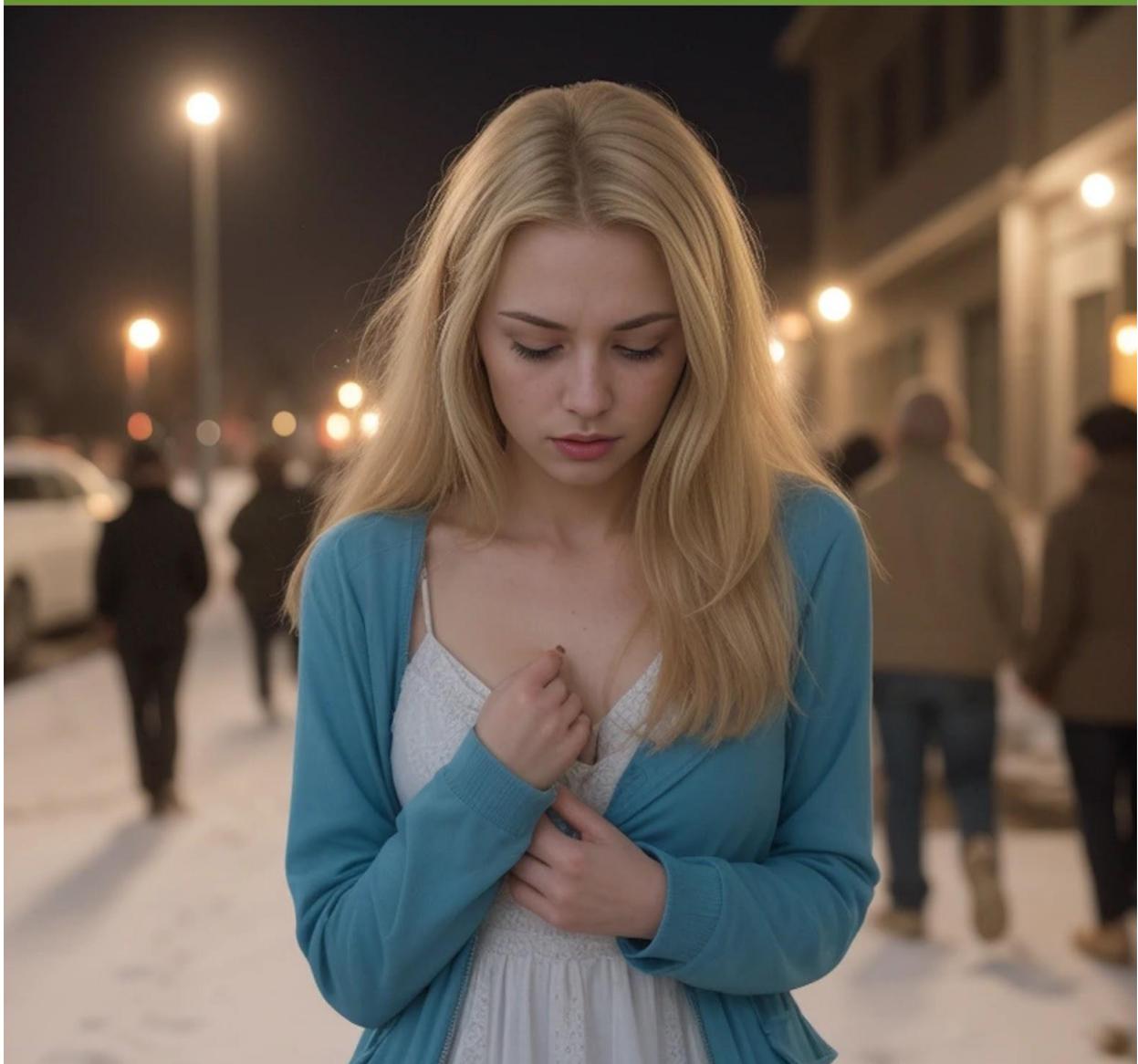


The Alternate's Tale

The RA Volume IV, Part Seven

ISAAC BYRNE



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By Isaac Byrne

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“I mean, shit Nessa, that’s why I didn’t want you moving into my place. You’re just not... Look, you’re not ugly or anything, but I swear, it’s like... dating... soggy... cardboard.” Myles nodded, as satisfied with his simile as he was dissatisfied with his apparently now ex-girlfriend. “I just felt sorry for you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are. That’s the problem. You’re always sorry. Just...”

Vanessa watched Myles go. She was proud of herself for how well she handled it. She managed to gather up her clothes before she started to cry. It did make it harder to put them back on, though.

It was a long walk home on a frigid December night. Her only company were the contemplations of what Myles’ “*Just...*” would have been if he’d thought she was worth finishing a thought for. Lots of cars zipped by, but that only made her more afraid. Too many times some jerk yelled something at her, or a car slowed so some boy inside could leer. She’d hoped Lakeview, a place of higher learning, would be better than it had been back home. It wasn’t, though. The only difference seemed to be that the creeps were younger, and they had cars. She supposed that was an improvement from following along behind her on foot.

I don’t even have a butt, she thought. That’s what Myles had told her the first time she took her dress off in front of him. Their third date, way back in September. A “second back,” he’d said. He’d apologized, said he was only teasing, and then he’d proven he liked it just fine. Or at least that he could pretend to.

Her coat was in Myles’ car, though, back at the house party. Vanessa wrapped her arms around her thin top, trying to rub warmth back into her arms. Her phone buzzed after a few blocks. She hurriedly retrieved it, praying to see Myles’ name on the caller ID. Even if only to give her a ride back to Higgins. She’d settle for Frannie. Frannie had a car. She might be willing to come get her. It was over a mile, and the sidewalks were slick with ice and slush from a nasty snow → melt → refreeze cycle. Vanessa had wanted to look cute, but her heels were proving to be a major mistake. *Another* major mistake.

It was her mom. She couldn’t handle trying to hold her phone in this cold, not unless it was for a way to get out of it.

An hour later, her ankle bleeding from when she’d slipped and scraped it on the curb, Vanessa made the climb up to Higgins 3. A persistent, frigid winter breeze had done its part to halt her tears, though only when she was back in her room and inspected herself in the mirror did she see what had become of her makeup.

She slid open the selfie she’d taken with Myles when he’d come to pick her up, a few hours ago in that other lifetime. She’d looked so cute. Not cute enough, apparently. There were always cuter girls out there. Girls with real butts and actual boobs, girls whose eyebrows matched their hair color, without dustings of ugly freckles. Girls who smiled by default instead of only when their boyfriend reminded them they weren’t.

Girls who were probably dancing with Myles at that party trying to console him because they'd heard about the breakup but didn't know he didn't need consoling. Girls whose blue lips and disheveled hair and streaked makeup didn't make them look like sad ugly clowns.

Vanessa took a long shower. The shower heads here always stung, little needles of hot water shooting into her skin. The chill in her bones only made it worse. Still, it was warm, and private, and she could cry as much as she wanted and let the water carry it all away.

Just...

You have the body of a twelve-year-old.

You never initiate, and you don't know how to do anything.

You're depressing to be around.

You're soggy cardboard.

I feel sorry for you.

No. That wasn't it.

I felt sorry for you.

There it was. Past tense. Myles was done feeling anything for her.

Back in her room, she put on her PJs and shut out the light. Frannie wouldn't be home for hours, probably. She had a fake ID, and so did her friends. Just as well that hadn't been her calling. She would have been too drunk to drive. Frannie would have had to feel bad to tell Vanessa she couldn't help her. So that was nice.

She got out her phone, and after staring at it for a few minutes, pressed the button to call back her mom. It wasn't too late yet back home.

"Hey honey! I was figuring I wouldn't hear back from you until tomorrow."

"No yeah, I got home early. I figured you'd still be up. I hope I didn't wake you."

"Oh, you did, but I don't care. Fell asleep watching the news and doing my Wordle. Have you done today's yet?"

Vanessa let herself smile. "You know I won't give you any hints, Mom."

"I wasn't asking for hints! I was only asking..." She grunted indignantly. "I still have a couple hours I guess. So, how was your party? Isn't it only 10 something there?"

"I, um... I..." There were those tears again. She probably looked so ugly, crying this hard, this easily. "Myles dumped me, Mom!"

For a few minutes, her mom did like moms did and talked her down, shushed her sobbing, told her she loved her, that she was so pretty and wonderful and Myles must be an idiot not to appreciate what he'd had.

Then, she did like most moms didn't. Like she always did. She opened softly, at least. "Did he say why, honey?"

"He... He wanted to..." Vanessa didn't need to finish the sentence, thankfully, because she didn't think she could have. "But I said no, I wasn't ready, and he got really

mad, and he said I was too skinny and I'm soggy cardboard and he felt sorry for me, and...!"

"Soggy cardboard...?"

"That's what he said," whimpered Vanessa.

Her mother's second reaction to her blubbering was more on brand. "Oh honey. Maybe doordash yourself some ice cream, huh? It'll make you feel better, *and* maybe it'll help you pack on a few pounds so the next boy won't have anything to complain about. Put it on the credit card, my treat."

"Mom!" Her retort stopped there. It would have only been the same old thing.

I told you, nothing I do helps me gain weight, Mom.

I just want to look like I went through puberty, Mom.

You know Dr. Djuricko said empty calories aren't the way to go, Mom.

I know lots of girls would be jealous, but I'm not, Mom!

"Sorry, forget I said anything," Mom said, as if she'd just gone through the same mental exercise. "Not like you ever listen anyway."

"Mom, do *I* really have to be the one comforting *you* right now?"

"Well what do you want me to say, honey? I'm proud of you for being a good girl. I am! You know I am."

"But."

"But, you can't expect a man to feel the same way. These college boys, they're looking for adventure! Something wild and carefree and exciting. Girls go to college looking for a husband, but boys don't start looking for a wife until they're on their way out."

"So you're saying, what, I should have let him...?"

"Did I say that? No, I did not. You know, I do not like this attitude, young lady. If this is what you've been showing Myles, then small wonder he walked away."

"Mom, it's not even just about getting dumped. He was going to let me move in with him in January! Now I have to stay in the dorms, which I can barely afford, if I can even keep my spot here now that I applied to move out. I *hate* it here. A year and a half of being here where there's always people, always. You're never ever alone." She didn't want to say it, but she was certain her RA Mason could hear her in the next room right through the shared wall, too. Which was why she didn't want to say it.

"Socialization is good for you. You let people walk all over you, sweetie! You always have. Being around people will help you stop being so shy all the time. You'll meet a new boy before you know it, and if he's no Myles, I'm sure he'll still be perfectly nice, because you're perfectly perfect."

But Vanessa heard more of the first part of the assessment than the second. "I, um, thanks? But yeah, Frannie's home, so, yeah, I need to go."

"Good night, honey. I love you. S—"

Say hi to Myles for me. That had been what she'd been going to say.

"Mhm, love you, too."

Mason stopped by oh so casually the next morning, rapping at the door even as her knocks swung it open. Vanessa would never ever leave it open like that if she had her way. Frannie was social, though. Half the floor was friends with her, so she always left the door open – though with her hangover, only a crack that day.

After a brief exchange of howdies, her roommate made an excuse to bolt. She didn't like the RA. Not because of any particular incident, but Frannie broke rules and she had a broad dislike of snitches. Vanessa never broke rules, but she wasn't a snitch, so they got along OK.

"Hi."

"Hey, Nessa." Vanessa hated being called Nessa. It made her think of the Loch Ness Monster. Myles had asked her before he kissed her at the end of their first date if anybody called her that, but he'd misconstrued her answer and walked away thinking he'd come up with a special name for her only he used. She hadn't want to disappoint him, so she'd let him keep using it.

"Hi."

"So, now that it's just us then, I'ma come clean. I heard you last night, talking to your mama. First, I'm so sorry about Myles. Never liked that one. He's the type, you know what I mean?"

Vanessa didn't know anything about types. She'd had one boyfriend in her life, briefly, and she'd obviously not figured out how to appeal to his. There was an art to talking to people naturally, comfortably, and Vanessa's artistry was the equivalent of a toddler scratching the wall with a Sharpie. One time at high school the boy she'd gone to the dance with told her he was tired of trying to make her talk and left the dance early. He hadn't even had a ride, just walked home in his dress shoes, just to get out of spending time with her. She'd been thinking of him last night. He probably hadn't thought about her in years.

"Yeah."

"So first, don't worry, I'm sure they'll let you stay here next semester. If you want, I'll walk down to the housing office with you, help you find the right one to talk to. OK?"

Vanessa had applied to cancel her housing contract online. She'd had the page linking to all the housing forms bookmarked for weeks while she'd waited for Myles to decide if he'd really let her move in, and had clicked on it every night before bed to daydream about filling it out. She knew full well there was a link to email about questions, concerns and alterations. She'd been sulking about it last night, but it would probably take all of thirty seconds of clicking and typing to rectify.

"OK."

“And I heard your mama talking about you needing to be more confident,” Mason continued in a comforting tone. Vanessa felt incredibly uncomfortable that her mother was audible across the miles and then right through the walls. “I lie there thinking about it, and you know what? I think she’s onto something.”

“Oh.” Oh.

“You know what I think? I think you should apply to be an RA. Think about it! Nothing builds up confidence like having to wade into a screaming match between two high school besties about the one stealing they’s curling iron so now they ready to throw the fuck down. You could be such a badass, Nessa girl!”

Vanessa had several thoughts as she listened to this terrible idea unfold. First, that it was a terrible idea. She didn’t even really understand what her RA did other than show movies and order pizza and write people up for stuff. Maybe that was all she did. Second, that her RA’s phone conversations were also audible through the wall. Vanessa had heard her complaining to someone, probably another RA, about an edict handed down by their boss, that lady with the pretty accent she’d met once or twice when picking up her mail at the center desk. (Ms... Tinsley? That sounded right. Vanessa was bad with names, but at least nobody wanted to interact with her so much they wound up noticing.) According to her own unavoidable eavesdropping, the RAs all had to get at least one resident to apply to be an RA. There hadn’t been enough applicants the year before, so this would fix that. Apparently Mason thought Vanessa would be easy to pressure into applying so she could check it off her list.

Third, that she would rather die than be forced to get into the middle of a screaming match between two people she didn’t even know. It sounded absolutely terrifying.

“Oh. Um, no thanks.”

“Come on, just apply! Even just making a case for why you should be the next best thing to yours truly might make you feel more like the warrior queen inside.”

Vanessa felt validated in her cynical assessments of her merits. She also didn’t know how to say no to someone she’d just said no to without feeling like she was yelling at someone.

“OK.”

“Vanessa Steger. Stager? Steeger?”

“Steger,” she said softly. She didn’t like correcting people, but he’d asked. Most people just mispronounced it and moved on.

“Great. Thanks for coming in today. I’m John, and you can call me John.” He laughed. She imitated his laugh. “This is Gauri.”

The young woman extended an arm. She had dark skin, but there were darker patterns on it. Henna, she thought it was called. Mason had bullied her into going into a program where they were doing that, but she'd snuck out before anybody did it to her. Nobody noticed.

She accepted the offered hand, and the woman gave it a little shake. "Hi, Vanessa." Vanessa knew she was supposed to use a little pressure from the speech class they'd made her take in high school, but like in speech class, she was too terrified to remember to do the things they'd told her to do.

"Hi."

"And this is Spencer."

The young man – handsome, with kind eyes; Myles had had kind eyes, she'd thought once – extended a hand as well. "Nice to meet you, Vanessa." She shook his, too, but he suddenly wrenched his arm like she'd shocked him. "Dang, watch out for the grip strength on this one."

They laughed. Vanessa laughed. He was teasing her, which she usually hated, but he'd somehow done it without hurting her feelings. Like dang, what a weak grip you have, but it's cool that you do it that way.

John resumed speaking. "Gauri and Spencer are both current RAs. Gauri's up in Penderdast, and Spencer works for me down in Rowland."

