

TIOS

II JOE

*We, the Nighthawks*



*Isaac Byrne*

# **We, The Nighthawks**

**By Isaac Byrne**

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All characters involved in or witnessing sexual acts are eighteen or more years of age.

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## Chapter One

“So how did your date with Heather go?”

“Come on, Hailey. You don’t wanna talk about that, right?”

“You said you still wanted to be friends, Conner. Friends can talk to each other about their love lives. So did you mean it, or was that just letting me down gently?”

It had definitely been the latter. In fact, while he was out running a few pre-Christmas errands for his mom, stopping by Hailey McManus’s house had been on his To Do list as “let Hailey down” followed by a sad face. Which he’d further amended by giving it a tear drop. Still, he might not be especially experienced with girls, but he knew that there was no “gently” in telling them flat out you were letting them down gently.

“Well, OK. It went great, actually. We had a really nice time.”

Hailey rolled her eyes and threw one of her bed’s numerous stuffed animals at him, bouncing off his chest to land among the dirty clothes piled around the room. “Oh good grief, you don’t have to be coy about it. Details, Conner! I promise, I’m not gonna freak out. Yeah, I was upset at first, but really, I’m over it.”

Conner had serious doubts about this claim. For one, what he’d done to her had been objectively thoughtless, bordering on cruel. They both knew she’d been crushing on him for a long while, that he was the first guy she’d ever slept with, that their breakup mid-semester had been devastating for her. Then, right before finals, after humiliating himself by fainting in the midst of asking out Heather Blake, he’d decided to throw in the towel and told Hailey he wanted to give it another shot. Why not? She might get on his nerves sometimes, but she definitely wouldn’t complain. Even if he was using her, she’d have been perfectly happy to be used. Only then, later that same day, Heather turned around and agreed to go out with him, and in the chaos, he’d completely stood up Hailey, forgetting about it until the following day.

He’d texted her to apologize, but the response had been monosyllabic. Clearly that hadn’t cut it, and he owed her more than that, so here he was. It was the first Sunday of winter break; he’d wanted to bite the bullet on this. But instead of getting all weepy on him, she’d been nothing but smiles and sunshine, even somehow managed to talk him back into her bedroom. With Hailey’s mom and her brother Doug home, he wasn’t worried she’d try any awkward hanky panky.

Not much, anyway. Conner had noticed she’d shut her bedroom door behind them.

“Uh, all right. Sure. Not a lot to tell. I took her to Il Parata – you know it?”

“Oh wow, yeah, I *love* that place.”

“Me too. My stepsister suggested it, and she was totally right. I had the chicken marsala, and Heather ordered the shrimp alfredo.” He wasn’t sure what to say. “Breadsticks. Their breadsticks are insanely good. Have you tried them?”

“Uh huh, right, so you had food, good. So, then... did you...?” She arched an eyebrow.

“Oh. Yeah. So then, we, um, went to the Frostop and got dessert. I thought it was kinda weird getting ice cream in December, but she—”

“Get to the good part! Did you get anywhere with her or what?” In spite of the awkwardness of the situation, he couldn’t keep a grin from his face – and Hailey saw it immediately. “You did! You totally did! I remember your ‘I got lucky’ face, Conner, and that is SO it!”

“It is not!”

“It is!” She hopped up to her feet and gave him a playful shove. “Come on, tell me everything! Did it get serious?”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell, Hailey. No way.” To say nothing of how totally weird it would be discussing it with his ex-girlfriend.

“So you’re saying there was kissing?” she teased, making smoochy noises and giggling. “And don’t try to pretend you’re gentleman, Conner.”

“I so am!”

“I think you were standing right on that very spot when you gave me a facial and told me I was ‘one hell of a cocksucker,’ as I recall.”

His cheeks colored. “Hey, you were the one who started the dirty talk. I was only playing along!”

She patted his bicep reassuringly, though he couldn’t help stepping back, worried that one touch could become several. “I’m not making an accusation. I *liked* that you weren’t a gentleman. So tell me already. Were her boobs as amazing as everyone says? I only ever saw them in freshman gym class, and that was like two or three cup sizes ago for her. And I wasn’t really looking anyway, obviously.”

“They were... good.” He stopped himself too late. He should *not* be talking about this with her! But he hadn’t had a chance to tell anyone yet, and it was impossible not to brag. First off, she’d driven him crazy all through dinner with this incredibly snug sweater, clinging to her breasts so tightly it distended the wool in between them. Then, far better still, they’d made out in the back of his car at MacArthur Park, and when that didn’t satisfy them she’d taken him back to her house. With her mom away at work, they had the whole place to themselves, and right there in her bedroom she’d taken her shirt off again and let him suck on those glorious wonders for most of an hour. Neither of them had actually taken off any pants, so he’d gone home with balls bluer than he might’ve liked. No matter. He’d *made out* with *Heather Blake*. He’d been fantasizing about that for years, and reality had exceeded the version in his imagination.

“Good? The living legend didn’t live up to the hype, eh?”

“Living legend?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know full well what I’m talking about. Every boy in school raves about that girl’s giant titties. Except, apparently, the guy who just got firsthand experience with it. Makes sense, I suppose. You know, I think she’s actually the same size as me?”

“The hell she is!” Again, Conner spoke without thinking. It was easy to forget that Hailey McManus, the girl known throughout Northside High as Hefty Hailey, didn’t see the same girl he saw when he looked at her. To her, she was the pudgy, pasty frizzy-haired girl she’d seen in the mirror her whole life. Only Conner and his best friend Owen knew that, thanks to TIOS – This Is Our Story, the school’s eponymous yearbook software with its seemingly magical properties– she’d switched bodies with Hayleigh McKnight. Hayleigh was the reason Hailey had needed her alliterative nickname. Hottie Hayleigh was one of the best-looking girls in school. Or had been, before TIOS, not that anyone but Conner was aware.

Though, per his present outburst, Hayleigh (now Hailey) was a C cup – mere foothills compared to the mountain peaks jutting out from Heather’s chest.

Hailey waved away his protest. “Well, we haven’t swapped bras or anything, obviously, but yeah. Skinny girls with big boobs just look bigger is all.”

“She’s not skinny.”

“She’s skinnier than me,” Hailey said. Also untrue. Heather had a cute bit of baby fat on her; Hailey’s new body was quite lean.

“Either way. The date went well.”

Hailey plainly wasn’t letting him off that easily. “So did you just play with her tits, or did she actually do anything for you?”

Conner’s jaw hung open. “Hailey!”

“What? Just curious if she’s the princess I pegged her for or if she knows how to use her cunt to get you off.”

“Come on, don’t...”

“So she didn’t.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no, she didn’t. And that’s fine.”

“Did you even try to get her to...?”

He frowned. “No. Not too hard, anyway.” She’d moved his hand from the front of her pants to the back, and he’d left it at that.

Like he’d feared, this discussion lead immediately into an advance by Hailey. “Poor baby. Want me to take care of it? I’ve missed your cock so bad, Conner. I would be so good to you.” She took a step towards him. He didn’t know at what point she’d gotten so confident, but this was a far cry from the timid, desperate Hailey he’d first fooled around with last fall.

“Hailey, no. We’re friends now. That’s all. You can’t say things like that!” Conner back-pedaled until he stumbled into the door, Hailey following him all the way, not stopping until her chest was pressed against him. “And I’m dating Heather now!”

“That sounded like an afterthought,” she said, grinning with perfect, dazzling teeth. “Heather doesn’t have to know. And if we’re just friends, then let me be friendly. Conner, I’ll be so fucking friendly to you. If she won’t take care of you, you deserve a little release.”

“I... No, I shouldn’t...do, um, that...” Damn, she was sexy. Maybe this body wasn’t hers originally, but she’d certainly learned how to use it.

She took his hands, and, met with no resistance, placed them on her boobs. “You don’t have to do anything, Conner. I’ll do everything.”

“I... I...”

Heather’s words echoed back to him, that soon they’d be going their separate ways, that relationships were temporary, that it couldn’t become anything serious...

Oh, fuck it. He leaned forward. And at that precise moment, the door opened up right into his butt. “Oh! Sorry, kids,” came Hailey’s mom’s voice. “Hailey, I just need to get your laundry, all right pumpkin? I’ll be in and out.”

He stumbled out of the way of the door, and Hailey stepped backward. “I was actually just going,” he said as she came in, laundry basket in hand.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Those roads are real slick, Conner. You drive careful, OK?”

“I won’t. And hey, Merry Christmas.”

“So, how’d the second date go, dude?”

Conner inched as far away from Owen as he could manage, squirming into the farthest corner of the couch. “It... you know. It was...” He risked a glance to his left. “I’m sorry, but could you two not do while I’m over here?”

“Do what?” Angelica asked, hungrily nuzzling her cheeks into Owen’s crotch.

“*That*, Ange. You’re practically...”

“Motorboating my balls?” Owen supplied. “I know. Hot, right?”

“Not for me!” He looked away again. “She’s my sister, man.”

“Stepsister, actually. No common blood. What a difference a suffix makes, right?”

“Prefix,” the stepsiblings corrected in unison. Angelica continued, speaking directly into Owen’s groin. “And legal or not, don’t touch me. Be grateful I’m even letting you come over here, Goner.”

“Grateful. For *you* letting *me* come over to *my* best friend’s house.”

“Yeah. I’m supposed to be collecting on my Christmas present right now, but instead, no, I’m holding back and letting you two have your gossip hour.”

“This is holding back?” he asked, looking over and immediately away at the sight of her licking the front of his sweatpants. He supposed it probably was, though. TIOS was nothing if not hamfisted when it came to imposing the editor-in-chief’s notation. And when Owen had convinced him to write that she couldn’t get enough of his dick... Angelica’s social circle now consisted of Owen and his friends Dick and the twins Harry and Curly. She didn’t seem to mind, though. Somehow. It was the only balm for Conner’s guilty conscience over turning his stepsister into his friend’s personal sex toy, to say nothing of having accidentally re-enrolled her in high school despite having graduated two years earlier.

“You have no idea,” she murmured, sighing breathily.

“Dare I even ask what your present to her was?”

“All access pass to my dick for the rest of break.” Owen grinned arrogantly, scratching the back of Angelica’s head. If she minded being handled like a housecat, she didn’t complain. “And she’s not gonna hold back from unwrapping much longer, so come on. Dish. How’d it go?”

“Pretty well, I think. She definitely looked amazing. Wore this blue shirt I’ve seen her wear to school, but man. Two fewer buttons.”

“What a difference two buttons make, eh?” Angelica giggled. “Especially on a pair of sweater cows like *those*.”

“I thought you didn’t like the term ‘sweater cows,’” Owen grouched.

“For mine, yeah. Mine are sweater puppies, and they’re even more adorable. Right?” She looked up, and despite the fact that Owen could open his fly and make her drool like a different set of puppies, he almost flinched back at the hard look there.



“Right,” the boys said in unison. Owen continued, giving an appreciative grope of Angelica’s boobs. “So anyway, she’s lookin’ hot, and...? Finally make it past second?”

“You know, for normal couples, there’s more to a date than just fooling around. For your information, we—” He made the mistake of looking over again. “Dammit, Angelica! Do you have any idea how distracting that is?”

She shrugged, taking another long lick up Owen’s now exposed shaft. “What? I was being quiet about it.”

“Can you not wait half a freaking hour so he and I can talk in peace?”

“Half an hour? Better be one hell of a story,” Owen grumbled.

“You bitch an awful lot for a guy who, I dunno, *made me this way*,” she snapped. Another slow lick, the smile immediately returning to her face.

“Can you at least, I dunno...” Conner looked around. He quickly spotted the throw blanket on the back of the couch and jerked it out from behind his friend, then draped it over his stepsister’s head. “Ugh. There.”

“Did you just drape a blanket over my head like I’m a friggin’ cmmfmmmmm... mmm...”

Her protests were cut off by Owen gripping her head and planting it on his cock. “Don’t talk with your mouth full, babe.”

The lump under the blanket wriggled in his lap. She wasn’t trying to be quiet any more, but the covers helped. “I still can’t believe she lets you do that.”

“Praise be to TIOS, man. Speaking of, you plant any other seeds of truthiness in Heather yet? Maybe tell her science has proved that sucking dick twice a day can double your IQ?”

Conner grimaced, but then laughed in spite of himself. One more TIOS-related accident. His efforts to record a sweet moment, in which Heather defended his word over that jerk Jordan Lyons’, had caused her to apparently believe every word he said as true. Conner hadn’t pressed it, both out of feeling awkward abusing her trust and because he didn’t want to see the limits of it. Hadn’t pressed except, that is, for the time he told her she’d agreed to go out with him, and that she was really attracted to him, and liked to have her boobs noticed. She liked him, though, so it was a victimless crime.

Wasn’t it?

Still, he wasn’t about to try to turn her into another Angelica. He actually cared about Heather. That she was so attractive to him was simply a bonus. “No, I didn’t. I’ve spent the last month learning to watch what I say around her precisely to avoid doing something to fuck up her head.”

“I was actually more talking about fucking her head. Sans the up.” His eyes squeezed shut. “Oh wow. Keep doing that, Ange.”

Conner tried to ignore that. “Anyway, no, she didn’t... do that. We actually didn’t even make out this time, except for a kiss at the end. Not every date has to culminate in getting off for it to be a success.”

A muffled voice came from beneath the blanket. “You tried to though, right?”

He frowned. “I... am working on my game.”

“Translation: the barbarian was thwarted at the moat.” Her laugh continued as her mouth resumed its more pressing work.

“Sorry, man. Was she just tired, or...?”

Conner frowned. “Not everyone is ruled by their libidos. It’s not a big deal if she wasn’t interested in that this one time. We’ve already made out, like, two other times.”

“Yeah, totally.”

“I’m serious! It was nothing. And she said I could call her again sometime soon and set up another date. So there.”

Angelica once more stopped playing with her Christmas present long enough to chime in. “Wait, she told you to ask her out again, or you suggested it, and she said OK?”

He thought back on it. “The second one, I guess. Why, is that bad?”

“No, it’s probably fine,” she replied in her least convincing tone that wasn’t sarcasm. “Keep on at it.” With that, she immediately took her own advice, and the muted slurping resumed.

“It was no big deal,” Conner insisted. “Really, things went fine.”

Owen nodded. “No, yeah, it sounds like it. You guys make such a good couple and all, and stuff. You, uh, you know, bringing her over for New Year’s?”

He shook his head. “I invited her, but she’s going to a party.”

“Jayce Deacon’s thing?”

Conner frowned at the talking blanket. “How’d you know?”

“I’m hot, she’s hot. We get invited to the same places. Kirsten was talking it up like it was going to be this huge thing.” More slurping. Owen’s libido spiked still further at the mention of Kirsten Vaughan, hands down the sexiest girl in school.

“So, you’re gonna ditch us for the cool kids table, eh Conner?” Owen said. Though he didn’t say it like he’d mind. Right now, it wasn’t hard to see why the notion of being left alone with Angelica to ring in the new had its appeal.

“No, I’ll still be here. What, you think I wanna spend New Year’s Eve with those jerks? Especially after that whole... episode.” He didn’t like to even use the word “fainting” any more. Lord, it had been humiliating.

“But she invited you, right?” Owen asked.

His friend considered. “Hmm. I’m not sure she technically did—”

“Oh, Goner...” said the blanket.

“—but I think only because I didn’t show any interest. Like, she could tell I wouldn’t wanna go. I mean, she’s got her life and I’ve got mine, right?”

Owen nodded slowly. "Right. Yeah, probably better that way, man."

Conner's eyes narrowed, but he couldn't tell if Owen was placating him or simply too distracted by the wet thing on his dick to pay attention. His cheeks were definitely beginning to match his red hair in hue. "Anyway, the date went fine, and I'm going to leave before this gets any weirder."

"Oh thank god," Angelica cried, throwing the blanket away.

To his credit, Conner only stared at her for a moment before averting his gaze. "Angelica! How the hell did you take your clothes off under there!"

"I had plenty of room."

"That is not a very big blanket."

"I'm flexible. And motivated."

"You're something, all right." His eyes betrayed him with another glance.

She planted her hands on her hips, legs shoulder-width apart, tits and pussy on full display. "Get your eyeful? Happy now? Now I thought someone said something about you leaving."

"I am." He started up the steps hastily, as he could still hear them.

"Mind if this barbarian crosses your moat, Ange?"

"I'm so fucking wet, you're gonna need a fucking canoe. Now get that thing in me."

Conner slammed the door behind him. Sheesh. Those two were practically animals. He was actually glad that he and Heather weren't so wild. They were taking it slow, and that was going to be better, in the long run.

Shannon heard the front door open and close. Her husband was sound asleep on the recliner. That was common enough as to be practically expected, but what she hadn't expected was to hear the door so soon. She'd been making cookies. (Oatmeal raisin, Conner's favorite.) She figured it might give her a good pretext to chat him up about this new girl he was seeing, and might help cheer him up a little. She could tell her boy had been dreading the return to school, and even if she didn't know why, she wanted to do her best to get him started on the right foot, like a mother should.

"Angelica, is that you?" she called. Her husband had no trouble napping through disruption, so she didn't bother holding back. Though having her come back so early would be surprising, too. Frankly, she was a bit concerned at all the time her stepdaughter spent out and about with her friends, but at twenty-one years old, it really wasn't her place to tell the young woman when and how to spend her time. Even if she was still in high school.

"It's me, mom," came Conner's voice. It sounded smaller than it should, and her motherly instincts kicked in immediately. She hustled over to the landing, where her son was sitting on a step, slowly taking a shoe off. When she arrived in front of him, though, she could see that although Conner looked so handsome in his new outfit he'd gotten with the gift card his stepdad had given him for Christmas, his face was despondent.

"What's going on, sweetheart? You're home early."

"Yeah," was all he said.

She wracked her brain to think why he'd be back so soon. Her son was a catch, and if he'd waited longer than she had to start dating, it was only because he was very involved in his studies and activities, while she'd been a pretty young girl raised in a household with expectations of motherhood right out of high school. If not sooner.

"What happened? Was she not feeling well, or—"

"Nothing. We just... ended early." He sniffled.

Shannon sat down next to her son and put an arm around him. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

The tender touch of his mother was all it took to break through the dam, and the tears starting flowing. Hard. It was one of those whiny-growly ugly-cry kinds of flows. There were words, almost none of which she could understand, except for the more drawn out...

"She broke up with me!" And then immediately started bawling, and she immediately started mothering. Conner didn't notice his stepdad rounding the corner, looking puzzled at this bizarre noise – protracted enough to wake even him – but Shannon shooed him away, and with a shrug, he shuffled down to their bedroom to get away from this discomfiting outburst.

"Come on, sweetheart. I'll make you some cookies. We'll talk."

Numbly, her son let her herd him up to the kitchen and into his usual chair, right in front of the groove he'd worn in it trying to saw into the table with a butter knife when he was three. He was still crying when the first pan came out. She spatulaed a few onto a plate and poured him a tall glass of milk.

“So,” Shannon said softly, squeezing her son’s hand. “Tell me the story.”

## Chapter Two

The return to school was not great, but compared to how he'd been feeling the last time he entered this building, it wasn't so bad. For Conner, that is; for the other two in the car, it went swimmingly. Angelica took advantage of the remaining minutes of her Christmas present – she insisted winter break wasn't over until the first bell rang – and Conner did his best not to glance in the back seat.

As for the editor-in-chief, he was relieved that his fainting spell seemed to have been forgotten over the two-week vacation. Sure, Nick Neuhauser made a crack at his expense at one point, but Nick was good people, and it wasn't meant mean-spiritedly. Conner had gone to school with Nick and his twin brother Rick since forever, at least until Rick's passing in a car accident in middle school. Conner had designed a two-page spread as a tribute to Rick, and their mother had written him a letter to thank him for the gesture after the yearbook went live. They weren't friends, quite, but they were friendly acquaintances, and if anything Nick's teasing only reminded people that all was well, and things could go back to normal.

The Northside Nighthawks thronged the hallways, relaxed after their winter break. Neither test nor essay nor group project threatened their happiness. The voice of Miss Jackson on the morning announcements had an uncharacteristically lyrical quality to it. Here and there, Conner recognized a few new students who'd transferred in at break navigating the halls with their school planner and its map in hand, his peers and teachers pausing to offer assistance. Yessir, Conner was glad to be back where he belonged.

His own spring semester schedule was a mixed bag, but more good than bad. Conner's years of denial of the graduation requirement for PE meant it was at last time to submit to Health and Fitness with Coach Conrad, a real meathead's meathead. He and Owen had had Mr. Conrad for sex ed as sophomores, and still giggled sometimes about the way the coach's "relaxed" pose was standing in front of the room flexing every muscle in his barrel-sized chest. Both Hailey *and* Hayleigh were in his psychology class, and it was immediately surreal seeing his classmates leering at the chunky legs of Hayleigh in her off-season skirt, while ignoring how amazing Hailey's boobs looked in her winter sweater. Luckily the alphabetical seating chart spared him the added discomfort of sitting next to her, but it did mean he was immediately in front of Jordan Lyons. Mercifully, for once Jordan seemed content to ignore him.

In further good news, he had econ this semester, and like his government class last semester, Angelica was in the same section. It made for a handy study partner, and besides, while she wasn't very studious, she *had* taken this before in her normal high school career. Plus, having been an adult, with a job and all, that had to help in understanding economics... right? Additionally, a schedule change had landed Owen in

the same earth space science, their first class together since first semester junior year, and since Dr. Laugherty didn't believe in seating charts, they were allowed to be side by side.

"So how's your new schedule?" he asked while they were working on answering the reading questions.

"Dude, solid. For me, anyway. Angelica's in two of my classes. I swear to god, she spent almost the whole period staring at my crotch, man."

Conner sighed. "Here's hoping she can pay enough attention to be able to pass."

"It's foods and Brit lit. Foods is a blowoff, and Mr. Shepherd doesn't do shit. He just assigns reading and sits at his desk watching ESPN on his phone. His student aid does all the grading, and Lindsey's not gonna flunk me. Besides, she already has a diploma. I don't think employers are looking for applicants who double-majored in high school and more high school."

"That was her line, and I was there when she said it. Don't try to pass her stuff off as yours. It degrades discourse."

Owen shrugged it off. "How 'bout yours?"

Conner went through his own pros and cons of it, talked about how weird it was sharing a locker room with a bunch of dudes still finishing up puberty.

"Hey, speaking of pubes—"

"I wasn't, actually."

"Heather in any of your classes?"

Conner shook his head. "Just yearbook. She's in almost all honors and AP classes."

"Yearbook still last period?" Conner nodded. "How you think it's gonna go?"

Conner almost asked him how he knew about him and Miss C. Kristy Coszic-Lewandoski, the young-ish journalism and English teacher, was also the yearbook coordinator. And now, thanks to TIOS, a tender memory in which she'd told him she wanted him to be happy had culminated in her keeping him after school the last day before break and making him *very* happy. They hadn't spoken since, and with the hubbub of winter break keeping him busy, he'd been much more focused on Heather until returning to school today. Since then, however, it had been hard to think of much else.

He had had *sex*. With *Miss C. A teacher*. That was something he'd told exactly no one. Owen was a friend, but he could have a big mouth sometimes. And running his mouth here could get Miss C fired, or worse.

Presently, however, he stopped himself and remembered he was only asking about Heather. "Oh. Probably pretty awkward. I don't know. She was cool to me after the whole, you know, incident."

“You’ve got to stop referring to one time fainting for like three seconds as ‘The Incident,’ man.”

“Shut up. So hopefully she’ll still be all right. Who knows, maybe she recons—”

“She didn’t. Don’t do that, dude. You’ll torture yourself. She’s not that into you. It sucks, but them’s the breaks.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re probably right.”



Miss C opened the new semester with a long list of projects in search of personnel, and a batch of her celebrated homemade blueberry lemon bread to compensate. Yearbook was a special session for her as well as for them, almost more of a workplace than a class. Heather arrived before he did, and in the lax setting of the yearbook classroom, he opted to sit a ways away. He figured he wouldn't look too eager that way, or like he couldn't take a hint. (Or did he now look like he was sulking? Optics were one of the editor-in-chief's strong points, but when it came to girls, he had a lot to learn.)

His buxom blonde classmate smiled at him when he came in, but beyond that, there was little to do for most of the class but ride the TIOS train. Conner was excited, actually. This was an overview of many of the biggest events of this semester. The King of Hearts Dance, prom, spring sports, science olympiad, the cross-town classic basketball game, and of course, graduation. This Is Our Story would be in publication by then, of course, but they still squeezed in as much as they could before the print deadline, and found a few students willing to try on their cap and gown early for a photo or two in a rare breach of authenticity. Once he and Miss C had upcoming projects and ongoing assignments delegated, it was time to get to the grindstone and start preparing spreads.

Little did Conner realize, however, that the period was far from over.

First off, while he'd decided to take Owen's advice and give Heather her space, it was in fact Heather who approached him. She looked incredible. Uncharacteristically so, in fact. While Heather's ample bosom was the subject of bountiful admiration, she'd adapted by simply dressing to cover them up. Days where Heather actually showed any skin on her chest were infrequent at best. Today, however, she was wearing the same blue shirt she'd worn on their second date, and again, two buttons down. If he wasn't mistaken, her bra was enhancing them in a way it hadn't been the last time he'd seen them.

"Ahem."

Conner blushed at realizing he'd been staring. "Oh gosh, I'm sorry. You just... sorry. You look great. Sorry."

"I think one apology will do," she said with a dry smile. "And it's probably a little bit on me. Ever since you reminded me before break about how I'd said I liked getting a little more attention for them, I guess... I dunno. I've honestly always tried to *avoid* getting them noticed, ever since the darn things sprouted in middle school. But I figured maybe I'd try the other way, ya know? See how I like it."

"Still, I shouldn't have... you know. It won't happen again."

Heather rolled her eyes and gave him a little swat on the arm. "Conner, seriously. It's OK. Like I said, I wouldn't have them out if I didn't like having them seen. And you... I mean, why get shy about something you've already seen, right?"

His mouth was drying up, he was so nervous. Lord, TIOS made things confusing. Her facial expression and body language said she wasn't trying to flirt, but the way she was talking... She was only saying it because of what she'd said before that made her believe what he said and then he'd said that she'd said... It was dizzying. Moreover, he could already feel the temptation to type that up in the Heather Blake notes. For shame. He reminded himself he did *not* want his very own Angelica.

At least, not outside his imagination.

"Sure. Anyway, what's up? I'm sure you didn't walk over to talk about your, um, what-have-you's."

She blurted a surprised laugh. "Did you just call my breasts 'what-have-you's'?"

"Just trying to find something you're comfortable with." She'd rebuked him for using the word "tits," and on their first date he'd teased her a little for her sensitivity to the term.

"Right. Anyway, I know we talked about it, you know, over break, but we need to get the staff spread updated from the Christmas party. I mean, I know things didn't wind up working out for you and me, but I want you to know that I am so grateful for what you did for me and I don't want to forget it. And since we're in the business of preserving memories..."

That brought a sheepish smile to his face, the memory of sticking up for her when she got a low grade on the final that could have cost her everything. And the expression of gratitude that had followed. "I don't want to forget, either."

"I still can't believe that old cunt Miss C was going to give me a C. Ugh." She glared at where their teacher was helping Don organize his notes. "Pardon my French."

Conner didn't dare tell her that Miss C had only done that to set him up to be a hero, which he hadn't learned until after school. "Yeah, no kidding. I know your work. You've never done C level work in your life."

"Thanks. Anyway, shall we?"

The two spent the final twenty minutes of the period looking over photos from the yearbook holiday party. They shared a tender smile at one, in which someone had taken a few photos of Conner in the editor's office defending Heather, then him slipping through the curtain into the computer lab to comfort her. Conner made a mental note to thank Marisa; for once her inclination to be nosy had yielded good fruit.

Their only interruption came from Jordan, actually. He poked his head into the editor's office. "Hey, you got a sec, chief?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"A private sec, I meant." He eyed Heather, who took the hint and excused herself, letting him shut the door after her. After the jerkwad move Jordan had pulled after the incid— after he fainted, Conner didn't have anything to say. He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

“So yeah, couple things. First off...” He took a breath. “Just to get it out of the way, I’m supposed to say I’m sorry for how things went down before break.”

The editor-in-chief blinked at what was easily the most roundabout, half-assed apology he’d heard in a while. Jordan, apparently seeing his audience wasn’t moved, continued. “I mean it. Like, I know I was supposed to say something Friday, but I was pissed at being stuck in the suspension room all day and I know me. It wouldn’t have been shit. But now that things calmed down, I still feel kinda shitty about it, so... hey, for whatever it’s worth, sorry.”

Conner considered it and supposed it was the best he was likely to get. “All right. We’re cool.”

Jordan smiled, so much so that Conner reevaluated his estimation of the guy’s remorsefulness. If being forgiven made him smile so much, maybe he really had been taking it hard. “Awesome. So, with that out of the way, another thing. So you know how I got assigned to the spread for that stupid-ass diversity event?”

He meant the MLK, Jr. Day march and rally, Conner deduced. “Yeah, I guess so. What’s up?”

“Right. Well, you know I don’t like, speak PCese, right?”

Conner frowned. “What are PCE’s?”

Jordan sighed irritably. “I’m not politically correct, dumb fuck.” He stopped himself. “Sorry. It’s, you know, hard to talk about. Anyway, so like, I don’t want it to look like shit, ‘cause I know Miss C’ll be pissed if that one looks sketchy, so I wondered if maybe you could help me out with it?”

“Me? Why me? I’m not exactly the expert on blackness.” He rolled up his sleeve to show the white skin. “Don’t you think you’d be better off getting help from someone who’s more involved in that arena? If you don’t feel comfortable doing it, I don’t think it’s bad to let an actual person of color weigh in or take over, if you can find someone interested.”

Jordan frowned. “Dude, I may not know PC culture, but I know you’re not supposed to call them colored people.”

“It’s... I didn’t...” The dismissal bell rang then, and he decided this wasn’t the time to bring Jordan up to speed. “Never mind. Fine. But I’m not doing it for you, understand? Have something written up, and I’ll help you look it over.”

“Right. Cool man, appreciate it. Catch you later.”

With that, Jordan was gone before Conner could even reply. The blinds overlooking the classroom were open, and Heather had disappeared as well, along with the rest of the class. But before he could even crane his neck to see if Miss C was still in her room, she was there in the office doorway.

“Hi, Conner.”

“Heya, Kristy.”

She smiled. "You remembered."

"I had a good teacher."

A student popped into the classroom, and Miss C excused herself to field their question, something about some binder. When they left, she asked Conner if he minded giving her a few minutes until the halls were good and clear. After what she'd done for him before break, he agreed instantly, and texted Angelica to go ahead and drive herself and Owen home using her set of keys to his car. No one else entered, and Conner tried to pretend he wasn't watching his teacher as she organized some papers on her desk while the seconds ticked by. Waiting for her to return, five minutes felt like an hour. Still, he'd have waited all night to hear what she wanted to talk to him about, whatever it was.

At last, they were closed in the cozy confines of the editor's office, blinds closed, door locked, the classroom beyond sealed and dark as well. Conner tried not to get over-eager as he watched her arrange for their privacy, but it wasn't easy. She hadn't even dressed out of the ordinary today, and he'd seen her wear this knee-length skirt and sweater many times, but today, having seen what was beneath it, suddenly the mundane had become alluring. When she settled, it was on the edge of his desk. Right where Hailey had sat the first time they'd fooled around in here, where Kristy herself had positioned herself prior to their fling two weeks ago. *Play it cool, Fishers*, he reminded himself, then wondered why he'd called himself by his surname.

"How was your break?" she asked casually. Her legs crossed at the ankles.

"Oh. Decent, I guess. Got a tablet, which is pretty cool. I was hoping for a laptop, but ya know, money's tight, and I was glad for what I got."

"See any family? Travel anywhere?"

"Nah, not really. My extended family lives out in New Mexico, and my stepdad's family isn't close. At least, not with him." He shrugged. "Other than their wedding, I've never even seen most of them."

"And, you know I've been wondering... how did things go with Heather?"

Like that, his budding erection wilted. With a little coaxing, he told her. Unlike Hailey, it didn't feel weird to share. Unlike Owen and Angelica, she gave him her full attention. And unlike his mom, he could share the lurid details without feeling like a loser. In fact, he even thanked her for that very thing as he finished his rambling play-by-play of his too-short fling.

"I've met your mother several times, Conner. There's no way she'd ever think less of you. And I'm sorry things didn't work out. You two seemed like such a good match, and with the help you said you received from TIOS, I'm actually somewhat surprised. I guess the timing just wasn't right." She patted him on the shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess not. She's still pissed off about that fake C on the exam, too, by the way."

His teacher laughed softly. “She’ll get over it. Or not. Either way, I’ve survived worse than the sullen pout of Heather Blake.”

Conner decided to switch gears. Talking about being dumped only reminded him of how lousy it had felt to begin with, which he’d been doing a decent job of forgetting all day to that point. “How about you? Have a fun holiday?”

She shrugged. “Meh. I got caught up on grading, and that only took the first week. Then I got caught up on planning, which only took until ten o’clock last night. But when I wasn’t being a good teacher, I had fun, yes. Got some good reading in, which was nice.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. A little philosophical reading, about the nature of free will versus determinism.”

Conner frowned. He had a pretty good vocabulary for a twelfth-grader, but everyone had gaps. “Determinism...?”

“The idea that our actions are predestined. That choice is an illusion, and that our lives are simply the process of carrying out the script that was written before we began.”

“Sounds... bleak.” Conner wrinkled his nose.

“It can be. But I also find there’s something freeing – perhaps ironically so – about the idea that some of the things that happen are beyond our control.”

“How is losing control freeing? It sounds more scary than liberating.” How had this turned into a discussion of philosophy? How had neither of them yet approached the fact that they had slept together?

“Well, let me pretend to be Miss C again a moment and illustrate it with an example. Suppose something terrible happened, and that rather than some act of nature, a person was responsible for that terrible thing. Say, more specifically, a loved one was killed in a car accident by a driver who’d been distracted, sending a text message. Now, someone who believes stolidly in free will would contend that the other driver was culpable, that they made the choice to neglect their responsibilities as a driver.”

“Yeah. They did. How else do you look at that?”

“Well, a determinist might see it simply as a bad thing happened, and that while a person did it, there was no malice behind it, that the person was doing something lots of people do all the time and that day it happened to cause a problem.”

“They’d just let them off the hook? If some jerk sending a text killed someone I love, you bet I’d be pressing charges.”

“Sure, let’s pursue that. So you’re angry at them, and nobody could fault you for that. And that anger, it can eat at you, widen the hole your loved one left behind. Because you’re fixated on assigning blame, rather than understanding the event that happened for what it was and simply grieving.”

“I can’t do both? Be mad *and* grieve?”

“I’m not saying one is better than the other; only that I can see why someone might feel the latter is liberating, and the former is stifling. And that’s when you apply it to someone else. If you’ve ever been inattentive at the wheel – drinking, exhausted, distracted by a friend, whatever – imagine how it would feel to be held responsible for the consequences of an innocent mistake, and how comforting it might feel to have your mistake acknowledged as a tragic aspect of life.”

Conner shook himself. “If you’re trying to scare me into never goofing around in the car again, it’s working.”

“I didn’t read the book just to lecture at you, I promise.”

“Is that the kind of thing you usually read? I guess since you’re an English teacher, in my head your house is filled with Shakespeare and the classics and the so-called Great Books.” She smiled; he’d remembered her lectures from freshman English about the notion of there being a set of texts somehow on another level from normal books. She’d always tried to encourage kids to read whatever they liked, so long as they were reading. Not a lesson Conner had needed, but maybe it had inspired some of his peers.

“I definitely don’t read Shakespeare,” she said, chuckling. “And no, it’s not my usual sort of book. But after learning that I’d had my mind re-wired, I was curious what there was to be done about it.”

Conner froze. “Oh gosh. I... I didn’t even see it like that. You’re right, though. Oh gosh, I didn’t mean to...!”

Before he could hyperventilate – oh god, or faint again – she placed both hands firmly on his shoulders and looked him hard in the eyes. “Conner. I am not angry with you. I wasn’t then, and I’m not now. I’m your friend, and I care about you, and that was true before TIOS ever intervened. Tell me you understand.”

He took a few deep breaths. “I understand. But—”

“No. Understanding means accepting. Don’t sully that by qualifying it.” She gave him a long moment to process, and when the panic from realizing he’d wronged someone he cared for subsided, he started breathing normally again.

“See? It’s liberating, isn’t it.” She flashed a tight smile.

Conner chuckled self-consciously. “Is *that* why you read it?”

“No. If you really want to know, I wanted to see if... How to put this. Not looking for a loophole, per se, but for some way to understand whether I still had free will; or if I ever did; or if I’d lost it, how I could get it back.”

“Wow. Um, did you learn anything?” He’d never thought of philosophy as something that could actually solve real problems.

“I don’t know. I knew trying to undo TIOS wouldn’t make you happy, and if I’m being honest, I don’t know that it would have made *me* happy either, so I stopped pursuing it. But if my Reader’s Digest synopsis gave you any relief, I’m glad. Remember,

Conner. At least where it pertains to me, you didn't do anything on purpose. Even a staunch advocate of free will would have a hard time faulting you for recording a pleasant memory simply because... well."

Conner knew he'd be staying up late that night staring at the ceiling of his bedroom trying to decide to what extent his other meddlings had been mere accidents, and to what extent he was culpable. But for now, he was here, as was she.

"So yeah, speaking of pertaining to us..."

She smiled. "You want to talk about what happens now?"

"Well... yeah. Kind of my first time hooking up with a teacher."

"My first time hooking up with a student. Since I was one myself, at least." She smiled, then moved over to the loveseat on the far wall. "Do you want to sit with me? Or would that be uncomfortable?"

"No, that'd be cool." The plush, lumpy couch was broad, almost a full sofa, but it was a more appropriate place to discuss a relationship than sitting at a desk with his teacher looming over him. He joined her, folding one foot under his knee.

"So, I think we've established where I'm at in all this. Which is to say, I want you to be happy. If being given your space will do that, that's what I want to do, and if not, well then..." She smiled, and didn't distract as he reflexively looked over her sumptuous body before he caught himself. "So the question seems to be, what do *you* want to happen?" She could tell the question immediately made him feel anxious, and quickly added, "And please speak freely, Conner. No judgments here. This is a bit of a unique situation, so there's no expectation on my part whatsoever."

"I... I don't know. I mean, I had, you know, fun, before break. A lot of fun. But... you know, you have Brent, and I already feel bad about that as it is." As it so happened, Conner had been so preoccupied by matters with Heather that he hadn't given a single thought to his teacher's boyfriend until precisely that moment, but once it occurred to him, he did.

"Don't. Brent and I broke up more than a month ago, right around Thanksgiving." She didn't tell him until more than a month later the why of it. The breakup had in part occurred because her increasing preoccupation with her students had bothered him so. Further, her new feelings towards Conner made her realize that she cared less about her boyfriend's happiness than she probably should in a committed relationship. She'd tried to broach the subject, to see if there was something to work out, but he'd left while she was at work the next day, and had not come back.

"Oh. You never said. I... I'm sorry. I mean, I guess I'm glad we didn't... that you didn't... but yeah, sorry."

"Don't be. So. Brent's out of the picture. I'll ask again, what do *you* want to happen between us?"

He was quiet for a long while, thinking, though the thoughts centered primarily around what had transpired between them the last time he'd been on this couch with her. Finally he made himself address the situation at hand, trying to be as objective as possible. Kristy waited patiently, seeing no sense hurrying a major decision.

"I had a lot of fun before," he said at last. "But, I guess I also don't want to do anything that you could get in trouble for. If we kept... you know, and anybody found out... It could end your career. I mean, I'm legally an adult and all so *that's* not an issue, at least for me, but I don't even know if a teacher fooling around with a student is a separate law altogether."

"It's not, at least not in this state. School policy only." She gave a weird little smile. "Another bit of reading I happened to do over break."

"Yeah. But still, I don't want you to get fired, either. You're an awesome teacher, and more important, you're my friend. I'd feel awful if somebody found out and we got caught. So... I guess I think maybe we should, you know, call it a one-time thing, or whatever."

"Now like I said before, I want whatever is going to make you happy, but I will say this. If you're pushing me away because you're afraid, that doesn't sound like happy. If you're pushing me away because you're happier without the complications, then that's fine."

"It sounds like you're arguing for us to keep on... like that."

"I'm not. Not necessarily, anyway. In the spirit of full disclosure, I'll say this. TIOS isn't gentle about the way it enforces your rewrites of our stories, Conner. My judgment is compromised. If you said you'd be happier having me quit my job and so we could be together while avoiding this obstacle altogether... I'd give it some thought. So unfortunately, you're going to have to rely on your own here, and I'll do my best to help out."

His eyes widened. "You'd really...?"

"Maybe. Do you want me to?"

"No!"

She smiled. "Good. So I tell you what. You seem like you're having a lot of thoughts on this. Why don't you go home tonight, do some processing, and we can talk again tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good, Miss... Kristy."

She tousled his hair. "I swear, it's a matter of time before you start calling me Misty. Now, is there anything else I can do to make you happy before you go?" She sat up straight, leaned a little closer. There was nothing overtly sexual in it, but somehow, it still got him hard in an instant. *I said, play it cool, Fishers!*

"Why, Miss Coszic-Lewandoski, you're trying to seduce me, aren't you?" Conner had watched that movie last summer with his stepdad. Not his cup of tea, but he'd been



trying to take his mom's advice and look for things to do together, to bond. It hadn't produced much.

"I'm trying to ascertain if you'd like to be seduced," she answered.

In truth, Conner hadn't gotten off since the night of his first date with Heather. Even then, it had only come after, once he'd gotten home. Then leading up to the second date, he'd been "saving up" – something Owen told him was the opposite of what he ought to be doing – but then that date had gone so tepidly that he hadn't felt the urge since. (To say nothing of the boner-negation that was being dumped.)

"A k-kiss...?" He leaned forward slightly extending his neck.

Rather than meet him halfway, however, his teacher rolled toward him, throwing one leg over his lap and straddling him. Without saying a word, she sank down onto his crotch, the only thing stopping him from being inside her being a few pesky layers of clothing. Then, her lips were on his, and in the next breath, their mouths were open, and her tongue was invading to dance against his. She took one of his hands in each of hers, lifting them over his head and pressing them to the wall behind the couch. It left him feeling completely vulnerable – and yet, he didn't feel anxious at all.

"Anything else?"

He hadn't even realized she'd stopped kissing him. His hands were still in hers, though, and she was still hovering right over his lap. Her breasts were right in front of his face. *Right* in front. Like they were being held out to him for sampling. She removed her hair tie, letting her wavy brown hair cascade around her shoulders.

"One more, maybe?"

Again. This time, she didn't let up until they were each breathing hard, hearts racing. How did a *teacher* know how to use her body like that?! "Are you happy yet?" she whispered, her breath hot against his lips.

"Getting there, I think."

She lowered herself a bit, squirming her pussy against him as she licked up his neck to his ear, where she sucked the lobe into her mouth and lashed it with her tongue. "Tell me how to make you happy, Conner."

He could have sex with her again, right now. He knew it. All he had to do was say the word, and she'd do it, and she'd be glad for it. Or he could get a blowjob. A handjob. She could do all three, and then show him some things he hadn't even thought of, probably. All he had to do was say the words.

"I need the night to think about it," he said, and she was still looking at his retreating backside in confusion as he scurried out of the room.

It snowed all that evening, but Conner barely noticed. The entire night was consumed by his dilemma. He'd accidentally rewired his teacher to be fixated on his happiness. The thing was, he'd always had a solid relationship with Miss C. He wouldn't have said she made him "happy," per se, but he loved her class, and she made him better at what he was passionate about. Plus, while he was as prone to teenage angst as anyone, Conner was usually not an unhappy person. He liked school well enough, was content with his social life, and if he wished he'd done better with Heather, it was less a case of a burning need for companionship and more because he was genuinely interested in a particular girl. He didn't *need* anyone to make him happy.

That said, there was no denying that his attractive English teacher had some very intriguing means of making him happier. Conner wasn't the sort to be prone to crushing on women who were out of his zone of possibility, but he'd certainly developed more than a few fantasies about her over the years. They'd always been merely that, fantasies, but all of the sudden, the fantastical was right in that zone. He might be able to be happy without her, but being *with* her had been incredible. Though he knew the his teacher wasn't *old*, she was certainly older than any other girl he'd fooled around with, and the contrast was sharp. She was mature, aggressive, confident, practiced. Of the three girls he had any significant experience with, she was easily the most talented lover.

Except she was his teacher. And she hadn't asked for this. But now that her happiness was so tied to his own, did he owe it to her? Now that fate had laid his fantasies at his feet, did he owe it to himself?

Soon enough, he boiled the question down to the simple matter of whether or not he wanted a sexual relationship with his teacher. There were other considerations, sure, but that was the most weighty. In time, he finally tried to organize his thoughts in a pros and cons list.

#### *Pros*

- *exciting!*
- *attracted to her*
- *single (her/me)*
- *learn ropes from experienced partner – better for future*
- *she likes doing it too*
- *help get over heather*

#### *Cons*

- *getting caught*
  - *fired!*
  - *reputation ruined (hers; mine?)*
  - *rumors*
  - *what will mom think*

- *would she be my angelica*

He stared at that page for over an hour, but still didn't know what he'd do. From her behavior today, and her enthusiasm from before break, Conner would bet heavily that if he didn't make a decision, Miss C would decide it for him, and she'd decide to use every tool in her kit to make him happier. And the more he thought about it, the more likely he thought they could keep it secret. They already worked closely together, and it wasn't like he was going to start groping her in the middle of class. Even if someone did get suspicious, TIOS might be useful to help cover for it, if for once he could make it do what he wanted on purpose.

Still, even if they did keep it entirely clandestine, that still left that final bullet.

Around ten o'clock, he heard the front door. That would be Angelica, home from her night of screwing around at Owen's. With a glance at the final bullet on his list, he headed for the hallway and intercepted her on her way into her bedroom. He tried to ignore the telltale smudges in her lipstick.

"Hey, Angelica. Can we talk for a minute?"

She sighed. "I guess, but let me just say up front that I am not getting involved between you and Heather."

"It's not about Heather," he assured her.

Angelica looked surprised. "Oh. OK, then." She followed him into his bedroom; though they'd gotten closer since she'd hooked up with Owen, he was still *persona non grata* in hers. He flopped down on his bed, and, sensing this might be more than a basic question, she settled into his desk chair.

"So, before I say anything, I need you to promise me that you will keep this totally between us. Not even Owen can know about it. All right?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Why do I feel like I'm about to find out something I didn't want to know?"

"Promise."

"Hey, you're the one who dragged me into this. I don't have to promise shit."

"*Promise*, Angelica. Or I can tell your dad where you're really going every evening."

She gritted her teeth. "Blackmail, huh. Whatever. Fine, cross my heart and all that crap. Now what's going on?"

Thankfully, her outburst at the revelation was mistaken by their parents in the living room as the two of them fighting. "Quiet down, you two – and it's a school night, get to bed," yelled Conner's stepdad, though both knew full well he had no intention of enforcing it.

"You *fucked* your *teacher*?!" she half-whispered, half-screamed. "What the hell, Conner! I thought you were trying to be more responsible with this thing! First me, then

Heather, and now your journalism teacher? Jesus Christ, Conner, why don't you just start up a fucking harem already while you're at it!"

"I didn't mean to, OK! I mean, with you, Owen and I were trying to see what TIOS did. Neither of us thought it was going to do... that! And with Miss C and Heather, I was just writing down memories. I've done tons of spreads this year – how was I supposed to know these would somehow transcend the laws of reality!"

"Why are you even telling me this? Am I supposed to tell you how to woo an older woman or something? Because I am not your date coach."

"No, it's not that. It's..." He took a breath, and explained their interaction today after school. He kept it vague on the details of the kissing and all, but made it clear the terms he'd been offered. "And now, I don't know what to do. And since, I dunno, you're in kind of a similar position, I wondered..."

Angelica looked skeptical. "So, because you made me obsessed with Owen's cock, you think I'm, what, an expert on being a fuck buddy?"

"Well... sorta, yeah. Three months in, and you guys seem like you're making the best of things, doing good keeping it under wraps. I just hoped you'd be able to help me do the right thing."

After a brief pause, Angelica burst into laughter. "I literally don't think I've ever had someone ask *me* what the right thing to do was before!" she forced out.

"I'm serious, Angelica! Come on, for once in our lives let's pretend like we're a normal pair of siblings, and not two people whose only similarity is approximate age."

"Fine. All right. So. Right thing to do. Hmm." She stroked her chin, but so far as Conner could tell, she seemed to be giving it real thought. "OK. So, the quote was what, exactly?"

"Something like, 'you mean the world to me, and all I want is for you to be happy.' Pretty close to that, if not verbatim."

"Wow. Yikes, that's... strong." She saw him looking at her quizzically. "I mean, take me. I said, because I didn't think I lived in a world where magic yearbooks could fry your brain, that I couldn't get enough of Owen's cock. And now... it's literally true. The only reasons I ever stop going to town on that puppy are the limits of his stamina and that I know no matter how much I get, I'll want more. So why bother chasing a moving goalpost, ya know?"

Conner rolled over to look up at the ceiling. "Scary to think TIOS, for all its power, doesn't have the ability to distinguish between truth and bullshit. One day Owen was an obnoxious pest who was always driving you crazy, and the next... Like, if we'd quoted you reading MacBeth, you'd be trying to kill Uncle Jeff."

She laughed. "Well, I wouldn't say it was *totally* off the mark."

He flipped over to look at her, eyebrow arched as high as it would go. "What?"

“I mean...” she broke eye contact, looking at the same spot on the ceiling his gaze had just vacated. “I know he’s a skeezy little perv and all, but... I dunno. I always kinda liked him. Not in a way where I probably ever would’ve given him a shot, unless I were totally drunk. It was fun, getting hit on and getting to keep saying no but knowing he’d keep going. From him, anyway.” She shrugged. “And speaking of not saying shit, you tell him I said that and I will castrate you in your sleep.”

He held up his hands defensively until her glare subsided. “If you had to go back and decide if you wanted this or not, would you still do it?”

She seemed to mull that over for a moment. “I honestly don’t know. But I can’t, so why torture myself with the what-ifs? Can I go now? I’m freaking exhausted.”

Conner considered the ramifications of her words. Could that be why some of the quotes he’d entered came true, and some seemed not to do anything? That he’d noticed, anyway. Hard to credit Coach Conrad saying that his boys were hard workers with their victory at conference, but maybe. But then what about the Hailey-Hayleigh swap? Or Heather and her trust issues? Could it be she’d really had so much faith in him, even before that? Maybe Angelica’s small interest in Owen and the fact that TIOS had enforced that quote were unrelated.

Angelica, however, was tired from a long night of sucking cock, and interrupted his musings. “So look. I can’t tell you what to do, but I’ll say this. I’ve had a lot of fun the past few months. I’m not some brainless bimbo. Whenever Owen’s being an asshole, I tell him and make damn sure he fixes it. Maybe for the first time in my life, I know what I want, and I know how to get it. For me, at least, it feels... right.”

Conner was dressed and ready and ready to speed his way to school already when his mother informed him that there was going to be a snow day. For the first time in his life, he was disappointed at the news, but looking outside, he saw what looked like close to a foot of snow piled on top of his car. The roads here were clear, but enough of the student body lived in more rural parts of town that it wouldn't be true for everyone. His stepdad still headed to work, not one to be deterred by a little thing like a forty-five minute commute through a snowstorm, leaving Conner, his mother and stepsister at home.

He considered texting to see if he and Miss C could meet up, but he didn't want to start his top secret affair by creating a document trail. Besides, it felt too much like a booty call, and he was determined he was going to make sure he treated her with respect. Just because TIOS wasn't putting the idea in his head, he wanted to make her happy, too.

So, he fidgeted. Even though Conner's mother had told Angelica the roads weren't safe enough for her to go out in, his stepsister still snuck out while her back was turned. The footprints in the snow leading from their driveway across the street told the tale for anyone to see, but who was looking?

Only then, something surreal happened.

"Conner, sweetie, it's for you!" his mother called a few moments after the doorbell rang.

Who could it be? Normally, he'd assume Owen, only Owen would simply walk in, not ring the doorbell, and besides, he was no doubt enjoying a leisurely day with the house to himself and his... girlfriend? They didn't use those terms, but it was basically true.

His jaw literally dropped when he saw who it was. "Jordan? What the f... What are you doing here?"

Jordan was kicking the snow off his boots as Conner's mother closed the door behind him. "Hey, buddy. Thought we could tackle that spread we talked about. That cool?"

"Uh... what?"

"Remember, yesterday? The MLK thing? You said you'd help?"

Conner blinked. "Uh, yeah. But... what? What are you doing here? It's a snow day."

Jordan laughed, allowing Conner's mother to help him with his coat. She shot a pointed look at her son to remind him to be polite to their guest. "Yeah, I know, but my parents are super pissed – pardon my French, Mrs. Fishers – about my grades. So I'm trying to get them off my back, show I'm going the extra mile and all that sh–, uh, jazz."

He didn't bother to point out that his mother was Mrs. Buck, not Fishers. Still, Mrs. Buck was looking at her son with a clear expectation of being a good host. He

hadn't vented to her about all the crap Jordan had put him through; he didn't want her to think less of him. Which made his presence here all the more jarring.

He had a sudden epiphany, a means of removing Jordan without having to be rude. "Wait a minute. This is for the MLK spread?"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"That's not until next Monday. You do know when MLK Day is, right?"

"Ya, I know when it is, chiefy," he said, smiling brightly. From the chummy way he was acting, his mother must think they were friends. "But I remember you said it's never a bad idea to get prepped before the event, so when it happens you can just, you know, plug in the details, fill in a quote or two, paste a couple pictures in, and voila. That was you, right?"

Miss C had given the same instructions a hundred times – her constant cure for students who claimed they were all caught up – but he'd certainly echoed it. It wasn't his style, personally – he liked to witness first and transcribe second – but it worked for some of his staffers. "Yeah, I guess that was me."

"Tight. Shall we?"

His mind raced to come up with any other reasons to not let Jordan Lyons into his home. Apology or no, he'd gone out of his way to humiliate Conner after Heather rejected him. He was probably the person most responsible for the fainting spell. "Oh! Yeah, sorry, but I didn't check out a laptop. So, unfortunately, we can't–"

"Sall good, buddy," Jordan said, cocking a grin. "I got one right here."

Since Conner handled the lion's share of yearbook assignments, it was no coincidence that he and Jordan had never worked together on a spread before. And now that he knew what it was like, he'd never let it happen again. The kid was *constantly* distracted, and totally unprepared. He made Conner start up the spread while he groomed his hair, citing "frozen gel," and then he paced around the room relentlessly while they talked it over. On three separate occasions, he stumbled over the power cord, and of course, he'd let the battery die without charging it before bringing it over, and forced them to sit there twiddling their thumbs as they waited for it to reboot, load up TIOS, and for Conner to re-enter his password.

Conner finally insisted that Jordan have a seat before he went crazy, and finally Jordan seemed to buckle down. It was really a pretty simple set-up. It wasn't a major event, so no need to do a deluxe spread. The themes were prescriptive, so all they had to do was emphasize the school's diversity. The school's website had more detailed information on the school's racial breakdown, and even shared that they had one of the top graduation rates for students of color – a term Conner now explained to his classmate – of any high school in the state. After an hour's work, the two had reached a point where Conner felt comfortable putting a pin in it.

“So on Monday, get a pass and a camera in the morning. Go to the rally, snap a few pictures, get a few quotes. Try not to say anything offensive, OK? Just ask what Dr. King’s legacy means to them, what they thought of the speaker, that kind of thing. Cool?”

“You got it, chiefy. Hey, thanks for this. Didn’t mean to rain on your snow day or anything. Just looking to get a headstart on the future, ya know?” He grinned broadly, and as ever, Jordan’s smile was more of a smirk.

“Right. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He followed Jordan to the door, where his mother was already tugging on her boots to run to the grocery store.

“Hi, boys. You get everything done?” To avoid an entanglement, she grabbed Jordan’s coat off the hook and held it out for him to insert his arms in the sleeves.

With his back to her, Jordan made a face Conner liked not at all, all the less because it was accompanied by him saying, “Oh, there’s another thing or two I wanted to do, but... maybe I’ll swing by some other day for that.”

Conner glared. “I think we can restrict our work to school, Jordan.”

“Hey, you got it, buddy.” He reciprocated, helping Conner’s mother on with her own coat. “Wouldn’t want you going out without this, would we? Slender thing like you probably freeze to death.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she patted him playfully. “Oh stop it.”

“Yeah, really. Stop it,” Conner added.

Then he did, and then he was gone, and the whole bizarre experience was over as suddenly as it began.

The snow didn’t melt overnight, but it didn’t get any deeper either. So when school opened the next day, Conner proceeded immediately to Miss C’s room. He was hustling so quickly he actually got yelled at to slow down by Mr. Durnes. She was already in her room when he entered, her hair up in its usual ponytail.

“Kristy? I have something I need to tell you,” he announced.

“Please don’t use my first name, Conner,” she said sternly, frowning.

He was dumbfounded. She’d literally *trained* him to call her that when they were...

“And, while we’re on the subject of names... Conner Fishers, this is Amanda Carpenter. She’s a new student this semester, and she’ll be joining us in yearbook.”

Stepping out of the editor’s office was, apparently, Amanda. The new girl extended a hand. “Hi, Conner. I’m looking forward to seeing what you can bring to the team.”

He shook hands, forcing a smile. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Miss C interjected. “I should clarify, sorry. You see, you’re speaking to the editor-in-chief.”



Conner inclined his head, as if to forgive the minor slight – but was puzzled to see Amanda do the same, followed by a puzzled look of her own.

“Wait, who’s...?”

“Both of you, that is. It appears our yearbook is back up to two editors.”

## Chapter Three

“Wait, so how the hell can you have *two* editor-in-chiefs?” Owen asked around a mouthful of spaghetti casserole.

“It’s editors-in-chief,” Conner pointed out.

“Really. I’m trying to empathize, and you correct my grammar?”

“Sorry. And hell if I know! Argh, I just want to...” He didn’t quite know what he wanted to do about this Amanda Carpenter girl. Really, what he wanted was for her to go back to not existing.

Owen shuffled his noodles around his tray. “Well what’s Miss C said? I mean, you’ve always been her guy, right? I’m sure she’s not going to promote some random new girl to top of the food chain on day one.”

“I think she might,” Conner said. His food remained untouched; that Amanda Carpenter had stolen his appetite, too. “Editors-in-chief are a rare thing. There’s only four of us in the entire state, and the folks at ASAL are pretty particular about bestowing credentials. I went to camps and conferences for it every summer since sixth grade to learn what I needed to know to make the ASAL cut.”

“What the hell is ASAL?”

“The American Scholastic Annual League? Come on, man, I’ve only mentioned them a million times.”

“How nice for you, to have a friend who lets you keep mentioning something so insanely uninteresting.”

“Anyway, I guess this is coming down from the administration. At least, Miss C said her hands were tied, and we’d find a way to deal with it. But... dammit, this is my baby! This was supposed to be my year, and she’s only been a Nighthawk for...” He glanced around for a clock. “Three and a half freaking hours!”

“Seems like some bullshit,” Owen agreed in a tone almost as bland as the cafeteria fare. Suddenly, though, he perked up. “Wait, what about TIOS? Is she going to be able to do what you do? You know, like...?” He nodded to where Jayce Deacons was sitting with his secretly massive girlfriend Hayleigh. Only Owen and Conner knew about her.

“I don’t know. I’m sure as hell going to try to prevent it, though. But if the school is letting this stand, I don’t know if I can stop it. Maybe I’ll have to sit her down and explain it, warn her off. Or maybe I can use TIOS myself, try to find some way to stop her. I don’t think it lets me edit student schedules, so I can’t just boot her that way, so unless Mrs. Prendergast has a change of heart, I’m stuck with her. For now.”

“Yeah. I mean... what was the name again?” Owen asked.

“Amanda Carpenter.”

“Amanda Carpenter can’t use the TIOS program,” he announced. “There, now just go enter that in, and presto. Right?”

“It’s usually not that simple, but I’ll try.”

“Fingers crossed, man. Not sure I wanna see what happens if we wind up with *two* people turning NHS into crazy town. I think we have exactly the right amount of crazy right now.”

Conner scowled at nothing, just to be scowling. “Give or take. We’ve had our share of mishaps, but the only thing stopping TIOS from completely throwing everything into chaos is that the editor has a stake in the story. Amanda Carpenter doesn’t know or care anything about the Nighthawks.”

Owen chugged his chocolate milk carton, then began the always-disgusting process of loudly slurping down his jello square. “So is she hot?”

Conner snapped out of his gloom at the unexpected question. “Who?”

“Who the hell do you think?”

“Sure, if you like red skin, horns and a wicked little mustache.”

“Just saying, maybe you could seduce her. Maybe we got ourselves another girl who can’t get enough cock.” He grinned.

“Gross. Don’t you already have enough on your plate with Angelica?”

Owen shook his head. “I mean for you, pencil dick.”

“Still gross. And I don’t bang evil.”

“You banged Hefty Hailey.” They both looked across to the little nook she tended to inhabit, where the young vision had her nose in a book. Middling fashion sense aside, one of the most attractive girls in the entire school was cohabitating with the untouchables. It seemed wrong, somehow, but after hooking up with her, dumping her, then taking her back and dumping her again on the same day... even Conner thought she deserved better than she’d gotten from him. She obviously didn’t feel the same way, but he had no intention of risking hurting the poor girl all over again.

She did look amazing in that sweater, though.

“Not technically. And she’s not evil, she’s... Hailey.”

“Better come up with something, then, Mr. One-of-the-editor-in-chiefs.”

“That’s Mr. One-of-the-editors... oh, never mind.”

Indeed, Conner had a battle strategy at the ready when he returned to Miss C's room for class that day – one very different from the plan he'd had when he entered that morning. It was all well and good to know that Miss C wanted him to be “happy,” but she had to know the intrusion of this outsider, this Amanda Carpenter, would accomplish the opposite. Which had to mean that if she could weigh in on this, she would have. So it was up to him.

Then, for the second time that day, he was outplayed before he even arrived.

“Looks like everyone's here,” Miss C's voice was saying as he made his way down the hall. “So. You may have noticed–”

“Conner's not here,” said a voice. Siobhan's, he thought.

“–noticed that we have a new face. Conner's already gotten to meet her, but I wanted to introduce you all to Amanda.”

“Hi, everyone.” The girl waved. No, not so much waved, Conner decided. That was too friendly for this snake. She lifted a hand, as if to simply signal that she had arrived.

Conner strode into the room, but nobody noticed. All eyes were on the new arrival standing beside Miss C. “Amanda, we have ourselves a work day today, but since Amanda is going to be joining Conner as editor-in-chief, I want to get her acquainted with you all.”

The class's confusion was immediately apparent, to Conner's relief. “Wait. She's going to be co-editor?”

“Yeah, how do you have two chiefs?”

“Is she our boss now too?”

Miss C struggled to regain control. By now, his arrival had been noticed, and some seemed to be looking to him for confirmation. He merely did his best to help their teacher regain control until eventually they quieted down.

“Look, I know this isn't expected, but I think this is actually going to work out really well for us. As many of you who've been around for a while know, we're a little short-staffed this year. Plus, with all of us adjusting to the new format – and don't think I haven't noticed that several of you are *still* converting old spreads – Amanda can be a big help to us. She... actually, Amanda, would you like to talk about your experience?”

“Sure,” she said, casually taking a seat on the corner of Miss C's desk. “So, like Miss Koz... Kosh-chek? Sorry, I know I'm butchering it.”

She sure was. “Just call me Miss C. Everyone does.”

“Thanks. So, my name is Amanda Carpenter, and like Miss C said, I'm a new arrival.”

“Where from?” asked Don.

“Somewhere way over the rainbow,” she answered. Conner begged to differ; her presence here was proof positive that her homeland wasn’t a place where witches were squashed by houses. “Basically the middle of nowhere.”

“So you’ve gone full circle,” joked Marisa.

Amanda somehow smiled without revealing her fangs. “Should be a smooth transition for me then. Either way, I just arrived. Still kind of figuring things out. Except when it comes to yearbooking – there, I promise you guys, I’m ready to hit the ground running. I have extensive experience with all the usual software, from Photoshop to Office to Reviserie.”

“What’s Reviserie?”

Amanda answered before Conner could. “You guys don’t have that? That’s too bad. It’s... well, it doesn’t matter then, I guess. Anyway, I know I’m new here, and I know I have a lot to learn about Northside. But I promise you, I am qualified, and I am here to make sure you guys get the best damn yearbook NHS has ever seen. Cool?”

To Conner’s dismay, the room broke out in applause. Amanda looked right at him, not quite smirking, and he had no choice but to join in clapping lest he be seen being rude to the new girl. Point Carpenter.

Miss C took her place at the front of the room again. “That’s so awesome, Amanda. You guys, I’ve gotten to speak some with her, and really, all that’s only scratching the surface. I hope you all had a restful break, because even though it’s still winter outside, it’s spring semester, which means pedal to the metal. For today, you have a work day. I’ll be around to touch base on a few issues, but feel free to interrupt me if you need something. Amanda, I’m going to let you work with our own Conner Fishers, and I’ll let him start bringing you up to speed. Sound good?”

Apparently it did, because the room fell into its usual routine of organized chaos, staffers snatching up laptops or settling into a station in the computer lab and getting to work. (Or at least looking like they were.) It was then that Conner realized that Heather wasn’t there. Come to think of it, neither was Jordan. Strange. Heather had near-perfect attendance, and while the same couldn’t be said for Jordan, Conner had seen him in psychology not two hours ago.

But neither of those things mattered to him. Right now, it was time to take Amanda aside and do his damndest to bring her down.

“So – Conner, right? – where do you want to set up?” she asked him, once she’d waded through a handful of introductions.

“May as well use the editor’s office,” he said, resenting that suddenly he could no longer say “my office.”

“Lead the way.”

Conner didn’t miss the significant glance from Miss C. He knew her well enough to read it. *Play nice*, it said.

“So what has Miss C already told you? So I know what not to bother with.”

“You mean Kristy?” she asked too casually. When he made a face, she explained, “Sorry, just that this morning, you called her ‘Kristy.’ I guess you two have a good working relationship, huh?”

His eyes narrowed. What had he said? What had she deduced? “Yeah, we do. Why, didn’t your old yearbook teacher like you?”

“That’s good to see,” she said, ignoring his gibe. “Anyway, like I said, I really do want to get going ASAP. My goal is to be up to speed by the end of the week, so why don’t you just pretend she hasn’t told me anything and I’ll let you know what I don’t need to know.”

“Sure. So, we have our own custom software for the yearbook, new to us this year. It’s called This Is Our Story.”

“Wait, the yearbook, or the software?”

“Both. Custom job. Does some really impressive stuff. We call it TIOS for short. Do you know how to use TIOS?”

“Not yet. Why don’t we get started.” She nodded to the laptop.

“Wait, so you’re saying you *don’t* know how to use the yearbook software?” Conner unfolded it slowly, entering his login incorrectly twice before finally tapping the right keys.

“I’m saying I’d like to learn.” She gestured to the screen demonstratively.

“That’s so surprising,” Conner said, distractedly flipping through the menu for TIOS. “With your background, I’d have figured you’d have this kind of thing down. So you really don’t know how to use it?”

