

LUCK OF THE DRAW
(working title)

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an original work of fiction by Larissa Dahroug

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dedicated to those with the wisdom to keep ancient knowledge and traditions

CHAPTER 10

Some Mommy Time

Doug Was walking haltingly up the stairs struggling a little with Stewart's carrier. Doug wasn't the only one with a spreading waist line. Stewart was quite ample as well these days.

"Stew-poo, no more treats this week. Nothing but crunchies...for you AND Daddy." Doug had taken time to wash some lettuce and veggies for a salad before he left his house and had all the clean chopped items individually packed, including a side of oil and vinegar, in an insulated lunchbox he had since he was in college. Stewart meowed in clear objection.

"Really Stew-pie, it's not so bad. You can still catch meeces." Doug stopped just before the top step. He could hear Maggie talking to Tubbs in the hall behind the offices.

"They were gorgeous, Tubbs! Where were they from? I just Love sunflowers and that vase! It was just like a Van Gogh painting!" Maggie squealed. Doug's heart began to pound. Was Maggie talking about Jack's sunflowers? Why would Tubbs have any of Jack's sunflowers?

"I don't know where he got them. He was just dropping them off for Amy. I happened to see him and told him I would take them to her myself. Ask Doug next time you see him. He'd know. I'm sure." Tubbs answered Maggie.

So they *were* talking about Jack's sunflowers! Doug felt like he might throw up. Quickly, and as quietly as he could, he started back down the stairs and headed towards his car. He needed a mental health day himself now *and* to find out more about the sunflowers. He started his Escape and backed out of the parking space without even securing Stewart's carrier with a seatbelt. The carrier lurched forward with the weight of the fat kitty.

"Oh, Stew-poo, Daddy's sorry. We'll be home in a minute Big Guy. I promise. And then you can have kitty crack." Doug said going back on his earlier assertion. Stewart meowed softly and settled himself in the back of the carrier causing it to slide back into place on the seat.

Doug's mind was reeling. Should he call Eberly? Was it Eberly who brought the flowers? It wouldn't be unlike him, but it also wouldn't be unlike him to spill the beans either. Had Eberly told Tubbs about what Doug had done? Or had Mike or Oleg brought the flowers by? Had *they* found Eberly and Jack and Stephanie and hurt them too? Doug was beside himself. He didn't know just how much trouble he was in, if any, and he resented the entire situation. He didn't

have anything against Amy and he also didn't want anyone in his tiny world to get hurt. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong...really...other than be an accomplice to an assault. Oh my God! He was in so much trouble. He was going to lose his license! He was going to lose his house! He was going to lose....everything! Any why? Because he took on a new client? He just wanted to go home and lie down and close his eyes and wake up and have it be two weeks ago when his biggest concerns were switching to the next bigger hole in his belt, what to order at brunch, and Eberly chastising him for his poor fashion sense. This was all too much. He was so caught up in his thoughts, Doug blew right through a stop sign and nearly collided with an old Chinese woman driving a beat-up old Lexus. The woman honked and yelled something at him out her window, but Doug didn't care. He just wanted the relative safety of his bedroom and his fleece bathrobe.

Back in his townhouse Doug freed Stewart from his carrier and dropped his bag and lunchbox on the floor in the foyer then ran up the stairs to his bathroom and threw up. He hadn't had anything for breakfast other than a cup of Earl Grey with milk. The dairy tasted sour in the back of his throat and stomach acid stung inside his sinuses. Doug spat a gooey string of vomit and mucus in the toilet and wiped his mouth with a wad of tissue before blowing his nose and flushing it all down. Then he washed his face with cold water and stood, bent over the sink with his head under the stream, wetting his head. Rubbing his hands over his face and scalp he felt the thinning patch at the crown of his head. Just one more insult for the day. Still hunched over the sink bowl, he turned off the spigot and felt around for the hand towel hanging on the wall next to the sink. Finding it, he wiped his face and blotted at his dripping hair. Stewart sat in the doorway looking at him quizzically, his orange and yellow striped tail with its white tip flicking back and forth around the kitty's heavy bottom planted solidly on the floor.

"Oh, Stew-poo! Look at your stupid Daddy! It's OK kitty. We're OK." Doug lied to the cat scooping him up in his arms and holding his warm furry body to his cheek, hugging him tight. Stewart purred and relaxed his weight into his Daddy's hug. Doug took the kitty over to his bed and laid him carefully on the corner of the mattress.

"Daddy will be right back and we can have a good snuggle and maybe watch some TV." Doug picked up the remote from his nightstand and turned on the wall-mounted flat screen at the foot of the bed. Some cooking show maven was whisking heavy whipping cream into a thick froth.