"I thought you told me I worked for the betterment of mankind, John."

"You'll thank me later for lying to you. The betterment of mankind pays even worse than we do." John winced, but playfully. "Which I probably shouldn't joke about during a job interview. I'm sorry. Where were we?"

Gauri rolled her eyes. "Sorry, Vanessa. This is our seventh interview this afternoon. We were much more charming in the first couple."

"Most of us, anyway." John eyed Spencer askance, but they each cracked a smile. He had a very attractive smile. "Anyway, we're just gonna ask you some questions, and you can ask these two some questions, and then we all finally get to go home. You're our last of the day."

He was joking about how bad he wanted to get out of there. Wasn't he? But Gauri had said they'd been doing this for hours. They probably had a million candidates. No way she was going to get this job. They must interview everybody, even people like her who had no chance.

"Why don't you start by just telling us about yourself, and why you decided to apply to be an RA?"

Probably best to keep it short, then.

"I'm Vanessa, and I'm a sophomore, majoring in environmental science. I'm from Tennessee. I applied because my RA said I should."

The three of them shared a look. That was probably a really stupid answer. She didn't want to lie though. If she tried to pretend she liked people and wanted to be a "leader" or something, they'd see right through her, and then she'd be a girl with bad answers *and* a liar. Not that she was going to get the job anyway, but she didn't want to fail on purpose.

"Right, straight and to the point. I like that. Now Gauri, do you want to, or should we just yield to Spencer and let him get his little question in?"

Gauri laughed and deferred to the boy RA. Spencer. She'd never met a boy named Spencer before. What a nice name. "It's a good question!" he insisted.

"You like to ask it, you mean," said John.

Spencer waved it off. "OK. Vanessa. My question, and there will be a followup—"

Gauri laughed. "Followup this time?"

"—is this: If we asked your friends to describe you as any sort of animal, what would they tell us, and why?"

Vanessa felt her heart racing. This wasn't one of the questions she'd read they would ask in an interview. None of her other jobs had ever had an interview. They just figured she had two eyes, ears and hands and could figure out how to work the grill. Interviews were supposed to ask about strengths and weaknesses, past experience, a hypothetical to assess your attitude or work ethic.

An animal? What would her friends say?

"I don't really have any friends here." They would tell her to answer honestly, if she did, so she did. "I did, but one graduated and another transferred to another school closer to home."

The girl looked plainly disturbed. John made a face like she'd just told him she was a three-legged possum or something. God, this was why she never talked to people. They made you feel stupid because you didn't have something clever to say. Vanessa wasn't stupid. She just wasn't clever.

Spencer chuckled, though, and she clung to that like a baby bird in a hurricane. "I'm a fifth year senior, so I totally feel you. The worst, right? So how about you? How would *you* describe yourself? What animal, and why?"

Vanessa felt her cheeks burning. He was too handsome. She didn't deserve that smile. It made her talk without thinking about what she was saying. "A swan. A baby swan. Because I feel – um, sometimes – like I'm weak, and helpless, and ugly, but, um, I'm not. And I know that I'm growing, and I'm only going to get better."

A beautiful smile touched the boy's lips. He loved her answer, she could tell. She couldn't even remember what she'd said. It had just come out, spilling out of her into those eyes. "That is hands down the best answer to that question we've heard yet. I know all I need to know. Hire this woman."

“I’m just waiting to hear the followup,” Gauri muttered. Plainly the answer hadn’t impressed her. Had she really said swan? What? Vanessa Steger, a *swan*? Swine was more like it.

“Followup, Swan: What do you think of my question? Be honest.”

I love you. “I love it.”

It was the end of the portion of the interview in which she wasn’t transparently bombing with all three of her appraisers. They really liked pitching scenarios to her and asking how she’d respond – roommates fighting, cyberbullying, what sort of program she’d do to help new students make friends. Most of her answers were some variety on asking someone who knew what to do what she should do.

It was short at least. They’d probably appreciated that. Then John had asked if she had any questions, which she didn’t. He did a spiel about remuneration that sounded both rehearsed and rushed. Vanessa already knew that anyway. Full room and board and a small monthly stipend. It was the best paying job on campus by far, as she’d said when Gauri asked her to say what she looked forward to about the position. It was the only reason she hadn’t let herself chicken out of this interview. Her big sister Ellen had graduated last year and was constantly complaining about her loans. Vanessa had started looking at the math on it, and started imagining what grad school would do to that. She couldn’t get the job, but the compound interest formula wasn’t lying about how good it would be if some mistake in the paperwork let her land it.

Spencer. Oof. She was still sitting near the little meeting room in the student union where that disaster of an interview had taken place, texting Mom to tell her how it had gone, when her interviewers exited the room. They each saw her, smiled in acknowledgment, and promptly went on about forgetting her forever. Now that she could see him standing up, he was even cuter. He worked out, for sure. Then he walked over to this absurdly pretty Latina girl who’d been evidently waiting for him in a little sitting area. She pulled him right down into a kiss so hot it was almost scandalous.

Of course he was with someone like that. She probably had sex with him every week, not make him feel bad when he touched her because she wasn’t sure if she was getting turned on or having a panic attack or both. It was fun to fantasize, though. Vanessa had spent a lot of time trying to look pretty for the interview, so it wasn’t even *that* silly to imagine he’d give someone like her a second glance.

Gauri wandered off quickly enough, but John had bumped into someone he knew, too. An older man, gray and wiry, whose posture clearly communicated he was above John. They were standing there talking in the direction she needed to start going, unless she wanted to sit here trying not to notice Spencer making out with that hot girl. Vanessa tried to squeeze by surreptitiously, something she was usually pretty good at. For the second time in half an hour, however, she failed, with John as a witness to both.

“Whoops, excuse us,” said John, stepping aside. “Vanessa here just interviewed with us for an RA position, Bob.”

“Ah, nice.” Bob glanced at her like he didn’t want to have to waste time glancing at her, much less having to learn her name. Only then he looked back again, and smiled. Sometimes it took a moment for people to remember their manners. “Very nice. How’d she do, John?”

“Oh you should ask Spencer – he was sold on her after the first question.” John smiled politely. That was nice of him.

The man, Bob, turned to where Spencer and the girl were now merely talking, though only inches apart. They were a ways away, so he had to raise his voice. “Hey Spencer, how’d she do?” He sounded like someone very comfortable shouting to be heard.

Spencer looked over, smiled, and yelled back “She’s a swan!” Right in front of his girlfriend. That wasn’t very nice of him, but Vanessa would forgive him in an instant if he’d agree to exchange the courtesy of forgetting they’d ever met.

Five weeks later, after nearly breaking into tears during a second interview – a group one this time, where they made her work in a *team* with *other applicants* in what might have been the most uncomfortable morning of her entire life – Vanessa received an email informing her that she had not gotten the job.

She wept with relief.

“Oh, honey, tell me you’re not going to Sunday brunch in *that*,” her mother said, frowning through her reflection in the mirror as she adjusted her pearls. Fake, Vanessa knew. She’d heard her father making the case to sell them so they could afford to renovate Ellen’s old bedroom, so he could have a man cave. A second story cave seemed ill-considered to her.

“What’s wrong with this?” Vanessa asked, inspecting herself. She liked this dress. It was blue, pale blue. Her favorite color. She wasn’t about to go trying to show the cleavage she didn’t have in front of Nana, so what was the matter?

“It makes you look like you’re still in middle school is what’s wrong with it. It’s three sizes too big for you at least! Go change into something that actually fits.”

“I’m going to grow into it,” Vanessa argued. “I’ve already put on four pounds this summer.”

“I put on four pounds on that meatloaf last night,” said her dad as he fidgeted with his tie. He always wore it too short, and always took too long tying it. “I thought college girls were supposed to put on fifteen, something like that?”

“That’s during their first year, dear, the ‘freshman fifteen. But maybe the third year will be the charm for her.”

Vanessa had lost six pounds back during her freshman year. She hated the food at the Penderdast food court. It was so processed and unhealthy. Six different national cuisines serving the same batter-fried chickens in different sauces. Then she’d had to go to the hospital when one of her ovaries had gotten inflamed and had nearly ruptured, which Dr. Djuricko had said her being underweight and malnourished had contributed to. Which her dad knew, because he was still complaining about the medical bill because their HMO had decided that her moving out of state for school put Dr. Djuricko out of her network. Their lawyer was still fighting it, which was another bill frequently brought up at dinner.

“I’m trying, Dad.”

She was. Sophomore year, she’d only lost two.

“Yeah, well, do what your mother asks. We only get the chance to see her mother day-drunk on champagne four times a month usually, so let’s be grateful to some dead Romans for gifting us this fifth opportunity this month.”

Vanessa didn’t argue. She knew why they were sucking up to Nana, and knew that someday she’d probably be the beneficiary of enough money to pay a chunk of her loans. Probably. Unless Nana changed her mind. She used to be mortified by the obsequiousness of her parents, but she was beginning to comprehend what the money would mean for them. Vanessa might only throw away half her thirties paying down loans instead of all of them. So she marched to her room, considering herself noble for this gift to her distant future self. It was better than feeling like a con artist, working on her own family.

Vanessa spread the dress out smoothly on her bed. She could change back into this after brunch, maybe go to the library and read by that new fountain they’d installed while she was away. It was too hot out, though. She’d burn. Oh well. Maybe she could just wear it around the house later. It was so pretty, though probably more so than she had business wearing.

She was standing in her underwear looking at her reflection, trying to imagine where those pounds would go and how she might look with them, when the phone rang.

HIGGINS CENTER DESK, read the caller ID. What on earth? She knew why the number was in there, so if she got locked out of her room and couldn’t find Mason to help let her in, she could get one of the other RAs to come do it. That was it. Why in the world would they be calling her in the middle of July? Or, like, ever?

She answered, braced for it to be some new sophisticated scam where a random number from her contact list tried to warn her of an expired warranty on a car. Nana would have to die awfully soon for her to think she might get a car before she finished grad school.

“Hello?”

“Hi. Vanessa Steger?” Vanessa remembered that voice, the accent.

“This is.”

“Good morning, Vanessa. This is Ramona Tinsley, the hall manager of Higgins Hall at Lakeview. How are you doing today?”

“I’m well.” She set down the much tighter though no more alluring dress she’d been dreading wearing. Her mother had bought it for her, and insisted it made Vanessa look incredible and that it was melodramatic to complain she couldn’t breathe in it and that being able to fit in such a pretty thing at all was proof Dr. Djuricko didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Good, good. Look, I realize it’s the weekend so I apologize for bothering you, but, well, I’ve found myself in a bit of a predicament here. It’s time-sensitive. I was hoping you could help me out.”

“Me? Why me?” Vanessa turned away from the mirror. It felt creepy talking to a stranger while she could see herself in her bra and underwear. Only now she could feel invisible eyes on her flat bottom, which didn’t feel any better.

“How would you like to be an RA?”

Vanessa dropped her phone. Not in excitement. Girls dropped their phones when they got calls that their auditions had succeeded on reality shows. They were excited. Vanessa was not excited. It was like her brain decided all the months of anxiety she’d skipped over by not getting the job needed to be inflicted on her in a second. The woman must have taken her squeak of surprise and embarrassment, along with the thud in her ear from the phone bouncing off her footboard, to make the other assumption though, because she laughed.

“Careful, Vanessa, we’re not liable to replace your phone until you accept!”

Vanessa shoved the phone back against her ear. “I’m so sorry. Did you say... RA? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sorry to ambush you with it like that, truly. I don’t know how else to get to it, though. Are you all right? Is your phone?”

The screen had cracked. Not too badly, she hoped. If it was broken, she might be better off if this had been a scammer and she’d just kept working at Wendy’s next year. Maybe she should anyway.

“It’s fine.”

“Good, good. So, to give you a little more information, I found out yesterday that I’m losing three of my five RAs for next school year. Fun Friday night update, right? Anyway, we had a million and a half applicants this year – long story – and so I reached out to the head office and said, ‘who do you got for me? Don’t make me read all those alternate files, just tell me who our best applicants are.’”

Who had they been? Why would they all decline the offer until this woman had no choice but to reach out to Vanessa?

But the woman kept on making no sense. “Your name was one of the top names they gave me. One of the only names, in fact, which I can only take to mean they think I’d be stupid not to offer it to you. So here I am!” The woman made a noise. “Sorry, and I should probably give details so you know what I’m offering and not just what I’m asking.”

Mrs. Tinsley reiterated a lot of what John had told Vanessa in her interview. Higgins 2. Private room. That was all she’d needed to say, really. “I was on Higgins 3 last year. I, um, don’t suppose...?” She cut herself short. If the woman wanted her on Higgins 3, she’d have said so.

“Really? You were one of mine? Oh, right! I remember you, with the freckles.”

“You remember me?” That was surprising. She was usually pretty good at being forgettable. It would be nice to be remembered for something other than the stupid freckles, though. Oh well.

“I try to get to know as many residents as I can. But anyway, I unfortunately can’t give you Higgins 3. If it’s important to you, I can give you any other floor you want, but that one’s the coed floor, thematic community, and one of the RA’s they let me keep already has it. Just please say yes. I need you!”

The woman was doing a good job of making her professional irritation sound like sincere pleading, Vanessa decided. Still, “Why me, though? I did horrible in my interviews, and they said they weren’t considering me.”

A moment’s pause, the tapping of keys. “Hmm. No, I’m looking at a copy of the email. It says you were offered a position on the alternate list. Now, I don’t see a response from you accepting alternate status, so maybe that’s why...? I don’t know.”

“Vanessa, honey, we’re waiting! You know Nana doesn’t like it when we’re late!”

“Good call making her change three minutes before we needed to be in the car,” she heard her dad grumbling downstairs.

Vanessa was certain she hadn’t been offered a position as an alternate. Because it was common for RAs to have stuff come up and bow out, they kept a list of people who were good enough for a position but they didn’t quite have room for. Spencer, that amazing boy from the interview, had compared it to having people on the bench in sports. She remembered that guy, John, explaining that alternate status was something that could happen, and she remembered that it hadn’t. That email had remained in her inbox ever since arriving. It was at times a rebuke of how her shyness ruined opportunities for her, and at times a source of relief that she’d dodged the frightful sounding job.

“Please, Vanessa. Higgins needs you!”

Her door swung open a few moments later while she was still staring through the wall reliving the dread she'd felt at the prospect of having to respond to those scenarios in those interviews. Then she realized she was in her underwear and dove for cover. It didn't seem to bother her dad, though. He didn't permit locked doors in his house. When things like this happened and she complained, he told her if she didn't like it, she was free to buy her own house and lock whatever she wanted.

He was also a fan of blaming her for it, which he presently did. "Damnit, Vanessa, a girl your age ought to know better than to sit around looking like that when we have places to be! Tell your friend you have places to be, and let's get to them, yeah?"

Normally she would never take such a long time changing. Bad judgment. The door had been closed, though. Why did they have to hire her? Her muscles remained frozen in place.

"It's not a friend. It's someone from Lakeview."

"I'm sorry, that didn't sound like 'I'll be ready in a minute, Dad,'" he griped.

"Can you please just go? I'm on the phone!" she whined, hoping her thumb was blocking the noise from reaching Mrs. Tinsley. Wishing she had a super-thumb that would block her from her dad's jerk intrusions.

"Well hurry up and get dressed. We'll be in the car."

"Dad!" Great. Now Mrs. Tinsley knew she was undressed. The feeling of eyes on her magnified. They were squinting at her, now.

A private room.

She lifted the phone to her lips again. "Higgins 2 sounds great. I accept."

"Whoof, you're a lifesaver, Vanessa! I'll email you everything you need to know. I can't wait to see you again in a couple weeks."

"Um, yeah."

Vanessa hastily put on the other dress and ran down to the garage. The car was backing out before she had her seatbelt on.

Her mom was inspecting her hair in the side view mirror. "Your father said you were late because you were on the phone...? Who were you talking to, honey?"