*Come on*, he thought. *Give me something I can use!* All he wanted was to be able to edit in a nice “*I don’t know how to use TIOS.*” – *Amanda Carpenter* and there would be nothing left to worry about. He figured he could slap it right in the metaspread, the one he and Heather had been working on about yearbook. She couldn’t be editor-in-chief if she couldn’t grasp how to use the required software. He waited for her to set him up...

... and was disappointed.

She leaned in close, her voice lowered. “Look here, Fishers. I get that you’ve been top dog around here, and I appreciate that you feel threatened.” Her tone suddenly lowered further, skipping right past intimate and into the territory of menacing. “And maybe you should. I don’t know your pedigree, but I sure as hell know my own worth. So if you wanna try to put me through my paces, you’re going to find out in a big damn hurry that this bitch isn’t on a leash. She’s a hundred thirty pounds with a two-ton bite and a long bloody trail of ripped-out jugulars spreading out behind her from the punks who thought it’d be cute to pull on her tail.”

Conner gaped. Before the chill running up and down his spine could subside, the thundercloud on her face subsided and she gestured once more to the monitor. “So, how does this work?”

He swallowed down a lump rising in his throat. “Uh, it’s not so hard, actually. Here, let me show you.”

That Amanda Carpenter was indeed a fast learner, and a lot of the hour was spent with her waving away tutorials in this and that. Conner would have been impressed if he wasn’t too busy hating her. His only interruption was that when Miss C popped in to help her set up her own TIOS account near the end of the period. Amanda used her newly issued school login as her ID, picked a password, but in the drop-down menu to select her title, she was stopped short.

“There’s only editor and assistant editor. No editor-in-chief?” Amanda frowned at the slight from the software.

Last fall, Conner had used that box to type the title in. But even as she began to do exactly that, he quickly chimed in. “Yeah, I know. You just have to pick editor. I typed in editor-in-chief at first but then it went all screwy.”

“Oh. All right then.” He restrained a sigh of relief as she clicked the editor box.

Their teacher glanced at the clock, seeing class was nearly over. “So, I hope you guys got to know one another a bit. I feel really lucky to have two students of your calibre on this project. It’s overkill, for sure, but I’ve been teaching for a good while now and am yet to complain about having too much talent on my yearbook staff. For now, my vision is to let the two of you feel things out for the next day or two, let Amanda get to know the staff and the scope and status of the project. Then sometime early next week the three of us can arrange to meet after school and hash out how we want to structure leadership roles. Sound good?”

“Sounds great, Miss C. Though I do want to learn how to say your actual name sometime. We’ll make that a week one goal.” Amanda smiled, then excused herself to gather up her things in preparation for dismissal.

Before Conner could say anything to his teacher, suddenly Heather’s cherubic face was leaning around the doorway. “Miss C?” she said in a small voice. “I, um, wanted to check if I missed any assignments or announcements today.”

The teacher’s voice was uncharacteristically cool. “Conner can fill you in if any decisions were made that pertain to you.”

The teacher stepped out into the classroom; through the open doorway, he could hear the usual people making their usual after-school plans, meeting up at The Bean Bag Cafe. To his chagrin, he overheard Marisa extending an invitation to Amanda. Just what he needed, having his rival entrenched in the staff’s social scene. But then Heather stepped into the room, and his interest in that Amanda Carpenter stopped.

Heather was wearing a shame shirt.

He didn't even know if that was their official name, or if they even had one, but that was how they were known in school. Girls who violated NHS dress code were sent to the office, where they were given the choice of being sent home for the day, or being allowed to stay in ISS, the in-school suspension room, where their classwork was sent down to them. And they were made to wear a shame shirt. The school had invested in them junior year, a collection of huge baggy tees. On the front was a simple printing of *I heart Northside*, which many – Conner included – felt only exacerbated the humiliation by forcing students to advertise their enthusiasm for their oppressors.

“Oh gosh, Heather, what the heck happened?” He stood up without knowing why. She'd done a fairly good job of covering it up, but he could see she'd been crying.

“Nothing. Just... you know.” She flapped at the hem of the enormous t-shirt, looking down at the ground. There were black flecks on her cheeks, which he realized were left over from when her makeup had run from crying.

“Ugh. That sucks. I'm so sorry, Heather. I can't believe they make you guys wear those things. I can't even imagine you were wearing anything so bad it deserved that.”

She stiffened. “So in your eyes, what could I be wearing that would be 'bad'? Like, if I came to school in leggings and a tank top, should they wrap me in burlap? If my hair gets distracting, should we shave my head? Maybe we should all just wear those inflatable sumo suits, ya know, and veils over our faces, so we don't distract any of the boys.”

She saw he was inching back, and let out a sigh. Her face suddenly softened to something closer to its usual self. “I'm sorry, Conner. I know you didn't mean anything, and I'm sorry I took it out on you. It's just been a sucky freaking day.”

“Oh hey, it's totally OK. I can't imagine. And you're right, the dress code is such total bull. I always see people protesting their school's on social media, but they usually don't enforce it at Northside. I guess somebody didn't have a very relaxing winter break.”

Again, he was immediately aware he'd said the wrong thing. “Are you serious? Conner, they enforce it all the time. You just don't notice because they take girls aside all quiet and sensitive-like, and then they – we – disappear for the day. Most of my friends have been busted for it at least once this year.”

“Really?”

“Totally. Hayleigh got called out the week before finals because like three inches of her lower back was showing. She had to spend the rest of the day in ISS in one of these stupid things, and she missed the review and totally bombed the final. But hey, at least none of the boys were *distracted*.”

Conner wondered if it would be as distracting if they could see the same Hayleigh he saw. “Wow. I didn't realize.”



The bell rang, and the rest of the class fled for the chill but free air. “Guess that means I can ditch this,” Heather said bitterly, hastily shedding the T-shirt and tossing it to the floor contemptuously.

Immediately, he saw what had landed her in ISS. The shirt she wore was skintight, and the horizontal stripes accentuated every incredible curve. The neckline was a plunging oval, and her bra was managing a herculean effort of thrusting her boobs simultaneously upward and outward. When he realized he was staring, Conner looked up to see Heather smirking. She didn’t look upset, though.

“Anybody who covers *that* up is insane. Sorry, I don’t mean to sound sexist, but you look amazing.”

“Thanks.” She smiled. “You know, we had that talk last semester about how I dress, and after almost losing my college fund... Sorry, I don’t want to hold you up. I know school’s over.”

“No, please. Go on.” He gestured to the couch, and the two sat down opposite one another. She shut the door first behind her.

“OK, so like, my grandpa – my mom’s dad, not my dad’s – he was such an asshole. In general, but especially to her. She got pregnant her senior year of high school with me. Except he’s all religious and stuff, and so abortion was not an option. Which, I mean, *I’m* glad for, but still, he’s the one who forced her to go through with it. Which back then meant dropping out of school, because there was nobody to look after me.”

“Yeah, I remember you told me. And then he basically disowned her because of the whole single mom thing and all, right?”

Outside, the room was now empty save for the presence of Miss C – Kristy – tidying up. “And he had money, he could’ve gotten day care or whatever, but no, he had to teach her his bullshit lesson about the wickedness of sexuality. And she took it to heart, because she’s a nice person and it was easier to feel bad about herself than be pissed off at him.”

Conner had met Heather’s mom only once, briefly, when he’d picked her up for their first date. She’d been pleasant, but he’d also gotten a bit of a “don’t fuck with my daughter” vibe. “Yeah, she seemed really nice.”

“She is. She didn’t deserve that puritanical prick. And honestly? My mom has never said it, but I know that’s what his whole college fund thing was about. It was win-win for him. Either I’d be completely perfect, and he could show her that she was no good and she could’ve had everything if she hadn’t been a little slut. Or I’d fuck up, and he could show her that she’d brought a worthless kid into the world, one no better than she was.”

Conner’s grandparents on his mother’s side lived two hours away and contact with them was mostly complaints about how they weren’t contacted more often. He hadn’t even seen his dad’s parents since middle school. They sent him a check for his

birthday every year, a bittersweet reminder of their mutual loss. Add to that his mother, who had loved and supported him unreservedly his whole life, and he had conceded that this sort of strife was not something he'd experienced. He simply sat quiet and let Heather speak.

“And I've been *feeling* that for a long time, like this whole money thing was just his way of using me to hurt my mom, and so I've tried to *not* be like he saw her because... I dunno, maybe it felt like she was disappointed in the way he saw her and I didn't want to look like I was following in those footsteps?”

“That makes sense. I think.”

“Then you and I talked, and you know, how I said I wanted to get noticed, you know?”

Conner nodded. She had not, in fact, said that, but since TIOS had made her believe his every word, he'd had a weak moment upon realizing how literally that seemed to be. Actually, until that moment, he hadn't even considered that his confabulation – that after *she* fainted, she'd told him she wanted to get more attention for her boobs – could be behind her shift in wardrobe. It had been a heady moment, and he barely remember what he'd said. Whatever it was, it apparently still left her plenty of room to back out after only three dates.

“And I've realized, I actually like like the way I look. And I'm tired of trying to dress down to keep from pissing off the ghost of my jerk of a grandfather. So to come in feeling empowered and adult and then have Mr. Stegers send me to the office where I'm told I have to go right back to covering myself up... I'm just tired of letting men tell me how to dress myself!”

She realized from the way Conner was leaning back that she'd gotten a bit more intense than she'd intended. “Sorry, Conner. I guess I shouldn't be venting to you about my problems, after... you know.”

“I don't mind.” He really didn't.

She smiled softly, swiping a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “Where were you when I still had time left to date high school guys?”

He pointed to the chair behind the editor's desk. “About six feet that way, too chicken to ask you out.”

Her smile broadened for a moment. “Say, speaking of, how about that new girl?”

“Which one?”

“The editor, doofus. The one I just saw walk out of here?”

“What about her?”

“You should ask her out! She's pretty cute, and I'm sure you have a lot in common. Plus, new girl means nobody's got dibs yet, right? Strike while the iron's hot!”

Conner tried once more to objectively assess the attractiveness of Amanda Carpenter, but the stench of sulfur and firm belief that her tennis shoes concealed a pair

of cloven hooves continued to dissuade him. “Yeah, maybe. So do we get to look forward to a righteous selfie tonight, one more girl shaking her fist at The Man and his dress code?”

She giggled. “Yeah, maybe. I don’t know. I can’t get myself suspended, but they can’t stop me from looking hot online.”

“Hey, I thought you looked hot with that frumpy t-shirt on. You don’t need to tell me.”

“Blergh. Someone should burn that thing.”

“Hey. Maybe someone should.”

Conner’s phone buzzed, and he snatched it from his pocket by reflex. Owen, wanting to know what was holding him up, with an expletive-laden reminder of how cold it was.

“Hey, I should let you go,” Heather said, standing. She stopped by the door to pick up the shame shirt, wadding it up and tucking it into her purse. “Thanks for listening, and thanks for talking. I’ll see you tomorrow, OK?”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.” Though he’d be seeing a bit less of her, sadly.

She noticed his glance downward, and rolled her eyes with a little grin. “Last eyeful for a while, Conner.” She winked at him, then left.

He had just enough time to text Owen and Angelica to go on without him again and slump back on the couch, letting the fading image of Heather’s amazing boobs project on his eyelids, before he heard heeled footsteps enter the room.

“You look unhappy. Give me a few minutes to finish up out here, and let’s talk.”

Conner nodded, shuffling numbly over to the couch and laying down. Damn that Amanda Carpenter! And damn him for not having the stones to ask out Heather earlier! Maybe she was only being sweet, but still. Damn it!

Cassie, a junior that Conner expected would succeed him as editor next year, came in and out of the editor's office while he waited to check out a camera, politely ignoring her agonized-looking editor-in-chief lying with his eyes squeezed shut in the back of the room. One of her editors-in-chief, that is. The old, boring one.

Finally, the lights went out in the classroom, and Miss C entered the office. There, too, she transitioned from the harsh fluorescent lights to the soft lamp in the corner. Up went the blinds. With Conner taking up the couch, she rolled his desk chair alongside him and sat down. "How you holding up, Conner?" She squeezed his leg. It wasn't entirely suggestive, but neither could it be considered entirely platonic.

"I've had better days."

"I know it. I'm so sorry about today. I found out late yesterday, and she got to my classroom only minutes before you did. As soon as I found out, I knew you'd be upset, but like I said, this was out of my hands."

He opened his eyes, looking at his teacher plaintively. "But surely there's something we can do. Isn't there? Like, we can have her be assistant editor? Just because she was running the show at wherever her old school was—"

"Oz, if I recall."

"—it doesn't mean she should be in charge here! She doesn't know Northside! She doesn't know the students, the faculty, the rivalries, the traditions... how can we leave someone in charge of recording the memories of our class when she doesn't share in any of them?!"

She swiped her fingers through her hair, as if trying to wipe away her own tension. "To a large extent, I agree with you. Having two leaders is bad for any organization. Especially since you're not editors but editors-in-chief. With you two in charge of the actual production, I can't even step in as teacherly overlord and assume command."

"Can't you, though? Who's watching? Would Principal Beckmann really storm down and yell at you for taking charge of the yearbook?"

"Well for one, he might, because I don't know how Amanda and her family would react if I demoted her and how much hell they might raise. And for two, it's less about that, and more about what happens if ASAL gets wind of it. Right now, we're a highly rated program, and you get to put that on your college applications. The editor my first year at NHS got them to really go to bat for him, secured a major scholarship. Right now, the program is student-run and top quality, so you're looking really good to them. As will your successor, and their successor."

"So?"

“So, if they find out that our editor-in-chief isn’t actually serving in that capacity and that a faculty member is doing their job, you’ll lose that good will, the program will be permanently stained, as will my custody of it. Maybe it’s not as bad as those teachers in Georgia who were caught fixing standardized tests, but it’s the yearbook equivalent.”

Conner scowled. She was right, and it galled. His college applications were already out, but having one of his strongest achievements and his most vocal recommendation tarnished could cost more than it was worth down the road. Plus, like she said, drawing negative attention to the program, as that fiend Amanda Carpenter seemed exactly the sort to try to do, could also hurt future editors down the line. His legacy had to be bigger than his pride, and as editor-in-chief, legacies were kind of his thing.

“There’s nothing we can do then?”

“I could do what I did when I was in high school, spread rumors that she gave one of the popular boys chlamydia.” He sat up, looking at her agog. “I’m kidding.” Then she mumbled, “mostly.”

“Augh!” He slammed a fist on the armrest. “Have you even talked to her yet? Gotten to know her at all? She’s... She’s just so... so... Augh!”

Miss C struck a patient tone. “Maybe you need to spend a little time getting to know her. She seemed to make a good impression on the rest of the staff.”

“Oh, I suppose now *you’re* going to tell me I should date her, too.”

Miss C laughed. “Heather said that?” He confirmed she had. “I swear, that girl...”

“That girl, what? What do you mean?”

“I mean, she knows she used you and hurt you and now she’s trying to pawn you off on somebody so she doesn’t have to handle the backlash. It’s what hot girls have been doing to sweet boys since the dawn of time.”

“Use me? Heather didn’t use me. If anything, I used her.”

Her features waned sympathetic. Pitying, really. “Oh, sweetie.”

“What! She didn’t. I was the one who used TIOS to score the date in the first place. Getting dumped for it is what I deserved.”

“Using someone isn’t always about sex, Conner.”

“We didn’t have sex!” Despite his own history with Miss C, he suddenly felt quite self-conscious discussing his sex life with his teacher.

“What I mean is, Heather is the sort of person who sees herself as the Nice Girl. Rejecting you made her feel mean, to say nothing of how you reacted to it. So she gave you a shot in order to restore her self-image. Then she could feel like she threw her dog a bone, how nice of her, and with her self-image restored, she let you down easy, double nice.”

“That’s not... she wouldn’t...” Would she? It didn’t sound like Heather. But he supposed it could be true. Then again, Miss C and Heather both harbored some strange dislike of one another. Conner did not understand women, that was for certain.

“And no, by the way, I’m not trying to say you should hit on Amanda. Honestly, if she doesn’t have a date set up with Don or DeShaun by the end of the day, I’ll be pretty surprised.”

“I think Don’s seeing Brittany Dettweiler.”

“Well, lucky DeShaun.”

He frowned. “She’s not even that good-looking.”

Miss C chuckled. “Sure, Conner. Whatever you need to tell yourself.”

“Is this why you wanted to talk to me? To make me feel even worse than I already did?”

At her grimace, Conner immediately regretted his words; that blow may have struck lower than he’d intended. “No, that’s not why. I know we have something else important on the docket.”

“Oh. Right.” His heart started beating faster at the prospect of this dialogue.

“So, let’s dive in, shall we?” She looked at him expectantly. “Did you read that email from the print shop about the increase in cyan ink costs?”

After a moment, he burst into laughter. “Yeah, actually. We’re going to have to either scale back on the senior portraits, or I might be able to shade them so—”

“I’m kidding, Conner. I know you have something to say, and I’ve kept you waiting all day. So say it already.” She put a hand over his and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Man. I obsessed over this all day yesterday and the day before, and then this whole thing with that Amanda Carpenter almost made me forget about it,” he admitted.

“Don’t let her wreck this for you, too. C’mon, the people are dying of suspense over here.”

“All right. So. This whole school year, I’ve had my eye out for Heather Blake. And I haven’t really thought about anyone else like that, and even though I fooled around a little with this one girl, I guess I sorta figured that I wanted to be with someone I really care about, or nobody at all, you know?”

Kristy schooled her features, seeing that this pronouncement was to be more drawn out than she’d anticipated, and let him get the words out. “But then this thing with you and I happened, and it was so amazing and you were so, just *wow*, and then there was Heather, and I didn’t see you all break, and then yesterday, or two days ago, or whatever, we talked, and...”

He stopped to take a breath. “Sorry, I’m really nervous.”

“Don’t be.”

Conner paused to take a few deep breaths. At last, with Kristy fidgeting anxiously with the curly mop of her ponytail, he gave it another try. “All right. So... here’s the thing. I like you. I always liked you. And you’re so, so pretty, and just... wow. And I’m not just saying that – you’re really, *really*–, um...”

“I get it, you’re attracted to me. Keep going.” She smiled and waved him on, trying not to look impatient.

“Right. Sorry. Now, you always say a good question is more important than a fast answer, right?”

“I suppose I do say that,” she said dryly.

“So here it is. Do you think you ever would’ve, you know...”

“Had sex with you?”

“Yeah. That. Would you have done that, if not for TIOS?”

She laughed softly. “Conner, you’ve always been a favorite of mine. I think you’re cute as a button, sweet as can be, and a genuinely kind person. But if you’re asking if I would ever normally engage in a sexual relationship with a student?” She shook her head. “You’re cute, but you’re not *that* cute.”

Conner wilted a little inside. It was what he’d expected to hear, but it didn’t make it much easier on his swollen ego. “I sorta figured. I mean, I didn’t ever expect to do something like that with a teacher either.”

“Naturally. But now you did. And I did. And I think you liked it. Right?”

“Right. But it’s not that simple, Kristy. It’s just not.”

“Ah. So you’re afraid of getting caught. Is that it?”

“No, I– Well, yes, actually, but we could probably be careful enough if we wanted.”

“Probably, yes. Is it because I’m a teacher and you’re my student?”

“No. Actually, um, I think that’s kind of, like, hot. If that’s not weird.”

“Again, I agree. I spend so much time trying to ignore the stray glances of all you boys that it was surprisingly rewarding to indulge one.” She smiled thinly. “Is it because I’m older?”

His eyes narrowed. “How old are you?”

“That’s a rude question to ask a lady, but you had a bad day, I’ll let it slide.”

“Sorry. But anyway, no. There’s nothing at all wrong with you.”

Miss C arched a thin eyebrow. “You’re giving me too much credit.”

“You know what I mean!” he exclaimed, his frustration increasing at not finding the words. Or at least, the courage to say them.

“All right. So if it’s not the obvious hurdles, what’s holding you back?”

He looked down at the worn rug on the floor, unable to say the words to her face. “Because I don’t want you to do it because I made you!”

She blinked. “Because you made me? Conner, nobody *made* me do anything. Let’s face it, I was the one who made the first move.”

Conner shook his head. “But these feelings you’re having aren’t real, don’t you get that? I put your quote into TIOS, and now you have no choice but to act this way!”

She lifted his chin up until their eyes met. “Is that what you think? You think I’m some helpless puppet? That I can’t decide things for myself?”

Her tone made him want to rush to reassurance, but he stopped himself. “But that’s the thing, TIOS is the one deciding it for you! Look. I want you to do something you know will upset me. Hurt my feelings, make fun of me, whatever. Do it.”

Her look of displeasure intensified. “No. Conner, why would I be mean to you for no reason? You’re my student, and my friend.”

He stood up, looming over her only as long as it took for her to stand up and look him eye to eye. He threw his hands up in the air in exasperation. “See! You can’t. That’s my point. TIOS won’t let you do it!”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Oh? How do you know I simply don’t want to? Tell you what, let’s turn the tables. I want you to hit me. Just once. In the arm, if you want to keep it light. But really, I want you to. Don’t hold back – hit me.” She twisted at the hips, offering up her right bicep.

He stepped back, falling down on the couch but bouncing back up to mask his embarrassment. “What? I’m not going to hit you. No way.”

“Oh? But how do you know that’s really you, and not some magic spell or something stopping you?”

“But nobody ever...”

“That you know of, right? But hey, you’re probably right. So if you are totally free willed and I’m just some wind-up toy, go ahead. C’mon, do something you don’t want to do. Throw that laptop on the ground. Break the lamp. Pee on the rug – anything. I want to see you do it.”

There was an icy silence as, of course, Conner didn’t do any such thing. “It’s not the same,” he said at last.

“Says philosopher-king Fishers, eh?” She stormed into the classroom, snatching a book out of her purse before returning and jabbing the edge of it hard into his chest. The cover read *Culpability and Morality*. “I told you, I’ve been reading about free will. When it boils down to it, none of us have totally free will. Everybody has a hundred factors influencing everything they do. Whether it’s upbringing, the law, religious guilt, anxiety, tiredness, or a gun to your goddamn head. So when I tell you that something made me feel good and I want to keep doing it, don’t presume you’re inside my head and know why!”

Conner rubbed the spot where she’d poked him. “Kristy, I...”



“Sure, maybe TIOS made me *want* to be nice to you. But let me ask you something. You *wanted* to ask out Heather Blake for years. Why didn’t you?”

“I... I don’t know, I just...”

“Because we don’t always blindly act on the things we want to do!” she answered for him. He’d never heard Miss C actually yell before. She had her teacher voice, sure, but she actually had a way of getting quieter when she got annoyed that somehow worked much better than yelling. Or so he’d thought until this moment. “I *want* to move to Florida. I *want* to learn to salsa dance. I *want* to slap you upside the head right now! But am I doing those things?”

He realized that question wasn’t rhetorical. “Uh, no.”

“No, I haven’t. Because there’s a world of difference between what we want to do, and what we choose to do. You say TIOS is ‘made me’ feel a certain way, even though it’s the way I told you I already felt. And I’m telling you, our choices are more than our desires. So for today, I choose to ask you to go on home and come back tomorrow with a plan in hand for how you and Amanda can begin an amicable and fair sharing of responsibility, *co*-editor-in-chief. Is that understood?”

Conner licked suddenly dry lips. “Understood.” Her response had done a lot to erode the already feeble resistance he’d managed to summon to her proposal from two days ago. “So, um, before I go, I don’t suppose you’d wanna...”

“I don’t suppose I would. Plan in hand tomorrow, Conner.”

Hailey McManus was not having a great day. Which is to say, it was like most days. Up early for school, make sure Doug wasn't merely pretending to be awake before she left, then on her bike and ready to go. Of course, it was fifteen degrees out today, plus the roads were still bad from the snowstorm, which meant either walking the mile and a half to school, or meandering in and out of traffic wherever the edges of the road were too slushy. She had opted for the latter, and arrived at school so thoroughly soaked in gray-brown sludge from the waist down that she skipped first period to dry them out in her spot under the auditorium stage, warming them in the heat from the nearby boiler room.

Curled up in their old hook-up spot, she even dared to hope that maybe Conner would come by – she even had a valid excuse to not have her pants on – but no such luck. She'd heard how Heather Blake had already dumped him; it was stupid of her to think that a guy who scored even a single date with the busty blonde titty toast of Northside would go back to someone like her. She'd even been exercising and eating better lately, but the scale persisted in hatefully reminding her she was never to drop below 125. She was born to be a whale, it seemed. Though she thought her hair was looking a little better lately. Not that it would matter. She may as well have Hefty Hailey tattooed on her forehead.

It wasn't fair. She'd landed Conner fair and square, when out of nowhere he was snatched away. He'd told her he wanted to give her a second shot, and later that same day, she'd caught him fooling around with Heather Blake in his office – the same office she'd first gone down on him in last semester. Was it Heather's idea of a practical joke, to steal the ugly girl's boy at the last minute? Some kind of power trip? Sheer cruelty? Heather had always seemed like such a nice girl in their classes... Maybe it was just dumb luck, that their stars aligned in the nick of time to steal away her happiness. Could it even be Conner trying to hurt her, for kicks?

No. Conner was a nice boy. He'd hurt her, but he'd apologized, and she'd seen in his eyes that he meant it. She should have known no boy like him would ever want someone like her. So she went back to her routine, reining in those hopes and locking them back in the dungeon where they belonged.

School was the usual slog. Boring classes, and she only had a friend in one class, except it was Denise, who was still mad at her over the fight they'd had when Hailey had confided in her that she'd lost her v-card. Denise had called her a liar, and Hailey had called her a prude, and that had been before break. They'd hardly spoken since. Spaghetti casserole for lunch, which she enjoyed, except some of the boys at a nearby table started flicking skittles at her. One of them almost struck her in the eye right while she was drinking her carton of milk. She dropped it, and there went the spaghetti casserole. Brad and Mikey were laughing hysterically, but she knew there was no point in telling on them. Mr. Rodriguez either caught someone red-handed or didn't

investigate at all. Besides, they weren't the only ones laughing. It really could have been any number of people.

The last bell rang, and Hailey heaved her usual sigh of relief. The lunch incident had been the sum total of the day's bullying – unless that jeep really had splashed her on purpose, which made for two, which was still not so bad – but her arrival at the bike rack upped the total by another. The seat of her bicycle had something doodled it; once she got up close, she could see that it said “MOO” in all caps, slathered on in whiteout. She scratched at it, but the frigid air made her fingers hurt too much to bother. Immediately, she glanced around the parking lot. (Oftentimes, she'd learned, the perpetrators of these slights enjoyed witnessing the reaction it got them.) But nobody seemed to be paying attention to her.

That is, until she tried to get on the bike and found the air had been let out of the tires. The unexpected feeling of the rims hitting the pavement threw her off-balance and she fell. Worse, the front tire was still partially in the bike rack, and when she fell sideways, it bent the entire rim.

“That's why pigs ride in trucks!” yelled someone from their car window, following the taunt with a series of snorts.

“Poor bike finally had too much!” cackled another.

“Hefty hefty hefty!” a trio of boys walking by said in a deep voice. Those commercials had practically become her theme song over the years.

But right before she picked herself up, suddenly there was a hand in her face. “Are you OK?”

She looked up, and standing there was, of all people... “Jordan?”

“The one, the only.” He smiled at her. Maybe the first time he'd ever smiled in her direction without first cracking a joke at her expense. How could someone so mean be so handsome? “So... you OK?” he repeated.

Hailey finally realized he was holding out his hand to help her up, and allowed him to do so. To be safe, she tried not to put enough of her weight in his grasp that she'd fall when he let go. Surprisingly, he didn't. “Yeah, I'll be all right. More than I can say for my bike.”

“I saw. That sucks. You're sure you're not hurt though?”

Hailey literally shook her head a little, worried she might have a concussion. Jordan Lyons was checking to see if she was OK? He'd never spoken to her in life except to tease her. And even that had ended in middle school, when even being seen talking to her was more of a social risk than he seemed willing to take. Still, she knew his reputation as a punk and a player.

And, she hated to admit, he *was* really cute. That throwback high-swept hair, black sunglasses, the jean jacket... the 80's seemed to be attempting a comeback, and they'd chosen one heck of a pair of shoulders to start with.

Why was he suddenly being... nice?

“You’re starting to worry me, uh, Holly...? That’s not it.”

“Hailey,” she supplied.

“Right. So you remember your name. Good. How many fingers am I holding up?”

He held up a closed fist. She waited a few seconds for fingers to raise, but they didn’t. “Uh... what?”

He grinned. “I’m just screwing with you Hailey. Looks like your bike’s pretty fucked up, huh.”

“Yeah. Looks like.” As she spoke, she could tell he was realizing what was written on the seat. Not surprisingly, he gave a little chuckle.

But his words contrasted sharply with his reaction. “Sorry. That’s so shitty. Whoever did that... man, people can be such fuckin’ dicks, you know?”

“Yeah. I mean, I guess. Sure, yeah.” Why did cute boys make her so tongue-tied? Usually her loquacious nature was one of her greatest strengths!

“I can give you a lift, if you want.”

Her eyes widened. What? Being nice was one thing, but... going out of his way...? To *help* her...? The tint in his windows couldn’t possibly be *that* dark. “Oh, I couldn’t...”

“No worries, girl. Tell you what, let’s toss that bike in the back of my SUV. Should fit.”

She was still looking around for someone recording what must be some kind of prank as he jogged away into the parking lot. There was nothing to do then but wait, but it didn’t take long. Jordan didn’t even wait for permission; he snatched her bike and threw it in the back of his SUV – which was a heck of a nice vehicle, metallic gold and really new and shiny looking, except for where the road salt was caked on the bottom. She was still staring in disbelief by the time he hopped back into the driver seat.

“You comin’, girl?”

Girl. Nobody ever called her ‘girl’ like that. That was something boys did to flirt with cute girls. “I guess.”

She was riding in a car alone with Jordan Lyons. What was happening?! “This is a really nice car,” she said.

“It’s an SUV, not a car,” he corrected. She immediately felt like an idiot. “But thanks, it was a birthday present last year from my stepdad.”

“Oh wow, that’s so cool! My mom talked about maybe letting me buy her car in a couple years. It’s kind of old and stuff, but I’d be buying a used car anyways, and at least this way I could trust the past owner and know its history. And it has memories, you know? I’m such a sucker for sentimental value. Like this one time, we were taking my brother to the park, only we didn’t realize he wasn’t in the back seat, and we sort of left without him, and we stopped and realized he was like two blocks back sprinting after the car, and we backed up to meet him and then he got in and was so upset that when we got

to the park we couldn't get him to get out, so now that's Doug's seat, in perpetuity, and he won't ride anywhere else, even if the front seat is open. Isn't that funny?"

Jordan nodded. "Yeah, totally. You wanna listen to some tunes?"

She didn't have a chance to respond before he turned on the radio – some kind of loud hip hop song she didn't recognize that seemed to be about a man inviting a woman to go down on him, if she was reading the slang right. It was... graphic. Jordan didn't seem to realize it, or at least didn't mind.

"So where you live, girl?"

"6326 Opal Park Way. It's behind the Foodway. The east side one."

"You got it." Then the music was back up. It was rattling her entire body, it was so loud, but maybe this was how cool kids listened to it? It would be rude to complain.

At the first red light, Jordan reached inside his jacket and produced a pack of cigarettes, quickly lighting one and rolling the window down a crack. "You smoke, babe?"

Babe?! Her cheeks flushed. "Uh, no. I mean, I never have, anyway..."

"That sounds like an 'I wanna,' right?" He grinned, and with a jerk of his wrist, another cigarette flicked out of the pack as he extended it to her. Her mother had smoked for a long time, until Hailey was around seven. So she was used to the smell, and as she took her first drag, she barely coughed.

"Good, right?"

She nodded, trying to exhale normally, but failing. A little sputter produced small bursts of blue-white smoke. "Yeah. It's really good."

As he drove on, he coached her on how to handle it. To hold the smoke in, get herself acclimated, then let it all out at once. By the time they pulled up in front of her house, she felt like she was getting the hang of it. She dribbled ash on her blouse, but wiped it off before he noticed. At least, he didn't say anything.

*McWelcome to the McManus Home!* proclaimed a sign she and her mother had painted together a couple years ago. It suddenly felt so embarrassing in front of someone like Jordan. Oh well. She was home now, and back to reality.

"Thanks for the ride, Jordan. And, um, the cigarette." She smiled as she exited the vehicle. "I'll see you later, I guess."

"Hang on, I still gotta get your bike." He hustled around to the back of the car, and she didn't fail to notice he hadn't left the engine running. With the bike in hand, he turned back to Hailey and asked, "Where you want it?"

"Um, the garage?"

"Lead the way."

It was absurd, the notion that she couldn't have easily moved it up there herself. She was even aware that women existed in the world who had so many men looking for excuses to do things for them that they found it annoying. Hot privilege, maybe? For

Hailey, though, trying not to be too obvious about watching Jordan's cute little backside was her only response to the chivalry on display.

He was nearly to the top of the driveway when he set it down. "Was that your phone or mine?"

"Huh? I didn't hear anything."

Jordan reached for his phone and studied the screen a moment. "Oh, damn. My stepmom texted me to warn me she's got her cunt friends over and to piss off for a while."

"Oh. Um, that's too bad."

He carried the bike the final few feet, setting it down quite nearly where it normally went. "Hey, maybe this is weird and all, but... you mind if I hang out here for a while? My friends are at this totally lame... look, it's not interesting, but basically I got no place to go, and I don't wanna drive around town in this slushy shit just to kill time."

Her heart throbbed in her chest. For the second time in her life, a boy – a cute boy! – wanted to hang out in her house. What in the heck was going on?! There was only one reason why he might want to hang out with her, and it was to find a means of humiliating her somehow. She didn't know how, but somehow.

"Look, Jordan, maybe this isn't the best idea."

"What? What's wrong, girl?"

Girl, again. Why did that affect her so? "I just... I barely know you. And we're not friends. I don't know what your game is, but please, I just want to be left alone."

"Game? There's no game, Hailey. Shit, we've known each other since like freshman year, and we've hardly ever talked."

"We've been in school together since first grade, Jordan. We had our lockers right next to each other all through middle school." She'd been relieved that the high school didn't assign lockers alphabetically.

"Yeah, that's what I meant. Sorry, I'm not really good at talking to girls one on one, ya know? I get tongue-tied." The thrill skipped right past her throbbing heart and this time slammed right into her pussy. *She* was making *him* nervous?! "Anyway, I just thought you seemed cool, and I wanted to get to know you better. That's all."

Hailey fidgeted in place. She knew she wasn't cool, as sure as she knew the sun rose in the east. Yet hearing that lie from his lips turned her around so that she couldn't have guessed which way was which. "I don't know..."

"I'll be a perfect gentleman, hand to god. If I try anything funny, you just toss my ass right out in the snow. Cool?" That smile!

"O-okay," she said at last. "Come on in."

Jordan Lyons was having an amazing day. As he followed this girl, this creature with the body of a goddess and the personality of a dog turd, he had to fight to play it casual. He couldn't believe she hadn't already told him to get lost. She got suspicious he was going to shit on her once he got into her house, but didn't have the brains to realize he was the one who'd fucked up her bike? For fuck's sake, he'd been ten feet away when it happened. It was always the person settled in to witness the reaction who'd done it. How could someone bullied as much as Hefty Hailey McManus not know that?

"Do you want something to drink?" she asked once they'd taken off their shoes and coats. "We have kool-aid, or coke, or water."

Jordan looked to where she was pointing in the fridge. Coke? Diet caffeine-free pepsi. Holy shit, these people. He gestured past where she was pointing to a collection of bottles tucked in the back. "What's the story on that beer?"

"Beer? Uh, we're not... I mean, I'm not..."

"Come on, Hailey. It's only one beer. Your folks won't miss it, right?"

She giggled. "Yeah, I guess not. It's been in there since Thanksgiving. The only reason we have it is because my uncle won't come over if we don't have the beer he likes. I'm not even kidding – one year we didn't have it, and he totally threw this huge fit, and..."

He reached past her and grabbed two bottles, using a hand on her waist for balance as he leaned in. The bitch tensed like he'd twisted her nipple – too fucking easy. "Cheers."

They clinked bottles, and he downed his in one go. Girls like Hefty were always impressed by that for some reason. She tried to do the same, and about halfway down she coughed up a big mouthful. Some of it splashed on his socks. Fucking great. Not that his trophy wife stepmom was going to give a shit if he came home reeking of alcohol.

"Sorry! Sorry, I didn't mean to... oh gosh, here, let me..." She scurried to find a towel and dabbed at the floor.

"Don't worry about it, babe." He stepped back when she started in on his feet. "Really, it's cool. Not the first time I had a little beer spilled on me."

"Yeah, totally. I mean, of course. Same here," she said, an obvious lie. As if he gave a shit.

She stood back up, and, eager to get on with things and move past foreplay, he touched his fingers to where a spot had spilled on her shirt. It was most of the way up her left breast, and while it was high enough it wasn't quite a direct violation, it sure as shit wasn't nothing. God damn. He'd wanted to touch that cunt Hayleigh's tits for years, but Jayce beat him to it and had his territory staked out. Word had it he'd beat some kid from Central to a pulp because he saw him pestering her in the stands during one of his football games. The meathead gave up a touchdown that cost them the game, but had

plenty of attention where his slam piece was concerned. But with this girl, the only other person who might stake her out was that douche canoe Fishers.

“You spilled a little on yourself, too.” He poked a finger at a spot on her chest, not quite over her bra.

She turned crimson. He and Hayleigh were close friends; he’d never seen her blush in her life. If something embarrassed her, she turned on the bitch switch and demolished the offender where he stood. Kirsten Vaughan was the only girl he knew who surpassed her mastery of bitchcraft, and only the fact that Hayleigh was content to restrict herself to Jayce kept them from being mortal enemies.

“Um, yeah. Oops.”

“Do you wanna change? I mean, I don’t want you to be uncomfortable. And you don’t wanna smell like beer when your folks come home.”

“Oh! Yeah. Well, no. I mean, my mom won’t be home for, like, hours yet. And Doug won’t get out of school until four. Plus, he’s in choir, so add like an hour for that. Plus transit, which—”

“Who’s Doug?” No way this bitch had a college aged boyfriend. No fucking way. Or were people outside NHS immune to TIOS? No, that couldn’t be the case, or her family would’ve freaked on day one.

“Doug’s my little brother. He’s in fourth grade, and…” Finally, she realized his fingers were still where he’d placed them, and resumed feeling awkward. God, making Hayleigh squirm was delicious. “Um, yeah, anyway, I should probably change.”

“Can I watch?” He waited for her to feel the shock of the ballsy advance, then laughed it off. “Kidding, obviously. Though I’m curious to see your room. I always think you can tell so much about somebody from their bedroom, you know?”

“What? Oh, yeah. Sure. Yeah, you can, um, follow. Follow me, that is, I mean.”

Her stammering had him even harder than those perfect tits of hers. She lead him down a hallway, past a room that had to be Doug’s from the typical little boy paraphernalia, and into her own. It was about what he’d have expected. Walls painted pink, dresser covered in stickers, the floor covered in dirty clothes and assorted books and personal effects. Not surprising – what was a loser like Hefty Hailey going to have in her room? A friend? He smirked at her back, morphing it into his flirt smile in time for her to turn around.

“It’s really nice,” he said. “Oh hey, my sister had the same teddy bear. Has, I guess. She’s off at college now, so her room’s kind of this empty shrine to her.”

Hailey, meanwhile, was hastily kicking the dirty clothes under her bed, mortified that he was seeing her boring ass granny panties. A box of feminine supplies was sitting out on her nightstand, which she literally slapped away to knock it behind her dresser. Jordan was noticing that everything here seemed Hayleigh-sized, including what he could see in the closet. He was pretty sure, at least. Amazing. That fucking wonder



program had managed to not only swap the girls, but even resized their wardrobes for them. It would have to, he supposed, if they were going to keep on living like nothing had changed.

“Sorry about the mess. I wasn’t expecting anyone, so...”

“What? Oh come on, you should see mine.” His indeed looked every bit as bad; their housekeeper Esmeralda wasn’t due back until Friday.

“Yeah. Well, I’d give you the tour, but you can kinda, you know, see everything.”

“Sure, sure. You want me to turn around, so you can...?” Jordan had some experience with girls like this, with rock-bottom self-esteem. If you could get them out of their shirt, you could get them anywhere. He just wished she’d hurry this up, but he knew it was important not to be too aggressive. She’d almost spooked on him in the garage. But if she was OK this time around and he let there be a next time, hopefully they could move shit along.

“Right. Yeah. Uh, gosh. I just need to find something to put on real quick.”

Jordan tilted his head to one side. “Need any help?”

The girl probably didn’t even realize the way her hand practically spasmed, fidgeting at her side. “What?”

Jordan took the lead, again, and walked over to her closet. He looked through. Lots of boring shit. It was clear that although the clothing sizes had changed, the fashion had not. These were by and large the clothes of a girl who was trying not to be noticed, who got most of her clothes in the bargain bin with a few “special” ensembles from birthdays and Christmases. She silently watched him riffle through her hanging clothes, but after a minute, towards the back, he found something worthy of that body.

“How about this? This is cute.” He held it up to her. It was a red top that looked like it would be good and tight on her, and with a neckline that would show one hell of a lot of cleavage. Plus, he figured it would be easy enough to justify to her self-image. He’d seen enough of the real Hayleigh in her disgusting new body over break, and she clearly still thought she was the same trim, sexy girl she’d always been. It stood to reason this girl, who’d still think of herself as a total lardass, would have that typical fat girl pride in her jugs. Like guys gave two fucks if a pig had huge titties.

“That!?” she exclaimed, eyes widening.

“I dunno. Maybe I’m out of line here, but... a pair like those shouldn’t be hid away. If I’m being too honest, just say so, but I’m just sayin’.”

Her jaw dropped, but he could tell the flattery had struck home. “I mean, I can put that on, if you want...”

Jordan handed off the garment, then turned around to let her change. He heard her wet shirt hit the floor, and took a glance over his shoulder. He’d seen Hayleigh in bikinis before, but never in just her bra. She had her back to him, but she was glancing back at him as well, and giggled shyly.

All right. He could keep this bullshit flirtation game going all afternoon, or he could push his luck now. “You know, you don’t have to put it on if you don’t want.”

“Jordan...” He braced himself for a rebuke, that she’d gone suspicious again. Which she should be. He’d have shoved his dick in a pencil sharpener as soon as let this heifer touch it. But little did she know, that perv Fishers had used her as a human guinea pig to test out TIOS. Jordan had to hand it to the loser. It’s exactly what he would’ve done. Nobody was easier to manipulate than losers like this girl.

But instead of scolding him, or backing down, she slowly turned to face him. As he did the same, her body twisted to the side bashfully, but her feet stayed planted. “Do... do you really like them?”

“Seriously? Those babies are top notch, Hailey. You must not’ve had them when we were locker buddies, ‘cause I sure as hell would’ve remembered those.”

She grinned, but it quickly faded. “Honest? If you’re just setting me up to make fun of me, just say so.”

“You’re still worried about that?” Jordan fished his cell phone out of his pocket, opened her top dresser drawer, and dumped it in. “There, crazy girl. No chance I’m recording shit, snapping pics, nothing. That better? Just you and me now.”

She seemed to mull that over, and finally let out her breath. “OK. Yeah. Sorry, I just... this is all so...”

“Hey, sometimes life takes you places you never thought you’d go.” She swooned at his cheesy line, like he’d known she would. Fuck, this dumb bitch was too easy. “Now, I believe we left off at me appreciating those suckers right there.”

Hailey sucked in her lower lip anxiously as he descended on those heavenly tits with all the tenderness he could force himself to employ. She was wearing a plain beige bra, having obviously not anticipated anyone seeing it, much less a guy. Much less a good-looking guy like him. Whatever. He’d been fantasizing over these tits for years, and now Jayce was no impediment at all. Jordan was about to cuck that stupid jock and he’d never even know it.

The bra came off in no time at all. Hailey’s doing, actually. Once he started touching her, she was into it every bit as much as he was and then some. They were perfect. He’d never seen such amazing tits. As he pulled her down onto her bed and started sucking on them, he even looked for surgical scars, but he sure couldn’t find any. Juicy little teardrops, perfectly symmetrical, mahogany nipples perking out invitingly on evenly tanned tits. (Hadn’t Hayleigh had tan lines on these puppies? Jesus, she wasn’t just perfect, she was *improved*.)

This bitch belonged in porn, and she thought she was the bottom rung on the ladder. For today, he treated her like she deserved to be treated. When he got her pants off of her – which took next to no urging on his part – he gave her a measured

compliment. Far less than this body deserved, but way more than the girl walking in it did.

“I really want to go down on you. Is that all right?” he asked. As if she’d say no. Her panties were half-off by the time he bothered seeking permission.

She was beyond fighting him. “Uh, huh.”

Jordan knew from overhearing some girl talk that Hayleigh practiced rigorous lawn maintenance; it seemed as though Hailey had abandoned that practice. Not much point when you’re not getting it seen. Whatever. Hayleigh’s body was so fucking tight and fit. This girl had been using it for months now. Was she just taking good care of it, somehow, or was Hayleigh’s fitness and exercise boosting her old body and vice versa? Who the hell knew. And who cared. If he were playing god, he might put a bit more ass on her, but those narrow hips, slender legs, every line of her chiseled in yielding marble... He dove in tongue-first.

“Oh my fucking god, yes!” she wailed. Jordan prided himself on his cunnilingus skills. He’d practiced a lot, and even studied the art. Sometimes knowing his way around a cunt made all the difference between one-night stands and fuck buddies. Only Hailey, she kept going with the theatrics. In Hayleigh’s huskier voice, she was panting out a stream of filth.

“Fuck yes! Fucking eat me, YES! Eat your slut’s pussy! Oh god, my slutty little cunt has needed this so much, fuck!” she cried.

What the *fuck*.

He kept at it, and so did she. Had Fishers done this to her, too? He hadn’t seen anything like that in her spread – aside from the photo swap, the only thing in her file was a note that she was in a picture from physics club. He’d have to check if there was some way to hide material, especially once his plans really got going. With what he’d done already, he was taking a risk, but once he’d seen this slice of fuck pie walking around unnoticed, he couldn’t help himself. Sneaking could wait.

He couldn’t even tell if or when she was coming; from the way she responded, it felt like she was the whole time. It was her who cut him short, scrambling up to her knees and pawing at his bare chest with those long red nails Hayleigh always favored. Even the nail polish is Hayleigh, he noted with interest. But he didn’t have long to dwell on it. “You have to let me suck your cock, Jordan,” she murmured, trailing kisses down his chest. When she got to his crotch, she didn’t even start the blowjob; she just kept begging. “Please, baby, please. I’m so thirsty for your fucking cum, I *need* it. Please, I’ll be such a good little cock-sucker for you...”

Holy fucking god. She was a sub. Suddenly that agonizingly chatty mouth of hers was quite possibly the sexiest thing about her. Screw it. He could play along with that. “Call me Mr. Lyons.”

She licked her lips hungrily, licking through his pubes and across his balls. “May your little sex puppet pretty,” *lick*, “pretty,” *slurp*, “PLEASE suck your dick with her greedy whore mouth, Mr. Lyons, sir?”

“Blow me, gorgeous.”

She moaned as it entered her mouth, and confirmed right away she’d been learning the art of the blowjob from somebody. Fishers? Or maybe it was that old wives tale about fat girls being better at sucking dick as a necessary adaptation. What the fuck ever. The girl knew her craft, that was for damn sure. It wasn’t even skill, he decided as she gargled his shaft in the back of her throat; it was *enthusiasm*. He’d had plenty of girls go down on him before, but he’d never had one worship his dick. Not like this. It was as if she’d been poisoned, and the only antidote was in his come.

He didn’t know how long it took her to make him come, but as she slurped his jizz down like it was her favorite flavor yogurt, he knew it wasn’t something to brag about.

“Holy shit, Hailey. That was... something else.”

She flopped down beside him, and he rolled to face her so he could keep stroking that dynamite body she’d stolen while he worked up to his second go. “Um, sorry I... I can get a little... into it.”

“Are you kidding me? That shit was so fucking hot. If I’d known that hot-ass slut was hiding out inside you, I’d have been over here every day since puberty, girl.”

Hailey giggled. “Really? You don’t think I’m, like weird? Or... gross?”

Jesus, did this bitch have a single drop of self-esteem in her? Though even as he thought the question, he had to concede he was glad for it. She’d be way easier to handle like this. “Feel this, Hailey.” He took Hayleigh’s hand and moved it to his cock, which was hardening again fast. The warmth of her fingers only hastened it. “Does this feel like I think you’re anything but sexy as hell?”

An elated smile bloomed on her face. The real Hayleigh never looked like that, no matter who complimented her how. Her instagram feed was an endless series of photos – many of which, according to Jayce, she spent more than hour at a go posing for and filtering to perfection – and the comments were a flood of praises for her looks. All of them went either ignored or some variant of “aw, you’re nice.”

“Um, it feels like you’re getting, like, big. Again. Already.”

“With those big sexy tits of yours staring me in the face, how could I not?”

She grinned, using one hand to play with her tit while she talked. She didn’t know how to pose or deliberately flaunt her sex appeal, but she didn’t really need to. “Yeah. Just... my ex-boyfriend, he usually took, you know. Longer. Like a few minutes, at least.”

Hmm. Jordan had been fully ready to dive into that cunt dick-first this time, but this might be a handy segue. “Who, Conner?”

She jerked back, boob forgotten. “How did you know?”

“I hear things,” he said cryptically. As if anybody at NHS could give two shits about the sex lives of these two losers. Of course, if people found out he fucked that old bitch Miss C, people would get interested in a hurry. But hopefully it wouldn’t come to that. Desperation lead to chaos, and right now, he wanted Conner nice and relaxed, hands full of the mundane bullshit he called a life. “And I remember, right before break, you came into Miss C’s room. When she was talking about how she helped set them up, and I remember you got upset and ran out. So I put two and two together.”

That had been trippy. He’d seen her as Hefty Hailey at the time. Only after lingering after, hearing Fishers explain to Miss C (after he fucked the old bitch) how to see the real Hailey, did he repeat the process and penetrate the illusion. By then she’d been gone, with no way to get at her over winter break.

“Oh yeah. I sort of forgot you were there for that.” She frowned. “Well, yeah. It was nothing big. Just for a little while last fall. Then he dumped me. I guess for Heather Blake. Which, if I’m gonna get dumped for somebody, maybe it’s flattering that it was somebody like her.”

Heather Blake was an ice princess like no other girl he’d gone out with. Only a few dates, but he’d gotten fucking nowhere with her. She barely even kissed him. Sure, she had huge tits, but if you didn’t get to see ‘em on the regular, who the fuck cared?

“Yeah, I wouldn’t feel too bad. That pussy passed out when she rejected him, and when she gave him a pity date, I hear he cried like a baby when she kicked him to the curb. Why he’d even want a prude like Heather when he could have a tigress like you... hard to imagine.”

“Stop, you’re making me blush!”

Which was the point, of course. “So, you seeing anybody nowadays? Any chance you might get back together with Fishers now that he’s available again?”

“I’m single. But I don’t think he’s interested. I’m not sure I am any more either. Like, I *like* him, but... I dunno.” She shrugged, then looked back at him, her gaze growing steadily more lustful as she ran fingers over his pecs, his abs. Not a six-pack, but he kept in good shape.

“I’ve got my eye on somebody, maybe,” he said, moving on top of her. Damn, she was so fucking hot. “You ready to be my little slut again?”

“Yes, Mr. Lyons.” Her breath quickened, eyes locked on his with an unspoken prayer to be fucked.

Jordan fucked his friend Hayleigh’s body three more times that afternoon, and every time she begged him for more. There would be more all right. Not only with Hailey, or Hayleigh, or whatever it was he’d just fucked; if his plans panned out, he’d have access to every quality pussy at Northside. It was ironic, when he thought about it. It had been Fishers who’d helped teach him the skills he needed to do it.

Maybe he’d let the kid keep Miss C. Maybe.

## Chapter Four

Conner was beginning to wonder how much temptation he could take.

It was strange, in a way. He'd been single for the vast majority of high school. His only real relationships, if one could call them that, were a few months of dating Janine Freemonte in which their parents had picked them up and dropped them off; and going with his friend Jacqui to the junior year dances and making out a bit after, just long enough to establish that neither was really feeling any chemistry.

He'd always been more or less content with the occasional tenderness of his own right hand. But after his fling with Hailey, getting to make out with Heather, and of course that amazing evening with Kristy... his hand was no longer a match for his appetites. Not even close. His dreams were filled with sex, a blur of boobs and pussies and moaning women. His waking imagination wasn't much better. A week went by, and Miss C was showing no signs of remorse that he could tell. Heather was too wrapped up in her new project to seem to even notice him, and even Hailey, well...

"So how've you been?" he asked her during psych class Friday afternoon. They were assigned partner work and even got to pick said partner, but he was surprised to see she didn't seem to immediately look his way. Conner had swooped in before she paired off. She hadn't put up a fight.

"Pretty good, actually. And yourself?"

"Not too bad," he lied. Maybe not lied, exactly, but certainly gave the truth a miss.

Before he could find any sort of segue to flirtation, she wanted to get work on the assignment. Fair enough. As flighty as she acted, he forgot sometimes that she was a good student. Conner dove in, and did his part so fast he had time to help with hers. She even insisted on reviewing it after, stymying his intentions further. The clock said class would let out any minute; if he didn't manage to say something fast, he'd be out of luck for the weekend.

"So, got any cool weekend plans?" If so, it would be the first time he'd heard her mention such.

"Nah, not really. I think my mom might want to do a family movie day, but it'll be whatever Doug wants to see, so..." Her lips twisted. "You?"

"Nope, got the whole weekend open. I was thinking I might--"

The dismissal bell rang in the middle of his sentence. Hailey didn't give the slightest sign of being intrigued, simply loading up her books and making for the door with the rest of the class. "Say," he interjected as they entered the hallway. "If you get bored or whatever, you can, ya know, look me up, or whatever."

She turned her head to the side, arching an eyebrow. "Conner..."

"As friends, I mean. I'm not suggesting..." He forced a laugh. "Nothing like that, geez! What do you take me for?"

She smiled and patted his shoulder. "You're a nice boy."

She didn't call. He may as well have been flirting with Hayleigh McKnight for how well it had gone. (Except for the part where Jayce beat him to a pulp.) So his weekend was spent trying to ignore Angelica's ceaseless desires for Owen while he squeezed in some bro time. When she wasn't there, she was texting at intervals; when she was, it was rare she wasn't at least touching him flirtatiously. At one point he went to the bathroom and came back to find her kneeling in front of the couch with the blanket over her head. Owen told him she'd said to just pretend she wasn't there; meanwhile, he could hear her whimpering in apparent delight at the taste of him.

Conner went home. Easier to pretend she wasn't in the room with him when she wasn't. He spent the rest of the evening helping his mom with her Christmas scrapbook.

What was TIOS's deal? How had Owen wound up with an insatiable nymphomaniac, while the editor-in-chief wound up with one beautiful girl who had seemingly lost interest? One who might trust him wholeheartedly but seemingly never had any interest? And one who professedly did have interest but was too upset with him to let him act on it?

Worse, it was beginning to affect the way he heard people.

"So are you and Kaden going to go out now, or what?" a sophomore girl in his P.E. class asked her friend as the two lifted five-pound dumbbells while examining themselves in the mirror.

The other girl, a cute little brunette who seemed to be just growing into a nice little pair of boobs, shook her head. "I dunno. Kaden's cool, but like... freshmen and sophomores aren't allowed to go to the King of Hearts Dance. I really want to hook up with an upperclassman, ya know?"

"Ooooh, got your eyes on anyone in particular?"

The brunette shrugged. "Eh. There's only, like, a few weeks before tickets go on sale. At this point, I'd pretty much take any senior who asked." The two giggled.

Conner tried to avoid learning the girl's name so he wouldn't have to see what "*I really want to hook up with an upperclassman... I'd pretty much take any senior who asked*" would do. (Her name was Amy Freitag, he learned that evening while looking through the master class spread for her school picture. With a force of will, he closed the program after deleting the unsaved quote.)

Or there was Dominique Holt, a pretty black girl who'd been in yearbook with him until dropping it junior year. She was sitting at the next table in lunch, venting to her friends about some reality dating show. "I do not get what Victoria even sees in him! How can she not see he's totally playing her while he's screwing around with Dawn on the side?"

"You just wish he was screwing around with *you*," her friend Angela teased.

The whole table giggled, which doubled in magnitude as Maryann pressed further, “Lila just wishes *anyone* was screwing around with her!”

“You’re such a bitch, Maryann!” she said, but she was laughing.

“Language, girls,” droned Mr. Rodriguez.

Surely TIOS couldn’t use that. It couldn’t let what someone else said about you transform you... could it? He made himself not check.

But the greatest temptation of all came from the least likely of places.



The new leadership model for yearbook, Conner's punishment assignment from Miss C and apparent punishment situation for sins of a past life, was adopted quickly. He had to hand it to that Amanda Carpenter. She hit the ground running, learning the lay of the land with zeal and tackling whatever responsibilities Miss C let her wrest away from him. Which were numerous, in point of fact. They divided up staff supervision, taking half the staff out from under him. Coordination of the master calendar, correspondence with the print shop, layout design for the underclassmen segments... She even asked for her own key to the classroom, so she could work after hours and on weekends. Miss C had drawn the line there, giving a significant look to Conner to keep his own key a secret.

The staff liked her. Somehow. Just when he'd feel sure someone was about to tell her to stop being so bossy, but instead, "You got it, chief." She'd give someone some constructive criticism, and as he readied himself to savor an invitation to piss off, instead he'd hear a "Oh, I didn't know it would let me do that, thanks!"

Even more annoying, Conner had to grudgingly give her some sliver of respect himself. She knew the trade, all right. Three days on the job, and she'd already cut costs 6% by switching from the Premium 150 paper to the Matte 120. Which, by extension, meant that his long-harbored fears of having to do the senior portraits in black and white were no longer a problem, and they'd even be able to expand to some new spreads for culture and spirit that they hadn't thought they'd be able to squeeze in. Amanda was a competent copy editor, a whiz at photo editing, and had an impressive capacity for connecting names and faces.

"Let's see, that's... Jessica Barnes. Freshman," she said as Conner was squinting at a picture on his laptop, trying to complete the tagging. She had a desk in the editor's office, too, now; the couch had been relocated to the corner of the computer lab, where the bean bag chair had once been. (The bean bag chair, where he'd first made out with Heather, the site of one of his greatest memories, was now at Miss C's house.)

"I'm pretty sure that's Donna Palladino, actually." One of the hazards of TIOS was that he had to either delegate photo tagging to his staff, or be ultra-careful in doing it himself. He didn't want another Hailey/Hayleigh situation to occur, after all.

"No, Donna Palladino is a redhead. Plus, look at the nose ring. See?"

"It's a black and white photo," he retorted. Though as he zoomed in, sure enough, there was the nose ring, a tiny silver stud that in the monochrome picture was nearly lost in the girl's freckles.

"You can't tell the difference between redheads and brunettes in black and white?" She smirked at him. He was pretty sure it was a smirk, anyway.

"How would you know who Donna and Jess are, anyway? You haven't been here for a week yet, and you expect me to believe you're encyclopaedic on the underclassmen?"

“I’ve been here for one week, one day, and, from the time I walked in the door, about seven hours. And if you must know, I’ve been studying the master spread and quizzing myself. No time to lose, right?”

Conner snorted. “Quizzing yourself? I hate to break it to you, but school pictures aren’t exactly the most accurate way to start recognizing people. Lots of people do their hair differently and get dressed up for photos, and plus, they take those in September, so by now you have people with different color hair, new glasses, all that jazz.”

“Would you prefer I simply go through the rest of the year not knowing who anyone is?” She rolled her eyes. “Besides, I do live fire quizzes. I like to freak people out by walking up to total strangers in the hallway, saying what I think their name is, and if I get it right, just walking away. Peter says there’s a rumor going around amongst some of the sophomores that I’m an undercover cop.”

Conner laughed, but only for a minute. It was funny, but he didn’t want her thinking he’d let his defenses down. Helping keep the smile from his face was the fact that he’d decided that yes, it was Jessica Barnes. Damn that Amanda Carpenter!

“So, as I’m getting the swing of things a bit, I had a few ideas for some new spreads I wanted to run by you,” she said after a little while. “Got a few?”

“Be my guest. Nice of you to keep me in the loop.”

“Miss C said I should.” She scooted to the unoccupied corner of her desk, setting her own laptop down. “So all right, I had a handful of things that weren’t being covered yet that I thought might make for interesting pieces.”

“I said go ahead.” He gestured.

“Right. Well, let’s see. First up was a piece for the students who started at mid-year. Not just because that’s my situation, of course, but I checked in the office and they said we had forty-five adds at semester, which is well above normal. I figured that’s a few percent of the school, so might be a worthy inclusion. Thoughts?”

“Eh. We can throw have someone throw something together, include it if we wind up having space.” He didn’t want to add that the extra space would be thanks to her help trimming the budget. She was too smug by half already. “What else?”

“Well, that idea made me think that we could do something for the new teachers. We have five this year, it looks like. I mean who knows, someday people’s kids are gonna have these teachers, so how cool would it be to crack open the yearbook and see them fresh-faced and new? Otherwise, it’ll just be their photo in the faculty spread, but nothing that shows they’re newbs, ya know?”

“Fair point. Sure. Or maybe we could save space, simply make an annotation for new hires. Come to think, we could do the same for the ones retiring or leaving this year, too. I know Mr. Gallegos is retiring after forty years; he’s an institution around here, so we’ll probably want that to have its own page space. But we can at least acknowledge the others.”

She typed some notes to herself to keep track of plans. Just in case, Conner did the same. “Very cool. Then there’s this whole thing with all these seniors having to retake their freshman health class. Have you heard about this?”

“Yeah, my stepsister got caught up in that.” Angelica had been griping about it on the car ride home yesterday. Owen and Conner had both laughed hysterically at the idea of the twenty-year-old former college student having to “learn” the school system’s typical anti-smoking anti-drinking anti-drugs anti-sex dogma. That last topic in particular.

“A lot of people did, and apparently it’s caused havoc. Switching schedules around in your last semester is a royal pain, I guess. I had to drop chem II and switch into Mrs. Rydell’s econ class.” She was widely known to be the less popular teacher for the subject. Conner had been relieved not to see her name on his schedule at registration.

“Do we even know what caused that? I heard it was some hush-hush thing the school wasn’t allowed to talk about.”

She shook her head. “Nothing exciting. From what I heard, Mr. Conrad was still finishing his certification or something? So technically speaking, the course doesn’t count since. I guess you need government authorization to hand out worksheets and tell kids they’re all going to die of AIDS. Now he has to have a co-teacher and all this stuff just to fix the gaffe.”

Conner considered. “Hmm. Is that a memory, though, or a story? That sounds like newspaper territory, not yearbook. Covering scandals is more Bob Woodward than David McCullough. That’s the guy who broke the Watergate story and—”

“The historian. *1776, John Adams*... I know who he is.” Of course she did. Man, he hated know-it-alls. “All right then, we’ll drop that one. Good call. Speaking of, Heather came to me and asked if we wanted to start keeping tabs on her protest movement.”

He frowned. Heather had come to Amanda instead of him? “Oh. Yeah, we can do that.”

Amanda gave him a hard-to-read look. “Are you sure? After all, nobody’s taken up her call, so at this point it’s only her. Besides, if our photo options thus far are that picture she posted online, or one of how she’s dressing now...”

The night after she’d been detained in in-school suspension, she’d gone home and posted a picture of herself on every social media site she used, wearing the attire she’d been kicked out of class for. She looked amazing, that mighty bust of hers thrust forth proudly, hands on curvaceous yet defiant hips. That, plus the passionate way she’d written against the policy and most of the kids in school had slammed that Like button for her. Still, as was yearbook’s usual guiding principle when it came to “sexy” photos, they’d let people keep their own records of their budding sex appeal, while the yearbook

kept the sorts of pictures that their future children wouldn't be horrified by. Heather's tit-showcasing shot would be a pretty clear violation of their standard.

Amanda was right that the other option, a shot of her in her protest garb, was little better. Rather than try to protest by continuing to defy the dress code, she instead went for a creative tactic of buying up the ugliest, loudest, most jarring clothes she could find on the cheap and wearing those instead. He glanced through the blinds to where she was working with Marisa on a spread; presently, she was wearing a neon orange dress that sort of made her lower half look like a traffic cone, a purple and green striped shirt and a bright pink headband. It was hideous. She'd walk into a room, and instantly, everyone would stop and stare – and not for the reason some guys were accustomed to staring at Heather Blake. He liked the art of it, showing how adhering to the dress code could be far more disruptive than her previous wardrobe choices, but he wondered how long she could keep it going.

Plus, it was hard to look at Heather and see... that.

"Yeah..." he said spacily. He'd be damned if she didn't still look beautiful in spite of it all. Now that he'd seen her without her top on, it was a simple thing – too simple, really – to imagine it back off of her. Those incredible boobs. Every straight guy in school had imagined seeing them, and Conner actually had. Owen always said huge boobs often looked weird once you saw them bare (or he'd been saying ever since hooking up with Angelica). But they hadn't disappointed. Not in the least. The sight, the way they'd felt, the way they'd tasted, the face she'd made when he...

Amanda cleared her throat; he winced at having been caught staring. Luckily she couldn't see his erection throbbing in his pants from where she was sitting. "I said yeah." He had, right? "We can do something on that. Be the change you want to see in the school, right?"

"See, and I was thinking this might be another newspaper vs. yearbook issue. But hey, you know this place better than I do, Conner. You tell me what you want done, and I'll do it."

His hands literally clenched into fists to stop himself from typing that into TIOS. Like that, his problems – *all* of his problems – could be solved. After a moment was able to be objective and acknowledge that, for now at least, there was nothing for them to do there as yet. But those words of hers... they echoed in his ears, thundering at him in every idle moment.

All right, so he could admit it. Amanda Carpenter was attractive. Not that *he* was attracted to her, but to the unbiased eye, to someone who'd never had to work alongside her or listen to her talk, sure. Maybe she wasn't quite conventionally hot, a tightly packaged T&A dynamo, but it would be a rare Nighthawk who'd turn her away if she made an advance. She was tall, taller than Conner by several inches, and when she wore a dress that one day and he'd had to sit opposite her in the office with her legs crossed, it

had seemed as if her legs were two thirds of her. They weren't thick, quite, but they were ample, real thighs with a little extra meat on the bone. He was yet to see her in anything that clung tightly enough to her chest to get much impression, but it was looked like the padding on her legs skipped right over the waist and made up for it with a pair of low-riding but decidedly generous boobs. (Maybe not Heather Blake generous, but who was?) All that, and she had a pretty enough face – dimples, a light dusting of freckles, a wave of dark red hair, deep blue eyes and bright red lips.

(From what he heard, she was still single, somehow, but with legs like those that couldn't last long.)

So maybe there were cloven hooves in her shoes, maybe the hint of perfume she wore was only to mask the brimstone, and he was reasonably sure he occasionally caught sight of those horns beneath her glossy brown hair. But...

*“You tell me what you want done, and I'll do it.” – Amanda Carpenter*

He lost hours that week staring at a spread with her name on it on his borrowed school laptop, typing and deleting those words.

