

Linkage

Matt said to Al, “Would I be out of line to conclude I don’t like *people*?”

“Not in the least,” Al said.

They were having cocktails on Matt’s deck. Way out there you could see a sliver of ocean peeking through the fog, if you looked hard. The fact was it was dang chilly here in September, which you didn’t want to admit, Matt and Al both wearing shorts and t-shirts, and drinking mai-tais and slinging around the bullshit like they were in Tahiti.

“I go to a wedding down in the city,” Matt said.

“There’s this guy I sort of knew, my old neighborhood in Terra Linda.”

“Wait,” Al said, “this is recent? Biscuit and I’ve been passing by every day for weeks, your vehicle’s always in the driveway.”

“You missed one. Actually you didn’t, someone picked me up. You gonna keep interrupting?”

Biscuit looked up. “The way you went high at the end,” Al said, “she thinks you’re offering a *t-r-e-a-t*.”

“Well let’s take care of that,” Matt said. “Come on girl.” And he went in the kitchen and gave her a couple mini milk bones that he’d made sure to stock up on. Al had been one of those difficult gentlemen that you thought never in a million years . . . but Matt couldn’t resist saying hi to Biscuit when he was fiddling around in the front yard and they came by . . . and who would have thunk Al became his best friend out here.

Which wasn't necessarily saying much, since the pool of potential friends was limited. It was a planned neighborhood designed for second-home weekend people. That changed a bit the last few years, there were more full-timers on account of more doofuses working remotely, but it was still pretty dead.

Either way Al was a good human, they connected. Matt said, “Guy I’m referring to, he went on to play college football. Louisiana Tech.”

“That’s not bad,” Al said. “I would’ve heard of him?”

“No. He didn’t get in the games. Should have gone to a JC first, developed a little more. He lit it up though in high school, I’ll give him that.”

“But you only *sort* of knew him?”

“Yeah, he was older, I knew his sister. That wasn't exactly what started the altercation.”

Al said, “Okay I gotta hear this. I notice Amanda’s coming this way though . . . see her, the one with the little barbells? She likes to old-fashioned power-walk.”

“Have to admit,” Matt said.

“Yeah, she’s all right. We’ve been banging each other the last couple nights . . . you mind if I invite her in?”

“Jesus. You gotta be so blunt? And I thought you told me, that last business, you were done with relationships?”

“I am . . . Babe! Come up here a second.”

Amanda played it coy like he was interrupting something important, but Al waited her out and she came inside.

The first thing you couldn’t help notice, despite the baggy sweatshirt, was her sizable endowment, and Matt shook hands and said hello and tried to keep his eyes moving . . . and she said anything’s fine but a tropical drink did look refreshing if there was any more, and Matt screwed it up this time as he was blending hers--

way too much orange curacao and not enough rum--but she seemed good.

Biscuit was on Amanda's lap right away out on the deck. "How come I don't get that?" Matt said. "You guys've only been screwing around a few days."

"C'mon man, Jeez," Al said, "take it easy."

"Yeah right," Matt said. "Amanda, I haven't seen you before."

She said, "You mean what's my deal in a nutshell?"

"Sure. Or not's fine too."

Al said, "You've picked up a bit of an edge, dude."

"He's colorful," Amanda said, "we can use that. To answer your earlier question, my lap's softer than yours."

"O-kay," Al said. "But putting it together--Matty, does seem to me you've been in a ornery mood since the porn flick thing didn't work."

"Oh really," Amanda said.

"We're letting it all hang out, is that it," Matt said. "For your information--wrong, I'm glad it didn't go anywhere."

Al said, “Matt’s ex-girlfriend, she shows up and informs him she’s making anonymous porno shorts. That it pays substantially better than art modeling.”

“How *does* it work, the pay scale?” Amanda said. “I was always curious.”

“Some guy explained it to me one time,” Matt said, “in a bar in Manhattan Beach. He claimed he was in the industry, that they shot them in one of those multi-million dollar houses right on the Strand. Bottom line, the women earn a third more than the men.”

“Do you think he really was?” Amanda said.

“In the business? Maybe. He was pissed off enough to be convincing, that they still owed him for a couple scenes.”

“What did your friend look like?” she said.

“Not my friend. Like a beach lifeguard.”

“All righty,” Al said. “Let’s leave it right there . . . point about Matt’s *actual* friend, she rakes a lot of it in through Patreon. Or their version of it.”

“What does anonymous mean?” Amanda said.