"Someone from Lakeview."

"Yeah?"

"They offered me a job. As an RA."

Dad barked a laugh that was much too loud for the small car. "Don't RAs have to break up fights and bust parties and stuff? You sure it wasn't a wrong number?"

"No."

He laughed again, quieter, as Mom pointed out, "You didn't tell us you applied to be an RA."

"I didn't think I'd get it."

Her mom's hand reached back and patted her daughter on the knee. "Well see? That's what you get for not being more confident. We're proud of you, sweetie."
"Thanks."

"I think if we have to do one more diversity training session, I'm gonna hate crime her. Don't get me wrong, Ramona's a chill boss, but..." Carmen's cheeks puffed out as she forced out an exasperated breath. "Straight up hate crime her. You watch me."

Carmen was a breath of fresh air. She filled so much *space*. Tiny though she was, no bigger than Vanessa despite the steady diet of breaded breadings with a side of bread they kept feeding the staff during RA training, she was a conversational giant. She never ran out of things to say. It was welcome not only because Vanessa generally liked her, but also because it was fewer opportunities for someone to force Vanessa to speak. RA training had been over a week of non-stop talking, and it wasn't over. Some of the buildings had dozens of RAs to do all that talking. Higgins had six. Ramona did her best not to let sessions stagnate, but six people could only comment so much. (Except for Carmen.)

"Look, Carmen, the white folks need to demonstrate their guilt complexes so we can all go on working it up in peace and harmony." Vickie gritted her teeth, glowering between her colleagues on the opposite side of the Higgins staff's table at the food court. People who so happened to mostly be white.

Then she cracked a grin. "Damn, you guys need to lighten up. I'm kidding."

Vickie made Vanessa nervous. But in a good way, she thought. She was funny. Witty. Edgy, as her latest foray into racial prankery on the mostly white Higgins staff aptly demonstrated.

Vanessa had never given much thought to social justice prior to this past week. She didn't think about society much in general. That was part of why she was studying environmental science, because it would hopefully take her far, far away from people. It was interesting, though, thinking of her new job as trying to actually help people, contemplating the way people's words and actions and biases impacted interactions. Even so, she was right there with Carmen. There was such a thing as beating a dead horse.

Vickie had seemed even less interested in such matters than the white people or even Carmen, though. Vanessa wasn't sure what to make of that. She'd never had a black friend. Her high school graduating class had been just over five hundred students with just three of them black, neither of whom numbered among the two who were friends with Vanessa. Not that Vickie was a potential friend. Vickie was *cool*. She said things

that sounded like quotes but weren't. The closest Vanessa had come to being quotable had been confessing what a loser she was during a job interview.

Savannah overcame her discomfort first, offering a laugh. "You shouldn't joke like that, Vickie. You know how sensitive we are." She elbowed the people on either side of her, Spencer and Vanessa. "Right, fellow white people?"

Savannah was the most terrifying woman Vanessa had ever met. She'd never been one for fighting over boys, having never met one she found interesting enough to contemplate shedding her cowardice over. Until Spencer, anyway. That only made Savannah the more intimidating. Looks aside—

No. There was no putting those looks aside. Rather, in addition to those looks, she was also gracious, charming, patient, a good listener, and gave freely of her kindness. She'd practically dragged Vanessa to their girls' nights, sneaking out after hours at training to grab drinks. Carmen wasn't twenty-one yet, which meant there was all that extra space where Vickie and Janis and Savannah looked to her to say things.

She'd followed Vanessa into the ladies room two nights back, sitting in the stall next to her and speaking just loudly enough to be heard over the music. She said, unprompted, that she knew Vanessa didn't like being the center of attention, but that it meant a lot to her that she was stepping outside of her comfort zone to help make their team feel like such a tight group. That she'd been nervous taking on a leadership position, too, and that any time Vanessa felt overwhelmed or alone or wanted to vent, she'd be there. That even though they'd only known each other for a couple weeks, and only because of random chance of hiring and placement, she felt like Vanessa was a friend. And she hoped saying it through the stall so there was no need for eye contact made all that sappy stuff easier to hear.

Which it did. Holy *shit*, it did. After their two sessions on LGBTQIA+ issues and concerns, one half an hour and one a full, Vanessa had felt some biases she hadn't realized she'd harbored melting off of her. Savannah Gray was a dangerous woman to befriend over drinks and country dancing when one was in the midst of learning acceptance of alternative sexualities.

In a gulp, Spencer downed the dinky little orange juice container that came with the tightly budgeted RA staff breakfast. He elbowed Savannah back. "Ha! This will be fun fodder for conversation during this afternoon's white guilt reinforcement training."

Spencer was an improvement on perfection. Spencer was equal parts deliciousness and mirth, dumped in a blender and spiked with warmth and a tangy aftertaste of total obliviousness. If Savannah was dangerous, Spencer personified armageddon.

Vickie eyed that exchange of elbows subtly, but Vanessa was perceptive. She might not speak much, but she watched people closely. It was a coping mechanism for having to be around them so much. Spencer was single, he'd shared. Evidently things

hadn't worked out with that one girl she'd seen him with at their interview in the spring, that good kisser chick. Vickie had been eyeballing him ever since he'd shared it. Girls night had featured a lot of discussion of Spencer. It was embarrassing, talking about how cute he was. It came so close to revealing her stupid pointless crush. Maybe Vickie felt the same way. Then again, if Vickie wanted him, all she had to do was take him. That was what girls like Vickie did.

Not as in people of color! she chided herself mentally at the stray thought. *Cool hot people, that's all.* Maybe she needed more diversity training after all.

Janis, however, nodded seriously at Spencer's joke. "Right? We've talked and talked and *tawked* about minorities and women and the handicapped and every non-Christian religion ever invented. Doesn't it seem weird that we're not talking about the actual majority of our residents?"

Janis was the absolute worst. Over drinks, she had let slip that like Vanessa, she'd been sent a rejection email by mistake and had been intended to be offered a position as an alternate. Unlike Vanessa, she thought the mistake was the original email and not the one that had wound up in the file sent to Ramona when she'd needed to fill Higgins' three sudden vacancies. (Carmen had filled the third, but she actually had been an alternate, no paperwork glitches.)

That the candidacy of someone as repellent as Janis had been resurrected from the ashes of rejection only confirmed what Vanessa had presumed. Someone in the Lakeview Housing Office was playing a really mean joke on Ramona, dumping the two of them in her lap.

Breakfast went about itself. Janis complained, Vickie mocked her so subtly she didn't notice, Spencer said something to make peace between them, Savannah said something in support of peace in general. Carmen filled the rest of the space. They really were a great team. At Wendy's she'd barely known her coworkers' names. As an RA, she'd been in their homes, gone out to drinks with them, given and received advice. She'd been hugged – and sometimes by the most dauntingly incredible boy she'd ever met.

So long as her residents didn't show up Wednesday, Vanessa thought she might like this job.

It was soon time to get back to Higgins for yet another training session. She found the whole affair less tedious than the others seemed to, though probably only because she had so much more to learn about leadership and rules infractions and communication and confidence. She wished she could take notes, but nobody else was taking notes.

That was a thing she'd learned on her own about people. Don't be the only one in the room taking notes.

The Higgins RA staff emerged from Penderdast as a team. It was only 9 AM but it was already hot outside, but their own small residence hall beckoned from right across the street. That was why she'd requested to live in Higgins as a freshman, why she'd stayed as a sophomore, why she was glad it was where she'd gotten a job as an RA. Fewer than 200 residents, the smallest hall on campus. Janis grumbled something about how Vickie was so lucky she couldn't sunburn. As they departed, though, Spencer fell in beside her.

"Hey Vanessa."

"Um, hey. Spencer." She smiled. A baby swan, she'd called herself when they'd first met. (He hadn't remembered her interview, though he'd apologized for the lapse. Embarrassing, yes, but all the better considering how terribly it had gone. She was still sad he'd forgotten the swan, though.)

As for Spencer, he was a golden retriever puppy, through and through.

His pace slackened, she noticed. The others were pulling ahead fast, hurrying out of the humidity and the heat. It was a couple minutes walk as a stroll, but Spencer's casual gait would double that. Fine by her. He was the best part of training. Vanessa slowed, folding her arms behind her back. No breasts to speak of to catch his eye, but she could at least make it harder for him to notice her absentee butt.

"Hey, I wanted to talk to you about last night, if that's OK?"

Vanessa's blood froze. How had he find out? She'd never done that, *touched* herself like that, in her entire life. Vanessa wasn't stupid, she knew what masturbation was. Myles used to make her watch pornography of other girls doing that with him, he said to help put them both in the mood. It never had, not for her, but she'd been glad at the time to try to make him happy.

Soggy cardboard. His words suddenly bounced around her head and she heard herself wheeze in sudden panic.

"Are you OK?" he asked, smiling, as she literally stumbled over the figurative fear that Spencer would find out how bad she was at being a girl. She'd nearly tripped in the middle of the street. He would rescue her, though. He talked about being an RA like he woke up first thing in the morning to think about how he could make Higgins a better place to live. He was so good.

Working with Spencer... *That* put her in the mood. It wasn't only his looks. It was everything about him. It was so sappy it wasn't even cliché, but he was... dreamy. She literally dreamt about him – but alone, by herself, in her own private room, with no witnesses.

So how had he found out she'd been fucking herself with his water bottle?!

She hadn't meant to. It was creepy as hell, she knew. Perverted. Disgusting. Whorish. Vickie had been making a crude joke about blowjobs to make fun of Bob, the housing director who was always trying to foist off handfuls of condoms on everybody.

Spencer had joined in. He didn't worry about the sort of immature "no homo" posturing so many boys Vanessa had known did. It was funny when Vickie did it, and it was funny when he joined in.

Only, for reasons she hadn't fully understood, she'd swiped the plastic bottle he'd fellated and taken it back to her room. The idea that his mouth had been there, on the thing she was putting inside herself... It made her so *horny*, even if she knew it was totally illogical. She'd felt like such a freak doing it, but that image, his mouth sucking and licking...

Myles had never shown her porn where guys put their mouths on girls down there, but she'd heard of it. That thought – plus the slender-necked bottle stretching out her virgin pussy – had given her the first orgasm of her life. She'd thought she'd had them before, but those had been nothing. She was embarrassed to think she'd let Myles fool her into thinking she'd come with him.

The bottle had proceeded to give Vanessa her second through fifth. Then she'd noticed she was bleeding, and she'd had to rush around gathering cleaning supplies before it seeped into the mattress. She'd already done her RCR with Ramona when she moved in. That would be mortifying to explain at checkout next June. Or however long she lasted.

Spencer was waiting for a response. Her near-death stumble in front of traffic had never really registered, still gripped with horror that he had somehow found out her nasty dirty secret.

"I... I... I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

A couple dozen paces ahead, Savannah turned back. Vanessa must have looked a sight, because concern immediately touched those sculpted features. Spencer was suddenly in front of her, waving the others ahead behind his back. Vanessa wanted to throw up. Pass out. Die. Oh no. She was such a deviant. She'd known she was weird for not being as interested in guys as her friends. Finally she met a guy she really liked, and she turned into a freaky deaky freakoid overnight. Oh no.

Spencer put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. It kept her upright even as it threatened to melt the ice in her knees. "Hey! Hey, whoa there. Are you...? Vanessa, whoa. Whoa whoa, hey, it's OK, it's OK, just—"

Did she faint? Had he simply swept her up in his arms? Either way, she was vaguely conscious of being carried, hefted effortlessly in strong male arms and whisked over to one of the benches at the Penderdast bus stop. Shade. That was nice of him. There had been a closer bench in the sun, but he'd gone the extra few steps and put her under the canopied one. Such a nice man. Such a nice bottle.

Oh no.

For a few minutes there was nothing to do but let him hold her hand and fan her with the bottom of his shirt. He was speaking, but today's panic attack seemed to have

decided to deafen her on top of the paralysis. Finally, she began to breathe, consciously breathe, and her brain began to work again.

“Hey, there she is.” Spencer was above her. She was on her back? He was smiling. What a smile. He’d put his hand on her! What hands. “That’s it, keep breathing. You’re doing great.”

“T-training,” she said.

“Training?”

“We’ll be late.”

His smile widened. Good teeth. She really liked nice teeth on a man. He was so beautiful. “We’re already late. It’s fine. I texted Ramona and told her we needed a minute.”

Vanessa tried to sit up, but a firm hand on her shoulder held her down. “No, I have to...! She’ll be so disappointed. I’ll get fired.”

“You won’t, and she won’t, and I didn’t tell her why. She doesn’t have to know about the panic attack. We’ll tell her... I don’t know. Tell her we forgot our binders at the food court, but they’d locked up on our heels so we had to go banging on doors and yadda yadda. OK?”

Vanessa smiled. That was smart. She was such a bad liar that she never dared try. Her voice was so quiet sometimes people accused her of lying even though she wasn’t. “OK.”

He gave her another minute coming out of it. It wasn’t easy, knowing he was only waiting to call her out. It was humiliating. Would he think it was... hot? Some boys had told her she was pretty, before they tried to talk to her and lost interest. Maybe he would be flattered.

Oh, who was she kidding. Maybe she could quit and drop out of school so she’d never have to face him again.

“I can explain,” she said finally. “I, um, I got so worked up, and you were so...” Vanessa shuddered.

“Hey. That’s nonsense, OK? That’s why we practice, so when it’s time to do it for real, we have a sense of how to go about it. It’s fake and all, but it’s good preparation.”

“You... You don’t think less of me?”

He gasped, as if affronted. It was around this time in their conversation that later, Vanessa would reflect that she ought to have begun to recognize they were talking about two very different incidents. Her Spencer cocktail recipe was astute, though; Spencer hadn’t even suspected his bottle had been swiped, much less employed to deflower one of his coworkers. In fact, unbeknownst to her, he had awakened at after two in the morning with an inexplicable preoccupation with its whereabouts. He hardly ever consumed bottle water – his eco-ethics were far above average, one of the sexiest traits a man could have in Vanessa’s book – but that day he had partaken after the campus-wide

sexual harassment training in anticipation of the long walk back to Higgins in this awful heat wave.

(He'd even firmly corrected Janis when she attributed the weather to "global warming," a term she had been using ironically, an incident which had figured prominently in her masturbatory pursuits.)

The bottle had been left at the scene of their final training session of the evening, an hours-long series of roleplays where the staff practiced confronting both common and serious behavioral issues. His reference to Vanessa's activity of the previous evening was targeted there, to a scenario in which she, in character as an RA, had been walking down the hall and stumbled upon an underaged resident played by Savannah, staggering down the hallway inebriated and concealing a vodka bottle poorly.

Each scenario ran twice, once with its surprise factor intact, and once after discussion and reflection on the mixed results of the first run. It had been Vanessa's turn to go first that scenario. It had gone predictably terribly. She likely wouldn't have confronted a real resident at all, but it was less embarrassing to make an effort for the sake of the exercise. By the end of her awkward, fumbling attempt at assertiveness in the face of Savannah's criminally inept deception, she'd not only let Savannah leave the scene with her bottle in hand, but also failed to ascertain her correct identity. ("I'm, uh, *Gina*," Savannah had said. She'd even laughed this ditzzy drunken giggle, just to make it really, really obvious Vanessa should be checking her ID.)

"Are you even trying?" Janis had asked when Ramona finally called it off after Vanessa failed to realize "Gina" had passed out in the hall behind her as she walked away. A fair question. It must have looked like she wasn't, but in truth, she was just afraid. Like usual.

Spencer answered her question in the spirit of the dialogue he had meant to initiate, Vanessa trying to quell the hammering of her delicate heart while she listened in the spirit of hers. Her realization of what they were actually talking about would come soon, but not yet. "Think less of you? Oh my god, not at all! It was your first time, that's all. You should have seen me my first time. I was a *mess*."

