

I'm With the Band – Part 3

This story takes place in [DKFenger's Trust Machines](#) universe. Trust Machines are also called Venn Machines because of the large Venn diagram on the outside panel. Two people enter. Each modifies the other without seeing how the other is modifying them. When they hit the green button, the change takes place in the other. Changes can be in thirds of days, one to three days, months or years. But never permanent.

Debra got home from her assignment late that night. She found the apartment dark and wondered where Kevin was. She walked into the bedroom and flipped the lights on. Kevin was sitting in the reading nook he insisted they needed in the bedroom. There was a book on his lap but he could not have been reading it in the dark. He was looking out the window and did not react when she entered.

"Kevin?"

"Oh, hi, I didn't hear you come in."

"Kevin, you were sitting in the dark."

He looked around as if he did not know where he was. "Yes, um, could you sit down?"

"You're scaring me."

"I'm-- I'm not trying to." He stood up and helped her sit down on the bed. He sat next to her. "So, I went to the bookstore yesterday. And for some reason I felt sick and had to rush into the back to throw up. Mrs. Cache joked that it reminded her of morning sickness. I thought nothing of it until I threw up this morning. And well, on a whim, I took.... Anyway, long story short, I'm pregnant. How was your day?"

Debra shook her head in bewilderment. "You're what?"

"Yeah, pregnant, that's what the pink lines mean."

"That's wonderful." She kissed Kevin and he had not realized how much better that would make him feel.

"I'm sorry. You were supposed to be the Mommy and...."

"Sh-sh-sh-sh, it's okay. And you need to see an OB."

"Not like this I don't."

"We'll stop at a Venn Machine before your appointment. I'll call my doctor tomorrow morning."

* * *

"I'm not nervous," Ravenna said.

"You are gripping the arms of the chair like we're on a roller coaster," Debra said.

"I'm not allowed on roller coasters in my condition."

"Ha ha. Calm down."

"Only one person and I have been where this person is about to go. I'm allowed to be nervous."

"That's twice as many people as were in mine when I first saw a gynecologist."

"Mrs. McNichols?" the nurse called.

"That's you," Debra said.

"What? Oh, right." They got up and followed the nurse into an office. Behind the desk was a woman in her thirties. She stood and shook their hands.

"Debra, I see you've brought a friend. Hi, I'm Dr. Sandra Smith."

"This is my wife and husband, Ravenna."

"Congratulations." She said with a funny look. "How does that work?"

"We met when we were both vanned to the opposite gender," Ravenna said. "I'm vanned now."

"Well, you probably don't need to see a gynecologist if your normally male."

"Not according to the test."

"Oh, then you might be pregnant."

"That's why we're here."

"You aren't the first patient I've had in this particular set of circumstances," she said pressing a button the intercom.

A nurse walked in. "Please take Ravenna to an exam room. Do a blood test and the usual tests. And get her prepped for examination."

"And be gentle, it's my first time." Ravenna added.

The doctor held Debra back. "You shouldn't go in there. She should get use to being an adult woman at her doctor's office."

"I suppose. Next time I'll show up as her husband."

"Do you spend a lot of time as a man?"

"I used the Venn Machines professionally long before I met Ravenna. You're a professional woman. You know male colleagues treat women differently. I created my Derek persona right out of college to avoid that issue. I thought Kevin was cute and Ravenna adorable. So I introduced myself to her as Derek. We have several hobbies in common and we both changed our gender for professional advantage. We were meant to be."

"He became a woman for professional reason?"

"She's the singer in a band."

"Ob-la-di, ob-la-da."

The nurse escorted Ravenna to a room where she drew blood, checked her temperature and blood pressure – the usual suite of medical tests. "You'll need to disrobe. Put this on when you are done." She left and Ravenna looked at the examination table like it was from of torture chamber in the dark ages.

Sandra came in about ten minutes later. "Test says you are about six to eight weeks pregnant. It's slightly too soon to do an ultrasound so we'll save that for

next time. Please sit on the table. This will be awkward and sometimes uncomfortable. I do my best to mitigate that. But it is what it is."

During the exam, Dr. Smith tried to keep up the small talk to distract her from the examination. "So, Debra says you spend most of your time as a woman because you're in a band. Did you ever want to be a woman before that?"

"No. It was just a crazy idea to see if we'd get more popular with a female lead singer."

"And now you're pregnant."

"That's because I fell in love."

"That's sweet."

"Yeah, I wasn't supposed to go first. It was an accident. I spent the last six weeks as Kevin. But I had to stay like this for a week immediately after the wedding because of some existing band engagements."

"Perhaps fate exists."

"Well, fate has a sense of humor then."

"You are a healthy young woman. But then, all vanned people are healthy."

"Okay, I'll see you back here in four weeks. And every four weeks after that until toward the end. The receptionist will give you some pamphlets for various dos and donts. I recommend that you stay vanned as a woman throughout the pregnancy."

"Really?"

"Yes, especially the third trimester. And also for several months after the birth if you are going to breastfeed."

"I had not thought about that."

"Well, first time mothers vary widely in their level of knowledge before the big day. When does your current venn end?"

"We set it for a year."

"Good. Stay out of the venn machine. It might be safe to be a man for a short time during the pregnancy, but I feel it is better to be safe than sorry."

"Have you vanned?" Ravenna said as she got up and reached for her closes.

The doctor pause before leaving. "I have. I like to spend weekends as a house cat. It's a great way to catch up on sleep."

* * *

Ravenna and Debra arrived at the McNichols home that night for dinner, a dinner they had planned to attend a few days ago. When Sara opened the door, she greeted them with kisses on the cheek and said, "I thought you still had another couple days as Kevin to go."

"An appointment Ravenna needed to go to came up unexpectedly," Debra said as they entered.

They went to the kitchen where Mrs. McNichols was finishing dinner. "Oh,

hello, kids," Ravenna's mother said as they entered. "Dinner will be in a few moments."