“No face,” Matt said. “What, you’re not telling me the wheels are turning.”

“I’m feeling the booze,” Al said, “anyone want another.”

“Sure,” Matt said, “surprise us. Things can’t deteriorate much further.”

Al went in Matt's kitchen and you heard him banging around and Amanda said to Matt, “You're good with it, living here full-time?”

“I get that,” Matt said. “My stock answer is you better rent something out here first, make sure.”

“I know. My in-laws? They built a house in Dillon Beach. Then they spent all their time driving to Petaluma. They created reasons.”

Matt nodded. “Your consecutive days without sun, it messes with you. You *were* married . . . or are?”

“Am.”

“Ah.”

Al was back with a pitcher of something that was a light greenish color, not appetizing, but it did the job. He said, “Matty’s friend, she was an entrepreneur. She wanted *him* to enter the industry. Join the fun, at the minimum.”

“And *how* so, exactly?” Amanda said.

“Participate in a couple limited flicks with her, while she was stuck out here on furlough,” Matt said. “What I was starting to tell Al about when you came along--more interesting--a confrontation I had down the city.”

“To clear it up first,” Al said, “Matt balked.”

“You weren’t attracted to her any more?” Amanda said. “Or you couldn’t perform under pressure?”

“You’re a tough broad,” Matt said. “And I use that word sarcastically, but still . . . probably a combination, I won’t deny it.”

“She got mad at him subsequently,” Al said.

“I can see it, she felt slighted,” Amanda said, “more than the business part.”

“She was using you man,” Al said. “You not playing along exposed her true colors.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Matt said.

“Relationships can be knotty,” Amanda said. Biscuit was busy checking out something under the railing, so Amanda slid over onto Al’s lap.

Al said, “I punched a guy on account of one once, something stupid, but the good thing, I thought that got it out of my system.”

“One and done,” Matt said. “Possibly makes sense.”

“Yeah but then not too long after, some guy gives me the finger and passes me over the double yellow line.”

“Uh-oh,” Amanda said.

“Spare us the gory details,” Matt said. “Did the cops get involved?”

“No. Thankfully. But that was when I checked into therapy.”

“For real?” Amanda said. “Like a facility?”

“No. Just a weekly rotation in someone’s office. A bi-product being, have to say, she was quite voluptuous.”

“And you selected her by accident naturally,” Amanda said.

“I did, swear to God.”

“Voluptuous how?” Matt said.

“You know,” Al said, using his hands.

“Well,” Matt said, “since we’re in anything-goes mode, you have consistent taste.”

Amanda said nothing personal but she did have to use the little girls' room.

“Dog, you’re kinda killing me here,” Al said. “Not sure if it’s okay or *not*.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not trying to undercut you. I ever tell you about the guy, drove the tourist boats to Alcatraz, I was best man at his wedding?”

“Go ahead. A different wedding now I take it.”

“Oh yeah, not that city thing where the idiot takes off his vest. This one was years ago.”

“He took off his suit vest to fight you? That’s pretty funny.”

“Why? Frees up your arms more.”

Amanda was back. “I heard part of that. More macho-man talk.”

“Point I was making,” Matt said, “Al here wanted to clarify I’m not putting any moves on you, or intending to. The guy where I was best man, that thing didn’t last long. Like a couple years. But then I’d run into the wife different places and my friend was suspicious that we had something going.”

“What difference would it make?” Al said.

“Right. A, we didn’t, but b, it’s not his business anymore *what* the ex-wife does.”

“I can see it though,” Amanda said, “there’s a residual carryover. Destructive behavior could ensue.”

Al and Matt looked at each other. “What are you *talking* about?” Al said.

“Nah that’s okay,” Matt said, “same way he saw it. It wrecked our friendship. I hit *Like* on his postings once in a while on Instagram.”

“What happened to the wife?” Amanda said.

“That’s the other thing. She moved to Reykjavik. The chump was still suspicious.”

“What's that, Iceland?” Al said.

“Yeah, she met an Armenian guy playing cricket at a country club in Ojai. Far as I know they're still there.”

“This shit’s too weird,” Al said.

Amanda said, “Did you know actually, Iceland . . . their weather is milder than Minneapolis?”

“I heard that too,” Matt said. “Bullshit. What happened with the therapist?”

“Well first thing I instruct her,” Al said, “don’t bring me back to the womb, none of that. Once I laid the groundwork it worked out pretty good.”