This, Vanessa knew more of. Myles had always been very messy. When she made him come, he'd come *hard*. Probably because she didn't do it as often as a girlfriend evidently should. Once Frannie had even noticed his spots on her dress. It had been so embarrassing. Her cheeks colored, both at the memory and the conjured image of Spencer spurting all over her face, like Myles had always pestered her to let him do.

Disgusting. Unless it was Spencer. That might be interesting, she thought.

"I can't believe you're not upset. If I were in your shoes, I think I would be really upset with me. You've been so nice to me, so patient, and that's how I repay it."

The diverging lines of their conversation blurred, the notion of repayment not quite gelling, but Spencer figured this girl was simply awkward, and just snapping out of

a panic attack. “Hey. You made it here on your own steam. You don’t owe anybody anything. You just need practice, that’s all. I’d be happy to help, if you want.”

“You... you would... *help*?” Vanessa’s mouth was hanging open, she knew. On her back, she couldn’t even blame gravity. Oh god. Would he use his mouth? Or his...?! Oh god!

“Sure. Look, I know you’re shy, Vanessa. There’s nothing wrong with being shy. We just need to work on switching the shyness off and switching the you that’s underneath that on.”

“I’m, um, feeling kind of switched on right now,” she said, giggling. Had she *ever* giggled before? He was making her feel so normal about it, though! How could this man even be possible? Maybe she’d hit her head on the sidewalk and this was all just a vivid hallucination.

Spencer’s smile shined down on her. “I’m not sure doing it on a bus stop bench while they’re waiting for us at training is the best time, but I like your enthusiasm, Vanessa.”

“Oh. Gosh, right. I didn’t mean...”

“After our last session today, why don’t you stop by my room? Or text me and I can come to yours, if you’d rather. Whatever you’re more comfortable with.”

Oh god. Oh god oh god! This couldn’t be happening. Was it a prank? She’d come to his room, offer to kiss him, and then Savannah and Vickie would pop out of the closet and laugh at her for thinking she had any chance with him when women like them existed.

Not worth risking it was sincere, though. Those lips. That smile. What his voice did to her insides. She found herself nodding.

“OK. Wow. Yeah. Your room would be good. That sounds... wow.” Suddenly she was hugging him around the waist. It took a little contortion, but she figured he’d be seeing her in a far more compromising position tonight anyway.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he said, not able to hug her in their respective positions, but patting under the arm a little, where his hand naturally landed. Did he feel her bra? That would be so hot, probably. She didn’t really need a bra, and sometimes went without, but around Spencer her nipples were *always* hard. It would be too embarrassing.

“Do I need to bring the bottle?” she asked.

Spencer’s head cock to the side, which from her angle looked like twisting unnaturally on an axis it wasn’t supposed to have. “The... bottle? Oh, you mean Savannah’s prop? Pretty sure we tossed that in the recycling.”

“Savannah’s bottle?” She frowned, considering. It had had a long neck, she supposed. More like a man’s thingy. “OK, yeah, I guess that would fit better.”

“Um, yeah, if we still had it.” Again, he gave her that nervous look. (Had she hit her head after all? Was she bleeding or something?) “You know – sorry, this is so stupid, but you look like you could use a reminder of how ridiculous I can be. So speaking of bottles, I left my water bottle in the basement hallway last night, OK? Random accident. But then I remembered in the middle of the night, and I just thought of custodial coming in this morning and finding it lying in Savannah’s hallway, only us RAs in the building so they’d figure the new girl thinks she can dump her trash anywhere like it’s their job to bustle around tidying up after her. Felt *awful*. Three in the morning, I’m getting dressed to go find a bottle four stories down. Maybe Vickie’s onto something with this guilt complex thing, huh. Stupidest thing. I’m creeping down there hoping to god nobody hears me, you know? Like what a b.s.-sounding excuse to be wandering around somebody’s floor in the middle of the night.”

As he explained, Vanessa at long last realized her misapprehension and nearly died of shame all over again, only this time of how dense she’d been. As if Spencer were going to casually offer to help teach her how to pleasure herself after dinner. Stupid stupid stupid! And oh shit, now she’d offered to meet with him, *alone*, in his *room*, for *roleplay*! Vanessa had never done anything that kinky, but she knew the word had sexual connotations. Oh god!

“It wasn’t there, though,” he said, grinning sheepishly. “I don’t suppose I have you to thank for cleaning up after me, do I?”

“I don’t have your bottle!” she blurted.

Spencer simply nodded, though. “Probably Savannah. I’ll have to apologize and say thanks. Anyway, you think you’re ready to try your legs? No rush if you’re not.”

Vanessa almost sat up, but her vision swam. That had been so embarrassing – the panicking, the reminder of how badly she’d done last night, her dumb miscommunication. His bottle! “I, um, still feel a little lightheaded? But, you know, if you wanted, maybe you could... carry me? Again?”

“You trying to make everybody think I’m a stud, huh?” He laughed. “Why don’t we just sit here for a few more minutes.”

Vanessa took his hand. It was the boldest move she had ever made towards a boy. He accepted her immediately, and held it until at last Ramona called them to return. “So we’re still on for tonight, right?” he asked as he helped her to her feet. Even once she was standing, he didn’t try to extricate his hand from her grasp.

“Yes. Thank you. I, um, could definitely use the help. I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m not exactly the most assertive person.”

“You’re going to do great, Vanessa. Believe me.”

That night, after floating back down to her floor after hours of nerve-wracking but also very helpful practice with the best guy in the universe, Vanessa removed the door tag on Higgins 210. She’d always had a little talent for arts and crafts, an easy way

to pass hours in companionable solitude. Each name on each door tag had a distinct pattern or symbol. Her own door tag was a puffy paint rendition of herself, reading a book by a creek. It read, quite simply,

VANESSA STEGER

The Higgins 2 staffer took up her puffy paint, and atop the creek added two letters.

VANESSA STEGER

RA

She believed him.

“My daughter lives!”

“Hi, Mom.”

“You were so busy all through that training of yours that I wondered if I’d ever get to talk to you again. Then with classes starting, I didn’t want to be a bother. I know how you like to seclude yourself.”

Her mother was right about that, though she’d not been given the opportunity to in weeks. She’d thought dorms were places of constant social imposition when she’d lived here as a resident. As an RA, it was like there was a flashing arrow outside her door. More than once during move-in week, there had been an actual *line*. Pure hell.

“It’s been busy all right.”

“Yeah? You spent all summer moping around the house worrying yourself sick over it. Is it as dreadful as you worried? Tell me all about it. I know you’ve been gone a few weeks but it feels like ages. I miss your voice.”

Vanessa smiled. She never knew which mom she’d get. The good one, today. “Oh, it’s nothing so interesting.”

Her mother was probably frowning, never knowing which daughter she’d get. The quieter one, today. “No? Well I guess that’s good, right? When you’re a leader, ‘interesting’ usually means something bad is happening. So your girls, they’re all getting along?”

“It’s not ‘possessive’ to tell you not to use one of my purses without asking, Gabbie!”

“You have like twenty purses, Alyssa. You have so many that you had to ask me if you could store some over my closet in my storage bin!”

"You said you weren't using it! Just because I put it on your side doesn't mean you can just use it!"

"Fine! Then get your shit out of my...! Oh hi, Vanessa. About time."

"Hi. Um, what's...?"

"She's stealing my things!"

"She's a paranoid control freak!"

"Tell her she can't just take my stuff without asking!"

"I borrowed it for like three hours and you wouldn't even have noticed if you weren't up, again, talking to your boyfriend, ALL NIGHT!"

"You weren't even in the room!"

"You do it even when I am!"

"Um, can you guys keep it down...? And, um, good luck. Try to, yeah, not make, um, accusing...? statements? I'll just... have a nice night."

"Yeah, mostly."

"Mostly? No fights or anything too ugly, I hope."

"There was one fight, but I wasn't there for it."

"Oh? What happened?"

"Oh? What happened?"

"Well I missed the beginning. By the time Ramona and I got there, it was almost over. The one girl, she was just... berserk, and the other one, she was just trying not to get clawed or choked. I felt so bad for her. She was terrified."

"Yeah yeah yeah, now back up to the part where he was naked? And do be specific." Carmen leaned in, steepling her fingers.

"You're so bad. But really, I was doing crowd control with my back to the fight. Can you believe some of those girls of his were trying to record it? Nasty. But I barely saw anything."

"Which means you saw something. And what you saw was...?"

Savannah's face slowly split into a big grin. "It was... yeah. About like you'd expect."

"Meaning...?" Carmen looked desperate for a crumb.

The Higgins basement RA glanced to make sure no residents were coming up to the center desk, then held up her hands, parallel, most of a foot apart. Vanessa wasn't sure what that meant, but the way Carmen and Vickie reacted, it was very exciting.

"Somebody ought to go up there and comfort the guy," Carmen suggested.

"Oh I can be hella comforting. Maybe just slip into something a little more comfortable first, know what I'm saying?" Vickie's eyebrows did a couple waggles. "I'm saying I'm gonna go up there and the rules about coworkers be thrice damned, y'all."

"Actually," said Savannah, cheeks flushing, "Ramona asked me to hang out afterward and make sure he was OK, and we got to talking... and..."

“Aaaand, he asked you to send in a pro?”

For once, nobody had a laugh for Vickie’s jibes. The details were too potentially juicy. “No, but we... I think we’re gonna... hang out. Tonight.”

“Oh my gosh. Do you think you guys are gonna hook up? What about Price?”

“Price? He and I... We’ve been drifting apart for a long time. When we broke up freshman year, I told him I couldn’t do the long distance. But then he just started driving up to see me a couple weekends a month, so I was like, maybe this will work. When we broke up last year, I said our lives were just going in different directions, but then I went back home for the summer and he’s made apprentice, and my parents wouldn’t shut up about him, so I...”

Vanessa looked at Vickie and Carmen. Were they as bored of hearing about Price as she was? She thought so. How could they not be? Say more about Spencer, Vanessa thought.

“Anyway, I gave him one last shot, but I just think, for once, I have to think about what’s right for me.”

Carmen managed a smirk. “Translation: she’s totally gonna climb Mount Spencer.”

“Minus the climb,” said Vickie. A sub-par effort, Vanessa judged. It meant the same thing with or without “climb.”

“I’m totally gonna go hang out with Spencer. Seriously you guys, it’s no big deal!”

Vickie held up her hands the same way Savannah had. “Looks like a pretty big deal to me, but if you’re not into it—”

“I’m into it! I’m into it!” Savannah hopped up and hurried toward the exit, off to see Spencer, apparently. “Vanessa, I’ll meet you on my floor to start rounds at 10, OK?”

“OK.”

“Two girls got into a fight is all. Over a boy.” One literally over him, and one under.

“Oh goodness. Wherever I might have failed you as a parent, honey, I can at least take solace that I didn’t raise the sort of girl who got that bird-brained over boys. Or at least, I didn’t raise two girls who...”

*Vanessa laughed, though her mind was going back to that day again. Like Vickie and Carmen, she fervently wished she’d been there to see it. Still, part of her was glad she wasn’t. Spencer wasn’t just a body. He was her mentor. Her friend. And she *was* absolutely bird-brained over him. She hadn’t even thrown away his bottle until that very morning, and it didn’t even count, considering.*

Vanessa took a moment to smooth out her hair before opening the door. AA surprise visit from Spencer! He was the sweetest boy in human history. “Well if it isn’t

my favorite blonde coworker. Not that you had much competition.” They laughed. Janis was terrible. “I was heading over to grab lunch, and I wondered if...?”

“Sure! I’d like that.”

They talked the whole way over to Penderdast about this and that. Classes, how hot it had been this semester so far, about how much he missed his dog. Vanessa talked, too! Somehow it just felt easy with him. About the research she was helping one of her professors with, about how his suggested breathing technique had helped her running, about how she had a niece or nephew on the way. Vanessa didn’t like people, but she had a feeling this new little creature might make for an exception.

Only when they were sitting down in a little nook by some potted trees, secluded happily away, did they start to talk about work stuff. She’d known he’d make the transition at some point, but it had been nice to just be normal friends for a while first.

He wasn’t subtle about it. They both knew he was gnawing this bone so much with her because she was so obviously awful at the job. He swore Ramona wasn’t making him do it, and she believed him. (She believed it a smidge less each time he repeated it, though.) Still, she didn’t mind. Vanessa really did want to be better. This job wrenched her out of her comfort zone constantly, but thanks to Spencer, she thought she was getting ever so gradually less afraid of it.

She opened up to him about everything. In their one-on-ones, Ramona mostly wanted to talk about issues. What was wrong, and what Vanessa had done and still needed to do to address it. Spencer, however, just wanted to listen. For the first time in her life, she wanted to talk.

So she told him about roommate conflicts. The girl in 222 who was miserably homesick. How she felt bad submitting work order requests, like she was bossing around the custodians. The near panic attack she’d had over having to go confront Martina in 202 over all the food she left sitting around her room, a beacon for critters that would impact the whole floor.

After a while, she realized he was just sitting there smiling at her, a weird, dopey smile she didn’t know what to make of. “What?”

Spencer chuckled. “Vanessa, do you know that you’ve been talking to me, non-stop, for almost twenty minutes?”

“I was?”

He nodded. “Clock on the wall behind you. I didn’t start a timer, but when I realized it was happening, I started keeping an eye on it. At least sixteen. I thought I was having lunch with Carmen for a second.”

“Oh. Oh gosh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

But he only reached across the table and took her tiny hand in his. “Vanessa, hey, no! I loved it. Seriously. I like listening to you talk. And I think you seem to know what you’re doing.”

She did not. "I do?"

"Absolutely. Now, you just gotta do it. That's the easy part. Knock, knock. 'Clean this up, ya nasty.' Knock, knock. 'Stop borrowing her stuff, and you stop being so dramatic.' Type, type. 'Got a squeaky hinge that needs some WD-40, won't take but a minute.' You got this."

She smiled. Were her teeth showing? She never smiled that big. Seeing Spencer smile back made four long years of braces completely worth it. "You think so?"

"I know so. Say, you wanna hit the gym with me in a bit? I could use a running buddy, and none of my other friends can keep up. It's fine if you're busy."

"No, that sounds fun! Um, you're sure your girlfriend won't mind?" Girlfriends, technically, but that felt rude to say.

The water bottle at the rec center vending machine were a lot better shaped. Vanessa bought them both a bottle, and replaced that uncomfortably wide one from training at last.

"It's going really well so far, Mom. I think I might not suck as bad as I thought I would."

"I told you you'd rise to the occasion, honey. You usually do."

Their first staff meeting in September, the RAs filled out the duty schedule for the rest of the semester. By then, the Higgins RAs had their classes, extracurriculars, and social schedules determined as best they could. It was a perk, being able to not only know your work schedule months in advance, but to have direct input. At least, it was a perk for the rest of the staff. Vanessa didn't have a social calendar.

Unlike when they'd scheduled the preceding few weeks during training, though, the women on staff had gone from joking behind Spencer's back about trying to score ("score") shifts with him to actually doing it. It was like a game, she supposed. Carmen seated herself so she could see his planner on his phone, avoiding days he was booked. Astute. When Spencer shared his willingness to take extra weekend shifts since he had no life, that was Vanessa's cue to follow suit, and for the same reason.

They took turns, Ramona pulling names out of an actual hat, each of their names in the hat a number of times equal to their remaining shifts. Whenever Spencer's name was drawn, there was a psychological game of how quickly someone else could pounce on whatever night he'd taken. If they were too obvious, it would get weird; if they were too patient, they'd lose it to someone else. They watched for patterns, slowly catching up with the Carmen approach in anticipating his moves. As he settled into a rhythm picking up consecutive Wednesdays, Savannah "realized" Wednesdays also worked well for her, and with a little chuckle, signing her name beneath his week after week. Vickie had a

smart play, cracking a joke about how if that psycho from his floor came back, she wanted a dude on shift with her for protection. Then it was safe to joke about needing big strong male protection and latching onto his shifts immediately – until Janis ruined it, that is.