But he couldn't. All it took was remember Angelica, that mortified, frustrated, outraged, needful expression on her face as he and Owen tested her obedience. Maybe what he'd entered for Miss C had allowed her to wriggle out of it, and maybe Heather believing his every word wasn't quite the same as her agreeing with it. But Angelica was proof positive for him that those casual words of cooperation from Amanda Carpenter could have her on her knees, begging the sole editor-in-chief to let her earn a place on his staff. So to speak.

Somehow, every time he opened her file, every time he looked hard at her profile photo, every time he typed up those words and hovered the mouse over the Save button... he still closed it, unsaved, every time. Looking was all it could be. Sometimes, he could see that image, her smiling form perched on a picnic bench, legs crossed in a cute little sundress, even after he closed his eyes.

So what was he to do? Conner invited Hailey to sit with him and Owen at lunch, thinking maybe he could at least try to mend that bridge and have a little fun – consensual fun – for what remained of his time at Northside. She said she wasn't really doing lunch any more, whatever that meant, and only then did he notice she wasn't. Wherever she was during lunch, it wasn't her usual spot in the nerd nook. He even thought to see if she was dining privately under the stage, but when he got in close, he could hear a rhythmic thumping and grunting that could only be one thing. Obviously nobody else in school was going to start banging Hailey. With a scowl at the notion that their spot was now compromised, Conner left the young couple to their fun. He flirted with her in class when possible, though she never seemed to take the hint. When he was more direct, she was always busy, and after the fourth time, finally told him that maybe it was better that they just be friends in school. He said he understood.

Miss C... well, he didn't know what he could even do with Miss C. She'd gone back to strict professionalism. He couldn't exactly walk up to her and whine that he was unhappy and expect to see her crumble. He'd basically tried that after school right before she banished him from her room and gave half the yearbook away to Amanda. There was no way to casually flirt with a teacher, and certainly not a means of asking if she'd like to hang out sometime. So he took notes, did his assignments, and tried not to remember what her ass had looked like bent over the teacher's desk.

Which left Heather, who, every time he tried to talk with her one on one, siderailed things into a diatribe against the sexism of the dress code. He actually agreed with her position – if boys couldn't focus because a girl was showing her shoulders or a little cleavage, that was on the boys. He acknowledged that even as he was more distracted by girls than he'd ever been. Still, the constant haranguing got a bit tired after a while.

Conner was desperate. He didn't want to start hitting on random girls – he didn't even know how. So he figured he'd try to help out Heather, and if the only thing that came of it was smashing the patriarchy, he'd be all right with that.

"Totally," he agreed for probably the fifth time that afternoon.

Heather, today sporting a pair of puke green corduroys and a white t-shirt with "HA" written on it hundreds of times in huge red letters at odd angles, nodded. "I checked it out, and Central's dress code? Get this. Here, let me get my phone out so I can quote it to you. There. 'Students are not to wear clothing promoting drugs, alcohol, tobacco use, or that might disrupt the learning environment in accordance with our Mission Statement.' And I checked, their mission statement doesn't say anything about concealing the female body. Which means if my house were two miles south, I could dress however the heck I wanted!"

"You wouldn't be a Nighthawk, though," Conner pointed out.

"Too right." She smiled at him. Oh, that smile. But then she was right back at it. "But that only means I have the opportunity to fight back, right? Those who have the means to fight injustice have the obligation to fight injustice, somebody said. Thomas Jefferson or something."

"Sounds more like one of the X-Men," Conner joked.

"With great boobs comes great responsibility?"

"That's the one. So what can I do to help?"

She eyed him askance. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I think it's a stupid rule with an even stupider punishment, and I want to help."

He was pleasantly surprised when her response was a sudden hug. "You know, you're only the third guy to offer to help me, and the first one I don't think is just trying to get in my pants."

“Well, I...” He caught himself. There were girls you could make a flirty joke about wanting to sleep with, and there was Heather Blake. “...um, figured that maybe having a boy speaking out would help, you know? Like, show it’s more than just girls wanting to dress provocatively.”

She made a face. “It’s not about wanting to dress ‘provocatively’ at all, Conner. ‘Provocative’ comes from ‘provoke,’ and my clothes aren’t provoking anyone to do anything.” She stopped herself. “Sorry. I know you meant well – I’m just sensitive on the subject is all. I want this to become a movement, and it needs to be lead by women since it’s for women. I have some really cool protests I’ve read about online once I get some more women to help.”

“So... what can I be doing, then?”

“I’m not sure. And I’m not some man-hater or anything, I promise! You know I am actually quite a fan of men,” she said, flashing a sultry grin. “If I think of anything you can do, I’ll let you know. But speak out, and once I have a few more people, we’ll start up on social media and you can follow and share, and... we’re going to do this, Conner.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

Conner wasn’t actually upset at being excluded. For one, having a pro-women movement run by women seemed like the logical move. For two, he actually had ideas of his own for how he might be able to help.

Just over a week later, Conner strode into Principal Beckmann's office during last period. Miss C was used to him going off whenever and wherever he needed, so while the rest of the class was getting a lesson on pagination, he was here to conduct another surreptitious interview. He didn't know Principal Beckmann very well. Mostly by reputation, really. But her reputation held that she was a fair-minded woman, and was a believer in straight talk. He hoped he'd be proven right today.

"Hi, Principal Beckmann, thanks for meeting with me."

"Happy to, Conner. I've heard lots of good things about you from Ms. Coszic-Lewandoski. She really sings your praises." She gestured for him to have a seat opposite her at the small conference table. It was loaded high with stacks of letters, forms and mail, and the bespectacled forty-something woman in her dark gray pants suit looked perfectly at home.

"Really? That's cool. She's the best." He felt self-conscious giving and receiving praise as it pertained to Miss C, considering the complication in their relationship, but assured himself once again that if anybody suspected anything, they'd have hauled him down here long ago.

"Now, what can I do for you? You said you wanted to talk to me for an article in the yearbook?"

"We call them spreads, actually... but that's not important. Anyway, yes. We've recently cut our spending a bit, so we're hoping to be able to do some features on some prominent and well-liked members of the faculty, and naturally your name came to mind."

Her tone was dry, but she looked amused. "Naturally, eh? Why do I feel like I'm about to be asked for a donation?"

"Every little bit helps," he said, then waved his hands to make it clear he was only kidding. "So if it's OK with you, I was going to do a quick interview about yourself, your thoughts on NHS, and get out of your hair."

"That's what you said in the email," she said, fetching her coffee mug from her desk and taking a sip.

Mrs. Beckmann nodded to allow him to record the conversation, and he got to work. The interview proceeded like the others had this past week. One question about her background to loosen the tongue, a question about what she liked about NHS to get her thinking fondly about the students, a couple short questions about major events this year – the homecoming victory over the Pirates, the danceathon fundraiser for the children's hospital, and...

"I was curious what your take is on the school dress code controversy," he said, as casually as possible.

"What's that?" she asked, frowning at the cooling coffee in her mug.



“Well, we’re also doing a #metoo spread. Since this is a major women’s issue at Northside as we have, we’re just asking successful women like yourself what they think about the recent activism.”

Mrs. Beckmann glanced at the clock, but seemed to decide she still had enough time to entertain his inquiry. She refreshed her coffee from a pot in the corner while she responded. “I’ll say to you what I said to those young women. What are they calling themselves? The Pride? Northside Pride? Something like that. Regardless, it’s like this, Mr. Fishers. The school board sets these policies, and my role is merely to enforce it. So regardless of how I feel about it, I’m here to provide a service, not advance an agenda.”

“What do you say, then, to the claim made by the students leading the protests that the administration has broad latitude in interpreting and enforcing such directives? For instance, they cited the ban on the use of cell phones during school hours, written in the same section of the manual as the dress code? They say that that rule is met with a blind eye, so—”

She silenced him with a look over her shoulder that wasn’t quite frosty, but neither was it warm. “Not every policy receives annual review, and I don’t like to micro-manage teachers in their enforcement of policy unless I see a problem. Frankly, those haven’t been. Off the record, I believe women should be able to dress however they like, and I’d abolish the dress code if they’d let me. Many schools don’t have dress codes, and still somehow manage to teach. But until the school board says otherwise, that’s not my call to make.”

Under the table, Conner’s hand clenched in excitement. “Great. Well I think that about wraps it up, Mrs. Beckmann. Thanks again for your time.”

Conner opened his spread entitled dresscode, and typed in this latest entry with the help of his recording. Hopefully it would be the last. He now had over a dozen teachers and administrators on record opposing the dress code. His eyes scanned down the list.

*Freedom of expression is a necessary right not only for an artist, but for every person. – Mrs. Mirandoza*

*If it gets [Heather Blake and the other protesters] to stop dressing themselves like something out of a bad acid trip, I'm all for [abolishing the dress code]. – Mr. Gallegos*

*Honestly? I think the dress code is an abomination, and I don't enforce it. We have to stop shaming young women for the way they dress themselves, and blaming them for the way men act toward them. – Miss Jackson*

*I'll tell you what I tell my boys – you can't let some pretty young thing be distracting you from your objective. I don't care if they walk in wearing nothing but tassels and a smile, you keep your eyes on the goal. – Coach Conrad*

*[Heather Blake] is one of the best students I've ever had, and I hope she smashes this 19th century – pardon my French – bullshit into the dirt. Let those girls wear, or not wear, whatever they want! – Mrs. Graziano*

*When will people learn that they have no right to judge people for their appearance? I don't care if it's someone's race, or gender, disability, or the clothes on their back. People are people, and we should love them for what they are, regardless of what they look like. – Mr. Baber*

And so on it went. He didn't pretend to understand how TIOS chose how to interpret what he entered, much less how it affected the change. But by now, he had teachers from every subject, several department heads, coaches, and now, Mrs. Beckmann herself. *Women should be able to dress however they like, and I'd abolish the dress code if they'd let me.*

The statement didn't look like the last nail in the coffin for the GHS dress code, but only because Mrs. Beckmann was ignorant of two facts. The first was that her interviewer was a TIOS editor-in-chief. The second?

*We deliberately avoided having highly specific definitions [in the dress code]. I think the principal should have the ability to decide what is and is not appropriate attire for her students. – Mrs. Spratley, school board member*

It was a classic dodge of culpability. In the two weeks of her protest, Heather had now recruited close to a dozen other female Nighthawks to join in her protest. It had made the local newspaper, and their online group, Lady Nighthawk Pride, had over three hundred members, a number of them parents and graduates. Mrs. Spratley had passed the buck right on down to the principal, and now? He giggled to himself in excitement. He really hadn't thought it would be that easy.

School was already out; he hadn't wanted to risk chaos if TIOS did something unpredictable. Miss C had already left; she hadn't stayed late with him since their argument. He waited until everything in the halls was quiet, the custodians turning off lights as they went about their duties. With a broad smile, Conner saved the file as "dresscode" and folded up his laptop. TIOS didn't seem to object to any of the quotes; he'd done his best to accurately, if selectively, transcribe them, and it seemed the program didn't object. However it worked out, he hoped it was a step for the better for NHS. And that it made Heather happy. He returned the laptop to the cart, and went home.

As it so happened, the dress code ended not with a bang, but with a whimper. Specifically, the whimper of Conner Fishers as he entered the halls of NHS. He didn't know how the word had gotten out, but boy had it ever. It seemed like everywhere he looked, there was someone who wasn't merely flirting with what until yesterday had been the line, but sailed right past it. Leggings were the most popular offender. Black leggings, peach flesh tone leggings, purple leggings, rainbow leggings... The sheer quantity of jiggling backside was staggering. Everywhere he looked were the not-quite-naked outlines of his classmates' legs and asses.

Then there were the tops. Tops with no shoulders. Tops with no backs. Tops with no midriffs. Tops with no earthly business on teenage girls. Conner hadn't even realized his classmates *owned* clothes like these. There went Kirsten Vaughan, her perfect body stuffed into a t-shirt split so far down the front that there was no doubt she had come to school braless. In fact as he looked, bralessness was evidently in vogue, as unbound tits wobbled and bounced on every other chest.

"Uh, Angelica? Did you not get the memo?" His stepsister was clad in black jeans and a button-up beige top, pretty standard fare for her, and while plenty of the girls were still dressed in the normal fashion as of yesterday, he doubted they were a majority.

"What memo? What are you talking about?" she asked, annoyed.

"Yeah, what's up? Is it spirit week or something?"

He looked at them, then looked pointedly, wide-eyed, at the display spreading out in the hallway before him. "That!"

She looked around. "Uh... am I missing something?"

"Yeah, are you on something, dude?" Owen asked.

Oh boy, not again. Had TIOS changed things and once more left only him in the know? "Never mind. See you guys later."

"Later, dawg."

"Whatever, Goner." The three parted ways, and though they'd been making out in the back seat on the drive over, to see them now you wouldn't even think they knew one another. Would they ever become a normal couple? Did they even want to? He got a sense that Owen did, but for his stepsister, he was unsure. Regardless, he only wondered a moment, distracted instantly by the sight of tight, skimpy clothing, and the girls beneath it.

Sure enough, as classes began and people settled in, nobody acted as though anything were out of the ordinary. There was no announcement, no convocation, nothing. It was jarring. For him, anyway. Bizarrely, nobody else seemed bothered. The people who were inclined to leer yesterday continued leering today; he supposed they merely had a better time of it. Did they notice? They certainly didn't mind, and Conner had to admit that while this wasn't what he'd intended, it was not the worst change TIOS

had wrought. He lost himself for a moment staring at Mirana Sollenberger at the pencil sharpener, the slight lift in her arms raising up her sweater to reveal where her thong was emerging from her leggings, her unfettered boobs wobbling fluidly as she worked the handle. Any other day, someone would have snapped a pic under their desk and it would've gone straight on instagram. Today, crickets chirped.

There seemed to be no pattern to it. It wasn't just the hot or popular girls who were showing off. In fact, as many of them were still dressed like yesterday as not, as near as he could tell. In psych, Hailey was wearing a plain white tank top with a low square neckline over a dress that hung down to mid-thigh at best. It was the sort of thing Hayleigh used to wear for selfies outside of school, casually sexy, so she could look hot without it looking like she'd gone to some special trouble. Hayleigh, meanwhile, had on pink sweats with a brand name on the butt and a loose-fitting hoodie. Conner tried not to ogle anyone; several times already that day someone had caught him, and if he kept this up he was going to get a reputation.

Speaking of people who seemed as though they might develop a reputation... there was Heather. Heather and, evidently, her fellow protesters. The Pride, they called themselves, a group of girls who'd likewise been burned by the dress code and shared her spirit of activism. Heather was the only protester he had any classes with, but she'd been passing on updates to him on the regular, and announcing it on social media with daily recaps. They'd been coordinating outfits, trying to make waves by drawing attention to the same behaviors. Two days ago, they had white t-shirts on which they had written "am I distracting you" in black marker on the backs. Yesterday, it had been thigh-high galoshes, clunky winter boots, and he'd heard for one girl, her dad's oversized fishing waders. Conner had to hand it to them; it was definitely way more distracting having someone make bobble noises while they clonked around the room than it was to allow a little cleavage.

Today, however...

Heather walked into the yearbook room showing more of her body than he'd seen when he'd gotten her top off. He heard her before he saw her, sauntering along in black heels that were six inches if they were one. Fishnet stockings clung to her shapely legs, the several rips in them commanding attention. They rode up and into a pair of denim cut-off shorts that didn't really have thighs to speak of, and surely didn't cover the entirety of her butt. (When she turned to set her purse down on her desk, he confirmed that no, they did not. In fact, the gauzy yellow underwear she was wearing underneath was easily visible, and was see-through enough that the top of her ass crack poking out the top was entirely visible.)

See-through, apparently, was the theme of the outfit, as the top... well, it may as well not have existed. It was cut like a normal button-up blouse, excepting that the pearlescent buttons were by far the biggest obstacle to her body underneath. White and

ephemerally thin, it gave more of the appearance of the skin beneath it than of the garment itself. Her black bra would have been noticeable through a normal white shirt, but today, it was basically her only covering, and it looked to be a demi cup bra. Those titanic tits of hers were sloshing around inside it as she teetered in on those heels, half of her broad nipples easily discernible to the entire school.

She didn't look hot. She looked whorish.

In spite of an entire day of seeing girls showing off their bodies like never before, it was striking, and he spoke without thinking. "Heather? What on earth are you wearing?!"

Luckily it was still during passing period; only half the class was there to gape at his seeming rudeness. "Clothes...? Just today's Pride outfit. How about you?"

"Sorry, I, uh... I... just wanted to say you look, um, nice."

"Thanks, weirdo," she said, giving him a funny look and settling into her desk.

As it was last period, he wasn't surprised when Miss C came through the computer lab wearing jeans and a casual t-shirt. It seemed that teachers were now absolved of their own dress code; Conner hadn't been very specific, he belatedly realized. It was a little tight across the chest, and while he wouldn't call it sexy, it was sexier than her usual. Marisa had fallen in the "normal" attire camp. Siobhan and Amanda, however, were taking advantage of the unspoken policy change, both in black leggings; for the former, it accompanied a v-neck sweater, and for the latter, a t-shirt that was sized for someone a lot shorter than her, revealing a good five inches of her tummy. It looked cute on her – or it would, if he didn't know that Amanda Carpenter could never be cute.

Finally, however, Conner could crack open TIOS and try to figure out what on earth had gone wrong. It was a work day, and for once even that Amanda Carpenter woman was leaving him in peace. The two of them conferred on a couple points, Conner signed out a couple of cameras, and then it was time to investigate.

Or it would have been, except Heather chose that day to catch up on the yearbook staff spread. She glanced out into the office, then spoke softly as she settled in beside him. "I thought today would be a good day to get some stuff together about the transition? You know, with Amanda. And since she's not here, I figured it'd be easier."

"Uh, sorry, what?" He really hadn't heard a word of it. She was a foot away from him, and there simply too much seeing to be done to leave room for hearing.

"I said, let's talk about the staff spread, and Amanda?"

"Oh. Right. Yeah. We can... yeah, let's."

She leaned her head out to look at him from the front. "Are you OK, Conner? You're acting super weird today."

That simple act allowed one of her breasts to spill out of its half-cup sufficiently to let a nipple entirely free. His cock felt like it might explode. “Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry, a little out of it. So did you have anything you wanted to start with?”

“I have a couple shots we might be able to use,” and with that, she was loading up graphics and the two started talking shop. It took some effort to keep his eyes on task, but the editor-in-chief was a professional, after all, and he intended to act like one. He supposed it was proof that if he could ignore *that* distraction, there really had never been any need for a dress code. They had plenty to cover – or at least, it felt like they did, and he was glad for the company, even aside from the way she looked today. There were pics from the holiday party, what she’d written up about his fainting spell (a lamentable but necessary inclusion), some shots from the new semester... which brought them around again to Amanda.

“Are you warming up to her any?” she asked as he rejected a picture of her laughing with Gillian and Don. Gillian was making a weird face; otherwise, it would’ve been a contender.

He sighed. “I wish I could say I was. I’m trying, though, I really am.”

Heather rested her elbow on the desktop and leaned her chin on it. “What’s holding you back, do you think?”

Conner wasn’t sure quite what to say. Nobody had really asked him to put it in words. “She’s just... kind of a know-it-all, and it feels like she’s constantly stepping on my toes. Like she’s always trying to make me feel incompetent and unnecessary.”

Heather’s voice was empathetic, but it still had a no-nonsense way about it. “And how much of that do you think is her, and how much of that do you think is you?”

Conner jerked back. “What? Me? What do you mean, me?”

She stood up and grabbed her things. “Look, just... think about it, all right?” She patted his shoulder. Of course, with her boobs suddenly right in his face again, it was impossible not to stare. He shook himself out of it after a moment.

“Sorry, geez. I didn’t mean to, um...”

“Stare? Conner, you can stare all you want.”

Was he hearing things? What the hell was that! Surely nothing he’d input into TIOS included her giving him carte blanche to ogle her. Yet there she stood, hands on hips in open posture, standing before him with apparent permission to do precisely that. Which he was embarrassed to admit he did, if only for a few more moments.

Then one more moment. Lord, those were spectacular. And she really didn’t seem to mind at all. If anything, the little smirk on her face suggested she was actually enjoying it!

“Heather, I have to ask.” How to phrase the question when she didn’t remember the past the way he did? “What, um... what’s up with the outfit? It feels... I guess a little different from how you usually dress.”

“Well I should hope so,” she said, laughing.

Good, she knew it was weird. “So what gives?” Was there a sale at a sex shop? And a very precise flood in her closet and dresser?

“The protest?” She looked at him like he was stupid.

“The protest, of course. But with no dress code, what, um... what’re you protesting?”

“This has nothing to do with dress codes, Conner.” She sighed, folding her arms under her breasts, heaving both nipples up and out this time. She kept speaking, but he was barely heard a word. “Have you heard nothing I’ve been saying to you? This is about protesting a society that tells women they have no right to ‘distract’ men with their bodies. That it’s somehow wrong for me to let someone see my underwear, or to flaunt my sexuality.”

“Right, society,” he mumbled.

“There’s nothing wrong with women feeling like they want to be noticed for not only their brains, but their bodies, and until every Nighthawk has the freedom to command all the attention they want and deserve, Lady Nighthawk Pride will fight on for that freedom.” She bent down, but he didn’t even know how she was looking at him, because the leaning turned tits into full-on titties, swinging and bouncing against one another.

“Mmhmm. Freedom. Yep,” he droned, trying not to drool.

“See, that’s one of the things I like about you Conner. You get it. I give you the chance to look at my chest, and you seize it! That’s what we’re after.” She stood back up, tucking her boobs back into her bra. “The world needs more guys like you.”

He stared at her as she left. Right at her ass. He didn’t even notice her turn and smile appreciatively at his leer.

At long last, he flew to the dress code spread and tried to make sense of all this. Line by line, there was nothing in here that seemed to justify Heather’s reaction. Were all of her fellow protesters dressed like that? Come to think of it, he was pretty sure the girl in the backless top he’d seen that morning was Kiara deBartolo, one of her Lady Nighthawk Pride cohorts. That cherry red hair, at least, made her a strong contender. Most of the girls taking advantage of the newly abolished dress code looked like they’d picked up clothes out of their closet that were incidentally sexier. But Heather had crossed that line and kept driving through the night. From the way she talked, the rest had, too.

The only quotes in the TIOS spread about Heather were Mr. Gallegos’ complaint about her clothes looking like an acid trip, and the line from Mrs. Graziano, *let those girls wear, or not wear, whatever they want!* That didn’t seem to account for the behavior he’d just witnessed, though. Unless she’d wanted to dress like a prostitute. So why was she? Why did her protest mantra change from “girls’ outfits shouldn’t distract



boys” to the exact opposite? It would have felt misogynist coming from someone other than Heather. As far as he was concerned she had the right to dress however she wanted, but that she would suddenly embrace looking like a total slut was disturbing. And if guys started catching on that she loved to be stared at, where might that staring lead?

The more he dwelled on it, the more nervous he got. He’d only meant to undo the dress code, and he’d felt sure nothing in that spread would do any damage. Conner had chosen lines that seemed bereft of the potential for harm, and yet here they were, half the girls in school dressed revealingly, and a handful going to full-blown slutty. The guys didn’t seem to have changed, but maybe he’d messed up something there, too. It was hard to say; most guys he knew didn’t even own clothes that would violate the old dress code.

He had no answers to his questions when the bell rang. As before, TIOS refused to allow him to delete the quotes; what was done was, apparently, done. Was Heather going to keep dressing like that? Would that be her life now, a daily quest for more male attention?

What had he done to them?

The look on Fishers' face said it all. Little bitch. Kid had to be some kind of queer to be pouting at the sight of Heather fucking Blake's turbo-titties popping out in his face. Overnight NHS had gone from Beckmann School for Prisses to the Lyons Porno Academy. He wondered if TIOS would let him rename the place. With the shit he'd already pulled, renaming the place seemed like a parlor trick.

Maybe Fishers' deserved an honorable mention. After all, changing the dress code had been his idea. He really ought to give his files less conspicuous names. Code names, or at least something boring like that stupid MLK rally he'd had to go to. Nobody'd think to look there. Still, with the opportunity to skankify all of Northside, he settles for some kind of SJW puss-out?

It hadn't even been hard. After all, Jordan had Fishers to tutor him. He figured chief-boy had more experience than him at using the program, so all he had to do was study what he was up to and copy it. When he saw a big fat collection of quotes, all driving at the same obvious agenda... Suffice to say, it hadn't been too hard to round up a few extra quotes from some less beneficent sources.

*"Any more, it feels like half of you kids dress yourselves like your goal is to display as much of yourselves as you can sneak out of the house wearing in the morning. Not that your parents seem to care."* – Mrs. Lujack

That was probably his favorite. Nothing like the cynicism of the elderly to produce useful condemnations of the young. He supposed he had to hand it to Coach Conrad for delivering Heather's stuck-up ass into that glorious sluthood he'd seen today. He'd seen the on-the-record version his baseball coach had delivered to Fishers, but among his own tribe, he'd spoken his real opinions, producing gems like: *"Those protester girls? They're just out for attention. They can call it feminism, but all they're really after is male attention."* – Coach Conrad

Poetry. Jordan's tenure as the school's second baseman had done wonders to loosen the Coach's tongue, and really, seeing Heather Blake smile blandly as he openly scoped out her T&A was the least of it. Yessir, his class with Coach Conrad was his favorite, hands down.

Jordan checked the time on his phone. He'd told Hailey he'd stop by to fuck her after school, but his friends were all getting together, and it'd be one more opportunity to drill holes in Heather's bra with his eyes. He was pretty sure Natalie was one of her little feminazi bitches, too. A quick text to Hailey that he'd swing by later that evening and she could show him how a good slut gives road head, and he was off to The Bean Bag.

Should he feel bad for turning Heather and her crusade into a joke? Meh. It was the least he was owed, after all, for helping her get rid of that pesky dress code. Today had already been among his most exciting days of conquest thus far, and he had the whole rest of the school year to improve upon it. Who knows, maybe the new way of life

around here would even yield a few more choice observations that would help him make his vision for Northside a reality.

What a difference it made coming to work in comfortable clothes for once, Kristy thought to herself as she tidied up her classroom. She loved the freestyle nature of yearbook, but it often led to her room looking like a tornado had swept through. If it got too out of hand she kept them after to pitch in, but really, there was a therapy for her in cleaning. Not that she went out of her way for it. But like a certain semibarbaric king from her freshman story lineup, few things pleased her so much as making the crooked straight.

Kristy had needed it lately, too. TIOS was no doubt in part to blame; seeing Conner so persistently miserable was heartbreaking. It was like seeing an abandoned puppy sitting out in the rain, but instead of picking it up and taking care of it, she was driving by to splash it with a puddle. His presumption about her pliability had been upsetting, to be sure, and she'd be damned if she was going to let anyone treat her like some kind of infatuated, lovesick girl like she saw every day in her classes. Still, seeing his misery and doing nothing for him was leaving a hole in her heart. The daily ritual of tidying her room was one of many ineffectual strategies she'd adopted for trying to fill it.

She had everything all packed up and was on her way out the door when the presence of a sliver of light coming through the curtain to the computer lab caught her attention. Amanda had been using it for interviews and small group meetings lately; she must've simply forgotten to shut everything down. Kristy strode right through the curtains and flipped off the light switch.

Conner was lying there on the couch so still she almost didn't notice him. Just lying, one forearm across his eyes. She'd have let him keep on napping, except at the last moment, in the dim glow of the nightlight, she saw the trail of a tear snaking down his cheek.

Did it bother her so much because she was a compassionate teacher? Because she considered Conner a friend? Or because of some crazy app? The very question she'd been turning over and over for weeks now. But as she kept telling herself – as she'd told Conner – that the why of it didn't really matter. She was going to try to help because she chose to try and help.

“Hey, Conner.”

He was aware enough of his surroundings he didn't seem surprised to hear her voice. “Hi, um, Miss C.”

“You can still call me Kristy, when we're alone.”

“OK.”

He didn't offer anything further, so she pulled over one of the chairs and sat in it backward near the couch. Close enough to be able to give a reassuring touch, but not so close as to be called intimate. “Talk to me.”

“You wouldn't understand.” Conner's voice went directly into his arm, but there was no mistaking the amount of teen self-pity in it.

“When you have your arm over your fave like that, you’re right, I can’t understand you at all.” Conner dropped the arm, if only to give her an annoyed look. “There you go. Now come on. If I leave weepy messes behind in my classroom, they dock my pay. So do me a favor and talk to me.”

That got a smile, if only for a moment. “It’s TIOS. I did something again.”

That should have sent chills down her spine. She knew that. But so far, the things she *knew* he’d done with TIOS had all made him happy, so it was hard to think they were bad. Manipulating Heather into hooking up with him, sleeping with her... and if he hadn’t taken advantage of swapping Hayleigh McKnight into Hailey McManus she’d eat her shoe.

But maybe this time he’d inadvertently done something actually bad?

“What was it? It’s probably not as awful as what you think.”

He looked at her. “You look comfy today.”

Kristy arched an eyebrow. “Yep. You, too.”

“How come you’re dressed down? Usually you come to work in dresses, slacks, nice shirts. Casual Wednesday?”

She could tell from his grave expression he was going somewhere with it, so she kept humoring him a bit. “Nope, no reason, just what I felt like wearing today.”

“But every other day you felt like dressing up.”

“Not every other day. I’m not a slave to my wardrobe.” The teacher shrugged.

“But almost every other day. You’d admit that almost every day you get more dressed up than this. Right?”

“I guess, most days, sure. Are you criticizing my outfit? Conner, just because we slept together once doesn’t mean I’m going to play dress-up for you.”

The boy sat up, shaking his head wearily. “Did you think anything was unusual about the way your students were dressed today?”

She thought about it. “Are you talking about Heather and her ‘protest’ garb? That was weird, I guess, but they’ve been pulling stunts like that every day for a while now. Maybe I got numb to it.”

“Numb. To a student wearing a see-through top, fishnet stockings and booty shorts.”

“Hey, you don’t see me wearing it. You don’t like it, take it up with the Pride – and good luck. Heather’s got a lot of repression you’ll have to fight through.”

Conner groaned in frustration, but she didn’t know at what. “Do you even remember there being a dress code here? For teachers, students, anything? The shame shirts?”

“Of course I remember that, Conner. You think Heather would get away with dressing like that if we had a dress code?”

“When did it end? Do you remember? Do you remember *how* it ended?”

“Principal Beckmann dissolved it. I couldn’t give you the date, exactly. Not that long ago, I think? With the number of emails they bombard us with from the office, I lose track of the little things.”

“So you remember an email? Was it yesterday, maybe? After school?”

Kristy tried to think. She didn’t actually recall the specific announcement, if she was being honest, but probably something like that. Had it been at the faculty meeting last week? Maybe that was it. “I’m not sure, Conner. But what does this have to do with TIOS?”

“It was me, Kristy. *I’m* the one who abolished the dress code. Heather was so upset, and I thought I could make her happy, you know? So I talked to all these teachers and administrators and got them to say they thought the dress code was bad, copied their words into TIOS, and hit save. Then today, I show up, and every third person is half-undressed, missing underwear, and so on. And Heather! For the life of me I don’t know what I put in to make her do that, but she went from hiding her body her entire life to walking around half-naked!”

“More than half,” she pointed out.

“Exactly! But once again, nobody even thinks it’s weird. I turned the whole school into some kind of... peep show! And nobody even realizes it!”

Kristy tried to consider his words objectively. She remembered the situation with Hailey/Hayleigh, where he’d had to trick her into seeing it. Could it be he was right, and once more she was too wrapped up in it to see it? The English teacher didn’t *feel* like her wardrobe was out of the ordinary. She knew she could wear whatever she wanted, but admittedly she couldn’t say *how* she knew it. Should she be upset at how the kids had dressed today? Heather’s outfit was extreme, yes, but what was she supposed to do about it – punish someone for something as ridiculous as the clothes they chose to wear? Heather didn’t seem to mind, so why should she?

But Conner definitely minded. He was fuming, mumbling self-recriminations in livid tones. Was it a jealousy thing? She tried to imagine how she’d feel if someone had somehow “made” her sister dress like Heather Blake and her attention-seeking posse. Yes. Yes, that would be bad. She could see that. And Conner had already proven TIOS could do pretty bizarre things to the staff and students of NHS – he wouldn’t be this upset if it weren’t real.

“I... I think I see,” she ventured at last. “I’m still caught up in it, I think, but... I’m hearing you. So, have you tried to undo it?”

“You can’t. At least, if you can, I don’t know how. The vanilla version is easy enough to use, but the editor-in-chief mode has all kinds of options that I don’t even understand and I’m afraid to click on, because what if I can’t undo *that* either?”

She made a note to confer with him more on that score later. For now, she was consoling, not counseling. “Look at it like this. Nobody noticed anything wrong with it,

which means nobody actually got hurt. Right now, the only one hurt by it is you. Which I'm not a big proponent of, but ought to be some small comfort."

"Well I'm glad I at least let you be more comfortable for the day."

She tousled his hair. "I was going to wear a g-string and a see-through tube top, but I didn't want to steal Heather's thunder." For a moment, it occurred to her she *could* wear that now, and that this ought to be strange. Hmm.

Conner groaned. "No offense, Kristy, but I've had about all the sexual frustration I can handle for one day. Kind of hitting a new low here."

She had not been lying when she said that there was nothing in her forcing her to look for ways to make him happy. It was an exaggeration, perhaps, when she said she felt no compulsion. Omitted from her explanation was the thrill it gave her to act on those urges, and how the mild depression that she'd been struggling with since the break-up with Brent had been exacerbated during the past couple weeks as she knowingly left this boy feeling dejected. Every day it was harder to motivate herself to do her job, easier to think about giving in to that voice that had been telling her that this was it, this was as long as she could hang on. Every night it was harder to ignore the memories and dreams of the most satisfying sex of her life.

But after weeks of bottling up her desire to please him, and even knowing his words were sulky teenage hyperbole... the statement hit her like a tank shell.

She had to grip the seat in white knuckles to keep from leaping up then and there. "Other than this dress code thing, you doing OK? We haven't touched base for a while beyond work issues."

He sighed. "Fine."

The clear lie in his tone stung her more than it should. "You and Amanda getting along better? It looks like you're getting a lot done, now that you have someone to take off some of your load."

"Eh. I'm getting used to it, I guess. Still sucks."

She frowned, as much at hearing his malcontent as it was at how the sentiment echoed around in her chest. "Classes going OK?"

"Yeah. I have a C in physics right now, but Dr. Laugherty is doing a makeup test after school Thursday, so... yay."

She'd dealt with enough sullen teenagers in her career to know there was no question she would ask that would get him to see the silver lining. He was upset, and it was going to color whatever he thought about. "They're only clothes, Conner. What a person covers their body with doesn't change who they are underneath."

He sighed. "If you say so. I just feel like I turned her into some kind of... not a whore, but... I don't know. Whatever the word is for somebody who dresses like that."

"Person, Conner. The word is person. You know what? Hang on." Before he could protest, she excused herself from the computer lab. When she returned a few minutes

later, he was once more laying down, staring despondently at the ceiling. Or he was, at least, until she flipped the lights on and he laid eyes on her.

It never ceased to amuse her how excited boys his age got over visual stimulation. One time she'd realized the way she was bending over to help a student in the front row was giving a bit too clear a glimpse of her backside. She stood up, after which not one but two of her male students asked permission to go to the restroom. All that from a few seconds looking at a woman's butt in tight pants.

Conner was looking at a fair amount more than that. As was usually the case, Kristy had brought her gym bag to school so she could hit the track before getting home. When it was nice out she preferred to run outside, but that was months away yet. If he hadn't been a student and she not a teacher, it wouldn't even have been salacious – just her usual indigo spandex shorts and an orange sports bra that zipped up the front. It didn't even show cleavage, revealing nothing more than the shape of her breasts. (At least, their shape when this well-supported.)

From the boy's reaction, she may as well have come in naked. He gaped, and both hands subconsciously flew to his lap to conceal his erection – which he'd had before, she'd noticed, but now that it was being encouraged, it was more conspicuous to him.

“I... I wasn't trying to get you to... where did you even...”

“I got them at the mall, and I had them with me because I'm heading to the gym after school. And I didn't put them on because of anything you said or did. I'm illustrating a point.”

She gave him a few seconds to stare – then a few more, enjoying the sight of his woebegone expression fleeing his cute little face – before snapping her fingers to get his attention off her body. “Illustrating a point, I said.”

“Right. Yes. Sorry. A point.” He fought to keep his eyes on her face, and was mostly losing. Whatever. Looking at her body made him happy, which made her happy, and they could both use a bit of that right now.

“Do I look more attractive to you now than I did during class, Conner?”

His response was immediate. “Yes. Oh god yes.”

“Does wearing this diminish my intellect, my experience, my commitment, in any way?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Do I look embarrassed, or uncomfortable? Never mind that, I'll spare you the diagnosis. No, I'm not. I chose to wear it in front of you, and I like the way I look in it. I work hard to maintain this body, you know.”

“You look amazing.”

She waved off his fixated compliment. “So if I wore this to school tomorrow – by *my* choice, because *I* want to and *I* felt good in it – and nobody else judged me or complained... how would you feel?”



The frown crept back onto his lips, if only slightly. “I... bad, I guess.”

“So there’s your problem, Conner. *You* feel bad. Everybody else feels fine, so the problem isn’t them. It’s not here.” She gestured with both hands to her breasts. “Or here.” She swept down across her bare tummy, down to her shorts, then spun around. “Or here.”

She walked over to Conner and crouched in front of him and placed her fingers to his temples. “It’s in here. And the good news is, you’re the best-equipped person in the universe to fix what’s going on in there.”

Conner smiled at that, placing his hand over hers, then bringing it before his face and giving her fingertips a kiss. He may as well have swirled his tongue around her clit. Kristy felt her nipples go hard and her pussy start to lube up in an instant. “Yeah. Maybe you’re right. I guess nobody was *hurt* by it. And I guess we still don’t know if any of this is permanent, or if it wears off after graduation, or when the yearbook is published, or what. Maybe it is OK.”

She leaned in, pressing her forehead to his, careful to angle it so it didn’t look like she was going in for a kiss. “Feel better?”

He grinned. “I felt better the second you walked back in in that. But yeah. You always know how to make me so much happier. Thank y-!”

The surge of pleasure caught her off guard. She slipped to her knees, trembling violently. It wasn’t an orgasm, quite, but she’d forgotten how delightful it had felt the last time he’d said something along those lines.

“Are you all right?!” Conner hastened to help her up.

She accepted his hand, rising all the way to her feet. “Yeah, I’m fine. I... lost my balance, I guess.”

“Yeesh, be careful. You... um...” He was staring right at her crotch, which was right in front of his face now.

“I will be,” she assured him, and took a few steps back.

“You didn’t lose your balance, did you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kristy, you’re... I can see...” Rather than finish his statement, he pointed. Right at her pussy.

Kristiana Coszic-Lewandoski wasn’t one to embarrass easily. She’d gotten accustomed to students’ ridicule when she made a typo; once in high school her bikini top had fallen off at a pool party and she’d simply bounced over and put it back on; she’d even managed not to blush at those kids who’d run to the restroom to masturbate. But this, to be so wet it seeped through her panties and became visible through her outer clothing, and right in front of a student...

“I have to go,” she blurted, pivoting to flee the lab. He didn’t say a word. Kristy fled the school so quickly she was still tugging her coat on when she made it to the

exterior doors. Principal Beckmann, on her way in from supervising bus loading, saw the pretty young yearbook teacher in her spandex shorts and sports bra, a broadening dark spot at her groin, and wished her a pleasant afternoon.

## Chapter Five

“One of these days, I really may have to spring for a tit job,” Angelica groused as she rubbed her presently unenhanced boobs against Owen’s shaft. She’d never gotten complaints about them. “Fun-sized,” one of her boyfriends had called them. Still, it would make tit-fucking a lot easier, and as it had become her favorite filler activity, that wasn’t nothing. Tit-fucking left her mouth available for talking, and her eyes open in case she felt like reading. Owen was usually willing to oblige her by holding the book against his belly and turning the page when she asked. Sometimes she even read out loud to him, pausing whenever he was close to coming (unless it was a really good part). And it took a lot less energy than actual sex, plus less cleanup after.

“I keep telling you, I like ‘em just fine the way they are. Fake boobs look weird, and you’d look weirder than most, strapping a pair of gigantic torpedo titties on your tiny body,” Owen assured her, lowering the volume on whatever dumbass movie he was watching. Sounded like it had Will Ferrell, she was pretty sure, but she didn’t recognize the dialogue. The pair had wildly divergent tastes in TV and movies, but they’d decided that whoever was facing front got to control the remote. That this was almost always Owen was inconsequential to Angelica, who preferred music to TV anyway, and could get at his cock every bit as easily with earbuds in.

She gave him a look like he was an idiot, a look he had mostly gotten used to. “Yeah, ‘cause *that’s* the main consideration, not thousands of dollars in surgery, not the fact that I’m still – again – a high school student. Not whether it’s what I want. No, let’s focus on whether your bum ass would get it up for me in two seconds or three.”

“Hey, easy now, Angel.”

“Jesus, Owen, I wasn’t actually mad, I... Oh.” She caught his meaning and released his cock long enough to squirt a fresh dollop of lube on. From months of practice, she knew exactly how to squirt it, a narrow oval that went along the inner expanses of her boobs, with a little extra glob at the top that could trickle down over time and keep the main surface of his cock good and slippery. They went through bottles of lube like a fat guy went through bottles of syrup, and since funding for their activities was scant, and since she preferred not to have to soak herself in her own spit using her mouth to slick him up, she tried to make it last.

“Much better, thanks.”

It had taken months, but she’d finally gotten the boy to show some basic manners. At first, he’d been eating out of the palm of her hand. For all his bravado, the guy had been almost totally inexperienced before she’d gotten to him. Deep down he must’ve figured he’d eventually lose it to some tier three classmate who didn’t want to finish high school with her cherry intact, so when he’d instead cut to the front of the

line, he hadn't known what to do with himself. Angelica had been there to take advantage of that.

Then her stepbrother pulled that asinine stunt, and Owen had realized how much leverage he had over her. It had taken until after Thanksgiving before he'd let up, making her dance for him, pose, even beg. Had she needed to? No, but it was that or be sent away, and the one time she'd put her foot down (when he'd asked to try anal), she'd had to go four days before he let her have another go. It had been hell. Nothing distracted her sufficiently from that feeling that she needed *more*. It was like being a middle schooler all over again, except now she knew what it was she needed, and it was limited to only one person.

Eventually, though, he'd gotten tired of bossing her around, dealing with a sullen, pissed off cocksucker. (She pretended otherwise, but she think he knew that some of those tooth-scrapes had been intentional.) They'd been friends, sort of, ever since they'd met, after all. Not conventional let's-hang-out friends, but she enjoyed the little pest's pestering as much as he enjoyed her needling. She'd helped him remember that, and they'd gotten along a lot better ever since.

Even if she wanted to slap him sometimes for being a thoughtless clod.

"So what're you up to this weekend?" he asked when he slowly realized she was going to take her time about this. Angelica knew full well he wanted her to make him come every ten minutes, but then, he wasn't the one who had to clean herself up after. Well, sometimes he did. If his parents had installed a shower in the basement bathroom, they'd be quadrupling the house's water bill; instead, dabbing herself with some tissues was less of an incentive for him.

"Eh. We were talking about going to this party at some guy's house, but it sounds kinda sketchy. I don't know the house, but I know the neighborhood – out behind the old mall. The kind of place where the headline reads "area girl escapes after nine years in lunatic meth addict's basement."

"Oh, come on. I'm sure he'd get bored of you after six or seven." Owen tapped her nose playfully.

Angelica frowned, but the smile fighting to get loose beneath it won out after a moment. "Yeah, so I dunno. Plus we got some huge econ test Monday, and I'm sure Goner's gonna make me study with him. You?"

"Not much. We got our party tomorrow night."

She tried to blow a strand of brown hair out of her eyes. Even aside from needing her hands to press her tits together, she didn't want to get lube in her hair. Rookie mistake. "Oh yeah, that stupid little, what did he call it, noble savage party?" Another blow, which also failed, so she took Owen's hands and put them on her boobs while she fixed her hair with a knuckle. Not surprisingly, he gripped them too hard, jerked them too fast, and – in her opinion – appreciated them too little.

“Yeah, that’s the one. Not my name, for reference. Should be fun, though. Board games and booze – solid combo. Thanks again for that, by the way. And, you know, you’re welcome to join us, if you want.”

Angelica rested her elbows on his knees, craning her neck up at him. “You don’t think that would break the rule?”

His voice was a little more tense; he was going to come sooner rather than later after all. “No, I don’t see why it would. It’s only across the street, and you could say you just followed Conner over. It doesn’t have to be, like, you and me. Heather said she might swing by. You guys are friends, right?”

“Eh, sort of. I don’t really consider any of these high school girls Friend friends. Just some folks I can hang out with at school so repeating the ordeal isn’t a total nightmare. Why is *she* coming?”

“Personally I don’t think she is, but he said he invited her and that she said she might stop by. It sounds like the usual brushing him off gently line to me, but hey. Cool with me if she does.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I’ll bet it is.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She performed a deep-voiced mockery of him. “Cool with me if she does. Just as long as she wears the slutty shit she does at school so I can beat off in the bathroom between rounds of Monopoly.’ Ugh. You’re such a perv.”

Conner had told them what had become of the NHS dress code, then tried to prove it to them when they said they didn’t see it. Angelica didn’t care, and had bailed early; as far as she was concerned, she could wear whatever she wanted and didn’t want to ogle girls, so who cared. Owen had eventually managed to eureka his way to realizing it, and the two had squawked like magpies about Heather and her posse’s whorish fashion choices. As if she weren’t right there in the car. As if Owen hadn’t seen Angelica naked a thousand times, and Heather zero. If Angelica weighed that much, with her little boobs, she’d be called a lard-ass, but grow a pair that need custom heavy duty bras and suddenly it’s just “baby fat.” Fucking double standard.

“Come on, Angel, don’t hate because she’s got the balls to come to school in a fishnet top and you barely even show your legs.”

“It’s January, dumbass, of course I’m not going to show my legs when it’s three fucking degrees out!” she snapped.

The sting of it was lost on him, apparently, because right then his body tensed, his neck arched back, and he came. Like the trooper that she was, she took over control of her tits, squashing them firmly around his dick and pumping him until he was spent. While he was coming back to earth with his usual idiot grin on his face, she snagged the box of tissues they kept under the couch and sponged her boobs (and her chin, this

time) clean, then lay down on the couch with her head in his lap, his waning cock just discernible as a soft lump behind her head.

“Fuck, you’re good,” he said between heaving breaths.

“Only good?” Still, she smiled. “Yesterday you said I was perfect.”

“Will you go to King of Hearts with me?” he blurted suddenly. As soon the words were out, his eyes bulged, shocked at his own gumption.

Grudgingly, Angelica sat up, forfeiting her coveted position touching his cock so she could look at him on an even level. “Uh, what?”

“The dance. The Valentine’s dance. I mean, it’s technically the day after, but still.”

“I know what the dance is, moron. I meant ‘uh, what’ as in uh, what about the rule?”

He took her hands. It was sickeningly romantic. “Come on, it could be fun. I clean up pretty good, you know. You and me, out on the town, looking super hot, getting our dance on, bumping and grinding. Like people do.”

“You might clean up good,” she said, though having seen him in a suit at her dad and stepmom’s wedding, she was being a bit charitable, “but I know you don’t know how to dance for shit. You made me learn to strip tease, asshole, but you might be the whitest white dude on the dance floor.”

“For one, plenty of white guys can dance—”

“Name three.”

“—and for two, you’re deflecting. Come on. Let’s do it. We don’t have to announce we’re a couple or anything. We’ll just get to leave the house for once, actually do something other than sit around my basement fucking all day every day. Which I cannot freaking believe I just said, but I stand by it.”

She withdrew her hands from his. “Look, I don’t know. Isn’t that why we made the rule? Because our situation is... weird?”

“Why is it so weird?”

Angelica ticked off the ways on her fingers as she said. “Why? Let’s see. One, I finished high school and its rites of passage two and a half years ago. Two, my friends would flip their shit if they found out I was going out with a high school boy in *any* capacity, much less to some cheesy Valentine’s dance. Three, if our parents find out we’re together, they might try to cock block me, which *cannot* happen. Four, we’re only together because you tricked me into letting a magical yearbook program make me fuck you. Five, what everybody at school is going to say when they find out, you know...”

“... that you’re willing to go out with someone like me.”

Angelica’s eye contact faltered for a moment. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“It’s what you meant, though.”

“No it’s not!” she protested. “It’s just... the world expects certain types of people to be together. Gay marriage only became law a few years ago, and my grandpa has told

me about the so-called good old days when it was illegal for people of different races. People get freaked out when things are outside the norm, Owen.”

“I wonder what year it’ll be when hot girls are legally allowed to be seen in public with gingers,” he said despondently.

Goddammit. This was the whole point of the rule, so they didn’t have to deal with bullshit like this. Men were so fucking emotional. “Come on. Let me get my pants off and I’ll make it up to you.”

“Don’t bother. I’m not in the mood.”

She frowned. This was a first. “Twenty bucks says I can have you in the mood in under thirty seconds.”

“I’m serious.”

“Not even for anal?” she ventured. God did she not want to, but she felt bad. And she still needed *more*. Like always.

“If you want something up your ass, why don’t you take the rule and cram it up there?”

“Owen...”

“I’m done for the night. Why don’t you head on home.”

The noble savage party – or “party” as Angelica had referred to it as Conner was leaving, finger quotes and all – turned out exactly right, as far as Conner was concerned. His kind of shindig. Fruity cocktails instead of cheap beer; Cards Against Humanity instead of flippy cup; an intimate circle of good friends instead of an anonymous mob. (Owen had wanted the anonymous mob spilling out into his parents’ yard, but since they didn’t have the social chops for it, he settled for the intimate circle in the living room.)

Conner was enjoying himself. At least, he should be, and he was doing his best to convince himself that he was. The party had all the elements he could have hoped for, and everybody else seemed to be having a good time. Trevor and his girlfriend Kayla were playing Conner and Oscar at euchre (and winning handsomely); Owen, Penny and Jacqui were playing some kind of racing video game in the living room, with enthusiastic shouts and good-natured taunts carrying to where the others were gathered in the kitchen.

The front door opened, and his neck snapped to look in that direction. But it was only Luis, who’d finally finished his shift at work and joined the gathering. Greetings were issued, and he hunkered down in front of the the huge television in the living room and picked up the final controller.

Conner allowed his gaze to linger on Penny and Jacqui for a moment. Not that he could see anything except the backs of their heads over the sofas. Why couldn’t he be interested in one of them? Was he that shallow? Penny was reasonably pretty, enough so that it merited the occasional crude comment from Owen (which she was skillful at deflecting and reversing). But she was also kind of a jock, and spent most of whatever time wasn’t spent playing sports on watching them. The attraction was there, but not much in the way of common interests. Jacqui maybe wasn’t much to look at, but she wasn’t ugly or anything. She was the “nice one” of the group (at least amongst the girls; Conner was frequently teased for bearing the mantle among the boys). But she was also hard to talk to, prone to one-word answers and comfortable with silence. During their attempt at dating junior year, he’d found it difficult to get close to her.

Or maybe he was making excuses not to make a move on anyone because he’d spent the better part of twenty hours in the past two weeks in classes with Heather, losing himself staring at the parade of racy outfits she’d taken to wearing. He suspected TIOS had transmuted her myriad “protest outfits” into such garb, the same way it had remade Hailey and Hayleigh’s wardrobes to fit their new physique. She caught him time and again, and every time he was the one who walked away blushing. She liked being stared at. Even with all the extra skin and curves and jiggle to be beheld around NHS these days, especially from her fellow Pride girls, he’d caught other guys noticing her, too. He supposed they were checking her out pre-TIOS, and were simply continuing to do so.

Regardless, tonight, she wasn’t here to be checked out.



“Conner? Earth to Conner...?” Kayla prompted.

“Sorry,” he said, returning his attention to the card game. He tossed out the jack of diamonds, the left bower bringing him and Oscar back within one point. As Trevor shuffled, he excused himself to refresh his drink, taking requests from the others.

The cooler was in the garage, and it appeared Owen had had the same idea before him. “How’s the cards going? You guys bored yet?”

“I think we’ll transition to something else after this game,” Conner answered. “I was thinking Settlers, but we’ll see how people feel. Who’s winning in the living room?”

“It’s not about keeping score, man.”

“So not you, then.” Conner twisted the cap off, wondering why anyone would prefer bottles that required a tool to open.

Headlights suddenly shone through the windows set in the garage door. Conner craned his neck to see who was pulling into the driveway. Could she finally be here? He realized it was only Angelica backing into their driveway across the street, though. Back from her own party, he guessed.

“Dude.”

Conner turned to face Owen, who was looking at him with distinct displeasure. “What?”

“She’s not coming, dude. You have got to get over this chick. It was three dates, a month ago, and it didn’t work out. But the way you’re obsessing over it, you’re killing not just my buzz, but your own buzz, too.”

“It’s just... I just...” Conner sighed, craning his neck one last time to see if she might be in the driveway or something. She wasn’t. “With the dance coming up, I know she said she’d not looking to start dating anyone in the new semester, but I thought, maybe for one night...”

“Is that it? You’re looking for a date to the dance? Fuck, man, why go at all? Those things are unbelievably lame. Just a bunch of assholes awkwardly dancing to shitty music while we watch the popular kids rub it in our faces that they’re going to leave and go fuck people the rest of us never had a shot with.”

“Yeesh, jealous much?”

“I calls ‘em like I sees ‘em, buddy. But I’m serious. Fuck the dance. I mean, King of Hearts? What the hell does that even mean?”

Conner shrugged his shoulders, settling down using the cooler as a seat. “I have to go to the dance. It’s a yearbook thing. And everybody bitches about the dance assignments, because everybody wants to actually go to the dance like normal people and not have to take pictures and interview people at the refreshment table and all that. So I figured if I was gonna go...”

“May as well go with one of your yearbook dorks,” Owen finished. “I see. I guess. Still, why not go with Jacqui? You went to junior prom with her last year, seemed to go all right, didn’t it? I don’t think she has a date yet.”

“I also went with her to homecoming, which is kinda the point. I think you can only go on two pity dates before both parties have to acknowledge what it really is.”

Owen grinned, chugging down the rest of his drink and brushing Conner aside so he could get another. “Yeah, that’s probably true. What about Hailey? I know you stood her up and all, but come on, like she’s got other options. I bet she’d cream her secretly tiny panties to be asked by you.”

“I’ve thought about it. But come on, I’d feel bad even asking her. After all I put her through... the fooling around, breaking up, ignoring her, giving her that burst of false hope only to crush it later the same day. It’d be cruel at this point.” He didn’t mention that she’d been brushing him off for weeks now.

“You just don’t want to be seen with her. At least not with the her that everybody else sees.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it. What reputation does the fainting loser of Northside have to blow anyway?” Conner flicked his bottle cap at Owen, but missed badly. He had to chase it down, lest Owen’s parents find it later and get suspicious.

“You’re probably better off going stag anyway, man. I bet Heather shows up in a g-string and booby tassels – you’ll round second base just watching her dance.”

Conner finished off his own drink. “You’re right. I mean, the hell with Heather Blake, right? I was happier before she and I ever–”

The door from the house suddenly opened, and standing in the doorway was none other than Heather Blake. Conner remembered distinctly that her attire at school that day had been a black leather dress with all sorts of studs and buckles and zippers, the latter of which were zipped up to the waist on either hip and halfway down to her belly button on the top. Owen and Conner had argued on the way home from school whether it was the sluttiest outfit yet; Conner said yes, but Owen insisted the sports bra and teensy yellow athletic shorts from earlier in the week took the cake. When she sat down, those shorts rode up so almost her entire ass cheeks were hanging out the bottom.

Presently, she was wearing a fuzzy white sweater and loose-fitting blue jeans. It was like he was seeing the real her for the first time in weeks. She’d obviously put a little time into hair and makeup, and the sweater probably clung a bit tighter than what she’d typically worn to school in the past, but for once she looked like the Heather Blake he knew.

“Hey, Conner. Owen. Funny running into you guys here.”

The boys responded in oblivious unison:

“I live here.”

“I invited you here.

She nodded slowly, smirking in her charming fashion. “Yep, that was the joke.”

“I thought you weren’t gonna make it,” Conner said.

“I said I’d try, and... I tried.” She grinned, then looked pointedly at their empty bottles. “Whose butt do I have to kick to get one of those?”

Conner retrieved one for her, as well as a fresh one for himself and Owen.

“Cheers.”

The three clinked the necks of their bottles together, twisted the caps and drank.

“You look really pretty tonight, Heather,” Conner said.

“Thanks. It’s nice to not have to dress all political, you know?”

Owen nearly spit out a mouthful of his drink trying not to laugh, then coughed so hard Heather started patting him on the back to make sure he was all right. “Sorry, sorry,” he managed at last. “Must’ve gone down the wrong pipe. But yeah, I wanted to say, I totally admire your, um, political attire. It’s so, like, bold of you.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have figured you for a feminist,” she responded.

“What? No way. Honestly, I wish more women had the guts to dress like you and the Pride. Why wouldn’t you think I was a feminist?”

She laughed. “I don’t know, maybe because of that time freshman year you sat behind me in geography and I caught you drawing a naked picture of me talking on a telephone that was captioned, if I recall correctly, ‘Heather’s Hooter Hotline.’”

Conner eyed his friend. “Dude, seriously?”

Owen grimaced. “Uh, I think they’re waiting for me inside. Glad you could make it, Heather.”

“Yeah, we’ll talk later. You can always call the hotline,” she jibed as he retreated inside. Conner laughed along with her.

“What’s the number for that hotline, by the way?”

Heather rolled her eyes, gulping down her drink. “1-800-dream-on.”

“Darn, I was hoping you guys were hiring. Mrs. Prendergast has been telling me to give up on that college nonsense and pursue my true calling as a phone sex operator.” He lowered his voice and donned a vaguely European accent, lifting his cell phone to his ear. “So, my dear, what are you wearing – and more importantly, what *aren’t* you wearing?”

“I’ll tell you what, it’s weirdly nice to be wearing a bra again. I’ve always hated the things, but going without, everything just... goes everywhere. You know?” Heather helped herself to another bottle.

“Yeah, I sorta noticed that. I think pretty much everyone noticed that, actually,” Conner mumbled.

“Oh, whatever. Most people think it’s some stupid little stunt. They’re waiting for us to give up. Not happening.”

“I’d be crushed if you did.”

“You might be about the only one. But I think we’re changing the dialogue. If we keep...” She stopped herself. “You know, I’ve chewed your ear off about this a hundred times, I feel like.”

“I don’t mind. Actually, I was wondering if you were going to protest at the dance? You know, for King of Hearts. If you’re going, that is. Are you going?”

“Actually, I—”

The door opened then. “Hey you guys,” Kayla said. She darted in to grab a few more bottles from the cooler, but stopped at the door to address them. “We’re about to start up a game of Settlers. Got room for both of you, if you want.”

She closed the door behind them. “Settlers?” Heather asked. “Is that some kind of drinking game?”

“No, it’s a board game. You build up a civilization, gathering and trading for resources like stone or wood or sheep.”

“Wow. I know you said this was a board game party, but... it really is a board game party.”

“Yeah, you don’t have to play anything if you don’t want.”

Heather gave him a little shove. “Are you kidding? I’ve come this far, haven’t I? I’m all in. I can’t stay out too late, but while I’m here, I’m here. So let’s go gather some sheep. All hail Sheeptopia!”

Heather caught the gist of the game pretty quickly. She did indeed name her kingdom Sheeptopia, then declared that it was not a kingdom but rather a leaderless anarchist collective represented by equitably alternating spokespersons who actuated the democratically voted will of the membership. It inspired similar declarations from the other players, competing for the most ridiculous and outlandish concepts.

Conner, however, spent most of the game trying not to think about what might happen if he entered their dialogue into TIOS.

“Anybody have any wood they’re willing to trade?” Heather asked.

The game had been uncharacteristically scarce in that resource; Kayla and Trevor both said they had none. “I have wood. What can you offer me for it?” Conner asked.

“Anything you want. I pretty much need it to be able to function.”

She would have no idea how much sleep he’d lose in the coming weeks telling himself it was wrong to test it out.

Heather, as well as several of the others, had a curfew, and so the party wound down pretty much all at once. Conner was staying back to help Owen with cleanup, but he took a break to walk Heather to her car. Trevor was designated driver for the rest of them, but Heather insisted she’d only had three drinks, none in the past hour, and would be fine. Conner relented, if only because he couldn’t make any such claims about his own capacity to drive.

“So did you have at least a little fun?”

“What? I totally had fun. I was a little nervous coming in, but it was actually a pretty chill night. So thank you. And tell Owen thanks for hosting.”

“Will do,” he said, darting across the street to snag the ice scraper from his own car to help with the windshields. It didn’t take much urging for her to settle into the driver’s seat and wait for the engine to heat up out of the chill winter breeze. She rolled the window down a crack after a few minutes to assure him that she could see well enough to be safe.

“If you’re sure.”

“Very sure. Thank you, Conner.”

The window had started to close when he spoke quickly to stop her. “So hey, real quick... I didn’t quite get around to asking you earlier if you were, you know, going to King of Hearts.”

“Yeah, I am. Got my ticket yesterday. You?”

His heart sank in his chest. “For yearbook, yeah. Who are you, um, going with?”

“Actually, kind of nobody? Lady Nighthawk Pride is going as a unit. Most of us, anyway – some have boyfriends. One girlfriend, too. I’ll save you a dance, OK?”

“Sounds great.” She put the car into drive. “Anyway, thanks for coming out. Good night, Heather.”

“G’night, Conner.”

“Oh my fucking god, Mr. Lyons, you’re making your little slut come so fucking hard she can’t even see straight!” Hailey whined.

“What else is new,” the man fucking her said. His tone was pure disdain, but she knew that was a good thing. The girl had gotten to be an expert in understanding what Jordan liked and didn’t like, and right there near the top of the Like column was condescension. At first, it had been a part of their relationship – not that they had a “relationship”; he’d been *very* clear about that – that she merely tolerated, but over the past month it had gradually transmuted into one more part that helped affirm her sexual persona. A persona that increasingly felt natural. She slipped into it more and more easily each time they hooked up.

“Please don’t stop,” she pleaded. “Oh fuck, your huge fucking dick is so... don’t take it away. Your slut will be so good to it, let her love it, let her show you how much she adores your perfect cock, sir!” Hailey cried as Jordan shifted their positions. She’d initiated by planting her hands on the arm of his couch, her ass thrust backwards in a tiny little skirt that was surely revealing that she wore no panties. But Jordan liked to dictate how and where he fucked her, so when he pulled back on her hair to get her upright and then slammed her tits-first against the wall, she simply clawed at it as she held on for sweet wonderful life.

Hailey was really grateful for his parents’ guest house. There were still some limits to how loudly she could scream, but much less concern for that than there was at her own place. It was rare for Doug to be gone and leave them the place to themselves, but sometimes Jordan stopped by to fuck her or get a blowjob or whatever unannounced, so she’d had to learn to keep the sound to a minimum. (And put a padlock on her door. Doug had never been much for respecting her privacy, and after eighteen long years she finally had something to hide.)

She’d offered to have sex in his car, at his place, a hotel room... but really, they both preferred the guest house. It had been built decades ago, when the former owners had wanted their servants to be available to them day or night. Still, they wanted to maintain their privacy from the help, so a copse of dense cedar trees obstructed the view from the house. Nowadays, the place was vacant except around the holidays or a few times a year when his stepmom used it to have cocktails with her friends. It was perfect for the two of them. Tonight, his simple text *GH in 30* had given her just enough time to change into this gray and black striped skirt and the gauzy white tank top she’d worn over it, drive over, and he waiting in a fuckable pose when he strolled in from the house.

“Yeah? You like that, you little slut? You like being my fucking bitch? You like being my little side piece? My own posable fuck doll?” Jordan grunted into her ear as he rutted away.

“You know I do, Mr. Lyons. Day and night, all your slut wants is to get fucked, to make you come in her tight wet cunt, to taste you in her whore mouth.” This was close to

true. Other than the side piece thing, anyway. Hailey would have very much liked it if he wanted to actually make her his girlfriend. Even his secret girlfriend. But Jordan had stated emphatically that he was completely uninterested in any sort of non-clandestine relationship with her, and that included using the terms boyfriend or girlfriend even when they were alone.

Not that she could blame him. Who was she, after all, to have any business dating the likes of him? Jordan was hot, in kind of a skinny way, and his family had money, and he had cool friends and got invited to all these parties and outings and stuff. It was a life a girl like her had no business in. Just that night, before rushing out the door to be on time for their rendezvous, she'd looked at herself in the mirror and wondered what on earth a boy like him was even doing using the pussy of a girl like her.

She hated every single thing in that reflection. Her stomach, of course, above everything. The damning way the XXS t-shirt clung to it. The little line that formed in the middle if she bent to touch her toes. The disgusting mole near her belly button where the skimpy tank top couldn't even cover the whole of her. Then there was the rest of it: the two thin lines of evenly tanned flesh oozing out from beneath her size 1 mini skirt; the revolting symmetry of her face; the way her collar bone stood out in such stark relief to her chest; the distractingly glossy sheen of her soft auburn hair; dimples like two craters in smooth round cheeks. The only thing she liked was her boobs. Fat pigs like her still could have great boobs.

Jordan, though? He didn't seem to mind. Somehow, impossibly, he seemed to actually find her inexplicably... attractive. Maybe even sexy?

No. Don't go putting on airs, Hailey, she scolded herself.

"Grab those ankles, Hailey, you fucking gutter slut," he said.

"Yes sir," she answered. She felt a little weird about the way he addressed her sometimes. Or had at first anyway. Their psych class was teaching her how he clearly had some kind of inferiority complex in regards to his father, as his need to be addressed respectfully was painfully easy to diagnose. As pretty as his stepmother was, no wonder he had all these issues envying his dad. She didn't mind, though. The more she debased herself, the more she exalted him, the more often he let her get fucked. If anything, she pitied him a little. She had a wonderful relationship with her mother, and could only imagine it being tinged with a sense of such profound inadequacy.

He spanked her, of course. Jordan almost always spanked her when he fucked her from behind. She missed it when he didn't, honestly. What could be a more apt signifier of her place as his pity fuck than the faceless, merciless slapping of her ass as he used her pussy like he owned it? Sometimes it hurt to sit down after. Hailey liked that, too. It let her remember it, something to savor in case he finally woke up and realized he was fucking the ugliest girl in school and kicked her to the curb. Where she probably belonged, with the rest of the garbage.

“Oh god, Mr. Lyons, I think you might actually fuck your stupid little slut’s brains out if you keep doing that! I fucking hope so. Please keep going? Please? Oh smack my fat stupid ass *harder!*”

That had been a more recent development, calling herself stupid. Ugly and unpopular and unlovable by the opposite sex, sure. These were facets of herself she’d made peace with over the course of a lifetime. But she’d never thought of herself as stupid. Still didn’t, really. But man, last week when she’d offhandedly spewed something about fucking her brains out, she’d been surprised at how he’d leapt on the premise, unabashedly hurling taunts and insults about her intelligence. Hailey had always known guys were often attracted to dumb girls, and she’d seen lots of times where girls acted like they were stupid just to get guys to notice them. Heck, she remembered how Hayleigh McKnight had made the honor roll all through middle school right along with Hailey herself, but as her body had developed into those rolling, jiggling, waddling curves that everyone so lusted after or envied, she’d started her high school classes with a vapid expression so spot-on that it could only be the result of practice. By the time she’d landed Jayce Deacons, the habit seemed to be too deeply ingrained to break.