After some small talk and calling Mr. McNichols to dinner, they were seated in the dining room eating. As the meal finished, Debra said, "Ravenna has something to announce."

All eyes turned to Ravenna and after a pause she said, "This wasn't exactly our plan so soon but we're going to have a baby."

"Oh, Debra, that's wonderful," Mom said. "So soon?"

"It wasn't planned, Mom," Debra said. She turned to Ravenna and said, "You left part of it out, Dear."

"Yes," Ravenna said. "Um, it's not Debra who's pregnant."

"No way," Sara said, looking at Ravenna.

She just nodded.

"Oh, Ravenna, that's wonderful," Mom repeated, with a smile.

"No one ever listens to me," Dad mumbled.

After dinner, they all sat in the living room to talk. The new baby being the central topic, of course. At one point, Ravenna excused herself and went upstairs. She entered Kevin's old bedroom and sat on the bed. She was thinking about when Kevin had hung the various band posters around the room, when Kevin had built the spaceship models hanging over her desk, when was the last time Kevin touched the baseball mitt.

"May I come in?"

"Dad!" she said as she noticed him standing in the doorway. "Sure," She waved him into the room.

He sat beside her on the bed. They were silent for a moment. She noticed how much bigger he was. Kevin was an inch or so taller than his father. But she felt small next to him.

"I haven't been in here in years," he said. "Kevin never really needed my help. He was always sure of himself. I remember when you told me you were going to be a musician. I know nothing about music. You get your talent from your mother's side of the family. But you said it with such conviction I just said...."

"You said, 'Give it everything you've got and you'll get what you want.'"

He made a point of looking her up and down, "Well, you gave more than most people are willing to give. And you have succeeded possibly beyond any level you had a right to believe possible."

"Thanks, Daddy."

"So stop all this moping."

"Moping?"

"Yes, moping. You may have never thought about being a mother all the years you lived here, but now you will be and you will give it all you've got because that's what you do."

Ravenna looked at her father as if for the first time. Then she hugged him. His arms folded around her and she felt stronger for being in his arms. Tears decorated her cheeks as they separated. "How is it you always know what to say?"

"It's a gift."

* * *

Karl opened the door and found Steph on his porch.

"Can I come in? I need a drink."

"Sure," Karl said as Steph passed him and went to the study to pour himself a straight tumbler of bourbon. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing's really wrong. I just found out Ravenna's pregnant." Steph said as he drank half his drink.

"That's wonderful," Karl said and gave Steph a hug. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"It's wonderful. It's beautiful. It's just I don't think Ravenna was planning to have a kid this soon. And it might throw a wrench in our band plans."

"Oh, don't worry about that now. Just be glad for her."

He finished his drink and looked at Karl thoughtfully, "You aren't reacting how I expected you would."

"I'm not?"

Diane's voice called from upstairs. "Darling, I'm naked and alone."

"Just a moment," Karl called back.

"Diane?" Steph asked Karl.

"You can tell?"

"Karl would have told you to start without him. He would catch up."

"He would, wouldn't he?"

"How did you get him to agree to venn?"

"My act after the bachelor's party helped. Let's go upstairs. Don't let on that you figured it out."

"Of course not. As long as you get him to do it again."

* * *

"Well, if it isn't our little mother-to-be," Scott said giving Ravenna a hug. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," Ravenna said, getting out her guitar. "I'm still a bit overwhelmed."

"Oh, it'll work out," Steph said.

Just the three of them were in their old practice space for the first time in months and for the first time since the wedding. The plan was to start writing a followup album to their debut. Alicia insisted that they get it done before Ravenna needed time off for child rearing.

"So what's it like?" Scott said.

"It's no different than normal, aside from occasional morning sickness. It's too soon for kicking and stuff like that, thank God."

"You sound nervous," Scott said.

"It's probably not unusual to be nervous. I'm just dwelling a bit on the whole 'I never thought about being pregnant myself ever in a million years' part of it."

"Well, that went out the window the moment we first vennd," Steph said.

"I suppose."

"Didn't you go on your honeymoon as Kevin? Were you pregnant then?" Scott asked.

"I was. Apparently pregnant men is a thing."

"Those machines are so weird."

"Can we just get started so I can focus on something else?"

Halfway through the songwriting session, Ravenna's phone rang. "It's Alicia," she told the guys. "Hi, Alicia, I put you on speaker."

"How's the session going? Any hit singles?"

"We only just started," Steph said, stepping closer to the phone.

"Of course. I don't want to interrupt your flow. I was just checking in."

"Thanks, mom," Scott said. "We'll let you know when we have a couple songs ready in a few weeks."

"We had years to write that first album. You can't expect a second one in just a few days," Steph said.

"I can hope," Alicia joked. "Since you are interrupted, is now a good time to talk appearance scheduling?"

"I suppose," Ravenna said.

"We need to get you guys back in the spotlight. So I thought you might do another morning show in a few weeks. And I have a late night appearance lined up in a couple months."

"That's awesome."

"You don't need new material for either of those. I'm sure they'll request *Dilation*. You have a tour setup for next month running for four months and sprinkling in a couple new songs is great for buzz. After that, I'm sure Ravenna will be showing. That doesn't mean you can't continue to tour, but we don't know how much it will wear you out."

"Too soon to think about," Ravenna said.

"I know, but we will need to know soon. Better never to have scheduled a date than to cancel one."

"Understood," Steph said.

"Okay, I don't want to waste too much of your time. Buh-Bye."

"Bye."

* * *

Several weeks later, they had enough songs to start thinking about an album theme. They arranged a few practice sessions with their stage band to teach

them the new songs. They also used the time to rehearse for the next tour.

Alicia stopped by one day with Naveed Prajeet, a rising record producer, so they could meet him for the first time and so he could hear the songs for the first time.

After run-throughs of a few of their favorites, Naveed asked, "Can we talk about these arrangements?"

"You have some ideas?" Steph asked.

"Just want to see what you think." Naveed then made suggestions for all of the songs, tweaking which musicians played which parts, alterations to the instrumentation, moving string sounds to brass or moving the solo guitar part to the flute. Really nothing radical. Just different compared to what they were already use to.