Stewart settled in and watched while Doug plodded down the stairs to get his bag with his laptop and phone..and a bag of potato chips and a soda. He took his lunch box into the kitchen and put it on an empty shelf then plucked a root beer from the bottom shelf and a bag of chips and bonito flakes from a cupboard and headed back up the stairs. Stewart was now laying on his back in a kind of C shape with his paws outstretched in the air and his white belly exposed. Doug sat the items in his hands down near his pillow and rubbed the kitty's belly. Stewart sprung into action biting playfully at his Daddy's hands.

"Oh, Stew-poo, what would Daddy do without you, Buddy?" Stewart looked at him blankly and winked one eye. Doug pulled off his clothes and rifled through a drawer looking for his grey elastic waisted jersey gym shorts and a soft well worn T-shirt from college and pulled his fleece robe from a hook on the wall and put it on. Sitting on the bed his trouser socks offended even his fashion sensibilities. So, he peeled them off tossing them into the corner in the direction of his hamper. Then he sprinkled some bonito flakes on the comforter for Stewart, cracked open the bottle of root beer and tore at the corner of the bag of potato chips. Crunching on a chip he pulled his laptop and cell phone out of his bag and started to dial his clients for the day. It was quarter of eleven. His first appointment was at eleven fifteen. With any luck he'd catch Sarah before she had left. It rang twice before going to voicemail. Damn. She was probably driving. "Hi? Sarah? This is Dr. Spears. I'm very sorry to do this so last minute, but I was suddenly ill and need to cancel our appointment for today. Please give me a call back later and we can reschedule. Again, I'm so sorry for the last minute call. Talk to you soon." Doug hated leaving messages, but right now he didn't really have any good options. At least he wasn't totally lying... for once. He *had* actually gotten suddenly ill, hadn't he? Doug went through the list of four clients for the day and called leaving a message on voicemail for all but one. Paul's voicemail was full. It was annoying. Part of Paul's problem was he was so apathetic about everything in his life. Doug wasn't surprised his voicemail was full. He pulled up the client file on his laptop and found an email address then sent an email to Paul. When he was done he put the laptop back in his bag and sat with the phone resting in his lap.

Doug picked up the remote and pulled up the menu of his DVR. He needed something to distract him, to create a sense of normal, of comfort. And there it was: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. He remembered for a moment he and his father watching the movie on TBS when he was seven or eight then building a mashed potato mountain at dinner and his mother yelling

at both of them to stop it. His father had turned to his mother and said in all seriousness, "This is important. This means something." Then he and Doug had busted out laughing and Anya had gotten up from the table snatching both their unfinished plates from them and scraped the food into the trash. Later his father had taken him to Dairy Queen and told him they were both in the dog house. Now Doug was missing his father *and* mother. He pressed play and turned down the volume to almost nothing. Stewart rolled back up into a ball next to Doug and rested his chin over Doug's ankle to watch.

Doug picked up his phone and looked at the "Favorites" list on his contacts. In the time since he and Eberly had started to cool things down Eberly had fallen from number one on the list to number seven. Galeena was now number one. Doug dialed her first.

"Privyet, Doug!" Galeena answered.

"Hi Galeena. I just wanted to call and check in. See how you're doing." Doug had a feeling in his stomach like the day before the first day of school.

"Oh, Doug, this old bubbie is fine just fine. How are you, Dear? How is mister Eberly these days? Did he like the T-shirt? It made me think of him. That's why I got them."

Doug looked over to the chair next to his hamper and saw the T-shirts still folded with tags on them resting on the seat with a folded pair of old jeans.

"Oh, he Loved it. You know he does." Doug lied to the sweet old woman.

"Thant's nice, Dear. Are we still on for lunch Saturday?"

"Yes. Galeena. Unless the good Lord says my time is up!" Doug laughed nervously.

"Don't be silly. I'll be rotting in the ground long before your time is up." Galeena said with an air of annoyance.

"One never can tell, Bubbs." Doug reminded her.

"Oh, Doug, what's wrong, Dear? Maybe Galeena will make lunch on Saturday? It's been some time since I made a pot of borscht or baked some good black bread. No?"

"Galeena that would be wonderful!" Doug said sincerely. Anya made borscht when Doug was growing up too, but she never used meat in her recipe. Doug Loved the chunks of beef and the big round bone in Galeena's soup and her bread was always a better texture than his mother's was. She used to bake double batches and give half to Anya every week until Doug graduated from high school. After that, Galeena stopped baking so much and Anya just bought seeded rye from a bakery.

“Well, I will look forward to seeing you then, Dear, and if you want Eberly is welcome to join us since it’s such a special meal.”