She’d always pitied girls like that, but now, if it got Jordan to fuck her harder, to use her more often, she’d act like a moron whenever he liked. The other day in psych class, the teacher had asked her to explain the distinction between id and super id. She’d given Jordan the briefest of glances, elevated the pitch of her voice as much as she thought she could get away with, and said, “Um, the difference is, um, Idunno, and super Idunno? This stuff is confusing!”

The class had laughed at her. Coming from some girls, her thick slathering of ignorance would have been seen for the feint it was, but nobody thought much of Hailey McManus. She had no reputation to slander, so the self-effacement wasn’t anything that she resented. Besides, Jordan hadn’t laughed. He’d adjusted his cock in his pants, then followed her home and fucked her twice right there in the living room. He hadn’t been able to even drag her down to her bed before ramming his cock inside her.

Whatever. She knew her intellectual worth. But she also knew it would never get a boy like Jordan Lyons to want to have sex with her, to see past her corpulent, 128 pound exterior to the perpetually horny slut within. So if he wanted her to pretend to be dumb...

“Don’t stop, don’t stop, fuck your dumbfuck bimbo’s stupid cunt, sir!” she wailed. Evidently, it had been the right thing to say – it was strange how her mouth always seemed to know the right thing to say to him during sex and never during the rare occasions they were talking without fucking – because he came like a firehose. Hailey had already had two orgasms, and was a bit disappointed to not quite hit three. There was no sense asking for his assistance, though; Jordan did what he wanted with her and then moved on. He was manly like that, she thought. Conner had always insisted on



making sure she was satisfied, but she guessed maybe he had a lot to learn. According to Jordan, anyway.

“God, Hailey, you sure can run that mouth of yours like nobody else, I swear.” Jordan fell on the couch, spreading himself across its entire expanse. Feeling awkward seating herself across the room, as well as remembering his admonition not to dribble her cunt on the furniture, she plopped down on the floor beside him. His hand took a possessive hold of her left tit, and from that alone she was ready to be fucked all over again.

“Sorry. I don’t mean to, but I get all excited,” she answered meekly.

Jordan laughed. “It wasn’t a complaint, dummy.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Damn, you apologize like nobody else, too. Here,” he said, raising his hand towards her face and slipping his index finger between her lips. She sucked on it dutifully, partially relieved not to have to risk saying anything else to upset him.

“You’re something else, you know that?” Hailey couldn’t respond, so she simply swirled her tongue around his finger. “Every time I think I’m nuts to be so in love with that pussy, you go and remind me that your sweet sloppy slit of yours is the best kept secret at Northside.”

“Honk oo,” she murmured around his finger. Geez, he knew how to make her all gushy again. Not that she’d ever really stopped. It had started the moment she’d seen she had a text from Jordan, and would probably persist until she diddled a few more out of herself at home. She was horny almost all the time these days.

“I mean it. Like, look at you, right? But even so, you came to school today positively rocking those leggings. Did you get them in flesh tone because I told you that’s what I like?”

He pulled her finger out of her mouth so she could reply, and after a moment’s consideration returned his hand to her tit. “Maaaybe.”

“I knew it, you little fucking slut. Well you’re pulling it off. You ever think about joining Heather Blake’s little skank squad?”

Hailey blinked. “You mean the Lady Nighthawk Pride?”

“Yeah, them, whatever they wanna call themselves.”

She frowned. “But... those girls are all, you know... pretty. I’d look gross trying to wear clothes like that. People would laugh at me.”

Jordan chuckled. “Yeah, probably. Ah, well. Guess I can still check out those bitches during the day, then have you to enjoy at night, right?”

Hailey was glad her back was to him so he couldn’t see the tears that welled up in her eyes. She knew the insults were just part of what got him turned on, but still, it hurt sometimes. “Yeah. I guess so.”

Jordan detected the wounded note in her voice, though, and tilted her chin around to look at him. “Oh come on, Hailey. I’d rather be here fucking you than looking at those girls any day.”

Her lips twitched in an attempted smile. “You don’t have to say that.”

“Hey, you know me. Have I ever bullshitted you to make you feel better?”

“Heck no.”

“Right. So when I tell you I love our time together, you gotta believe me, OK?”

She sniffled, the full smile finally blooming. “OK. I, um, like being with you, too.”

“Oh you don’t gotta tell me, babe. I just saw you come like a porn star a minute ago. You weren’t faking that shit, right?”

She shook her head vehemently. “Never. Your slut never has to fake how good your make her wet cunt feel, sir.” Heavy-handed? Maybe. But it came to her naturally around him, as it had around Conner, and sometimes if she talked slutty enough, he’d decide to give her another go.

“Good. Now why don’t you get yourself cleaned up. I got some people coming over before long, so I gotta get dressed and all. But I’ll see you Monday in class, right?”

Hailey wanted to suggest he could see her sooner if he liked, but she knew how he responded to her attempts to steer things to her own pacing. “Right.”

Jordan set about getting dressed; Hailey remained on the floor, his cum dribbling slowly out of her and dripping onto her ankle where it was curled strategically to serve that very purpose. She liked to shower here so she wouldn’t have to go home smelling like sex. She’d told her mom that she’d joined a gym, which worked as a handy alibi for her spontaneous disappearances of an hour or two, coming home with wet hair and flushed skin.

“Say, you know how King of Hearts is coming up?” she ventured as he pulled his jeans back on. He tensed visibly at the words, and she rushed her follow-up. “Don’t worry, I know you don’t want to go with me or anything.” She made herself giggle at such a preposterous idea.

“Yeah, I like having you all to myself, Hailey. You know, keeping us secret is so much hotter, don’t you think?”

“Right. Yeah. Totally,” she assured him. “I was only thinking that, um, I’m probably gonna go stag and all, so like, if you wanted, I thought maybe we could like, sneak off for a few minutes during, and... I dunno, maybe have a dance or something. I know some places nobody would ever ever find us or anything. If you wanted.”

Jordan grinned at her. “You sly little minx. You lookin’ to get your box stuffed during a school dance, eh?”

That had not, in fact, been what she’d meant, but it was easier to agree with him than admit she’d thought a dance might be romantic. “Your slut is *always* looking to get her box stuffed by you.”

Jordan walked over and patted her on the head. "We'll see. I'm going to be there with one of the girls in my second period, but if I wind up hooking up with them, trust me, I'll be thinking of you."

Hailey beamed. She'd never had a boy say yes to her before. Not that Jordan had, but... it would have to do. "That's really awesome. Thank you. You know, I was thinking maybe I'd go with somebody else anyway."

He laughed. She should have expected that. "Oh yeah? Who's that?"

"Conner Fishers."

Conner had been hinting at her pretty hard lately that he wanted another chance after blowing it during finals week, and again rebuffing her when she'd made an advance on him over break. She'd been hurt both times, but now that she'd been with Jordan, she was realizing that's how boys were. Conner had apologized, though, and been willing to be seen with her. He was nice to her, really.

Jordan scowled at the mention. "No."

Hailey blinked as she fastened her bra. "I'm sorry?"

"No. You're not going with him."

"Oh! No, I mean, just as friends! Obviously we're not gonna... you know."

"No. Your ass belongs to me, slut. Stay home, watch a movie, rub one out, and as soon as I get a chance, I'll swing by and give you what you need."

She brightened. "Like, after the dance?"

"Whenever. I'll probably be busy after. I think Kirsten Vaughan's hosting an after party at her place. Probably so the bitch'll have a bedroom handy for whatever doucher she picks up at the dance."

"Oh. That, um, sounds fun."

"Eh." His open palm slapped her hard on the ass as he walked past her to the guest house door. "But you stay home, be a good slut, and I'll see you when I see you. OK?"

"I can't wait."

Amanda tried to pretend she couldn't make hear their conversation through the door to the editor's office. For what felt like the hundredth time since showing up at Northside, Miss C and her wunderkind were locked in private conference, and once more, it was to talk about her.

"So undo it!" that boy was saying. "You told her she had to do it, so just un-tell her!"

"Calm down, Conner. Take a few breaths and tell me what's got you so upset."

The boy definitely didn't wait to take any unnecessary breaths before responding. "Isn't it obvious? I vent a little about not having a date to the King of Hearts Dance, and your solution is to co-assign *Amanda Carpenter* to the spread?"

She scowled indignantly at the way he always said her first and last name together like that. That boy was pure condescension.

"Come on, I thought it'd be a good bonding experience for the two of you. Something in common, but social enough that you can unwind a little. I thought this would make you happy."

Ugh. Why was this woman so fired up to make her golden child happy all the time? Bringing him soda, hovering near his shoulder while he worked, seeking his input on all sorts of stupid minutiae... it bordered on unprofessional, frankly.

"Happy? Why would having to spend an entire evening with *her* make me happy?"

*Yeah, because working with you is such a treat all the time*, she thought.

"You could always back out yourself now, you know. I don't think it takes two editors-in-chief to cover a single high school dance."

"If I back out, she'll know it's because of her, and that means she wins," he thundered.

"Seriously?" Amanda grumbled aloud. Like she'd asked to come to one of the only schools in the state that already had someone of her calibre on staff. It galled to acknowledge it, but he was every bit as good as her – and unlike him, she could admit it.

Finally, probably at Miss C's urging, their voices lowered enough that she couldn't hear them any longer. She gave them another minute before opening the door. Miss C was sitting on the calendar on Conner's desk, and he in his own seat with a gloomy look on his face. "Is it cool if I come in? I don't mean to interrupt, but I have a lot to get done today, and you gotta strike while the iron's hot, right?"

Miss C rose to her feet. Good thing. Amanda wasn't one to judge people on their clothing choices, but in that short of a dress, she'd been really close to flashing that boy her underwear. "Of course. The office is yours. *Both* of yours," she said, giving Conner one last reproving look before leaving them to their posts.

Amanda was content to get to work and ignore his spiteful sideward glances. She might be only newly minted a Nighthawk, but she'd already come to like being here.

There was a sort of warmth to the place – weather notwithstanding – and she'd felt right at home quickly. Heck, she so seldom went anywhere else that the school practically *was* her home. Besides, like any good yearbook editor, in-chief or no, she understood the importance of her work. Memories were precious, and she knew this sudden strange twist in her life story would be something she'd want to remember in the years to come.

That boy, however, was evidently not content to honor their pact of silence. “Hey. I don't know if you heard any of that...”

“Of course I heard it.” She didn't bother turning her head to look at him. “The office isn't exactly sound-proof.”

“I know that,” he snapped. “I've been here seven semesters longer than you, you know.”

She rolled her eyes, continuing to type as she responded. “I do seem to recall someone mentioning that a few dozen times, yes. Though it seems the wisdom of your many years didn't allow you to internalize much about the acoustics of your own office now, did it?”

He sighed irritably. “Why do you always have to make everything so difficult? I'm trying to be nice, but you have to go and pick a fight!”

“Oh, sorry. I know how important it is that you win everything, right?” She looked up in time to see his cheeks flushing at being confronted with his own words. “So fine, you win. Can I get some work done now?”

“FINE.” He spasmed in what looked like an attempt to slam his laptop *open*; she didn't bother saying anything about how foolish it made him look. If it kept him quiet, he could juggle the thing.

He was quiet for maybe two minutes – but what a couple of minutes they were – before speaking again. “It's not a date, you know.”

“What's not a date?”

“The King of Hearts spread we're doing. It's not a date.”

“Yeah, I know. Obviously.”

“I'm serious. Just because we're going to be working together and dressed up doesn't make it anything.”

Amanda forced herself to ignore it. “Agreed. And further, I'd like to point out we don't actually need to even work together on this. You can stand in your corner, and me in mine.”

“Oh no, I'm not going to let somebody who doesn't even know her way around the gym to handle half the photography unsupervised.”

“You're not my supervisor.”

Conner spoke right over her. “You don't even know the order of ceremonies, where the best angles will be, what kind of footage we still need and of who... we're doing this right, if we're going to do it.”

“Fine. Then it looks like we’ll be standing near one another on our non-date.”

“Fine.”

He made it almost three minutes that time. “So how come you didn’t already have a date?”

She spun her chair to look at him, folding her arms. “Hang on there, sparky. Why don’t we start with you? Why doesn’t the legendary Conner Fishers, with his years of experience, have a date?”

He raised his hands. “I was only curious, god. Nobody’s insinuating anything.”

“Oh, me either, just really curious why a catch like you could be going stag.”

“A lot of people go stag. There’s more to a dance than hooking up, you know.”

“Looks like you dodged that bullet then, eh.”

The boy gritted his teeth. “Why do you have to be like that? I was only asking a question about you because I was curious. You never talk about yourself.”

“So you’re allowed to wonder why I didn’t have a date, but I’m not. Is that it?”

“No! It’s because... never mind. Geez.”

Something in his tone piqued her own curiosity. “You can say it. Come on, I’m a big girl.”

“Because you’re... pretty.” That boy said the word like it had had to be ripped out of his lungs with pliers. In spite of herself, she laughed. “What? Why are you laughing! I’m not complimenting you—”

“Oh, thank goodness for that,” Amanda said as she continued laughing.

“—I’m only saying that you seem like you could find a guy who’d want to go with you. That’s all.”

She finally recovered from his unintended joke. “Who says I couldn’t? Why is it so impossible to believe I simply don’t want to go with anyone?”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess that makes sense. I only figured, since you’re new and all, and, you know...”

“I won’t make you say it again. It’s all right.”

Conner grinned in spite of himself. “I would’ve thought you could’ve had your pick of the guys around here. More or less, I mean. Within reason.”

Amanda found herself grinning back. “Within reason, I might, if I wanted to. But I assure you, I’ve seen a high school dance before.”

Less than thirty seconds this time. “Did you have a boyfriend at your old school?”

Amanda took a long breath and folded her laptop shut. “You’re determined not to let me get any work done, aren’t you.”

“Sorry. It’s just if we’re going to be going to a dance together—”

“Near one another,” she corrected him. “Not together. I was firmly told this is *not* a date.”

“Right. But you never talk about your old school, and I guess it made me wonder.”

“Have you ever *asked* about my old school?” she countered.

“I... I’m sure I have, at some point.”

“Name three specific details about my life before the start of January this year and I’ll go down on you right here, right now.”

His eyes grew as wide as frisbees. “Uh... you were editor-in-chief of your school’s yearbook...?”

“And that school was...”

He frowned. “I don’t know.”

“What state?”

He sighed, seeing his blowjob dreams evaporating. “California?”

“Strike two. You know, let’s invoke the mercy rules and call it three.”

He was quiet a moment. “So, can I show interest now?”

“Really, don’t worry about it.”

“I want to know.”

“What, so you can tell Miss C that you officially made an effort and get her off your back? I absolve you.”

“No,” he said more firmly. “Really.”

That boy. One minute he was bad-mouthing her to the teacher while she was sitting outside the room listening, the next... she crossed the office and leaned down to put a hand on his shoulder. Had he tried to look down her shirt? She’d have to get back in the habit of wearing bras. “I don’t like to think about it, OK? I didn’t really have a lot going on before Northside. But I appreciate that you showed interest, Conner. Really.”

“OK.”

“And while we’re having a moment, let me assure you, I like being a Nighthawk. I care about what we’re doing. I’m glad I’m here. And yes, it’s annoying as hell to have a co-chief for me, too, but I’m not trying to steal your thunder. I’m here to do a kick-ass job of giving everybody a set of memories worth cherishing. Same as you.”

That boy definitely looked down her shirt that time. But still, he looked as interested in her words as in her breasts. Amanda took her seat again.

“So can I get some work done now?”

Conner nodded. “Yeah, sorry.”

He lasted almost eight minutes this time. “So what do you think you’re going to wear?”

## Chapter Six

One of the things Conner had never enjoyed about school dances was the attire. Even in the total absence of a dress code, it seemed the moratorium on comfortable clothing was still in effect. He tried to weasel out of it, but sure enough, every guy he spoke to looked at Conner like he was nuts to ask what they thought about going to the King of Hearts dance in jeans and a t-shirt. So grudgingly, Conner put on his suit. Black with pinstripes, snug in irksome places, legs that ended three inches above his ankles... Such was life.

Conner's mom was beside herself over the sight of her son all gussied up for the occasion. Like always. She snapped picture after picture for the final semester scrapbook, and even his many reminders that he didn't even have a date did nothing to quell her enthusiasm.

"You look handsome," she insisted, darting in to pluck a piece of lint off the front of his jacket. "Those girls at your school are going to kick themselves for settling for those other boys. Not a single one of them with a lick of good taste."

"Gee, thanks," said Angelica, who was coming down the hall from her own bedroom.

"I didn't mean *you*, sweetie," her stepmother insisted, and then looked over at her. Angelica didn't usually seem to much care for the opinion of her dad's second wife, but tonight she seemed to be drinking in the awe. "You look beautiful! Doesn't she look beautiful, Conner? Honey, have you seen your daughter? She looks beautiful!"

"Oh, stop." She didn't look like she minded much, though. She was going to have to get used to it. The dress was tight red silk, laced across the ribs to show a good deal of her sides. It was brief, but didn't give everything away, and the same went for the cut at the top that gave a sampling of cleavage but no more. She'd spent the past two hours in the bathroom working on her makeup, but she'd eschewed the customary fancy hairdo and left it down, glossy and chestnut brown just past her shoulders.

*Poor Owen*, Conner thought. It wasn't going to be easy seeing that across the dance floor.

"You do look really nice, Angelica," Conner said.

"I know it. You look halfway all right yourself. Who knows, maybe you've got a shot with your non-date after all."

"Non-date? What non-date?" his mother asked.

"It's nothing, Mom. Just some girl from yearbook who got assigned to take pictures and stuff with me."

"Who? Marisa? Toni? Neveah? C'mon, tell me!" She poked at his ribs, and he squirmed away.



“Mom! It’s nobody. Just the other editor-in-chief. That Amanda Carpenter girl. You wouldn’t know her.”

“As much as you’ve grumbled that name under your breath lately, it sure feels like I do. So you guys are... working together?” she said suggestively.

“It’s not like that! God, it could *never* be like that. Amanda Carpenter is the *worst*.” He made a face.

“Oh. That’s too bad. For her, I mean.” She patted his shoulder. “All right, let me get some of the two of you together...”

Angelica and Conner gamely tolerated a couple dozen more shots around the living room until she was finally saved by the arrival of her date, Jackson MacDowell. He was friends with Jayce Deacons and Kirsten Vaughan and Hayleigh McKnight and that whole crowd, the kids Angelica hung out with at school and largely avoided outside of it. She was tight-lipped on the subject of how she dodged questions about where she spent her time at night. He supposed if there was one thing Angelica was good at, though, it was mixing frosty and friendly.

Then he was off to get Owen. Like Conner, Owen was going stag. Several of their friends were; rather than force a bunch of awkward friend-dates, they’d decided to simply buy tickets and go as a platonic group. Personally, he’d been a little surprised that his friend wasn’t taking Angelica. They’d kept their relationship on the down-low, but it seemed weirder for them to be at the dance *not* interacting than to see them together in public.

“Wow. You’re going in that...?” Conner asked as Owen climbed into the passenger seat.

“Jealous much?”

“Of a tuxedo t-shirt and pinned-on bow-tie? No, can’t say as I am.”

“It’s velcro, not pinned. This is civilized attire, man.”

For most of the ride there was no sound but the splashing of half-melted slush on the sides of the road. It was almost halfway through February, but that groundhog had evidently lied about not seeing his shadow. “So... how’d she look?” Owen asked.

“Who? Angelica?”

“No, your mom, dumbass. Of course Angelica.”

“She looked... good. Can’t lie.” Owen didn’t answer, and on they drove.

One of the weird thing about school dances was that they were, naturally, at school. That morning they’d pulled into this same lot, dressed for comfort and dreading a big test in Dr. Laugherty’s class. Fast forward to the present, and it was like entering another world. Rented limos were parked around the fringes of the lot for the handful of kids whose parents were looking to score brownie points; girls in expensive one-night hairdos and elegant gowns strode in alongside boys who were still learning how to really wear a suit.

Conner dropped Owen off near the entrance to the gym – tonight, the “ballroom,” they were calling it – as he needed to swing by the yearbook room to pick up a camera. His was one of only two cars in the east lot, on the opposite end of the school from the dance. The other, surprisingly, was Miss C’s.

“Kristy? What are you doing here on a Friday night?” he asked as he keyed into the room. She was seated at her desk, still wearing the same jeans and polo shirt she’d worn to class that day. Many teachers had continued wearing their old clothes, but Kristy was one of those who were enjoying a chance to be a bit more comfortable. Her laptop was open beside the stack of papers she was bent over, and tinny music was playing softly from its speakers.

“Conner! You look so handsome,” she said, giving him a warm smile. “My next door neighbor’s having this big party tonight and I made up an excuse why I couldn’t go, so now I’m hiding out from my own home. Plus, I figured I could swing by the dance and see how nice you guys all looked. This is the only dance I don’t volunteer to chaperone, but I still wanted to pop in. What about you?”

“Camera,” he said as he made his way to the editor’s office where they were stored.

“Amanda already got one, but I suppose it’s not bad if you’re both packing.”

Indeed, there on her desk in the office was her purse. Did she have her own key now? He didn’t know why that thought bothered him, but it did. Maybe Kristy had let her in. Maybe.

“Are you two going to be able to play nice tonight?” she asked as he returned to the classroom, camera in hand.

“I guess.” He’d made more than a few passive aggressive comments to communicate his displeasure since she’d set up this assignment. No point in further complaints at this point.

“Good. I promise, I didn’t do this as a punishment. I wish I knew what the magic bullet was to make you two get along. Honestly, when I first met her, I worried you two were going to hit it off and I’d have to prohibit you guys from having your office door shut when you were in there together.”

He laughed. “What? Me and Amanda Carpenter?”

“Why is that so funny? She’s a cutie, and you’re a catch.”

“Oh, come on.”

She came around in front of her desk. “I’m serious. You have a major dearth of confidence, but you’re a good-looking guy, big heart. If you learned how to dress yourself or bothered to update that haircut, you might have a fuller dance card. Then again, you wouldn’t be my Conner.”

Her compliments, their history, and his current state of feeling like a loser for not having been able to score a date collaborated to take over his mouth. “Do... do you think if we were in school at the same time that I’d have had a chance with you?”

She arched an eyebrow. “Conner, do I need to remind you that you in fact *did* get with me?”

His cheeks flushed. “No, I know, but I mean...”

“I know what you meant.” She pivoted her laptop around and tapped a few keys. Conner indulged himself with a long gaze at her round backside in those jeans. “Maybe? I don’t know. I don’t like to do hypotheticals. But I tell you what. You wanna throw an old broad a bone and give her a dance?” She tapped a final button, and a slow song began to play. He recognized it after a moment, *Bless the Broken Road*.

“Really? Um, sure. That’d be cool.” They both took a step forward, ending toe to toe. She placed his hands on her waist, then wrapped her own long arms around his neck. As the lyrics started up, the two began to sway softly. If there was some kind of trick to slow dancing with a girl, Conner sure didn’t know it. He kept his hands where she’d put them and tried to keep track of the rhythm.

Kristy laughed softly. “I’m not your cousin, Conner.”

“What?”

“I mean, you’re allowed to touch me. I don’t think we need to worry about leaving room for Jesus.”

“Oh.” Since he already had his hands on her hips, he wasn’t sure quite what she meant. She clarified by taking a step closer, their pelvises touching directly, her breasts not merely brushing against his chest but pressed firmly against it. Sure enough, Conner didn’t last thirty seconds before he could feel his cock stirring. He tried to think about dead kittens, but those poor murdered felines didn’t have squat on the feel of Kristy’s body against his.

“Having fun?” she asked, eyes glimmering.

“Sorry!” he squeaked. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Relax, Conner.” Her fingernails scratched at the back of his neck. “You’re not the first guy to get it up while dancing with a woman. Let’s just enjoy ourselves, OK?”

“OK.” Was she suggesting...? He wasn’t sure if she was simply trying to be nice or if she was offering something more serious. Tentatively he let his hands start drafting backwards along her waistline. She didn’t give any indication that she minded, and by the start of the second refrain he had his thumbs hooked inside the back of her pants, his fingers resting gently on the upper part of her butt.

“Is... is this OK?” he asked when she didn’t react.

She brought her head back from his shoulder to right in front of his face. She wasn’t smiling, but there was still a mirth about her features. “Do you feel me smacking your hands away?”

“No.” Emboldened, his hands slipped down and fully cupped her bottom, two handfuls of her meaty rear end. “This is really OK?” he asked. Kristy didn’t respond except to place her chin on his shoulder and lean harder into him. In the dim glow of the Christmas lights still strung up around the perimeter of the room, they finished the song with her fingernails gently scratching at the back of his neck and his hands ever more brazenly fondling her ass.

“Can... can I stay down here with you?” he asked as the next song in her playlist started up. More up-tempo, but with a heavier beat. The sort of music he’d heard in the background in movies when people had sex.

“You want to help me grade essays?” she asked wryly.

He remembered the effect of his words on her that time they’d been intimate last semester, then tried to follow her advice and sound more confident. “I thought it might make me happy to stay. Happier, I mean. ‘Cause you made me pretty happy just now.”

She laughed. “I think you’re confusing happy with horny.”

“I can’t be both?”

His yearbook teacher gave him an inscrutable look for a long moment. “Don’t you have a job to do, Mr. Editor-In-Chief?”

His smile faded. “I guess I do.”

“So you better go do it.”

“Yeah.”

The boy had almost shuffled out the door when she spoke again. “And Conner? Don’t forget to come back and return that camera after, all right? They’re expensive.”

He looked back, but she was already fixated on her stack of essays again. Had that been a directive from his yearbook teacher? Or an invitation from his former lover? But there was no clue on her face, and he didn’t have the guts to ask.

Which was just as well, Kristy herself was no more sure of her intentions either, except to frig herself silly as soon as he was gone.

Northside had metal gates that could be stretched across the hallways to prevent students from wandering the school after hours, and tonight they were all in place. Conner, however, was a skilled wanderer, and while his key from Miss C didn't help with the gates, he knew about the route through the cafeteria. They were good about locking away the kitchens and the business office, but due to its use as an after school meeting grounds for all sorts of clubs and faculty events, they often failed to lock the many side doors. It let him slip right out of the academic halls and into the area around the gym without having to go back outside in the chilly night air.

The music from the dance was audible most of the way, growing louder as he neared the gym. As he drew close, he saw the line of people waiting for their dance pictures, boys and girls as couples and several large groups commingled. Seeing no sign of his nemesis, Conner figured this would be a fine place to avoid her for at least a little while longer. Camera in hand, he made his way over and started snapping pictures. A few candid, first, then he used his powers of recall to select some classmates who didn't appear many other places in the yearbook as yet for some posed shots. He even stole away into the nearby classroom where Larry Wengert was set up and got some metaphotos. Larry was the school's photographer of choice, and since many seniors contracted him for their yearbook pictures, Conner knew him well. At the moment the man was so busy that he only had time to spare a smile before ushering in the next couple.

Even here on the periphery, the dance atmosphere was having its usual intoxicating effects. There was some combination of elements that made it difficult not to fall into the trance his fellow Nighthawks were under, a sense that despite knowing such occasions were branded indelibly as a part of childhood, that they were somehow a gateway to things adult. The chaperoning teachers conversed with students like they were all regular folk; elegant attire and the dance committee's best attempt at fancy regalia lent it an aura of sophistication; there was a cordiality to it even amongst natural enemies.

Was it ultimately somewhat silly? Sure. But it was fun to be nobility, if only for an evening.

Eventually, Conner saw his video card was half full, and his hand was starting to cramp from the extraneous quotes he was jotting down on his notepad. He'd use one of his usual prompts, and receive variations of the same few responses. "Everyone looks so great!" "We're having an awesome time!" and the like, with a few grumpy "These dances are so stupid" interspersed that both interviewer and interviewee knew would never be posted. Finally, there was nothing left to do but make his way to the dance floor and check in with that Amanda Carpenter.

Ticket sales had gone well, it seemed, judging by the mob in the gym. (Conner pondered if his interview with the dance committee chair and her assurance that "*Ticket*

*sales were through the roof!*” – *Maisie Kriesa* might have something to do with it. More people were trickling in fashionably late. Beneath the scintillating red lights reflecting off of some disco balls arrayed around the room, the Nighthawks were enjoying the festivities. The DJ had been playing pop hits of the past six months, and as the editor-in-chief entered the room, the song was a fast-paced country rock song that had the students in good spirits. Mrs. Beckmann was in the midst of separating a couple who’d been enjoying the song a bit *too* much as he entered. Conner made use of the distraction to shimmy a few feet up the collapsed bleachers and snapped a broad angle shot from his precarious perch before hustling back down.

He was still in line to get a cup of punch – zealously guarded by Mr. Rodriguez’ watchful eye – when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He expected Owen, but his grin dissipated in the face of none other than Amanda Carpenter.

Dammit all to hell if she didn’t look amazing. Her dress was strapless, revealing all the grace of her long arms and neck. The bodice was a field of silver sequins over black fabric, ending in a skirt of flowing black ruffles that, on most girls, would have ended past the knee, but on Amanda Carpenter still revealed several inches of her lower thigh. With those glimmering silver heels and the way her wine red hair was piled up in curls atop her head, her height advantage was more pronounced than usual. For a moment, Conner found himself enjoying being loomed over – until he remembered who was doing the looming.

“There you are,” she was saying while he was still taking in the sight of her. How on earth did a strapless dress manage to hold up her boobs like that? “I was starting to wonder if you were going to bail on me.”

“My word is my bond,” he replied dryly. “I was out by the picture line getting some shots.”

She arched a sculpted eyebrow. “You think that’s what people are going to want to remember about tonight? Standing in line? Or did we need backups of the pictures they’ll already have?”

“Plus,” he went on testily, “it was quieter out there, so it was the ideal place to do interviews. Just because we probably won’t use the pictures doesn’t mean it’s a bad idea to have them.” He said probably, but it galled to acknowledge her criticism was spot on.

“Doesn’t make it a good idea, either.” She gave him a once over, as if suddenly realizing they weren’t lounging around the office. “Hey, look at you. You clean up nice.”

“Thanks. You don’t look so bad yourself, for once.”

She held up her hands. “Whoa, co-chief. I’m bigtime turned on by you right now, but my poor heart can only take so much of that infamous Fishers charm.”

“I was trying to pay you a compliment! Geez,” he grumbled.

“That’s what passes for a compliment at Northside, is it?”

“There’s no pleasing you, is there?”

“Oooh, first a compliment, and now he’s talking about pleasing me.” She fanned herself.

“It’s clear now why you didn’t have a date already lined up.”

Her impish expression soured. “Wow. Way to make it personal.” With that, she stalked away, not even giving him a backward glance.

“Women, am I right?” said Greg Bassett, standing behind him in line. He was a junior, but Conner had ridden the bus with him through most of elementary and middle school. He lived only half a mile down the road from Conner and Owen.

“Yeah. Women.”

“That’s that new girl, isn’t it? How long you two been going out?”

Conner’s look conveyed his dismay. “We’re not going out.”

“Really? Huh. You should, man. She’s cute.”

“Thanks, Greg.”

Punch in hand, Conner wended around the perimeter of the gym. After getting a few more pictures, he left his camera and jacket with Owen, who was sulking at one of the tables piled high with sequined purses. He declined Conner’s entreaty to come check out the scene with him, and he didn’t have the will to try to talk his friend out of his dour attitude. Conner had already seen Angelica in the midst of a group of the pretty and popular clique, smiling and dancing with Jackson. They looked a bit silly together; the all-state basketball center had more than a foot on his diminutive date. He didn’t seem to mind, though.

While Conner kept a fairly tight circle of friends, he was friendly with a lot of people, and he took the opportunity to socialize, compliment people on their outfits, indulge in some of the gossip. Jessi Heller and Brian Malmuth had broken up since school let out that afternoon; Jayce Deacons had threatened to beat up a sophomore for looking too closely at Hayleigh; even a rumor that Coach Conrad had been sleeping with somebody in his sex ed class and that was why he wasn’t chaperoning. (Nobody seemed to believe that one, but given Conner’s own history, he was happy to move on from the topic.)

Myriad pettier goings-on were shared as well, but what people had worn was strangely off the menu, no doubt as some holdover from that whole strange dress code mishap. Which was all the less comprehensible when he caught sight of Heather and the Pride. They had coordinated outfits, clearly, to the extent that it could be called outfits. The girls, an even half a dozen of them, were congregating together near the middle of the dance floor, so thoroughly surrounded it took nearly hour of mingling and sliding in and out of improvised dance groups before he saw them.

Their dresses, it seemed, were nothing but plastic wrap.

Different members of the group had taken it to differing extremes. Molly Nguyen was poofed out and billowy, with layers and layers surrounding her legs and chest like

puffy off-white clouds. Kiara deBartolo's was green tinted, wrapped enough times around her thighs and hips to be impossible to see through in this dim lighting, but the two thinner ribbons of the stuff draped across her breasts left a clear impression of darkened nipples beneath. Jenny Strader, a freshman whose name he only knew because he'd learned to keep an eye out for the Pride, was clad in a single sheet of bubble wrap with the bottom cut into thin strips and splayed out whenever she moved too fast.

Heather herself had what seemed to be one, maybe two, layers of clear plastic. The bright red thong and bra beneath were so apparent he almost didn't realize she was wearing something over them at all. Which, he considered, she basically wasn't. Having seen her bare boobs before but never having gotten beneath her pants, it was basically the most exposed he'd ever seen her. Even on a team-building outing to the beach that last year's editor had arranged, her swimsuit had been a one-piece, and she'd worn clothes over it any time she wasn't in the water.

She saw him right around the time that he saw her and came over smiling. "Conner!" she yelled over the music.

"Hey!" he yelled back.

"Dance with me!"

He wasn't even sure she heard his response. In any other world, her appearance would be rated as obscene – to which Conner could only think that perhaps he'd not given obscenity a fair chance. The way her bared body rippled and jiggled was hypnotic, and like any other day post-dress code, she didn't object to him ogling. He'd almost forgotten it was supposed to be taboo. (After a conversation in which she'd assured him that she appreciated he didn't look at her like most of the others, like they were imagining her fully covered because her "liberation" seemed to clash with their cookie cutter worldview, he'd given up on not staring.) On closer inspection, he saw she'd even modified the "dress" by cutting diamond-shaped holes around the hips, up the sides, and across the chest. As if wearing paper-thin transparent plastic was too conservative for her.

They'd only been dancing for thirty seconds or so when the song faded. They had a moment of relative quiet as the DJ passed on an announcement about someone's lights being on in the parking lot.

"You look so good!" she gushed.

Remembering his misstep with Amanda Carpenter, he made his reply more directly. "You look incredible, Heather. What, um, inspired the, ah...?"

"The plastic wrap? Lisa's idea." She gestured to where Lisa Carberry was dancing with her boyfriend; her own ensemble was on a level with Heather's. "Cool, right? I figured, it's a big night, may as well kick up the glamor a notch, eh?"

"Yeah, cool," he agreed. "I'll leave you gals to it."



She grabbed his hand. Only Heather Blake could look so innocent while inspiring such wicked thoughts. “No way! Come on, one more dance!”

“Oh. Yeah, sure.”

The music resumed right then, and he was surprised to hear a slow song. All across the dance floor, couples smiled into one another’s eyes, bodies coming together while platonic partnerships took the opportunity to hit the restroom or refreshment table. Heather, however, was not put off, and before he could make some excuse to slither away, she pulled his hands to her hips and leaned her head against his chest. Kristy was a head taller than her, and had put her arms over his; Heather twined hers beneath, clutching his shoulders from below.

For the second time that night, he had to apologize for having an erection pressing into a girl’s body as she danced against him. Damnable thing! Why did they have to press themselves against him so hard? (Of all the problems to have!) But Heather dismissed it casually. “In this thing, I’d kinda be offended if you didn’t,” she said into his ear, giggling.

“I have to ask,” he said after a minute, noticing his hands were practically sticking to the plastic, “is that comfortable?”

“Ugh, no. But trust me, none of the girls here are comfortable. Though probably none are sweating like this either. That’s why I had one of the girls help me cut holes in it, let the skin breathe a little at least.”

His fingers had detected a little frill sticking out. Glancing over her shoulder, he saw – in addition to an interesting view of her essentially bare ass – the fringe of one such portion still clinging on. Her complaints about the ventilation made him feel comfortable peeling it off. In fact...

“Hey! Did you just pinch my butt?”

He had, of course, which she full well knew. “Oh, was that you? I thought that was another piece of the dress coming unraveled.”

Her shock gave way to laughter. “Oh! Oh my gosh, I thought you... sorry. Do you mind making sure? I don’t want to look stupid if my dress is falling off.”

He probed around again a little. God, her ass felt good. He was slowly becoming something of an ass connoisseur, and the little bit of baby fat on Heather made hers nice and round, perfect for squeezing.

“All right, that wasn’t an offer to go on vacation back there,” she said after a moment.

“Sorry, wanted to be sure. So you don’t get embarrassed.”

She smiled in gratitude and rested once more against his chest. All around them, couples were swaying in near unison. A few were attempting more creative moves, but mostly succeeded only in looking faintly ridiculous. They seemed to be having fun, at least. In the distance, he saw Amanda getting some pictures of one such couple; she shot

Conner a withering glance when she noticed him looking at her. Not far off he could see Jordan dancing with Mary Buchanan, the homecoming queen, only she had her back against him, round ass grinding into his pelvis. He'd always heard that Mary was something of a prude – “all looky no touchy” as Owen put it – but evidently not. It was probably the third or fourth girl he'd seen Jordan dancing with in such fashion that night, but she didn't seem to mind sharing.

As he found himself glaring at his old bully, he reminded himself that he actually hadn't been too bad so far this semester. Maybe visiting his home on that snow day last month had humanized his prey? Who knew what went on in a mind like Jordan's. Besides, he was squandering what could be a wonderful moment being angry. He returned his attention to Heather. With the enticing fragrance of her perfume wafting into his nostrils, it was easy to enjoy the remainder of the song, though it ended all too soon.

“That was nice,” she said as the next song started, back to the usual up-tempo stuff.

He wracked his brain to think of something suave to say, but all he came up with was, “Yeah.”

With that, Heather patted his cheek and returned to the rest of the Pride. He allowed himself a moment to take in those incredible gyrations of hers before recognizing that standing there in the middle of the dance floor was awkward and inconvenient. Finally, he retreated, going back to where Owen was still sitting. He smiled at Miss C, who had finally made it up to survey things, and was chatting nearby with a group of students. She waved casually and turned back to her conversation as he turned back to his friend.

“What does he have that I don't?” Owen grumbled, gesturing angrily at where Angelica was dancing with Jackson.

Conner wanted to empathize, but the question was ludicrous. “You mean, apart from being a foot taller, broad shoulders, he's handsome, his family is rich, he's an all-state athlete, has a dick so big even *I've* heard about it, he's—”

“Still!” Owen insisted. “I can't believe she's being so... so...!” He finished in an animalistic growl.

“Superficial?” Conner offered.

“Yes! Exactly!”

“That's my stepsister for ya. Not exactly a sentimentalist. And not that making her obsessed about your cock is exactly sentimental, either.”

“She liked me before that,” Owen retorted.

“What? Bullshit, Owen. Angelica treated you like a pest.”

“That was just our game. She told me, man. I'd come after her, she'd push me away so she'd get to see me come after her again.”

Conner made a skeptical face. “That sounds like the way people justify Pepé Le Pew behavior.”

“It does, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. Come on, man. Do you really think TIOS would have let you put that in if it wasn’t at least a little bit true?”

Conner considered. “I don’t know. It’s let me do an awful lot of things that don’t seem like it was in the spirit of what people meant. Sure, maybe Hefty envied Hottie, but obviously the reverse wasn’t true.”

“If it didn’t have to be at least a little true, it’d let you put in anything you want.”

Conner didn’t want to argue the point. TIOS was TIOS, and he had given up trying to understand its methodology. “Well hey. I’m sure after the dance she’ll come over and... you know. Probably even wear the dress for you if you ask.”

“I know she would, but that’s not the point. I’m tired of...” He gathered his thoughts, and Conner recognized that set in his jaw that signified an impending epic rant. It began with a pounding of his fist on the table that was lost in the bass of the music.

“I’m tired of her acting like she’s ashamed of me! What’s so awful about me that she doesn’t want to be seen with me outside of my basement? And I’m tired of her looking down on me like she’s doing me some kind of favor when she comes twice as hard and a hundred times as often as I ever do! I’m tired of having my dad, kids at school, tease me like I’m some kind of loser virgin! And... and... I’m fucking sick and fucking tired of her never having to be jealous back at me! I’m not some troglodyte! A lot of people happen to think I’m really good-looking, dammit! If I wanted, I could have my pick of girls here! But she always acts like she’s throwing me a bone, like she’s taking time away from her jock fucking schedule to slum with me!”

Conner listened patiently. Amanda was coming towards the pair, looking to be none too thrilled to be forced to interact with him, but Conner subtly raised a finger to ask her to wait. She seemed to get bored halfway through the outburst and simply walked over to Miss C a few tables away. He didn’t miss that the two of them were eyeing the emotional outburst with frowns (of commiseration or condemnation, he couldn’t say.)

But before Conner could try to offer Owen any sympathy of his own, someone interjected in their conversation. “Whoa there, ladies, maybe lay off the estrogen supplements, huh?”

They both looked over to see Jordan sifting through a collection of purses on one table. “Mind your own business, Jordan.”

“I was trying to, but if you’re gonna cry that loud, it’s hard not to overhear.”

Conner approached him. “What are you doing going through girls’ purses, Jordan? Forget yours at home?”

“Nice, but I already played the you-guys-are-girls card,” he said, shifting to another table. He stopped upon finding a red and white striped one, reaching inside and coming up with a chain of interconnection condoms, which he promptly stuffed into his pocket. “There we go. Let’s hope we have enough, eh?”

“I think that’s enough for a month – even for a man-whore like you,” said Owen.

“You really don’t appreciate what a month in my shoes is like,” he said. “I tell ya, it’s a damn shame about the rubbers, but if you haven’t screened the bitches first, you can’t trust ‘em, ya know?”

“You’re disgusting, Jordan.”

“You’re jealous, Fishers.”

They let him walk away, right back to where MacKenzie Wolfe was waiting for him. He took her hand and lead her right out of the gym; Conner tried not to think about what the two were about to do. Or where they might do it. He’d always thought MacKenzie was not the sort of girl who went for guys like Jordan; she had a reputation for being kind of angry and serious in her convictions, while Jordan had never espoused any that Conner had ever seen.

He returned his attention to Owen, for whom the interruption seemed to have at least redirected some of his anger. “Hey, man. I’m sorry tonight’s going shitty. You really ought to go over by where Luis and Penny and everybody are. Half of them came stag, too, so you’d fit right in. Plus, if you keep staring at Angelica like that, pretty soon I think Jackson’s going to notice. You know I got your back, but please try not to get both of our asses kicked, all right?”

Owen made a noncommittal sound that Conner reckoned was the best he was likely to get, then made ready to do the hardest thing he’d done all night. Time to make peace with the devil herself, Amanda Carpenter. Maybe she’d been annoying, but the more he’d dwelled on it as he saw her roaming the room, doing her job for his yearbook, the more he regretted having upset her. He hadn’t meant to, but as his mother had often said, apologize for what you did, not for what you meant to do.

He cornered her, literally, by the DJ’s station. She appeared to have been hiding behind the speakers, though at least on the other side of them it was quiet enough they could talk. “Were you trying to avoid me?” he demanded.

“Don’t flatter yourself. I was only getting away for a minute so I could check my film roll and see if I was missing anything. Though I can’t believe there are so few girls trying to avoid you that you’d still take offense from it.”

He threw his hands up in the air. “Why do you have to be like that?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Sorry, I must be grumpy, on account of how I couldn’t get a date.”

“You know what? I…” Only suddenly, as a ray of blue light reflected off a disco ball and streamed across her face, he saw more clearly the person beneath the attitude.

There was a mask of invulnerability, but beneath it he saw the traces of someone who had been truly wounded.

Maybe Amanda Carpenter was the worst, and maybe he shouldn't have to shoulder the burden of the hurt feelings of someone whose mere existence was already about all the burden he could stand. But then, maybe underneath the horns and fangs and even the cloven hooves, Amanda Carpenter was just a girl named Amanda, and that girl was, however newly minted, a Nighthawk.

"You...?" she gestured impatiently.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry. For what I said earlier." And, like his mother had taught him, he didn't further qualify it.

As the seconds ticked by, the bass beat thundering from the speakers, her mask crumbled, and underneath it was a smile trying not to show itself at first, but fast abandoning that pretense. "It's all right," she said at last. "I know you didn't mean it. I was just feeling shitty about it, and... look, it's no big deal. But I appreciate your apology."

"So, you get anything good?" He nodded to her camera.

"Ugh, I got enough to last the next five King of Hearts. Kings of Heart? Whatever."

"Same, I think. Want to compare notes?"

"Sure."

Side by side, the editors-in-chief made their way out into the gym lobby. Up ahead he caught sight of Jordan Lyons walking through the lobby with Miranda Whitehall, a junior, guiding her with a hand firmly gripping her ass. Ugh. He didn't seem to notice his editors-in-chief in the corner and proceeded right out into the parking lot with his prize, perhaps to make use of his bevy of prophylactics. Nearer by, dance pictures were long since done with, and Larry Wengert was nearly done packing up his equipment into his van. "Hey, you two," he said as they came near.

"Hi, Mr. Wengert," she replied.

"All done for the night?"

"Yeah, looks like. You two... ducking out early?" His tone was neutral, but left just enough of a pause to make a suggestion as to the cause.

"No!" they exclaimed as one.

"All right, all right, didn't mean to rile you. You two have a good evening." His grin might have been merely courteous, or it might have been saying that he didn't believe their denial for an instant; either way he resumed carting off his final load, and then he was gone.

"That's the second person tonight to make that assumption to me." Conner shook his head.

"Third for me," Amanda said, equally off-put. "So, shall we?"

Conner's eyes widened for a moment, then he remembered why they'd come out here in the first place and took her intended meaning. They exchanged cameras and began looking through each other's photos. "Oh, that one of the slow dance, that's great."

"Right? The high shot you have is amazing! How'd you get it?"

"Climbed the bleachers. I almost fell on my face, but no risk no reward, right?"

"If you can call smashing that mug of yours a risk," she teased.

This time, he took her teasing for what it was. "No, I meant the camera, obviously."

She laughed. "Any good quotes?"

"Tons of blah, but maybe a couple winners. You?"

"I think my favorite was freshman Danielle Jansen, who said, let's see..." she tugged a notepad from inside her bodice. Conner averted his eyes as she fished for it. "It's sooo cool how King of Hearts is, like, right before Valentine's Day, because, like, both are about love, you know?" Not kidding. Her *exact* words. Down to the tone. I waited for her to start laughing, but nope. Super cool."

"Oh my god. I think I interviewed her for marching band last semester, and she said... I can't remember, but yeah, it left enough of an impression that *that* word salad doesn't surprise me."

The song changed from within the gym, still easily audible out in the lobby. Conner's ears perked up, as did Amanda's. "I love this song!" they both said at the same time.

"Right?" Amanda continued. "I know she's all about the hip hop these days, but she has such a beautiful singing voice it's a crime she doesn't do more like this. I could cry, listening to this."

Conner, in fact, had cried listening to it, right after Heather had dumped him. The dumping had far more to do with it than the song, obviously, but he'd been keeping it together until this song came on. "Yeah. I don't listen to a ton of new music, but this one's just so... mm. Love it."

They stood there face to face, listening to the opening verse with dopy grins, until finally Amanda couldn't handle it any more and took initiative. "So if you're not going to ask me to dance, I will."

Conner looked at her, waiting for the ask.

She sighed in exasperation. "Lord, what am I going to do with this boy."

And then they were dancing. It wasn't slow enough to let him get away with the easy grab-and-sway he'd done with Heather, but noticing that Amanda was every bit as awkward of a dancer as he was took the edge off. The two danced together like the dorky novices they were, even sneaking in a few awkwardly executed twirls and kicks with exuberant giggles.

Then Amanda kicked him in the chin, and while he was checking to see if anything was bleeding, she started laughing so hard she collapsed against him. "I'm so sorry!" she gasped. "I know it's not funny, but your face...! You're OK, right?"

"I think so," he said. Her laughter, inappropriate as it was, was infectious, and he had to fight not to smile.

"Let me see." She bent down to inspect it. "Yeah, same amount of ugly as before. Heck, I may have improved things."

"Gee, maybe you could kick me a few more times to fix the rest of the face," he grumbled, but his heart wasn't in it.

Then, to his shock, she leaned in and kissed him. Not on the lips, quite, but right below them where her shoe had connected. It wasn't a long kiss, but it was long enough to be more than sweet.

"Better?"

Conner went right for her lips. She squeaked in surprise, but she didn't resist, and after a moment was kissing back with equal interest. His arms slowly wrapped around her back, settling on her bared shoulder blades. Her skin was so soft, so warm, and her lips more so. Jordan and Miranda came back through, the girl's expensively arranged hair somewhat disheveled. That was quick. Thank goodness they didn't look behind them to notice the editors-in-chief in their tender moment. Good. The last thing in the world Conner wanted was to have this experience soured by Jordan freaking Lyons.

The song ended, but he didn't realize it until she pulled back. "Wow. That was..."

"Yeah, it was," she agreed.

"Say, what are you doing after? Do you wanna...?"

Amanda rolled her eyes, but was grinning. "Sorry, that's as far as I go on a non-date. I'm gonna head out, actually, since you helped me check 'kick boy in the face' off my checklist. But I'll see you Monday, OK?"

"Oh. OK."

She could see he was disappointed, but gave him a final peck on the cheek and a squeeze on the shoulder. "And if you need to see a doctor, bill me for that and the change of tampons, all right?"

He gave her a little chortle. "All right. Want me to take your camera back?"

"That'd be cool of you, thanks." She handed it over, put her hand softly on his cheek, and then she was gone.

Conner gave it a couple minutes before he made his way back to the dance. His work was pretty much done; he figured he'd see if Owen was looking to head out soon or planned to soldier through to the end. First, though, he wanted to catch some fresh air and try to clear his head a little.

What a night. In the course of his mingling, he'd danced *near* to a number of girls, friends trying out silly moves and amusing formations. Still, he'd only really danced *with* someone three times – and each time someone different and surreal. Kristy, his yearbook teacher, who'd more or less brushed him aside after their one-night affair last semester. Heather, his crush, who'd practically come to King of Hearts naked but thought nothing of pressing that invisibly clothed body against his for a platonic dance. Then Amanda Carpenter, heretofore the bane of his existence, but tonight blindsiding him with a kiss.

All that, yet here he was about to go home to take care of his own frustrations the old-fashioned way.

It was a couple minutes before he saw Jordan strolling back from the parking lot, a disheveled Miranda scurrying on ahead. He didn't seem to care that she wasn't waiting for him. In fact, as she hastened into the gym lobby, Jordan stopped next to Conner with a satisfied smirk on his face.

"You and Miranda have a nice time?" he asked somewhat cattily.

"Is that her name?" Jordan looked through the glass doors to the retreating blue dress in the lobby. When he saw Conner's scowl intensify, his response was merely to laugh. "Relax, I'm kidding! Miranda Whitehead."

"Whitehall."

"Whitehall, yeah, that's what I said. How about you? Having a nice time? Getting some quality pictures of other people's foreplay?"

"It's been pretty good, actually," Conner said evenly.

"Yeah, I saw you dancing with Heather earlier. Boy, she's looking good tonight, right?"

Conner arched an eyebrow. "I suppose. Though I wouldn't say it's... outside her particular style."

"Bitch does have style, too, doesn't she." He elbowed Conner softly, though not as softly as he'd have liked. Though really what Conner would have liked was to sock him in the face. Still, he knew how to deal with jerks like Jordan Lyons. Taking his bait would only make him do it again in the future.

Conner redirected the discussion. "So, you seem like you're popular tonight – even by your standards. I must've seen you getting pretty familiar with half a dozen girls out there."

"Then you weren't looking too closely," Jordan said back, smirk intensifying.



“I gotta ask – how do you do it? No offense, but you seem to be having a successful night, even considering...” He almost said considering the sluts you hang out with, but he amended his words, if only slightly. “By the standards of the girls you hang out with.”

“What can I say? My dad always tells me to diversify my portfolio. Guess I figured I’d finally take him up on his advice, know what I mean?”

“Not really.” In fact, he didn’t really understand either the primary meaning of the phrase or Jordan’s secondary meaning here. “Most girls I know aren’t keen on hooking up with a guy who they just saw making out – or whatever – with another girl.”

Jordan frowned. “Well... maybe you’re hanging with the wrong girls.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Conner said, shaking his head.

He’d meant morally, but Jordan responded to the practical implications. “Hey, I might be a little prick to you, but I know how to class up when I need to. You don’t know shit about girls, Fishers, so don’t grill me on how I run my game. I just know how to act around them is all, and you can mind your own fucking business.”

The intensity of his response far exceeded what Conner had anticipated, and Jordan could see it in his face. “Hey, I’m just fucking with ya, man. I’m gonna back in there, see if I can diversify a little further, right? Stay toasty, all right Fishers?” He clapped Conner hard on the back and walked – quickly – back into the gym.

*So that was weird*, Conner thought. Jordan was a creep and superficial to his core, but he’d never seemed skittish about it. Evidently good hair, a handsome face and a fancy SUV went a long way with girls. Conner didn’t know what he’d said to set the guy off, but whatever it was he was glad Jordan had dropped it rather than zero in for some further harassment.

Weird, though, how he’d mentioned Heather’s dress.

Ah, well; Conner supposed making crude comments about girls must have been a long-standing habit for Jordan.

Not eager to lay eyes on the guy again, Conner took a few minutes to text his mom to assure her he was having a good time and would be home before too long, then made a post with a selfie he’d taken earlier. He didn’t exclusively trust social media to do his memory-keeping. It provided one more way to track the events of his life, though, so he liked to provide ample fodder for future nostalgia. Thus satisfied, he made his way back into the gym to look for Owen and see if he was good to leave soon, or if he wanted to soldier on to the conclusion.

“I guess we can bug out, if you want. This dance is lame anyway,” Owen said, downing his solo cup of punch and tossing it away. It almost hit a girl who was in the midst of retrieving her phone from her purse.

“You sure? I’m not trying to rush you or anything. If you actually want to try to have a little fun before we go, don’t feel like I’m herding you out the door.”

“Who says I’m not having fun?” Owen snapped. “I’m having a *super* time. Goddamn epic.”

“Yeah, it sure looks like an awesome party over here.”

“You stopped by at a rare lull in the festivities.”

“I can see that. You know, I was actually—”

“Hey, it’s Owen, right?” said a girl’s voice suddenly. It was the girl who’d nearly been hit by the discarded cup. Conner thought he recognized her, but couldn’t put a name to the face. He was usually good at that, but nobody quite looked themselves on these glamorous occasions.

“Yeah, I’m Owen,” he replied guardedly. “Sorry if I hit you with the cup. I didn’t realize anyone was standing there.”

“What? Oh, no! That’s nothing. Um, I’m Becky. I sat behind you in Mr. Keeley’s class last year?” Oh yeah, Rebecca Trevino. Not somebody either boy knew very well, but the way she looked tonight, they were regretting it.

Owen’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah...”

“Um, so... you came alone, right? Like, you’re not here *with* anyone?”

“No...” Conner shared his puzzlement. What was going on?

“Cool! Me too. So like, I was wondering, do you wanna, like... dance?” Her eyes sparkled brightly. “With me?”

“What?” said Owen.

“Yeah, what?” said Conner.

Becky giggled. “I said, do you wanna dance?”

“Not with you, he doesn’t. Beat it, sophomore.” Both boys recognized that voice, but until their heads swiveled to take in the sight of her, it was difficult to imagine that none other than Kirsten Vaughan was involving herself with the likes of them.

Kirsten Vaughan was Hayleigh’s best friend, and widely considered to be the most terrible, wonderful girl at NHS. After being held back in sixth grade, the now nineteen-year-old instagram model was known far and wide as a ruthless bully and the only girl in school who could make Hayleigh McKnight seem humble by comparison. Rumor had it that her body was the handiwork of the best cosmetic surgeon in the western United States. Another rumor, equally plausible, held that she hadn’t had to take a test in a class with a male teacher since freshman year. She had the face of an angel, the body of a centerfold, and the soul of a cobra.

And, most notably still, she was presently commanding Owen to dance with her.

“Who, me?” he asked. It was clear he thought this was some prank, some means of humiliating him. But at the same time, the abundant cleavage spilling out of her plunging neckline made it very hard to want to resist such a thing.

“Yeah, you,” she said, grinning. God, even her teeth were sexy. Just looking at her made him want to buy whatever toothpaste she recommended. “Come on, get your cute ass out there already.”

“Me?” he asked again.

She rolled her eyes. “Have it your way then, retard.”

“I’m coming!” he blurted, launching himself to his feet.

“That’s more like it.” She took his hand, leading him to the dance floor even as Owen looked over at his shoulder in raw bewilderment. “Are you new here? Why have I not seen you around here before?”

Conner stared after them, bracing himself to see Jayce and Jackson and the rest of those guys ready to throw down at a nobody like Owen laying hands on one of theirs. Not that Kirsten was taken; in fact, she was infamously single, a bloody trail of wax-coated feathers and broken carcasses trailing along behind her from fools who’d flown too close to her hotness. He definitely didn’t miss the displeased expression on Angelica’s face as Kirsten lead him into their circle, but Owen only had eyes for the perfect golden hair on the back of the head distantly attached to the delectable ass grinding on him.

Nobody laughed. Nobody pantsed him. Nobody threw a punch at him or dumped any punch on him. After mere seconds, the group’s curiosity abated, and they all went back to their own dates. Conner stared agape at the sight of Kirsten Vaughan wiggling a body so sexy it ought to require licensure against Owen Gibson. It was incredible, thought Conner. A fantasy unfolding before his eyes. Too incredible, perhaps. Like, really, *really* unnaturally incredible.

“TIOS.”

Conner bolted, then turned back when he realized he’d left the cameras on the table. Nearby people stared as he nearly tripped over a chair leg, but he regained his balance and took off running. Through the cafeteria, down the B hallway, squeezing through the English corridor gate he’d left open earlier, careening into a wall as his fancy shoes and their total lack of grip failed to give him any sort of turn traction, and into Miss C’s room.

The door was open.

Nobody was there.

They had to be, though. The editor’s office was open – had he locked it behind him when he’d gotten his camera? – but no one in there either. Then he dashed through the curtain and into the computer lab.

The bright light emanating from a single monitor was almost blinding after the dimly lit gymnasium and the dark corridors of NHS. He looked both ways, but there was nobody in here. Chilled, he made his way over to the monitor; it was clear even from a distance that the window was open to TIOS. He’d recognize the interface in his sleep.

A spread was open, one that he'd created himself but not touched in months. It had only two lines typed in it. The first was all too familiar, and it read simply, "*I can't get enough of your cock, Owen.*" – *Angelica Buck*

The second, however, entered a half-dozen or so lines beneath the first, was new – so new he could still hear Owen's voice ringing in his ears. "*A lot of people happen to think I'm really good-looking, dammit! If I wanted, I could have my pick of girls!*" – *Owen Gibson*

He stared, thunderstruck, for a long time – then before Conner even reached for the mouse, the screen went dark. "What? No!" He tapped furiously at the keys, frantically wiggling the mouse. Power saver mode! The screen flickered back on after a few seconds – but as Conner well knew would be the case, that brief interruption had caused the system to log out of TIOS. The screen was now prompting him to enter a user name and password. Conner did so, having to retry it twice in his haste. He hastily brought up the file, and there it was. The words had been saved to the system. Knowing full well it was futile, Conner tried to delete it, but there was nothing doing. It was entered as irrevocably as any other change.

Baffled, Conner made one last check of the room, shining the light on his phone under desks, into the back corner of the editor's office, but there was nobody. He even peered up and down the hallway outside, but it too was silent. What on earth had happened? And who had done it? Having been logged out of the system, there was no way to see whether it had been Conner's own editor-in-chief account open, or someone else's. He plopped down and tried to think rationally about this incomprehensibly strange development, though his thoughts were running a mile a minute.

There were three people who knew about TIOS. Himself, Owen, and Miss C. He knew he hadn't done it, obviously. Owen didn't have access... Or did he? Conner had left his jacket with him the whole evening, and his keys had been right there in the pocket. But could he have logged into TIOS? He'd need to have stolen Conner's password – which he might have been able to do, as much time as they'd spent together. Still, why now? Could he have been so jealous of Angelica that he might have taken things that far?

He forced himself to consider other possibilities. Miss C had been nearby, quite possibly near enough to have overheard that outburst. She'd insisted that she didn't have editor-in-chief privileges, but did the school's system allow her as a teacher to eavesdrop on student passwords? But even if so, why would she do this? Could she have thought that it would make him happy to try to comfort his friend? It was a stretch, but then, so was Heather wearing the emperor's new prom dress as her way of embracing female empowerment. TIOS made people behave strangely. If Miss C had done this, though, why hadn't she done anything else?

Or had she? Lord knows there had been strange occurrences aplenty of late, both in his life and around school. Could she be behind the strange way the dress code situation had played out? Or the way Heather had taken to exhibiting herself? She certainly knew that being able to ogle Heather would be a sure way to please any guy.

Still, it was no more sure than his first hypothesis. Was there anyone else who might have been in a position to do this? The blood in Conner's veins froze. Amanda Carpenter. Of course! She could have been playing him this whole semester, pretending her login conferred none of the power that his did. But she was an editor-in-chief as surely as he was, and she'd been right there by Miss C too! But why...

He rolled his eyes. As if that snake needed a reason. She was trying to fuck with him – again! Teasing him and playing with his head and throwing his words in his face hadn't been enough. Now she was screwing around with his best friend just to send a message. Damn her! Conner paused, and incrementally admitted the idea was far-fetched. Still, it was no more so than the other possibilities he'd examined.

The only other person he could begin to image was Jordan Lyons, if only because he happened to be on yearbook and happened to have overheard the comment. But Jordan couldn't know about what TIOS could do, could he? He had been doing very well with the ladies tonight, but Jordan had always had a reputation as a player, and maybe aside from Miranda, he hadn't done more than dance up on those other girls, he didn't think. He hadn't thought to chaperone the guy, after all.

Besides, Conner added, even if Jordan somehow found out about TIOS, and even if he found a way to hack his way into editor-in-chief privileges, there was *definitely* no way he'd use that power to give another guy a hand with women, especially not someone he only knew as the best friend of his pushy yearbook boss. If a guy like that got power like this, Conner would bet every dollar he'd ever see that Jordan would use it for himself first and anyone else never.

At least three possibilities. All of them fraught with both possibilities and impossibilities. He spend some time flipping through the maze of sub-menus trying to find something that might show the authorship of a particular edit, but he found nothing to show anything more than that Conner had created the spread last October and it had been updated earlier tonight, mere minutes ago. Not by whom.

To be safe, he changed his password before he logged out, then shuffled outside to his car to mull things over. Miss C was still parked nearby, which could mean nothing or anything. Pulling into the west lot, he wended back and forth through the rows looking for Amanda's car, but couldn't find it. Which could also mean nothing or anything. He texted Owen to see what the story was, but the dance was over and the parking lot flooded with departing Nighthawks before he got a reply, which told him only that he'd gotten another ride, and that he'd see him tomorrow.

*See you tomorrow*, he texted back, and home he went.

Jordan heaved a sigh of relief as Conner finally left the computer lab. Or he would have, if he could have gotten enough air to manage a sigh. The curtain that blocked off the computer lab ran along the inside wall of the lab on one side; thank god he'd heard the sound of dress shoes thundering down the hallway and had just enough time to save and dart to safety. Then that dickhead Fishers had to sit there fiddling for half a fucking hour almost. That thick-ass curtain didn't let shit for air in.

Still, that wasn't the worst news. He attempted to log back in, but that fucker had changed his password. Smart of him, even if it was too late. Maybe he hadn't milked TIOS dry, yet, but he had enough to tide him over. He hoped so, at least.

So, the big bad editor-in-chief had finally realized somebody else was fucking around in his system. Took the moron long enough. Hopefully his ploy would work, too. The way Conner had been looking at him during that talk in the parking lot had gotten him nervous. The only thing that might be able to fuck up his plan was if that dork stuck his dork nose into it and shut it down. Jordan hadn't figured out how to undo any editor-in-chief modifications, but it would be simple enough for someone with that program to deal with a pest. A single misspeak, or even a memory of something in the past, and the inability to advance his plans would be the least of his problems.

Jordan knew he'd been good about covering his tracks so far. It wasn't even all that hard, really; he had months of opportunities – years, really – to see how Fishers operated and adjust his style to obfuscate. But now the jig was up. Conner had raced in so damn fast – he could only assume his new quote had had something to do with it – that he hadn't had the chance to conceal the text this time.

At least, not on *that* spread.

It was a solid one-two punch, as far as Jordan was concerned. The bullshit quote from that perv Gibson had been for misdirection. He couldn't believe nobody else had noticed the way that new girl, Angelica, had been staring at the ginger freak's crotch all the time in English class, but once he realized it was Fishers' stepsister, it didn't take him long to figure out what they'd done and then to look through TIOS to find out exactly how and where they'd done it. Jordan hadn't figured out why the twenty-year-old had spontaneously transferred to Northside in the middle of the last semester, but he was sure Fishers and his dork friend had something to do with that, too. So if Gibson had used the program to get his jollies once, maybe Fishers would think he was doing it again. He'd point his guns at the wrong target and lose an ally in the process. Owen would deny it if confronted, of course, but so would Jordan. In an absence of evidence, innocence and guilt were indistinguishable to a paranoid man.

The other edit, however, was Jordan's real stroke of genius. After all, a guy like Fishers with hardly any friends (probably) and no pussy to speak of had a major abundance of one resource: time. And a guy with time on his hands had time to get curious. To ask questions. To notice things. To do something about it. But there was

always one sure-fire way to cure any and all cases of “why do I keep seeing so many girls with Jordan Lyons” – and that was to get Fishers a girl of his own.

He'd had Miranda to thank for it, actually. Fishers too, technically, for saving him the trouble of figuring out her last name when it came time to enter the source of the quote. While she was putting her panties back on in his back seat after he'd busted a nut in her virgin ass, she'd noticed the guy standing there by the door.

“Isn't that that guy that one girl in the plastic wrap dress was hitting on earlier?” she had asked.

Jordan had carefully zipped up around his cock, having needed to take his dick out too many times that night to want to be slowed down by underwear. “And I don't think she was hitting on him. No way. Not Conner Fishers.”

“Yes way!” Miranda insisted. “She was totally ready to bang him on the spot. Like, she didn't even care that he groped her in front of everyone.”

That had been before Fishers spooked him, but even so he hadn't been convinced that Heather's supposed willingness to bang him in that moment would translate to any on-going desire. “You're imagining things, babe.”

“I am not! I'm telling you,” she insisted peevishly, confident in her diagnosis. But it was what she said next that Jordan had entered into TIOS.

