastic sheeting–before the air camo went on top. The stuff let sunlight in without letting any heat out, which let the gardens inside survive the winter. "Um. We just got started here–"

"So it should be easy enough to switch gears," he cut in with a smile.

The smile I gave him in return was placating, if not patronizing. "I mean I'm responsible for this crew bringing in lumber to the planer."

He waved a hand. "And you will. Leave behind a few to clean up what you've felled so far–looks like only half of them have proper tools, anyway–and bring the rest out to the fields. Bring 'em back when we're done."

I crossed my arms. "Director Cole–er, Greg. Mister Abernathy's expecting me to–"

Cole stepped forward and put a hand on my shoulder. "Susan, relax. I'll smooth things over with Joe. And David, as I expect he'll be the one who's more upset."

He was right about that. The elder Abernathy seemed happy so long as everyone pitched in. His son was the one worried about output and schedules.

Not to mention, Cole was the Director so therefore Abernathy's boss, and my grandboss. How much of this was song and dance, I wondered. Had I at any point actually intended to refuse Cole's demand?

"Alright," I shrugged. As he grinned in triumph, I called out the names of poolies who were working without tools or whose work with tools wasn't amounting to much. We counted up tools and locked them in the tool cart, and I promised the remaining workers that I would be back to check in later. Then we were off.

My crew knew where we were going, and rolling out plastic sheeting was far easier than hacking apart tough pine trees, so they preceded Cole and I in a ragged but light-hearted line.

"Settling in alright?" he asked me as we walked.

I started to answer, but tripped over the seemingly simple question. How to answer? "Yes, it's so much more comfortable as the oppressor," or "Yes, it's nice to be in the suite that I actually paid for?" Finally I settled on, "Yes, thank you."

"I don't see you at First Mess very often."

"I try to eat with the rest of Ponderosa," I answered lightly. "I think it's good for morale. Builds trust."

He nodded meditatively. "I suspect you're right. I guess I have it easy; my whole lodge eats at First."

There wasn't any answer to the man plainly outlining his own privileges, so I merely nodded. We walked on in silence for a while, and then I glanced over at him. His face seemed tied up in frustration and hesitation. I realized he was trying to think of something to say, to make conversation that wasn't about the weather. I decided to throw him a bone.

"And how are you doing these days, Greg?" I asked. "How heavy is the head that wears the crown?"

He chuckled at that, at least, and shook his head ruefully. "Above water, but only just," he smiled. "This place was a lot easier to run when everybody left on Sunday afternoon."

"Missing the good old days?" I prompted, seeing if I could get him to talk again.

"Well who doesn't," he responded easily. "With the satellite out and no ESPN, I've got nothing to do all day." He laughed; a joke.

"I see you out here working every day," I countered generously, but also truthfully. Like myself, Cole worked alongside his crews.

"Work to be done," he shrugged, but I could see in his face that he appreciated the recognition. "You know, it's funny, I built this place hoping it would never be necessary. I spent nearly twenty years on a contingency plan, and if you think that's strange–and it was–it's even stranger seeing it all come to life. All the policies and procedures we agonized over–me and Joe and Martin and Don, sitting around a table on the deck in an empty campground, dreaming how it would work filled with people–and now the people are here, the policies and procedures are in motion, and we're… lurching into the future." He shook his head in disbelief. "Sometimes I think the fact that it was planned makes it even stranger."

I gave him a sly smile. "Did you ever wonder if it would actually work?"

He scoffed. "I never thought we'd find out. But Joe and Martin… they were smart guys. I knew they'd get it right." Cole's speech and confidence seemed to dribble out. I glanced back at him and saw he was staring down at the trail, expression distant.

"I heard about Martin," I said, attempting sympathy while going in for the strike. "I always liked him. He must have been a good friend."

The Director nodded, licked his lips. "He was. Losing him was… a blow."

Losing him to a grisly murder, I couldn't help but wonder, or losing his support? Having to kill your friend to keep your dream alive? How heavy *was* the head that wore the crown?

But then we reached the walipinis, set out in deliberately skewed rows, nets of green rags stretched out over opalescent panels. I imagined I could feel the warm, verdant life nestled inside each one. When we came to the far end of the greenhouses, though, I was surprised at what I saw.

Two long rectangles had been dug into the ground, the bones of new walipinis. But the digging was not finished. The walls along the uphill sides were only just started. The struts across which the polypropylene would be stretched were missing.

"I thought we were rolling out plastic?" I asked, confused.

Cole started handing out shovels to my poolies. "We are," he answered confidently, for my ears and theirs. "If we put our backs into it, we can be rolling out poly by the end of the day."