At the end of the day, Naveed said farewell and the group gathered around Alicia. "He knows his stuff," Scott said.

"He's fabulous, isn't he?" Alicia said.

"I don't know," Steph said. "I get a funny vibe from him."

"Don't be silly," Ravenna said. "He's just trying to make the songs better."

* * *

A week before the tour kicked off they were scheduled to perform on a late night television show from a major broadcaster. They were in the green room waiting for the show to start when the host came in.

Tommy Maven was a tall, middle-aged man, wearing business casual attire. They recognized him immediately, he reached out a hand to each of them, "Ravenna, Steph, Scott, welcome to my little late show. Nervous?"

"A little."

"Only a little? You're doing better than me," he said. "No, there's nothing to worry about. We're running a bit short and I was hoping, Ravenna, you wouldn't mind sitting with me at the desk for a few questions after the performance."

"I'd love to."

"Just Ravenna," Steph asked.

"Oh, no, you guys can join us. My assistant, Loni, will stop by later to run a few of the questions by you."

"Yes, I'd like to see those questions," Alicia said.

"You're their manager? Yes, of course. We're very softball around here." He said. "I've got other things to take care of so I'll see you during the show."

"Okay," Ravenna said.

After he left Alicia said, "This is great. The musical guest is usually on close to 12:30. This means you'll be on earlier when fewer people have fallen asleep."

After their performance, Tommy plugged their album and said to stay tuned for more of Ravenna's Libido. The three of them sat across from Tommy at the

desk as they came back from commercial.

"That was just great," he said, holding up the album cover. "That's a great cover pic, too. It looks so true to life I'm sure it was taken in a boring studio with a dozen people standing around."

"Something like that," Ravenna said, thinking back to that day in the meadow.

"So you guys are going back on tour?"

"Yes, we have a bunch of dates planned for then next few months," Scott said.

"It starts tomorrow here at the arena," Steph said.

"I heard someone got married."

Ravenna held out her ring, "Yes, a few months ago." She turned to look at the camera. "Hi, Honey."

"That's cute. Any talk of children."

"There's talk," she replied slowly. "I'll let you know if anything changes."

"You'll let me know?"

"Yes, just you."

"I feel so privileged. I hear you're working on a new album."

"Yeah, we might be previewing some of them on tour," Ravenna said.

"That sounds exciting. Okay, we've got to go to commercial break. You guys are performing again, right?"

"Yeah, *All of You* is next."

On the limo ride back to the hotel, Steph said, "Was it me or did he seem annoyed when Scott or I spoke?"

"He seemed annoyed to me." Scott said.

"Did he?" Ravenna said.

"I think so," Alicia said. "People will see you as the star no matter how much you tell them otherwise."

* * *

Karl answered the door, wearing just a bathrobe and his jaw dropped at who was there. "Steph?"

"May I come in?" Steph was wearing a spaghetti-strapped red dress. Their lips were a glossy, fire-engine red, matching their nails. The rest of their makeup was dark and inviting.

"What's the occasion?"

"I can't dress up for my besties?" Steph asked stepping in.

Karl could not resist fondling their ass.

Steph swatted his hand away. "There'll be time for that later. Where's Diane? I was hoping to talk with her."

"Well, if you had called ahead, I'd have told you she wasn't available tonight for conversation."

"What is she tonight?"

"Blowup doll. I brought her home from the mall about an hour ago. I dutifully brought her up to the bedroom. I removed my clothes in front her, even did a little striptease. Then I put on my robe and came downstairs. I'm watching a ball game. Want to join me?"

"That's mean. And if she asks, you told me she was out."

The ballgame lasted another two hours and Steph was nearly naked by the time they both went upstairs to join Diane on the bed.

In the morning, Diane turned back to normal and noticed Steph was lying awake next to her.

"Finally," Steph said, still staring at the ceiling. "It's like she doesn't see it at all."

"We're you waiting for me to turn back?"

"Yeah."

"Who doesn't see what?"

"Ravenna, she doesn't see that it's become all about her."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm sure it's not her fault," Diane said.

"I didn't say it was her fault. She just doesn't seem to notice it when it's happening."

"That's not true," Karl said.

"You're awake?" Diane said.

"You two yammering, how could I sleep? We watched you guys on that late program. She tried to throw a question to you. The ass-wipe host practically shot daggers at her with his eyes."

"You watched that?"

"Sure, you're going places. It's fun to watch from the sidelines."

"Sometimes I feel like I'm on the sidelines, too."

"Nonsense," Diana said. "That was you performing in front of millions of television viewers. And you were playing a song you helped write. Don't sell yourself short."

"I'm not selling myself short. But that doesn't mean others aren't."

* * *

"I don't think the guys are happy with me."

"Why is that?" Debra asked, as she massaged Ravenna's feet.

"Two weeks into the tour and we've done three appearances together. Every one of the interviewers focused on me. I get called to appear places by myself. They don't. Alicia told me the other day MC Dog wants me to sing on one of his new album tracks."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Of course I'm going to do it. But it's yet another instance of Ravenna going solo."

"Do you want me to talk to Steph? They usually tell me things they don't tell you."

"Like what?"

"Steph asked me for some makeup advice a couple weeks ago. It took me by surprise since they usually do the goth chick makeup rather well. But they wanted something prettier for some reason."

"Probably for his SC."

"SC?"

"Significant Couple, Karl and Diane."

"Oh, yeah, they were at the weddings. They still seeing each other?"

"As far as I know. Steph hasn't said anything to the contrary."

"Maybe there is something to it."

"What?"

"Where is Scott right now?"

"I don't know. Home?"

"Who's he with?"

"Is he seeing someone?"

"You don't know?"

Ravenna blinked. "I don't know. Is he?"

"Nothing serious. He's still playing the field. But you didn't know."

"Well, it's hard to hang out with Scott. He wants to hang out in a bar and I can't do that."