“I’ll ask him Galeena, but I think he has other plans already.” Doug had no idea if Eberly had plans, but even if they hadn’t been fighting, Doug didn’t feel like sharing this with him anyway. But Galeena didn’t need to know that.

“Well maybe my new gentleman friend will join us. I think he’d like to meet you and I think I’d like you to meet him.” Doug almost choked on spittle.

“Oh, Galeena. I do want to meet him, but can’t it just be us on Saturday? Just family.” Doug almost begged.

“Why, Doug, you sweet boy. Galeena knows. You just need some mommy time?” Doug was relieved.

“Yes. Galeena. I Love you.”

“I Love you too, Dear. Now, I need to go.”

“OK. Be safe and let me know if you need anything anytime. Even in the middle of the night. Even early in the morning. If you need anything, just call. OK?”

Galeena laughed. “Of course Doug. You’re my baby too, my Love.”

“OK. See you later.”

“Yes. Bye-bye.”

“Bye.” Doug hung up and took a deep breath. Good old Galeena. What a gem. No one could ever be a better aunt to Doug even if they were blood. Stewart shifted his weight and rubbed his face against Doug’s ankle. Doug reached down and rubbed the kitty’s ears then slumped back onto his pillow. He needed to call Eberly. He picked up the phone and pressed Eberly’s name on the contacts list. It only rang once.

“Douglas. What a surprise.” Eberly answered.

“Eb, we need to talk.”

“What? Shall I come by and get my drawer? Do you have it boxed up for me already? You know, I want that Deco side table I bought in BC last spring too. The only reason it’s in your place is because it didn’t fit in mine at the time and now I have room for it.” Eb lied. He didn’t have room for it, but he thought it would make a lovely housewarming gift once Stephanie graduated and she and Jack settled in their new place. It would be perfect next to the Gettleman family chair. In the mean time he could squeeze it in his bedroom. It would be a little crowded, but it would only be temporary.

"That's not why I called, but whatever you want. I don't care about the table and if it's over for us I'm a big boy and so are you." Doug didn't care about the table. He had never even really liked it. He thought it was hideous. It was on the small landing in the middle of his staircase and Doug frequently stubbed his toe on it coming down the stairs in the morning.

"Well if that's how it is..." Eberly started.

"Yeah. That's how it is, Eb. Look, I just want to know, did you send sunflowers to Amy?"

Eberly was silent for a moment. Doug thought he had his answer.

"No. I didn't." He finally replied in a voice Doug had never heard before...a voice totally devoid of feminine aspect. The answer was like a sucker punch.

"Then who the fuck did, Eberly? Who the fuck sent Jack's sunflowers to Amaranth Gonder?"

"Well, Lover. I may have told Jack-Jack and Steph-Steph about your little situation and Jack-Jack may have felt bad for the poor woman you so cruelly assaulted and he just may have taken her a big beautiful vase of flowers. But she wasn't there so he gave them to some janitor." Doug felt the blood rising to his face in anger and fear.

"You did what? We are definitely over. You are the worst boyfriend ever. Have you and I EVER had anything that was private between the two of us? ANYTHING?"

"Considering there was a man on either side of me getting their lollipop licked that first time we met, I'd have to say no, probably not." Eberly was right in his recollection. There had been two other couples enjoying themselves at the truck stop that fateful night. Doug was not amused. He had always taken Eberly's confidences very seriously, whether personal or work related. This was more betrayal than he could stand for.

"Then yeah, come get your shit tonight. I'll have it by the curb where the trash belongs."

Eberly let out a high pitched cut-off sound from the back of his throat before hanging up the phone.

Doug became light headed and his thoughts began to swim as his sight narrowed with anger and fear. Who all knew? Had they told the police yet? He closed his eyes and fell back onto the pillow but he was just a little too close to the wall and smacked the balding crown of his head on the drywall leaving a small dent. He rolled to his side grasping the top of his head in pain. Stewart meowed and scrambled off the bed and into Doug's slightly open closet to hide.

"Damn it! Stew-pie don't you pee in there!"

Doug got up and knelt down next to the bed and fished with one arm for a Rubbermaid container. He found an empty one among the others filled with winter sweaters and other cold-

weather clothes he used when traveling and threw it on the bed. Then he went to his dresser and pulled out the drawer with Eberly's things and dumped it in. Then he went back in the bathroom and grabbed Eberly's toothbrush, toothpaste, aftershave, face wash and lotion and threw them on top of the pile of now unfolded clothes, sex toys and lube. He secured the lid and tore off his gym shorts replacing them with the jeans sitting on his chair. Reminded once again of the T-shirts from Galeena, he took one and stuffed it in the box with Eberly's other things. Then he put on the plastic Adidas slides he saved for wearing in public showers and carried the box down the stairs and sat it by the door. Then he went back up to the landing and picked up the side table and carried it down as well. He stacked the box on top of the table then lifted both items up from the lip of the table and carried them out to the curb at the end of the driveway.