I gave the Director a thunderous look and he had the grace to look just slightly ashamed at his deception. Still, here we were and there was work to be done. I shepherded my crew into the worksite. One by one they picked up tools and made themselves useful.

I didn't see Cole for a few hours after that; it's possible he avoided me after bringing us here under false pretenses. I certainly didn't seek him out. I ate lunch back with my lumber crew when I checked in with them–they'd delivered two hefty trees to our tiny little "mill" and had just brought down a third. When I returned to the walipinis he was waiting for me.

"You're the Director of the whole refuge, Greg, you could have just told me you wanted us to dig and build and roll out," I said by way of greeting. I wasn't angry; I was far too weary to be angry. Even as a sweetie I was working my body every day, and I was also tired of watching the parade of injustices that my new position afforded me. Cole's deception was par for the course, and I couldn't be bothered to have a reaction any more emotional than a perfunctory reminder that his clever set of half-truths wasn't necessary in the first place.

He shrugged apologetically. "It sounded better in my head if we were just doing poly."

I studied his demeanor, his shoulders not quite slumped, his eyes not quite meeting mine. He didn't need to keep standing there, and yet he did, just like before when he was so desperate to make conversation. I decided to take a risk. "Make it up to me," I suggested, "by allowing me one impertinent question."

He grinned, hopeful and grateful. "Of course, Susan. I like talking with you."

Wait and see how you feel in a moment, I thought, and squared my shoulders. "Why did you overbook the refuge?"

His eager face fell, and he looked back at our combined work crews, well out of earshot below us. When he faced me again, his expression was a battle between dread and challenge. I could see how little he wanted to answer, and how much he wanted to surprise me, amaze me, with the right answer.

Cole put his fists on his hips. "Well first of all, I'm hardly alone in this. Lots of other refuges did the same."

I lifted one eyebrow. If he was going to make this about winning my approval, I'd happily milk that for more information. "Other refuges?"

"Tall Pines is hardly alone in this… industry," Cole said with a slight chuckle. "Hell, there were trade shows for us up until last year. I talk with a dozen other refuges over the sat phone. And nearly all of them overbooked. It was standard practice."

"Standard practice established by whom?" I asked, a touch incredulous. "The experienced apocalypse survivors?"

He laughed at that, and rubbed the back of his head. "Well you've got me there. Hard to

guess how much to overbook by when civilization hasn't ever fallen apart before."

Something in his answer struck me. "How much?" I repeated. "How much… did you overbook by, and how many of the subscribers actually showed up?"

"We overbooked a thousand percent," he answered, as flatly as he could. It was like he was confessing a terrible sin but did not want to recognize its gravity.

"You sold each suite to ten different people?" I gasped. "Ten different families. They all thought there was a safe place waiting for them, and…"

"And just over a fifth of them actually made it up here," he finished grimly. "A lot more than we expected."

I lifted one eyebrow. "That should be a cause for celebration, not a disappointment. Too many escaped violence and starvation?"

He held up a hand and looked pained. "I am. Grateful. I am very happy so many people made it, even if it makes things… difficult going forward. The apocalypse just happened slower than we thought it would."

For a moment, I felt a flash of sympathy for someone who'd simply made a bad bet. But then I reminded myself: a bad bet with other people's lives in the balance. "You should have consulted an economist," I told him ruefully, "or a historian. We would have told you apocalypses are glacial, grueling affairs. Most take a generation or two. By comparison, this one's lightning fast."

He smiled thinly. Cold comfort. "We have, in the pantry under the Mess and buried around the grounds, three thousand fifty-gallon drums of rice. It will never go bad as long as it's sealed. We have twenty-six miles of perimeter wall, built in the middle of nowhere, ten miles away from the nearest access road. We have water reclamation, solar power, god damn air conditioning. We wouldn't have any of that if I hadn't overbooked the refuge. On a tenth of the budget? Impossible. We wouldn't have been viable." He said the last, not angrily, but with the force one puts into a statement one needs to be true.

My heart was pounding. "How… how did it feel, promising safe haven to people you didn't expect to make it here? Taking their money for services you didn't think you'd have to provide?" I'd only asked for one impertinent question, but couldn't stop myself asking.

Cole looked down at the ground, but his expression barely changed. "You know… not that bad," he admitted with a sigh. He looked up at me, squinting slightly. "They weren't all like you, Susan. Hardly any of them were like you. Rich fat cats, mostly. One percenters. People who spent their lives wringing as much profit out of the world as they could, not caring at all what they crushed in the process. Most of our subscribers, Susan, could only afford the fee

because they destroyed other people's lives on a daily basis. These are the people who wrecked the world, that were wrecking the world when I took their money, so no, I don't feel guilty selling them a tenth of a suite and telling them it was all theirs."