"They serve drinks without alcohol in bars."

"And I'm married and...."

"And you're good at rationalizing and making excuses."

Ravenna pouted.

"You're out on the road and you spend all your time in your room reading baby books."

"But..."

"Yes, baby books are important. But when you look back on this twenty years from now, do you want to look back on these days of touring and think fondly of reading *Baby's on the Way: Don't Panic* or do you want to remember good times with your closest friends? Maybe they aren't just unhappy that you get the lime-light. Maybe they think you think you deserve more limelight because you don't spend enough time being their friend."

* * *

Scott was lying back in bed enjoying the warm, moist mouth pleasuring him. The woman next to him climbed up on his chest and said, "Do me."

"You're Mandy, right?"

"No, she's Mandy. I'm Candi." She said with a wink and a toss of her pixie cut

blond hair.

Later, the three of them were lying next to each other exhausted in a good way.

"It's funny," he said. "You do taste like strawberries."

The two women giggled. "You want..."

"You want to tell..."

"... to tell him?"

"One at a time, please."

Mandy said, "We thought you knew. We're venned."

"I suppose identical twins don't generally have the same birth marks," he said.

"Do I want to know who you really are?"

"We hope so."

"We heard you..."

"... liked twins and so we..."

"Are you even sisters?" he interrupted.

"We're BFFs? We feel..."

"... like sisters."

"You even end each other's sentences."

They giggled again.

"We figured you would be okay with venning because of your bandmates."

"I'm not venned. I've only been in one of those machines a couple times. And I was turning someone into a drumset at the time."

"That sounds..."

"... so cool. I want you..."

"... to pound our..."

"... skins." They ended in unison.

"I thought we just did that."

Candi said, "I hope you're not mad."

Mandy said, "We really enjoyed this. We hope we can do it again."

"Sure, just not this morning."

"We turn back this afternoon."

"Unless you want to help change us later?"

"Into what?"

Scott agreed to it.

Later, he was pressing the green button and true to their word, they did not mess with his form. The door cycled and he darted around to the other side. Out stepped one gorgeous woman exactly as he had specified: long red hair, tall, busty, and leggy. And no one else stepped out.

"Oh, thank you," they said. "We love having one body. It feels like we were meant to be one."

"If I hadn't heard you talking nearly in unison earlier, I'd say that was crazy. So

what do I call you?"

"I think we're Randi," they said. "This is a nice dress."

"That actually took a bit longer than I expected. Clothes are hard."

"You just need more venning practice. Maybe experience changing too."

"Not tonight," Scott said offering them his arm.

* * *

The group was in Los Angeles a few weeks later. The band rode a bus to the arena for the concert. "Have you seen Ravenna?" Steph asked Scott.

"I thought she was in back."

"Nope."

"She'll turn up."

The band was almost done with soundchecks when Ravenna scurried on stage.

"Nice of you to join us," Scott said.

"I was recording vocals for MC Dog."

"That was today?" Steph said.

"Yeah, I had no idea."

"No one told us either."

Later in their dressing rooms, Ravenna was telling Kate, Regina, and Chance about the session earlier in the day.

"Phil had a closed recording session. He had an issue with pirates releasing his entire last album early so everything is really buttoned up this time."

"Phil?"

"MC Dog. His name is Phil. He's a fan apparently. He had me sign our CD and it looked like it had been played a lot. Nice guy. Spends a lot of money on tats."

"I've seen pics of him with his shirt off. They are everywhere. And he is ripped," Regina said.

"Yes, he is. He wasn't wearing a shirt when he was in the recording booth," Ravenna said. "He showed me the lyrics I needed to sing. And then he came in with me to show me how he wanted it done. After that I gave him like four good takes each a little different and his producer said they had what they needed."

"What's the song about?"

"Technically I'm not supposed to say. And that's good because I have no idea. Whenever I heard the playback, I never heard what he was rapping. And my vocals are mostly runs so, yeah, no idea."

Ravenna was answering a few more questions when she turned around to see Scott standing in the doorway. He just shook his head and walked away without saying a word.

When she could, she left the women and tracked down Scott.

"What was that?" She asked.

"Yeah, what was that?" Scott retorted. "Have a good time with the rapper?"

"I did. What of it?"

"We gonna bring in a rapper so you can do this song at our concerts? I doubt our fan base really crosses over with DJ Dog."

"MC Dog."

"Whatever. The Kevin I knew would never want to sing on a rap song. I don't know you any more. Did you see yourself telling the women about what hunk MC Dog was? I didn't come in because I thought I was interrupting girl talk."

"That's not fair."

"Maybe it is. I'm angry and irrational. It happens."

"It does. And I don't know why you're angry. But I also don't see how I'm the source of it."

Scott sighed and sat down. "We use to be a foursome. Four guys pounding instruments in front of an ungrateful handful of drunks. It was fun, out there, in your face. Now we have a retinue, MIDI cues, stagehands, costume changes. The songs are overproduced. We use to have a sound. Now we sound like every other pop band. What happened to us."

Steph stepped up and said, "We got what we wanted. Recognition. Bigger gigs. Better tours. An income that didn't require day jobs."

"We got what you wanted. You and Kevin went into that Venn machine and made a deal with the Devil for fame. She's freaking pregnant. Oh." He turned to Ravenna. "It's awesome and a blessing and I'm happy for you. But someone in the band getting pregnant. How could that happen?" He stopped as Ravenna gave him a hug. After a moment he started laughing. "Wow, I'm the pig now. Maybe I'm jealous you fell in love. Even Steph has a steady relationship of sorts. We don't see each other except when we do band stuff. I miss hitting a movie with you guys. We use to hang out. Now you're hanging out with MC Dog, doing radio shows, chilling with the spouse, and stuff."

"Scott, you can always call on the phone if we aren't together," Steph said. "Besides, we'll be living in hotels and buses for the next couple months. You'll be sick of us in no time."

"I don't hang out much now at all. I haven't been to my book club since the weddings."

"You're in a book club?"