*“That girl Conner was dancing with, she's super into him.” – Miranda Whitehall*

By this point, Jordan was well practiced at the art of picking up TIOS-viable lines from around the halls of NHS. But this? This was too fucking perfect. When she'd said it, he'd only noted it with wry bemusement that Fishers could only wish he'd overheard it – and then had the balls to enter it. He practically worshipped Heather and those ridiculous titties of hers. But then, after the way the guy had eyeballed him in the parking lot, it had been the perfect fodder to guarantee a thorough distraction. Once Jordan got that saved, the line from that pussy Gibson's rant had been the perfect misdirect in case he looked his gift horse in the mouth.

Would he be sad to lose Blake and her boobs? Sure he would. He supposed he could keep fucking her if he wanted, but she wasn't the best lay to be honest. Looking was almost as good as the real thing with her, and she was all kinds of easy to look at these days. The idea of taking Fishers' sloppy seconds was so repellent he doubted he'd ever so much as let her blow him again, but... the semester was long.

So sure, Conner was aware someone was fucking with him, and yeah, the son of a bitch had changed his password and put an end to Jordan's access – until he found a way to recover it again, anyway. But he was never going to suspect Jordan was behind it. Even if he went full Sherlock Holmes investigating, nobody was going to have anything to say about the real culprit. He had that first-rate bitch Kirsten Vaughan to thank for that one. He'd been feeling good about himself after fucking Hailey, and yeah, maybe he

was talking himself up a bit. So she'd decided to put him in his place, saying that she knew he was his own favorite subject, but...

*"Absolutely nobody else wants to talk about you. Ever."– Kirsten Vaughan*

Thanks to TIOS, Jordan had his own harem of senior girls now, and nobody had said a fucking word to anybody. Nor would they. It occasionally bruised his ego, the way people immediately changed the subject if he brought up the public aspects of his personal life, but it was a small price to pay for anonymity.

A minor setback tonight, but the catastrophe had been averted and the threat eliminated. Enjoy the gift, Fishers. It'll be the last one.



## Chapter Seven

By Saturday evening, Jordan's dick had well and recovered from the King of Hearts dance the night before. He'd gotten accustomed over the past month or so to having sex every day, usually multiple times, but outside of his usual dicking grounds, his stamina was only that of regular guys. Still, last night – thanks to one of his dad's pills – he'd managed to go through nine different girls. Three of them had come with their own dates. He couldn't have said why it felt that teensy bit better raw dogging some bitch when her guy was in the next room, but it did. And every time somebody looked at him like the whore that he was, he could just shrug it off and know they weren't gonna say shit. There were limits to it – the three days of detention he'd gotten after grabbing some junior's ass in the hallway were proof of that – but when it came to mere rumors and gossip, he was bulletproof.

A good night's sleep had taken the sting off of losing Fishers' password, too. After all, by this point he'd not only prematurely aced the semester, he'd retroactively aced every class he'd taken through high school. He'd almost padded his college applications with some extracurriculars and athletics before remembering that pud Conner would definitely notice if Jordan was suddenly the captain of every team in school. C'est la vie. That was about all the French he knew, yet thanks to Madame Bouchet and her assertion that "anybody can get an A in my class if they want to" he was as fluent as he needed to be.

More important by far than academics, however, was the girls. His first inclination was to find some dork and see if he couldn't get a nicely worded admission of his success with the ladies out of them. Lots of these losers were eager to kiss up to the cool kids, after all, and he could sift through all the *I-bet-you-fucked-half-the-girls-in-school's* and *you're-one-of-the-hottest-guys-at-NHS* until he found pay dirt, maybe a nice *you-could-have-any-girl-you-want* or something, like he'd charitably done for Gibson last night. Again, Kirsten's little rumor-free bubble meant it wouldn't even occasion comment.

But something that blatant, Fishers might've noticed. Being a slut at the dance was one thing; doing it all day every day in school was another. For one, Jordan hadn't found a way to edit Fishers himself, which would have solved all kinds of problems. Nor had he been able to puzzle out a way to erase anything once it was entered, yet he didn't want to bet it all that the editor-in-chief himself couldn't find a way. Hell, even if Fishers didn't know how to either, it wouldn't be that hard for him to find a way to well and truly fuck Jordan over.

So he'd had to get creative, and do a few things even he wasn't proud of. But in the end, it had netted him his own personal pussy playground. Secluded, private, rumor-free. A mere hour a day, sure, but he found ways to stretch that out like virgin

cunt. Hell, Jordan could have gotten plenty more trim out of it after school hours if he'd wanted, but...

Much as he hated to admit it, Hefty Hailey was one hell of a lay.

There was a big fucking difference, he'd learned, between a girl who let you do shit to her, a girl who wanted you to do shit to her, and a girl who *begged* you to do shit to her. Hailey was a fucking freak – and he meant that in the best possible way. He couldn't find anything she didn't wanna do. Frankly, the limits of her appetites were way beyond his. He'd had every hole, more positions than he could remember, any place and time he wanted. They'd gone at it in the park a few nights, all over town in the back of his SUV, in the movie theater (arriving separately of course, and only sitting together once it was dark), and almost every room in his house would glow under a blacklight thanks to that slut's juicy little pussy. She was quite explicit in what she was offering. About the only thing that made her squeamish was getting caught by her mom or brother, but he didn't want her family interrupting them any more than she did, so that was fine.

At first, he'd thought to decorate the annals of TIOS with her gutter talk until she really and truly was his personal fuck toy – only he fast realized how totally unnecessary it was. He hadn't needed to record a word, and she'd literally do anything he wanted at the snap of his fingers. Maybe Hailey wasn't the hottest girl in the senior class, quite, but she was an easy 8 by even the most critical standards. And frankly, she could take a few whacks from the ugly stick and still come out ahead in his book. She knew exactly how to get him hard, what made him come, when to make him wait for it, how to pose herself. She fuckin' studied it. Literally took notes for herself afterwards – she'd even showed him. That girl had to be the horniest fucking wannabe slut in school, and he had her all to himself.

She wasn't in love with him. He made sure of that with all sorts of subtle digs, dismissals, abuses. He was more of an asshole to her now than before he'd started fucking her, honestly. But he allowed her to let that inner psychoslut out, and for that she'd put up with all of it and beg for more. God damn, the mouth on that girl. Except when they weren't fucking, in which case she drove him nuts. Worth it, though. So fucking worth it. His secret pride and joy.

Was this love? It sure wasn't the stuff of Hallmark movies, but he couldn't wait to get his dick in her every chance he got, and when he was fucking somebody else, he often heard her voice cheering him on inside his head.

So Saturday evening, after snubbing her for Friday's dance, he thought he'd toss his bitch a treat and stop by to get his dick wet. He hadn't taken a shower yet, and he was curious if she'd be able to taste those other girls on his cock. Usually he cleaned up after, but he'd been too tired the night before and too lazy the next day. He bet she could. Jordan could already imagine her oohing and aahing about how lucky she felt to

be his second favorite slut, to not forget to cum on her pretty titties just because of those other girls, to plead to be given a chance to seduce him back into her cunt. He was going 20 over the speed limit and ran at least two stop signs on his way over to her house.

Where he saw Fishers' garbage fucking car parked out front.

Son of a bitch.

“Do you need to respond to that?” Conner asked.

Hailey glanced down at her buzzing phone again. “Nah. It’s nobody.”

“All right. If you say—” It buzzed again. “It sure seems like somebody.”

She frowned at it, finally powering it down and setting it on her nightstand. “It’s going to be a whole big thing if I answer, and I feel like we haven’t hung out in forever, so it can wait.”

Conner couldn’t help but smile. Whatever else one could say about her, Hailey always knew how to make a guy feel special. “That’s nice of you. I was thinking the same, actually. Figured I’d, you know, check in, see how you’re doing.”

He was surprised to find she was still in bed, having simply texted him to come on in when he got there after he asked if he could stop by. “So, sleeping in late, were we?”

She shrugged, sitting up and bunching her blanket up around her waist. “Nap, actually.”

“Oh! Intruding on nap time is a serious offense! I can come by later, let you get back to—”

She rolled her eyes at his display of chivalry, then threw one of her pillows at him. “Relax, Conner! I was about to get up anyway. Doug got sick again last night, so we were at the hospital until super late, so I didn’t get to bed until like 5am. Mom and Doug are still there.”

He frowned. “I’m so sorry. Is he OK? Is it serious?”

She shrugged. “He’s always had a hundred little problems. Last night he just had a hundred and one. The doctors don’t think there’s anything to panic about, but they’re happy to bilk some hours out of my mom’s insurance to monitor him. I swear, he comes in half-dead and they want to kick him out the door, but let the kid come in at 98.7 degrees and they’re suddenly petrified for him.”

“Oh. Still, I’m sorry. I’m sure the hospital isn’t exactly fun for him.”

“He’s got his tablet. And my mom. Basically his two best friends.” She laughed. “He downloaded one of those games where you slide numbers around to make bigger numbers, and swears he’s found some kind of pattern in it that will let him build up to infinity. I’m starting to worry he’s going to rub off his thumb prints on that thing.”

“Hey, that could be handy if he ever decides to become a master thief.”

She giggled. “So long as he commits all of his crimes using only his thumbs. The Thumbs Up Bandit, they’ll call him. Accidental destroyer of dozens of priceless Fabergé eggs! They slip through his thumbs, but then he slips through their fingers!”

Conner laughed, settling onto the corner of her bed in the absence of any other place to sit. “Do you need to be heading back to the hospital? I don’t want to be in the way.”

“Nah, stay with me. I could use some cheering up. He’ll still be there when you and I finish hanging out.”

“Is that why you weren’t at the dance?” he asked. He’d originally figured she hadn’t been able to score a date, but plenty of people went by themselves, and he’d seen some of her friends there. Both of them, that is.

“Nah. I got tired of going doe, you know? I asked somebody but he wasn’t interested. Obviously, I guess. So yeah, kind of sucky when you’re not there with somebody. Slow song comes on and everybody gets all close and snuggly and you’re just ‘la la la I have nobody dum dee dum’ and everything.”

The girl could teach a master class in making people feel awkward about having to pity her. “Trust me, you didn’t miss much. Typical dance stuff. Drama, grinding, stale refreshments and recycled decorations.”

“Who’d you go with?”

“La la la, dum dee dum.” She laughed. “Also asked someone, also shot down. You’re in good company.”

“I already knew that.” She grinned at him. “Who’d you ask? Heather Blake?”

“That obvious, huh. Yeah, she just wanted to go by herself. I only wound up going because I had to for yearbook. Got to spend the whole night working with Amanda Carpenter.” He made a face, briefly explaining the new co-editor-in-chief situation.

“She’s that super tall new girl, right? She’s in my government class. She’s really pretty! Why didn’t you go with her?”

“I’m pretty sure she is either in league with or is herself the devil.” He tried not to think about the sinful inclinations she’d awakened in him last night before brushing him off. “Do you wanna see pictures? My camera’s in the car.”

“Sure,” said Hailey. He was back in a few moments, sitting down beside her. Hailey leaned her head against Conner’s shoulder as he went through his shots, explaining what they were looking at and apologizing again and again for how tiny the screen was.

“Oh my gosh, is that... is she wearing... *plastic wrap*?!” she exclaimed, looking at a picture of Heather and some of her friends.

“Sure was.”

“Wow. That girl... she is *fearless*. I wish I was half that brave.”

Conner tried not to think about the sight of Hailey in a similar “dress.” “She’s confident, all right.”

Hailey spun in place to look directly at Conner. “Are you OK? You sound upset. Still bummed over the rejection?”

“Nah.” He saw the look on her face. “Well, maybe. I dunno, just sort of... tense. I don’t know why the dance got to me like it did, but did it ever.” Claiming he didn’t know

why was a bald-faced lie, but the stress was anything but. Still, it felt wrong to vent to Hailey about being rejected after what he'd put her through.

"Want me to give you a back rub?" she offered.

"Oh geez, I didn't come over here to—"

"I'm not offering to suck your cock, Conner," she said, playfully shoving his shoulder. He barely budged. "Wow, you really *are* tense. Come on, lay down. Let me see if I can't ease some of that out of you."

He hesitated, but the hesitation didn't last long. Who was he holding out for? The girl who'd stolen his coveted and hard-won leadership position? His teacher who'd made it plain she was fully willing and able to spurn his advances? The girl who'd rejected him not once, not twice, but three times this semester? So what if he'd danced with them! He'd gone home alone. Besides, she was only offering a back rub. It didn't *have* to be sexual. Conner meekly acquiesced and laid down on the space she cleared on her bed.

Then Hailey stood up, and he realized she wasn't wearing any pants.

"Hailey!"

But she was straddling his waist before he could even move. "Relax, Conner. Nothing you haven't seen before, and it serves you right for waking me up from my nap. Now come on, let me get to work."

Conner's cock had been suffering what felt like a perpetually semi-hard state ever since the dance, and with the feel of Hailey's scantily concealed pussy pressing down on the back of his pants, his pulse was positively thundering through its swiftly increasing length.

Whatever resistance was left in him fled at the sensation of her fingers sinking into knotted muscles of his shoulders. He groaned quite indelicately as the tension eased out of him.

"Was that OK?"

"Ungh," he replied.

She laughed. "I'll take that as a yes."

The fading light of day filtered in through the cracks between the blinds, dancing chaotically across the room as the leafless tree in Hailey's front yard shook in the wind, darting in and out of sunbeams. Conner soon became so relaxed he might have fallen asleep had he been able to forget, as he so keenly tried, that a beautiful half-naked girl was mounted on his back side. It wasn't long before he found himself asking if she'd mind if he removed his shirt to let her really dig in.

She kept rubbing hard at his tricep. "I don't know, Conner. You take off your shirt and suddenly everybody will be doing it. We'll be living in one big shirtless anarchical commune, and we'll only have you to blame."

"Oh. Yeah, sorry. It's fine. You're doing great as it is."

She flicked him suddenly in the back of the head. “Conner, I’ve had my shirt off for the past ten minutes.”

The tension came back. “You have?”

“I have. Though I guess it only goes to prove that taking one’s shirt off can lead to a chain effect.” She laughed, and he joined her after a moment. When had Hailey become so relaxed in such a sexually charged encounter? “Off with it, buddy. Let’s go.”

She helped him remove it, though as the massage resumed, it soon became clear it was no longer serving its purpose. “What’s wrong? It’s like your muscles are solid rock back here. Which, not gonna lie, is kinda hot, but seems like I’m not doing something right.”

“You’re doing an amazing job. Better than amazing. Perfect.” She really was. He wasn’t exactly a back rub connoisseur, but her fingers had certainly seemed to know what they were doing. If he didn’t know better, he’d have thought she’d been practicing.

“Are you cold?”

“I’m not cold.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

His fists were clenching the blanket as if that were the only thing restraining him from throwing this girl on her back and fucking her then and there. His reply was aimed directly into her pillow.

“I couldn’t make that out. Talk to me, Conner. You’re worrying me.”

After a few deep breaths, he turned his head back to the side so let his voice reach open air. “I said, ‘there’s a hot naked girl with her hands on my bare skin.’”

There was a brief pause before he heard a flattered giggle. “I’m not naked. I still have my underwear on.”

“Naked enough.”

“And unless I’m not seeing someone, there’s not a hot girl in here either. Just little old me.”

His eyes squeezed shut. How he wished he could tell her what had happened! Doing so would only lead to questions he couldn’t answer, though. No, this way was best. This way at least didn’t turn the poor girl’s life upside down. “You seem cute enough to me,” he said at last.

The back rub resumed, futile though its ostensible purpose was. Some minutes later, she spoke in a low voice, “You know, it’s OK that you didn’t want to go out with me, Conner.”

“Hailey...”

“Really. It’s OK. I know I came on really strong, and I’m sorry I made you feel like you were being hunted, or whatever you want to call it. Besides, we’re both going to graduate in a few months, and you’ll go your way and I’ll go mine. Not like you have nothing better to do than spend time with stupid, ugly old me.”

“Hailey.”

His voice was firm enough to stop her this time. “Yeah?”

“Hailey, you were nothing but good to me, and I was scared and stupid and treated you horribly, and even so you’ve been nothing but nice to me. I think you’re sexy as hell. And I was at your academic decathlon tournament, so I know full well how smart you are. I don’t ever, ever want to hear you run yourself down like that, OK?”

“OK, Conner.”

She bent lower, planting an elbow near his shoulder blade and kneading hard. It felt wonderful – compounded by the sudden presence of the starchy fibers of her bra rubbing against his skin. He lost himself in those touches for a time. He couldn’t have said if it was a minute or an hour.

“You know, if you wanted, we could still... have fun.”

“Fun?”

“I mean, if you wanted. I know we can’t, like, date, or whatever, but if you really, um, think I’m sexy, or whatever.” Her palms roved delicately up and down his spine. “It’s fine if you don’t. But I liked being with you, like that, and so... yeah. I wanted to put that out there.” Her fingers rested on his shoulders and kneaded softly. “And I’ll still rub your back, if you want, even if you don’t want to... you know.”

He couldn’t take it any more. In a flash, he bucked her off his back and onto the bed beside him, positioning himself over her. Her bra was a total mismatch for her panties, white with yellow trim and and gray with red polka dots respectively, but he only had eyes for that look of pure delight on her face at being literally swept away. “I do want to... you know.”

“Really?”

After what he’d put her through, he didn’t want to pressure her into anything, so he quickly added, “And yeah, maybe a relationship isn’t the best idea for us, but this... you’re sure you want this?”

“I’ve wanted this every time I’ve seen you in school for months.” Those were all the words she got out before he pressed his mouth to hers. There was a flurry of activity, clothes flying across the room as hastily as they could be discarded, her lamp tumbling to the floor as Conner’s pants careened through it.

“Fuck me,” she whined. “Please fuck your little slut. Fuck me bow-legged. Fuck me like a stallion mounting his mare. Fuck my tight slutty pussy until it forgets what it feels like not to have your huge fucking dick inside it.”

He paused. “You don’t have to do that, Hailey. We can just... regular style.”

She looked up at him, brown eyes wide. “Is it all right if I *want* to do that?”

That was all he needed to hear. Conner’s muscles remembered the exact positioning to line up right at the entrance, and he slid into her soupy wet cunt in the



next instant. Conner's eyes squinted shut as she groaned in ecstasy. "Oh my fucking GOD," she groaned. "I forgot how fucking BIG you are!"

He couldn't help but grin. "You don't have to flatter me, either."

"N-not flat-t-tering," she stammered, the whole of her body beginning to quake. Was she coming already? "Just lately I've... it's been a long, mmm, long t-time since I was this strrrrrretched out."

"You want me to stop?" He knew she didn't, but he wanted to hear her answer as much as she wanted to say it.

"Oh *please* never stop fucking me! Your personal fuck toy is worthless without your cock to pleasure. Her cunt is a greedy, wicked cunt, but she begs you not to stop using it yet!" With her character reasserting itself, Hailey's voice lost its tremulous quality. In fact, as she proceeded to whine in delight, beg for more, and sing the praises of his every maneuver, it grew so loud he would have worried about having the neighbors hear it if he could bring himself to find any fault with her.

She got him off three times that evening. The first, after having the dam of his lust break, was embarrassingly quick, but she wasted no time coaxing him back to readiness with a blowjob that somehow felt even more enthusiastic and skillful than he'd remembered. Hailey got carried away and brought him once more to completion, but he was ready again soon enough after she mounted his body and humped herself against him while he played with her boobs. Or rather, her "fat slut titties," as she mislabeled them, unable to realize she'd traded her original large bust for the smaller but shapelier pair of Hayleigh McKnight.

It was night out when her glorious, exulting, sweaty body rode out a final orgasm that went on so long that the spasms in her pussy ushered in his own. She collapsed alongside him, the two of them laughing at nothing in the darkened room. It was only then he was struck with a realization, sitting bolt upright.

"I forgot a condom!"

Hailey eased him back down with a gentle hand. "Conner, I'm on the pill. Deep breaths, hon. Relax. Unless you're just looking for excuses to ask for another back rub."

Slowly, he eased his way back down. "You are? Really?" He didn't realize how callous the question sounded until he said it, but it was already too late to take it back.

Hailey rolled to the side and slid open the drawer of her nightstand, fishing out a packet of pills, four even rows of seven. The first two rows were empty, as were two in the third. "See? Feel better?"

"Sorry. I just... you know."

"I do. How would I get to keep being your fuck buddy if I got pregnant? Pretty sure that's a way different place on the hook-up spectrum."

He smiled at her, relaxation setting back in. "Is that what we are now? Fuck buddies?"

“Well, we fucked, and we’re just friends, so... yeah, I think that’s what that is? New to me, too.” She shrugged guilelessly.

“And you’re sure you’re OK with that?” The prospect of using her, of having her become his Angelica, nagged at him anew.

“Conner, relax. I’m not going to chase you down and demand attention. Just know that I have fun with you, and whenever you’re feeling like having fun with me...” She gave his cock a soft squeeze. “Come have fun with me.”

Owen had gone with his parents to visit his grandmother Saturday and Sunday, and when Conner went to pick him up Monday, Mrs. Gibson told him that he wasn't feeling well and was staying home. Conner asked him to pass on a get well soon and headed to school, Angelica in tow. For her part, she was uncharacteristically quiet. This was one of, if not the longest runs she'd gone without a dose of Owen's cock ever since they'd implanted her addiction to it, but when he tried to gently probe how she was holding up, she told him to "worry about your own lonely dick" and put her ear buds in. Conner supposed he'd have to wait to hear more about how things had gone with Kirsten Vaughan at the dance until he got time to text him later.

Meanwhile, the show must go on. Conner supposed he had Hailey to thank for being able to keep level-headed through what otherwise might have been the most frustrating day he'd had in a while. He had Heather sitting across from him in a crop top in psychology, smiling as genially as ever when he nodded to her. Hailey was in there, too, though to see her, one would have thought nothing had changed between them. He respected her wishes for a little space.

Things really heated up toward the end of the school day. It *should* have been an easy afternoon in yearbook. After a brief Monday meeting, Miss C was running a tutorial on some of the photo editing software they used for touch-ups, and on rare occasion, more extensive editing. Last year they'd had to edit Arpit Rajamade into half a dozen pictures after he'd wound up in the hospital on group picture day and his mother had thrown a colossal fit at Miss C. Conner had stepped in and promised to make it right; Miss C had forwarded her the thank-you email she'd received over the summer after Arpit received his yearbook. A printed copy had gone in his own junior year scrapbook.

It was old hat to both editors-in-chief, so they shut themselves in the editor-in-chief office while Miss C taught the rest of the class her lesson. Conner had been a little irked that Amanda had even closed the blinds for total privacy; even aside from Heather's now-typical ogle-inspiring attire, Miss C had been wearing a really snug low-cut sweater, and his teenage libido had been primed to steal the occasional glimpse of it from his desk. She had made more use of the dress code cancellation than most of the faculty, but still, she seldom showed much skin, especially during the cold months. Heather might be showing a good deal more, but then, he could see that pretty much every day. Like his econ teacher had often said last semester, competition was good.

He supposed Amanda was looking pretty good herself. She tended towards long shirts over leggings or occasionally jeans, but today was a fairly brief pair of chocolate colored khaki shorts that left all six feet of leg out for admiration. Plus, from the way she kept coming over to his desk to collaborate on the selection of photos, he had a preposterously easy time seeing right down her shirt to an electric blue bra that, once he'd seen it, he realized was noticeable right through her t-shirt if he looked for it. It was hard not to.

Once upon a time, Conner had not frittered away his school days leering at his classmates. Now, it seemed it was impossible not to.

Still, not 48 hours earlier, he'd had some of the best sex of his life and it had done wonders to clear his thinking. After their kiss in the gym lobby at King of Hearts, he'd actually found himself considering making a go at her! Amanda Carpenter, self-described unleashed bitch, the bane of his academic existence and usually the most frustrating part of his day. Sure, he could admit, he found her attractive. But he'd come scarily close to letting that fact cause him to forget that she was also a power-hungry, manipulative thief.

(That she had gotten him so worked up and then brushed him off like a cobweb had nothing to do with his resurgence of resentment, he told himself.)

So when she came to sit down on the edge of his desk, those dazzling thighs crossed mere inches from his fingertips, that flashy blue bra of hers concealed only a couple feet from his face, he was prepared. Somehow, the moment she rested there, he knew something was up. He'd had too many women – Hailey, Kristy, Heather – take that exact spot not to know it was an omen of momentous conversations.

“So are we going to talk about what happened after the dance, or are you going to keep pretending you forgot about it?” she began.

“You mean the part where we kissed, or the part where we both went home alone and went on with life?”

“The first one, obviously.”

“I was sort of hoping to keep pretending.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So it's like that, is it.”

“Like what? Amanda, it was one kiss. We both started the night pissed off to go alone. We were forced to be together, and a great song came on and we got excited. That's it. We don't need to act like it was some kind of big deal. It obviously wasn't to you then, so let's not make it one now.”

She frowned. From the intensity of that frown, he wondered how many guys had ever spoken to her like that before. “Nobody said it was a big deal. But I don't go around randomly kissing guys. Especially not like *that*.”

“Like what?”

“Conner, we were practically making out. Don't be obtuse. It's not a good look on you.”

“Well envy's not a good look on *you*.”

Her nostrils flared. “Oh? And what am I supposed to be envious of? Your right hand, or the wad of kleenex that followed?”

“See? *This* is why I didn't want to talk about it. You're rude, pushy, and clearly don't respect me! I was trying to go easy, but no, the great Amanda Carpenter had to go

down swinging. Wouldn't want anyone to forget about that trail of ripped out jugulars, would we?"

"Jesus, are you still butt-hurt over that? It was my first day and I didn't want the guy who was running the show – incredibly, by the way, not that you apparently think I'm capable of giving you credit for anything – to think he could walk all over me! Which he did anyway, and I *still* kissed him!"

"*Me* walk all over *you*?!" He rose to his feet, looking – slightly upwards – into the tall girl's eyes. "Since the day you showed up here, you've done nothing but usurp my responsibilities and try to oust me from a position I worked three years to get! If you were any more of a job stealer, they'd have wanted posters with your face on them at the post office!"

"Oh, so all of a sudden the great Conner Fishers thinks someone could want me?"

Before he could rebut further, the door to the office swung open, and Miss C was in the doorway, giving a hard look at her two editors-in-chief. Behind her, every eye in the classroom was fixed on what they could make out of the scene around their teacher's body, classmates craning their necks to peep on their spat. "Conner, could you give me a hand out here?"

He let his glare linger on Amanda for another moment, but she glared right back. "Sure," he said at last, heatedly. "Be happy to."

As her counterpart narrowly avoided slamming the door shut behind him, Amanda collapsed into his nearby chair, and in mere moments, found the tears bursting forth.

What had she ever done to him? Sure, she knew that coming in and making him share his position – not *taking* it, just *sharing* it – could upset someone. But he had to see by now she was every bit as qualified as he was! Impressing him hadn't been any part of her intention, but she was a hard worker, and even the slackers on staff had recognized her worthiness of her title. Did he think she liked sharing the role any more than he did? Heck, when she wasn't so pissed off at him, she sometimes even admitted to herself that she was grateful to have his expertise on the team.

But that wasn't what was really bothering her. His words echoed in her ears, mingling in the snuffles and occasional piteous sound that betrayed her intentions to keep silent. Just a kiss. Go on with life. No big deal. He'd called her pushy, rude, and disrespectful. As if he wasn't every one of those things to her day in and day out!

OK, so the kiss had been a weird, spontaneous thing. But Amanda had to admit, she'd spent a lot of time that weekend thinking about it. She'd never planned to fall for him, but then, falling by its very nature wasn't a plannable kind of ordeal. Why hadn't she asked him out on the spot? In hindsight, if he'd made a move on her, she'd have let him. Let him what, she didn't know, but she'd have let him. If he had a clue how much time she'd spent fantasizing about that kiss the past two days, his ego might finally swell up big enough to blow up his whole stupid head.

She peered through the blinds to where he had joined Miss C in floating around the room, helping the class with their photo editing. He was leaning over that tart Heather Blake's desk, all but openly leering at those freakishly huge boobs of hers, which were as always showed off like she was expecting to win a prize for them any day now. Was that it? Was that all Conner valued in a girl?

She looked at the roll of thumbnails displayed on his screen and selected one with her picture. She'd looked *good*, dammit. Not that he'd acknowledged it beyond that b.s. "you don't look half bad" line. So Miss C thought Conner was fit not only to edit, but to help her teach? She'd learned TIOS's image editor backwards and forwards. With a glower through the wall at where Conner was no doubt drooling on the busty blonde girl's sleeve, she imagined a Heather-ier version of herself.

The important thing was to be subtle – a trait that Heather Blake decidedly lacked, to say nothing of her wardrobe. Amanda didn't want to make the picture look like a centerfold, after all. She aimed for a less pronounced version of the girl's hourglass figure. With her black dress set against the dark room behind her, it was easy to select her midsection and pinch it in a few inches without the lines showing. She'd always been a bit straight up the sides, but suddenly the Amanda in the picture had hips to go with her gams.

Next up was the face. She liked what she saw in the mirror well enough, sure, but zoom in enough and ScarJo herself revealed flaws. And with the incredible resolution on the school's cameras, it was easier still. She spent a few minutes touching up, lifting her cheekbones slightly, whitening her smile, shortening her front teeth, accentuating the thickness of her lips, brushing away what few blemishes she could find and dulling the wrinkles in her forehead while eliminating the bags under her eyes altogether. Her hair was up, but she could still do a little touching up that added a teensy bit of gloss and volume to it. When she zoomed back out, it was to the sight of a girl who ought to be a face model. Amanda, still, but one slightly better in every way.

Not that Conner cared about faces. She was already every bit as pretty as Heather Blake, as far as she was concerned. No, that boy was interested in only one thing. She panned the image down to her chest. Her dress had been strapless and showed a fair amount of skin, so proper editing would call for a detailed modification of both the field of silver sequins as well as tweaking the exposed portion of her bust to match. To do it right might take an hour or more, and while she was having fun with her little experiment, she didn't want to sit around looking at her own chest all afternoon.

But there was also another, easier way. It might not look quite as real, but instead of altering the entire shape of the breast, she could simply accentuate the far more easily modified skin portion. It was much more uniform in tone than the sequins, which were a mess of black, silver, white where light reflected off of them, and countless other colors where they caught the lights swirling around the dance floor. With a few bubble distortions, she was able to make it look like she was simply incredibly perky – practically inflated – and that the dress was acting more as a shelf beneath naturally buoyant breasts. It took some doing to stretch and adjust the sequins, pasting in a couple extra rows to make it look plausible that these whoppers didn't have nipples well above the neckline, but it wasn't that hard. They were noticeably bigger, but even if they weren't Heather Blake big, they were much better shaped. Women would pay good money for a rack like the girl in the picture.

She zoomed out to take in the whole of it. Damn, she looked sexy! She didn't think it was different enough from the real thing to stand out as a fake, but it was a clear improvement – at least insofar as Conner's simplistic tastes were concerned. Amanda clicked save and closed the image. Let that bastard Conner's jaw hit the floor when he saw that. Maybe she didn't really have that kind of body, but let it worm into his imagination, let it make a cameo in his pathetic, lonely dreams.

She'd still figure out how to snare him. Superficial and obnoxious or no, something about that boy did it for her. Even after that fight they'd just had, she knew if he came in and tried to kiss her again, she'd be returning it in an instant. One of these days, she'd get him to do exactly that.

And this time, she'd make sure there was no more nonsense about it being "just a kiss."



It was one of those rare periods where the bell rang without anyone realizing it was coming. Miss C shouted a few last minute instructions during the frenzy of departure; meanwhile the class hastily returned laptops to the charging station as those using the desktops in the adjoined lab logged off and bolted. Conner was in the middle of a sotto voce discussion with Heather regarding his fight with Amanda; he hadn't yet gotten to telling her about the kiss at the dance and how she'd blown it out of proportion. Before he could, one of those last minute instructions suddenly attached his name to it.

"Conner, I'd like to see you after class," Miss C announced as the pair neared the door.

He winced. Here it came. "I'll tell you about it later," he said to Heather.

"Can't wait. Good luck," she murmured to him before making her departure with a reassuring squeeze of his hand. That was different. That fight must have gotten loud if she thought he needed luck that badly.

"Me too, Miss C?" asked Amanda Carpenter as she... as she...

Words stopped forming. What the *hell!* Amanda came out of the editor's office looking *stunning*. No. It wasn't a beauty thing – though he supposed her makeup was incredibly on point today. She looked like sex on legs. And what legs. Had she lost weight without him noticing? That was insane. She must be sucking it in or something to fake it.

Maybe that was why her boobs suddenly looked enormous.

She hadn't been tiny before, but on those rare occasions he'd been able to see past her attitude, they'd always struck him as a little unusual somehow, a little too widely spaced, like they had some kind of force of repulsion towards one another. Could she have put on a pushup bra in there? She must have. These suckers were impossible to miss, high-riding half-globes planted on her chest, and at her height, that made them only a few inches below his eye level.

He blinked and made himself look away. She'd obviously done it to make him feel stupid for rejecting her, and he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction.

"Do you think you need to stay, Amanda?" Miss C answered as he gathered his wits (and his jaw off the floor).

"I know we got sort of loud. I'm sorry if we disrupted the class. But it was a personal thing, nothing to do with yearbook."

Miss C looked to Conner. "Is that how you'd categorize it, Conner?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"I need you two to be able to work together. You don't have to like each other, but we do need our ship to sail smoothly, which means when things get stormy, one of you has to be able to let the other handle the wheel."

She must be covering metaphors with her freshmen, he decided. "I get that," he said. "It won't happen again."

"Good. Amanda?"

"Won't happen again," she echoed.

"Good." But before Conner could do more than pivot his head back toward the door, she cut him off. "Conner, stay back."

Amanda had the grace to at least try not to smirk at him as she strode out the door, but then he was alone with his teacher and the consequences of having a shouting match during her class.

Conner decided to try to get out in front of the impending lecture. "Look, Kristy, I really am sorry I let that get out of hand earlier. We had kind of a... I dunno. Something happened at the dance, and we started arguing about it and I let it get personal. I'm sorry. I know having the two of us at one another's throats makes things harder for you, and I promise, this was totally a one-time occurrence. I'll talk to her tomorrow and we'll work something out. You don't have to worry about it."

"That's good to hear," she answered. Before he knew what was happening, though, she was advancing on him in long strides, releasing her hair from its ponytail and in a single fluid motion sliding the hair tie around her wrist. Then, she kissing him. She didn't even stop walking while she did so, driving him right back into the computer lab, throwing the curtain shut behind them.

"What's happening?" he squeaked once she gave him a moment for air. It didn't last long, and her only response was to entwine her arms under his and clasp his shoulders, pulling him tight against her. These weren't the tender, surprised kisses he'd exchanged with Amanda at the dance, nor the gentle, almost friendly kiss from Heather, nor even the sloppily enthused tongue-lashing he and Hailey had engaged in Saturday. These were messages, urgent messages meant to convey one and only one concept.

Lust.

With Hailey, he'd had to decide what to do with her every step of the way. Given that she spent most of the time pleading for particulars, it was simple enough to guess how to proceed, and to occasionally tease her with a little withholding before giving in. Now, with Kristy, he was running on pure instinct. So when she finally came up for air, he had one hand cupping the back of her neck and the other tucked into her back pocket.

"I've been waiting all weekend to do that," she said softly.

"Why? You have? What?"

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Um, I have an essay for Mrs. Brantley that I sort of haven't started yet."

"What's it about?"

"We're making parallels between *Julius Caesar* and contemporary political stuff."

“Oooh, fun. ‘He doth bstride the narrow world like a Colossus, and we petty men walk beneath his legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves.’ Seems pretty apt.”

“Uh, yeah. Right.”

She leaned into him, pressing her body hard against his. “Come home with me. We can work on that essay together. And other things.”

“I... I don’t know...” He knew what he wanted, but recent experience had taught him to think twice before simply diving in to do the thing he wanted.

Kristy gave a long, sensuous kiss along his neck; shivers of pleasure ran up and down his spine. Could this really be happening? “Please? Let me take care of you. Say you’ll come to my house tonight.”

“I...”

She cut off his protest – if he’d even been going to protest; he wasn’t sure – with her lips on his. Three more times this happened, until he realized he was only hesitating to accept her invitation in order to spur her on.

“Come. Come to my house, tonight. I need you. Pretend you don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“Actually,” said another voice, “he does.”

Both heads whipped around to where the curtain had parted. There stood none other than Heather Blake, hands posted on broad, defiant hips as she glared daggers at their teacher. Though teacher’s and editor’s faces were mere inches apart, Conner had no doubt her displeasure was reserved solely for the woman in his arms.

“Hello, Heather,” said Kristy evenly. She didn’t even bother to extricate herself from his grasp. Conner was too shell-shocked to even realize his hand was still clasping their teacher’s butt.

“Don’t ‘hello Heather’ me. Just how long has this been going on?”

“What? No! No, it’s not... We’re not... I haven’t... we...” It was only his need to gesticulate that prompted him to finally release his grip on Kristy’s ass.

“It sure looks like that. And before you even think about bullshitting me, yes, I caught that on camera.” She stepped fully between the curtains holding up the screen of her phone, on which was a recording of the two making out, shifting in and out of focus. It was partially obscured by the curtain at various moments, but it was nonetheless damning.

“Heather, please, you can’t show that to anyone. We’d be–”

“*She’d* be, you mean,” she cut in. “I can’t believe this! All this time, the two of you...!”

“No! Not all this time! Just since December! Well, not really ‘since’ December, but–”

“Save it. This is just...” She made a disgusted sound. “Can you give me even one reason why I shouldn’t take this down to Principal Beckmann right this minute? You know what? Never mind. I’m going. I can’t believe I ever let you touch me!”

“All right, but it’s your funeral,” said Kristy. It was the first time she’d spoken since saying hello, but it was in that same ice cold tone.

Heather paused. “What, getting fired wasn’t enough, now you wanna go to jail? Are you seriously threatening me?”

“No. As a matter of fact, *you’re* threatening you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? After what I just saw, you don’t have any room to be pushing me around – not any more. Oh no, you are freaking *done* here, lady.”

“Are you going to listen, or just stand there making speeches?” Heather’s jaw clicked shut, but her glare intensified. “Good. This all began when I made advances on Conner last semester. He refused me, but I didn’t want to take no for an answer.”

Conner stared at her, perplexed beyond measure. What on earth was she talking about?

“But you know Conner. Perfect student, perfect gentleman. I had nothing I could use as leverage on him. Nothing, that is, until finals came around and you, Heather, got a C. It was obvious that Conner cared for you, and I used that to get what I wanted.”

Heather’s voice shot up an octave in sheer outrage. “What?! Are you saying you tanked my grade on purpose?!”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all. You legitimately received that C. But when Conner learned of it, he came to me and pleaded with me to fix it. I consented... but conditionally. And now you know the condition.”

Heather’s face grew paler by the word. “No. That can’t be... that’s inhuman! How could you? I don’t believe you!”

“I wanted him. I got him. Tell her, Conner.”

He looked between the two, trying to make sense of things. Conner had never told Kristy how he’d rendered Heather susceptible to believing his every word, but she was plainly looking for him to corroborate her story – a story which sounded even worse than the truth, somehow. She must have a reason, but if he backed her up, that would be it. Heather would accept the story as true.

“Go on, tell her.” Kristy gave him a firm look, and in that moment, he decided to trust his friend and mentor, and took the leap.

“It’s true.” He sounded as confident as he could.

Heather’s face vacillated between incredulity, pain, and rage. “Well if that’s true, then all the more reason you’re going down, you bitch.”

“You aren’t comprehending, Heather. Suppose you go to the office and show Principal Beckmann that video. What then?”

“Then everyone finds out what you did!”

“Right. Including changing your grade.”

“I...” Heather stopped herself immediately. “But...”

Conner realized it at the same time she did. Heather’s scholarship from her dead grandfather was contingent on maintaining straight A’s. Her grade on that test – a grade their teacher actually *had* changed, to set up Conner to be the hero so Heather would give him a chance – would be revealed, and her hopes of going to her dream school would be destroyed.

“They’ll never believe you. Everyone will know what you did. I’ll tell them you changed my grade to get to Conner. You can’t... this won’t...”

But again, she was reasoning it out along with him. Maybe she was right and the relevant authorities would decide Kristy had manipulated the grade and it was therefore immaterial. But it was also possible that they wouldn’t. For all Heather knew, Kristy still had that test floating around with comments and a rubric that would justify the score. Or maybe Heather’s aunts and uncles would even get lawyers involved when the issue went public. After all, if their niece didn’t get the money, one of them surely would.

It wasn’t certain that exposing Kristy would wreck her future, but it was certainly in the realm of possibility.

Conner decided it was time to step in. His mother had always teased him for being a terrible liar, but if he’d ever needed to spin a convincing yarn, this was it. “Heather... I’m sorry. I wish I could have told you. I didn’t want you to think... Look, it doesn’t matter. But you can’t put your future at risk to protect me. Please. I did what I did for you. Don’t make it for nothing.”

His guts twisted inside as he betrayed that blind trust she had in him, as he used her deepest fear against her. And almost as much as he hated himself for it, he dreaded what might happen if she refused. To himself and to Kristy, yes, but to her as well.

Finally, tears forced their way out. “You’re a monster.” That was all she said before she ran out of the room, and though he’d meant it for Kristy, Conner felt the sting every bit as keenly. More so, probably.

He stumbled over to a chair and fell into it. “What did we just do?”

His teacher knelt in front of him. “Something awful, but better than doing nothing. Thank you for going along with it, Conner. I know how hard that was for you. And I’m so sorry I let that happen. I promise you I will make it up to you.”

She took his hands, but he pulled away. “I should get going,” he said. “You know, got that Caesar big essay.”

“Yeah. ‘This was the most unkindest cut of all.’ Mark Antony in, I wanna say, Act 3 Scene 3? Or 2. Either way. Maybe see if you can apply that one to current events.”

“Maybe.”

## Chapter Eight

Tuesday promised to be a day of difficult conversations. If someone would have told Conner yesterday that talking to Owen about how he was the latest victim of TIOS shenanigans would be the easiest of them, he'd have laughed in their face. After Monday afternoon's debacle, he'd used his anxiety over that situation to distract him from the impending catastrophe should Kristy's assurances about Heather's silence prove misplaced. That was too terrifying to think about. So instead, he spent time analyzing the possibilities surrounding the rogue TIOS message that had transformed his somewhat homely ginger friend into a guy worthy of the attention of Kirsten freaking Vaughan.

Who could have written that message in TIOS? It seemed obvious – at first, at least. Owen was the obvious culprit. He was the sole beneficiary, after all, and his sulkiness over Angelica going to the dance with another guy had clearly been bothering him. What better way to exact revenge than by putting himself on her level, with easy access to the opposite sex? He and Owen were friends, too, so if there was someone who might have found a clever way to get his password, it was Owen. It made sense.

Only, the more Conner thought about it, the more he began to see other possibilities, too. It started by reminding himself who all knew about TIOS. Himself. There was one person he was sure hadn't written it. Owen. Miss C? She seemed fairly unlikely to intervene on behalf of a student she barely remembered from her freshman English class three years ago. Only maybe she had reasoned that Owen's mood was affecting Conner's happiness and decided to try something? It didn't seem likely, but then, he hadn't thought it was likely she would throw herself at him after school yesterday. She had access to the lab and knowledge of the program, though. He was pretty sure her access to the system didn't affect things like his, but maybe she had some way of upgrading her copy, or even stealing his password and using his profile.

Angelica came to mind next. She knew better than anyone what TIOS was capable of with a few decontextualized words. She had been at the dance, and could well have learned about the secret ways into the journalism room from any number of people. The girl was obsessed with Owen's cock, and whatever Owen had said, it was clear her refusal to date him publicly had caused friction. Could she have used TIOS to give him a boost in perceived hotness? Then there would be no stigma attached to dating him. If anything, it would be a profile boost for her. And living across the hall as she did, she could have had ample opportunity to get at his password as well.

Speaking of Jordan, Conner had suspected him when he'd first seen the edit. The more he thought about that, though, the less sense it made. He'd overheard Owen's outburst, but if a guy like that had access to Conner's password, he'd certainly not be using it to play fairy godmother to a classmate beneath his notice. Perhaps he'd repeated

what he'd overheard to mock Owen and the perpetrator had been in earshot? Come to think of it, he really didn't know who else might have been near enough to overhear. Could Amanda have done such a thing? They worked together in the editor's office all the time; he supposed she could have somehow found out his password. But why would she change that? Just to upset Conner? He wouldn't put it past her.

Were there other possibilities? He supposed so, but it was hard to imagine most students having the kind of power TIOS had given to its editor-in-chief and not abusing it in a way that anyone would notice. Conner tried to keep his own alterations minimal. He wasn't going to pretend he'd gotten nothing out of it, of course. There had been the incredible evening of sex with both Hailey and his journalism teacher for sure, and arguably the dates with Heather Blake as well. But he wasn't naïve enough to deny that most people would be abusing TIOS to radically alter the story of the Nighthawks to their own liking, and that clearly wasn't happening. Heck, Conner had accidentally turned the fashion trends into a peep show on accident – imagine if someone were *trying* to effect that sort of outcome!

He couldn't come right out and ask Owen if he'd done it. If he had, he'd probably lie and say he hadn't. If he hadn't, it meant Conner would have to tell him what had happened, and he didn't know what that could do. He was already having a crisis of self-esteem thanks to the situation with Angelica; finding out he'd only been invited to dance with Kirsten Vaughan because of TIOS could crush him. If he were indeed innocent, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if he got to enjoy a little popularity before graduation.

During yearbook the next day, a little coaxing managed to get DeShaun, who he had absolutely no suspicion of being involved in the Owen situation, to say, "You'd know who did it if somebody hacked your TIOS account." TIOS, however, flatly refused to allow him to input the quote, and the error code he received wasn't referenced anywhere he could find in the system. His best guess was that the program simply wouldn't let him gain direct power over itself, though that was only a guess. Apparently editor-in-chief was still a step down from programmer.

All he had to go on was the discussion he'd had with Owen in the car that morning. "So are you going to tell me what happened at the dance after I left, or do I have to beat it out of you?" Conner asked, nudging him with an elbow.

"What's to tell?" Angelica interjected from the back seat. "He and Kirsten danced for, like, two songs, and then the dance was over and everybody went home alone. That's it." Angelica had been part of that same group of hot and popular people, so she would have had front row seats.

"Three dances," said Owen definitively.

"Oh yeah? Like, just you and Kirsten, or you joined the whole group of which she was one member?" asked Conner skeptically.

“Just me and her.”

“And...?”

“And what? We danced.”

Conner gave him an exasperated look. “Right, so you and the hottest girl in school randomly danced together, three times, and no big whoop. Just a typical Friday night for the great Owen Gibson.”

“I was at a dance. Isn’t that what people do there?” Owen shrugged. “Not like anybody else asked.”

The look on Angelica’s face lowered the temperature in the car, silencing all further discussion on the subject. Or on any subject, for that matter. Conner had no idea what her problem was. She was the one who’d rejected Owen, after all. How could you reject someone, then still be jealous?

As for any other saucy details, he figured he’d just get them from Owen at lunch. Only once he arrived in the cafeteria, Conner watched in shock as Hayleigh, Kirsten, her minion Olivia Snyder and Maggie Bray – the head of the school dance team, no less – cornered him on his way out of the lunch line and lead him over to their table. Conner asked if anyone else was seeing this, but nobody else seemed surprised. In fact, Trevor only gave Kayla a kiss on the cheek and said he was only glad Owen left some girls for the rest of them. Kayla merely gave a lustful gaze at Owen’s butt, then smiled at her boyfriend.

Weirdly, even sitting with his friends, the absence of Owen was acute. But why should he feel threatened by the sight of Owen laughing along with the in crowd? He had one of their premier members all to himself. In fact, a quick text to Hailey confirmed her willingness to meet up under the stage. Happily, she’d evidently never even removed the blanket she’d put over the gymnastics mat, nor the two pillows. He spent the rest of lunch lost in the lips and hands of, in her words, “the most eager cock worshipper in school.”

It did a lot to make him feel better, right up until physics. Today was a lab day, but Owen abandoned Conner to pair up with Candace Marino, one of the senior cheerleaders. Conner still remembered vividly the time sophomore year when she’d caught Owen trying to look up her skirt on the stairwell. She’d had her then boyfriend punch him in the stomach and threaten to beat him to a pulp if he did it again. If Candace had any recollection of it, the smile on her face as she twirled her hair around a finger gazing at her lab partner gave no sign of it.

In English class, Conner handed in his Caesar essay on the subject of leaders who cultivate a cult of personality, the same subject half the class had selected. The events transpiring in his life were too complex to be reduced to Shakespeare. Then on to yearbook. Ordinarily it was the highlight of his day, but today, it was the rock in the pit of his stomach. He assumed Heather hadn’t told anyone, since he hadn’t been hauled



down to Principal Beckmann's office, but there was still a lot of anxiety. Best case scenario, it would be the most uncomfortable hour of his life.

In fact, it was on that exact note that class began. Everybody was in their seats, side conversations every which way as the bell had only just rung and Miss C was still conferring with Siobhan at her desk. Then Heather stood up and declared, in a voice both loud and imperious, "Miss C? I need to talk with you and Conner."

The announcement was so disruptive – and uncharacteristic – that all other discussion in the room stopped instantly as everyone looked at the diminutive blonde honors student. They should have been looking anyway, in Conner's opinion, wearing a lacy teal top that her nipples partially showed through, but that was old hat by now. Even Miss C was caught off guard, it seemed, but in the silence that followed, Heather pressed her advantage. "Now. Please." She said the first word a good deal more forcefully.

Miss C's eyes narrowed for a moment, then she quietly asked Siobhan to be seated. "We have a lot to cover today, Heather, but if you want to wait around after class, I'd be happy to talk with you."

Conner's blood froze in his veins, waiting to see what Heather would do. The two women stared one another down for seconds that stretched into agonizing eons. "That will be fine," Heather said at last. Conner didn't even bother to chime in, just in case anyone had forgotten his name had been involved in that tense exchange. The other students looked around, trying to puzzle out what had just happened, but then Miss C was starting in on day two of image editing, and they got busy enough learning the differences between jpgs, pngs, gifs and bmps to forget the outburst.

Conner spent most of the period like he had yesterday, floating around the room giving pointers and troubleshooting, which was a fine excuse to avoid going into the editor's office to reconcile with Amanda Carpenter over yesterday's fight. After what had happened yesterday, he'd nearly forgotten all about it until he realized she was secluded in the editor's office working. In fact, when she didn't surface during the period, he counted on the situation with Heather to make his teacher forget to check up on the apology situation and let it slide altogether. By ducking into the computer lab right at the bell, he managed to avoid so much as seeing Amanda Carpenter, which was always a recipe for an improvement to his day.

Except it meant that class was over, which meant it was time to be alone again with Heather and Kristy.

This time, the teacher made good and sure the door to her classroom was locked so they wouldn't have anyone else walking in on them. The trio went into the computer lab, where Heather attempted a power move by planting herself on the love seat – the same one that had been in the editor's office until Amanda Carpenter's arrival, the one on which Conner and Kristy had first fooled around. Conner pulled up one of the

computer chairs nearby, but their teacher quickly countered Heather's play by remaining standing.

"Well? I'd invite you to get it off your chest, but given the way you dress yourself, I wouldn't want you to take it literally," Kristy began. A clear sign that she wasn't handling this as Heather's teacher, but rather woman to woman. And she was a woman who didn't intend to take any crap.

Heather ignored the slight, and from the way she began, it was clear she'd rehearsed this speech since last night. "You're not going to lay a finger on Conner any more. I understand that he allowed you to because he wanted to help me, and I appreciate that." She looked away from Kristy to her classmate, and her face went from steel to butter. "Really, Conner. That you would do something like that, make that sacrifice for me... you'll never know how much that means to me."

Conner only nodded, and her face hardened once more as she returned her eyes to the other woman. "But even if that act of kindness was part of a contrivance on your part to seduce him – your own student," she said with disgust, "I won't let you continue to abuse him, especially not on my behalf. Conner is a good person, and I'm not going to let you take advantage of that any more. If I get even a whiff that you're forcing yourself on him again, I don't care what the consequences are to myself. I'll make you pay. Am I understood?"

Kristy seemed to be looking her over, and after a moment even Heather's burst of confidence showed cracks as confusion set in. "Sorry, I wanted to look to see if you're wearing some cord of recording device. But I suppose in that, it would only be too obvious."

"Slut shaming? Really? You're practically a child molester, but you want to try to make me feel bad because I'm not embarrassed about my femininity. Now tell me you understand me, or I have to hurry to the main office before Principal Beckmann leaves for the day."

"Don't make threats we both know you won't keep, Heather. Even if you wanted to martyr yourself and throw away your grandpappy's fortune and wind up a sub-minimum wage waitress who makes above average tips like your mother, you're not going to do that to Conner."

"May I ask why not?" But even Conner could hear the doubt in her voice.

"Because you know what it would mean for him. Or if you're too obtuse to have thought about the ramifications for anyone but yourself, allow me. First and most immediately, he'll be humiliated. There'd be some bros slapping him on the back and congratulating him for nailing his teacher, sure, but most at NHS will react with disgust. Can you imagine what his mother will think?"

Conner had spoken to Heather more than once about his closeness with his mother; she knew that relationship was important to him. "Then there's what will

happen to his future. I'm his sponsor as his editor-in-chief with ASAL, which means he'll lose that position, possibly even be forced out of yearbook altogether. So you could take that from him along with his dignity. All that said, there's an even simpler reason you're not going to do it."

"What's that?" Heather asked, though he could already see that Kristy's words were striking a nerve.

"Because you care about him. A good deal, I think, even if it's not in the way he wishes."

Heather fell silent then, her eyes falling to the floor. Conner was shocked to hear Kristy showing such hostility, though in the past she'd made it plain to him that she didn't much like this particular student. Seeing she'd silenced her opposition, Kristy continued. "So. You don't want him. You had your taste and you spit him out. I happen to like Conner quite a bit. So how about we agree that all three of us are adults, and let one another make up our own minds about how we conduct our affairs?"

Heather's jaw clenched. "Fuck you."

Kristy's head snapped back. For the first time that afternoon, she looked genuinely taken aback. "I'm sorry?"

The shorter girl took to her feet, rage on her face. "I said, FUCK. YOU!" She ran out of the room.

"Go," Kristy said to him after a moment. She bent down in front of him, touching her forehead softly against his. "But we do need to talk. I know I have a lot to apologize for, and I mean to. Text me later?"

He agreed to do so, then grabbed his backpack and ran after Heather.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the halls of Northside High, Angelica met up with the thot squad like usual for the day-end bullshit. (“Thot squad” was her private term for the group, not theirs, but then, this group of bitches might actually take it as a compliment.) Jackson was walking conspicuously close by, trying to chat her up. Without quite knowing how Angelica had become the intellectual of the group, perhaps by virtue of having already graduated high school once, Jackson was trying to impress her by misrepresenting some article he’d read online. He’d probably only read the headline and was making up the rest as he went from the sound of things. After agreeing to go to the dance with him, she almost wanted to apologize if it had lent him a sense that she was attracted to him, but she had a strict policy against dating high school boys. Even if they were as dumb and pretty as Jackson.

Jayce and Hayleigh were in yet another of their endless quarrels, this time an accusation by Jayce of her being too friendly with some other bro. Angelica knew both that it was true she’d been flirting, but also that she’d only done it to provoke this fight. Their insecurities were the glue that held them together. Jordan, Aiden and Liam were horsing around in the back, the usual dude-bro bullshit about who was a faggot or a pussy or whatever. That only left Kirsten and Olivia for conversation, and as usual the former was abusing the sycophantic submission of the latter to express her ennui about the minutiae of her day. Guys who’d hit on her, guys who’d merely stared at her, girls who’d given her the stink eye, with Olivia on hand to express commiseration, sympathy, envy, and shared contempt as appropriate.

You know, the usual. Only then...

“So, do you think you and Owen are going to, like, hook up?” Olivia asked.

Angelica’s ears suddenly perked up like she was a German shepherd as Kirsten replied, grinning lasciviously. “I dunno. I mean, he’s kinda hot, right? In that unconventional way, and I’m so tired of the conventional.”

“I totally know what you mean,” Olivia agreed. As if she ever disagreed with anything Kirsten said.

“And I just get this vibe, like he could just snatch up any girl he wanted, you know? Like, I think I’ve had classes with him before, but I’ve totally never seen him with a girl. And you know what that means, right?” She laughed. Olivia laughed.

Angelica tried to guess at the answer. “Gay?”

Kirsten swatted her arm, a little too hard as usual. She probably didn’t even realize she was doing it so hard. Guys probably never complained about her touching them, even violently, and girls wouldn’t have the guts. “No, bitch. College girl, obviously!”

Angelica wanted to laugh. Up until last week, he *had* been hooking up with a college girl. Namely, herself. She’d always sort of taken it for granted the way her stepbrother’s hot friend had obsessed over her, even using that dumb yearbook program

to make her fixated on his dick. But it was like all of the sudden, everybody else was noticing how hot he was, too. And what was Angelica to do? She was the one who'd rejected him for homecoming, after all. What had she been thinking? The guy had free reign over the girls of NHS, but she'd kept him at arm's length because she wasn't willing to admit to him that she'd like the geek's advances. Even if he was a *hot* geek.

God she missed that cock.

"Obviously," she mumbled.

"Well, are you gonna, like, tell him he can ask you out?" asked Olivia.

Kirsten rolled her eyes. "What, you got the hots for him? Liv, you have got to stop living through me, babe, and get your own life."

Olivia froze up, seeing as readily as Angelica that it was a trap. If she said she wasn't interested, she'd be accused of thinking she was too good for him, which Kirsten could spin as Olivia was saying she was better than her; if she said she was interested, Kirsten could accuse her of trying to horn in on her guy, likely followed by reminding Olivia of her many shortcomings that would make it pointless to compete. There had been a girl just like Kirsten in Angelica's social circle at her old high school. There was probably a girl like her at every high school in America. Bullies with perfect hair and skin and tits as big as their heads. She'd gotten lucky with Kirsten's counterpart at Central, uncovering a bit of blackmailable intel that had kept the bitch off her back. So far, no such luck with Kirsten. And poor Olivia. At least Angelica only had to tolerate her until school hours were over and she could go back to Owen and her real friends.

Well, to the latter, anyway. She hadn't seen Owen except on the ride to school in weeks, and then he barely acknowledged her. He'd even gone back to riding shotgun, depriving her of her morning handjobs out of sight of Conner's rear view mirror.

"You're so right," Olivia said. When in doubt, capitulate – the first page in the toady's playbook. "I bet you anything he makes a move on you before long. You guys looked so good together at the dance. Don't you think, Ange?" Flattery and deflection, pages two and three. Olivia was on her game today.

"I guess, if that's your thing," she said noncommittally.

Kirsten smirked. "What, is that not your thing? Look out, Olivia, I think Angelica's thinking about switching teams."

"She was totally just talking about being gay, too!" Olivia giggled.

"I was not! I only said that *Owen* might be gay."

"Weird that that was your first instinct," said Olivia, glancing out of the corner of her eye to make sure the teasing was still amusing Kirsten.

"I only said it because she asked why he wasn't already seeing anybody! Obviously he's not gay! I wasn't–"

"What's that mean?" Kirsten had the art of taking command of a conversation down to an art. Olivia was suddenly gravely serious, taking her cue from the alpha.

“What does what mean?”

“You said it’s obvious he’s not gay. What does that mean?”

Angelica scrambled. “Because, you know. Like she said, the way he was all over you at King of Hearts. Can’t fake that, right?”

Kirsten stopped in her tracks. It threw off the cadence of the entire group, and suddenly everyone else had stopped, all of them looking to Kirsten, then to where she was looking, at Angelica. “Don’t bullshit me, Ange. What did you mean when you said Owen obviously isn’t gay?”

“Who’s Owen?” asked Aiden.

“That new guy, I think,” said Liam.

Olivia looked at him with contempt. “He’s not new, your dumb ass just never noticed him.”

“I think he’s new,” Aiden pressed. “I’d have noticed a dude like *that*.”

“You’re noticing dudes now, huh?” teased Jayce. “Which one of his balls do you think tastes better? I know you’re usually a lefty.”

“Oh my GOD are you embarrassing,” groaned Hayleigh.

As the boys continued their banter, however, Kirsten’s gaze never faltered, riveted on Angelica. The deafening silence, however, eventually tamed even those idiot boys, who fell silent in seeming puzzlement that they still weren’t moving. “Uh, what’re we doing?”

“Why is that obvious.” Kirsten’s tone said she was already in possession of the answer, though Angelica knew Kirsten often used that trick to get people to say things.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” said Jordan at last. “Her stepbrother’s best friends with the guy. Don’t you ride to school with him? Like, every day?”

It was Angelica’s turn to glare. “What, are you stalking me or something?”

“Stalking Owen, more like it, fag” said Liam to a fresh round of gay jokes and guffaws.

“Is that right? You know him?” Kirsten asked softly.

Angelica shrugged. “Yeah, I know him.”

“How well would you say you know him?”

Angelica didn’t know what to say, but it didn’t matter. Her hesitation said everything. Too late, she said, “Well enough.”

“Mm.” And Kirsten resumed walking, and so did the rest. Olivia and Hayleigh were giving Angelica looks like they knew what she’d done. They didn’t, of course, but then, neither did she.

The group soon exited the school through the side door. Usually, this was where everyone broke up to go to their respective rides. Today, however, after the group broke up, Angelica began to veer toward her stepbrother’s car but was fast aware that Kirsten and Olivia were not merely going in the same direction. They were following her.

“So you’re not interested in him... are you, Ange?” Kirsten asked pointedly as she easily kept pace with the shorter girl, in spite of her haste.

The same trap she’d tried on Olivia, though she’d been careful to leave her an out. “No, totally not.” Was she? Her thoughts were lagging well behind events.

“Then you wouldn’t mind setting me up with him, would you? Since you guys are buddies and all.”

“We’re not buddies, we just ride to school together.”

“But you at least know him, right?” Olivia said. “Why wouldn’t you help your friend?”

“Yeah, you’re my friend, right?” Kirsten said in her dangerous, friendly way.

Up ahead, they could see Owen leaning against the side of Conner’s car, staring down at his phone. Probably playing that stupid gem slider monster fighting game he’d started using to distract himself so her blowjobs could last longer. He’d done it as a favor to her, at first, and then like Pavlov and his dogs, he’d started getting excited every time he played it. He was addicted. “Sure,” Angelica said.

He looked up as they approached, stowing the phone in his pocket. “Hi, Owen,” said Olivia, twisting one leg at the toes.

“Uh, hi Olivia. Kirsten.” He paused. “Angelica.”

“This your car?” Kirsten asked. The domineering bitch expression was gone, replaced by a facade of bright, perky innocence that ought to be impossible to superimpose over the skull of this snake.

“Huh? Oh no, it’s my friend’s car. Angelica’s brother.”

“Stepbrother,” she corrected. “You know Conner Fishers, right?”

“Uh, duh, of course I know Conner Fishers,” said Kirsten, laughing as if anyone who knew her didn’t know such a statement was a patent lie.

“Right. So yeah, just waiting on him, but guess he’s running late again. How about you? What’re you ladies up to?”

Kirsten shrugged, tucking a wisp of her golden hair behind her shoulder. The rays of the sun obliged her, casting the perfect light to make it gleam. “I don’t know yet. Trying to figure out my afternoon. Maybe just drive around, see what’s good, ya know?”

“Yeah, totally.” If Angelica had a nickel for every time she’d heard a boy say “yeah, totally” to Kirsten, she could pay off her student loans.

Then there was a barely perceptible shove, a nudge really, from Kirsten’s elbow at her back. She recognized her cue. “You should check out Kirsten’s car, Owen. It’s seriously kick-ass. Heated leather seats, and the hybrid engine runs so quiet it’s like it’s not even on.”

“Are you into cars?” Kirsten asked.

“Nah, not really.”

“Me either!” she agreed, somehow using the half of her face Owen couldn’t see to glare at Angelica, as if it were her fault. “As long as they get me from A to B, ya know?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Do you wanna check it out?” Olivia actually jumped. It was practically unheard of, Kirsten Vaughan deigning to prompt a guy so directly. She couldn’t let her alpha be embarrassed. “It’s right over there.”

“Oh, I’m sure I wouldn’t know the difference between it and a hundred others. Besides, pretty happy with the car I got.” He slapped the side of Conner’s shitbox a few times. Angelica, caught more directly between her society and her feelings than ever before, knew he wasn’t talking about the car, but with the most socially deadly girl at Northside at her elbow, she pretended to miss the way he looked at her as he patted it.

“Well that’s ‘cause you haven’t seen it yet!” exclaimed Olivia, not one to let her mistress go disappointed. “Her parents gave it to her as an early graduation present. It cost like fifty thousand dollars!”

It had cost fifty-seven thousand, actually, as Angelica remembered Kirsten sharing with them when he’d gotten it for her in November after she’d wrecked her old car, an aging 2016 rustbucket worth a paltry forty-five thousand. Sometimes Angelica thought the root of most of the world’s evils were at the nexus of immaculate genetics and embarrassing wealth.

Kirsten inched closer to him, her tits thrust forward more than usual. God, how she wanted to drag him into that backseat, rip his pants off and claim that cock in front of Kirsten and everyone. More so than usual, even. Almost as much as that night she’d turned him down for the dance, when he’d thrown her out of his basement. The last time she’d seen him smile at her, right before she’d told him no.

Not that she hadn’t seen him smile since. He’d smiled plenty at Kirsten on the dance floor, and today at the lunch table.

With that thought in mind, she chimed in, seizing on his metaphor. “Come on, Owen. Don’t you want to ride in something new and fancy? You’ve been complaining about how tired you are riding around in this.”

“Have I? I remember saying not that long ago that I wish this car was mine.”

“Maybe you just need to be grateful you get to ride in it at all.”

“I was, until I found out the driver won’t let me ride shotgun.”

“Why is it so important to be seen in the front seat?”

“I didn’t think it was until I realized how shitty the view is from the back.”

“Maybe if you had someone to ride in the back with you, it wouldn’t feel so shitty.”

Their audience was watching them with banal smiles, though a glimmer in Kirsten’s eyes said she was following this better than Angelica would have liked. Owen, oblivious, simply sneered at Angelica, but then looked to Kirsten and broke out in



smiles. “Or maybe I just don’t know what else is out there. Would you mind showing me your ride? I bet it’s amazing.”

Olivia suddenly realized she’d become a third wheel. “Uh, what am I supposed to...”

“You can ride home with us, Liv,” said a voice from behind them. The group turned to see Heather Blake walking up alongside Conner. How she could stand wearing that paper-thin shirt with no jacket in forty degree weather was mystifying. Angelica had to hand it to her; the girl was damn committed to her crusade. Two huge nipples were jutting out like daggers, the weapons of her war on the patriarchy.

Angelica didn’t know what “us” referred to, but Kirsten didn’t wait to hear more. “Awesome. Thanks, Heather. Dynamite top, by the way. Come on, Owen, I’m freezing!”

“Well let’s go warm you up, then,” said Owen, gallantly putting his arm around her waist and letting her drag him away. Each of them separately gave a last resentful smirk at Angelica over their shoulders before disappearing behind a line of SUVs.

She was feeling pretty cold herself. “Come on, Goner. Let’s go.”