“It’s like you guys are all trying to score every shift with Spencer that you can. Obsess much?”

Crickets. Savannah and Vickie both had girlfriend privileges, enabling them to keep poaching his shifts, though it only made them look catty. Their unusual arrangement wasn’t supposed to be public knowledge, but it was. Janis complained about it all the time, sometimes even in front of them, and Carmen was always saying something passive aggressive about how jealous she was, and – ha ha – wouldn’t it be wild if he went for the hat trick. Vanessa’s dad was a big hockey fan and had tried ineffectively to impart this passion to her, so it was a rare bit of sports jargon she comprehended.

As for him dating half the female staff in the building, Vanessa didn’t care. Objectively, who her coworkers dated was none of her business. Personally, she actually liked it. They seemed to make him happy, and if Vanessa wasn’t worthy to try, someone ought to.

Now that she was officially a habitual masturbator (which the internet swore was perfectly normal), that was her favorite thing to think about while she pleased herself. They would look so beautiful together. She imagined the look on his face, the way his shoulders would slump into a sigh as Vickie settled into his lap and put his thing inside her vagina. Oh god, and that time she’d been going through his floor on rounds and heard him call someone a “cocksucker,” only to have Savannah share at breakfast the next morning that they’d had a date the night before, and that it had been magical.

Savannah Gray, on her knees, maybe even naked, giving Spencer a blowjob and moaning as he praised her for being such a generous cocksucker. They were so perfect for each other. She must make him so happy. Vanessa never had any such encounter with him and Vickie, but she had to be incredible. The perfect lay. Why else would he take time away from Savannah’s pouty, plump, cocksucking lips to spend time with her? They probably fucked (a word Vanessa did not like, but found oddly appealing when applied to her coworkers) like a Greek god and his goddesses.

Vanessa was so, so happy for him. A man like him deserved women like them. She’d seen how badly all those girls up on the third floor teased him, and how devoted he was to being loyal to his girlfriends.

It was that sentiment that had primarily led to her getting so few nights on duty with him. Who was she to keep him from getting to work alongside his girlfriends? So she took shifts with Carmen, and yes, even Janis. It wasn’t ideal, but it was the least she could do to repay all he did for her.

Plus, he took a lot of weekend shifts, when there were three RAs on duty rather than the usual two. So he could do his rounds with his girlfriends (more often than not) and Vanessa could work primary at the center desk. They closed it down at midnight, and then she liked to race back to her room so she could have her walkie talkie pressed against her sopping naked labia when he announced, “Higgins staff starting rounds.”

(Not that Vanessa was some kind of deviant. She sanitized the walkie thoroughly before returning it to the charging station on Marcus’s desk.)

Plus, there was one other benefit.

“Spencer?” she whispered.

“If you talk that quiet while we’re walking down the spookiest corridor on earth, I’m going to pee my pants, Vanessa.”

The dreadway.

That’s what the Higgins female RA staff called it when Spencer wasn’t around to make them feel like scaredy girls. It was like something out of a horror movie. The basement of the center building was this dimly lit utility area even the maintenance people seldom went to. Because of a slight incline on the Higgins grounds, however, the loading dock was on that lower level. The Higgins cafe had been closed years ago to consolidate resources over at the Penderdast food court, but over two hundred residents received their mail and packages there, plus all the supplies to run a residence hall, toilet paper and trashbags and whatnot. The doors were open by day so delivery people could access the storage areas in the basement, and Marcus locked it up on his way out.

Evidently, one time last year he’d forgotten not only to lock the door, but even to latch it. A mask of raccoons – the official term, she’d informed her colleagues as humbly as she could – had been the only infiltrators, thankfully. Still, the center building housed myriad valuable pieces of art donated by Lakeview alumni. There was a special guest suite upstairs that the university used for VIPs on very rare occasion in which a decorative bed frame donated by a past emperor of Japan was stored. During their facility walkthrough in training, Ramona had shown it to them – but sternly forbidden them to touch it. It was apparently worth something in the low seven figures.

Now, the RAs double checked Marcus’s lockup follow-through when they closed the building at midnight. (Ramona insisted explicitly that they weren’t inspecting for break-ins, which Vickie quickly noted was Housing’s way of avoiding getting sued if some psycho slit their throats down there. Ramona didn’t rebut it, which Vanessa had not liked at all.)

The dreadway ran the length of the building, under the atrium, the center desk, and the formal lounge. At the end by the stairwell, there was a single fluorescent light to either side down a short cross corridor, where the utility and storage rooms were. The dreadway itself was unlit. By day, some light shined down the hall from the loading dock. Dim, but adequate for a big featureless hall.

By night?

It was two hundred feet of unfathomable darkness, punctuated exclusively by two tiny red bulbs behind the fire alarms, lights which seemed to serve the exclusive purpose of warning a profoundly deaf person who happened to be standing in the seldom used concrete block utility hallway without any existing desire to exit by either of the available directions. The lights made the entire affair orders of magnitude more terrifying.

As Vickie had put it, the lights were there so they'd have the face of the man who raped them to death burned into the retinae of their souls on their way down to purgatory. (So quotable.) The first time Vanessa had closed down here, she'd done so with Savannah, who had taken one look down the hallway and joined Vanessa in crying in pure terror.

Vanessa did not like the dreadway.

"Sorry." Still whispering. She forced her vocal chords into action. "I was just going to say, I hate checking the loading dock, because... yeah. Like you said. So. Dark. Who uses a blinking red light bulb?"

He nodded, sweeping the dreadway with the flashlight on his phone. Vanessa passed one of those lights and shuddered. They invited a double take so naturally, and of course nobody was pointing a light behind them. Apart from those hellish embers, pure darkness. She shuddered again. "I always think it's going to blink on and I'll see someone standing there." Shoot, she'd whispered again.

Spencer gave her an exasperated look. She liked that look. Most people thought Vanessa was too delicate to give dirty looks to, and they were generally right. She and Spencer were comfortable with each other, though. He could be a little rougher, and she could roll with his telegraphed punches. "I think I just dribbled a little. Thanks for that image."

"Sorry," she apologized again, "it's just... I'm always glad when we're on duty together. You make me feel safe."

Spencer smiled. That feeling he gave her was deliberate, she knew. He was the sort of person who prided himself on making people feel safe. It was often thankless. As Vanessa knew from personal experience, frightened people were often too frightened to remember to also be grateful.

"Yeah, well, if the boogie man manifests at the end of the hall, I'm using you as a human shield."

Spencer was the kind of man who would jump on a grenade for people – or, if he proved to be insufficiently courageous, he would die regretting it, which was still pretty noble in her book. That he even pretended otherwise made her giggle as only he could. "Spencer! See, there you are, making me laugh when I'm always so scared down here with everybody else."

Careful to shine his light ahead and stave off the darkness, he turned back and patted Vanessa's bony shoulder. "I do what I can, human shield."

She patted his back, though gently. He was Savannah's, and Vickie's, and rumor had it three, or maybe four, of his residents'. Did he make those girls feel as special as he did Vanessa? If he did, she hoped he slept with more of them. As she began to retain physical details of his residents, they were emerging into her rotation of Spencerbation fantasies as well.

She never appeared in them herself. She was no Savannah.

"You do good."

They reached the loading dock, which was, as always, sealed tight. Spencer jiggled the latch as they'd been trained to do, and was satisfied. "You know, if you want, you can hop out here, go in through the back. Not go all the way back down the hall again."

"I wouldn't leave you alone down here."

"We just checked the hallway. Unless somebody ninjaed past us just now..." He made a little show of anxiously turning to double check. "Nope, I think I'll be OK."

"You're really not afraid to be down here by yourself?"

He shrugged. "Hey, I have you to thank for it, though."

"Me? I've never made anyone feel brave in my life. Except for maybe this girl at Brownie scout camp when she found out I was her sparring partner for boxing, but I don't think that counts."

Spencer, cognizant of the effect of the oppressive darkness, opened the loading dock. It didn't do much, and the dumpsters were right there with all their stink, but there were some big lamps in the parking lot. At least it felt like if they were attacked she had somewhere to run. "You? Boxing?"

"I know, right? I have the arm strength of a butterfly." She did a little footwork, punched the air. "Float like a butterfly, sting like a mosquito!"

He put his hands in front of her fists, inviting her to punch them. Not the way she'd touch him given options, but it was fun to goof around with him. And if some deranged meth head popped out of the nearby dumpsters sheathed in feral raccoons, she'd be ready to land a few blows, maybe distract him long enough for Spencer not to get hurt defending her.

"I'm serious, though. Remember that night in training, we were sitting around the lounge prepping our door tags? Or rather, you were embarrassing us with your door tags?"

"Yours were fine! I'm just sorry you had to redo half of them."

"Yeah, well. Anyway, remember, Savannah asked everybody what they were nervous about. You know, so she could pretend she was making conversation before unloading about her own stuff?"

Vanessa nodded. She'd been very switched on during RA training. At first just because this wonderful boy was there and she didn't want to miss anything, but soon she'd realized she was learning, and sort of making friends. She really hoped she didn't make Ramona fire her.

"Yeah. Janis said terrorists, you cut her off, and then Carmen went on about coming into contact with bodily fluids, for *way* too long."

"She's not wrong, though. My first year – no, second year – oh god who cares – anyway, I had these dudes on my floor, puked everywhere at least once a month, didn't give a crap how much J-board fined them. Oh god, and this freaking nasty-ass jerk who kept – pardon my French – jerking off in the bathroom stalls and getting, um, 'it' on the latch. I've learned there is a non-zero number of people who just can't be trusted to cohabit with us gentlefolk in the residence halls."

"Gentle? Who's 'gentle?'" She put her weight into a punch, confident he wouldn't even notice the difference.

Indeed, Spencer caught Vanessa's fist in a firm hand, then used his grip to sit her down on the edge of the loading dock, settling right down beside her. Yes, there were dumpsters, but it was Vanessa – not like he had to worry about being romantic. It was also private, and quiet, though. Intimate. The presence of the dreadway gaping behind them barely registered with Spencer at her side. They sat, hip to hip, arms touching softly. Weirder still, he said nothing, waited for her to continue where he'd interrupted. Nobody who knew Vanessa ever expected she had more to say after opening up, and anybody but Spencer would be right. With Spencer, talking was so easy.

"But yeah, let's see, after that Vickie made a joke that she was afraid her residents would all fall in love with her, but Janis pushed back." For once a Janis rebuttal had been fair and useful, calling her out for making light of other people letting themselves be vulnerable. "So Vickie pivoted and said she hoped she didn't have to try to break up a fight between the boys on your floor."

"Is it more ironic that the boys were all girls, or that the fight wound up being way worse than any guys I've ever seen in a scrap?"

"Second one, definitely." Vanessa leaned against his shoulder. He was so solid, and she was so small, he didn't budge at all. Savannah better be so, so good to this boy once they finished rounds. She wished they were the sort of friends who could talk about boy stuff together. Not just to get to hear juicy details, but so she could help make sure he was completely taken care of.

Vanessa tried not to fall too much more in love as she went on. "Let's see. Then Janis tried something less awful and said she was afraid of her residents being slobs and bringing cockroaches onto her floor, which was fine, except then she regrouped and said she hoped she didn't get any who didn't speak English."

Spencer sighed. "Oh, Janis."

She hadn't forgotten Spencer saying she'd somehow helped him, but he didn't seem eager for her to let him get to his point. "And you, you said you were afraid your style wouldn't work with the women on your floor. Shows what you know, the supposed expert."

"Oh man, I did say that, didn't I. How innocent you were, you sweet summer Spencer. Trust me, though, it's still pretty scary up there some days." His head leaned on her head. "But do you remember what *you* said?"

Vanessa couldn't shrug, couldn't shake her head, without risking him withdrawing. Smell be damned, she would sit here with him all night. His body wash was beneath it anyway. She concentrated on that, hoping when she got back to her room and made herself blackout orgasm over this that she'd only remember the good part of the odor.

"I don't," she admitted. "Everything.' That's what I would have said if I were being honest."

He laughed. "That's exactly what you said."

"Good, good. Here I worried I'd forgotten to lead with my anxiety for once. So how exactly did that inspire you?"

A car pulled into Higgins' modest lot, parking right near where Spencer's own vehicle was parked. Four girls got out, looked around guiltily. Both RAs sat up in unison.

"Because if the girl downstairs is being brave about *everything*, then I can be brave about my petty problems, too."

Vanessa wanted to press herself back against him, to reassure him that she didn't think his problems were petty, to invite him to come to her room if he was still up after Savannah finished sucking his cock and keep talking. Bring her with, if he wanted.

Instead, she saw the driver of the vehicle pop the trunk, then fish out a backpack that was decidedly rectangular.

She knew what he was about to say. "*Keep an eye on the loading dock, and I'll go deal with this.*" But he was right. She could be brave, if she needed to be. She could deal with this. So she told herself as her heart began to hammer in her chest.

Vanessa hopped down from the loading dock and unclipped her walkie from her belt. "Primary to secondaries. Could you meet me in the back lot?" One of them was already here, but they seemed to want them to talk like cops on these things, so she made use of what jargon she had.

She held up a hand to forestall Spencer as Savannah's voice replied. "On my way. Everything OK?"

She was already walking to the scene of the confrontation, where she'd tell four girls each twice her size that she was going to take their booze and get them in trouble. *Don't throw up*, she told herself. Out loud, she held the talkie to her mouth and said,

“Yep. Spencer’s finishing closing the center building, but there’s a few ladies trying to have a bit too good of a time.”

The lot was dark, but Spencer’s proud smile lit her path. She handled it badly, and might have tucked tail and let them go with a warning if not for Savannah’s presence at her side. Vanessa stood her ground and handled it, though. She handled it.

At their next staff meeting Savannah and Spencer jointly nominated her for the brick, their award for the week’s MVP. The vote was unanimous.

“I can’t believe he’s dating *both* of them.” Carmen savagely bit her potato wedge in half. “How is that even fair? I mean, Savannah I get. But Vickie too? Nothing against her or anything, you know I love Vickie, but seriously, Vickie?”

Vanessa carefully prepared a bite of her salad. “I don’t know. I think Vickie’s very attractive. There’s an intensity to her that I think he would find appealing.”

Carmen’s glare softened but didn’t abate. “I guess if you’re going to hook up with multiple women, you may as well pick two really different types. Meanwhile here my dumb ass is, all ‘duh, hey big bro.’ Because that’s what every guy dreams of, their shrimpy kid sister. This is what you get for watching porn. Everybody’s sister doing their laundry, getting a nice anonymous fuck from behind when they get stuck, and it starts to feel less crazy after a while, you know?”

“I haven’t really watched much porn. Just with my ex-boyfriend. Is there a lot of that? Incest?”

Carmen snickered. “Forgot who I was talking to for a second. Um, ya, there’s just a teensy bit of incest porn out there. It’s not as bad as it sounds. They’re only actors after all, and even the characters are only step-related. But it can be pretty hot.”

Vanessa adjusted the portions on her fork. 10% less tahini, and a cherry tomato this time. “Why is that hot?”

Carmen shrugged, speaking around more tomato. Not many things slowed her down. “Because it’s wrong, you know? It’s about people who know they shouldn’t, but they’re so horny for each other they can’t help themselves.”

Vanessa shook her head. “Glad I don’t have a brother.”

“Doesn’t have to be bro-sis. Can be daughter hot for daddy, mommy teaches son, or mommy teaches son how to fuck daughter, or all the gay variations. Besides, before you get all judgy, imagine your mom married Spencer’s dad.”

“Both of our parents are still married.”

Carmen whipped a potato wedge at her. It went down her top. Vanessa fished it out of her bra and threw it right back. How had she let herself spend two years of college thinking there was no point to making friends? Like just because it was temporary, there

was no reason to stick her neck out and try to meet people. “Don’t be so literal all the time, Vanessa, god! You know what I mean. Just imagine, you come home from the... office?”