"I've mentioned that before."

Both of them shook their heads.

"It was something I did to make Ravenna feel like a normal person. It was before our first west coast tour. Of course, now I don't need anything to make this feel normal since I'm basically going to be Ravenna for a year." There was an awkward silence. "Are you okay, Scott?" She asked.

"Yeah. Just needed to vent."

"And you?" She asked Steph.

"I know where's he's coming from."

"I'll try not to hide in my dressing room. I'm just reading when I disappear. You aren't the only one freaked out about my pregnancy. At least I'm over the morning sickness. But soon there will be bloating."

After the concert, Scott and Steph disappeared before Ravenna could find them. She went back to her hotel room and called Debra. "I could really use one of those massages."

"Chance would do it."

"I don't want Chance to do it."

"I'm sorry but I have to work this week. I'll meet up with you in Seattle."

"Scott had a meltdown today. He says we don't hang out enough."

"You don't."

"I know but I'm very tired after a concert now-a-days."

"You need to take control of your schedule. People have you running in three or four directions at once."

"I tell you they think I'm distant and you want me to hire an assistant to handle my scheduling."

"Why aren't you with them tonight?"

"They disappeared before I could find them."

* * *

"She looked tired. It'll be fine," Steph said. They sat at a table at a corner bar not far from the hotel.

"I just unloaded on her for not being around and you drag me away before she's done getting her war paint off." Scott said finishing a text and putting his phone down.

"I wanted to talk to you. Alone."

"I've told you several times I don't swing that way."

"I'm serious."

"Okay. What?"

"I don't trust Naveed. I don't think he works for us."

"Why wouldn't he want our record to do well?"

"He wants the record to do well. Us is another story."

"What does that mean?"

"I think his loyalty is the record company. And I don't trust them at all."

"Have you talked to Alicia?"

"I have my doubts about her too."

"Slow down. What are these doubts?"

"I think the label wants to take Ravenna solo. I think Naveed is there to make sure the record is Ravenna's record not our record. And I think Alicia wants a

client who hits big whether it's us or just Rav."

Scott thought for a moment before saying, "You could be right. Have you talked to Ravenna?"

"She doesn't see it. I've tried. She trusts Alicia I guess because Sara hired her. I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about all of it."

"Maybe we should talk to Sara."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Hello, Scott," said a woman walking up to the table.

"Randi, hello," he said standing up to give her a hug. As they sat down, "Steph, this is Randi. You'll like them."

"Hi. You are gorgeous. Venn?"

"Yes, we are."

"We?"

"We're a chimera. Mandy plus Candi equals Randi."

"I've never tried that."

"Scott's a Venn party pooper."

"And proud of it." Scott said. "Experimenting is for scientists."

They stuck their tongue out at him.

"I think I've said enough," Steph said standing up. "Three's company. Four's a crowd. I guess."

"You don't have to leave," Randi said.

"Scott doesn't swing my way. Have fun, kids." Steph looked at Scott. "Think about what I said."

* * *

"Ravenna," Alicia said into the telephone.

"Hi, Alicia," she replied. "I am so glad I have a week off in the middle of the tour. Please tell me you aren't going interrupt my week off."

"Alicia?" Debra asked from across the room.

"Now you make me feel bad for having great news."

Ravenna nodded at Debra. "Have you forgotten our deal? I can run ragged up to the third trimester as long as there are one or two one-week rest periods along the way. This is one of the rest periods."

"I know. I know. But I got a call from a major network. They are making a Winter Holiday special and they want you to sing on it."

"It's only June."

"I know. There's always a long lead time on these things. You need to pick a song and record it. They know about your pregnancy so they want to film it before you start showing."

"I have started to show a bit." Debra ran a hand over Ravenna's belly as she said it.

"Well, lighting will help with that," Alicia said. She rattled off the names of the director and the recording producers involved. "Will you do it?"

"Should I?" She asked Debra, who shrugged.

"Okay. But will it be this week?"

"They need to know the song by Friday. So it won't be work where you make an appearance. Just work getting ready."

"And they want the guys?"

"No, they want you. Is that a problem?"

"It is starting to be."

"Listen, dear," Alicia said. "You are going places. And they are going with you. They may not be going places without you. But you are able to go without them. That might bruise their male egos. But that's the way it is. If you can't square that with them, you need to decide what is more important to you."

"What's wrong?" Debra asked as Ravenna waved her hand to wait.

"I'll get back to you with a song by Friday, Alicia. I've gotta go. Bye." Ravenna hung up the phone. "She just told me I don't need the guys but the guys need me."

"Maybe they were right."

"What am I going to do?"

"What do you want?"

That sat in silence for a while until Ravenna said, "Woah."

"What?"

"I think I felt a kick."

"Really?" Debra put her hands on Ravenna's belly.

"It was a soft bubbling feeling. I don't think you could have felt it on the outside, yet."

"No, but you felt it."

"Yeah," Ravenna said wistfully.

"See, motherhood won't be so bad."

"This was cool. But it's still terrifying."

Debra lay down beside Ravenna and held her. "It'll be fine."

"And the band?"

"They'll be fine too."

* * *

"Look at that," Derek said as the doctor moved the scope across Ravenna's stomach. On a video monitor, the distorted shape of a tiny human being crammed into too small a space was visible.

"That is a healthy looking 18 week old fetus," Dr. Smith said. "Do you want to know the baby's sex?"

"No, we decided to be surprised," Ravenna said.

"Okay," Sandra said as she turned the monitor away and moved the scanner a few more times to get a final look at the fetus. "Well, everything looks good." She turned the monitor off. "How are you feeling?"

"Good. Although every time I think I've gotten use to this something new comes along. Latest being my waistline expanding."

"You were complaining about your breasts last month."

"Yes, they're huge but they've finally stopped being tender all the time."

"They might grow a bit more as you reach full term."

"Wonderful."

"I'll let you get dressed. The nurse will help you." As she got up to leave, she motioned for Derek to follow.