He rolled his shoulders and looked out at the poolies toiling in the dirt. In a flash, I saw them as Cole must have seen them: bankers, executives, hedge fund managers, and high society scions, all bent over the first real work of their lives, complaining at the toil while billions of people outside our walls starved because of their greed.

I wondered if Cole worked alongside his poolies not to share the burden but to enjoy first-row seats to their discomfort.

"I took their money," Cole went on even as he stared at them, "and I built this place. This place, that would stand even when their world fell apart. A place where Zoe would be safe."

Everything clicked. "You built the refuge for Zoe."

He turned to me, nodded once, and looked out over the crews again. "The rest of us just get to live here."

—

I rarely ate lunch in the Mess, preferring to eat with my crew at our work site. My motives were always murky.

It had started as a noble impulse, a demonstration of solidarity. I'd sit on a log and eat my rice ball like any other subscriber, the meal bookended by working alongside my crew. The other sweeties thought I was crazy, and so did most of the poolies, too.

But the food from the cart was the same fare served in the Mess. The view from the log, with the mountain breeze brushing along the little hairs on my arm, beat the view from the Mess benches easily. The fact was, I liked lunching outdoors.

And no doubt it was never lost on the poolies that if I wanted to eat elsewhere, I could. They had to eat where they worked. No escape from the toil for them; it haunted them even as they ate.

So I felt vaguely guilty as I sat across the long table from Caden, our lunch spread out between us. But he'd asked me to have lunch with him and I wasn't about to turn down such an offer. We'd chatted cheerily for fifteen minutes, but I could tell he was working himself up to his real topic of discussion.

"So," he said, tone and pacing dropping down. Here it was. "Zoe asked me to be her

sweetie."

"You're already a sweetie," I said on impulse, buying time. I had expected this, if not now then soon, but I still fought to keep my emotions off my face. She was almost five years older than my sweet boy; she would chew him up and spit him out. He wasn't ready for a relationship that included casual sex and cohabitation. But to say that so bluntly to a teenager would only convince him of the opposite.

"She means move in with her," he explained needlessly.

"She means join her man harem," I countered unhappily.

"Yes, but…" Caden sighed, and then the words came out of him in a rush. "She's the Director's daughter, and CeeCee is Miss Clark's daughter…"

"CeeCee?"

He waved a hand. "Cynthia. She's Mavis Clark's daughter. So… her mom is a Host."

I wasn't sure where this was going. "And?"

He rolled his eyes as if the answer was obvious. "Can I say no?"

"You can always say no," I answered immediately, with what was probably a dangerous amount of heat.

"No, I mean… without making things hard for you. And Jackson. And Dad."

I could feel my features hardening. "Did she say as much?" I growled. "Did Zoe Cole threaten you?"

In a flash, Caden went from awkward to panicked. "No, no," he said, a little too loudly. A few heads turned in the otherwise quiet hall. "Mom, no. She never said anything like that. Or CeeCee," he added, pre-empting my next question.

I locked eyes with him. "Caden, if they or anyone else ever does, you know I will protect you. I will burn this place down before anyone hurts you."

"Mom." He reached across the table to grab my hands. "Nobody threatened me, okay? Set down the flamethrower." My son watched me until I deflated. "I was just thinking, with… how things are around here. Me turning her down could make trouble for you. You just got into the lodge and all."

"Honey, even if that were true," I said, squeezing his hand, "I'd go back to labor pool to keep you safe. And honestly that might simplify my life. You don't have to…" I closed my eyes as I

realized what I was actually saying out loud, "You don't have to join the man harem."

"Um. Okay," he mumbled, and looked down at the table.

Something was off.

He licked his lips and said, "I mean. Are you sure?" He seemed almost hopeful that I might not be able to protect him, and all at once it made sense.

"Oh Christ, you want to go, don't you?"

My youngest child didn't meet my eye, hiding behind his curly bangs.

"And you think I'll disapprove," I pressed. "That I'll think less of you."

One eye flashed at me from under his mop. "Maybe."

I leaned back, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath before answering. "Caden honey, I will not think less of you. Zoe's a pretty girl, and… all her friends are attractive, too. And you're sixteen so really why would I be surprised that you respond to an invitation to a non-stop orgy."

"It's not like that," he protested immediately. "It's not… it's not all sex all the time."

"But it is sex a lot of the time," I put in. "Cram six horny twenty-somethings into a room with nothing else to do, what else should anyone expect."