“Not a business major.”

“Jungle.”

“Autoimmune disorder. Can’t get the necessary vaccinations.”

“Dog park?”

“Cat person.”

“Laboratory.”

“Not when you emphasize the wrong syllable like that.”

“Dominatrix sex dungeon...?”

Vanessa finally failed to suppress a grin. Carmen had started this game back in training, teasing Vanessa for being so reserved about herself and guessing at the details. It had pried more information about her into the limelight than anyone else at Lakeview had in two years of living here. “As an employee or a client?”

“Employee, obviously.”

“Proceed.”

“So you’re literally coming home from your a busy shift at your day job, clamping the nipples of rich dudes and tweezing their privates—”

“That’s a thing?!”

“Sure, why not. Anyway, you get home, and there’s your step-brother, Spencer, standing shirtless in front of the house, chopping wood with a big sweaty axe.”

“How does an axe get sweaty?”

“And he’s like ‘hi there, my beautiful blonde sister. I was just here providing for our mutual family. Apologies for being shirtless with my muscles glistening with sweat and smelling like peppermint Old Spice. Oh, and I see you noticed my huge veiny pole poking out into my jeans.’ And you’re telling me you wouldn’t tell him to take it out and bend you over this chopping block?”

Vanessa rode that cherry tomato high on her next bite. “Is this what happens in your porn?”

“The sisters are seldom blonde, but pretty much.”

Vanessa finished chewing, then interrupted Carmen’s elaboration on other pornographic plot notes. “I wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t... what? Bang your step-Spencer?”

“No. I wouldn’t ‘bang him’ even if he wasn’t my brother. Which he isn’t, which I’m not.”

“Bullshit. You think you’re sly, but I see that wandering eye of yours. You think if you make yourself small enough we won’t notice.”

Vanessa had indeed lived a good portion of her life by that code, and it had generally produced the desired results. “That’s not what I mean. Yes, I’m attracted to him. Yes, we get along well. He’s not meant for someone like me, though.”

“I don’t know about you, chica, but when I’m getting my hee ho ha hum on, I’m not thinking about who the man on the other end of that D is meant for.”

“I wouldn’t be either. I’m only saying, he’s... unrestrained. Sexually.”

“I knew you meant it sexually. But he’s only a little less restrained than you. That guy’s like the Bob Ross of RAs. ‘Let’s do a little diversity program over here. Yeah, that’s nice. Oops, flashed my wiener to my floor, but let’s just touch that up with some nice kinky shower head shrubbery.’” Carmen frowned. “OK, maybe he’s not *totally* wholesome.”

“He’s Adonis.” Vanessa eyed him across the way, nodding. He and Savannah were giggling at each other, their faces so close it was like they were making out in the middle of the food court. “I couldn’t handle that much. I know that sounds cheesy, but I couldn’t. But he makes women happy. Look at her. She doesn’t care about Vickie. And you’ve seen how Vickie’s been dressing lately, always skirts and dresses, always something that makes her easily accessible. My sense is that he accesses her pretty frequently.”

“She has been in a pretty killer mood lately. She was even being nice to Janis the other night on rounds. I heard it myself or I wouldn’t have believed it. Laughing together, like they were friends almost.”

“And it’s not only those two. You know at least some of those rumors about his residents have some truth to them. The homesick girl. His neighbor. His other neighbor. The girls you wrote up for that party. His floor governor. His ex-girlfriend may be back in the picture.”

“Dang, Vanessa. Stalk much?”

“I just listen is all. Half of it I heard, or inferred, from him.” She got the sense Spencer didn’t have anybody to vent to about being the object of lust for his whole floor. She just tried to be a good listener, like they’d taught her during training.

“So then, if he’s such a man-slut, why are you acting like you don’t have a shot? You’re a little baby kitten all fuzzy and tiny and adorable. And I am about ninety percent sure you have a pussy, even.”

“I told you, I don’t want a shot.”

“Eighty-five.”

“But if you like him, you should tell him. He might surprise you.”

“What are you, his pimp?”

Vanessa studied her salad once more. Rather, she looked like she was studying her salad. Really, she was thinking back to last night. She’d caught the two girls who lived in her old room, Angel and Leigh, heading out to a frat party. After ten o’clock

rounds, she'd gone back up to Spencer's floor. It was a Friday night, pretty quiet at that hour. He'd had Vickie over, she knew, since Vickie was her rounds partner. Vanessa had snuck into her old room and pressed her ear to the shared wall, listening to Vickie moan and beg and boss him around.

"Lick Vickie. Vickie needs the licky licky. Oh fuck, you... you're... Oh fuck Vickie likes that. Vickie might have to reward her slutty little man-friend. Do you want a reward? Do you want to be Vickie's good boy?"

Vanessa wanted him to. The noises she made while he worked her body, they were even hotter than the ones Savannah had made the weekend before, when Leigh and Angel were visiting home for the weekend. (She recognized Angel's car now, and by evening, they were inseparable. Easy to track.) She only wished she'd been on duty that night when he'd come down Savannah's throat over the radio, but somehow karma had selected Janis for that. Janis was probably masturbating like a beast to that memory, whatever she said.

He made them all so happy. And they made her horny out of her goddamn mind. Sometimes, she almost hoped he slept with every last consenting girl on that floor.

And Carmen too, of course. She was a friend.

"Calm down? *Me* calm down? That kid tells me I'm not allowed in a room in my own goddamn house, but you're right. I'm the problem. Jesus!"

"You're practically frothing at the mouth, dear. She's a grown woman now! She's always been on the private side."

"Private? Little bitch tells me to get the hell out. Can you believe that? So glad we're kissing your mother's ass to pay for her damn college if this is what she's out there learning."

Vanessa felt she had been restrained, not using the f-word instead. Still, she'd done it. She'd drawn a line, and she'd enforced it. She'd choked down her fear for just long enough. If he entered her room uninvited ever again, he'd have two man caves and no daughters. That was that.

During RA training, they'd done a teambuilding exercise where everybody had to look up quotes or poems or song lyrics or whatever that reminded them of one another. She'd been really embarrassed at the time – nobody had ever done anything even a little bit like that before; Myles hadn't even gotten her a birthday card – and most of them had looked at shy, quiet Vanessa and found something that expressed those qualities. *Still waters run deep* had been the best of those, from Carmen.

Spencer, however, didn't even need to look one up. He'd even done Vanessa's first. He'd grinned ear to ear, lunging for a marker and scribbling on a note card until it was all down.

Maybe you came to college because you wanted to save the world, but I want you to know that it's okay if you only save one person, and it's okay if that person is you.

That notecard was tucked inside her pillowcase on the top bunk, where she slept so she could be a few feet closer to him. She fell asleep with it every night. Maybe he'd been on to something – maybe she could save her rather pathetic self. Maybe she already had.

It made her want to see if she could save anybody else. That was probably crazy, though.

"They can't stay daddy's little girls forever, Andrew."

"Yeah, well, we'll see about that."

No, they wouldn't. She knew what it was like to feel safe now. She'd never let anyone make her feel unsafe in her own home ever again. And she'd make sure the same went for her niece as well. That made two.

Ramona held Vanessa's slight body like she was a fragile, precious doll as they cried.

"That was so, so brave of you. I'm so proud of you, darling. I can't imagine."

Vanessa sniffled. "Thank you."

"Soon – today – I'm going to make sure you get every resource and aid I can put at your disposal. It's your choice, but I strongly, strongly encourage you to see a counselor."

"Thanks, but I don't think I need counseling. I'm OK."

Ramona exerted a gentle pressure on the back of her neck, pulling Vanessa forward until her lips pressed softly onto her forehead. "That's your choice, but know that I'm going to push back. You did the right thing, telling me. I'm honored, truly."

"Um, thanks. Or you're welcome?" Vanessa laughed an ugly, weepy laugh. "Sorry, I don't... Sorry."

"You don't need to apologize to me." Ramona took a few minutes helping her wipe her face, compose herself, calm down. Her dad was a creep. He'd never touched her, but he'd humiliated her and violated her privacy time and time again over the years. It hadn't been until taking this job – a job, of all things! – that she'd been trained about being a resource for women who had been abused. It was just how things had always been for her, so she'd never really appreciated that families weren't supposed to behave

in such ways. Or if it really was as wrong as it felt, she sure as hell never wanted anyone to find out. She'd never told anyone before. She didn't really want to talk about it again. She said as much, and Ramona nodded.

"All right. Then, for now, let's, I guess, go back to normal one-on-one mode." Normally Vanessa sat alone on Ramona's couch, and Ramona in her chair. Ramona kept to the couch, but scooted back enough to allow her a little space. "So, other than that, how was your fall break?"

Vanessa laughed in spite of herself. "I'm glad to be back here at Higgins."

"Good. You know, if it's all right, I actually had something I wanted to talk to you about today if that's OK."

"Oh, sure." She sat up straighter, crossed her legs. It sounded a little worrisome. "Is something wrong?"

"No, not wrong. Unexpected, surprising, but not wrong."

She frowned. "On my floor?"

Ramona folded her hands in her lap placidly. "Ordinarily, I evaluate staff members once a semester. It helps identify areas of concern and develop plans of behavior to address them. Additionally, it points out strengths and makes sure they don't go disregarded."

Vanessa heard only the first portion. "Are there areas of concern? I'm trying to do—"

Ramona shook her head and extended an arm, which was all it took to quell her plea. "I'll be honest with you, Vanessa. When I hired you, I was desperate, and I took what I could get. When you told me you didn't think you'd made the alternate list... I had a lot on my plate last summer. When I had time to look into it... well... I'm honestly not sure you did. Mistakes do get made."

Vanessa's heart sank. She knew it would come out eventually. "Oh."

"Still, we were halfway through RA training by then, and even aside from the logistical nightmare it would create in Higgins, I wasn't about to 'correct the mistake,' so to speak, without at least giving you a fair shake.

"I've been watching you closely this semester. There have been some red flags, which I've kept diligent notes on." She hopped over to her desk chair and spun, picking up the clipboard she'd set down when Vanessa replied to *How was your break?* by dropping that emotional bomb on her. Clipped inside it were a stack of papers. It was not a thin stack. "Sometimes, evaluation can't wait until the end of the semester."

"I swear, I'm trying to—"

Ramona held up a finger. "You're doing a good job, Vanessa." She smiled. "My apologies for not coming out and saying so immediately, but I couldn't help myself – I am a sucker for dramatic tension. Please don't be cross with me."

Vanessa blinked, startled by the abruptness of it. "But..."

“No. No buts. You are doing a good job. That’s it.”

“I... But I’m not. I’m definitely not.”

“What makes you say that?”

Vanessa had so many things she wanted to say. Unfortunately, she said them, a litany of self-recrimination. Conflicts she’d shied away from. Little things she’d let slide. Her October educational program had bombed – only two girls had showed up, and when Vanessa ran to the bathroom, she returned to find they’d left along with \$80 of pizza. Thankfully she had enough of a filter in place not to blab about the loss of self-control that had culminated in her eavesdropping in her old dorm room to listen to Spencer hook up with her friends/coworkers. Still, the rest of it was bad enough.

“Vanessa, listen to me. I want to say another thing to you. It isn’t kind, but I think you need to hear it.” She leaned closer. “You’re not a *great* RA. Now the only reason I say that is because I want you to know I’m being straight with you. If this were solely an effort to inflate your ego or some bullshit attempt at a pick-me-up, I could phone in some raving about your merits and achievements. The truth is, you are a *good* RA. But I remember you told me how overwhelmed you felt back during our first one-on-one after Welcome Week. You felt unequal to the task, and frankly, at the time, I felt the same. But I have watched you grow like a dandelion, from a fluffy little seed into a beautiful blonde flower.”

“I have?”

Ramona went through those papers in her hands. “Let’s see. Here, this is an email following up on a work order. Advocating for your residents. Or here, you confronted four students trying to smuggle in two cases of beer in a dark parking lot *by yourself*. Until Savannah arrived anyway. Teaming up with Carmen to plan a program, delegating the door-knocking to her and taking on the signage and coordination. Recognizing each of your strengths and weaknesses. Or here, my notes from my meeting with Gabbie and Alyssa. We worked out a new agreement for them, and while yes, it had to rise to my level, when I met with them, they both told me that what I’d told them was pretty much exactly what you told them. Be more respectful of the other’s boundaries, even if they aren’t your boundaries.”

“Things only got that bad between them because I hid from it, though.”

“Until you didn’t.” Ramona smiled. “Vanessa, dear, we almost had a resident die last weekend up on Spencer’s floor. But we didn’t, and part of that is because when Higgins’ primary heard there was a medical emergency, she knew exactly who to call, what to share, and how to coordinate between the EMTs, staff, and that poor girl. If you hadn’t been your calm, focused, deliberate self, who knows what might have happened that night. Maybe you’re a life-saver and maybe you’re an assistant life-saver, but either way, you should feel very proud of yourself for how you handled it.”

“Oh. I mean, I just made calls, radioed people. It was no big deal.”

“Tell that to the girl who nearly bled out on the bathroom floor. And don’t even get me started on what all Spencer has to say about you. I know you two are friends, and I think he’s kept from telling you you’re his favorite coworker to keep from embarrassing you. And you know I wouldn’t make that claim, considering his prior relationships with Savannah and Vickie, unless it were true.”

He’d said that...?! Vanessa licked her lips. “I heard they broke up.”

“Yes, well, for now. Who knows. The way women are drawn to that young man, I’m frankly exhausted trying to monitor the boy’s social activities.”

“Yeah, I heard about that girl. The one with the implants.” Vanessa would never snitch on Spencer, but he’d already told her that Ramona was aware. “Is he going to be fired?”

“I hope not,” Ramona said softly. “For now, though, you have a lot going on in that soft, sweet heart of yours, so try to give Spencer a wide berth until you’re both in a better place, hm?”

“Why? We’re just friends. That’s it.”

Ramona nodded. “Spencer enjoys the company of women, and right now, he’s confused and he’s hurting and there’s a lot of scrutiny and pressure on him. Things will calm down, but for now, I want you to worry about Vanessa. OK?”

She took convincing – a lot of convincing – but Vanessa at last agreed. She couldn’t imagine Spencer slumming with someone like her, but he was kind of a horndog, as Janis liked to point out. The last thing Vanessa would want to see happen was for something she did to make things worse for him.

Vanessa was, to her great surprise, the farthest thing from in trouble. Before the meeting was over, she hadn’t let Ramona talk her into seeing a counselor, but she did promise to come back next week with ideas for what she might be able to lead a training session on during winter training. The woman was forceful on the subject of steering clear of Spencer for now. Why she was so nervous about Spencer hooking up with the likes of Vanessa Steger, she had no idea, but she promised to give him space while he struggled through what sounded like an extraordinarily stressful situation. The girl with the concussion, everyone mad because of his faux pas with the boob job girl, his floor governor calling for his head. She felt so bad for him.

She couldn’t help but think about what Spencer do, if it were her.

“I’ll turn it down.”

Vanessa shook her head. “No, it’s fine. I actually really like this song.”

The freshman smiled briefly at the compliment. “Um, then... Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all. I just wanted to talk to you.”

Immediately, the girl’s eyes darted in the direction of room 310, the RA’s room. Where was Mason now? she wondered. She’d been a pretty decent RA, all things considered. Still, no denying that Higgins 3’s current RA was a major upgrade.

“About what.” The girl folded her arms beneath a pair of breasts that were absolute giants on her tiny frame, even in the bulky sweatshirt. Vanessa had worried about the roommate being here, but no mistaking that chest.

“About... those.” Vanessa inclined her head towards those fleshly globes. “And everything.”

“Spencer’s a big boy. He shouldn’t need to send one of his legion of girlfriends to make his apologies for him.”