"If I didn't know you, Debra, I'd swear you were born a man. And Ravenna too. She seems so natural as a woman," the doctor said as they reached her office.

"Well, I promised once she started showing I'd be Derek full time since being taller and stronger around the house will probably be helpful once she gets bigger. And after the baby is born, I'll stay a man as long as she needs to be a woman."

"It's so nice to see couple so devoted to one another."

Ravenna entered the office and sat down.

"So I'll see you in a month. I have a prescription renewal for your prenatal vitamins." She said passing the slip to Ravenna.

"Good. I'm wondering when I should stop flying."

"Oh, you have time. 10-12 weeks from now you should consider stopping. Where're you going?"

"I might have to go to LA end of July. So that fits in the window pretty well."

Looking at Ravenna's chart, she said, "Your due date is November 12th. So you have plenty of time for a flight during the summer."

"Thank you, Sandra."

"Take care."

* * *

Touring continued through the end of June and into July. Their last performance was August 4th at an arena close to home. During the soundcheck, Steph stopped in the middle of a song to address someone standing off stage. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I work here."

"Who are you yelling at?" Ravenna asked.

"He's yelling at me," said the man walking onto the stage from the wings. He wore his hair shorter than before but there was no doubt it was Stig.

"It's not terrible to see you, Stig," Ravenna said.

Scott got up from behind the drum set and rushed at Stig. "How've you been,

you fucking ass?" He ended up giving Stig an unexpected hug.

"I've been well. I know you've been doing well." Looking at Ravenna he added, "And someone got you to spread 'em I see."

"Still a charmer, aren't you?" Steph said.

"Hey, I wasn't going to say anything until you yelled at me."

"My mistake."

"Boys." Ravenna said. "As for my condition, you know damn well I'm married."

Scott spoke before Stig could say anything, "Hey, can't we all be nice, or at least what passes for nice from you, Stig."

"I have no regrets," Stig said. "Don't know why they're hostile."

"It's because you trash talk everybody," Steph said.

"It's my charm."

"As if."

"Where are your boots? That girl finally get sick of being your boots?"

"I haven't used her this tour as I didn't want to take any chance of being off balance."

"Ya wanna play a song?" Scott blurted out.

Steph looked like they could kill Scott at that moment. Ravenna was merely surprised.

"Technically I'm working so that's probably not a good...." Stig said.

"C'mon. This is rock 'n roll. You remember how to play Stage Mothers?"

"We haven't played that in years," Ravenna said.

Even Stig was shocked by the idea. "I'll do it if you will."

"Road band players," Scott said. "Take five and someone find Stig a strat."

"We're gonna do this?" Ravenna said, getting her electric guitar hooked up.

"Why not?" Steph said.

Scott hopped behind the drum kit as a roadie handed Stig a guitar and a cable. Stig put on the guitar and plugged in. He turned up the volume knob and plucked a couple harmonics. Then he looked at everyone else and played a few power chords. The band joined in and the song was under way. Ravenna stepped up to her microphone and started singing a song she had never sung as Ravenna before.

Four minutes later, Scott was smashing his cymbals in a rave up before they finally finished the song, a wail of distorted guitar harmonics fading across the arena.

"I almost forgot there was a guitar duet," Ravenna said.

"You still have your chops, Kev. Don't let singing with MC Dog make you forget that," Stig said, taking the guitar off and setting it down in a stand. "I really have to get back to work. Good to see you guys." He offered his hand to Steph as he passed by and Steph shook it.

"What was that song?" Gary asked as the band returned to stage.

"That's an old Ravenous Libido song Stig wrote that fell off the set list a few years ago," Steph said. "I'd forgotten how it went until he played the opening chords."

"That guitar duet was killer," Terrance said looking at Ravenna. "You should challenge yourself with stuff like that more often."

* * *

Debra entered the apartment. Hearing the light strum of a guitar she went to the bedroom and peeked inside. Ravenna sat on the bed playing guitar and singing:

"It seems so strange to think
My voice is the only one you know
But you can't comprehend
Not until you've time to grow"

"That's beautiful," Debra said, entering the room. "Don't stop because of me."
"That's all I have," Ravenna said setting the guitar down. "I have time to finish it."

Debra sat on the bed beside her and rubbed her wife's stomach. "That must reverberate inside you amazingly."

"I'm sure I make a great speaker cabinet," Ravenna said. "Not sure I could sing that as a Ravenna's Libido song."

"Alicia says you should do a solo album."

"I know but the guys believe I'm going to ditch them. Making a solo album would not allay those fears."

"Oh, they're worse than old ladies worrying about every little thing."

"Stig was at our last concert."

"Really? I thought you guys had a restraining order."

"No, just a non-compete and a rights settlement," Ravenna said. "He was nearly nice. We played one of his old songs during soundcheck. I did it for Scott. He had been longing for the old days when things were simple."

* * *

Ravenna was already in her third trimester as the tour ended. She managed to remain active and had no trouble getting around.

Several days of studio time were set aside to lay down the backing tracks to the new album. Ravenna entered the control room as the guys played a backing track together. "Pee break finished?" Alicia asked.

Ravenna patted her stomach, "At least for half an hour, I hope."

Alicia smiled. "After we're done with the album next month, you'll have three months of baby time. The only time you'll see my face when I visit to see the

baby."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Derek said standing up and directing Ravenna to sit in his chair.

"Thanks," she said.

Steph and Scott were finishing up a track that Steph had written. In the control room, Naveed was writing notes on his tablet as it tracked the progress of the song. When they finished, he said into the studio mic, "That was great. We'll record a few touch ups here and there. Ravenna's back. Should she head in and do the vocal?"

"What touch ups?"

Naveed indicated a few time positions to the engineer and he played them back. Steph and Scott listened and nodded. "Okay, those are minor. Ravenna's turn."

Ravenna took six takes to get the lead vocals down, two of which were because Naveed suggested variations she should do invalidating the prior good takes. When she was done, she asked to have them start again so she could do the backing vocals. About an hour later, she was done. When she came back into the control room to listen to what was done, Steph and Scott went into the studio individually to do their spot fixes.