"Mom, it's not like that," he repeated, and then resorted to mumbling. "I think I kinda really like her."

"Her being Zoe," I clarified. "The collector of pretty boys."

He looked left and right, as if someone might overhear. "Yeah."

I reached forward to grab his hand. "I worry. It's my job to worry, and nothing will change that. And right now, I worry that you're walking into a… situation, a relationship that is nowhere near equal." I paused a beat. "You maybe kinda really like her. But I want her to maybe kinda really like you back. Not just… collect you."

"Yeah, I, um. Well. I mean. Me, too," he finally managed. "It's just that–this is the way to find out if she does."

I leaned back and heaved a sigh. "Well that's the first point in this conversation where you've sounded like yourself. You've thought this through."

He bobbed his head, bangs bouncing. "I have. I've thought about it a lot. Especially since

we got the suite, I see a lot more of her, and we talk, and–"

Caden launched into one of his monologues and I kept listening–really–even as I considered my young son. It was clear that he was smitten, but also that Zoe had paid attention to him, made him feel special, even drew him out of his shell.

He was just six weeks short of sixteen, and quite capable of falling in love. Hell, for most of human history, people were married and parents by sixteen. And that was probably, I reflected, how things were going to be going forward.

But a man harem, my mind railed: is that the future, too? I took a moment to pick apart my feelings on the power dynamics involved (troubling), the divergence from a traditional coupling (been there myself), and the implied group sex with my son in the middle (here I ran out of emotional fortitude). I balked at whether I was upset at a real threat or just confronted with something beyond my understanding.

I remembered coming out to my mother, a few weeks before she passed, and her inability to comprehend the shape of my life.

"Uh huh," I said automatically, one of those small conversational sounds to keep somebody talking. I realized I'd lost track of what Caden was saying. He was flushed with excitement, recounting some conversation he'd had with Zoe (or maybe CeeCee), and there was a certainty in him that I'd rarely seen before. His mind was made up, I realized.

Caden was joining the man harem whether or not I gave my blessing.

I could stand in his way, or at least try, but I'd be picking a fight I would not win. All I'd get for my trouble would be his resentment. All I'd be telling him is that I didn't trust him.

I started in my seat and a flash rippled across my skin. Was it that simple? Did I trust my son to be an adult? And more upsetting: were we already to this point in his life, and in my parenting? Sixteen.

"Mom?" Caden stumbled to a halt. "You okay?"

As an answer I leaned forward and trapped his hands in mine. "Caden, I trust you," I said, feeling out the words as I said them. I nodded softly. It was true. "I'll still worry, but… you're obviously capable of making your own decisions."

He blinked, mouth open, for a few heartbeats. "Really?"

"Yes, really," I laughed. "Just be careful. Part of making your own decisions is making your own mistakes, and learning from them. And it's not up to me to judge whether this decision is a

mistake or not. Not anymore, I don't think."

Caden beamed at me from across the table.

"Just. Practice safer sex," I was compelled to throw in.

"Mom." He made a face. "There's a ton of condoms, don't worry."

"I will worry," I repeated, banishing the line of questioning asking why he already knew there were a ton of condoms. "But I won't interfere." My stomach did a somersault at the words, but I pressed on. "Which may inspire you, young man, to refrain in the future from implying that you're being sexually assaulted when you are not. There are easier ways to get me to go along with your plans."

He winced. "Yeah, I did that, didn't I?"

"You did," I nodded. "Don't do it again."

--

Our peaceful reverie was ripped apart by shouting from across the Mess. I had noted the knot of sweeties two tables behind Caden the moment we'd sat down. The five of them were loud and boisterous, passing around a pair of pitchers sloshing with a sickly brown concoction. The lot of them had gotten progressively drunk as Caden and I had talked.

Now one of the men was leaning forward and shouting at his companion across the table. The start was incomprehensible but as his volume rose, he ended with, "shut your lying mouth!"

The other man decided against the better part of valor and surged to his feet. "I'd like to see you try!" He was a big guy and the backs of his legs smacked the bench on his rise. The men on his left and right threw their arms out to avoid falling.

The first man, elaborately mustachioed, made a grab across the table for his new enemy's shirt. The pitcher and cups between them toppled and the hands of cooler heads sprang forward to rescue the hooch.

I watched as the explosive tangle of limbs grabbing for precious alcohol or simple balance convinced both shouting men that their loud disagreement had escalated to a full-on brawl. The big man grabbed the incoming hand and yanked, swinging his opponent into his neighbor. The man's other hand, flailing, raked fingernails across yet another face.

