

Part Eight – Junior Year, Fall Semester

You can imagine by the beginning of my junior year, I was more than a little nervous about my continuing education, but I wasn't exactly brimming with alternative options. For better or worse, I'd tied my horse to CARP until I was out and had a degree. In two years' time, I would be free to carve my own path through the world, but until then, I needed to keep my head down and not draw attention to myself whenever I could help it.

The nail that sticks out gets hammered and all that.

You can imagine that it's basically impossible in a university where we're all *supposed* to stand up, but I was going to do my best to not get caught doing anything Dr. Igarashi suggested I not do. That meant my investigations into Will Bierko and Agent Costello had to remain secret, even from my partners, something I wasn't especially comfortable with, but I rationalized that it was for their own safety as much as it was mine. It's astonishing the shit you'll tell yourself when you're younger.

It was a week before classes started, and there was, surprise surprise, a full student body assembly being held, but this time, we knew what was up, and so Julia, Chelsea and I left a note explaining a bit about who we were, what we were like, where this expected new roommate could shack up if she didn't want to be with the rest of us, and a small plate of freshly baked cookies to show that we were welcoming to new and friendly faces. Chelsea admitted she thought it would've been a nice thing to stumble across when she was moving in.

When we headed to the assembly, I realized that the elder class of CARP had shrunk again somehow during the summer. We were down to about 60 or so students in the junior year class, having lost another fifteen or so during the course of the last year, some dipping out early in the sophomore year and some departing during the summer break, and with the class size being as small as it was, this time there were people I knew relatively well missing. I wouldn't have expected Kevin or Josephine to have left during the summer session, but no matter where I looked around in the assembly, I couldn't see them, so I had to assume they'd either transferred away or dropped out. At the time, I hadn't realized there were other options I could've been considering.

As I sat down with Julia on one side, Chelsea on the other, Brianna Greene and her two betas, Kelly and Casey, sat down in front of us, Brianna turning around in her seat to grin at me. I've mentioned her before, but I suppose this is a good time to give you a bit more detail about her and her polycule, because junior year was when we started growing closer as friends.

Brianna had joined CARP last year, and my initial impression had been that she was a freshman in the year beneath me, but as I'd learned within a few months, she was a transfer student from Harvard, simply because she hadn't fit in among the students there and was actually in the same class level as me.

She was the product of an Ashkenazi Jewish father and 1st generation Chinese immigrant mother and had overachiever syndrome written all over her. She was gorgeous to look at, her Asian and Jewish skin tones blending into something that looked almost Mediterranean if it weren't for the classically Chinese shaped eyes, although her hair was naturally a very light brown, bordering on blonde, instead of the jet black of her mother. She was quite slender, but extremely graceful. She was usually dressed in arty clothes over workout clothes, like she might want to practice her ballet dancing at a moment's notice and didn't want to have to change.

It took me several months to be able to remember which was which, but eventually I'd learn that Kelly was the guy of her two partners, a sort of swimmer who was pleasant enough to talk to but tended to blend into the background. I'd eventually come to recognize that he

reminded me of a less handsome Jason Statham, and that he was Brianna's physical support. He was hoping to be on the Olympic swim team out of college but was also studying physical rehabilitation so that he'd have something to fall back on if that didn't work out.

That meant that the other person with her was Casey, who was the girl of her two partners, and her emotional support. Casey was a slightly plump southern girl from Atlanta who was far paler than I imagine most southerners to be and had hair so lightly blonde it was bordering on white. Casey was studying to become a therapist, and so she took a lot of classes on psychology, behavior, ethics and the like, and was always a kind shoulder to lean on when any students were having a rough go of it.

"What's up, JT?" Brianna asked me as we were waiting for the assembly to start. "You notice the distinct lack of a few familiar faces in this crowd?"

I nodded to her. "I'm not entirely surprised Kevin isn't here, but Josephine didn't strike me as the kind to give up or walk away."