Her stepbrother pulled out his keys, but instead of hitting the button to unlock the car, he handed them to her. “I’m going home with Heather, actually. You can take my car home; I’ll have Mom pick me up later.”

“Oh. OK.” He dropped the keys in her hand and wasted no time walking away with Heather. Were they holding hands? Oh fuck, not again. How many times was that idiot going to let her break his heart?

Olivia saw it, too, and held back. “You don’t mind dropping me off, do you?”

“Be my guest,” she said, sliding into the driver’s seat.

She spent a few moments cycling through radio stations so she could avoid bursting into tears in front of Olivia. Her passenger seemed to sense it anyway. “Rule number one with Kirsten,” she said. “Never let her know you want something.”

Angelica backed out of her spot and made for the lane leading out of the lot. “I don’t want him.”

“Could’ve fooled me. You must be the only girl at Northside who doesn’t.” She looked at the back seat. “You know, he’s right? It doesn’t look like there’s much of a view from back there.”

Kristy Coszic-Lewandoski could hardly believe she was shifting into park at the end of Heather Blake's driveway. Not because the little bitch had threatened to expose her – and who knew more about women being exposed than Heather – but because she was there to pick up another student. To pick up, and, quite possibly seduce him.

Like the texts had said, Heather's house was a ways off the road, with ample trees; there was no chance of the girl being able to look out the window and identify her, even if her headlights didn't preclude it. She could only make out the young couple on the porch because the light was on, and she wanted to kick herself for the pang of jealousy she felt as she watched Conner kiss the girl goodbye. Heather even waved in the direction of the distant car; Kristy beeped her horn twice to "wave" back as Conner trotted down the lane to her. He settled into the front seat, grinning the broad grin of a teenage boy who'd just kissed a pretty girl.

In spite of herself, she felt relieved to see him looking so pleased.

"Looks like that went well," she said, forcing herself to keep the car slow as she pulled away. Heather was almost certainly looking, but in the darkened car she'd see silhouettes at best. Still, it was enough to make the teacher nervous.

"It did, actually. She was, um, grateful."

"I'm sure she was. One constant for teenage girls – nothing turns them on more than taking a man away from another woman, especially if the woman's above them on the social ladder."

"So you're saying we should've let her catch us kissing two months ago."

She laughed. "Not quite what I'm saying. So are you all right going back to my place? I want to talk to you, and I figured it would be the most private."

"Um, yeah. That'd be all right. You live out by the water tower, right? I remember had that picnic there after publication last year."

She nodded. "That was a really nice day."

"It was."

She drove him to her home in silence, pretending not to notice him noticing her. She hadn't dressed up for him, quite. A new white top with a deep neckline and layers of ripples, and a pair of pants that looked casual enough but were the right fit and color to almost look like bare legs, at least in the dimness of the car. When she got home, she pulled right into the garage, just in case a nosy neighbor happened to be looking.

"Sorry about the mess," she said as she let him inside. She'd actually tidied up some, but ever since Brent had moved out she'd been in a slow process of removing and replacing knick-knacks around the house. Some surfaces were totally bare, while others were heaped with old pictures she'd packed away when they'd started dating and was only now considering letting out.

"It looks nice in here. Smells nice, too."

She gestured to the corner. “Scented candle. Blueberry scone.” It had been a Christmas gift from her sister, a regift from her work’s gift exchange. But it was better than the smell the unkempt place had taken on these past months by far. She’d have to do some deeper cleaning if these visits became more regular.

“Nice,” he said again.

“Have a seat anywhere you like. Do you want something to drink? I’m having a glass of wine. You’re welcome to, if you like.” She’d already opened it that afternoon, trying to wash down the anxiety of bluffing her way through a nearly career-ending catastrophe. One that she was already here threatening to repeat.

He settled onto one end of her couch, gently shoving one of her stacks of essays aside. “I don’t know if I should...”

She gave him a wry look from her kitchen as she poured a glass. “I won’t call the cops, Conner. Promise.”

“No, not that.”

“A glass of wine won’t force you to have sex or make a girl pregnant, no matter what Coach Conrad told you in sex ed.”

Conner laughed. “I have him for P.E., not sex ed. Thankfully I wasn’t one of the seniors who had to retake it.” He saw she was still giving him a chance to reconsider her offer, and reluctantly nodded for her to pour a glass for him as well.

“Looks like you’re getting some sexual education this year anyway,” she continued, carrying the glasses with her to the living room, where she sat opposite him on the sofa.

He accepted his glass, giving a curious sniff before sipping at it. He made a face, clearly not used to the taste. “Yeah... about that...”

“Did you sleep with Heather?”

“No!” he said insistently. “We, um, we made out some is all. But that’s it.”

Kristy took a long drink. She didn’t need to ask if the decision not to had been her idea or his. The ungrateful bitch. “So you two made up?”

“Yeah. She wasn’t mad at me, just upset that I... or rather, upset that we *said* I... you know.”

*That you slept with your teacher for her grade*, she finished. “I’m so sorry for putting you that in that position. I knew it would upset her. I hated saying it, making you a part of a lie. But I was thinking fast, and at the time I didn’t see any other way to keep her from saying anything. I thought we could make her mad without being mad at you. Which seems to have worked. You have lipstick on your cheek, by the way.”

He blushed, then rubbed quickly with his sleeve his cheek. “The other one.” He redirected, then took another drink that wound up draining the rest of his glass.

“Why *did* you kiss me the other day?” he asked finally.

It was her turn to stall with a long drink. She set the glass aside, then fixed a firm look on him. “Before we open this can of worms, I want to make one small request. Maybe not so small, actually, but... well, here goes.” She scooted closer to him and put her hands over his. “Let’s agree to be honest with one another. About what’s happened, about how we feel about it. About what we want. Whatever you say, as long as it’s the truth, I’ll be all right with it. Can we do that?”

He hesitated longer than she would have liked, but finally nodded. Good. Better he consider it before simply agreeing by some reflex for courtesy. “Yeah. We can do that.”

“Good. Now, before I do that...” Kristy snagged his glass and quickly poured them each another glass. “There we go. So. You asked me a question.”

“Why you kissed me.”

“Right. So there’s a short answer and a long answer. And the short answer is, I wanted to. I know I’ve sent some mixed signals, but I’d be lying if I said that our night together before Christmas wasn’t some of the best sex I’ve ever had. And the other night, when we were dancing... I don’t know. Maybe it brought me back to that moment, but I sat here all weekend thinking about you. Us. Whatever. And yes, maybe it started with TIOS—”

“Maybe?” he cut in softly.

“Full honesty, right. So yes, it started with TIOS. By accident,” she added emphatically. “If you’d meant to... well, if it was on purpose, I think I’d feel differently. But all TIOS did was take what I’d really meant, that I think you’re an extraordinary person and I care about you, and make it a little more real. But I did enjoy being with you, and I do like you, and so... yeah. I kissed you Monday because I wanted to.”

What she didn’t say was that for months now, ever since that incredible high, feeling him come inside her, of *feeling* the bliss she’d given him, she’d been having a harder and harder time with basic functioning. She spent all day looking forward to yearbook and cursing those days he was secluded in his office, cringing at the disappointment she felt from him every time Amanda took over a project or some aspect of production. Then she’d come home and try not to think about how much she missed that feeling, a wholeness she’d never felt with any other man. And to think, it had come from this shy, sweet boy who barely knew what to do with her. After their brief dance together this weekend, she’d hardly been able to stop touching herself and reliving their time together. *You made me so happy, Kristy.* She was damp right now just remembering those words.

Conner listened patiently, seeming to consider his words before he said them. “I like you, too. And yes, that night... that was... I’ve *never*...”

She squeezed his hand. “Good.”

He fidgeted, pulling his hand back from hers. “But... things are complicated.”

“They sure are.”

“I mean, you’re my teacher.”

This was something she’d thought a lot about a great deal. “Yes. For now. But, as it pertains to our discussion, I’d suggest that it’s also only something we need to talk about if we actually want to be together – in whatever capacity – going forward. If you’re not interested, you can say that, and we can move on.”

“No, I’m... I don’t know.” He drank a little wine, and she took the opportunity to do the same. It might be the only thing keeping her nerves in check; the last time she’d sat down to have a heart to heart, it had culminated with Brent accusing her of being career-obsessed and frigid and storming out for a long weekend, then coming back to tell her he didn’t want to work it out. She knew Conner would be gentler, but him being what he was to her would nonetheless make any hard truths harder.

“I’m not sure what I want. I’ve been seeing this one girl recently, but it’s only been... you know. Physical. But for what it was it was going well. And then tonight, with Heather... after we... fooled around, or whatever, she asked if I wanted to start dating again, but... I told her I didn’t know. I still like her, but what happened before really hurt. And it’s hard to believe that won’t happen again. Plus she’s leaving at the end of the summer for college, so even if we... But then there’s you. And I like you so much, and you were so incredible when we...”

“Sex, Conner. It’s OK to use the word.” She flicked her fingers at his leg playfully. “Making love, coitus, screwing, fucking... I don’t blush easily.”

But Conner did. What a sweetheart. “OK, when we had sex. And I respect you, and... heck, if we’re being completely honest, just being able to *know* that you care about my happiness, with whatever mix of TIOS and you that’s in it, that’s actually really reassuring.”

She nodded. “Good. I admit, it’s a little weird for me sometimes, thinking that software might have actually hacked my brain, or whatever. But we can’t change it, and if we could, I don’t know if we’d want to.”

He looked surprised. “Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I already wanted you to be happy because you’re a good person and I like you. And since we’re being honest... when we were together, it was this dizzying loop of pleasure. I did something that you liked, which made you happy, which made me happy. No offense, but you’re still a novice when it comes to sex – like you should be at your age. Even so, that was *still* the best sex of my life, hands down. And I’ve had some great sex. So no, I don’t know that I’d give that up even if you wanted me to.”

“Wow. That’s... pretty cool.”

“You have no idea.” She finished her second glass, setting it aside. “So what do we do? I’ve laid my cards on the table. I like you and I want you. The question is what you want to do with me.”

Kristy kept a poker face so that her suggestive phrasing would seem an innocent happenstance. “You’re definitely making me want to do some things with you...”

She could see he was only joking, but didn’t let him off that easily. “Things like what?”

He blushed deeper. “I was just... I didn’t mean...” the boy stammered.

“You didn’t mean that you wanted to have sex with me? Or that you want another blowjob?” She tilted her head, eyeing him evenly. “Or do you not want me to suck your cock?”

She’d meant to shock him only a little, but her timing, it turned out, was terrible. A spray of red wine shot from his mouth and all over her face, and worse, her outfit. “Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry! I just... oh geez!” He kept on exclaiming, but Kristy couldn’t help bursting into laughter as she grabbed some tissue and wiped off her face.

“Relax, Conner,” she insisted over his ongoing apologies. “It’ll probably wash out. Tell you what. I’m gonna go toss these clothes in the washer, and then I’m going to go to my bedroom and put on some new clothes. You can wait here.” She stood up and started for the hall, then finished over her shoulder. “Or, if you want, you can come interrupt me at any part of that process that you like.”

She put a little extra sway in her hips, but it wasn’t really necessary. For one, he was a teenage boy; they weren’t exactly difficult to get excited. She’d had boys in her classes squirming in their seats trying to hide boners because her bra strap was showing. For two, she’d been cursed with her mother’s ass, and if anything she’d had to learn to walk in a way that didn’t roll her hips like a pirate wench, as Brent had creatively put it.

Conner didn’t take long to make up his mind. She barely had her shirt off when she saw him come around the corner, stopping at the end of the hall and watching. She’d worn a black bra with some red stitching, one of her sexier ones in her ex’s opinion. Conner couldn’t take his eyes off of it – at least until she turned away from him to remove her pants, bending at the waist to pull them down to her ankles, then tossing them into the washer after her shirt. She poured in some detergent, then beckoned him closer. He stumbled to her like those that glass and a half of wine had gotten him drunk.

“I can’t see. Do I have any on my underwear?” With her hands on the washer behind her, Kristy arched her back, thrusting her breasts out for him to inspect.

“I... I’m trying to...”

“Don’t forget to check my panties.” She gave him a minute to stare at the matching panties, a rose sewn into them right over her pussy, before turning to let him check the back. Never mind that she obviously hadn’t gotten any wine on her ass while sitting down.

“I don’t see any...”

“You’re sure? If you do, I’ll need to throw them in the washer. Just to be safe.”

It took him a long moment before he realized she was not really addressing the spill. “I guess we better toss them in, then. Better safe than sorry when it comes to wine stains.”

“Mind giving a girl a hand?” Kristy stepped even closer and placed her hands on the back of her head, letting her breasts brush against his chest. He took her meaning soon enough and reached behind her for the clasp. He got it faster than she would have thought. Good lad.

“Would you like to get the rest?”

The time she’d spent that afternoon spent doing a little lawn maintenance was suddenly worth it from the way his young eyes glued themselves to her neatly trimmed snatch. He stayed kneeling in front of her when he got them off, reaching up to hand them to her. With a little dexterity, she managed to close the lid and start the cycle without turning away from him.

“Holy shit. You’re so... it smells so...”

She looked down at him with a hint of reproof. “All right, now that one you really can’t just trail off on, Conner, or I-eeeeee-!”

Both hands seized hold of her ass and pulled her pussy up to his face. Conner’s tongue dove right between her legs, and whether he knew what he was after or not, its first stop was right on her clit. Her knees threatened to buckle in an instant; she stumbled and fell back against the frame of the laundry room doorway. He yelped as she smushed his hand against the wall, but when she apologized and move her hips to let him have his hands back, he only squeezed her cheeks harder and pushed her back to the wall with his face.

“Conner,” she panted, “you don’t have to...”

“You taste so good, Kristy. Better than I ever imagined.” That was all he said; he leapt back in so eagerly it was clear he didn’t want to use his mouth for anything but the task of getting her off. Which he was. Fucking god, he was. Kristy didn’t especially like to masturbate; it never felt quite right to her to do something that felt so intimate by herself. Besides, she’d usually been in relationships since she was old enough to know what an orgasm felt like, so it hadn’t often come up.

She did, however, like to tease. Conner had only gotten the slightest hint at how much she liked to drag out her play when she’d first made a move at him. Teasing herself was no less a hobby. Since she’d woken up in the middle of the night Friday, the image of Conner mounting her on her desk in the middle of yearbook class evaporating in her mind, she’d lost hours laying around her house partially or completely undressed, tracking manicured fingernails over her arms, her belly, her breasts, her nipples. Now and then she permitted a few minutes with her pussy, but only to keep her thrill going.

Simply by indulging in her little kink and netting this young man, she'd unwittingly built herself up to a height of arousal she'd never achieved before in her life.

Both hands held on to the top of the laundry room door frame to balance herself; without that, she might well have let her trembling legs carry her down to the ground. For all Conner was holding onto her ass like it was his life preserver in a shipwreck, he wasn't doing a damn thing to steady her. To the contrary, his tongue had the vigor of his years, and it was positively scrambling her brain. His quiet moan, muffled by her gushing sex, was all the confirmation she needed that he was enjoying himself. Still, the frantic slathering of his tongue in and out of her slit was a welcome addition.

She'd come twice already by the time he finally pulled back to catch his breath – only he wasn't catching his breath. Conner patted the top of the washing machine, licking her juices from his lips.

"You... you are trouble, sir," Kristy said, easing backward onto her washer. Her eyes squinted shut immediately as the vibrations of the spin cycle coursed through her body, her clit throbbing in time with the pulsing of her seat. Conner was standing now, pulling her mouth to his while his fingers replaced his mouth on her pussy. She couldn't call it a kiss, exactly. He was kissing her, but she was moaning constantly, beyond the capacity to work her jaw or lips. She rocked her hips into his thrusts, but for only a few repetitions.

"C-conner," she managed. The vibrations felt so strong it was like they'd were shaking apart her voice box. "Fuck me. Please. I want you inside me."

Kristy held herself on the washer, riding just below the crest of fulfillment, while Conner threw off his clothes. She scooted to the very edge of the machine so that, with a hand trembling in arousal and anticipation, she could guide him inside her. The pretty young yearbook teacher was not accustomed to going two months without sex, and in that moment, she gasped at finally feeling *full* for the first time in far too long.

Conner. Her Conner. Every part of him bespoke his happiness with her. That he was hard as steel the moment he took his shorts off. The strength of the grip he took on her hips. The way he licked his lips to savor the taste of her wetness. His eyes, fixed on her body with a lust that could not have been more evident. How soon he began to sweat with exertion as he thrust into her, as if trying to match the machine beneath her in power.

None of it, however, said it as clearly as what he actually said. "I don't know how you turned this around, but this might be the best day of my life."

Kristy came to the next morning with a smile still plastered on her face. She was accustomed to her phone's 4:30 alarm so she had time for a run and a little me-time before school. Though she and her prize student had been up past midnight, she found she wasn't tired. He was still sleeping, snoring softly, but he'd had the presence of mind to ask her to wake him when she got up so she could drop him off at home before his



parents would be awake. She giggled to herself that here she was, sneaking around her boyfriend's parents like she was still a girl herself. It gave her the opportunity to awaken him in a gentler fashion, wrapping one leg over him and rubbing the smooth – freshly shaved, in fact – expanse of her thigh against his groin until both he and his cock began to stir.

“Best wake-up call ever,” he murmured as his eyes blinked open.

A shockwave of delight coursed through her, and she mounted him once more. Then took him to her shower, where the boy somehow managed to get it up one more time and plowed her from behind with her face and tits pressed up against the glass. Tits. She'd gone through a bad-girl phase when she was around Conner's age where she'd called her breasts tits, but the boy's plain enjoyment of dirty talk had resurrected that for her overnight.

“When can we do this again?” he asked as she pulled up in front of his house. The sun wasn't yet up, only a couple houses on the street even showing a light on.

“That depends on how quickly you can get your homework done.”

“Homework?” He blinked, surprised. “I didn't think we had any.”

“A special report, just for you.”

Conner's smile returned as he realized her game. “What kind of report, Miss Coszic-Lewandoski?”

“You have to research whether or not I'm wearing any panties before the last bell. If I find your report credibly evidenced... you'll pass with flying colors. Research thoroughly enough, and I might just throw you some extra credit.” Her fantasies had, uncharacteristically, centered around fucking him in their classroom. During class. That might not be practical, but if she could get in a little play... Kristy wasn't looking to get fired, but she wasn't looking to go through life without having any sexcapades worth bragging about, either.

She floated through her classes that day. A few students even commented that she seemed to be in an especially good mood. She went to school in her little red dress, the one she used to use for date night with Brent. Her breasts – her tits – were absolutely popping out of the scooped neckline, and while the skirt reached almost to her knees, it had a tendency to flare out which meant she had to be careful not to turn too fast. Not that her students seemed to notice, thanks to Conner and TIOS. She began to wonder what all she might be able to get away with. Hell, if nobody said boo about the whorish way Heather Blake and the Pride girls were showing off their bodies, what *couldn't* she get away with?

Conner, as it turned out, earned his extra credit. She was in the editor's office looking at something with Amanda when he came up behind her, ostensibly to peer over her shoulder and join the discussion. Then, just as she'd hoped when she'd bent over Amanda's desk, she felt a hand beneath her skirt. Of course she wasn't wearing any

panties, but the boy still slipped a couple fingers inside her to make sure. When she could stall no longer and had to stand back up, he was sucking his fingers clean as she turned around.

For the past few years, Kristy had been giving increasing thought to leaving her job. The long hours, dwindling pay and benefits, the stress of dealing with some of these disrespectful brats, having to work a second job through the summer just to pay her mortgage... it had been less and less worth it for her. Even before she'd cheated on him with Conner, Brent had been showing warning signs of his departure, tired of having his exhausted, moody girlfriend with so little energy left for him.

Today, she'd had limitless energy. Her prep period was a flurry of productivity, her attitude was where it had been when she'd started teaching seven years ago, and she had a smile for everyone. Even the faculty meeting after school, the sort of thing that usually left drained and bitter, today was challenging and informative.

"You sure seem to be in good spirits today, Kris," said Dawn Brantley, her department head as they left the meeting.

"Yeah? I just had a really great interaction with a student today, and I'm feeling in the zone." She shrugged.

"That's great. I worry about you sometimes, you know? Don't quit fighting for this place. We need young blood like you at Northside."

"Believe me, I won't." Northside High had finally – *finally* – become a place worth fighting for.

## Chapter Nine

Thursday night, Conner picked up Heather and took her to MacArthur Park, where they'd gone on their first date back in December. She apologized for not having changed after school, but he had no trouble forgiving her for wearing the overalls with no shirt or bra underneath. An old tip from Owen, from back in the days before either of them had any opportunity to render such information useful, reminded him that he could adjust the heat settings to fog up the windows for a little privacy. That, coupled with the overalls, made what followed even easier – namely making her pound on the glass and try not to scream too loud while he tried to suck her nipples right off of her big fat boobs.

Friday, as Owen and Angelica had both formally announced that they were making separate travel arrangements in perpetuity, he was able to stay late after school and fucked Kristy on their couch. Then they went to her house, had a home-cooked dinner, exchanged oral sex, downed a bottle of wine, then went back to her bedroom to enjoy a leisurely half-hour fuck in her bed. She woke him with another blowjob before reluctantly letting him leave to clean house for company.

Saturday, with Heather working on a group project and Kristy entertaining her visiting sister, he paid Hailey a visit. She was Doug-sitting, but he was only too happy to pop in his headphones in his DS as a show of gratitude for the video game Conner donated from his own stash. Hailey still tried to keep it down, though her standard – but nonetheless innovative – stream of filth was impossible to completely stop. She threw out classics like “your little slut would do anything for your big hard cock” to new numbers like “can you make sure your fuck toy’s battery is fully charged?” He didn’t even know what that meant, and he wasn’t sure she did either. They sure gave it their best to figure it out, though.

Three girls. One who said she didn’t care what he did so long as he let her make him happy from time to time; one who said she’d prefer not to have a formal relationship, but was delighted to just have fun making out on the DL; one who was so hot for him she didn’t even care that he was just using her for sex. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he needed to be investigating who had made Owen the cock of the walk. He even considered that his recent burst of good fortune might be born from a similar source – but fleetingly, not at sufficient length to let the thought take root. But since he’d barely seen his friend this week, he allowed himself a little time to enjoy his good fortune. Not like he had any leads, and if the two of them were both having amazing sex with incredible women, maybe it was all right not to look the gift horse in its mouth for a while.

That’s what he told himself, at least, until once again, Amanda fucking Carpenter had to come along and ruin everything.

He almost didn't notice. Kristy was wearing a set of dizzyingly multicolored leggings that rode right up her butt crack, and she'd confided in him how much it turned her on to have him find ways to touch her surreptitiously during class. Unfortunately, he hadn't managed to work in more than rubbing the toes of his shoe against her pussy while she knelt down to help Don with his spread for the STEM faculty before she was summoned to the office. He might have felt awkward fooling around with her in front of Heather except that ever since their confrontation, the student had refused to even make eye contact with her teacher. He probably could have made out with her on her desk without Heather noticing.

He lost a minute entertaining that fantasy, then another minute with one in which Heather did notice and decided to compete for his affections. Ah, well. Kristy may well be gone until the end of the period. Time to get some work done, he supposed. He made for the editor's office, bracing himself to have his libido crushed by the harpy herself.

Only... it wasn't. Not even a little.

It wasn't her outfit – though that didn't hurt. Her skirt looked almost like a small berry red wrap. On someone Heather's height, it would have hung down close to the knee, but on those mile-high thighs of Amanda's, the way her legs were crossed in her desk seat, her legs were bared such that he was surprised he couldn't see underwear. Her top was cute too, a fashionable sleeveless top in chocolate brown, with a diamond cut deep between her breasts and two more along her sides. Finished with a pair of dark brown boots that were laced up to her knees, it was a damn good look on her.

Only that wasn't all that she had going on. She simply looked *better*. If he hadn't spent the past two months cooped up in a room five feet away from her for an hour a day, plus a few stress dreams a week featuring her front and center, he might have just thought she'd gone the extra mile that morning, and maybe touched up after lunch. But this was not that. Everything about her was a little bit sexier.

Her hair was like burnished copper, glowing similar to Angelica's when she'd spent an hour brushing it before a big date, and hung in gentle waves to her mid-back. Her face was subtly different, and while he couldn't have quite said how, it was an improvement. On closer inspection, he thought he remembered there being a dusting of freckles that was now absent; Amanda's lips were fuller now, and when she opened her mouth to ask what he was gawking at, her teeth were whiter and more even. Even her eyes were popping in a way he'd never observed them doing before. And that was only the face. Her body...

"Conner? If you're going to stare that hard, you gotta pay six tickets at the gate, Jesus."

He shook himself. "I... sorry. You... wow. I sorry. Err, I'm sorry."

"You're still staring."

Once her words trudged through the molasses in which her body had mired his brain, he made himself look away. It took effort. He took his seat at his desk, and once she stopped smirking at him – he supposed a girl couldn't look that good and not get cocky about it – he let himself start studying her again. Grudgingly, he knew she'd been a good-looking woman, but now she was positively arresting, the sort of girl he'd have assumed was an actress or a model. Maybe that was over-selling it. Maybe. For a time, he simply couldn't get over how goddamn hot she looked. She was really killing it today. Had been all week, he supposed.

But then, once he'd gotten an eyeful, it was time to come to grips with something. Amanda had changed. He vaguely recalled noticing before that she'd been looking good, but since then he'd hardly spent any time in the office with her, and his habit was not to notice her when he didn't have to. Still, if this had been a mere makeover – and a skin bleaching – and a boob job – and liposuction – people would have been talking about it. Amanda had evidently made a choice not to ingratiate herself with the in crowd, but the sudden arrival of an attractive new girl assured that she would have eyes on her. This would have occasioned comment. He'd have at least heard guys mumbling, girls complimenting. Conner only knew one way someone's appearance could substantially change without anyone noticing.

TIOS.

He tried to focus through the temptation of those mouth-watering thighs she was showing off – passingly wondering if the old dress code maybe had played some role in enhancing attention span after all – and put together the facts as he remembered them. It all started at the dance. Before that, things had been pretty much the same way for a while. Heather had rejected him. Kristy had treated him like a student, if a favored one. Hailey had been turned off by his own rejections, tired of waiting for him.

Then the dance happened. He'd danced with both Kristy and Heather that night, and not only danced with Amanda but kissed her as well. He was certain she had looked like her regular self that night. Well, prettier than usual, but only in the same way every girl had. He brought up the pictures they'd taken at the dance and found a couple with her in them, and they were definitely Amanda 2.0. Yet when he looked back at older pictures, they likewise reflected this lovelier creature.

He went through the timeline as he understood it. The morning of the King of Hearts dance, things had seemed normal. Then the dances with Kristy, Heather and Amanda. Somewhere in the middle of them, Owen had his outburst. Then the kiss, that had been after. Then Conner found the quote from that outburst in the abandoned computer lab. Fast forward to the next week, and Amanda looked like a movie star, Kristy had suddenly professed her attraction to him, and Heather suddenly volunteered to become friends with benefits. Owen was riding home – or wherever they went – with

Kirsten Vaughan, a girl so legendarily hot that calling her by her first name felt unnatural.

If there was a common beneficiary, it was himself, but that was also the one person he was absolutely certain it wasn't. He'd been the cause of some accidents, but walking in to find someone had hacked his account and entered new quotes was no accident. But if he couldn't see who gained something, he had to think of it another way.

Amanda casually tossed her hair over her shoulder with a flip of her neck; it cascaded gently down ivory shoulders. She scratched at her leg a moment; Conner tried to find any blemish on them anywhere. There was nothing. Nothing but a river of smooth, creamy flesh flowing down from her dress to where it emptied in her heels.

Who had the means to do this? That seemed like a dead end at first, too; anybody could have overheard and copied a quote, after all. But then he realized that this new evidence provided a new avenue. Whoever had done this obviously hadn't started from scratch or swapped her body out altogether. Amanda presently gave him a jaw-dropping look at her cleavage by bending to fetch a mechanical pencil from her purse, inadvertently confirming the absence of a bra. Amazing? Sure. But it was still too much *her* to be someone else.

Was it possible that using the editor-in-chief authorization allowed someone to actually edit someone's appearance? He considered for a moment, then decided on a quick experiment. He brought up a picture of Marisa in the metaspread he'd been working on with Heather, zooming in on the birthmark on her neck. He remembered from all the way back in elementary school that she'd always been sensitive about it, and tried her best to obscure it with the way she wore her hair. Conner made a few clicks and keystrokes until the skin there blended as seamlessly as possible with the rest of her neck and hit save, then made his way into the computer lab where she was working on finishing up a photo editing assignment herself.

"Hey, Marisa," he said, getting her to turn toward him. Her hair really did a good job of covering it up.

"Sup."

"How are you doing here? Get the gradient tool to work right?"

She shrugged. "I fiddled with it some. It didn't come out great, but I think it's one of those things where unless you're really... looking..." She narrowed her eyes. "What."

"Sorry, it looked like there was something on your neck. Is that marker?"

"Really? Are you messing with me?" She frowned, brushing her hair aside and revealing the smooth skin of her neck.

"Oh, sorry. Weird trick of the light. You're good. Anyway, cool. Everything else good with..." He nodded to the project on her screen.

"Yeah, I think so. Thanks."

Conner tried to remember what his normal walk looked like and did his best to emulate that on his way back to the office. He shut the door behind him and sank into his chair.

“You OK? You look pale as hell. More than usual, I mean,” said Amanda. She grabbed a manila folder from her desk and hurried to his, fanning him rapidly.

“Amanda, this may be a weird question, but... I have to ask. Did you ever use my TIOS account to... do anything?”

He hadn't known what response to expect, but not a smirk. “You finally noticed, did you? Took you long enough.”

“But... how? How did you know how to do that? I guess I don't need to ask why.” This close, her body was so gorgeous it practically hurt not to touch it. If his classmates could see what he saw, there might be an earnest debate as to whether she surpassed Kirsten's playmate-ready beauty.

“How? It wasn't that hard. Resize some selections, a filter or two, some airbrushing...” She laughed. “Oh come on, don't act so hurt. Tuck it in your spank bank and get over it.”

“No, not how did you... I meant, how did you get access to my computer to begin with?”

“Why, does it log which account saved changes? I was trying to find an option for that, but there doesn't seem to be one. Don't get me wrong, TIOS has some great functions, but the menus on this sucker are so obtuse it's like they're trying to hide shit from you, right?”

He hadn't found such an option either, but he wasn't about to let her draw him off topic so easily. “How, Amanda.”

She gave him an affronted look. “If I recall, you implied I was a bridge troll and stormed out without apologizing. Which you still haven't, by the way, not that anyone is still waiting. So while you were out there playing the part of the Billy Badass of photo editing, I took the liberty of showing you that you were being obtuse, and arrogant. You're welcome.”

He stood up, making himself look her in the eyes. Those round hazel eyes. “And is that the *only* time you've ever messed with my account?”

She planted her hands on her hips. “Are you accusing me of sabotaging your work? Jesus Christ, Conner! We might argue sometimes, but I'm not a total psycho!”

“Answer the question!”

“No! I've never touched your precious fucking laptop! Do you want to hook me up to a goddamn lie detector?”

After a last tense moment of locked gazes, Conner slumped back down into his seat. It wasn't the admission of guilt he'd hoped for, but he believed her. It didn't stop

her from continuing to glare down at him past the swell of her impossibly perky breasts. Her nipples were noticeable caps on each peak.

Conner wanted to be mad, to be paranoid, to yell back at her. But much as he might be predisposed to feel otherwise, he believed her. If she really had been up to something, why would she admit she'd done it? If she was the nefarious mastermind behind amping up his sex life, it would be much more plausible for her to pretend someone else had edited her picture to titillate him. Heck, somebody might've done *that* simply for their own viewing gratification. Though surely such a person wouldn't have stopped there, which further corroborated her account.

He was so intent on his musing, he didn't even notice her eyes brimming with tears. Had he said something? No, he was pretty sure he hadn't been talking. "What's wrong?"

She managed to start crying and still scowl. "What's wrong? Conner, you have to be the biggest asshole I've ever met. I can't *believe* I ever told you I liked you!"

She stormed out.

He stared after her, stunned. Meanwhile the class stared back in at him, all of them looking horrified that he'd brought tears to this vision of a woman. Including Heather. And Kristy.

Damn that Amanda Carpenter!

Of all the people to walk into the office at that moment, it had to be Jordan. He entered with forced nonchalance, sticking his camera back in the cabinet. Though Conner was grateful he at least shut the door behind him.

"What'd you have a camera signed out for?" Conner asked as he signed it back in.

"Nude photo shoot with a couple senior cheerleaders – a little extra credit," Jordan joked. In poor taste, Conner thought. "What was all that about?"

"You heard that?"

"Dude. Everybody heard that. You two lovebirds need to learn how to have your quarrels a little quieter."

"Lovebirds? We are *not* lovebirds!" Conner protested.

"Could've fooled me. And her." Jordan laughed. "Mind my asking why not? Amanda's hot enough. Too hot for you, probably, but sometimes common geeky interests can win out. Hell, she was practically made for you, man. You oughta take advantage while you can."

"What? Amanda Carpenter? You can't be talking about the girl who just stormed out of here after admitting she violated my privacy."

"You got me excited with the violated, then you lost me with the privacy. What, she steal a tampon out of your purse?"

"No, she hacked my... you know, why am I even talking to you. Just don't go starting rumors. There is *nothing* between us. Never has been, never will be."



“Hey, suit yourself. I’m just saying what everybody else has been saying all semester. You two belong together. Especially after Heather chewed your ass up and spit you out. Nothing to mend the sting of having a bitch use you to make herself feel better like finding a new girl who’s not a selfish cunt.” He shrugged. “Good luck, man.”

Angelica had had enough. For three weeks, Owen had kept her at arm's length after his half-assed invitation to that stupid dance. He freaked out like they were some kind of normal boyfriend and girlfriend, like he'd poured his heart and soul into some elaborate, romantic ask, rather than an impulsive request he'd sprung on her because he suddenly wanted to show off the chick who polished his knob. Then the guy who only months ago used some devilspawn computer program to make her constantly want his cock decided to cut her off, leaving her high and anything but dry.

That had been bad. Really bad. But now this bullshit with Kirsten was worse. The best part of graduating high school had been leaving all this drama behind, but no, she'd wound up at Northside, thrust against her will right back into the fray. Kirsten was even worse than the queen bee at her old school. At least Jenna had been her friend since third grade, so Angelica'd had enough dirt on her to keep her in check, and Jenna's tendency towards more-or-less-monogamy had kept her from needing to play these kinds of games.

Kirsten, however, took positive relish in showing off how much fun she was having with her new toy for no reason other than to demoralize her. It was no secret that Angelica's antisocial behavior, declining most after school fraternization, annoyed the girl. She couldn't understand why someone who had the opportunity to join her society would choose not to do so, and obviously Angelica couldn't simply explain that she had her own circle of friends who, like her, had already graduated. It was hard enough picking hangouts that diminished the chances of her social circles becoming a Venn diagram.

Kirsten's discovery of Angelica's interest in Owen had been exactly the weakness she'd been looking for. She and her new boy-toy were the big talk around NHS lately. The best-kept secret in school dating the best-kept body. Angelica had front-row seats to watching her laugh at his clumsy jokes, eat food out of her hand, kiss each other whenever Mr. Rodriguez's back was turned. She got to stand there next to an awe-struck Olivia to hear Kirsten describe in vulgar detail how huge Owen's cock was. She turned to Angelica for confirmation, prompting her eyes to go still wider as she parroted the compulsory "yeah, totally." Owen's cock was fairly big, but he was no porn star, plus Angelica knew that saying otherwise would only leave her open to a line of ridicule for having such a loose cunt that his horse cock couldn't satisfy her. A bullying tactic as old as time.

Owen's house had an exterior entrance to the basement in the back of the house; it was how they'd so long kept his parents clueless as to their son's evening endeavors. They were so oblivious that they almost made her own dad seem an attentive and devoted parent. It was locked again, though. He'd been leaving it that way ever since her rejection. So she had to go around to the front and knock on the door.

“Hi there, Angie,” said Mrs. Gibson as she opened the door. “You looking for Conner?”

“It’s Angelica, actually,” she said, trying to keep the bitch out of her tone. God, she hated diminutive nicknames. Four fucking syllables – was that too much to ask? “And sort of. Conner left something over here and he’s not feeling great so he asked me to come get it. Mind if I go down and snag it?”

“Sure, sweetie.” She ushered Angelica to the basement steps, yelling down ahead of her. “Owen! Conner’s sister’s here, get some pants on for god’s sake!”

Owen was sitting in his usual spot on the couch staring vacantly at the TV. The fan was running in the bathroom. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your shit – you didn’t have to run out and play nonchalant on my account,” she said.

“I didn’t. What do you want?”

“I wanted to talk. Is that all right?”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Owen didn’t make room for her, so she took one of her usual spots on the floor by his feet and rested her elbows on the available space on the couch. “So how’re things going with Kirsten?”

“Great. Better than great,” he said a bit too quickly.

“Oh yeah? What’s better than great?”

“Amazing. Fantastic. Superior.”

“Look at little mister thesaurus over here. Who’d have thought that an extra cup size would bring out the poet in you?”

“Three cup sizes. Nicer ass, too.”

“I was making a joke, Jesus. I know what she looks like. And the ass thing is purely a matter of taste. This is a runner’s ass, not just a pair of fat globes somebody was too lazy to jog off. Lots of guys like them high and tight.”

“Sure they do. Is that all you came over for? Because if you’re just here to shit on Kirsten, you can go.”

“No, that’s not why I came over. I actually wanted to talk about... I dunno. Us.”

Owen still hadn’t bothered to make eye contact with her. “Us? You made it pretty clear there is no us. Was no us.”

“You asked me if I wanted to go to the dance with you, and I said I liked keeping our thing on the DL. That’s it.”

“No, you said you didn’t want anyone to know you and I had our thing.”

“That’s what keeping it on the DL means, dumbass.”

“You basically said you were ashamed of me. I always thought our ‘rule’ was to keep us from getting our parents suspicious, not because you thought I was a troglodyte.”

“I did not! The only reason we wound up together is because I told you I was into you, you asshole!”

“Keep your voice down, Ange, or my parents really will get suspicious. And you only said that because I tricked you into it.”

“No you— Well OK, you did, but I only put up with it, and all your other flirting, because I thought you were kinda cute. Maybe not in a conventional way, sure, but if most guys walked up to me and told me to say ‘I can’t get enough of your dick,’ I would’ve punched them in it instead.”

“Great, so I was good enough to fuck in secret. I’m honored.”

“Did I say you should be honored? Fucking hell, Owen, I’m—” She caught herself yelling again and lowered her voice. “I’m trying to tell you I was into you, before everything. I didn’t mean hurt your feelings over the dance. I was still swallowing down your jizz when you asked me and I didn’t know what to say, OK? I was caught off guard and I freaked out.”

Finally, Owen turned his head to look at her. “And then you went with Jackson instead.”

“Well yeah, I did, but not as a date. We didn’t do anything. You know that, right? You threw me out and I guess I was upset and I’m—”

Angelica was about to say that most difficult word of all when suddenly, she realized she no longer heard the sound of the bathroom fan behind her. As her ears perked up, she heard a soft click of the latch, and whirled to see Kirsten Vaughan closing the door behind her.

“Oh, don’t let me interrupt,” she said. “You were about to apologize, right? And then try to get him to take you back?”

“What? No, I was only saying—”

“That I’m a lazy fat ass? That you can’t get enough of his dick?” She folded her arms. “I’m sorry, should I have just waited in the bathroom while you tried to fuck my boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend? You’ve been seeing each other for like a week, Kirsten.”

“Two weeks, actually, if you count the dance. Which seems about right considering you told him to fuck off and I asked him to dance with me. Right, baby?”

“Right,” said Owen.

“Look, Owen and I are trying to talk.”

“Owen and I are trying to fuck, actually,” Kirsten countered.

Angelica flinched visibly. Fucking Owen. So far, everything she’d said had been true. Yes, she felt bad for hurting him. Yes, she wanted him back. Yes, she had been attracted to him even before that yearbook program. But what she hadn’t said was that she missed his cock so badly it was becoming hard to function. She dreamed about it every night, often waking up multiple times with her hand between her legs. She

fantasized about it all day, so much so that she was starting to get comments from her teachers about being a space cadet. It was more than that, though. Food didn't taste as good – everything she put in her mouth became a comparison to his cock, and none of it a favorable one. She didn't feel right in her clothes, like wearing underwear was some kind of impediment to getting him inside her. She'd been trying to sneak into his for days now, but he was never there, presumably out with Kirsten. When she'd seen a light on through the curtains in the basement tonight, she'd literally run over, and had to force herself to keep calm in front of his mother.

The idea that Kirsten was going to get him and she wasn't was too much to bear.

“Can you please take a rain check for one fucking night so he and I can...” She didn't even know what to say. It was a ridiculous request any way she looked at it.

“Can what? Reconcile? Tell you what. Owen, if you'd rather fuck her than me, just say so and I'll leave you guys to it.”

Both girls turn to look at Owen. “You can stay, babe,” he said, looking right at Kirsten.

No. No way she could go home without a taste. She was not going to have another night like last night where she played with herself until her alarm went off. She'd worn out every battery in the house feeding her vibrator, and it still had done nothing to take the edge off. She would've punted Kirsten's fat ass right out the door if she thought it would get her closer to her goal, but he'd already chosen her. Why couldn't she have just apologized right off and gotten a few licks in before the bitch had come out of the bathroom? Maybe that would've been enough.

But it was too late for that now. Now, she was down to acts of desperation.

“What about a threesome?” she blurted.

Oh god no. That ultimate guy fantasy, something she'd shot down from every horny prick who'd ever propositioned her for one. Angelica was used to being the second-hottest girl in the room. She knew she was attractive, but that was a lot less comforting when you were always standing next to someone like Kirsten. If she had a nickel for every time one of her hotter friend's boyfriends had “joked” that she should join them, she'd have her next car payment. She hated the thought of a threesome more than she hated being called Angie, and she'd gotten suspended once in seventh grade for trying to rip Heidi Foster's ponytail off for persisting in calling her that.

“You little fucking slut!” exclaimed Kirsten, laughing at the plaintive expression on Angelica's face. “Can you believe this? Tell her, baby!”

“Sounds good to me,” he said. There. That grin. That right there was why she would never have agreed to such a thing. Goddammit!

“Sounds...?!” Kirsten exclaimed. “You want this little skank lapping at your balls while we make love?”

“Did you really just say ‘make love?’” Angelica said, rolling her eyes.

“Actually, that’s exactly what I want,” Owen said, standing up and taking his pants off without any apparent consideration that this wouldn’t go through. She had to hand it to the guy; he had confidence for days. He was still sitting down when Angelica threw herself at it, sucking him into her mouth like she’d been starving for it. Which she had been.

“Holy fuck, self-respect much?” Kirsten fidgeted, uncomfortable with the situation, and Angelica prayed she’d be repulsed by her so-called boyfriend’s willingness to let this proceed and simply storm out. Then dump him for good so things could back to how they’d been.

Instead, she heard the sound of clothes hitting the floor. Kirsten’s clothes. Angelica could hardly believe she was going to let this happen, like she’d simply decided Owen could have his pick of any girl in school and she was powerless to resist. Which made sense, she supposed, for a catch like Owen.

Then Kirsten was kneeling on the couch beside him, kissing him. Let her have the mouth, Angelica thought as he swelled to full hardness inside of hers. She was drooling like crazy, and though she tried not to let any saliva leak out, she was embarrassed to feel some dribbling down her chin.

“Your turn,” Owen said, tapping her shoulder.

She grudgingly let him slip from her mouth. Now that she wasn’t staring right into his crotch, she could see Kirsten’s well-rounded ass mere inches away. “My turn for what?”

“To get naked, obviously.” Kirsten turned to smirk, and probably also to show off what she had to admit was an insane pair of tits, the sort you usually only saw in softcore porn. From her angle, she also quickly noted a pair of faintly concealed surgical scars on the underside confirming how she’d come by them. Still, as someone who had given consideration to getting hers done from time to time, maybe someday she could ask Kirsten who’d done hers, because they were spectacular.

Angelica supposed it was only fair. Much as Kirsten was inspiring feelings of self-consciousness that Angelica had thought she’d permanently dispelled years ago, she couldn’t exactly get Owen’s cock inside her with her clothes on. Trying not to think about the freshly quantified three cup size difference between them, Angelica rose to her feet and shed her top, then her pants. The bra followed, and Kirsten didn’t even pretend not to smirk at her as she rubbed her huge tits on Owen’s bare chest. Off came her panties then, and she wished she’d have done a little lawn maintenance.

She slipped down onto his thigh opposite Kirsten, but he stopped her from moving closer with a hand between her breasts. “Wait a sec. What do you think you’re doing?”

Angelica didn’t know what he meant. “Um... kissing you?”

“Yeah, no. I think I liked Kirsten’s suggestion.”

“What suggestion was that?” She tilted her head. Kirsten, however, broke into peals of mocking laughter.

Angelica had never tasted pussy before. It didn't happen right away, of course. It began with the comforting taste of Owen's musk. He'd actually tidied up down there, she noticed. So Kirsten had talked him into trimming his pubes; she was grateful for that, at least. The gratitude did not last long, however, roughly until the first time her big booty slapped Angelica in the forehead while she tongued his balls. Little by little as the two fucked, Kirsten's wetness trickled down until there was nowhere left for Angelica to lap at him without sucking it down, too.

“I want to see her,” Kirsten said breathily. “Let up for a sec, baby.”

Owen let her tit out of his mouth long enough to grunt acceptance, and she lifted off his cock to turn around. “Help me back into him, would you, Ange?”

She wanted to punch her in her gaping cunt, but it was an invitation to touch his cock, and Angelica wasn't going to blow that in her needful state. She gave him a few gentle strokes as Kirsten lowered herself onto him. Fuck, she even had her pussy shaved into a fucking heart. Goddamn high school girls.

“Go on, then,” Kirsten prompted as she started rocking her hips. “His balls aren't going to lick themselves.”

“Don't be a bitch, Kirsten,” said Owen.

Angelica might have found it more touching if she didn't already have one of his balls sucked into her mouth before his rebuke. It wasn't quite cock good, but it was the next best thing. Despite the scent of Kirsten's increasingly dribbly snatch stampeding down her nostrils, the taste was still more than worth it. She didn't even let up the first time she came, a sudden gush of fluids seeping out around his shaft and making a mess all over Angelica's face. Kirsten's smirk grew a couple sizes bigger then.

“Tell you what, slut, since you said you... how did you put it? Can't get enough of his cock, I think it was? I can ease back a little, like so...” She squirmed her ass further into his lap. When she stopped, he was held inside her by the dome of his cock alone. Most of him was out and exposed, glistening wet. “There. Is that better?”

It was. Much as she wanted to call Kirsten a cunt and deck her so hard it popped one of those too-perfect fake tits, she needed this. Even though the flavor was at least two thirds Kirsten-pussy, there was still some Owen underneath it. The squirming of those wide hips provided a steady trickle down his cock and into her throat, but she ignored it. She'd slurp Kirsten's cunt directly if it was the only way to get at the dick inside it. She could hardly admit it to herself, but it was true.

In fact, she learned just how true it was a moment later when Owen suddenly stiffened, and he came. Kirsten cooed at him, the sound of her ego being satiated at confirming how pleasing she could be. But as he fast oozed out of her, Angelica's tongue was right there at where his tip was still inside her to slurp away at the leavings. She

didn't care who or what she was licking. In the past it hadn't even been his come that had driven her wild, but rather his cock itself, yet in that moment she couldn't distinguish between the two.

Which was how, a few moment later as she unwittingly swirled Kirsten's clit to get at every salty morsel inside her, the girl came once again.

"If you ever tell anyone about this, I will fucking murder your entire family," Kirsten hissed at her as they both stole out the back door a short time later.

"Likewise," Angelica agreed. Their long-legged strides soon carried them to the street; now that she was looking for it, she could see Kirsten's SUV parked a ways down the block.

"And, um, you'll let me know if you want to do it again?"

Kirsten eyed her, but soon let a smug, condescending expression steal over her – what passed for a smile, when she wasn't merely doing so to pose for polite company. "You little fucking slut."

Angelica shrugged. "Let me know."



“Been a while, man.”

“Seriously, man.”

Conner clinked the neck of his beer bottle against Owen’s and took a long drink. In truth, he’d never liked the taste of beer, and he didn’t intend to drink enough to get even buzzed, much less drunk. But nonetheless, there was a masculinity in the exchange, as there was in the consumption. For their teenage minds, masculinity was often measured its affiliation with the feminine, and both young men were feeling all sorts of masculine these days.

It felt like ages since the two had actually been together one on one. Owen had taken to riding to and from school with Kirsten, even though she had to go fifteen minutes out of her way; Conner couldn’t complain, since it gave him the opportunity to occasionally sneak in early to Miss C’s classroom to let her say good morning in her own exciting fashion. Lunch had seen them separated again by Kirsten, and Conner either joined their other friends or, if he was feeling the urge, met Hailey under the stage. Their evenings were entirely claimed by dates with their respective blonde goddesses, if not for both then for at least one of them. They still had their physics class together, where they enjoyed superficial companionship. Neither of them had much going on that was an appropriate topic for that venue.

But this particular early March Saturday evening, for once their social calendars had been clear. Though he’d not been over here in what for an eighteen-year-old felt like an age, it felt as natural as coming home.

“Kirsten busy this weekend?” Conner opened up.

“Nah. I just wanted a night off. They’re doing some big kegger at Joanna Pedretti’s parents’ lake house. It’s like an hour and a half drive out to BFE, and then I’m stuck there all night with those people.” He made a face, then washed it away with a swig of his beer.

“Those people, eh? You’ve not embraced your new tribe?” Conner elbowed him.

“What? Hell no, man. I’d rather be hanging out with you guys any day, but Kirsten... Seriously, all those folks have going for them is some combination of money and hotness.”

“But the hotness, right?” Conner grinned.

After a moment, Owen joined him. “Yeah, there is that, I guess.”

“Oh, come on, man. You guess? You’re dating Kirsten ‘Va Va’ Vaughan.”

That got a full-on laugh. “Holy shit, I forgot we used to call her that! Back in middle school, right? I’ll have to tell her. She’ll get a kick out of it. Where did that come from, again? I can’t even remember.”

“Luis, remember? He had that stutter back then, but once he said it, it just fit.”

“That’s right, yeah. You know, she was the first girl I ever jacked it to? Look at me now.”

“Totally. Now you’re jacking it to hundreds of girls.” Conner clapped his friend’s shoulder. “So...?”

Owen eyed him askance. “So... what?”

“Come on, man. You’re going out with your dream girl. No. The dream girl of every red-blooded Nighthawk male. I heard she once flashed Wayne Hilliard and turned him straight. You gotta at least give me something.”

Owen stroked his chin, a far-off look in her eyes. “It’s as good as we always imagined and better. Body-wise, anyway. Booty like it was 3D printed for porn, perfect tits. Heaping handfuls with basically no sag. Though I’ve heard from, uh, some people, that she had them done.”

“Really? Have you asked her?”

“What? Fuck no. Flattery and attention are the keys to her kingdom. Start slinging accusations like that and I’ll be hearing about it for a month.”

“Hearing about it? From what I hear you’d be lucky not to get your remains dumped in the river.”

“What can I say, I guess she’s got a soft spot.” He sipped his beer, the finished quietly, “somewhere down there.”

“Are you happy, though? Finally got a girlfriend, and... I mean, what a girlfriend, right?”

His friend let out a long, self-satisfied sigh before answering, but Conner knew how to read his tone, which said something else. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s pretty all right.”

“You don’t sound stoked.”

Owen shrugged. “Perfect tits aren’t the same as a perfect girlfriend.”

It was quiet for a long moment as Owen excused himself to get another bottle. “So I gotta ask,” Conner said as he sat back down. “How’d you manage to land a girl like Kirsten Vaughan?”

“What do you mean?” Owen asked, looking sincerely perplexed by the question.

Conner hadn’t come here intending to ask, but it had been weighing on his mind for weeks now. Both of their lives had been shaken up a good deal lately, but they were still best friends. Conner was tired of harboring suspicions.

“I mean, before my stepsister, you’d barely even kissed a girl, but all of a sudden, Jessica Rabbit’s hotter little sister herself beats down your door? You don’t find that strange?”

Owen considered. “I dunno. I mean, I never asked her out either. I’m hot, she’s hot... makes sense.”

Conner had seen Owen spout bullshit about girls since he hit puberty, and he’d learned the guy’s ticks. In that response, he’d seen none of them. Plus, if he’d done it, he would’ve come up with a better cover than the same sort of confused hand-waving as everyone else who’d been snookered by TIOS. He recognized that inability to grasp

reality by now. Conner decided then and there not to tell him. Not only would it risk souring his relationship, but frankly, the knowledge that he could “have his pick” of girls could be more corruption than Owen was capable of withstanding.

“Hmm. How’s Angelica taking it?”

“You live across the hall from her. You tell me.”

“I’ve been... pretty busy lately. And you know how she is. Happy to tell me what to do, but hasn’t ever shared or asked for advice since I’ve known her.”

“Busy? What’s going on in the Connerverse? More body snatchings?” Owen grinned, but evidently Conner’s poker face needed some work, because he almost immediately realized he’d accidentally hit onto something. “Wait, really? What the heck have you got cooking now?”

“Nothing TIOS-related. Just... yeesh, where to begin.”

“Is it more Hailey?” Owen grinned. Good grief, banging the hottest girl NHS had spawned in years, and he was still looking to let his dick live vicariously through Conner’s.

“No. Well, yes. But—”

“I knew it!” He pounded his bottle against Conner’s. “Ha! I knew you’d give in. It’d be a total crime not to. Keeping it on the sly, right? I haven’t heard of anything, and lord knows Hottie Hayleigh is always ready to trash talk her counterpart. I tell you, she is even bitchier behind the scenes than she is in public. And it’s crazy hearing her new fat ass bad mouth her own slammin’ body.”

“Yeah. Well... can you keep a secret?”

“Who, me? Come on, dude, I’m already keeping the most interesting secret you’ve ever had. Probably the most interesting secret anyone has ever had.”

“Fair point. Well...” And he told him. About Heather, and Kristy, and Hailey, and even about Amanda’s accidental self-improvement and profession of her fleeting crush. He even got out his phone and, using her altered dance picture, walked him through the realization, like he had last semester with Hailey.

“Jesus goat-blowing Christ, dude! Here I was trying to soft-pedal my situation for you, and you’re over here drowning in pussy! Miss C? Fuck! I thought she’d been looking good, lately.”

Conner nodded. “She likes to get felt up by me during class, actually Kind of a kink, I guess. Take my word for it, if she’s wearing a skirt or dress, there’s no panties under there.”

“Damn. And Heather! Finally managed to close that deal. Mazel tov.”

“Well, we haven’t had sex, yet. But she definitely likes making out. Boobs like that with nipples that sensitive are a godsend, I tell ya. She can get off just from having her boobs played with.”

“Damn. Look at you, man, the covert king of cunt!” Owen smacked Conner’s chest with the back of his hand.

Conner arched an eyebrow. “How long have you had *that* gem stashed away?”

“Waiting for you to earn it, man. Hey, look at us. Two studs living the dream.” He held out his bottle.

“Hell yeah, man.” He tapped the necks together, and both boys took a swig. Neither, however, was smiling.

## Chapter Ten

Over the next couple weeks, Conner began to realize just how little smiling he was doing. It made no sense whatsoever, and the more he thought about it, the more irritated he grew with himself. These should be the best days of his life, and he knew any straight guy in school would have given anything to be in his shoes. In his pants, really. Whenever he found himself sitting around feeling morose, he walked through his day as a reminder of all that he had to smile about.

Take yesterday, for instance.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Kristy cooed soothingly. But it was really the smell that awakened him, and he opened his eyes to the sight of his journalism teacher standing over him holding a plate of fried eggs and bacon, a glass of OJ in her other hand. Even his mother, in her spoilingest mood, couldn’t hold a candle to Kristy.

Conner rubbed the sleep from his eyes, banishing thoughts of his mother, whom he had lied to – again – to say he was staying over at Owen’s. Owen, in fact, had his own overnight guest in the voluptuous form of Kirsten Vaughan, and Conner took no offense in his certainty that Owen preferred her to his old friend. Last week his mother had texted and asked him if he could run home and help her find some of her crafting glue for her end of winter scrapbook. He’d had to tell her they’d ran to the store, and had to pray she didn’t notice him walking back to the house from the end of the block where Kristy dropped him off. She didn’t. He’d gotten to know the floor of Kristy’s back seat better than he’d ever cared to.

It wasn’t until she remembered she needed to turn off the stovetop and darted back to her kitchen that he realized Kristy was only wearing a pair of boxers under her apron. His boxers, he realized. Not that it was surprising. She worked hard to maintain her body, and for most of her adult life she’d been teaching, and thus not in a position to be able to show it off. Or so she said. He’d never failed to notice she was attractive, certainly, though he’d grant that he enjoyed the sight of her naked a good deal more than her old school clothes. Kristy wasn’t shy about being naked around him – wasn’t shy about much of anything, really – but cooking for him in her underwear was a rare treat.

Then she was back, curled up beside him on the bed, dragging her fingernails softly across his scalp while he dug in. “You really didn’t need to do that,” he assured her. “It’s really good, though. Thanks.”

“It’s just eggs and bacon, and don’t give me that ‘you don’t need to’ line again, buster. You know full well I like taking care of you, and if we can’t be a normal couple, you have to at least put up with me playing wifey now and then.”

Conner had learned that a great many activities fell under the purview of ‘playing wifey,’ most of them when she was giving in to her instincts to be a little extra pleasing.

Her tendency to push him outside his comfort zone was less because she was older and more experienced than him, as he'd thought at first, and more because she was a very sexually aggressive woman. A few days earlier in class while she was reviewing one of Amanda's projects, their teacher had lifted her dress in the back to confirm that, per usual, she wasn't wearing any panties. Having learned that the surest way to have her in the mood after school was to find a way to lay his hands on her during class, he popped over to join in on their conference, surreptitiously fingering her pussy while Amanda blathered on about her considerations of interior margin width. Not five minutes after the last bell he'd had that same pussy wrapped around his dick in editor's office, keeping it extra quiet on account of a handful of students strolling in to submit essays.

Unbidden, the image of Amanda and Kristy swapping rolls, fooling around in the editor's office right under their teacher's nose, sprang into his imagination, full of lurid details. *Go away, Amanda!* he reprimanded her, banishing such thoughts.

It turned out that after their 1 AM snack, Conner wasn't very hungry, but at his urging, she helped him finish it off. With a satisfied tummy he set his plate on the nightstand – *his* nightstand, she'd made clear, now stocked with all the overnight essentials – and rolled to face her.

“So what're you up to today?” he asked.

“I don't actually have much in the way of hard plans for the weekend. I have to finish some grading for my English 9, but that's kind of a whenever thing.” Kristy brushed a few strands of her thick, wavy hair out of her face, then gave him one of her cocky grins. “Why, did you have something in mind?”

“Nothing specific. And I mean, we can't... you know.” It was her time of the month, she'd informed him. “Not that that's all I'd want to do with you, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” she answered with wry smile. “Conner, you're a teenage boy. If you didn't want to have sex with me looking like this, I'd hang up my hat.”

“You could hang up the apron instead, if you want.”

“Oooh, look at you with the witty repartee.” She sat up and undid the apron strings, lifting it off over her head. Her boobs looked fuller than usual, and usual was pretty darn full.

“My muse,” he said, as much in response to her as his teacher and lover as to her naked breasts.

She smiled at that. “Aren't you sweet this morning.”

“Hey, I'm sweet to you every day.” Conner poked her toned tummy.

“You are, you know.” Suddenly there was a seriousness to her affectionate expression. “I'm going to miss you so much when you go to school in the fall, you know.”

“Not as much as I'm going to miss you.”

He didn't say, and she didn't hear, that he was going to miss Heather and Hailey, too. The woman's smile broadened in response to his flattery. “Oh, come on. You're

going to meet some pretty young thing, or a dozen of them. Meanwhile I'll have to deal with Carrie the Conqueror as my editor and go back to wearing underwear to work."

"Aw, but what if I come back and visit?" Conner tapped her nose.

She giggled and sidled up closer, throwing a leg over him. "Well then I'll just have to... oh my, is all that for little old me?" Kristy reached under the blanket and felt as his erection through his underwear.

"Well, it would be, if not for... you know."

"That which must not be named?" She laughed. "If only there were some other way I could take care of it. Surely the lord in his infinite wisdom provided womankind with multiple means of satisfying her man. I'm sure I read about that somewhere. I just can't put my finger on it..." She tapped her lip pensively, and not at all inconspicuously.

"I wasn't trying to proposition you, I swear!"

Suddenly she looked affronted, rising to her knees to loom over him. "You weren't? What, you don't think I'm worth propositioning? What's wrong with me, huh? You got other, better prospects?"

Conner put his hands up in alarm. "I wasn't— I didn't mean—"

"Conner." Her voice silenced his protests. "Relax. I was joking. Come on, let me take care of you. At least one of us can have a happy morning."

"Oh, now I feel selfish."

She rolled her eyes while sweeping aside the bed clothes and easing down his underwear. It was chilly outside the covers, but not chilly enough to talk down his lingering morning wood. "Blowjobs are always selfish, sweetie. That's why you say thank you. Now lay back and be glad you have maybe the only woman in the world who can get off just from watching you come."

Then her mouth was on him. Of the women whose lips he'd had the privilege of having wrapped around his phallus, Kristina Coszic-Lewandoski was singular in this art form. Hailey was more enthusiastic, but likewise less controlled; Heather had only gone down on him twice and each time had plainly done it as a favor; after junior prom Penny had consented and they'd each done their clumsy best, knowing full well that was what it was. It didn't make him a connoisseur, but he was no longer a novice either, and he knew enough to know he had a rare treasure in this woman.

For starters, she was a bigger believe in presentation. It began with eye contact, her hazel orbs smoldering in their sockets as she pleased him. Kristy didn't stop herself there, though. Like it was a reflex, as her neck brought her mouth to bear, she was sweeping her hair back into a ponytail with the hairband she always kept around her left wrist, assuring him an unfettered view of her breasts swinging beneath her while she applied herself. Behind her, wide hips broadened to a wider ass that was just visible behind her head on the downswing, and from the way she had to arch her back to guarantee this, he knew it was no accident.

The sounds of it were also part of the performance. Hailey was loud, not merely because her frenzied lips were too unrestrained to prevent the slurping, lip-smacking noises, but because even during a blowjob she couldn't help herself from intermittent pauses to interject more gutter talk. Kristy seldom paused to speak; however, the subtle sound of wet friction, the way the woman purred around his shaft when she could see he was enjoying himself, the frolicsome whimpers brought on by her exertions – all were colors on her palette.

As for the focus of it, lips and tongue and hands, she was simply masterful. Conner couldn't begin to imagine how Brett could have left her for this alone. She didn't speak much about her relationship with her ex-boyfriend, but she'd certainly confided that she hadn't woken up one morning with a craving for Conner's cock. This was a refined skill, and had clearly seen much practice. Her abs were proving their merit as they suspended her without the aid of hands, which were busy massaging his balls and stroking his shaft in time with her bobbing mouth. She knew exactly how much pressure to apply, how much friction would end things too quickly, how much would frustrate rather than satisfy. She'd learned his preferences without his having to say a word, though he would as soon have tried to tutor Michelangelo as advise Kristy on how best to service his dick.

In return, all he had to do was make a little noise, smile when he wasn't panting, and when they were getting close to coming, say those magic words and tell her how happy she had made him. It was rare they didn't come in unison, and when they didn't, more often the case that she went over the edge before him.

Yet for all that, with the smell of his underwear-cooked breakfast still wafting in the air, it was the jest she'd made before that was echoing in his mind while she pleased him. *You got other, better prospects?*

He certainly would not have said "better." Three women, all to himself. His crush. His forbidden fruit. His devoted fuck toy. (Hailey's words, not his.) Each was incredible in her own way. But that he had other prospects, that they both knew that later on that evening he'd be making out with Heather or fucking Hailey's tits, was something he could never quite forget.

That morning they came together, then showered separately at her insistence. (This was something he could seldom do with Hailey and never with Heather, but he knew in a few days' time he'd once more bathe her and be bathed in return.) Clean and groomed, Conner helped her with her grading, some of the light stuff that just needed a glance and a completion grade, then she ordered in lunch. It was almost comedic how *normal* it felt, even mere weeks into their relationship. The comfort they'd developed working together the past few years had built into this cozy nest, almost as relaxing as if he were in his own living room. It was easy to forget that they were a teacher and student and not a regular couple adjusting to living together.



After lunch, she finally sent him on his way with a final, searing kiss that soon became a second blowjob right inside her front door. He wasn't surprised. Kristy sucked him off to make him happy, but she naturally preferred more mutual activities. Still, once he admitted to her that he was off to see Heather when he left, as always it brought out that competitive side in her. Oh, she insisted she was simply helping him keep up his stamina for the impending date, but he knew she enjoyed being the recipient of his hardest comes. She'd as much as told him how much satisfaction she derived from thinking that sometimes when he was being intimate with Heather, his thoughts returned to Kristy.

She never tried to make him choose. Never pressured him to cancel dates, compare assets and techniques, never so much as tried to be named his favorite. She had to either have the smallest jealous streak of any woman he'd ever met, or was the most cunning at concealing it. He wondered sometimes how she might react if she found out about Hailey. Knowing her, she'd probably try to convince him she was vicariously pleased to know his cock had one more outlet.

Then she drove him home in his usual "disguise" of a hoodie and sunglasses, looking respectively natural and out of place on this rainy Saturday afternoon, to change clothes and get ready for his date. His mother greeted him at the door with a hug and a quick peck. (Many mothers let their teenage sons off the hook with such things, but Shannon Buck's mother had been a daughter of European immigrants, and the family had held fast to physical displays of affection as a custom and didn't seem keen on budging.)

"Whoa, what was that on your lips?" she asked.

Conner froze. If he'd had a moment to think, he'd have realized she couldn't possibly know the source of any lipstick that had transferred over, but in that instant, he only managed a startled "Uhhhhh..."

"Chinese?"

He blinked. The takeout! "Oh, yeah. We ran out to the Golden Dragon real quick for lunch."

She smiled and patted his head. "You've been eating out a lot lately. You're sure you don't need a little extra money?"

Conner let her give him a twenty, then excused himself to change clothes, spritz on some of that cologne Heather liked, and with another lie about heading to school to work on some unspecified "yearbook stuff," he drove to Heather's house, parking his beat-up car at the end of that long driveway.

Her mom answered the door, welcoming him inside. Plumply pleasant, she'd aged out of her prime years but was an attractive enough woman herself, the clear source of Heather's own good looks. If nothing else, old photos in albums on the walls showed the looker she'd once been. "Hi, Ms. Blake. Is Heather here?"

She helped him off with his coat and guided him toward the staircase that lead up to her daughter's bedroom. "She sure is. Don't be coy, come on in, you know the way by now. HEATHER! Sweetie, Conner's here!"

He managed not to wince from the woman's impressive volume and headed on up as Heather responded. "I know, Mom, I heard him pull up, geez!"

"You watch that tone, missy!" The two were back and forth at one another, and while Conner knew from Heather that their relationship was at times strained, what she followed up with confirmed they were nothing more than a mother and teenage daughter. "You want me to bring up some snacks?"