At the end of the day, Naveed left and the three of them were listening to rough mixes with the engineer. Derek was present as well.

"Did you notice?" Steph said to Ravenna.

"Notice what?"

"We booked eight hours with Naveed and he spent nearly six of them with your vocals and only two of them with the backing tracks."

"Well, he did say he wanted to get my stuff down as soon as possible."

"There's no real time crunch. We aren't releasing the album until four or five months after your due."

"And why aren't you playing on the backing tracks?" Scott said. "He insists on doing it all separately so we end up playing to a click track. It feels so artificial."

"What we should do is introduce these song completed to the road band and record them live in the studio," Steph said.

"That would be cool," Scott said.

"It would," Derek said. "But there's no time for that now, certainly."

"Maybe not. But there's no reason to focus on the lead vocals at the expense of the backing tracks. The vocals might attract the listener. But groove gets people up and moving."

"Tomorrow, we'll do *Good Times Gone* and we'll insist on trying to get it right together. I'll even insist on playing the solo," Ravenna said.

"Will you?" Steph said.

"What does that mean?"

"Sometimes you get a rise up and say you are going to do something and then Alicia says something and you back down," Steph said.

"Remember you originally turned down MC Dog," Scott said. "Alicia changed your mind."

"And we were going to end the tour in early July and she insisted we stick it out until August. So now we're closer to your due date here in the studio," Steph said.

"Okay, guys, back off," Derek said. "She said she'd play on the songs tomorrow. So she'll do it. Don't pile on."

"We don't want to be confrontational," Scott said.

"But we've seen this before," Steph added, getting a dirty look from Scott.

"They're right," Ravenna said. "I've told you myself I need to stop caving."

"That's a relief," Steph said. "I feared you didn't even know you were doing it." They gave Ravenna a hug.

"I have an idea," Ravenna said. "Come over to our place. Tomorrow night. I don't want you saying you already have plans tonight. Bring along a friend or two if you like. We'll have a little dinner party."

"On such short notice?" Derek said.

"It'll give you something to do," Ravenna said with a wink. "Tonight I need to practice that solo."

* * *

"Today was the best day in the studio," Steph said to the group assembled at the dining table. They raised a glass. "To foiling Naveed's plans."

"Oh, c'mon, we did no such thing," Ravenna said, sitting next to Derek who sat on the end closest to the kitchen.

"You didn't see it?" Scott said. "Every time you told him what to do, he gave you three or four excuses against it. You held your ground and he would just say 'we'll try it your way.' But when you turned to go into the studio, he would throw his hands in the air or do something else to indicate he wasn't happy."

"He did," Steph added.

"Isn't it your album you're recording?" Diane asked. Diane sat next to Karl and Steph at the table.

"You would think so," Scott said. He was sitting next to Randi, who was next to Ravenna, on the side of the table opposite from Steph's group.

"The label hired Naveed Prajeet to produce their second album. I think Alicia, their manager, recommended him," Derek said.

"But I think they want to turn the act into a solo project for our lovely lead singer," Steph said.

"That's crazy," Ravenna said.

"Is it?" Scott said.

"Scott and I give Naveed ideas. If you aren't there agreeing with us, they get brushed aside. 'Let's try it this way first,' and then there's no second time."

"He also considers the song finished once you sing on it."

"Oh yeah," Ravenna said. When Derek looked at her questioningly, she added, "Steph wanted to add keyboards to the song from yesterday but Naveed put his foot down and said if there was time, we could do that once the other songs are done."

"Tomorrow, you don't sing a note until the rest of the track is done." Steph said.

"Yes, Steph will lay down the guide vocal and you don't go near a mic until we've got a finished backing track."

After dinner, while cleaning up, Ravenna snuck away to her room to make a call. "Sara?"

"Hey, Sis, how's it going?"

"I'm not sure."

"Is it the baby?"

"No, no, it's the band. I need you to do something."

"Anything, Sis."

* * *

"It's true," Sara said. "It's all my fault."

"No way," Ravenna said.

"What do you mean?" Derek said. The three of them were sitting in the kitchen the next night.

"When I gave up being your manager, I told Alicia to look out for the band and if she ever did anything to hurt you I'd come after her. She apparently took that to mean you were more important than the band."

"So when your friendly label decided they wanted to push you to the front of the band, she said that was a great idea. It's all my fault."

"I can't believe Monica is in on this," Derek said. "She discovered you guys."

"I spoke to Monica," Sara said. "After I spoke to Alicia, I called her. She said she wasn't happy with it but it isn't her job to say how the talent is used. She moved from A&R to head of marketing. So she has more pull but takes orders from the head of A&R."

"She's made her displeasure known but the higher ups aren't interested in what she says. And she doesn't want to rock the boat too much."

"No," Ravenna said. "I wouldn't expect her to lose her job or something because of me."

"How did you leave it with Alicia?" Derek asked.

"She thinks I'm happy with how she's been handling it, for now," Sara said. "I want to wring her neck. Protecting you means not making you crazy about the

band being broken up. Wouldn't you say so?"

"I knew you could help," Ravenna said. "Now what do we do?"

"Depends on what you want to do," Sara said. "The label could easily insist that you stick with Naveed. You guys are still a new band so your contract probably favors the label."

"They could drop the band?" Derek said.

"Worse. They could keep them and not make the album. Then they can't make albums for any label because they're under contract."

"They can do that?" Derek said.

"This is why I didn't want to be your manager. The music business is a business. And getting your foot in the door requires giving up too much. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. If I give up, I hurt not only us but all the people who now depend on us. And if I give in, I hurt my closest friends."

They just sat in silence for a moment before Derek said, "What will you do?"

"I don't know."

* * *

Over the next week, tensions mounted during the recordings, Alicia called Ravenna one evening.

"What's up, Alicia?"

"What's going on at the studio? Don't you like working with Naveed?"

"He doesn't listen to anything Scott or Steph says."