Brianna smirked at me, clearly knowing something I didn't. "She hasn't quit; she's doing a semester abroad, learning remote while touring through several countries to study their economic systems, see what works and what doesn't. Four months, ten countries, for her and her two boy toys," she giggled. "We'll see her back in January, and I'm sure she'll have loads to talk about then. Shame about Kevin, though."

"His grades weren't looking great last spring," I agreed. "He wash out during the same?"

"Sounds like it. Ali said she saw him and his team packing up a few weeks ago, but I'm a little surprised they didn't stop and say goodbye to anyone," she sighed. "Maybe he was ashamed of not being able to pull it together? He *knows* we wouldn't have judged him for it, though. This place can be rough enough to break anyone some days."

"You ready for your next addition to your polycule?" I asked her. "It's, what, social this year, isn't it? I wonder if they're going to drag us all to some dilettante ball, a cotillion or something, and we'll meet our next partners like prom night all over again, and we're all suddenly prom kings and queens for just one year."

"Ha! Wouldn't that be a lark?" she said, covering her mouth with her hand to hide her laughter. "But if that was happening, you'd definitely have been told about it in advance, to book either a DJ or a band to play the event."

"I suppose you're right," I chuckled, leaning back in my chair. "Still, how does someone take care of our 'social' needs? That's the one leg on Dr. Igarashi's table that I don't completely understand."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," I said to her as Dr. Igarashi and the rest of the staff slowly filed their way onto stage, while Jesus Jones' song "Right Here, Right Now" was blasting through the PA system at all of us. There was something odd about the way student assemblies were at CARP, how they were more like political rallies than a bunch of college students. I think I was starting to worry that we'd see slogans on signs but at least that part we seemed to be avoiding. The entrance Dr. Igarashi made was much more akin to a rockstar than the head of a small start up college, walking on stage to thunderous applause.

"Good afternoon, my beloved Carps!" she shouted out, waving her hands up in the air, standing before the microphone at the front of the gymnasium. "Congratulations on making it to Year 3! You are over halfway through your education, and you are already showing signs of being the finest collection of razor-sharp minds that has ever walked this planet. Now, as many of you know, year 3 is where we are going to introduce you to your social partners. This is going to be done somewhat differently than previous partners have been introduced to you, because it

is vitally important that if this isn't going to work out, that we course correct immediately and repair you with somebody else in the pool. As such, you're going to spend the next 24 hours getting to know your social partner, and if at any time either you or your new partner feel it's not going to work out, you can contact administration, and we will swap them out for another option. I should stress, however, that by the end of seven days, you *must* have found a social partner, or one will unilaterally be assigned to you, and no further alterations will be allowed at that point."

I remember there being a little bit of a scuttlebutt at that, a gossip wave passing through the student body. There'd never been a time limitation on us accepting partners, and the whole idea of everything changing about how we'd done it wasn't sitting especially well with a handful of my fellow students, I could tell, and I think so could Dr. Igarashi.

"I realize, students, that this is not the system you may have become accustomed to, but for these individuals, they are not entirely sold on the concepts we're pioneering here at CARP, and while they are willing to entertain the idea that we may be right, they do not wish to jump right in and trust us with their hard-earned societal statuses. So you, my bright and wise students, will convince them to let you into their lives, and into their beds. We will get access to the upper echelons of power and influence, and through them, begin to start implementing our changes to society on the whole, starting to make the world a better place for those who have typically been marginalized by it."

The look on the Doctor's face could tell me she knew this was a bit more of a harder sell, but also that she thought we were capable of it. The challenge was definitely going to be all of us brain pod weirdos but what I realized was that our previous two partners were, in some ways, training for this.

"In addition to that, once you've convinced them to join with you, they are not going to be students here, so you will need to keep the relationship up via distance or through regular visits until you've graduated," she said. "Most of them are students relatively nearby – SFSU, SJSU, UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz – and as such, you'll just spend time with them not far from either here or their university. You will, of course, be allowed to spend the night at their homes, so you can ingratiate yourself better into their societal trappings, and they will be welcome to spend time here. But the most important thing, the *most important thing*, is that you must be able to successfully integrate yourself into their social circles and pass as one of *them*."