"No, Mom, I told you we're going out to dinner in a while!"

"Fine, see if I offer again, Miss Grumpy Britches," her mother grumbled, though Conner saw she was still smiling, and he knew from experience she would most certainly offer again next time he came over. She almost always did.

From the way he'd gotten used to her dressing at school, it had become jarring for him to see her dressed in her normal clothes. Yesterday in class she'd worn a pleated skirt and white blouse knotted just below her breasts, the lack of bra more than apparent from the way two huge dark circles were visible on those two huge creamy orbs. The remaining members of the Pride had all dressed in kind, in what Heather had declared a satirical parody of school uniforms meant to shame antiquated modes of thinking about girl's attire. Conner had assured her he fully agreed, and she smiled at him as he stared right at her tits so long he'd had to stay after school to finish his quiz. (Something had told him Kristy wouldn't mind.) As always, since he'd unwittingly made her think that attention on her breasts was a token of respect, she only smiled back at him when she took notice of his gaze.

Today? Jeans and a wooly white turtleneck. She'd put on makeup, and her hair was brushed and gleaming almost as brightly as Amanda's – *no, do not let Amanda worm into your girl comparison troubles!* – but otherwise, she looked like the girl he'd developed his crush on these past years of high school.

Her room was a teenage brainiac's comfort bunker. Once the master bedroom, her mother had given it to her as a sweet sixteen present as Heather's book collection (and need for a desk for her computer) had grown beyond the cramped confines of the second bedroom. Conner couldn't even guess how many books graced the walls, and from such a variety of genres. Biographies, reference books, thrillers, romance – and of course, a few books of his own creation, filed right alongside some far more faded yearbooks of her mother's. Most women he knew had telltale signs of femininity throughout their rooms. Hailey with her stuffed animals, Angelica with the scores of pictures of her and her friends, Kristy with the lavender paint job and silk flowers on the dresser. But Heather's resisted such classifications, as if all the literature couldn't make room for any limitations of gender. The only thing marking it as a girl's bedroom was

yesterday's skimpy skirt and blouse balled up on the floor, the red thong kicked off atop them.

She greeted him with a hug. "Hey there, handsome."

"Hiya, Heather. You look so pretty today."

"Thanks," she said with a grin. She didn't insist on much flattery, but was glad of it when it was offered. "Do you mind if we just stay in today? Rainy weather always makes me want to loaf around."

Conner didn't mind in the least. That they had thus far mutually agreed to keep their relationship quiet was manifestly more difficult when they went out in public. Heather, he knew, simply didn't enjoy the drama that went along with such things, and since many of her friends were in that den of vipers that was Kirsten, Jordan and Hayleigh's clique, that she would go out with a relative nobody like Conner Fishers was sure to cause a hassle that she didn't want. While Owen had developed that two-ton chip on his shoulder about Angelica wanting a similar arrangement, Conner was perfectly happy to keep things private. He'd had his share of bullying when he'd dared to rise above his station by asking her out (only to literally sink back down when he fainted).

"Actually," she said right after he agreed, "let's go out. For just a minute. Come on."

And then he was putting his jacket and shoes back on, and letting Heather lead him by the hand out the front door. The sky was still drizzling, and with gray haze in every direction, it held every promise of continuing in that spirit for hours. Behind them the house loomed large, but the yard was positively enormous, several acres of grassland rimmed by massive firs. As a waitress, Heather's mother could never have afforded such a thing, but her late aunt had left it to her as an apology for the way her brother, Heather's stingy judgmental grandfather, had treated her. On the outskirts of town, their nearest neighbor was a quarter mile or more away. It was a rustic kingdom unto itself.

Conner had not realized the grounds held a greenhouse until she lead him around the side of the house. It wasn't large, maybe a few hundred square feet, but once they were inside it looked a great deal bigger. Rows of potted plants, most of which were mere sprouts, sat along rows of tables running down its length, and the scent of the black potting soil was heavy in the air. Strangely, it made Conner think of Hailey's mother, the florist. She'd have loved this.

Heather lead him to a wide armchair sitting in one corner. It was made of durable red fabric that was nonetheless weathered and threadbare in places, its lumpy seat clearly well-used. "I come out here to read, sometimes, when it's nice enough out. It's just nice to get away from everything sometimes."

“It’s beautiful.” It was true. The gray world beyond was gifted a greenish tinge from the glass, and the abundance of open space surrounding it gave a sense of infinity to it all. A private box in the middle of an endless, open world.

“Would you want to maybe hang out in here today? I have this book, and... I dunno. Maybe this is lame, but I thought it might be fun to kinda hang out, maybe, like, read to each other?”

Conner smiled. Heather was a workhorse by temperament and often gave the impression of someone who was all business. Her books, however, brought out that inner romantic that she so seldom let see the light of day. At least not among other people. She couldn’t keep the eagerness from her voice, trying as she was not to pressure him into her unconventional activity. “That sounds great.”

She brightened. “Really?”

“As long as you brought a book.”

“I have one. Have a seat.” As Conner settled in, squeezing to one side as best he could, she hurried to a nearby wooden trunk that was every bit as worn as the chair, and produced a thick blanket and a thin book. She tried to nestle in beside him, but it was obvious it wasn’t a tenable arrangement.

“Are you OK with me, um, being on your lap?”

Was he ever. “Sure. Have you ever brought someone out here before?” Conner wasn’t a very big guy; he had a hard time imagining someone who would actually fit with her side by side, so that she’d tried to make it fit had made him curious.

“No. No boys, anyway. Some of my friends come out here sometimes to get high.” She shrugged.

“Thanks for that.” She took a seat on his lap, leaning against the high armrest on one side and draping her feet over the other. Once Conner belatedly squirmed out of his jacket, she wrapped the blanket over them and showed him the book.

“It’s actually poetry, if that’s OK? If it’s not your thing, I can get something else.”

“If this is what you want to read, it’s what I want to read.”

She grinned. “Good. I, um, have actually been planning this all week. The weather was a happy coincidence.”

Conner, who knew she was prone to getting chilly, wrapped his arm around her shoulder and accepted the book from her, letting her withdraw completely beneath the covers save from her head, reclining on his shoulder. “So what do we have here?”

“Poetry. Romantic. Not the ‘I love you’ kind, but as in from the Romance period.” Her correction came out quickly, as if afraid the boy whose lap she occupied might worry she meant to seduce him.

“Do I just start with the first one, or did you have something particular in mind?”

“It’s poetry, Conner. There’s not a right or wrong about how you read it.”

He suspected Kristy might have disagreed with that claim, remembering her grumbling that morning over misinterpreted metaphors in her freshmen's homework, but he kept that to himself. Conner flipped to the table of contents and browsed titles until one grabbed his eye. "The Sick Rose, by William Blake," he said aloud. "Ya know, every English teacher I have ever had has insisted the rose is too cliché to include in poetry, but let's see what the pros did."

"Don't you mean what the poets did? It's poetry, not prose."

"I meant..." He stopped himself, noticing her impish look. "Very funny." Conner turned to the page and read aloud.

*O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm  
Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.*

"That's really grim," she said after. "Poor rose. Maybe your teachers were right." Conner stared balefully at the page a moment. "Let's try another one."

And so the afternoon passed, flipping through the pages of her book, taking turns reading. She was a better reader than him, or so he thought; at least, he preferred her voice to his own. Still, Heather enjoyed being read to, and he was happy to indulge her. From time to time, one of the poems would spark something and they would lose themselves to a topic for a few minutes or an hour. The sun set before long, but Heather retrieved a tiny flashlight and held it for them. Rather than pass over them, the rain only intensified, culminating in a heavy thunderstorm that effectively trapped them in the greenhouse, if one could be said to be trapped in a place one has no desire to leave.

Some hours later, the storm left as quickly as it arrived. A bright moon now illuminated the greenhouse as Heather snapped the book closed and set it aside, switching off the flashlight and plunging the greenhouse into darkness, punctuated at intervals by distant lightning that scintillated through the rain-spattered windows. "Thanks for reading to me," she said softly. "Most guys don't like to do that sort of thing."

"Thanks for suggesting it. I was going to propose marathoning Honey Boo Boo, but this was at least as good." Somewhere above them still lingering in outer space was an extended rant she'd once delivered on her particular contempt for that show.

She swatted at his chest beneath the blanket, but left her hand there, fingernails tracing lines across his pecs. “Why can’t you come to California with me in the fall?”

“Beside the fact that you insisted that I not?” he asked. It was a discussion from a week or two ago. They’d been talking about college, and she’d asked that same question in that same tone. He’d asked if she wanted him to, but before the conversation could pursue that track any further, she hastily insisted that he had his own dreams and couldn’t postpone them to follow his girlfriend and watch her chase hers. Both knew full well that Conner couldn’t possibly get his hands on the sort of money it would take to go to a school like Berkeley. Not that they’d have accepted him anyway. He was a good student, but he didn’t eat and breathe academia like Heather.

This time, however, she let the dialogue proceed. “Sure. Besides that.”

“Then I don’t have any other valid reasons.”

She looked up at him. “What, so you’d follow me if I asked you to?”

He considered. She didn’t like glib answers, and he didn’t give her any. “Sure. I mean, they have other colleges right there in San Francisco. San Francisco State, University of San Francisco, UC San Francisco, City College of San Francisco...”

“Are you making these up, or did you actually research other schools near Berkeley?”

“I might have done the research, though admittedly, it seems like any combination of words that includes colleges and San Francisco seems to be an option.”

Her laugh trailed off after a moment. The wind was loud against the windows, the greenhouse door rattling as it was buffeted by the gusts. By the time it stopped, she was no longer smiling. “I like that you looked into that. That’s sweet.” Heather pulled his head down and gave him a long, sweet kiss. Her lips bore the strong taste of her strawberry lip gloss. “But you’re still not allowed to throw your plans away for me.”

He might have argued, but her kiss had done its work and rendered him sufficiently pliant to the voluptuous blonde’s will. Instead of arguing, he settled for kissing her again, and this time, she didn’t stop. When she shifted from sitting in his lap to straddling it, he refrained from groaning in relief that the blood was returning to his legs and instead put his mouth to the far more productive task of satiating the hunger of her lips.

More so than Kristy and far more so than Hailey, Heather liked to take her time with foreplay. Often, foreplay became the only play, in fact, which he supposed could have been an issue for some men. For Conner, who was getting off essentially as often as he wanted and at times more so, he didn’t mind slowing to savor. Besides, once they’d gotten in a good amount of kissing and moved to heavy petting, Heather’s sweater hit the dusty floor of the greenhouse, and not long after went her bra. Once her boobs were in play, he could have taken it as slow as she wanted.

Heather Blake's tits were legend. He remembered as far back as freshman year hearing Owen ask how she managed to run on the track team without those things bobbling up and hitting her in the face. Indeed as they continued growing she'd left track behind, so perhaps he'd been onto something there. Besides, after one night, when she'd complained that she thought they were too droopy – which he contended was both untrue and unfair, given their sheer size – he'd taken a page out of Amanda Carpenter's playbook. After overcoming her objections to topless selfies with her unfailing trust in him (here, a promise that he would delete it as soon as she asked him to), he'd slapped those sweater puppies in TIOS and spent an entire afternoon giving them a facelift. He told himself he was doing it for her and tried not to feel too ignoble about it.

They'd been stupendous before; now, they were quite nearly something out of anime porn. Huge, impossibly perky hemispheres of quivering boob, defying gravity like they were the wicked witch herself. Conner could grope and suck on them for hours – and Heather only indulged him. Since she only occasionally went below the belt yet had incredibly sensitive nipples, sometimes it was the only way she was able to get off from their makeouts.

That night, however, the romantic evening had overwhelmed her demure nature, and she gently guided his mussed up hair away from her chest to say, in a way that turned iron into steel, “Conner? Can we maybe... do more tonight?”

He slowly remembered he spoke English, and that his mouth wasn't merely a device for inhaling tits. “More?” His fluency was slow in returning.

She nodded, suggestively undoing the button on her jeans and sliding down the zipper. “More.”

The two teenage lovers were so awash with lust that it would be more accurate to say their pants were torn off rather than simply removed. Then she was pressing him against one of the tables, her hands slithering inside his boxers to grasp at his butt. Conner would have returned the favor except that the eight-inch height differential rendered hers out of reach. He settled instead for letting her kiss his chest and fondle away, cautioning himself that with Heather, even this might be the end point of their activities; hands inside underwear was no guarantee of genital contact.

That was what he told himself right up until she took it to the next step and lowered his boxers, kneeling down to get them to the floor and help him step out of them. To his immense surprise, she remained in place, crouched by his feet, staring hard at his cock. *Wow, is she really going to dive right in?* Previously, oral sex from Heather had been something he'd had to suggest, and he only did so when he was too horny to stop himself as he knew she didn't love it and he could easily find someone else who would. (Even if Kristy wasn't in the mood, Hailey had yet to deny him such a request, and encouraged him to make it more often.) The idea of her being so worked up she simply dove in herself was so hot that he'd take that even over one of Kristy's.

Was Heather finally so turned on from her self-arranged romantic date that she was about to do it herself?

Before he knew what was happening, she had darted away and returned with her cell phone, and in the next moment, the flashlight was on and shining on his cock. “What. The. FUCK.”

He didn’t have a clue what was happening. “What? Is something wrong? Is it a funny color or something?”

“Conner? Mind telling me why you have a fucking *lipstick ring* around the base of your cock?!” She was back on her feet then, hands planted furiously on her hips. The flare of her nostrils more than compensated for the lack of bra as it pertained to an intimidating countenance.

Holy shit. Kristy must’ve left some smudges from her second blowjob, and he evidently hadn’t noticed when he’d changed at home. Had she done that on purpose? Shit! What could he tell her? “Y-you saw that, huh?”

She glared. “Yeah, I saw it! What the hell is it doing there?!”

For months now, Conner had been training himself to speak carefully around her, ever mindful that she believed everything he said and sometimes to unfathomable degrees. Now, in his moment of panic, the talent he had developed for monitoring his words turned on itself and inverted, and became exactly what he’d been fighting to stave off.

“I put it there.” He said the words before he even knew the idea had formed.

“You? Why?”

“Um, because...” Why indeed? “Because I wanted to see if you’d notice.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“Uh, I guess I was...” What. Why. Why would anyone do that. He blurted out the first lie that came to mind. “I was trying to see if you’d be jealous or not. If what we were was anything more than friends who sometimes make out, or if you actually felt something for me.”

It was a bald-faced lie that no girl he’d ever met or heard of would fall for. Smearing lipstick on his cock so a girl who seldom took a hard look at the thing could think you were cheating on her? It was like saying he’d robbed a bank and then sat in the parking lot with the cash in hand so he could tell the police he’d discovered a flaw in their security. Even if what he’d told her was true, it would arouse so much suspicion that no sane boyfriend would do it. He regretted it the moment he said it.

Right up until her glare vanished, and became a huge sigh of relief. “Conner! Oh my gosh, you don’t have to go to those kinds of lengths to test things with me. Just talk to me, OK?”

“Right. Um, I will.”



“And you know, I really do like you. A lot. And I overreacted there, for sure. We agreed we were going to have a casual, open relationship, and that’s still for the best. It’s not fair of me to demand more of you when I know we’re going our separate ways in a few months. If you want to see other girls, you go for it. OK? I really don’t mind.”

His muscles tense, already imagining those words in her TIOS profile. “OK.”

“But if you were worried I didn’t like you, that I was just using you as a... well, not a fuck buddy,” she said, her mouth twisting at the use of the vulgar term, “then don’t. I do like you. A lot, actually. And if I’ve made you feel like I don’t, then I’m sorry.”

“Oh. Wow. No, it’s fine.”

Heather’s eyes narrowed, then she made a frustrated face. “Darnit! No it isn’t. I can tell from your face you’re upset.” She led him back over to the chair and all but shoved him into it, following him down and straddling his lap near the knees. “If I’ve made you feel this is just some shallow thing, I’m really sorry. I swear, I don’t go randomly making out with guys I only sorta like. I mean come on, with these things,” she hefted her boobs, “I have perv balls throwing themselves at me left and right. Do you know how many boys in school I could probably get to make out with me just because I have big breasts?”

Conner did know almost exactly how many. As editor-in-chief, he was aware that Northside High School was the home of 1,105 Nighthawks, and 1,131 Lady Nighthawks. Assuming equivalent numbers of homosexuals in each gender, that made just over 1100 people who’d give anything to put their hands and/or mouths on these things.

While he did his mental math, she mistook his silence for disbelief. “Conner, please. I really do like you, and you don’t have to go to these lengths to check, OK? I care about you, and I like being with you. Here. Let me prove it to you.”

Her panties came off. He’d only gotten those off one other time, a few weeks ago when he convinced her to let him go down on her. She’d insisted on keeping the room dark then, but tonight, even in the wan light of the moon, he could see that her pussy was almost as blonde as her head. But then she was back on him, sliding closer, her breasts pressed against him, and he realized what she meant to do.

“Heather, wait. You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to... prove yourself to me, or whatever.”

“Apparently I do,” she said, eyes flickering down to his cock.

“No. Really. I...” *What are you saying?!* He made himself silent that inner voice and continue. “I don’t want it like this. I only want to do this when you’re ready, because you want to.”

She blinked. “Because I want to? Conner, I’ve wanted to have sex with you since, like, our second date.”

It was his turn to look surprised. “Wait, *what?!?*”

“Yeah. I mean, it seemed like all you wanted to do was make out all night. Which was fine, but like... I kept waiting for you to be ready to go for it. I figured if I gave you a few signals, you know, took my shirt off, let you get in the mood, you’d want to keep going, but...”

God in heaven, had he really been *that* stupid? All this time trying to respect her boundaries, and she’d been doing it right back at him.

“Heather, this is an amazing and bizarre failure of our communication and I very much look forward to looking back on it and laughing, but right now, I think we really, really need to have sex.”

Her face lit up. “OK. I’ll get a condom. I have one in my pants – one sec.”

He seized her hips. “Wait. Aren’t you on the pill?”

“Well, yeah, but you know, STDs and all. I mean, you slept with Miss C, and who knows where that... blech, woman has been.”

Conner knew full well both she and he were clean. For one, he’d have noticed by now if something were wrong, and for two, Kristy had assured him she’d had herself tested within the past year after her initial encounter with Brent, a one-night stand that only later became more. Plus, obviously he was the only guy who’d ever slept with Hailey, so no worries there.

“I had myself checked out after that, and the doc gave me and the wang a clean bill of health,” he lied, smiling as confidently as he could.

“Oh. Really? Well, in that case, I guess we can skip it. Only...”

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t call it the wang, OK? You know how I feel about dirty talk.”

She began to position herself over him, guiding his shaft to the right angle. “What should I call it, then?”

The buxom blonde lowered herself and her eyes widened, then squeezed shut in evident ecstasy. “I don’t care what you call it just *use* it,” she moaned, smashing her lips to his and rocking her hips as only a round-bottomed girl truly can.

Conner had thought Heather was blessed with sensitive nipples, but they turned out to be nothing compared to her pussy. While he was getting in plenty of practice of late, he harbored no delusions that his efforts to time thrusts appropriate to Heather’s were anything special. By all accounts, what transpired between them was relatively plain, vanilla fucking. Maybe not missionary style – at first, though once she started coming so hard he worried for her balance they transitioned to the dirty greenhouse floor – but pretty conventional cock in pussy, hands on tits, grunting and moaning and sweating and swearing sex. But to see Heather, one would’ve thought he’d spent years learning what made her tick and was using every trick he knew right off the bat.

Yet for all her orgasmic throes, their love-making was a sweet endeavor, tender in a way Hailey was too bashfully immodest for and Kristy had simply outgrown. The wind

whistling over the greenhouse and the pants and moans of the two teenagers blissfully enshrined within were the only sounds; the one time Conner opened his mouth to say something to her – a very corny but sincere “you look so unbelievably beautiful right now” – she merely smiled and kissed him in a way that said she appreciated it, and that nothing further need be said.

Only later, with the final orgasm score at two to (he was pretty sure) two dozen, the two of them back on their chair, Heather once more ensconced in his lap, did he venture to speak again. “I’ve never seen a girl...” He’d been going to say “come so hard,” but then remember her predilection against what she considered vulgarity.

“Come so hard?” she asked, grinning coyly.

“Yes. That. Exactly.”

“All right, well promise you won’t tease me?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, I, um, kind of bottle up. When I’m seeing someone, that is. Like, I don’t, you know, masturbate or whatever. And since you made me wait this long, other than where it was unavoidable, I’ve basically been storing up sexual energy ever since you, um, used your mouth. Down there.”

He ignored the cryptic question of when it might be unavoidable and went right to his shock. “Holy crap, Heather, that was like... weeks ago!”

“Twenty-two days. Twenty-three if it’s after eight o’clock.”

He laughed, but stopped himself. “Sorry. Just... wow. What about, you know, when we’re making out? I thought you were having orgasms from the boob thing.”

“A whole afternoon reading poetry, and the best you can do is ‘the boob thing?’”

“I don’t remember any poems about boobs. Though someone should definitely write one about yours.”

Her grin stretched ear to ear. “Better. Anyway, ‘the boob thing’ is like... they’re orgasms? But... I dunno, it’s like having a bite of pie. It’s good, but what you want is a whole piece.”

“Glad you finally got your piece then.” He kissed her sweaty forehead.

“Conner, that was a whole pie just now.”

They cuddled for a while, but conscious that her mother could grow curious what the two teenagers were doing for so long and apprehensive about being found together naked under a blanket, she at last said they should probably get dressed. Conner couldn’t imagine the night improving from here, and decided to not risk spoiling a perfect date. He walked her to her front door and enjoyed a long goodnight kiss.

“So... are we still in an open relationship?” he asked.

“Conner... For your sake, yes.”

“For my sake?”

“Yes. Because I’m not changing my mind about leaving, and I’m not changing my mind about you trying to follow me, so I’d feel awful trying to dictate what your life here is going to be. Believe me, part of me feels really guilty as it is.”

“Don’t–”

“I’m not going to be seeing anyone else. If you want to, though, you should. Really. OK? I want us to have a fun end to the school year, and not for things to get weird and messy and possessive and complicated. The last thing I want is for either of us to get our hearts broken over this. Does that make sense?”

After a moment, he nodded slowly. “Yeah. That makes sense.”

She kissed him one last time. “Good night, Conner.”

“G’night. See you Monday – miss you till then.”

“Miss you more,” she said, though he could tell she was only playing the part of the lovestruck teen gushing emotion.

He gave her breasts one last significant look, making sure to let his pining show. “I think I’ll miss you most of all.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re such a boy sometimes.”

But when he made it to his car, she glanced hastily through the window set in the front door for her mother, and upon not seeing her, flashed them, tongue out. He raised a grateful, triumphant fist out the window, and departed.

At the first red light, he fished his phone out of the sunglasses compartment and dared to check his messages. As it so happened, there were thirteen of them. He pulled over in the next parking lot and scrolled through them.

One from his mom asking him to pick up some of the crackers his stepdad liked at the grocery store; one from Owen complaining about how lame this drinking party was that Kirsten had dragged him to; one from Don saying he’d forgotten to check out a camera for his assignment covering the spring fun run fundraiser that day and asking if Conner could get him one; and ten from Hailey. In order, there was:

- *hey whats up?*
- *you bored this weekend? lemme know*
- *I got this super hawt new underwear I think youll like...*
- A picture of her in the underwear, a matching red silk set that was so tight it dug into her flesh. (He liked it.)
- A picture of her from behind in the underwear.
- A picture of her from behind in the underwear, bent over and looking over her shoulder.
- A picture of her squeezing her tits together in the underwear, lips puckered.
- *did your naughty little fuck slut do good?*

- A picture of her with her legs spread in her bed, with a caption *ugh they totally show how wet I am tho lol!* (They did.)
- *guess you're busy! no biggie. suck u soon lol!*

Upon reflection, he decided she must not be all that eager for him. She was a lot more lewd and explicit in her photos when she got really horny. Good old Hailey, always ready and never holding a grudge when he wasn't in the mood. The perfect fuck buddy. (Her term, not his.) After two blowjobs and coming twice with Heather, his cock was exhausted. His mind was swimming with all the emotions and desires he'd been stewing in all day, as it often was by this time. But at the moment, two in particular were rising to the top. Hearing Heather insist he avail himself of other opportunities, and how fucking horny the mere memory of her riding his cock was making him.

Oh, what the hell.

Hailey's mother was home, so she met him at the street. She'd hit upon this idea, as it allowed her to get dressed in her room and exit the house through the garage so as to avoid being seen. It let her dress a lot more enticingly, and while the sight of Hailey in sweatpants and a hoodie would have been plenty to turn any guy on, she liked to go that extra mile. No doubt she enjoyed getting to feel sexy, for the first time in her life being with a guy who inexplicably – from her point of view, at least – found her attractive.

"Conner!" she squealed gleefully as she hopped into the passenger seat. "I didn't think I'd get to see you today."

"Sorry I didn't respond sooner. I didn't have my phone with me. Those pics looked amazing, by the way. Crazy hot."

"Aw, you're gonna make your little slut cream her brand new panties if you keep talking like that."

"You're wearing them?"

"Of course. Wanna see?"

"Maybe not right here in front of your house? I don't want to have to fight off a crowd of jealous neighbors. Come on, let's go to our spot."

No matter how many compliments he gave her, she always responded with embarrassed denial or a dopey grin. This time, it was the latter.

As makeout spots go, it was a far cry from the hill overlooking town that he'd always seen in old movies. There was a parking lot near an old department store that had closed when Conner was a child. The city had never decided what to do with it, and here it sat, vacant for well more than a decade. More than a few abandoned cars still sat in the lot, left here for reasons unknown by persons unknown, so the presence of their car was inconspicuous. It had been Hailey's suggestion to come here; not unlike their place under the stage, it was a place she'd been coming for quite some time when she wanted to be alone. Off to one side, past the end of the store, it looked over a retention pond now surrounded by tall grass and trees just beginning to sprout leaves. In years

past, workers would take their smoke breaks at an old picnic table overlooking the pond, though it was a bit damp and chilly for sitting outside.

It was no greenhouse on a rainy evening, but it was more than romantic – and private – enough for the two of them.

“Sooo, ready?” she asked once he’d parked, bouncing in her seat with eagerness.

“I’ve been ready since I saw those pictures.”

They were practiced enough at this by now that they moved to the back seat together in unison. Hailey shed her coat and left in the front seat, and in the back, nimbly undid the row of buttons on her shirt, giving him an ever-expanding glimpse of the bounty beneath. She loved the theatrics of it. Small wonder Hayleigh McKnight had turned out the way she had; a body like hers had to be an enormously corrupting influence. He couldn’t have made himself look away if the car caught fire.

Hot as she looked in that underwear, that may have been a risk. Deep red silk clung to her so tightly that her pert C cups were bulging slightly over the top. The panties, bikini style with a thin frill of lace along the edges, dug in almost as tightly. This fact was confirmed when she spun and thrust her butt right in his face, as gloriously perky as ever. He’d never understood that adage about bouncing a quarter off of someone’s butt until he’d seen Hailey’s. He wondered if she’d let him if he asked to try. If he’d had to rank the asses of the women in his life, Conner couldn’t have said which he preferred. The soft curves of Heather’s; the wide, meaty globes of Kristy’s; the perky, athletic shape of Hailey’s; the way ass flowed into gazelle-like legs on Amanda.

*Damnit, Amanda, you are not welcome in this chain of thoughts!*

“Have you lost weight? I’m not trying to be flattering or anything. Your ass seriously looks sexier than usual.”

Hailey eased back into his lap, wriggling her mostly naked behind into him. “You tell me.”

“It sure looks like you have.” He didn’t want to say that she was probably a good twenty or thirty pounds lighter than Heather, who’d used him as a seat cover for hours that afternoon. “Have you been working out or something?”

She shrugged. “Yeah, some.” When she saw him narrowing his eyes, she abandoned the modesty. “OK, a lot. I dunno why, but lately it’s like it’s just been so *easy*. Making myself exercise was always sort of a pain, like literally a pain, but lately it’s been pretty easy. Easier, anyway.”

That was interesting. Could it be that suddenly transitioning to Hayleigh McKnight’s body was making her previous level of effort pay off better? Was having someone show physical interest in her raising her desire to get in shape? Was it boosting her self-esteem, giving her more energy? He wondered how Hayleigh was doing inside of Hailey.

“Well you look incredible. Seriously.”

“Good enough to eat?”

Indeed she was. In the cramped confines of his backseat, they had to do it with him laying on the seat and her sitting on his face, but they were practiced at it by now. It was sort of strange, in a way. Of the three women he'd been with that day, Hailey was many times over the most submissive. Kristy liked to make him happy but did so in her own way; Heather, when she didn't stop at mere makeouts, very much tended towards reciprocal activities. But it was Hailey he wound up eating out by far the most often. It wasn't even like he was doing a favor. Conner sincerely liked the feel of her labia on his tongue, the taste of her wetness, and especially the steady stream of filthy talk. What he could hear through her thighs, at least.

Tonight alone, the girl treated him to a “my brains are dribbling out my cunt” with a side of “your slut almost doesn't miss your cock when you lick her like this” over a bed of “if you make me come one more time I'm going to have to be your slave in the afterlife – so please don't stop!” She must come up with this stuff in her free time – nobody just *said* stuff like that, did they? – but it sounded convincingly authentic every time. Even when it was something she'd said a hundred times before, he never doubted that Hailey really meant it. She truly loved being used as his fuck toy. Or at least she loved feeling like that was the case. She had once acknowledged, blushing, that the being used part of it was more her using him for his willingness to use her.

After she'd had her fill, she laid down on top of him and started sucking her own juices off his lips. That was normal enough. It was kind of a slutty thing to do, and that was her pleasure, after all. What surprised him, however, was her question not long after she started.

“So, how was your date?”

He started so suddenly he banged his elbow into the center console. “Ow! What?”

“You were on a date tonight, right? How was it?”

“What? I mean, well, yeah, I was... how did you know?”

She was grinning brightly, obviously pleased with herself. “Oh, let's see. Four hours radio silence, your hair's all messed up, strawberry lip gloss that even the pussy on your lips didn't wash off, and, oh yeah, your shirt's on backwards.” Hailey tugged at his neckline, showing him the tag in the current front of his shirt.

“Oh gosh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to... I mean...”

She shut him up with another kiss, sucking his tongue into her mouth and swirling hers around it with unrestrained enthusiasm. “Well if you were trying to hide it, you did a terrible job.”

“Hailey, I...” He didn't know what to say.

“Oh, geez, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a sore subject. I guess it didn't go too well, huh? I shouldn't have said anything.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I don’t want you to feel bad, obviously. You’re my friend.”

Dear girl. “No, I meant what made you say it didn’t go well?”

“Oh! Oh. I mean... well it’s just... you’re here with me. So I guess I figured she didn’t, you know. Satisfy you, or whatever. Not like your big-titted tramp and her candy pussy, right?”

Little by little she eased her way back onto his cock, as if to give him ample opportunity to beg off. But he was too busy analyzing her comment. Tonight with Heather had been incredible, one of the most arousing and beautiful experiences of his short life. And yet... here he was, with Hailey, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t loving every minute of it. Was something in him unsatisfied? Or was it something else?

But then he was having sex, again, and his mind didn’t have room for anything else. Hailey was positively arresting that night. She was a girl who commanded his full attention on any given coupling, but tonight she pulled out all the stops. She started by apologizing for prying, imploring him to spank her until she learned that a good fuck toy didn’t ask questions. He’d never been one to even *want* to spank a girl, but conceding to Hailey’s begging taught him not to count out a kink until he tried it. Still he couldn’t supply all the discipline her “naughty whorish heinie” claimed it deserved.

After the day he’d had, Conner’s stamina was way up, and he got to see her moaning and coming over and over before he was ready, with all the gratitude that entailed. Being with Hailey was endlessly gratifying, her flattery delivered in the form of her behaving as if his cock was the most pleasing instrument in her universe. Heather had surprised him earlier by revealing how much she wanted it; Kristy had entertained him with her willingness to lavish her attention on it; but Hailey simply floored him with the heaps of evidence that Conner’s cock was a staple for her happiness.

And, while she seldom got emotional about it, he knew that her friendship and company meant a lot to her, too. Weirdly, that had somehow become a two-way street. He didn’t know if he’d feel differently about dating Hailey if she expressed renewed interest, but he genuinely liked spending time with someone who was so direct, thoughtful, and honest. For all the complications that had arisen between them this year, theirs was the least complicated relationship of the lot.

At last he came inside her, too soon for the insatiable girl’s liking no doubt. Nonetheless, from the way she collapsed on him, her chest against his, giggling and panting and still wriggling her hips to glean every last ounce of friction from his cock before it softened beyond utility, he knew it was enough. As she slowly recovered, he wondered all over again how much of her ecstasy was his doing, and how much was simply that Hailey was one of the horniest people on the planet and thus sex never failed to delight her.

“I’m so glad you came tonight,” she murmured into his shoulder. “I was worried you wouldn’t.”



“The way you were riding me there, trust me, there was no chance that wasn’t going to happen.”

“No! I meant—”

“I’m just kidding, Hailey.”

She giggled. “Oh. Durrr. I mean, I’m glad you *came* came, too, but like, I can’t even tell you how much I like that underwear, and once you want an audience for something, you just feel let down if you don’t get it. Like when I was a kid and I’d get a new toy or game or something and I’d want Amanda – Cullen? You remember her? She moved away in fourth grade, but before then she was my best friend – and anyway I’d want to show it to her and if I couldn’t it just felt like what’s the point of having it, you know? My mom got me this pack of Disney princess themed uno cards for my birthday one year because I just loooove Uno – do you like Uno?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty good.”

“Me too! And yeah, Amanda was away at summer camp for weeks and weeks, and by the time she got back home I’d soured on it to the point that I never even opened it because I couldn’t show it to anybody. Man. I wonder what she’s up to these days? We used to text every so often and check in but I don’t think I’ve heard from her since before last Thanksgiving. I only remember it was around Thanksgiving because I remember Doug running out to give me my phone while I was raking up all the leaves, but I answered it with my gloves on and they were kind of slippery I guess because I wound up dropping the phone in the leaves, so I could still kind of hear her but she couldn’t hear me. It was so funny!”

Conner simply smiled and let her chatter on. There was something relaxing in the cadence of it, he’d found, and while it didn’t make for great conversation, he felt good being there to listen to her. It didn’t even feel like he was doing her a favor; it felt truly good to be let into her little world. Before long she eased off his flagging cock and onto the seat beside him, snuggling in under his arm. If someone had later tried to ask him what all the two – but mostly the one – talked about, he didn’t think he’d be able to capture more than a fraction of it from the way she flitted from topic to topic, like she’d been holding in for days and the dam was now bursting from the pressure.

“...and I don’t know why I thought I’d ever get a real part in drama, but my mom kept telling me how much fun she’d had with it when she’d been in high school. She was all ‘try out, try out, try out,’ so I did it to shut her up, but it turned out even though I didn’t get an actual role, I felt a lot less nervous about being in front of groups after that for some reason. I had to give this presentation in bio about honey bees a week or so later and I’d been dreading it bigtime, and—”

“Do you want to go outside?” Conner blurted, not seeing an opening in sight.

“Outside? You mean, like, out of the car?”

“Yeah. Out of the car.”

“Sure! Um, do you want me to get dressed first?”

Conner eyed her askance. “Were you going to just walk around naked?”

“I mean, if you want. Or I didn’t know if you just wanted to bend me over that picnic table and get right to it. Not that I’d mind. I mean, that’d be really hot. But I didn’t know if you wanted to keep talking, so I thought you might want me to—”

He tossed her shirt at her face, and she broke out in giggles as she got dressed. Both of them had worked up quite a sweat and didn’t mind a chance to cool off.

“We fogged up the windows,” she observed as he shut the door behind her.

“I know how you value your privacy,” Conner joked.

He slid a hand into her back pocket – there was no going wrong by touching Hailey too much – and guided her down toward the retention pond. A family of geese was sitting on the far shore, the parents watching the intruders to make sure they weren’t coming too close. A spot under a large tree was still pretty dry, and he guided her to sit with him at its base, the two nestling close for warmth. It was still pretty brisk, but it was enough.

“So do you wanna talk about it?” she asked after a few minutes of uncharacteristic silence.

“About what?”

“Your date.”

“Oh. Nah, I’m sure you don’t wanna hear about that.”

“Conner, I’m your friend. I know we do all this other stuff, but I’m still your friend. You’re not the only one who’s looking at other people between hookups, ya know.” Her elbow nudged softly at his ribs. “I only figured it must not have gone too well if you went straight from there to here.”

“I mean, it went all right.” That was one hell of an understatement. “I just saw that underwear and couldn’t stay away.”

She grinned. “Mission accomplished.”

The two sat there quietly for a while. Little by little they were losing their warmth; they’d have to accept their limitations before long, but Hailey seemed willing to oblige him for a time at least. Conner’s mind was far away, though somewhere just as cold, somewhere with worm-eaten roses and passive aggressive blowjobs and resentful co-editors. None of it was something he could capture in words, but it all stirred something deep within him, something he’d prefer stay untouched.

“Do you feel like I’m using you?” he asked suddenly.

“What? Like, for sex?”

“Yeah. Or anything. Whatever.”

She gave it some thought before responding. “I don’t know. I mean, aren’t we both kind of using each other? And I don’t mean in a bad way. Sort of like how your

friend Owen uses you for a ride to school, ya know? Like, you're friends, so it's not like you mind, or he's doing it to be shitty."

Owen hadn't ridden with Conner in some time, but he got the point. "But I mean... you're *so* nice to me. And not just the sex stuff. Ugh, I mean, the sex is incredible, so I don't mean to downplay that either. But here you are trying to comfort me about my dating life after I basically told you I only want to be fuck buddies. How is that not totally shitty?"

"Wasn't I the one who told *you* I only wanted to be fuck buddies?"

Was that how it had gone? "I don't know. Maybe. Still."

She frowned at his stark assessment. "Oh. I mean, I guess when I thought of 'fuck buddies,' I was thinking like... I dunno, buddies who sometimes fuck. But maybe fucking is what makes us buddies. Huh. I guess I didn't see it like that."

"I don't even know what it's like. I mean, it's not like I want to run out the door as soon as I get off or anything."

"And I basically don't let you hang out and socialize before I get your pants off."

"But I mean, do we ever hang out except to have sex?"

"Sometimes we just do oral, or anal, or you fuck my tits, or..."

"You know what I mean."

A soft giggle. "Yeah. But hey, what's wrong with that? Don't you *like* the sex? You always seem like you do."

"I do! Oh believe me, I do." It was true in more ways than one that Hailey McManus was the best-kept secret at Northside High.

"Well? I like having sex with you too. I mean, you probably noticed." She giggled. "So maybe we're not normal friends, but I still like you, and I still like being with you in the way that we're with each other when we're together."

"You're sure?"

"Do you want to bend me over that picnic table and let me prove it?"

Naïvely, at first Conner didn't think he had the moxie to get it up again after the day he'd had, but Hailey knew exactly how to coach him through it. She laughed unreservedly at how cold the table was, and he had to say his balls swinging in the frigid night air felt about the same.

"You think you're using me? You fucking better use me. That's why your little slut has a pussy, for you to use it and use it like the little slut cunt it is," she moaned. The geese didn't seem to be offended, quite.

Conner never did come that time. Eventually, his legs and ass freezing, he phoned it in, tensing and grunting and holding his final thrust as he thought maybe he usually did. If Hailey noticed, she didn't say anything, and dutifully licked him clean after as per her custom. "Wow, maybe your date went better than I thought! You know you still have some lipstick down here?"

“How on earth can you see that in this light?”

“Aha! I wasn’t sure, actually, but you just confirmed it.”

“Guilty,” he confessed. Which was as close to the right word for that feeling that he could find.

That had been yesterday. A day that should have been the greatest of his life. Maybe it had been. Today, however, his phone buzzed with fresh pics from Hailey, a query from Kristy if he was planning on heading to the office today and wanted company, and a bitmoji from Heather holding up a plaque that said “you’re the best” and gave a sweet and sincere message about how much she’d enjoyed their evening. There was even a curt reminder from Amanda about their meeting with the print shop rep the following afternoon. But Conner was just sitting in the living room, looking out the window across the street, where Owen’s mother’s rose bush was struggling to bloom.

## Chapter Eleven

“So, let’s review from yesterday, gang. Somebody impress the heck out of me and tell me what the difference is between morals and ethics?” Mr. Adler clapped his hands together, surveying his group of apathetic students. The senioritis was real with this group, Amanda noted. She felt bad for most of her teachers, this time of year. A group of kids who were on their way out in a few months, and who knew full well that the school would do what it had to to keep graduation rates up. Slack was in plenty, while elbow grease reserves were running low.

Amanda fought to ignore the lingering gaze of Colin Bragg aimed at where her legs were crossed. Wondering if teachers had any concept of what these U-shaped seating charts meant for girls wearing dresses, she raised her hand. “Yes, Ms. Carpenter, preach at me!”

She favored him with a thin smile. Not that she was feeling it, but a guy trying this hard to drum up enthusiasm had her pity, at least. “Morals are internal, ethics are external,” she said simply.

“Correct – and succinct. Now, pretend for me if you will, that some of your peers – and I don’t want to name any Rebecca names – weren’t paying attention, and might benefit from an expanded definition. Love thy neighbor, Ms. Carpenter. External, internal... say more.”

Rebecca Chaplain blinked, looking around to see if someone had in fact said her name, but seemed relieved that nobody was paying her any mind. “Morals are one’s personal set of values, right and wrong. Ethics deal with the effects of one’s actions on another person.”

“Or animal,” interjected Gina Ozrey, eager as always to have an opportunity to interrupt on behalf of her voiceless fellow life forms.

“Or animal,” Amanda echoed.

Mr. Adler folded his arms. “All right, so can you give us an example? I mean, they sound kind of the same, right? If I hurt someone, I’d feel bad. Unethical, immoral, right?”

“All right. So, say someone was trying to look up someone’s dress. That’s unethical, because not only do the prescribed rules prohibit sexual harassment, but it is also injurious to the dignity of the person being harassed.” This got the class’s attention, and more than a few noticed her eyes riveted on the now-blushing personage of Colin. “However, whether or not the individual *feels* that this is a violation is up to that person – i.e. whether or not they feel being a creep is an immoral act.”

“On the nose as ever, Ms. Carpenter,” Mr. Adler said with a chuckle. “Colin, eyes above the deskline.”

“How about eyes above the neckline,” Amanda mumbled.

From there, after a few words from their teacher, the class was broken up into groups of three for a project. To Mr. Adler's credit, it seemed like it could have been an intriguing activity. Discuss the morality and ethics of different scenarios, with a group stenographer writing up the group's consensus and another tackling dissenting perspectives. To the lethargic group of seniors, their eyes on the horizon of their K-12 adventure, it mostly meant low-volume socializing while the brainiacs and those few whose college admissions still depended on their spring grades plowed through the actual work.

Amanda was often that person, but she was fortunate to be assigned to a group with none other than Tan Xun, who insisted in the first instant that he'd do all the work. Never mind that his partners, Amanda and Hailey McManus, were both honor roll students themselves. Usually teachers avoided clumping up their heavy lifters like this, but perhaps Mr. Adler was checking out a bit as well. Happy for the opportunity to do some shirking, she let him get to work as she produced her laptop and did the same.

It was the end of the year, hands down the most exhilarating time to be an editor-in-chief. Spreads were finishing faster than she and Conner could review them together, and despite their best efforts for editorial consistency, it was necessary for them to review one another's work to ensure the style was preserved throughout the annual. Per their agreement, she went through and double-checked all of his case load, and he did the same for hers. That boy was every bit as much of a stickler as she was, a relief that dulled her frustrations with him. Somewhat, anyway. Took the edge off a little at least. Sometimes.

Ugh, that boy. She forced herself to think about his editing, and not about the feel of his lips on hers.

Like a machine, she started plowing through the seemingly endless workload. Open, edit, make notes, close, next. Today she decided to finalize some of Conner's work, since that was what she'd be doing next period in yearbook anyway. May as well get in the rhythm early. Academic decathlon – looked solid. Baseball sectionals – they'd lost, so she suggested it be pared down to a couple sentences and adjoined to the main baseball spread. Caroling with German club – good spread, but space was always tight; she concurred with his recommendation to put it on the disinclude pile. One ambiguously labeled “ccon2se” that was merely several pages of blank space. Weird how many empty files like this that boy had made. Or was it a bug? She'd delete them except that TIOS blocked her from editing his stuff, a prohibition she noted with some irritation that it did not impose upon him where Amanda's work was concerned. So she wrote down the recommendation and kept on going. There was no shortage.

She tried not to dwell on the content; the pages were meant to inspire nostalgia, after all, and it was easy to get sucked in. This was a professional undertaking, and she had to keep pace. As Tan Xun scribbled out her invented objections to a scenario in

which someone used lethal force to repel an unarmed burglar, Amanda lost her stride for a moment as she began looking through what he had entitled the metaspread, the one he and Heather Blake had been working on – far too leisurely, in her estimation about the yearbook staff itself. Particularly considering how much time it meant that that boy was spending with the half-naked SJW.

Anyone who didn't already know Conner could browse this page and see how much of his heart he had invested in the yearbook. Every member of the staff had at least a couple quotes included, even some of the freshman who didn't engage much and weren't returning sophomore year. Miss C was quoted and pictured liberally, as well. There were pictures galore; she tried not to notice how many of them were of Heather, or of Heather and Conner together.

It wasn't fair. He'd had four years to fall for that big-titted blonde bookworm – more, if they'd gone to middle or elementary school together. She'd been here for barely three months. Moreover, the girl had rejected him, and brutally. His fainting spell had still been on the lips of the Nighthawk's gossip mongers when she'd arrived in January. Yet here they were, having their little secret fling, like she'd never chewed him up and spit him out. They thought they were so sneaky, but after that time a few weeks ago when she'd popped in after school to pick up her purse from the editor's office only to hear Conner softly moaning through the door, she'd realized he was obviously messing around with someone. From the way the two were always grinning at each other like idiots, it was easy enough to guess who.

“Oh hey, is that Conner Fishers?” said Hailey, peering over her shoulder.

Amanda started; she'd forgotten the girl was there. She only knew Hailey passingly, never having interacted with her outside of school. Not that Amanda interacted with much of anyone outside of school, really, unless her editor-in-chief duties required it. “Yeah, that's him. He and I are in yearbook together. I'm double-checking some things.”

Hailey smiled her frumpy, white-toothed smile and sat down on the floor beside her. “Oh, that's right. You're the co-editor, right?”

“Co-editor-in-chief,” she corrected. It might not mean much to the uninitiated, but to Amanda, it was a hard-fought badge of honor.

Hailey giggled. “Oh yeah. He's really sensitive about that, too. I forget sometimes. It means, what, that he's in charge instead of Miss C?”

“*We're* in charge. *Co*-editor-in-chief.”

“Right, yeah. Sorry. So like, what's it like working with him? He seems to take all that yearbook stuff so seriously.”

“You know Conner?” she asked.

Hailey shrugged. “Yeah, I know him.”



The girl was trying to play it casual, but it was obvious that her “know him” was more than what she was trying to play it off as. Could Conner have hooked up with a girl like Hailey McManus? Hard to believe he’d go to Heather Blame after a girl like this – with her awkwardly slender waist, hair glossy to the point of obnoxiousness, blandly unblemished skin. If Amanda hadn’t been able to get his attention, she pitied a girl like this, one who obviously couldn’t hold a candle to the competition.

“Cool, cool. Yeah, I mean, he’s the champ when it comes to this stuff. He eats and breathes it – says he’s been scrapbooking since he was old enough to hold safety-cut scissors. I’d give my left arm to have his eye for detail, or to be able to capture that voice. He always knows just what to write and what to leave out to make things feel exactly right. Like the way he writes about someone feels even realer than the someone themselves. He’s an artist.”

Amanda realized she was laying it on a little thick, and saw from Hailey’s expression that she’d picked up on it. Damn that boy! The last thing she wanted was to have people *realize* how addled he’d made her. “You sound like you really admire him.”

She heard the suggestion in Hailey’s tone, but tried to ignore it. “I do. From a professional standpoint.”

“Right, sure. But like, what about outside of work? I’ve been told he’s single these days.”

“You do, do you. And why are people telling you this? Are *you* interested?”

“Who, me? I mean, sure, I’ve liked him since forever. But we’re just friends.”

“Mm. What sort of friends? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“We’re pretty close, I guess.” The girl’s dimpled cheeks colored, which was all Amanda needed. What could Conner see in this girl? She’d heard the nickname “Hefty Hailey” on the lips of some of the jerks in her second period when they were looking for someone to gossip about. While Amanda didn’t quite get the reference – Hailey was morbidly toned – she got why people like that would pick on her.

“You guys talk a lot?”

“Oh yeah, all the time.”

Amanda considered a moment, but decided to go for it. Only two months left in the school year, and she’d gotten nowhere on her own. “Look, maybe this isn’t a cool thing to ask, but... has he ever mentioned me?”

“Nah, not that I remember.” She suddenly sat up straighter. “No, wait! He said you guys, um, kissed? At the Valentine’s dance.”

Amanda nodded. “Yeah. That was it though. Just that one time.”

Hailey leaned in closer, her voice low. “So are you, ya know, interested in him?”

Amanda tried not to look too eager and she replied, “I mean, I guess, maybe a little. I... no, never mind.”

“No, it’s OK! You can tell me. I won’t say a word to him, hand to god.”

Amanda shot her a hard look for how loud her exclamation had been. “It’s nothing, seriously.”

“Come on, if it’s about Conner, trust me, you’re talking to someone who knows him backwards and front.”

Amanda considered. The girl didn’t seem to possess an ounce of guile; it was hard to imagine that homely, neatly manicured face being anything but earnest. “Well... all right. I mean, I wondered, like... what sort of girls is he into? I don’t suppose you’d have, like, any pointers.”

Hailey grinned, and spoke in a much lower voice. The only person who could overhear her was Tan Xun, who was working hard on pretending he wasn’t listening to the leggy redhead gossiping about her crush. “Well, I don’t know about in general, but, I guess I can tell you what worked for me. But you *cannot* tell him I ever said anything to you about this, OK? He’s super private about that stuff.”

Amanda considered how he was keeping his relationship with Heather Blake a total secret, and immediately agreed. “You got it.”

Tan Xun was positively squirming in his seat by the time Hailey finished her piece. Amanda was fighting to keep her jaw out of her lap. Evidently the girl had basically thrown herself at him – even debased herself, literally *begged* him to give her a shot. She supposed it made sense, coming from a girl like Hailey. But to hear Hailey tell it, all that stuff really got him worked up. He’d crumbled, totally. Amanda had to stop her from going into lurid detail as the words flowed and flowed.

She could hardly believe it, but then, she couldn’t imagine Hailey would make something like this up – or that she even could invent a story with this level of detail.

Amanda’s stomach knotted. Would she really have to...?

The bell rang while Hailey was still dishing, and Tan Xun had to wait for the girls to leave so he could stand up without drawing attention his erection in his tight pants. Amanda thanked Hailey for her advice, and exchanged promises of secrecy. The thin, almost gangly, girl assured her it would stay between them. It was the best she was going to get.

Amanda headed toward Miss C’s room for yearbook. All the while she was pondering Hailey’s advice. Could she really do that? Her crush on him had only gotten worse since King of Hearts, but she’d flat-out told him she was interested and he’d only been a dick about it. Maybe she didn’t have a choice. Or at least, no choice except to keep feeling that caustic sense of rejection every time she saw him. Those stabbing pangs of jealousy every day she watched him leering at Heather Blake’s barely-concealed breasts.

The young co-editor-in-chief stewed in her frustrations as she navigated through the halls of NHS. For weeks now, she had been flirting her ass off with him. Not that she really had much experience flirting, but he was a teenage boy, for crying out loud. How

hard could it be to attract his interest? She dressed extra cute, showed a little more skin. When he still rebuffed her for a simple invitation to collaborate over coffee at the Bean Bag, she upped her game a little more. Bending at the waist to give him a glimpse or two of cleavage, bending at the waist to let him realize what he was missing in the back. Nada. Amanda even tried brighter lipstick, spent more time on her makeup, brushed her hair until it lustered and stopped wearing anything but shorts and dresses that came no lower than mid-thigh, bringing her biggest guns to bear... which culminated in another rejection of her proposal that they carpool to the print shop instead of driving separately. He instead rode with Miss C, of all people. The guy would rather ride with his teacher than a girl who was advertising her interest and availability every single day.

That boy couldn't be that clueless, could he?

Maybe it was worth it, just once, to try out Hailey's advice and go all in. At least then she could be sure.

She made a detour, returning to her locker. There, she sifted through the discarded clothing she'd brought for Coach Conrad's class until she found something that seemed more suitable. After all, she told herself as she made her way to the bathroom, there was no dress code here, and he obviously liked the way girls like Heather Blake abused the fact. The bell to start last period rang while she was still in her stall, which was a relief, since it meant fewer people to see her – though she had to hand it to her fellow Nighthawks, they were anything but judgmental when it came to how women chose to present themselves. Still, this was well outside Amanda's comfort zone for attire worn outside of its intended class.

The sports bra, she supposed, was mostly rather tame for what it was. Sure, it showed a little cleavage, but with breasts like hers, that was going to happen. The presence of the kitten face on the front of it, however, was practically an invitation to stare, the eyes nearly lining up with her nipples and the whiskers practically framing a bullseye on the middle of her chest. Her classmates were good enough to ignore it (and considering some of the shit she'd seen them wear, they had no right to judge). Still, her teacher sure got a kick out of it. The girly pink coloring only further highlighted its sexuality, as if to reassure lookers-on that she meant to attract that attention.

Yet it was nothing compared to her bottoms. The bra, at least, was pink on the trim but closer to white on most of it. The spandex shorts, however, were pure bubble gum pink, garish almost, impossible not to notice. It was the way they were cut, however, that cemented their status as sexual advertisement rather than workout fashion. She literally had to remove her panties to wear them; her briefs covered more of her butt than did the shorts she now wore. Trying to tuck them in only left weird panty lines in the tighter-than-skin-tight fabric that dug into her round bottom, so like in class, she went without. Amanda was conscious that she had amazing legs, long and padded in the thighs while staying trim in the calves. It wasn't smugness to be proud;

she'd simply be in denial not to accept they were great legs. These shorts covered not a single inch of them save for a fraction of an inch below her pussy, which itself could be identified by the barely visible camel toe.

The sneakers, she supposed, were sedate enough, aside from the pinkness. She reflected that if Mr. Adler were here, he might appreciate that in the absence of a dress code or any damage done to another, her outfit was perfectly ethical, while nonetheless being the very definition of sin.

Conner's double take when she strolled into the editor's office made every ounce of anxiety worth it.

"Sorry I'm late," she said casually.

"Holy...! Did you join the Pride or something?"

Amanda grimaced at his reference to Heather and her band of rebels without a cause, protesting a dress code that didn't even exist. She applauded the Pride for their commitment to women's issues; in another school with more antiquated values on that score, it would be heroic.

"No, I just wanted to look cute today. Is that a problem?"

"Um, no," he said, helplessly ogling her shorts. Weird how she minded that kind of thing from a creep like Colin Bragg, but when Conner did it, she kind of enjoyed it. "You just, um, don't usually... you know. Um, wear. Like that. Err, dress like that."

"Yeah, I guess I just felt like it. Do you like it?" She invited him to stare a little harder.

"Sure. I mean yeah. You look... yeah."

Amanda pivoted, showing him where her ass was spilling out of the back of the skimpy pink spandex. "It's not too much?"

He didn't even respond. Lord, he was practically drooling. Good. Maybe that Hailey girl had known what she was talking about after all. Her prior efforts had yielded precisely fuck-all. But today, in this desperate call for his attention, she was certainly getting it. It was a wonder she didn't hear his erection slam into the underside of his desk.

OK, maybe she was flattering herself with that. Or flattering the boy's cock.

"Say, do you have time to do some collaboration today? I have some notes I want to run by you." She still hadn't turned around, pretending to be sifting through some papers on her desk, bending just so. She could feel his eyes on her. Was this wrong? She wasn't sure. She'd never really had to flaunt her body like this for attention. Never wanted to, really. But she liked him so much.

Physically, yes, but more so than that it was an emotional connection. It was narcissism at its finest, but Conner was so much *her* that it scared her sometimes. Same focus, same drive, same passion. She was probably a little feistier than him, sure, but being a pretty eighteen-year-old girl meant having a lot of people question you, try to

use you, and she wasn't about to allow the patriarchy to stand in her way. But other than that, they were practically made for one another. Maybe he was simply bitter about having to share power. The same as she would've been in his shoes.

But he had to see how alike they were, didn't he?

Or maybe those huge stupid boobs on Heather Blake blinded him to that. Well, two could play at that game. She might only be equipped with DD's – "only" – thanks to that recent growth spurt, but she was also a head taller than the blonde girl, and almost all of it was smooth, curvaceous thigh.

"Yeah, I got the time," he said finally, only after she turned back around.

"Actually, did you see that email? I think you and Miss C were copied on it."

"I haven't checked since this morning. What's up?" She rolled her chair up next to his, leaning in close to see what was on his monitor, her shoulder against his, one hand sandwiched between where their legs pressed together.

The email was from ASAL, the American Scholastic Annual League, though the sender's name was given simply as SysAdmin. Conner started to read aloud, but she put a finger to his lips – those lips! – and read for herself.

*Editors-in-chief and supervisor, greetings during this eventful time of year! We hope you have been having success with the production of This Is Our Story. This exciting, innovative program has the potential to revolutionize the scholastic annual field, and your project is one we hope preserves the legacy of Northside High School graduates. Please note that the trial version of your software is set to expire on June 8<sup>th</sup> of this year, at which time all data will be removed and edits to standardized and base files will revert to 1.0 status. We anticipate that your project will have achieved publication by this time, but please contact us if this conflicts in any way with your schedule.*

*This message is simply to inform you that your trial version of the This Is Our Story software is scheduled to expire at the end of this academic year. We urge you to continue to explore and record until that time, and hope the experience proves satisfactory to you and, through your work, your classmates. It is our sincere hope that This Is Our Story plays a central role in preserving the history and memories Northside High School, and your feedback on this user experience is very important to us. We hope you'll be willing to provide it by completing [this survey](#).*

*Thank you for pioneering the ASAL's new scholastic annual program, and best of luck to you as you complete your own journey to graduation!*

*- ASAL SysAdmin*

“They signed it SysAdmin? All that, and they don’t even use their name? Sheesh. Assuming this is legit. I didn’t even know ASAL had anything to do with TIOS.”

“Neither did I,” said Conner. Though he’d obviously already read the thing before her arrival, he continued reading and rereading the email with narrowed eyes. How could he possibly be more interested in this boring terms of service email than her? She casually placed her arm on his armrest, her fingertips grazing his leg with lightness that would allow deniability. He didn’t react. “Miss C said she put in a request for updated software last year, and this was just what showed up.”

“Well that’s cool. Your ASAL dues at work, I guess. Too bad it’s only for the one year. This is some really badass software.”

“What do you think it means when it says the files ‘revert’?”

“I assume it means they’ll go back to using whatever program they had last year. But hey, looks like that’s going to be Carrie’s problem when she succeeds us.”

“But what about the stuff we edited? Will it...?” He trailed off.

“Will it... what? Look, see, it says the reversion isn’t until June 8<sup>th</sup>. That’s the day after graduation. The yearbook will be in print on its way to delivery by then. Shouldn’t be a problem for us. Unless you think they’re going to want to hoard this year’s photos for next year’s book, but that’s some amateur hour stuff.”

Conner nodded absently; he shared her contempt for shortcuts. It was easy to pass off some shots from previous years as current, especially if they didn’t have people in them. But all it took was a new tree being planted, a graduated student or retired teacher in the periphery, a new mural in the hall, to reveal it as a lie. The whole point of a yearbook was to tell how things had been in a particular year. She didn’t want to sully it because some staff member was too damn lazy to develop a fresh photo.

“Yeah, maybe. Hmm.”

She waited for him to lose interest in that email, but when he didn’t, she attempted to get his attention. She said his name, then repeated it, but he was still lost in thought. “Answer me and I’ll suck your cock,” she said.

It *still* took a moment, but that got his attention. “What? What’d you...?” His eyes widened, and his response was addressed to the kitten face on her sports bra. “Did you just offer to suck my cock?”

“I was *trying* to get your attention. You want me to go down on you, you gotta at least take me to dinner first.”

He blinked. “Il Parata at six.”

Amanda laughed. Or was he serious? It was hard to tell with him. *What the hell*, she thought. *Let’s carry this joke to the end zone if he’ll let us.* “You’re buying.”

But Conner only smiled, slowly remembering to direct it at her face and not her chest when she craned her neck down to put her face in his eyeline. Amanda did like him

checking her out, but she preferred to be able to look back. “Anyway, you wanted to work on stuff? What’s on the agenda?”

There was no way to ask if he was serious about dinner without sounding desperate, so she let it pass and got to work. It was mostly review and discussion of her notes, not strictly something they needed to do together, but this close to her crush, she grew embarrassingly giddy every time she caught him looking at her. Amanda tried to think of rotting garbage and veal cows and Ted Cruz and other entirely unsexy things, lest her pussy start to dampen. With no panties, and nothing to cover herself – and a veritable neon sign calling attention to her crotch – she’d be left to walk back to her locker with the evidence of her arousal in full view of everyone.

After a bit, they wound up at the same file she’d noticed last period, ccon2se. “What the... what’s this?”

“It says you created it, Conner. You tell me.”

“It’s just a blank file.”

“Uh, duh. I can see that.”

“It’s like somebody sat here and held down the enter key. Why is it so long?”

“I say again, you tell me. There’s a handful others like this. Scrambled titles, blank text, no pics.” She directed him to another she remembered seeing in an obscure subfolder, a file labeled dp18. Same exact thing. Less wasted space, maybe, but still blank. Conner closed the file and click delete, but an error message popped up with a number she didn’t understand.

“That mean anything to you?”

“Yeah, it means the editor-in-chief modified something in the file, and it won’t let me delete it.”

“Huh. I’ve never come across that before. So you don’t know what this one is either?”

“No. I sure don’t.”

“Oh well. We just won’t send it to the print shop. No big. You never noticed any of these?”

Conner explained how his file review was structured by his own on-going projects and reviewing staff spreads, and so he didn’t simply browse through the file system looking at the myriad thousands of files. As they resumed working, it seemed to bother him, for some reason, or maybe he was just really stressed out.

“Are you all right, Conner? You seem... I dunno. Bummed.”

“Nah, just this stuff with TIOS. I’ll be all right.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. If he had been tense before, her touch turned the boy to stone. “Anything I can do to help?”

“No. It’s fine, Amanda.”

*Throw yourself at him,* whispered Hailey’s voice.

Well, she hadn't dressed like this for nothing. Amanda took a breath, and braced herself. "Come on, let me rub your shoulders. You'll feel better. And right now, you're dragging us both down, so you'd be doing me a favor."

"What? No, you really don't—"

But she already was. His jaw immediately went slack, but the words no longer dribbled out. Amanda started at the sides of his neck, pressing with firm but insistent fingers into his skin, rubbing in expanding circles to drag the tightness out of him. His muscles yielded not at all at first, but he didn't attempt to renew his protest. Amanda didn't know much about giving a backrub – indeed, as with the kiss in the lobby at the dance, Conner was her first – but it seemed like he was enjoying it, and little by little, he let his chin slump down and began to relax.

For her part, she was only trying to contain herself. Here she was, finally able to touch him. To run her hands along those shoulders, like she'd been fantasizing about for months. It was only skin and muscles, same as hers, but touching him felt so... *good*. She didn't even realize she was doing it as she transitioned from his shoulders to the upper part of his chest, and with a small groan she interpreted as enjoyment, he leaned his head back, his forehead coming to rest on the underside of her breasts.

His eyes opened then, but Amanda only smiled at him and continued her massage – fast becoming more of a caress – and soon enough they closed again. There they were, his lips, partly opened, his breathing coming faster than it ought to for a guy merely sitting in a chair. She could do it, like Hailey had said, kiss him and jump in his lap and kiss him some more until he finally relented and forgot all about every other girl and was all hers. An overpowering current of arousal bid her lean down, lips parting to meet his, upside down though it would be.

The bell rang.

It was followed by the groans of desk chairs sliding on tile floor, dozens of feet stampeding for the door, voices no longer constrained in volume by the classroom code of conduct. Conner's eyes opened, but slowly. Had he seen her readying to kiss him? Oh god, it was mortifying. Almost as mortifying as her outfit.

"Oh gosh, I lost track of time, sorry," Conner said, hastily standing up. He was trying to get past her, but they kept trying to dodge to the same side until he finally put his hands on her hips – her half-bared hips, exposed from this joke of a pair of shorts – and scooted her to one side. "Thanks for that, Amanda. I'll, um, see you later, OK?"

"Yeah, Il Parata at six, right?"

He scooted right out the door, the little smile on his face entirely unsatisfying to her unspoken question of whether it was humoring her joke, or expressing his shared excitement of the appointment. Then he was gone.



She hurried out into the classroom where a few seniors were still chitchatting. Jordan was there, immediately raising an eyebrow at her appearance. “Damn, baby, lookin’ decent! About time you two got some real co-editing on. Bow chicka wow!”

Amanda rolled her eyes, ignoring him, but Heather, huddled with the others, made it impossible by asking a direct question. “Shut up, Jordan. You got serious guts, Amanda. You look great, really. Have you ever thought about joining the Pride?”

The editor-in-chief’s brown eyes took in Heather’s own outfit, a sheathe of electric blue spandex only marginally more concealing than Amanda’s own attire. Unlike her sports bra, the dress covered the blonde’s stomach, yet it more than compensated by how hard of those preposterous boobs of hers were squirming to get free from it. “Um, maybe. I’ll think about it.” She could still feel the lingering sensation of his hands on her hips. If she dressed like this, would he touch her again? Today had obviously been a success compared to past efforts.

Amanda said her goodbyes and made her way back to her locker. She took her time about it; there was never any rush after school. Her dress she’d rebuked Colin for trying to look up was balled up with other clothes in the bottom of her locker, but she didn’t trouble herself changing back. Why bother? She could wear this out the door, then come back tomorrow in something else, like usual. There was no point worrying about what she looked like during her exit from the building.

It was bitterly cold outside, considering her nearly naked body, but no matter. She didn’t have far to go. Marisa, Don and Siobhan waved as she passed them in the parking lot, but her thoughts were on the only yearbook staffer who really mattered to her. Would Conner show up tonight? She was surely going to. Just in case. It was probably a joke, but if she stood him up, she might not get another shot. And if he stood her up, she simply wouldn’t be there, because sitting alone in a restaurant wasn’t something high school yearbook editors-in-chief did in the course of their work. Whereas a dinner with her co-editor? That counted as work, right? Keeping up relations? It had to.

She made her way to the shrubbery that separated the school grounds from the adjacent apartment complex, as she always did. With a deep breath, she devoted one last moment to hope that Conner would be there tonight.

Then she stepped into the shrubs and disappeared.

## Chapter Twelve

At six o'clock that evening, Conner's family was finishing up dinner, a home cooked meal of au gratin potatoes and scallops, Conner's stepdad's favorite. Angelica had left immediately after dinner to meet Owen, which she'd announced as a study date. (For a fleeting moment, Conner winced at the notion that Owen was fooling around with both Kirsten and Angelica before the reality of his own new lifestyle came crashing home.) His stepdad had thanked his wife for the meal and excused himself to the basement living room. Conner stayed behind to help his mom with the dishes and clean-up.