I all but dragged Caden across our own the table to get him away from the brewing fight, then stood up, myself.

Despite many best efforts, hooch splashed across the table, along with a wave of its sticky-

sweet scent. The two combatants shoved the furniture aside in a momentary display of cooperation and then threw themselves at each other.

The hostility of the two men had skyrocketted to the point where their sole intent was now to inflict as much pain as possible. The big man had his burly arms wrapped around the other man's ribs, squeezing like a boa constrictor. His opponent, one arm free, drove his elbow into the larger man's eye socket over and over. At both their hips, presently forgotten, were holstered heavy pistols.

There was no way they would remain forgotten for long.

Their friends had retreated to a safe distance, one of them cradling the surviving pitcher protectively. I recognized him.

"Westin!" I hissed, then shouted. He glanced back in my direction, unwilling to tear his eyes off the fight for very long. I waved at the melee. "Westin, do something!"

Westin did nothing.

"Stay low and get out of here," I told Caden, pushing him down the aisle of benches, towards the nearest door.

He went a few steps before noticing I wasn't following. "What are you going to do?" he asked, bewildered.

"Something stupid," I answered, and stepped up onto the table. I hopped table to table, then stepped down into the makeshift arena the two fighters had constructed.

The bigger one finally released his grip, staggering back with one abused eye winced shut. The second man struggled to keep his feet as he sucked air back into his lungs. Both of their bodies tensed, however, to rush back at each other.

Muttering a curse at myself, I stepped in between them.

The shorter man tried to wave me aside and when that didn't work, grabbed for my shoulder. I twisted away. "Woman, get out of the way," he growled.

I looked from his scowling face to the other man, who had finally blinked enough stars out of his vision to see me. "This stops," I said as plainly as I could manage, "Right now. You're making drunken fools of yourselves."

The man behind me grabbed again, this time catching my sleeve. At the same time the big man advanced. "Hiding behind a woman?" he sneered.

"Both of you will have to go through me to get at each other," I mom-voiced at them.

"You're making fools of yourselves. Drunken fools."

The man trying to pull me aside by my sleeve snorted. "It takes more than a couple glasses of bathtub wine to get me drunk, lady."

I spared him half a glance. "I think you've lost some tolerance in the last few months, friend." Despite the disdain I poured into my voice, all I wanted was to provoke a response, a verbal one. If he was talking, he wasn't fighting. If he wasn't fighting, their adrenaline could die down.

"Listen, lady," the big man growled down at me, "this doesn't concern you. Get out of the way before you get hurt."

I locked eyes with him. "Are you going to hurt me, friend?"

He licked his lips. "Just move. He's gonna–"

But his opponent was already in motion. He released my sleeve. When I pulled away reflexively, he ducked the other way, trying to quick-step around me. I whirled around to see where he was going, knowing all he needed was one swing to reignite the fight.

But instead of a precise bob and weave, the mustachioed man went "Huck!" with his arms thrust awkwardly to his sides. Snaking around his shoulders and chest were two dark arms. From over his shoulder peeked Aubrey's face, grimacing with the effort of restraining him. She threw me one wink, and then set to wrenching him away.

I turned back to the bigger man, sidestepping to interpose myself again. "Playtime's over, alright? What's your name?"

He watched like a hawk as the other man was frogmarched away, not answering. I asked again. "What?" he finally answered.

"Your name," I asked a third time, enunciating like he was some kind of halfwit.

That at least got me a glare. "Ben," he grumbled. "Ben Fitzgerald."

"I'm Susan Soza." I put out my hand to shake, and leaned over to block his view of the other man. "Pleasure to meet you."

He shook my hand, falling into the familiarity of old routines. Finally he looked me square in the eye. "You know this doesn't change anything. That punk is still going to get what's coming to him."

I didn't release his hand. "No doubt. But–" I pulled him closer and leaned towards his ear. "When that happens, how about you don't do it in a crowded room with guns on your hips,

waiting to be drawn in anger." I paused a beat, then felt compelled to make the point perfectly clear. "You pull shit like this again and it's more likely you get somebody else shot than him."

His brow fell and I could see him actually start thinking instead of reacting. "Fuck."

I clapped his tricep and released his hand. "My work here is done," I muttered, and turned to find Westin gaping at me. I collapsed onto the nearest bench and pointed at the brown pitcher in his hand. "Pour me some of that before I completely lose my shit."

The hooch was sour and sticky-sweet, but undeniably alcoholic. I did not savor the taste, but the warmth down my throat and in my belly calmed me just enough that I didn't vomit from nerves.

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