It almost felt like we were told we were going to become spies, that to engage in the sort of social architecture we wanted to build, we would need to be able to pass among them without drawing suspicion to ourselves or our actions. For many of my fellow students, it was also the moment they realized we weren't just talking about making changes to society for the sake of thought experiments, but that we were being taught how to apply those theories into changing the real world around us. I was a little surprised how many of them hadn't considered that before that moment, but I suppose it was easy to get tunnel vision back in those days.

"Remember, my wonderful students – you have been paired with the person *we* think is your *best* option, but if it isn't working, you can always try a second or even a third option. But you must give it your very best. Failure is *not* an option, my CARP! In addition to that, we're going to accelerate your learning, double down on the things that interest you and how you can apply them more directly to your skillset. If there's any sort of side skills you'd like to develop, this year is the one to do that. So keep that in mind as you put together your fall and spring class schedules. Now, head back to your dorms and you can meet the people we have lined up for you. Swim, my CARP, swim!"

As we were standing up, Briana turned to look at me and laugh. "Can you believe this?"

she said to me. “Two years of just having people delivered to us on a platter and now we’re expected to have to *work* for the third? I mean, my game’s *shit* these days, and I don’t even *know* the last time I had to put the moves on a guy.”

“Bri, I don’t think you’ll have any problems with it,” I told her. “You’ve always been very good at getting whatever it is you want.” I didn’t realize exactly how prophetic those words would turn out to be when I said them, but we’ll get there in time.

We headed out of the assembly and started heading back towards our dorms, with Chelsea clinging to me as Julia scratched her fingertips along the back of my neck and tried to build my confidence up. “Relax, Josh, you got this,” Julia said. “Whoever she is, she can’t be any more intimidating than what I put you through with Naomi.”

“God, I loved hearing about that,” Chelsea purred into my ear. “You absolutely ravishing that surfer girl. She sounded like she loved every minute of it. Sooner or later, I’m going to get you to have a go like that at me...” She giggled, nibbling on my bottom lip. “Or at Jules, while I watch and encourage you.”

“You couldn’t talk up half the game I did, Chel,” Julia smirked. “But it was glorious to see our boy man up and just absolutely go to town on her. God, you should’ve heard her squeal.”

So, look, I’m happy to tell you honestly everything that happened next, but I’d rather none of this get back to my wife simply because nobody likes being reminded of what they were like when they were young and stupid, okay?

We got back to the dorm and the door was unlocked as we expected it to be. When we stepped into the room, there was a short young blonde woman sitting on our couch, dressed in a slinky black dress with one daring slit all the way up to her waist and a pair of long black boots that stopped just shy of her knees. Her hair was in a stylish, almost cut into bob with bangs in the front, none of that blonde mane beneath her chin. She had on very expensive looking make up, her cheeks smokey, her lips a deep shade of rose red. Her hands were folded in her lap, and she looked over in my direction.

“Joshua Turner?” she said, looking at me before glancing at Julia then Chelsea. She stood up, and I realized she was actually quite a bit shorter than I was, as she started walking over towards me. As she got closer, I could see a pair of the most piercing blue eyes I’d ever seen. “Hm. I was expecting someone... more muscular. I’m Abigail Rockefeller, but I don’t know how much further we should be going, as I’m not—”

“Great,” I said suddenly, walking away from her, heading towards the phone on the wall. “It’s not going to work, so you should just go and I can go find someone who isn’t a closed mind bigot.”

She scowled sharply and began to take offense. “How *dare* you suggest I’m a bigot?”

“Well,” I said, looking back over my shoulder, “you don’t know a thing about me, but you took one look at me, Julia and then Chelsea, who’s half-Chinese, and then you decided you weren’t interested, which clearly makes you a bigot.”