"He doesn't?"

"No. If I'm not there to agree with them, they get ignored. It's like he thinks he works only for me."

"Well, you are the star."

"What?"

"Ravenna's Libido is fronted by Ravenna, isn't it?"

"No. We are all equals in the band."

"Oh, honey, that's not how it works," Alicia said. "People want to see you. The music is just an excuse to get you and the audience in the same room."

"So, it's true."

"What's true?"

"You and Naveed are working to take me solo."

"Isn't that fabulous news? If you hadn't gotten pregnant so fast I was going to ask if you wanted to try appearing in a film. But that will wait a year if you can get this album in the can soon."

Ravenna said nothing and Alicia continued. "You have to stop all the bickering at the studio. I've seen how big you are starting to get. Standing for a few minutes in front of the microphone is going to start getting difficult and I've heard you haven't been singing much lately. This was when you were supposed to get

the lead vocals done and let Naveed get the backing tracks finished without you."

"Alicia?"

"Yes?"

"You're fired."

"What?"

"I said, 'You're fired.'" Ravenna hung up the phone and called Steph to tell him what she had done. Then she called Scott. Then she called the label. "This is Ravenna McNichols of Ravenna's Libido."

"Hello, this is Janet. How may I direct your call?"

"I need to tell security I guess that we just fired our manager and she should not be allowed into our sessions any more."

"One moment please."

She heard the phone ringing again.

"John McMurtry, A&R. Ravenna?"

"Yes."

"Good to hear from you. How's the record coming?"

"It's fine. I just wanted to let you know that we are no longer represented by Alicia Boyer and Associates. So, make sure she is kept out of our studio."

"Well, I will tell security but I'm curious. Do I need to know why she was let go?"

"She did not understand our goals as a band. Management differences. I hold no ill will for her. She just did not fit what we need."

"I understand. Do you have a new manager?"

"Not yet. I'll let you know."

"That's fine. Just one more question, will this impact the completion of the record?"

"I don't think it will. Why?"

"I've heard from Naveed that you've been pushing back on his suggestions lately. Is he a good fit?"

"If we got rid of him, wouldn't that delay the album?"

"Probably."

"Well, we'll see if we can reach an agreement with him."

"We've already spent a lot of money on your album. But if you think we should bring in a different producer, we can do that."

"I'll let you know. Firing Alicia has been enough stress for one day."

"Oh, of course. We'll talk again in a couple days."

"That would be better."

"Of course. I'm here for you."

"Thanks, John. Goodbye."

"Buh-bye."

* * *

"I'll get your drinks right away," the waiter said. Ravenna and Derek were having a rare night out to dinner, just the two of them.

"Remember, no salt. Dr. Smith is worried about your blood pressure."

"My blood pressure is the result of recording an album with a producer who doesn't listen."

"I know. I've been trying to find a new management team but when I mention who I represent, they think you would be a great solo artist. I think the last one I called could hear me grinding my teeth."

"You don't need to be stressed out too."

Appetizers came and they were quietly eating when a young girl, maybe eleven years old, approached the table with a napkin and a pen. "Are you Ravenna?"

"Yes, dear. What's your name?"

"Iona. Could I get your autograph?"

"Just for you, sure," Ravenna said, taking the pen and paper. As she was signing it, there was a flash and another. Two people with professional cameras took a picture of her signing the autograph.

One of them said, "I heard there are tensions in the studio. Care to comment?"

Derek stood up and got between Ravenna and the reporters. "This is a private dinner. If you have any questions, seek an interview through her label."

"We tried contacting her manager but they said they didn't represent you any more," the man said, trying talk to Ravenna around Derek. "Any thing to say about that?"

Derek called out over the reporters. "Can we have them removed? They are disturbing the patrons."

The Maitre'd asked the reporters to leave before he called the police and they left.

Derek sat down as things calmed down. The Maitre'd approached the table. "Next time, I shall seat you in a more private location."

"Thank you," Derek said.

"Could you find Iona, she's about 10 or 11? I was signing this for her and she fled without it when the paparazzi intruded," Ravenna said.

"I will do my best," the Maitre'd said and left them alone.

After a moment, Ravenna said, "That doesn't usually happen here. The locals leave me be."

"I didn't recognize them at all," Derek said.

* * *

As the due date was approaching, Ravenna found herself at home most of the

time. Steph and Scott would stop by every now and then to play the latest cuts. A few days before the due date, they were there.

"Listen to this," Steph said.

Strings and horns played a slow song. Ravenna interrupted, "What is that?"

"That's *Ten Hanged*," Scott said.

"It is?"

"That's what we thought."

"Where's the backing you guys did?"

"Naveed thought it would sound better orchestrated. Your recording enters soon." Steph said. And it did, sounding amazing over the orchestra.

"That's a wonderful song. But it's not us."

"Exactly."

Derek entered the apartment. "You played it for her?"

"Yeah."

"What are we going to do?"

"Stall. They can't release it without us signing off on it, right?" Ravenna said. "I'll be back in the studio in a few months. It'll all work out."

Derek frowned.

"What?" Steph said.

"You remember that night at dinner when paparazzi came out of nowhere?" Derek said.

"Yes."

"I was waiting outside McMurtry's office to see him when I noticed something on his receptionist's desk." Derek took out his phone and swiped to a photo in his gallery. He handed the phone to Ravenna.

"That's the girl from the restaurant. Iona, I think."

"I asked Betty, the receptionist about her. She's Betty's daughter."

"That bastard," Steph said.

"It was a setup?" Ravenna said.

"Must have been."

"You haven't been in the spotlight for over a month or two so they made sure you were seen in the tabloids." Scott said.

"That's how the reporters 'heard' there was trouble in the studio," Ravenna said.

"Those bastards," Steph said.

Scott, Steph, and Derek continued to discuss it, at varying levels of heat, when Ravenna said, "Oh, no."

Looking at her, her dress was wet. A puddle pooled beneath her.

"Is that...?"

"I think my water broke."