The door swung toward her face, but Vanessa planted a foot. This was something they’d been explicitly told during training to never do. It was confrontational, rude, pushy. Vanessa would hate it if someone had done it to her. Having just dealt with her own open door issues at home, it made her stomach lurch to do it.

This was bigger than discomfort, though.

“Please. I’m not here on his behalf. He doesn’t know I’m here – and he won’t, unless we keep talking like this in the hallway.”

The girl plainly didn’t like it, but like most residents, they presumed far more of RA authority than reality bore out. RAs made mall cops look like marines. “Fine. But make it quick.”

Vanessa entered this strange girl’s room. She remembered the face of the girls who’d lived here last year, but had never learned their names. “Do you mind if I...?”

“Oh sure, make yourself at home. Can I nuke you some tea...? Foot massage?”

Vanessa sat. After a moment, so did her host. “I’m Vanessa. I’m the RA—”

“Higgins 2, I know. You wrote up two of my friends.”

“Oh.” *Don’t panic*, Vanessa reminded herself. *Be brave. For him.* “Are they OK?”

“I guess.” That meant yes, but it was an admission the girl plainly didn’t like making. She offered no more than that.

“Do you prefer Lexi, or Lex?”

“People call me both. I don’t care.”

“Lexi, I’m—”

“You know, actually, let’s go with Lex.”

Vanessa took a deep breath. The girl was so angry. She wasn’t used to angry people. Now she’d shut herself in a room with someone who had every reason to be pissed off at Spencer, and at her by proxy. “OK, Lex. I wondered if we could talk about what happened. How you’re doing.”

“Why?”

Vanessa frowned. “Why...?”

“Yeah, what’s it to you? Did Spencer send you? Or that manager lady?”

“I told you, nobody made me come.”

“Maybe somebody should.” Lex smirked. “You look tightly wound,” she expanded.

Vanessa was not good at wordplay. She wasn’t convinced Lex was either, but most people were much better at banter than her. In second grade they’d taken a field trip to the arboretum and Adriana Samuels had seen Vanessa admiring some birds and said loudly, “Look everybody! Vanessa’s studying how to build a Vah-*nest*-a!” It was the dumbest, weakest taunt she’d ever heard, but she’d had no response, and had to sit next to the teacher on the bus ride back to school because she couldn’t stop crying. It still almost made her cry when she thought of it, which was at least a few times a year.

“I am. I’m actually really nervous right now.”

“Well feel free to fuck right off then. Door’s over there.”

Vanessa wilted. That was pretty darn blunt. She was most of the way to the door before she reminded herself why she’d come. As it so happened, it was the same moment Lex remembered herself as well.

“I’m sorry,” said Lex. “I’m just... I’m sorry. You can stay, say your spiel. I didn’t mean to be a bitch.”

Vanessa took a place on the edge of the bed again. “Thank you. And you don’t need to apologize. I won’t pretend I haven’t heard some of what you’ve been through. It sounds awful.”

Lex at last took a seat, hugging her legs to her very ample chest at the other end of her bed. “Which part? Wasting a fortune on these stupid slutty udders, my parents hating me, realizing I did it for some stupid guy who’s dipping his wick in anything hot and wet he can find, or having him giggle like a twelve-year-old when I told him what I just told you? Oh, or the goddamn *Iliad* playing over it? The tits that launched a thousand fits.”

Vanessa nodded. “Did you come up with that just now?”

“Heh. Nah, been using that one a bit, workshopping it.”

“It’s very clever. I’m terrible at that sort of thing.”

“Thanks.”

“It sounds like it’s been really stressful.”

“To put it mildly. It’s pretty fucked up, walking around with these things bouncing around, reminding me with every step that half the girls on this floor hate me for Spencer maybe getting fired soon, and the other half hate me because they think I played a cheat code to get his attention.”

“I don’t think they all hate you,” Vanessa said softly. Disagreeing with someone – out loud! – did not come easily to her. “Some, probably, but only because they really like

Spencer and are worried about losing him. I know you two used to get along, so maybe you know what that feels like.”

Lex frowned, but nodded.

“But I also know there wouldn’t be all this fighting and arguing over it if they didn’t care about you. Not showing it the way you want them to, but they’re concerned, I think. I was mad when I heard about it, and Spencer’s one of my best friends.”

“So you did come to try to get me to forgive him, then.”

“No! No, I promise. I could tell you all about how awful and stupid he feels for what he did, but that’s seriously not why I’m here. I’m here because he taught me how to be a good RA, even though right now, he screwed up so badly he can’t help you. So I wanted to help you.”

“Like, as a favor? So you can be coworker number three that he’s nailing?”

Vanessa summoned her nerves. She wanted to run, get as far away from this incredibly intense discussion as she could and let people just do whatever they wanted with her having no part in it. Only six months ago, a Vanessa had lived three doors down who would have rather died than confront someone over something sensitive like this.

This Vanessa lived downstairs now, though. In the RA room. 210, right beneath Spencer.

Deep breath.

“I don’t want to sleep with him. Even if I did, I’m not his type. He likes girls like you.”

“Idiot freaks?”

Vanessa laughed at the absurd self-assessment. “Beautiful, attractive girls with perfect bodies, with spirit and fire and cleverness. I’ve known you for five minutes and I can see you’ve got that and then some. Plus – and I apologize for knowing your business without you telling me again, but you know how dorm life is – but um... Aren’t you the ‘tits out’ girl?”

Slowly, a grin blossomed on Lex’s face. “He told you about that?”

“Yeah.”

Lex lowered her knees, taking a less defensive posture. “I feel so stupid about that. I mean, yeah, back home, I’d lay around my room in my underwear a lot. I like to be comfy, my parents’ apartment doesn’t have AC, and nobody cared. I didn’t figure I’d keep doing it, but then I get here and there’s all these insanely hot girls everywhere, and my roommate’s like the hottest one of all and she’s all throwing her perfect everything in my face, taking cheap shots. I know I don’t look it any more, but trust me, if we’d met three weeks ago, I’d have made you look like Kate Upton.”

Vanessa did not know who Kate Upton was, but she deduced the intended point from context. “I doubt that.”

“Anyway, trust me, I got it out of my system. I don’t know what I was thinking getting these things, like I’d come back to school like ‘hey Spencer, check out my ridiculous fake titties’ like he’d just swoon and be unable to resist himself. Which I guess he was, but like, ugh. Asshole. They’re still not fully healed. The scars itch like crazy. I literally have to wear mittens when I sleep so I don’t unconsciously try to scratch at the bandages and tear them open.”

Vanessa’s eyes bulged at the thought. “Oh my god! Oh my god. Yeah, please don’t do that.”

“Believe me, I won’t.” Lex sighed. “So, what, you want me to march down there and accept his apology?”

“No. I mean, if you want to, sure. Honestly, I’m not a hundred percent sure what I wanted to accomplish coming down here.” This was untrue, but she’d been spending enough time around Vickie and Carmen to learn a few things about how to express herself. “Did you know I lived on this floor last year?”

“Really? Huh. Small world...?”

“Yeah, down next to the RA room, where that girl who got attacked during Welcome Week lives. Leia?”

“Leigh. But she’s definitely a princess.”

“There was a different RA then. No shower fights over her.”

Lex giggled. “That was something, all right.”

“I’ll bet. But yeah, I lived here last year, and on Higgins basement when I was a freshman. And I was just thinking when I knocked on the door how I didn’t know the girls’ names who lived here last year. But this year, I feel like I know half the building. More every week. Today, you.”

“Huh. OK.” Lex was plainly not following, nor especially caring that she wasn’t. She was being polite-ish now though, a quality which Lex had little experience inspiring in others.

“I’ve always been really shy, you know? I barely even talked to my own roommate. I didn’t talk to people in classes. I just felt really alone sometimes. Sometimes when I was going through some really hard stuff.”

“Stuff? Like what?”

Lex’s mind flitted to the stuff. “Men who didn’t treat me the way I deserve to be treated. You can relate, I’m sure.”

What she’d left unsaid spoke volumes. “Yeah. Yeah, I can.”

“And I kept thinking about it, and I can’t do anything to fix my friend’s huge mess for him, and I can’t turn back time so you can give another thought to your surgery. But I thought, when I was feeling so small, and lonely, and ugly, wouldn’t it have been nice when I was busy building this wall between me and the world, if somebody would have

poked it down and tried to be my friend. I guess I was just too caught up in my own fear, and shame.”

“Afraid? Of what?” Lex asked softly.

“Just about everything. Being alone, being with people, not being good enough, not being bad enough. And you’re crazy if you think I never thought about doing exactly what you did. And you look beautiful, for what it’s worth. I hope that’s not unwelcome.”

The girl smiled softly.

“But yeah, my family doctor has been hounding me to put on weight since I was in middle school. I don’t take in enough calories, and I’m a vegetarian with vegan leanings and I screwed up and wasn’t getting the right nutrients to give me a proper puberty. I sort of thought if I did, and I grew boobs and hips and a butt, that people I didn’t want noticing me would notice me more. It was easier to hide and hope than to actually try.”

Vanessa pushed out a breath. “I don’t know. I guess I thought maybe we’d have some things to talk about, maybe.”

Lex studied her, unsure what to make of all that. She certainly hadn’t woken up that morning expecting a stranger to force her way into her home and unload vague hints of her own big problems and such overt empathy for Lex’s.

She allowed a thin smile. “Did you seriously knock on my door to ask me if I needed a friend?”

Vanessa hadn’t ever nailed down exactly what she’d hoped to get out of this. She just wanted to help somebody, and she’d found somebody to help. She considered a moment. “I think I knocked to tell you I want to be your friend.” Was that the same thing? The distinction felt significant, but communication was not her forte.

“Do you have a car?”

Vanessa shook her head. “No.”

“Shit. Some friend you are.” Lex smiled. “I was gonna say we should get some good Chinese food. The shit at the food court is always all dried out, so I thought maybe off campus.”

“I don’t mind walking. If you want.”

They both needed a moment to get ready, then they met up in front of the center building. Lex was sporting a tight top now, and *damn*. “Not bad, huh? Bit much, but... eh. Sometimes it’s fun to be a bit much.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Vanessa. “My chest will have to live vicariously through yours.”

As they set out, Lex gave her a thorough looking over. “You’re not totally flat, you know. You’d still fit in on Higgins 3.”

Vanessa smiled. “Thanks. I actually put on eight pounds so far this semester. I know it isn’t much, but it’s a start.”

“Happy Halloween,” Vanessa said as she arrived at the center desk.

Savannah laughed in delight at her friend’s costume. “Oh my god, happy Halloween. You look amazing. I’m so jealous.”

Even out of context, such a compliment from the likes of Savannah Gray made Vanessa stand a little taller. Less short, anyway. “Thank you. Busy night?”

“A little. Some weird little turd came in to use the computer lab earlier. They were in costume but I was pretty sure it was a guy, so not one of ours, but I wasn’t sure and the last thing I wanted to do was embarrass somebody.” There was a brief awkward moment as they acknowledged that Vanessa was the sort of girl who could easily be mistaken for a boy if she covered her face and hair, which her costume nearly did.

“Anyway,” Savannah went on, “they got me. Waited until I wasn’t looking, snuck right up under the transaction window there, and...” She leaned out and dragged a capped pen on the brick beneath it. “*Scrrrrrrraaaaatch. Scrrrrrrrrraaaaatch.* I finally got up to check it out, and they jumped up and scared the shit out of me, ran off laughing.”

“Oh geez! I’d have peed myself.”

“Who says I didn’t?” Savannah wrinkled her nose. “Ah well. One night a year. Anyway, I’m almost ready to close. Just had a group of girls come in to get change for the vending machine – guess their trick or treating didn’t yield enough candy – so I have to adjust the count on the drawer. But then we’re good.”

Vanessa offered to close the computer lab, and soon the two were good to go. Only one thing left to do.

Dreadway time.

The girls headed downstairs, pausing at the entrance to the hall. Those damnable red lights faded in and out, revealing only the sheer length of the darkness. It being Halloween didn’t help.

“Flashlights, or do we go full Halloween?” Vanessa asked. She was joking, but like always, her voice didn’t make that obvious.

“Oh hell, let’s do it.” Savannah stood at her side, rubbing her arms at an unseen chill. She called out, “If somebody’s down there thinking it’s going to be funny to jump out and scare us, it’s not!”

The only answer was her own echo.

“It’s going to be OK,” said Vanessa. “You can stay here if you want. I’ll go.”

“No. Are you serious? Spencer doesn’t even go down there by himself.”

Vanessa took a step. After a moment, Savannah followed.

“It’s the same hall as during the day,” her colleague recited to herself as they started slowly down the hallway. Carmen preferred to sprint down and back, even though this was widely considered an invitation to the murder-rapists lurking in the dreadway to decapitate her simply by holding their machetes out at neck level. Cautious was clearly the optimal pace, and tonight she stuck to it. That maybe-boy who’d jump-scared Savannah could be down here, or someone like him. Even as a mere prank, it would be traumatizing.

Poor Savannah. Vanessa took her hand and gave it a squeeze. She should distract her, give her something else to focus on as they crept forward.

“Savannah?”

“Yeah?” Was she crying? She sounded like she was crying.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah. But speak up. I love your sweet little voice, but right now...”

Vanessa forced a little more air through her pipes. “Why did you two break up?”

Savannah stopped abruptly. Vanessa and her tiny legs had wound up half a step behind, and her shoulder collided with the statuesque woman. “What? That came out of nowhere.”

“I’ve been wondering for a while. You don’t have to answer, though. It’s OK.”

It was so dark the women couldn’t have seen their own fingers if they held their arms out at length. Neither of them had mustered the courage to move again. “The truth is, I wanted to for a long time. I think deep down I’ve always known we’re not right for each other.”

Vanessa realized quickly that Savannah was not referring to the same breakup that she had been.

“He loves me. I know he does. And he’s good to me. He wants me to be happy, but it’s like... Hmm. Like he doesn’t know what happiness looks like? Like it’s some box he needs to check off, ‘made girlfriend happy, check.’ ‘Am provider, check.’ ‘Big truck, check.’ Like these things he thinks men need to do to be men, so he does them.”

Vanessa took a step. They were even, now.

“And don’t get me wrong. He’s a good guy. And he’s very, mmm, yeah. But – OK, there was this one time last summer where we were just goofing around in the pool, and he says – like a joke – how relieved he is we got back together, so finally the guys will stop giving him crap about losing me.”

Savannah took a step. “And Price was only kidding. I know that. He didn’t mean anything by it. But it’s how he is, you know? Like this window into how he really thinks. He does care about me, but he also sees me as another status symbol, same as his truck.”

Vanessa stepped again, tightened her grip. “So why do you keep taking him back?”

“I don’t know. It’s complicated. I guess he checks some boxes for me, too. ‘Stable, check.’ ‘Makes parents happy, check.’ ‘Don’t have to put myself out there and wade through the legions of jerkwads to find a good guy, check.’ God, I sound like such a Hallmark chick.”

“Savannah, you *are* the Hallmark chick.”

“Feel like the Hallmark horror chick right now,” she muttered, but Vanessa received a squeeze in kind.

“But didn’t you find a good guy?”

Savannah sniffed. “Oh, do you mean AAAAAAAAAAUGH SHIT SHIT FUCK SHIT FUCK FUCK SHIT AAAAAAIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” Savannah sprinted back to the start of the dreadway near the stairs, leaving Vanessa alone in the dark.

“What happened?!” she cried out to the girl frantically clawing at her face in the narrow strip of light. Her ears were still recovering from that shriek.

Savannah slowly regained control of herself. She was definitely crying now. “Sorry. Something touched my face. It was, um, a spider web. I think.”

Vanessa was glad her smug smile was invisible to her friend. She raised her voice, though the acoustics down here didn’t really need it. There was nowhere for sound to escape, just like there was nowhere for them to escape. God, she hated the dreadway.

“You’re OK. But... you were saying? About Spencer? Is he one of those jerkwads?”