“*She’s* not the reason I was going to—”

“Oh, so then you’re just *shallow*,” I said. “And judged *me* based on my *physical* appearance without knowing a thing about who I am or what I do and don’t like.”

It’s important to understand here that I recognized what Abi was attempting to do to me, and I had immediately taken an approach to strip her from the driver’s seat of the conversation. She, like many people in the upper echelons of society, was so used to being to control the path of a conversation that she really had very little experience with someone being deliberately rude or openly hostile.

“I’ve got a *reputation* to uphold,” she tried to counter, “so I can’t just—”

“You can’t just bring in someone who’s an independent thinker and isn’t going to just fold every time you want something in your walled garden,” I finished for her, although certainly not how she’d intended to. “No, I get it. You don’t like people who make you *think*, but you’re in the wrong place for that. The people here, we’re all big thinkers, people who are *always* going to challenge accepted notions, things that people claim are *settled*, because they aren’t. I’m not sure what you thought you were getting yourself into, Miss Rockefeller, but the people here, we’re going to change the world, whether your kind likes it or not.”

“If *that* isn’t the most arrogant thing I’ve—”

“What is it you respect most of all, Miss Rockefeller? Money?” I asked her. “I turned a thousand dollars that I got at the start of the freshman semester into, what was it at last count, Chelsea?”

“Four and a half million,” my newer partner said. “In a little under twenty months.”

“Maybe it’s not money, but influence,” I said. “We’ve been consulted with by over a dozen special interest groups on ways to get their businesses into better places for the future without going bankrupt, and at least two parts of term papers I did last year turned into sections of actual legislation that Congress passed last month.”

“Now wait a—”

“So which is it that’s keeping you from getting to know me – money, race, status or looks?”

I could see her eyes flaring, but the problem was that she didn’t see a way out of the conversation, because I hadn’t given her one that wouldn’t require her to admit she was making a snap judgment, and she absolutely didn’t want that.

“And if I was to say you might not be suitable sexually?” she said, thinking she might have a glimmer of light as an option.

“I’d say you don’t know what I’m capable of sexually, so you’re making a decision based on nothing other than a guess.”

She glared at me, but then started to let the wheels run in her head. “What if I told you to show me what a real man can do to a woman?” She smirked a little bit. “My safe word is Vancouver, and when I say I like it *rough*, I fucking mean it, pussy. So what are you going to do about it?”

I remember that look on her face, the one that was daring me to get rough with her, that she *wanted* to see if I could go at her in the way she wanted me to. “If you want to go down this road, we can, but you better remember, you’re the one telling me you want this.”

“What’s the matter?” she sneered. “Are you some kind of f—”

And before that word finished escaping her lips, my hand reached up and slapped her across the face. I’m not proud of it, but I remember the words that I said after that. “If you and me are going to have any kind of future, you’re never going to use a homophobic word, a racist word or any other identity slur again. Am I making myself clear?”

I’d heard both Chelsea and Julia gasp a little, because both of them know I’m *very much* not a violent man, but I could tell what word had been about to come out of Abi’s mouth, and I needed to know if it was simply her trying to press buttons or if that was the kind of language she used regularly.

The look on Abi’s face was one of total astonishment, like she was almost blown away by how quickly I’d gone from zero to sixty to zero again, but I didn’t hear her safe word escaping her lips, and, more to the point, I was certain I was seeing excitement behind her eyes.

I feel like it's worth pointing out at this point that I didn't want to be judgmental or anything, but this wasn't exactly what I would call 'my scene.' I've often thought of the sort of false machismo presented in D&S relationships to be the kind of behavior that wasn't benefitting anyone, but I also knew enough that trying to convince someone to change how their sexuality was slanted was a little like asking the wind if it didn't mind blowing the other direction.

"Yes," Abi finally said to me, breaking the silence.

"Yes *what?*"

"Yes *sir*, I won't use those kinds of words, as long as you can fuck me how I like it."