“That mean you hooked up with her?” Amanda said.

“I introduced the concept. Of course she was professional.”

“Do you think she might have wanted to?” Matt said. “When you stripped it all away? Reason I ask, I had a female therapist once too.”

“You boys have checkered pasts,” Amanda said.

“This was different,” Matt said. “I found a diary of my mom’s, she’d been schtupping around on my dad quite a bit.”

Al said, “Oh. Sorry to hear that.”

“What did the therapist say?” Amanda said.

“It didn’t go great. She got nervous when I said I was going to find a particular one of my mom’s affair-ees and ask some questions. I think she may have called someone on me.”

“What were you going to ask the guy?” Al said.

“Wait--you mean like the police?” Amanda said.

“Yeah well, someone shows up my house. No big thing in the end.”

“*Did* you reach out to the guy?” Al said.

“I did. I tracked him down at a celebrity golf tournament.”

“You’re not gonna say he *was* one,” Al said.

“No, he owned a car dealership that helped sponsor the deal. Stand-up guy actually, didn’t shy away from my questions.”

“And?” Amanda said.

“He said she was a great lay. His words. Referring to my mom.”

“Ooh,” Al said.

“So . . . that was it?” Amanda said.

“It was. It helped me get past the issue. I was tempted to go back to the therapist and tell her that’s how it worked.”

“Like a field assignment then,” Amanda said.

“Could have gone the other way too,” Al said.

“Is she still . . . around? Your mom?” Amanda said.

“Oh yeah. A condo complex in Florida. She still has it going on.”

“Well,” Al said. “Anyone hungry?”

“What are you, taking over?” Matt said. Al was back in the kitchen trying to figure it out.

Amanda said, “I should go. I just meant to say hi.”

“Stick around. Please.”

“Really?”

“I was asking Al,” Matt said, “is it okay not to like people. He said sure.”

She said, “I tend not to like them either.”

“But?”

“But I don’t know . . . What happened in the city?”

“I knew this guy’s wife growing up. Just casually one summer. We were working the snack bar at the skate place. So you know how weddings are, and eventually we’re out there dancing one together. The guy charges across the floor, goes nuts.”

“Wait . . . this is the groom?”

“No, it’s his cousin’s wedding. They restrain him and I figure I better take off. Problem was, I had a ride, this gal that lives in Forestville. So there’s a park across the street and I go over there and hang out.”

“I thought you said it was the guy’s sister you knew.” Al was back. He had a chef’s apron on and was holding a tongs.

“You must be telepathic,” Matt said, “because after a while the sister comes over to the park.”

“So good, you had company,” Amanda said.

“We smoke a joint, why not. She lays it on me that they’re all seriously afraid of this guy, her own brother. That there have been incidents.”

“The ex-college quarterback,” Al said.

“So I say--not thinking about it too hard--why not hire someone to do something about it? She looks at me big-eyed, and pretty soon she says well it’s been real, and goes back across to the thing.”

Al took a moment. “Except . . . you’re wondering if you planted a seed . . . that could take.”

“I am. I won’t lie, I keep checking the local news section of the Chronicle.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” Al said.

“No?”

“What will be will be,” Amanda said. “One time I was helping watch an elderly woman? We’re talking extremely old. There’s these big fizzy tablets that they use to soak their dentures in, which I didn’t know. So the woman asks for one so she can eat it, and dumb me, I go along, thinking it’s an antacid or something.”

“That’s not good,” Al said.

“So of course she swallows it whole and chokes on it. I’m debating should I try the Heimlich Maneuver, but I’m afraid of destroying what’s left of her rib cage, plus her organs. Her sister hears the commotion--this gal’s about 90 herself--sizes up the situation, takes a deep breath and says what will be will be.”

“So what happened?” Matt said.

“She didn’t make it.”

“Jeez,” Al said.

“What are you going to do,” Amanda said.

Al said, “The sister down in the city . . . how is she?”

“You mean . . . always been reasonably attractive I guess,” Matt said.

“So . . .” Al said. “Let ‘em do their thing, and if and when it plays out, look her up, see if you can, you know, connect with her.”

“Whoa,” Matt said.

“Sort of complete the cycle,” Al said.

“You think?”

“May as well cap it off, I would agree,” Amanda said.

“Is *that* what you would do,” Matt said.

She said, “You know something? I’m out of here.”

Al got up too. "Dude, we can entertain your needy stories up to a point. But this is bullshit."

"See ya," Matt said.

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