Back in the townhouse Stewart was sniffing the empty space where the table had once sat. Doug bent over and rubbed the kitty's ears. "Don't worry Stew-poo. I'm sure Eberly still Loves you. It's not your fault. Eb is just an asshole Daddy used to fuck." Stewart looked up at Doug and ran down the stairs to his bowl of crunchies. Doug stomped up the stairs to get his wallet, phone, sunglasses and keys. As he walked out the front door he had the sunglasses on his head while he locked the door. "Back real soon, Stew-pie. Be good." He called through the door. Doug situated himself behind the wheel of the Escape and backed out almost hitting the pile of Eberly's belongings. He stopped and pulled out his phone just long enough to text Eb:

You're shit's at the curb. Get it before gypsies steal it.

Then he finished backing out the driveway and sped off towards Palo Alto. Lunch hour traffic was heavy and it took Doug forty five minutes to get to downtown Palo Alto. He passed Jack and Stephanie's Bronco parked a few blocks from Jack's shop. It took almost twenty minutes but he finally found a parking spot not far from the shop. In his Dartmouth shirt, faded jeans, sunglasses and Adidas sandals on the Palo Alto street Doug looked more like a Stanford student than he did a grown man with a private clinical psychology practice. He could see Jack's shop. The door was open and Doug could see Jack behind the counter laughing with a woman holding a giant vase of roses. The sight of the flowers made him even more angry. If Eb's stuff was still at the curb when he got home he'd add the sunflowers on his coffee table to the pile. Otherwise he'd just enjoy smashing the vase and throwing the flowers in his compost bucket.

A bell chimed as Doug walked in the door of Jack's shop, *Masterpiece Flowers*. He almost knocked over a sandwich board with a color saturated photo of one of Jack's April O'Keefe Iris arrangements. The shop was full of sunflowers and giant floribundas in black buckets. Jack looked at Doug with hatred as he scrambled to stop the sandwich board from toppling over while the woman at the counter continued to speak.

"Think nothing of it Linda. I'm just so happy your event was a success. You let me know. If this is going to be a quarterly thing for you now we can just put it on the calendar."

"Jack, that would be wonderful. I'll have Bethany call you later to officially set up the account." the woman said to Jack.

"Great. I look forward to it." Jack said and smiled. The top three buttons of his light blue oxford were unbuttoned and the neck band of his white t-shirt was stretched and rolled and there was a small mustard stain over his right breast. "Linda" turned around, roses in her arms, to walk out with an ear to ear grin and passed Doug without even acknowledging him.

"See you later, Jack!" she called over her shoulder as she walked out the door.

Jack and Doug both waited for her to be out of sight before either spoke. Jack was first. He had the better view of the street from his position.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he wasted no time letting Doug know he wasn't welcome.

"Was it you who took sunflowers to my office?"

"Not your office you piece of shit. To that poor woman you almost killed with your spinelessness."

"Whatever. You know you have mustard on your shirt? Maybe if you took time to breath between bites you wouldn't look like such a pig all the time."

"Nice, Doug. But today I'm the one with the upper hand." Jack had his hand under the counter looking for the handgun he bought the year before after those kids of East Palo Alto had robbed him at gunpoint. The gun was nestled in a hidden cubbyhole next to an alarm button he had installed around the same time. It would alert both the security company and the police.

"I'm pretty sure the police know about you and your charade by now, Doug."

Doug just shook his head back and forth. He wanted to choke the fat prick.

"And just what did you tell them?"

"Oh I didn't tell them anything. I told that Mr. Tubbs all about you though, and I have a feeling he made a phone call or two."

Doug lurched toward Jack but before he could get across the counter to grab him and shake him Jack pulled the gun out and shot Doug twice, in the shoulder and chest, and pressed the alarm button. Doug laid on the floor of the shop, blood oozing out of the wounds, gasping for breath. Jack picked up the phone and dialed 9-1-1. He was crying.

“A man tried to attack me in my shop. I shot him. He’s bleeding!” Jack screamed into the phone. It was the last thing Doug heard before passing out. He never heard the sirens or saw the EMTs that packed his wounds and hoisted him into the ambulance. Jack was loaded into the back of a Palo Alto police cruiser and taken to the station for questioning. Poor Jeff was left to mop up the mess and close the shop for the day. He hadn’t seen any of it. He had been in the back loading the delivery van for the afternoon run.