Now, I've been incredibly forthcoming with you about how my sexual encounters have been up until this point, but for this one in particular, I am going to decline to get into further details about it, because I know you have my wife in another room down the hallway, and I'm certain you've been asking her questions about how she met me, what she thinks of me and how much she knows about me, my participation in CARP and what illegal activities I may or may not have known about in advance, and I want you to know that Abi and I are, in many ways, a marriage of convenience.

She has her sexual proclivities, and if you're hoping to shame her into revealing something I'm unlikely to give to you willingly, well, you should keep in mind that I contacted *you*, and that I'm here of my own free will, as is she.

I want answers just as much as you people do, and while I think I've figured out the what, the who and the why of it all, I'm still trying to understand where it went wrong. *If* it went wrong, because I'm still not entirely convinced of that one either. I know you here at the FBI *think* you know the ending of this story, that you know what happened to all the major players who are still alive, but I need you to understand, you *don't*. Not like you *think* you do.

Abi's family have what I've affectionately referred to as 'ultimate fuck you money,' meaning if you think you're going to go into her room, tell her that I said she likes a bit of rough sex and personal degradation when she's being fucked and that she's going to turn into some wilting flower clutching at her pearls, hoping you won't unmask her proclivities in public, you are going to be in for the rudest fucking awakening of your lives.

My wife will chew you up, spit you out and leave the carcass for the roaches to devour when the lights go off.

So yes, after our first encounter, Abi and I officially became a couple and would be married just a few months after we had graduated from college, me from CARP and her from Berkeley. There was no expectation of fidelity between us, other than that we would be discrete, we wouldn't contract any diseases and wouldn't have any children outside of the family. Beyond that, I didn't mind if she fucked around with other men, and she certainly didn't judge me for maintaining my relationships with the other (eventual) three women in my life.

Once we got past the initial first impressions we had of one another, we found a... mutual understanding of each other. She would joke that I was an out-of-touch big liberal idealist, and I would joke around that she was a spoiled brat of a princess who had no idea how the world really worked, but in the space between those jabs, we also came to love one another. Is she the favorite of my four partners? Absolutely not, but I think even she could tell you that. But I do love her, in my way, and she does love me.

But out of all my partners, Abi knows the least about what went on at CARP, and what the bigger plans were as we started to head towards the end of our time there. Shit, Agent Shetterly, you were *there*, at least a little bit of the time, because in December of that year was when you first made contact with me, telling me you were picking up what loose cases Agent

Costello had left behind, and you wanted to know what she was investigating with me and why she'd marked me down as a confidential informant. He told the rest of you about that, right? Let's be sure we have it down on the record, because I feel like it's only fair that we have *all* the details.

When Agent Shetterly first made contact with me, I warned him that I suspected there may have been foul play involved in Agent Costello's death, to which he said, and I quote, "Kid, you've been watching too many spy movies." So the more recent discoveries you've made when going through what little records you've been able to recover from the ashes of CARP that seem to indicate that not was Dr. Igarashi *aware* of Agent Costello's investigation, but that she might have been *involved* in helping along with its termination? Yeah, those didn't come as any surprise to me, because I fucking *told you* I suspected it.

Really?

Of the nearly eight hundred students that graduated from CARP during its six years of existence, there are only about a hundred of us still left alive, and you think *I'm* the danger? I'm here to ensure that me and my partners don't join the statistic of former CARP students who have died under *mysterious* circumstances. Yes, I know that number of those has dropped significantly since the showdown in Jakarta, but it hasn't stopped *entirely* now, has it? So, you'll have to forgive me if I cling to the belief that the late Dr. Igarashi had a plan for this, and that someone is out there, removing all the traces of her handiwork, so it can never be undone.

Yeah, that's a good idea. Why don't you go check and make sure they're finishing up my immunity deal, because I won't talk about senior year until I have it signed and reviewed by our attorneys, because that's what you most want to know about.

And while you're at it, send in Chelsea. She knows how to calm me down, and spring semester... well, spring semester was when I started putting some of the pieces together.