Savannah was leaning on her knees, catching her breath, composing herself. She didn’t look up at the mention of that name, but her expression shifted subtly. “He’s not a jerk, wad or otherwise.”

“But you still broke up with him for Price.”

“Price had nothing to do with it. Price is there so I don’t let myself go back to him again. I think if I dumped him for Spencer, again, he might drive down here and seriously go ballistic.”

Vanessa stiffened. “On you...?!”

“Huh? No! No no no. He would never. But Price is the sort of guy who would pound a total stranger if he found out they were hurting his girl. So yeah, Spencer... he’s fair game.”

Vanessa reflected on what it said about her that her first instinct upon hearing that was to contemplate pounding a total stranger if he abused her Spencer. Ridiculous, but feelings often were. “Is that why you dumped him, then? To protect him from a pissed off ex?”

Savannah straightened. “You know, this is like having a conversation with my conscience – or maybe just my libido – with you lurking out there in the dark. OK. I’m coming.” Haltingly, she took a step back into the dark, and then another, and then was only a silhouette against the stairwell light far behind her.

“I broke up with Spencer because I think he’s unhealthy for me,” Savannah’s voice came through the darkness. “No. I *know* he’s unhealthy for me.”

“How so?”

Vanessa could hear Savannah’s flawless face go through different expressions as she sorted out the words. “Because everything was way too *good*.”

“I don’t understand. You don’t want things to be good..?”

“OK. Um, to be a little TMI about it...” Savannah was still only halfway there. “Our chemistry was next level. The feel of his hands on my body. The taste of him in my mouth. The way he could just *look* at me and my body would start to...”

“Get wet, you mean?” Too many talks with Vickie was giving Vanessa a pottymouth, she worried.

“Um, well... Yeah. But I mean, if we’re goin there... Not wet. *Soaked*. He literally didn’t have to do anything. Heck, I didn’t want him to. I just wanted to, mmmm, *savor* him. Like once I was, um, going down on him? Like I didn’t ever want to stop. Like I had him completely to myself, hardness and softness and firmness in all the perfect proportions.”

Savannah sighed, then some sort of snorting sound. “Listen to me. And that’s what I mean! I don’t... *do* that. But like I get in a room with him, and I can’t help myself. My whole mind is twisted into this, this... pleasure quest. I get horny and slutty and needy, and I *never* get horny or slutty or needy.”

Vanessa’s hand was on its own pleasure quest inside her bulky costume as she listened to the most beautiful woman in the world talk about her lust for the most beautiful man in the world. What she wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall. To watch them, just once.

“But if you both make each other that way, then... isn’t that a good thing? Not that I’d know, but it sounds like a good thing.”

Savannah had nearly caught up to her. “But that’s the problem. I got horny-slutty-needy for Spencer, and Spencer got that way for half the girls in Higgins.”

“So it’s because of Vickie, then?” And who knows how many others.

“No. No I know, but it’s really not. See, the real problem is, I didn’t care. I *should* care. But I was too into him to mind. Honestly, sometimes we’d be hanging out, and I’d be sucking his cock – belated French apology – and I’d be thinking about Vickie, and those residents of his, and thinking how ha, he wants *me*, right now all this is *mine*. And then he’d come for me, and I’d come for him – and by the way I cannot stress enough that I do *not* talk like this – and it would only make me want to keep going, more, mmmm, more, and, and, and I’d go home and I’d think of him and wonder why I wasn’t still up there, knowing I could go back up and make him all mine because the slutty sonofabitch loves me, even if he focuses on one thing at a time about as well as a squirrel

on cocaine, and I can't be with a cocaine squirrel even if it's the best thing I've ever had. God, I miss his cum. His smile."

Savannah was near enough now that Vanessa could feel her warmth. Was she touching herself too? Her ears focused. Her hand stilled. She held her breath. There it was. The same sounds Vanessa made when she touched herself down there.

She reached out with her own sticky wet fingers and groped about in the darkness until she found Savannah's arm. It froze, but there was a brief moment when she'd felt her forearm wriggling, tensing.

"Vanessa? Why is your hand...?"

"The same reason yours is."

"Oh shit. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to! You just got me thinking about him, and—"

"It's OK. He makes me feel horny and slutty and needy sometimes, too. You can keep going, if you want. I won't tell."

Savannah sniffled. "Are, um, you going to keep going?"

Vanessa released her arm. "Tell me about how it feels to be his cocksucker."

"He told you about that...?!"

"No. You just did." Vanessa leaned the tail of her costume against the wall and slid down to the concrete floor. "And be as explicit as you like."

Savannah slid down the same way Vanessa had. There was a little grunt as she wriggled out of her pants and underwear. "His cock tastes hamburgers, and man sweat. That, mm, probably sounds nasty, but I like it."

"We run together. I know what you mean about the sweat. I like how he smells."

"Sometimes I'd put my fingers inside myself, get them, like, glazed? And then I'd tease them around his shaft and suck it clean. It was like tasting us having sex."

"Can... Can I...?" Vanessa's heart nearly stopped. She could never have said this in the light.

Suddenly a pair of slimy fingers touched her cheek. "You're so bad, Vanessa!" Savannah giggled as she blindly sought out her friend's lips, then slid her fingers inside. Then her fingers were being sucked clean, and there was no more giggling. Just a little moan, and the sounds of her left hand taking over.

"I like to do it in my underwear," Savannah said, teasing her moistened digits in and out of Vanessa's mouth. "I like how he looks at me when I undress. He just stares, like I'm, I'm, like I'm a painting, like he's memorizing me. Like he loves me. But I can't take off my panties because he'd find out how much it turns me on. I get, um, pretty... messy."

Vanessa removed the fingers from her mouth long enough to reply, "I can tell."

Savannah re-coated her fingers, then slid them back in. “I still think about it. Like, Price will be going down on me, and he’s good and all, but all I’m thinking about is being Spencer’s, mm, slutty horny little cocksucker.”

Vanessa thought back to the sounds she’d heard emanating from his lounge earlier that night. A Halloween party, but there had been... moaning. Lots of moaning. Vanessa hadn’t dared open the door, hadn’t wanted to risk spoiling their fun, but she’d tarried outside long enough to get a good idea of what was happening in there.

In the absence of Savannah, he’d tried to replace her by fucking his entire floor. Maybe it would be enough.

Vanessa sort of hoped it wouldn’t. It was all too close to her deepest, dirtiest fantasies.

“Savannah?”

She had to wait for a moan to subside before receiving an answer. “Yeah? Am I being too loud?”

“No, no, not at all. I was just thinking, um...” *Be brave.* “If you wanted, I could, um, do yours, if you wanted to do mine. Is that weird? Oh crap that’s so weird. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

Suddenly it was her turn to have a pussy-dampened hand on her forearm. A gentle pressure pulled her fingers out of her crotch, and after a moment in the cool air of the dreadway, it found a warm new home in Savannah’s. Then there were two fingers inside of her again, but not hers.

“Imagine it’s his cock,” Savannah whispered. Her arms were so long to be able to manage this. “Imagine that it’s him inside you. Fucking you.”

“I can’t,” Vanessa whimpered. “He can’t.”

“Come on, you’re beautiful. He absolutely would if you asked him to, I bet.”

Vanessa shook her head, not that anyone could see. Not in the dark, not in her costume. “No. I can’t imagine he’s fucking me because I’m imagining him fucking *you*.”

Savannah’s guttural howl echoed up and down the loading dock. “You are making me want to do some very, very bad things, Vanessa,” she whimpered.

“Do them. Do them all.”

Suddenly she was being kissed. By a girl? Not that any of the men she’d kissed had wound up doing much for her. Still it ought to bother her, except it was *this* girl, her friend, the woman of the dreams of the man of her dreams. Their fingers continued slowly, neither in any rush to be done. The dreadway was now just the comforting darkness concealing the depths of their depravity from themselves, each other, and the world.

Vanessa forced Spencer’s playmate down to the floor, following her down. Savannah giggled as Vanessa’s helmet tickled her, so she took it off and shut her up. Her

turn to put slimy fingers in a girl's mouth. "That's it. That's it, my beautiful, wonderful little cocksucker. Suck that cock. Suck it."

Savannah panted between slurps in her earnest attempt at fellatio. Had Spencer ever done this? Thrown Savannah on her back and mounted her face, fucked it like a pussy? He did it all the time in Vanessa's imagination. She distractedly fingered the girl. It was helpful – she probably wouldn't come without it – but her words were the real aphrodisiac.

"Don't stop. Don't you stop, cocksucker. Suck. Suck me off. Suck and suck and suck until I'm done with you."

"Mmng, please don't be done with me. I miss you. I miss this. I miss you. Don't stop. Don't be done. Let me mmnf..." Vanessa's hand swap completed, cutting her off and giving her a fresh taste of her own leaky pussy.

Vanessa bent down and whispered in her ear. This was exactly like her fantasies. Except instead of Spencer, her, and instead of a private beach resort, this grungy terrifying past and future crime scene. "You're a horny, slutty, needy little cocksucker. I bet if you got on your knees, stripped down to your bra and panties and asked him really nice, he'd let you suck his cock again."

"Please! Oh please, oh please, oh please, I'll never stop again, I'll never stop, never, please," she whispered.

"Promise you'll be good to him."

"You're, oh god, you're so..."

"Promise."

"I'll be good," Savannah capitulated as their fingers met in and around her pussy. "So good. Good little, ungh, right there don't stop, please don't stop, I'll... I'll..."

Vanessa aimed for that spot inside her own pussy that always made her explode all over her sheets. Savannah stiffened, her back arching as she cried out. *"I'll be a good little cocksucker! OH FUCK!* Please, please, keep going, right like, right, right like that, right there, oh god, I'll suck your cock so *good* Spencer, just *don't stop*, never, neverrrrrrrrrroohmyfucking*GAW-HAW-HAWD!*"

Vanessa waited until her friend and coworker and personal hero stopped screeching and spasming around her fingers. The intensity of her orgasm almost brightened the dreadway for a moment. Then they held each other for a while. Savannah said she didn't know what came over her. Vanessa said the same. They were both lying, and they both knew they were both lying.

"I, um, had fun."

"Me too. Who knew my friend Vanessa was a secret sexophile."

Vanessa giggled. "I'm not! It's your fault for being so freaking hot."

Savannah nodded, still in the dark, unseen. "Guilty. Though you better not pretend like you aren't, too. I felt all that."

Vanessa didn't cop to it. At last, the girls rose, tugged clothes and costumes back into place, and completed their stroll through the dreadway as if it were just another hall in Higgins. At the far end, Vanessa jiggled the handle to make sure the lock was in place. As she did so, though, she saw a familiar face in the parking lot, walking right towards them. The only man in the world who she could have seen emerge from the darkness in the dead of night in this of all places without making her scream in terror. Instead, she felt warm, and safe.

Savannah peered through the slit of a window. "What the hell...?"

But Vanessa had already seen someone behind him, his floor governor. Her arms were loaded with big balls of wadded up paper. His hands both held a number of trash bags by the drawstring. They must be cleaning up after their party, not wanting to overflow their trash room. Like a good RA.

"I should go." Savannah shook her head. "I don't know what I'm going to say to him, but I think you pushed me good and hard off the fence. Confusing."

"Yeah. Think about it. You two are so, so good together. And hey, do you mind letting me out? I want to say hi. Don't worry – I won't say anything." Vanessa laughed. Laughter, *here!* "Who would believe me if I did?"

Savannah looked down the dark hallway, but she was inspired by her friend's example and refused to let her fear show. "Yeah, go ahead. I'll be OK. Maybe yeah, leave out the makeout, but you better tell everybody I did the dreadway by myself."

"You're getting the brick for this."

Savannah pulled her in and hugged her tightly, planting a kiss on Vanessa's feathery helmet. Outside, a hollow metallic bang announced that Spencer had reached the dumpsters. "Thank you for this. Nobody makes me feel good about myself like you, you know that? Really. I love you."

Vanessa hugged back as tightly as she knew how. It wasn't much, but she would learn. "Um, thanks. And, um, yeah. I... yeah."

"You love me. You don't have to say it. Now go on."

Spencer's yell of startlement cut short when he recognized Savannah and her costumed companion. "Oh my god, you two scared the shit out of me!"

Savannah arched an eyebrow. "What's so scary? It's just a trash bin behind a building." With a smirk, she shut the door behind Vanessa.

"Hey, Vanessa."

Vanessa's head snapped back in surprise. "How'd you know it was me?"

He reached up his hands. She understood what he meant after a moment and trusted her weight – including the extra eight pounds – into his hands. He hefted her gently down to the ground, where Tori was stuffing her load into a dumpster. That was quite the costume. Vanessa couldn't imagine having the guts to be outside wearing so little.

“First off, you forget who you’re talking to. I always know who’s on duty. Second off, I mean, look at you. A swan. Who else could it be?”

Vanessa didn’t think she’d ever smiled so big in her life. “I thought you said you didn’t remember our interview.”

“It was our first day of training! I didn’t want Janis to be upset I remembered your answer but forgot hers.” He glanced up to the topmost level of Higgins. The RA rooms lined up vertically. There was hers, and above it Spencer’s, and above that Janis’s. The light was on. Probably praying for salvation from the ghosts and goblins or something. “Of course, that was before I got to know her, so...”

“Spencer, you said if I helped, you’d... you’d let me...” Tori’s eyes darted accusingly at the tiny girl in her tiny bird costume. It was actually a goose costume, but she’d put her craft skills to use and made the distinction clear.

“In a minute, Tori. You look great, though, Vanessa. Did you wear that because of...?”

She nodded. “Yeah. At the time, I was too frightened to talk, but I remember you had that followup question. And I wanted you to know, it was a great question.”

He beamed, and the earth whirled and the sun returned and shone down only for her. “Right?”

“I’d never thought about myself like that before. I don’t think I ever really tried to think about myself and what was good about me, why I was good enough for something. I think that question is the best question anybody’s ever asked me.”

“Spencerrrr...! I’m so *horrrrrnyyyy*...!” whined Tori. “I don’t care if she watches, just put it in me!”

“Oh my *god* Tori, I know it’s hard but you’ve got to keep it together better than *that!*” he snapped. Vanessa agreed. Crushing on Spencer, sure, but begging for cock behind the dumpsters in the parking lot was a bit much.

“Go ahead,” Vanessa said.

Spencer winced. “I... I’m sorry. She and I, we’re still... working things out. You really do look great, and thank you so much for saying that. That was so amazing of you. Do you want to get lunch tomorrow?”

“I’d like that.”

“Great. I’ll text you. I, ah, guess we better...” He looked over to where Tori was mauling her big brown tits in her slutty costume.

“Spencer, wait.” Had she just ordered someone to do something? A man? *This* man?

He waited, though. Automatically. “Yeah?”

“I meant go ahead, as in...” She gestured to Tori. “She said she didn’t mind if I watched. Do you, um, mind?”

Spencer's eyes and smile widened in dazzlingly equitable proportion, but then he shook his head, grinning sheepishly. "I guess if I'm doing this, I'm doing this, uh. So... sure, what the hell. How could I mind my swan? But I have one condition."

"OK."

Tori adapted surprisingly well to the presence of a woman standing behind her, bucking her hips into the back of her head to regulate the pace and intensity of her scummy behind-the-dumpster blowjob. She didn't have any choice, though. It was the only place she could stand where her lips could reach his. Besides, Tori had nearly gotten him fired. Vanessa was glad she'd come around, but she deserved some comeuppance for her little stunt.

"I think it's really hot that you're sleeping with them," she said as she rammed Tori's skull down around his shaft. The girl sputtered, gagged, but gradually accepted his cock down her throat. God, she was so lucky. "I wanted you to know that."

He grunted, shuddered, came down Tori's throat. "I'm not sure there's anything hotter than you telling me what you think is hot, Vanessa. Not gonna lie, I've spent some time wondering what makes you tick."

"Lunch tomorrow? I'll talk your ear off."