He had considered heading to Il Parata to double check if Amanda had been kidding. But it couldn't be. The whole way she'd acted today, it had been simply too bizarre. From that unbelievably skimpy outfit, the backrub... had she been about to kiss him? It couldn't be. They were rivals. Nemeses. Weren't they?

He didn't know, and he couldn't think about it. He had enough anxiety over Heather and Kristy and Hailey without adding that Amanda Carpenter into the mix. It was probably a prank anyway. He'd heard rumors about Betty Aufiery, a junior who would likely be next year's Hayleigh McKnight, asking Kurt Zeigler on a movie date. Kurt Zeigler was one of those kids so painfully nerdy that it was etched into his DNA, but he still somehow didn't see it coming when, as they stood in the ticket line, Josh Smith depantsed him in the middle of the crowded building and plastered pictures of it all over social media. Conner didn't know if it was true, but he wasn't keen on setting himself up to be humiliated if Amanda decided to take her bullying to a new level.

Not that she would. Deep down, he knew she'd never do anything like that. Whether he could ever bring himself to admit it aloud or not, she loved NHS and the Nighthawks. Not in some ra-ra cheerleader school spirit way, but in that same way that he did, accepting all of its flaws and idiosyncrasies as part of their whole. She could no more bully one of her classmates than he himself could – though that left the reasoning behind her behavior all the more bewildering.

Could she really be trying *that* hard to... no. No, that was impossible. Best not to think about it. Or that kitten. Or those shorts. Her hands. Her legs. Her lips. She couldn't really want to... could she?

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" his mother asked, snapping him out of his daydream.

"Huh? Nothing. Why?"

"You've been standing there staring at the faucet for a whole minute. I was starting to think you'd gotten hypnotized by the water or something."

"Sorry, just got sidetracked."

She slid the dinner plates into the other side of the sink and scraped their contents into the garbage disposal. “Anything you wanna talk about?”

“Nah, it’s all right.”

“You’re sure? I’m happy to listen if you want to talk. You know that, right?”

He smiled at her. “I know. But it’s really OK. Just this girl who might like me.”

“Ooooo!” she said, nudging him with an elbow. “Somebody special? Is she pretty?”

“She’s definitely really cute, but... I don’t like her like that. I might hate her. I used to. I don’t know. But either way, it’s nothing.”

“Sure,” she said, though he recognized the tone she took when she was placating rather than agreeing. “Probably smart to stay out of all that drama, right?”

“Right.”

They finished cleaning in companionable silence, completing the work like a single machine. For many years, doing the dishes together had been their nightly ritual. He hadn’t forgotten, and neither had she. When they finished, she produced a small plate of blueberry pie from the refrigerator. It must be fresh, because he hadn’t seen it in there that morning when he was getting breakfast. They sat across from one another, picking at the same piece.

“So how’s school going? You’ve been so busy lately, I’ve wondered how you’ve been keeping up with your studies.”

“They’re going OK. Miss C has, um, been helping me a lot with stuff.”

“Oh, good. I always liked her. I’ll have to make sure we do something nice for her at the end of the year. She’s been so good to you.”

“Yeah, she sure has,” he said, trying not to blush. It had been only two days ago that he’d gone over to her house after school, where she’d made out with him for over an hour before having sex with him on her kitchen table. And again on the living room floor. And again in the hallway when they got too caught up to finish the trip to the bedroom.

“But your other classes are going great? You’re doing well? You’re happy?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

She gave him an exasperated look around a mouthful of pie. “Yeah, Mom,” she repeated in a deep mocking voice. “Come on, if you’re going to pretend you’re happy, you have to be more convincing than that.”

Conner, as it turned out, was not happy. Once he’d consciously realized it, he’d begun analyzing it ad nauseam. After all, it flew in the face of everything he’d ever believed to be true. Three – four? – gorgeous women who were each in their own way enamored with him. His yearbook nearing completion, graduation looming, the horizon of college rushing to meet him. How could he not feel great? This should be the best time of his life.

But it wasn't. Day by day, he'd begun to feel worse about his good fortune. What had he done to deserve this, after all? TIOS had fallen into his lap, and little by little it had given him all this through no doing of his own. OK, sure, maybe Hailey would have gotten together with him anyway, but he probably wouldn't have ever given her a chance without the face lift, to say nothing of how much it improved their sex life. And yeah, Heather seemed to have come around on her own, but it was somehow behind her scandalous new attire, and the way she took his word as gospel. And yes, Kristy was clearly a good deal happier after their affair began than before, but the fact was that she was taking a risk every time she smuggled him in and out of her house. A risk that she never would have taken without TIOS realigning her diodes.

Round and round his thoughts went. Each of them seemed quite pleased with him, with their particular style of relationship. For a long time, he'd thought his ill ease stemmed from sleeping with three different women, yet they had each individually assured him they did not expect – or want – monogamy. Kristy knew full well about Heather, and while she played her little games, he believed her when she said she didn't mind him exploring his options. As for Heather, Conner sometimes wondered if she might be seeing someone else herself; she'd made an oblique reference or two to getting her satisfaction elsewhere, and while it could as easily have been a piece of plastic, he wondered. Regardless, she'd said a dozen times that they weren't a couple, that this was all a wonderful and very temporary diversion, and that her future was in California. And Hailey? Hailey literally told him she fantasized about being one of a hundred sluts in his stable, taken out and fucked like a cheap plastic toy that he used and came on and threw away. (Her words.)

So it wasn't the monogamy issue. Or at least if it bothered him sometimes, he knew that was only the effects of having been raised with the expectation of traditional relationships. But still, with so much to be happy about, he kept coming around to the same question: what had he done to deserve any of this?

He went through several bites of pie rehashing his plight for the millionth time in his head. "Sorry," he said, realizing his mom was sitting there, nibbling delicately at her pie, waiting for a reply. "Just, um, thinking about school stuff."

"Oh yeah? Anything interesting? I see so little of you these days, I hardly get to hear what you're learning. Remember when you used to come home every day and at dinner I'd ask you what you learned?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"You used to go on for the whole meal sometimes. I remember when you were in kindergarten, and your dad asked you what you learned, and you told him that day you'd learned the alphabet. He asked you to recite it for him, and you did, except you... what was it. I remember there was something wrong..."

"I switched M and N."

“Right! Exactly.” She laughed, a far-off look in her eyes.

Conner served up a second slice to each of them. She didn’t object. “And then afterwards you guys had me show prove it to you in writing, and... oh boy, it was bad. It was back and forth between capitals and lower case, and sure enough, L-N-M-O-P.”

“That’s right. I still have that piece of paper in your kindergarten scrapbook.”

“I know. That’s how I remember.”

“So? How’re things these days? Learn any new letters?”

He swallowed his mouthful of blueberry filling. Both he and his mother were picking at it, neither eager to have an excuse to leave the table, and like he had since he was little, he launched into a long-winded explanation, class by class, of what he’d been studying. She listened with interest, though his mind was still on that larger question. He wished he could ask his mom about all this stuff going on. If there was one person on earth he trusted absolutely, who always had his best interests at heart, who always steered him in the right direction, it was his mother.

Though... maybe he could ask her?

“Then, let’s see. So... Mr. Adler is doing this whole thing on ethics and morals.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I know, right? He said that ethics are about how things affect other people and are defined by codes – like laws or rules – and social norms, while morals are inside us, like your own personal values. So we did this activity with all these little scenarios on ethical conundrums, and... here, let me run some by you. I’m curious what you think.”

“I won’t do your homework for you, Conner.” She grinned, nose wrinkling playfully.

He laughed, and opened with a couple scenarios from the worksheet. One where you saw someone copying test answers from another student who didn’t realize they were being copied; the teacher catches them and threatens to punish both, and the question was whether one had an obligation to speak up. Another where everyone in an office is pooling money to get a fancy new coffee machine, but one employee is leaving that job in three months but is a heavy coffee drinker, and they had to answer whether he should have to chip in.

“I’d say he should. If you get into issues of who’s going to use it how much, then the whole thing becomes impossible to manage right?”

“That’s pretty much what my group agreed. OK, what else. Oh – there was, um a weird one. Let’s see what you think. So... there’s this guy, and he finds a magic rock that gives someone whatever they want. Only he doesn’t know it does that, he just likes the way it looks so he carries it around. And like, the rock sees he wants a girlfriend, only it goes a little overboard and gives him three girlfriends.”

“Yikes. There goes his savings.”

He chuckled, taking a bite of pie as a stall for time on how to extend his metaphor. “So like, now he’s dating three girls, and it even turns out that they’re all fine with it.”

“Because of the rock? Or are they just dating for fun? I read about how dating has changed for your generation.”

There was a good question. “The scenario didn’t say. I – we, my group – thought it was the second one, though.”

“Fair enough. OK, go on.”

“Right. So even though the guy has all this going on, and it’s all going really great and even though everyone else is happy with things, the guy still feels like he’s doing something wrong.”

“If nobody but him is unhappy, what’s the problem? I’m not sure I get what you’re – I mean the problem – is asking.”

“Yeah, that was the thing on this one, was we had to identify the ethics involved. Like, why someone might feel bad even if they haven’t done anything wrong and nobody’s been hurt.”

“But then that’s morals, not ethics, right? You said morals were internal, and here, nobody’s been hurt, and there’s no law against dating around. Playing the field, I think you kids call it.”

“Nobody calls it that. But yeah, technically a moral thing.”

She pondered over another bite of pie. “Hmm. Is that all the rock can do, make girls go gaga over this guy?”

“No, it can do practically anything he wants it to do.”

“Oho. Well there’s his problem, then.”

“What?”

“Just think about it. What would you do if you had this magic rock fall into your lap?” Since he’d just told her, he wasn’t sure what to say. His mother quickly got impatient and went on. “Come on, you could cure cancer, end homelessness, put *The Office* back on the air. But instead all this guy is using the rock for is like his personal dating app. If I were him, I’d feel bad that I was only using it for myself. I mean, who am I that I should get a magic rock and nobody else does?”

“Yes! That’s exactly it!”

His outburst was sudden, loud, and she sat back with a puzzled, wary smile. “Easy there. I think only one slice of pie for you in the future, Conner.”

“Sorry. We just, um, couldn’t figure that one out, but I think you’re right. I mean, why him, right?”

“So you got me to do your homework for you after all, huh.”

He stood up and gave his mom a hug. “You always say I need to put myself in other people’s shoes, mom. I should’ve done that. You got it right away. Maybe you have a magic rock.”

She hugged him back, rubbing his shoulder as she always did. “Uh oh, am I about to wind up with three girlfriends?”

“I think your husband might object.”

“Well...”

He laughed, recoiling. “Mom!”

“I’m just teasing!” She released him from her embrace. “You go on about your evening, sweetheart. I can finish cleaning up here. Thanks for helping.”

“No, thank you.”

“Whew. I’m just glad that was an actual school problem, and not... you know, for a minute there, I actually thought you had three girlfriends and were just doing one of those ‘you see, I have this friend,’ kinds of things to get advice.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mom.”

She kissed his forehead and told him she loved him. He gave her another hug and said it right back. Then he was snatching up a pencil and paper and brainstorming how best to use his magic rock.

It wasn't hard to secure Kristy's permission to use his yearbook class time that week to conduct interviews. All he had to do was promise to come over to her house each evening and let her "bring him up to speed," as she put it. Win win. She even gave him a night off to take Heather out to a movie, after which they went to their spot by MacArthur park and made out. She wasn't about to have sex with him in such an exposed location, but afterward Hailey was all too happy to trot out to the car and beg him to titty-fuck her in their parking lot.

After the weirdness with Amanda Carpenter the other day, it was a relief not to have to be trapped in the office with her. They saw one another in passing, and as he hoped, she said nothing of the dinner plans. So she'd been joking after all. Conner did notice that she had joined the Pride, however, and he was relieved not to have to face the awkwardness and temptation of being sealed in a room with his scantily clad vixen of a nemesis.

With his seventh period freed, he was able to get started on this, his latest and most significant TIOS project to date.

By this point in the year, teachers were much more lenient than usual when it came to letting him take a senior out of class for an interview. After all, in only a couple more months, those seniors would be graduates, adults on their own recognizance. So when Conner politely asked if he could borrow Jemisha Union, Mr. Rodriguez waved a dismissive hand and Jemisha grinned like she'd won a contest and bolted.

After a few pleasantries, Conner sat with her on a bench outside the cafeteria, unfolded his laptop, and explained what they were doing. At least, he explained the part of it she needed to know. "So in case you didn't know, I'm one of the editors-in-chief of yearbook, and we're looking to round out some of the final pages with some quotes and perspectives from Nighthawk seniors. We're not looking for anything in particular, but I'd just like you to be honest. Also, if you can, try to use full sentences. Repeat part of the question back if you need to. Like if I asked your favorite food, don't say 'pizza,' say 'my favorite food is pizza.' That way we can use your whole quote. All right?"

"Hey, whatever. You got me out of Rodriguez's boring-ass class – I'll answer whatever you want."

"Great. You mind if I record this? I want to get it right."

"Go for it."

He opened with a few softball questions – where she and her friends liked to hang out, favorite movie that came out that year, any big memories. Nothing surprising, simply easing her into the process of speaking from her inner monologue rather than a forced conversation with a near-stranger. This would work best if she stopped talking to Conner Fishers and started simply voicing her feelings out loud. They'd gone to school together since middle school, true, but he could count on one hand the number of times they'd spoken one on one. They'd had classes together, and his mindset to preserve



memories meant he knew more about her than most people would of such a distant acquaintance.

After ten minutes of transitioning the questions into those of greater import, he made his move. “You have family serving in the military, is that right?”

“Yeah, my dad’s overseas in Afghanistan. He’s an infantryman – kick ass, take names and all that.”

“That’s dangerous work, I imagine.” He knew it was. It was his one most poignant memory of Jemisha, hearing her make a speech at an assembly on Veteran’s Day last year about the importance of honoring combat troops. He remembered her voice breaking as she’d spoken about her father and his service and how afraid she was for him, and how honored to be his daughter.

“Yeah. He tries to act like everything’s cool and all, but... he got hit with some shrapnel from a bomb last year, wound up in the hospital. Two guys in his unit got it way worse.” She lifted her chin, too proud to let herself sniffle over that memory.

“Do you think he’s going to be all right?”

Her eyes narrowed for a moment at the somewhat callous question, but she decided not to take offense. “I mean, he’s got to. I can’t think about if... nah. My dad’s coming home safe. Can’t let myself think about any other way.”

“Absolutely.” Conner typed quickly into his open TIOS spread.

*“My dad’s coming home safe.” – Jemisha Union*

“Is that it?” she asked.

“I think that’ll do it. Thanks, Jemisha.” He named the spread “magicrock,” and clicked Save. TIOS did not object.

This was how Conner began to spend his seventh periods. Armed only with his arsenal of random factoids about his peers, gathered over years of trying to record as many details of their lives as possible, he rounded them up for interview after interview and coaxed the words out of them.

“Can you tell me anything about your band?”

Joel Nagle, lead singer and guitarist for Placebo grinned. It never took much to get Joel talking about his band. “Dude, you totally need a fuckin’ page for us in the yearbook, man. That would be so badass!”

Conner nodded. “I can’t promise anything, but I’m definitely a fan.”

“Yeah, we fuckin’ rock, man. Kenny’s totally tits on bass, and–”

“Uh, if I’m going to be able to quote you, you need to PG-13 the language, Joel.”

“Right, shit, – shit! – sorry, man. But yeah, Placebo rocks. We don’t have, like, lessons or anything, but we got raw talent. Kenny’s an awesome fuh... awesome bassist. And our drummer, Creature–”

“That’s Paul Creech, right?”

“Yeah, like, he fuckin’... he wails on those things. Dude breaks a stick almost every show.”

“What kind of venues do you guys usually play?”

“I mean, nothing big, but we go to the open mic night at The Review every time they have one, and we do, like, parties and stuff.”

Conner nodded. “No place else?”

Joel looked confused. “What? Nah, man. I mean, unless you’re lookin’ to hire us, because we could so use the exposure, man.”

“I heard you guys visit St. Lucy’s children’s hospital and play for the kids.”

Joel’s eyes narrowed. “Where’d you hear that shit?”

“Is that not true? I may have been misled.”

“No, it is, just... it’s not, like, *cool*. Just something we do to have an audience. I guess to be nice, or whatever. I mean, the kids dig it. We let them play the instruments. This one girl, she’s like eight or something, her name’s Eve but we call her Evil – not to be dicks, but because she thinks it’s badass – and she’s always making Creature let her try drum solos. She’s fuckin’ terrible, but she keeps on trying.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

Once Joel started, the details kept flowing. A little boy they’d appointed as their agent, who like to make believe he was making all these deals. A girl with esophageal cancer who was only a few years younger than them who’d appointed herself president of their fan club. She delivered them anonymous fan letters when they visited that they both pretended weren’t from her. A pair of severely twins conjoined at the side who worked together to play Joel’s guitar.

“They’re not half bad, considering,” he said, then suddenly grew self-conscious about what he’d shared. “Hey, don’t put that shit in the yearbook, man. I don’t want everybody thinking we’re a bunch of lame-asses who only play for a bunch of kids with leprosy or shit, man.”

“You got it.”

*“Placebo rocks. We got raw talent.” – Joel Nagle*

“I’m not buying a fucking yearbook, Fishers, and you can blow me. I just didn’t want to be in class and you gave me a way out. Doesn’t mean I’m gonna answer your faggot fucking questions.”

Conner did his best to keep pace. Tye Oldring was six inches taller, had an easy forty pounds of muscle on him, and on top of all that, an aura of menace that simply made him daunting to look at, much less approach. He’d bullied Owen relentlessly all through elementary and middle school, even beat the two of them up once in seventh grade when Conner got too defensive of his friend. Owen had had a black eye for a week. The only reason he’d let up was that after his stint in juvie, he came out angry with the whole world rather than focusing his ire on a select few.

“Come on, just a few. Please?”

“Eat my ass.”

“What’s a fond memory you have of your time at NHS?”

“This place fucking sucks. I hope it burns down. With all you people in it.”

“What was your favorite field trip?”

“I’m not allowed to go on field trips.”

“Why not?”

Tye stopped. “Want me to show you?”

Conner got an immediate sense that he did not. “No thanks. Wait wait!”

Tye had already started moving again, but halted again, this time pivoting to square off with Conner. The editor-in-chief took a step back. “What.”

“One more quick question. Can you, um, tell me anything about your life? Like, outside school and stuff. Just so we can get a better feel for you.” He braced himself to dodge the blow and to run like hell.

“My home life? The fuck you care? Keep your nose out of my fuckin’ life, you fuckin’ dork bitch cocksucker. My home life’s fuckin’ great, OK? Leave It To Beaver shit. You say one more word about it and I’ll stuff yours, understand?”

“Stuff my... what?”

“Your fuckin’ beaver, you fuckin’ pussy!” He took a step forward, and Conner ran, the mocking laughter of Tye issuing behind him. Two hallways later he was stopped by an irritable looking Senora Diaz, and he took a moment to catch his breath before typing his entry. TIOS wouldn’t allow him to omit the expletive, but he hoped it wouldn’t be taken literally.

*“My home life’s fuckin’ great.” – Tye Oldring*

Maybe it wouldn’t fix what was wrong with him, and maybe it was far too late. But with the snippets he’d heard over the years about what happened in the Oldring household... It couldn’t hurt.

“My parents?” Chelsea Detmer blinked. “What do you want to know about them for?”

“Just trying to have something about your life.”

“Oh. Well, my dad’s a union pipefitter, and my mom’s... not in the picture.”

“Not in the picture? Can you say more about that?”

For a moment, he thought he might have pressed her too far. But then she let out a sigh and answered. “She’s in prison. She didn’t do anything bad though. Just some bullshit.”

“Were you close?”

The girl was quiet for a moment. He wasn’t surprised, knowing something about the bullshit she was referencing. “Yeah. She wasn’t always the easiest to get along with – neither am I, I guess, ya know? – but my mom’s always there for me. She was, anyway.”

“Do you mind my asking what happened?”

Chelsea gave him an annoyed look. “Like I said, bullshit. Asshole cops were looking for my piece of shit uncle, ransacked the whole house – like he might be hiding in the fork drawer or something. And they found a big bag of weed that they said made for ‘intent to sell.’ And we lived down the block from Hadley Elementary, so that made intent to sell in a school zone... and bam. Now she’s two years into a four-year sentence for being a pothead with a dickhole ex-brother-in-law and now I live with my asshole dad who has him over all the time. Happy now?”

“I’m so sorry, Chelsea. That must be so hard. I think I remember your mom from that sock hop in middle school. Didn’t she chaperone once?”

Chelsea’s scowl gave way to a tepid smile. “Yeah, she had this moment like ‘I’ll be a normal PTA mom.’ Didn’t last, but it was cool she tried.”

“I hope you get to see her again soon.”

“Next time I can get my dad to take me. He’s a real piece of... Are you really going to put stuff about my mom in the yearbook? ‘Cause I really don’t want to remember this shit if I ever look at this thing someday.”

“Only good memories in there, I promise.”

*“My mom’s always there for me.” – Chelsea Detmer*

“Is this going to take long? We have a quiz tomorrow and Dr. Laugherty’s going over the study guide now.”

“I’ll try to be quick, Shawn.”

But after only two of his fluff questions, his interviewee was already getting fidgety and he needed to pounce.

“I realize this might be too personal, but... earlier this year, the movie *Wonder* aired. Do you find it was true to your experience as someone with Treacher Collins?”

Shawn laughed; his laugh was scratchy and might be off-putting to someone who didn’t know him. “I think *Deadpool* was closer to the mark on that one, Conner. Look, I’d really rather not talk about it if that’s all right.”

“Right. But can you tell me—”

“I need to get back to class, Conner. Please don’t put anything about me in the yearbook. I think the picture’s going to be reminder enough of my face, OK? Everybody sees what I look like. It is what it is.”

“Sure. Thanks, Shawn.”

Conner listened to their brief interview several times, but couldn’t find anything useful in it by itself. Still, he felt like his parting comment was license enough. For five hours that night, he sat in the vacant computer lab in Kristy’s classroom painstakingly editing. He supposed he could have just used a stock photo, but the idea of giving Shawn the face of some stranger was unseemly, and he’d have felt bad if it triggered another body swap like with Hailey and Hayleigh. Instead, he photoshopped Shawn’s picture,

one minor tweak after another, until the final result was of a young man with even eyes, dimpled cheeks around a gruff smile. The deformities were no longer visible, and he felt like it still looked enough like the original Shawn to do him justice. It wouldn't correct his hearing impairment or any internal issues, but with luck he wouldn't be judged on sight any more. With a weary smile, he saved Shawn's profile image and updated magicrock.

*"Everyone sees what I look like." – Shawn Howe*

"I can only imagine what it's like to have gone through something like that. How long has it been?"

Nick stroked his chin as he thought it out. "Five years this July. Jesus, I can't believe it's been that long."

"He and I were lockermates in middle school," Conner said. "Sixth grade. I remember he always packed his lunch, and this cheap plastic shelf my mom got me for my locker always broke and my books would fall down and smash the thing. Happened almost every week, I swear. I even offered to let him take the top, or stash his lunch on top of my books, but he'd laugh it off. He just ate those smushed-up sandwiches like it was the way they were supposed to come."

The other boy laughed. "He was always real chill. Used to drive me nuts, ya know? Sometimes I'd try to get a rise out of him Like – oh man – one time just to piss him off I went through the Xbox and deleted every one of his saves. And I remember he just laughed, like it was all good fun, and goes 'looks like I gotta school you on how to play all over again.'" Nick smiled distantly, but it slowly waned, and he soon found his eyes welling up. "I don't talk about it much any more. My folks hardly ever mention him. I think it's harder on them than it was on me." He wiped away a tear as it snaked down his cheek. "Sorry, man. Not trying to lay all the heavy stuff on you."

Conner waved away Nick's apology. "Hey, don't apologize. I didn't want to bring it up, but... I dunno. He's supposed to be graduating this year, and I was thinking about him. I still miss him." They hadn't been friends outside of school, but they'd always gotten along well. It was strange to be able to picture Rick's face, still frozen in time before the accident at the age of thirteen, with his identical twin's face in front of him.

That brought a warm smile to Nick's face. "Thanks, man. That's cool of you to say."

"How do you cope with something like that? If I can ask."

Nick shook his head. "You do the best you can, you know? It's still hard sometimes, yeah, but I'm not letting him go. The people ya lose, they stay inside you forever. He's gonna be walking that stage with me at graduation, don't you worry." He thumped a fist over his heart.

They chatted for a few more minutes before Nick excused himself, but the two actually exchanged a brief hug before Nick made his way back to class. The quote was

there, but... was this too far? If he input those words, what might happen? If TIOS was going to reset after graduation, what might it do to their family to see their son and brother, only to lose him again the next day? Would they even remember, or would TIOS make them accept it without question as it did with so many other things?

Conner thought about his dad, what it would mean to him if he could see him one more time.

Rick still had a profile in the system, left over from the school's common student information system that spanned the whole district. It wasn't indexed with the Nighthawks, nor with the middle school he'd attended at his passing. Just a bit of data in a computer system, drifting along through the years untouched and forgotten. But it was there.

There enough that TIOS let Conner tag him. "*[Rick Neuhauser]'s gonna be walking that stage with me at graduation.*" – Nick Neuhauser

There were dozens of other quotes he gathered that week. Reputations restored, betrayals reneged, and even a few other more substantial tragedies undone. In many cases, the results were immediately noticeable. Shawn came into school Thursday with the face Conner had given him, smiling at nothing in particular. He didn't know at first if the quote made people realize he'd changed or if they'd still see the old him like they did with Hailey and Hayleigh, but a few days later when he saw Gabby Willis flirting with him by their lockers, he knew they saw what he'd remade.

Others were less visible, but he heard the occasional whisper that lead him to believe he'd made a difference. He heard in psych class that Carl Briscoe was being adopted after a lifetime in the foster system. A few days later Heather mentioned that Dave Horvath, president of the Philanthropy Club, had received a second letter from Brown explaining that his initial rejection had been in error, and they were pleased to be offering him not only admission, but a substantial scholarship.

Kristy complained that Ginger Ortiz had missed three days in a row, but Conner suspected it was because she was enjoying her first trip to see her family in Puerto Rico since she was six. She'd told him how she worked forty hours a week to help her mom cover bills and still be able to send money back home, where they'd lost everything in the hurricane. She deserved a vacation more than anyone.

If Tye was in a better mood lately, it could be coincidence, but Conner swore he even saw him smile one day in the cafeteria. It was the first time he'd ever seen Tye's teeth except in a snarl.

For the first time in months – really, since the first time he laid hands on Hailey's sexy new body and had to ask himself what he'd done to deserve this – Conner felt at peace. Maybe he didn't deserve all the good in his life, but he could at least feel that, in the short time that remained until TIOS set everything back to normal, he wasn't alone in having some unearned good fortune. This was, in a bizarre way, why he'd started

working on his school's yearbook all those years ago – to make sure the story that was told made for the best possible memories.

If he couldn't exactly share it with someone, so what? He supposed he could tell the few people who knew about what TIOS could do, namely Owen, Angelica, and Kristy. But he didn't want to present his editor-in-chief privileges as that magic rock, granting wishes. Owen had gotten plenty of it already, and while he didn't see much of his stepsister these days, he supposed from how busy she was across the street now that they'd patched things up, she must be enjoying herself, too. Besides, he wasn't doing it for pats on the back. It was simply an opportunity to build a better NHS for his fellow Nighthawks. They were one flock. Let them enjoy the final days in the nest before flying out into the real world.

Soon it had been more than two weeks since Conner had attended Kristy's class. She didn't mind; he assured her his mysterious pet project was making him very, very happy, and with her TIOS-imposed mindset, his happiness was contagious. He talked with his co-editor-in-chief here and there via text and email as duties required. Heather confided that she was now a trend-setting member of the Pride, having really pushed for more leg-revealing "empowerment garb," as she put it. Occasionally he saw her in the halls. And in his dreams. He never remembered them for more than a few seconds, but they never failed to send him swiftly into the arms of one of his lovers. One night, he was staying over at Kristy's and awakened in the midst of the dream to find he was already mid-coitus; afterwards she told him he'd started humping and groping her in his sleep.

Then, one day Amanda texted him to ask if they could meet to discuss something. In a fog of good vibes and the absence of a plausible excuse, he agreed. After quickly typing "*I'm going to be a dancer.*" – *Laurie Farago* into magicrock, he folded up his laptop and headed to Kristy's room.

There was a brief round of scattered applause as he entered, mostly mocking, but he thought it was a good-natured sort of mockery. "Look who's back!" hooted DeShaun. Kristy gave him a bemused look of reproach.

"I know, I know. I promise, I've been working hard out there, guys," he assured them. "Have a little faith in your fearless leader."

"Fearless leader? I thought Amanda was fearless leader," quipped Jordan.

"I thought Amanda staged a coup and buried him under the football bleachers," said Marisa.

"The rumors of my dismemberment are greatly exaggerated. Hey, speaking of, anybody seen..." He caught sight of her mid-question, though, and the sight sapped his capacity to speak for long enough that the rest of it was never said. There was Amanda.

Her wine red hair flowed down in softly curled ringlets; when he got around to looking at her face again, he noted that two subtle pigtails were in evidence if one looked close. It took some time; once he laid eyes on her, he had no choice but to scan from

bottom to top, making sure to miss nothing of the in between. Her feet were in simple white sneakers with a pair of tall white socks stretching from there all the way up to mid-thigh. On most girls they'd have been too tall. Even so, those there was still plenty of soft, curvy thigh to take in before was obscured behind any bothersome fabric.

That fabric came in the form of a black skirt, ruffled and practically aching for a twirl, a breeze, any excuse to rise up and expose what little it didn't already. He could just barely make out the bottom of her panties beneath it, plain white cotton to match socks and shoes, but just barely was exhilarating enough. It wasn't even that the skirt was so short, but that the waistband was so high up, all the way over her belly button. He knew for sure it was over her belly button because her blouse... it was barely even there. It covered even less of her torso than the skirt did by virtue of its fabric being sheer to the point of transparent save for a few vertical strips that did more to underscore her nakedness than to prevent it. Had it been folded enough times to have color, he supposed it would be called white, but the single layer draped over her chest showed more flesh tone than anything else. Except, perhaps, the bra, scarlet red, the sole note of color in the ensemble. He didn't know if it was a push up bra, or if it was a holdover from before she'd accidentally augmented her bust and was simply no longer adequate to its task. Either way, it was pointless, failing to do much of anything to restrain her pneumatic globes from jutting proudly forth. He was pretty sure he could see a nipple peeking out on the left side, but if so, it was as red as the bra. As red as her lips.

Suddenly conscious that he had two of his lovers present in the room, the whole class staring at him staring at her, he cleared his throat. Heather, he belatedly noted, was wearing a similar outfit, though in place of the see-through blouse she'd simply left hers unbuttoned and tied it off beneath her tits. He almost pitied the poor thing for the load it was tasked with bearing.

"Ah, there you are. You wanted to meet?"

She simply inclined her head, inviting him into the office. Conner followed, leaving the door open behind him. A closed-door meeting with this veritable goddess would be fuel on the fires of any jealousy Kristy or Heather might have been nurturing. That damnable Amanda Carpenter had already turned up the heat enough that fire was a real threat.

"Hey, so, sorry I haven't been in much lately," he started.

"That's an understatement," she replied coolly.

"OK, so I haven't been in at all lately. But I am sorry. I have this big project I've been working on, and it's kind of taken up all of my time. It's important, though, trust me."



She pulled his chair over next to hers, treating him to a brief but incredible view of her ass; the skirt rode up even higher in the back, and even that slight lean revealed her underwear halfway up the length of it. Unreal.

“Show me, then. I’m excited to see what the great Conner Fishers has been so preoccupied with.” She sat, crossing her legs prettily. He noticed her voice was a bit horse; he wondered if she might be coming down with something.

He took the chair next to her, scooting it back a few inches, just to give himself breathing room. God, she even smelled good. So good.

“Um, it doesn’t look like much, but... when it’s done, I’ll show you.” What he would show her, he had no idea, but he obviously couldn’t show her a single file of a few dozen decontextualized quotes. Magicrock read more like a wish list than an actual spread.

He waited for her to chastise him, ridicule him, lash out. This was the busiest time of the year, and he knew she’d been in here fielding what should have been his job, all by herself, with only token responses from him. Really, though, he’d found that he trusted her to handle it. Which made her response all the more surreal.

“All right,” she said. That was it, those two words.

“Really? Just like that?”

“Really.”

“You’re not mad?”

She looked him in the eye. “I trust you. If you say your work was important, I believe you.”

Why was that such a relief? Was her unbelievably sexy presentation rendering him so pliable, or had her approval come to mean so much?

“Thank you, Amanda.”

She didn’t dwell on the moment, and with the tap of a few keys, her laptop monitor flickered to life, and soon, he was looking at her email. “So, among other things, here’s what I’ve been working on these past couple weeks.”

She slid the monitor over to him, and directed him to the chain of emails that was highlighted. It began with the email from ASAL to the two editors-in-chief and their advisor, Miss C. As he began to read, however, he saw that Amanda had made a reply, and they – whoever “SysAdmin” was – had replied in turn. Why hadn’t he thought to do that? Perhaps he’d gotten so accustomed to all things TIOS-related being shrouded in inexplicability that he hadn’t thought that this time, there might be an actual chance to dialogue with someone about it.

She began by thanking them for the use of the pilot version of their software, assuring them it was being put to good use, followed by asking what was meant by “edits to standardized and base files will revert to 1.0 status” in their message. The response succinctly stated that all user files would return to their status prior to any editing by

TIOS, though assured her that their annual would contain accurate files reflecting those edits as they had transpired, and that edited files would not become self-aware of said edits. When she asked for clarification, SysAdmin only restated that no edits would continue past the reversion date, nor did they anticipate any backlash caused by those edits.

To Amanda, it had been a source of confusion that she had seemed to attribute to her lack of experience in programming; to Conner, it was an incredible source of relief. If he was understanding it correctly, they were saying that although the changes he'd made would end the day after graduation, the Nighthawks would not suddenly realize their lives had been altered. It made sense enough, considering they didn't notice any of the edits happening, so why would they notice them going away? On June 8<sup>th</sup>, Hailey would wake up in her old body, without any clue anything had ever changed. And so on.

He would ponder what this might mean for him later; for now, Amanda was waiting for him to read the rest. And he did. There were numerous messages, both outgoing and incoming, and he could tell from the tone of her writing that Amanda had been aggressive and passionate in her inquiries. And, in the end, the final message, a brief note from SysAdmin timestamped less than an hour ago, left Conner floored.

*Ms. Carpenter,*

*In response to your repeatedly expressed interest in and admiration for the This Is Our Story program, we are pleased to be able to make an offer to Northside High School. We are prepared to offer a continuance of the TIOS program for your institution, but be aware that the following terms will be in effect:*

- *Any modifications of 1.0 files will remain in place; authorized modifications made by editor-in-chief accounts cannot be modified or reversed.*
- *An absence of editors-in-chief at your institution for more than one (1) year will result in reversion to 1.0 file status as previously detailed in this correspondence.*
- *Your account will be upgraded from editor status (current) to editor-in-chief status.*

*And the following conditions must be satisfied:*

- *The faculty supervisor to the editor-in-chief post must reply signaling their concurrence with this agreement prior to June 8<sup>th</sup>.*
- *All editors-in-chief in residence at your institution must reply signaling their concurrence with this agreement prior to June 8<sup>th</sup>.*

*Congratulation on being considered to continue this exciting and cutting edge test program. We look forward to hearing from you.*

*- SysAdmin*

“We... we can keep it?” he asked. He wasn’t even asking her; he was only marveling aloud.

She cleared her throat, though her voice was still a bit scratchy. “That’s what they said. I barely follow half of this techno jargon, but... yes. TIOS will live on. At least another year, if Carrie’s successor year after next isn’t an editor-in-chief. I don’t like this business of files being unalterable, but I suppose as long as we don’t foul anything up too badly...”

Conner leapt to his feet, and without really meaning to, cried out in exultation. “*We can keep it!*”

Amanda startled at his exuberance and reflexively hopped to her feet as well. Without even realizing it, he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her fiercely in celebration, laughing in pure joy.

She’d done it. Without even meaning to, she’d done it! Everything he’d been doing – all the good he’d tried to do these past weeks, the smaller nudges he’d been making all throughout that year, and yes, even those perks that were primarily for him – they would all remain in place! For only another year, maybe, but what of it! The thought that his classmates would get to retain these little joys for another year... he’d done it all in the hopes that a little short-term charity might improve his karma, but this? This was amazing!

Suddenly he realized he’d been hugging her for an awfully long time. “Sorry,” he said, loosening his hold on Amanda.

She didn’t loosen hers, though. “I did good, right?”

With a little effort, he backed out of her embrace and pulled the taller girl’s forehead down to rest against his own. “This is amazing, Amanda. You have no idea how great you did. And...” He released her, but she didn’t pull away. Her eyes, only inches away from his, bored into him.

“And I’m sorry for how I’ve treated you ever since you got here. I was threatened, and I was possessive and territorial, and I tried to run roughshod over you at every turn even though you’ve done amazing work and have made yourself a true Nighthawk in record adjustment time. I’m so sorry. From now on, we’re equal partners. All the way.”

“You’re going to authorize me to be editor-in-chief in TIOS?” she asked softly. Guardedly.

“I am.” She had no idea what she was in for, but she deserved it every bit as much as he had. He’d have to find some way to prepare her so she didn’t make the same mistakes he had, but once that was taken care of, he’d make it so. “Sorry I tricked you on that. I... no, I won’t qualify it. I’m just sorry.”

“You didn’t trick me, Conner. I tried to upgrade my account on day one and it told me it needed your authorization.”

He winced. "I'm better at yearbook editing than I am at deception."

"Clearly."

For some time, the two held their pose. Head to head, brains put together as they should have been from the very beginning. He put a hand on the back of her head, but she winced. "Sorry! I hit my head earlier, and it's still pretty tender." But before he could pull back, she grabbed his wrist and held his hand in place. "But it's starting to feel better now."

For the first time, Conner let himself see, really see, that look in her eyes, the unspoken permission and entreaty to kiss her. He could. He could kiss her right now. And why not? They deserved each other. He could make sense of his life later; for now, he needed to satisfy himself on her lips. He twisted his head to the side and—

"Hey, Aman... whoa!" came a voice from the doorway.

He jerked back so quickly Amanda nearly fell into him. Jordan! So much for that brief moment of thinking he had no nemesis. "We were just talking, Jordan, relax. We got good news."

"Really good news, looks like." He smirked; Conner saw the way his eyes were dwelling on Amanda's body. She didn't seem to mind, but it surprised him how much he did.

"Did you come in for a reason? We're kind of in the middle of something here."

"Yeah, could you help me out on that edit we were looking at earlier, Amanda? I think I got it, but I can't find a few of the finishing tools." Before she could answer, he looked back to Conner as if annoyed to have cause to stop ogling Amanda. "Oh, and I think I heard somebody say Miss C wants to talk to you, Conner."

The editors-in-chief sighed in mutual frustration. "Sure, Jordan. I'll be right out," she said.

He ducked back out, but left the door open. "I guess I should..."

"Yeah," he said. "I guess I should, too. But we'll talk tomorrow, right? The editor-in-chief version has some... well... we'll talk about it tomorrow."

"So you'll actually be here tomorrow?"

"Keep dressing like that and I couldn't stay away."

She grinned. "I can't wait."

Kristy had not, in fact, wanted to speak with him; Jordan had misheard, or just decided to cock block him. If so, he'd done a bangup job. Either way, before leaving that afternoon Conner set himself to giving Amanda editor-in-chief status in TIOS. He couldn't find any menu option for it. All the menus and submenus and tooltips, yet nothing for this.

Then he remembered there was another way, and quickly typed into magicrock.

*"You're going to authorize me to be editor-in-chief in TIOS?" – Amanda*

*Carpenter*

*“I am.” – Conner Fishers*

When he hit the save button this time, a popup message with a little exclamation point confronted him. *Warning: this action will extend editor-in-chief privileges to user: Carpenter, Amanda Renee. You will be unable to make further edits to that file. This action can only be undone by unanimous consent of all editors-in-chief. Are you sure you wish to proceed?*

He considered for a moment. There didn't seem to be any other way, so he went ahead and clicked Yes. He gave another look through the blinds to where she was bending to look at Jordan's computer, fists clenching and unclenching in desire. But the bell rang, and they were still working, showing no signs of stopping. With gritted teeth, he practically ran to his car. He had to do something before he exploded.

After school, Conner sped straight away to Hailey's house. Neither Doug nor her mother would be home yet, which was perfect. He had that image of Amanda Carpenter burned into his brain, and other than Amanda herself, there was only one woman who could help him through it. Hailey was always game for pretty much anything; she'd have no objections to putting on a schoolgirl outfit, or the closest to it she could muster, and letting him work through all this.

Using the garage door code, he went right in when he arrived; after hearing no response at calling out her name, he checked the house and found it empty. He typed a quick text to her. *Need you. Bad. When can you be home?*

She replied immediately. *omw b there 5 min*

Satisfied, Conner made his way down to her bedroom to wait, plopping down on the corner of her bed. His nervous energy was too much for him, though, and soon he was up and pacing around, a hungry dog waiting for his kibble. He occupied himself by inspecting her room. Usually when they were in here, he was either fucking her or recovering from fucking her; he didn't often have opportunity to look around. There wasn't much of real interest. Some pictures of her and her family, some with friends. Her academic decathlon medals suspended from a nail in the wall. Old stuffed animals piled in a hammock hung in the corner, a toy box with her name carved on the lid gathering dust underneath. He spritzed a bit of perfume into the air from the bottle on her dresser and suddenly the room smelled like her more than ever.

It was sort of funny. He'd always thought of Hailey as being a fairly tidy person, but being in her room unannounced gave him cause to wonder. Several days of dirty clothes littered the floor here. He remembered the jeans and sweater she'd worn yesterday, as he'd been the one who'd taken them off of her when they met under the stage during lunch. Kicked aside was the thong she'd been wearing underneath. Her ass really did look amazing in that thing. She knew by now that wearing a thong was usually a prelude to being fucked doggy style. She kept herself impressively toned in back, but there was still enough jiggle when he—

Wait. What was that?

He nudged aside a pair of her capri pants to find something that was decidedly out of place. A single pair of men's boxers. Silk, with a blue and black floral pattern. They looked fancy, except for a tear on one of the legs. He might have thought they were Hailey's – Angelica wore boxer shorts sometimes to sleep in – but these were much too big for her. Probably too big for Conner, even. Which meant they weren't Doug's, weren't her mother's.

So what the hell was another man's underwear doing in Hailey's bedroom?

The surge of emotion he felt at this discovery wasn't jealousy. Hailey let him sleep with whoever he wanted, and he'd always said the same. The difference was that there had been a dearth of people interested in doing so when it came to the ostensibly

overweight, stringy-hair, homely Hailey McManus. He might have even been able to understand if it was some fat guy who didn't think he could do any better, but these weren't *that* big. Touching them as little as possible, Conner checked for a tag with a size on it and confirmed they were indeed the same size he himself wore.

Conner was channeling every crime drama his stepdad had played in the living room – which was a lot – as he made deductions. A strange guy's underwear in Hailey's room suggested really only one thing. He even gave a moment's consideration that a relative had visited and somehow they'd ended up in here, but as much as Hailey chattered about the minutiae of her life, he'd have known if she'd had guests. So not that. Then there was the tear. Hailey could get awfully aggressive when it came to shucking his own underwear; it was easy to imagine she might have damaged this delicate pair in the process of removing it from whoever had worn them. But who was that? These were the underwear of a guy in reasonable shape, and the silk, the cut, the fact that they'd been discarded here after being torn rather than taken and worn anyway, did that mean money?

What able-bodied, wealthy guy had been here in Hailey's bedroom taking off his underwear? And if it was someone with personality or hygiene issues, why would Hailey want to sleep with them when she had Conner? He wasn't a Hemsworth, but he was still physically way out of what should have been Hailey's league. Why would this guy decide to hook up with Hefty Hailey McManus? There was a single logical reason he could think of, but it flew in the face of everything he'd taken for granted the past six months.

Could it be that someone else had noticed the change? If so, that might mean...

The front door opened, and he heard pounding feet as Hailey dashed to her bedroom and literally tackled him to the bed, smothering him with a flood of kisses. But the discovery had quelled the appetite that had driven him here, and he soon pushed her back.

"Is something wrong? Oh! Is your stupid little slut wearing too many clothes? You should punish her. She should be more thoughtful of the need to—"

"Hailey, whose underwear is that?"

She stopped, looked to where he was pointing, a bashful look stealing over her beautiful face. "Um, nobody's. Mine."

"You wear a men's large?"

"I... I..." And suddenly she was crying. "Are you mad at me? I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to... I..." Then she was sobbing too hard for any other words to be understood, if indeed those sounds were words.

Taken aback, Conner drew her into his arms and held her, stroking her hair soothingly and murmuring assurances that it was all right. It was, at least as far as his feelings for Hailey were concerned. She hadn't done anything wrong, and he immediately regretted making her feel like she had. "I'm not upset, Hailey. You have

every right to be with anyone you want. I mean, I know you know I... and it's really fine. Really."

It took an awful lot of this before her hysterics subsided, but in time she collected herself and directed her bleary, tear-stained face to look at his. "You're really not mad?"

"Not at all." And it was true. He enjoyed spending time with her, and he had come to think of her as a friend (however unconventionally so), but she was not his girlfriend. She probably wouldn't want the title if he offered it after what he'd done, with their time limited by their departures for school in the fall. "I didn't mean to upset you by asking. I was only wondering who the lucky guy was. That's all."

She sniffled, rubbing a dribble of snot indelicately on her sleeve, and in that moment, she was the same dowdy Hailey he'd known for years. "OK. Good. I didn't want to lose you."

He kissed her forehead. "You didn't."

She gave a deep sigh of relief. "Good."

Several minutes passed in silence. Bit by bit, the awkwardness grew. She knew he was still eager to hear the answer to his question; he knew she knew. So he waited, and eventually, in a small voice, she spoke again.

"Promise you won't get mad?"

"Promise."

With a grimace, Hailey leaned over to his ear and whispered to him. It was the last name he would have ever expected her say, but when she leaned back, he could see in her eyes it was the truth.

What the fuck was Jordan Lyons doing?!



## Chapter Thirteen

Jordan pulled his coat tighter around his shoulders. He'd left the heat on in his car for a while, but before long he worried someone might wonder at the presence of an SUV parked on their cul de sac with the engine running. It was cold outside, even for early January, and the temperature inside the vehicle was quickly falling to meet the outside where it was well below freezing according to the weather app on his phone. He took another nip from his bottle, premium Kentucky whiskey swiped from his dad's bar. Liquid courage – that was what his friends called it before they did something stupid. If he were to go through with this, he was going to need it.

This was going to be the most terrifying night of his life, but if he pulled it off, he'd have it made – and no one would be the wiser. Be the change you want to see in the world, as the faded poster in that slut Miss C's room read. He'd gotten a good long look at it a few weeks back while he was in there after school, the last day before break, while listening to his journalism teacher going to town on Conner Fishers.

The light was on in Mrs. Prendergast's house. She'd been in there all right. He'd done his research, and knew she lived alone. That was why he'd chosen her instead of one of the other guidance counselors. The Mrs. had made him nervous, but like most adults, she didn't know shit about protecting her online privacy. She'd divorced two years ago and simply never gotten around to changing back to her maiden name. No cars in the driveway meant no company, no boyfriend (which his research had turned up no evidence of either). Just her, alone in her little house at the end of the cul de sac.

He sat there for over three hours before she finally came out. The garage door groaned open, a growing rectangle of yellow light drawing his attention. Many of her neighbors had already set out their trash cans for pickup the following day. She was to be no exception. Good. Tomorrow morning in the light of day would not have worked for this, and since stealing that moron Fishers' password at his house that afternoon and confirming that TIOS worked as advertised, he was eager to put things in motion.

He started his car right as she got to the street, dragging a navy blue trash can through the knee-high snow piled up on her driveway. She looked up, surprised to see a car start so close, squinting to peer at the driver through its headlights. As he pulled up to the bottom of Mrs. Prendergast's driveway, his approach captured her attention. Good.

"Is that... Jordan Lyons?" she said, bewildered, as he got out of his car a short distance away from her. He made sure to park with the lights aimed elsewhere, just in case some nosy neighbor happened to glance out at the wrong moment. Trying to ID a strange figure at night in the dark, silhouetted against a bright light, would be impossible.

"It is. I was wondering if you could help me with something."

“What? Jordan, your being here is entirely inappropriate. This is my home. I don’t know what you’re doing here, but if you need something, you can come to my office tomorrow at school.”

“Why don’t we just go there now?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I said, let’s go to school.”

“Excuse me? What do you think you’re...”

Finally, she noticed the pistol in his right hand. One of his dad’s, who, like with his liquor supply, gave less thought to security than he perhaps ought. “Don’t make a sound. Get in the car – driver’s side.”

A pitiful sound of confusion and dismay wormed its way out of her mouth, but nothing that might be audible to anybody but him. When she didn’t move, however, he pointed the barrel at her midsection. “Now.”

“You can’t seriously be—!”

“I’m seriously about to shoot you in the fucking face, Deborah, so get your ass in the car if you don’t want that to happen. Play along, and you’ll be fine. But fuck with me, and everyone who loves you will wonder for the rest of your lives how you wound up full of holes and stuffed in your garbage can.”

Jordan couldn’t believe how scared he was. His heart was racing, and he felt like he might throw up. That wasn’t an option, though. He needed her to be afraid. Rehearsal hadn’t been like this, with the adrenaline pumping full tilt, but he needed her to be willing to comply. Would he shoot her if she didn’t? He’d told himself it was all a bluff, but now he’d actually done it. She’d seen his face. At that moment, he honestly didn’t know what he’d do if she screamed.

She got in the car, and his heart slid down out of his throat.

“What now?” she asked in a small voice.

“Drive. School.”

“School? Jordan, it’s eleven o’clock at night. It’s closed. Not even the custodians are there at this point.”

“But you can get in, right? You got keys.”

After a jab in the leg with the barrel of the pistol, she conceded that she could. In fact, the coat she’d donned to take the garbage out to the street was the very same one that had her keys and ID badge in it, so she didn’t even need to go into the house to get it. Luck was already with him.

“What are we going to do at school? Are... are you going to make me...” She took a deep breath, and the word came out in a whisper. “Do things...?” It was an ambiguity that he nonetheless readily understood. The old broad flattered herself.

“Not you.” That was all he said.

Northside High was dark and silent at this hour. A few cars still sat in the lot; he reminded himself to keep alert, just in case. The pistol was loaded, but he fervently hoped it remained a bluff. He needed Mrs. Prendergast for this. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and directed her to her office, her hands trembling so hard she had a difficult time opening it. Jordan had her sit in her desk chair and dragged one of the other two seats in the room to where he could observe her, then sat down himself. He kept the gun clutched in his lap.

“What is it we’re doing?” she asked as her computer booted up. “It’s too late to change your grades. They’re already archived in the district server.”

He laughed. “Not that. We’re making a little schedule change.”

“You... you want me to adjust your schedule?” She looked at him incredulously. “You didn’t really go to this length to switch sections, did you?”

“Of course not. It’s not for me. Well, it is, but I need you to change a few others, too.”

“All right,” she said guardedly. It clearly made no sense to her, but she wasn’t willing to die to preserve the sanctity of student class schedules. “Just tell me what you need.”

“Here goes. I want you to make a new class. And you’re going to put myself and a list of other people I’ll give you in that class.”

“What? That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“I think I can do that. Can I ask why, though?”

“A smart lady like you can figure it out, I bet.”

He handed her his list, typed up in advance. She browsed the names, eyes widening, and comprehension dawned. At least somewhat – she couldn’t know what he intended with it, but the theme on the roster was clear. He watched as she navigated the school’s administrative software, monitoring to make sure she didn’t try anything clever like sending a message to someone. She didn’t. With the initial terror fading somewhat, she’d begin to think more rationally, and her rational side would tell her to just play along and not make waves. After all, when she finished this, she could call the police, undo all the changes, and no harm done. And considering what was on that list, he couldn’t exactly kill her and still get away with it, either.

It wouldn’t be difficult for people to realize her dying act had been to create a new class featuring Jordan Lyons and thirty of the hottest upperclassman girls at Northside, and from there, develop a suspect.

In fact, she even pointed it out to him, probably worried he was stupid enough not to realize it. “Jordan, this class you’re asking for, with these girls... I don’t think this is going to work out the way you hope.”

“Maybe you’re right. But I think I’ll try my luck anyway, if it’s cool with you.”

She didn't object further. What would be the point? "All right. Does this class have a name?"

He'd had that ready since the night he'd learned the truth about TIOS. "Sex ed."

Mrs. Prendergast frowned at the clear connotation, but with a glance at the pistol in his lap, typed it into the box and hit enter. "Now the program is going to require me to name an instructor. Who, um, is going to be the teacher?"

"I am."

She frowned. He could see she was wondering if he was insane. A timely whiskey belch escaped just then, and her suspicions seemed to shift to being too drunk to be thinking straight. "It's a drop-down menu, Jordan. I have to appoint an actual faculty member. I can leave a comment that you're the, ah, actual teacher." She said it like she was trying to humor a lunatic.

"Fair enough. How about... hmm. How about Coach Conrad? Then yeah, do that thing you said, and note that he reports to me." Coach Conrad had been his actual sex ed teacher way back freshman year. He ought to do nicely.

"All right. Where would you like the class to meet?"

"Do we have any empty rooms anywhere?"

"What? No." She paused. "Well, there's the old copy shop, I suppose. It's not really set up as a classroom, though."

He remembered a year or two back, when the school trimmed the budget by firing the copy center lady and making the teachers make their own copies in the office. Lazy unionized fucks bitched about it for months. "Perfect. Do it."

"What period?"

He thought for a moment. "Second. Second sounds good. I don't want it to be first thing and be getting interrupted by the announcements and tardies and all that crap. But I don't wanna wait for it, either."

She looked again at the list. "This is going to take some time, Jordan. I'm going to have to pull everyone from their existing classes, and take everyone in Mr. Conrad's second period and assign them to a new class. This could take hours."

"Hours? Seriously?"

"It took the other counselors and I over a month to set up the schedules in the first place."

"Do what you gotta do. I got nowhere else to be."

She had not exaggerated. It was a painstakingly slow process, reassigning so many people, with so many classes already full. He even allowed her to consider graduation requirements, to a degree. The students in Coach's second period would only need a new P.E. class, which was simple enough, but the girls being put in his sex ed class were in many cases being deprived of credits they needed to graduate. After a

reminder that he was still holding a gun, she agreed that she could, technically, claim that his sex ed class satisfied a credit for any and all subject areas.

“Come on. French kissing? There’s your foreign language. Sixty-nining, there’s math. All that oral has got to be as good as a speech class. There’s going to be more than enough biology happening in there, and for social studies, what’s more social than a lesbian orgy?” She glared at his depravity, but went on.

It was after two in the morning before she was done. He watched her hit the save button and start the printer producing new schedules for affected students. Jordan stared at the class roster, heart pounding in his chest. Kirsten Vaughan. Maggie Bray. Olivia Snyder. Heather Blake. Jennica Barry. Every name on that list was a walking advertisement for the glories of pussy. This was going to be amazing.

“So, what happens now?” asked Mrs. Prendergast.

“Now, we wrap up loose ends. I need you to look me in the eye and tell me that nobody can know what we did here tonight.” She hesitated, so Jordan pointed the gun at her forehead. From this range, it was a sure shot. “Say it.”

She took a shuddering breath. “I’ll never tell anyone what—”

“That’s not what I fucking said. Nobody but us can know what we did here tonight. Now try again.”

“Nobody but us can know what we did here tonight.”

“Atta girl.” Jordan lowered the gun, then lifted his backpack on her desk and unzipped it. From inside he pulled out his laptop checked out from Miss C’s class. Keeping an eye on the guidance counselor, he logged in and loaded TIOS, entering Fishers’ password.

Jordan used his free hand to awkwardly type the words into TIOS. He’d already done some cursory testing, and confirmed TIOS didn’t work if there wasn’t at least *some* sincerity behind the speaker’s words. Some of the cool-ish kids in yearbook had gotten together at the Bean Bag that afternoon, which had allowed him to run some tests. It wouldn’t let him input his own quotes – that was the most frustrating discovery by far. He hadn’t let that stop him, though. That moron Don had confusedly complied when Jordan had told to say he, Jordan, was a billionaire. The dipshit had been disappointed that the joke seemed to have no punchline, but Jordan only cared that TIOS had refused to accept it. But when Marisa complained “they always take like ten minutes to get me my coffee here,” he tried that, and sure enough her next refill came ten minutes later to the second. When it was rooted in sincerity, it seemed to work.

*“Nobody but us can know what we did here tonight.” – Deborah Prendergast*

Mrs. Prendergast was as terrified as she’d ever been in her miserable life, and right now, she definitely meant what she’d said. She’d have changed her mind the moment he let her go, of course, but that was no longer a concern. Jordan typed it in the spread, then hit save. For a file name, he went with dp18. It’d be nonsense to anybody

else, but he had a head for those kinds of things. Deborah Prendergast, and the date, January 8<sup>th</sup>. It didn't seem TIOS let the editor-in-chief undo even his own account's edits, which was a big problem. If Fishers found out he'd been hacked, and by whom, all it'd take is finding an ex-girlfriend to say "Jordan Lyons is a piece of shit" and... he shuddered to think what a creative, vindictive person might do with this. Hell, even if Fishers couldn't tell who'd done the tampering, he could certainly change his password and leave Jordan high and dry.

He'd need to be subtle. First he highlighted the words in the quote and changed the font to white. At a glance, it was an empty file. For good measure, he threw an empty text box over it and made the borders invisible, so if Fishers got curious there was one more layer to trip him up. Visually, there was no difference between dp18 and any other blank file.

"Good. Now I want you to email Principal Beckmann and tell her exactly what we just did."

Her eyes widened as she found herself once more with a literal gun to her head. "But... you just said..."

"I know what I said. Now send the email or I'll put a bullet right between your eyes."

She started whimpering. "No! Jordan, we can't tell anyone!"

"Why's that?"

"Think about it. If we tell someone what you did, you'll get caught. If you're going to get caught, there's no reason for you not to... to..." She stared fearfully at his weapon.

"I want to get caught. Write the fucking email. Doing that is the only way you walk out of here. Email and live, or keep your secret and you die right here, right now."

She wailed in alarm. The woman was beyond rational action at this point, moaning and trembling. But as he observed her collapse into despair, at no point did she reach for the keyboard. He tried again with the phone, pen and sticky note – she wouldn't budge. He even got out his own phone and dialed Beckmann's office extension, but as the woman's voicemail message sounded, the panicked counselor slapped his phone out of his hands. The screen splintered into a thousand little shards, but Jordan could only smile. She couldn't tell a soul. Hell, she'd fight to protect his secret.

He put the gun back in his pocket, and by degrees she calmed back down. "What happens now?" she whimpered.

"You go back home and get some sleep. And me?" He patted her head. "I got lesson plans to write."

At first, Jordan had left Coach Conrad in charge and said he'd sit back and pretend he was another student, observe from the master. The man was a font of useful quotes, forming the foundation of his new spread for the class, Coach Conrad's second period sex ed – or ccon2se, as he abbreviated it in TIOS, using the same text-obscuring tactics he had with Mrs. Prendergast and his other projects so far. The first quote to go in the spread was about the Coach, rather than from him, and that was Mrs. Prendergast's note that Coach Conrad reported to him. With that in place, Conner could just sit back and watch the musclehead flounder through his own material, cherry-picking selections at his leisure. Even decontextualized, they were adequate.

“So how the fuck did you luck out so hard?” demanded Kirsten Vaughan on day one. The class had been pretty boring, so far. Explanation for the reason Mrs. Prendergast had made up for why these people needed to retake sex ed, distribution of syllabi, review of course expectations, that junk. Jordan had spent the period mining for good quotes, and already had several.

“Why, whatever do you mean?” Jordan replied, batting his eyelashes for effect.

“Yeah, whatever. My father is going to sue the fuck out of this school for this. It's like somebody turned this classroom into some kind of candy store. Half the hottest girls in school are sitting in this classroom. I'd say all the hottest girls but somehow that lucky cunt Hayleigh got out of it.” She looked him over, signaling how unimpressed she was by what she saw. They'd made out once at a party sophomore year, but only that; the next day sober Kirsten had informed him he'd never get another chance.

“Lucky me, huh?”

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe they meant to put Jordan Winslowe in here instead of you? She's pretty hot, I guess.”

“This whole situation makes my skin crawl,” added Kirsten's lackey Olivia, frowning.

“I'm just looking forward to getting to see *you* crawl, Kirsten.”

She had the fastest reflex toward indignation of any girl he knew, but that was a record even for her. “What the fuck did you just say to me, you little asshole?”

“Sorry, what I meant to say was, I'm going to enjoy using your face as a cum rag.”

“Coach Conrad!” she shrieked. “This little *pervert* is saying...!” The teen queen couldn't get the words out, she was so apoplectic.

“Hey now, we don't shame people in this classroom,” added Coach Conrad blandly from his newspaper, reading the sports section. He'd ended class ten minutes early, as he often did in his academic sections. He continued with his rote answer; no doubt he'd had to say such things a hundred times in sex ed classes of the past. “Shame doesn't invite participation, and we want people to feel empowered to participate.”

Jordan was already typing it up as she continued her tirade. “No! He's not participating, he's being disgusting!”

“Disgusting? I think seeing you with a faceful of my jizz would be beautiful.”

He actually worried for a moment she might throw something at him. But she'd opted for administrative intervention, and was still griping up a storm to demand justice when the bell rang. Jordan bolted for the door, but Kirsten and her minion were hot on his heels. “Where the hell do you think you're going? You're getting suspended for this, and that's nothing compared to the sexual harassment suit my—”

She crossed the threshold of the classroom and her jaw snapped shut.

“Everything cool, Kirsten?”

She shrugged. “Eh. Gotta figure out who I'm copying off of for the quiz in pre-cal next period.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Ya. Whatever.” And she walked away, a similarly placid Olivia in tow.

Jordan glanced back into the room at the poster hanging on the wall of what had until recently been an empty print shop. Where Coach had found the thing, and what macho instinct had made him feel it was appropriate for his classroom, who knew. The photo was nothing too risqué, just a bunch of adolescents eagerly leaning in to discuss the diagrams of male and female anatomy pinned to the board. It was the caption, however, that had made for a hell of a picture for the ccon2se spread:

*What happens in sex ed, stays in sex ed.*



“Wait, how can *you* be our teacher? You’re a student!” complained Jennica. Numerous other girls in class echoed their agreement.

“I know, I know, it seems weird, right?” Jordan hopped up on Coach Conrad’s desk. After instructing Coach making the announcement, Jordan had – as a show of power – dismissed him for the remainder of the semester.

“Weird? It seems illegal,” commented Heather. Again, sullen mumbles concurred. “I’m not repeating a year of high school because of some bizarre typo.” Jordan noted that she didn’t actually propose telling anyone, however. After all, what happened here...

“Look at it this way, though. In all your other classes, I’m one of you. I get you. I know what you’re interested in, what you’re nervous about, what gets you excited. We’re gonna make this class something relevant for once. Eh? How’s that sound?”

Not a single beautiful face held anything but a malcontent glower, save for perhaps the new girl, Amanda Carpenter, who simply looked bewildered beyond compare. (After some consideration, he’d had Mrs. Prendergast add the long-legged redhead, using the threat of revealing their secret as leverage. She’d capitulated instantly. While he was at it, he’d gone ahead and secured her promise to bump four years’ worth of his grades to straight A’s using the same tactic.)

“This is not going to fly, you preppy fuck,” shot Neveah Kinslan, resident big tiddy goth. “Just because some idiot in the counselor’s office made a typo doesn’t mean we’re going to sit here and pretend you’re a teacher.”

“And does everybody feel that way? Anyone want to speak up on my behalf? No? No takers?” A few of the girls looked around, as if curious if someone might, but most of them were used to high school boys eating out of the palms of their hands and thought they could stare him down with their gorgeous faces and watch him wilt.

“All right, class. I’m sorry to say that that was your first grade in sex ed, and you all failed. Zeros across the board. That means right now, each and every one of you is failing.”

“You can’t do that!” protested someone in the back.

“We’re not going to sit back and get F’s because of a bookkeeping error.” Heather again. He knew what her straight A’s meant to her. When they’d dated last year, she’d never shut up about her sob story with her stingy grandpa.

“You won’t fail because of a bookkeeping error. There was a participation grade, and you ignored your teacher. From a bimbo like Liz Baker, sure, nobody can be surprised at another F. For the rest of you... I’m surprised so many of you are willing to fail sex ed.”

*“We’re not willing to fail sex ed!” – Maggie Bray*

Jordan sat calmly behind the Coach's desk – *his* desk now – as one by one, the girls made their way behind the changing screens Elaine McCary had brought in, and one by one came back in their new attire. This process ate the first and last ten minutes of class every day, but was well worth it in his estimation.

It had been Heather's stupid little dress code stunt, raging against the patriarchy, that had inspired him. A new code specific to his classroom. A few girls had held out, but "*Most of us don't have any problem following the dress code, Heather.*" – Ashley LeBeau had taken care of the rest. Heather herself was wearing a neon orange dress under a purple and green striped shirt with a pink headband. It was hideous, but her contribution to the rest of the class's new attire made him forgive her easily. Sooner or later someone would say something to help him crack that nut.

In the meantime, he had only to adjust his eyeline a few degrees to either side to take in a welcome sight. The new dress code was almost the opposite of the NHS regular (hence the need for the girls to change). Tops must show cleavage. Bottoms may not extend past the ends of one's fingertips unless they were leggings or stockings. Bras and panties may not be detectable by any means – which, after another day of failed participation grades when Jordan demonstrated how easy it was to spot panty lines and bra straps through clothing, simply had most of them abandoning them altogether. Hilariously, thanks to "*Some of us would rather wear a shame shirt than adhere to some patriarchal dress code.*" – MacKenzie Wolfe he'd been able to design his own "shame shirt," which was nothing but an extra-long t-shirt that covered even less than most of the other girls wore. Now that feminazi MacKenzie spent most of the period trying – and failing – to tug it down enough to keep him from seeing her pussy.

It was a visual smorgasbord. If it never progressed beyond this point, his sex ed idea would be a resounding success. Lauren Tommassini, captain of the volleyball team, in spandex booty shorts and a sports bra halfway unzipped down the middle. Kirsten Vaughan in a flimsy tartan skirt and a corset. Yuri Andersen in a crop top and a skirt that was little more than a belt. (She had short arms.) Every day, nipples peeking out of tops, pussies flashing under itty bitty skirts, legs and asses displayed like cheap models on car magazines... it never got old. And even if he couldn't fuck them yet, he still had his Hailey-in-Hayleigh to take care of him after school. Or at lunch, or when he told her to ditch class and suck him off in the bathroom. He hated to admit it, but Hailey's submissive spirit and her genius at gutter talk was an actual improvement over anything Hayleigh could have thrown at him. It was the ideally balanced combination of the two.

He tried not to think about her when they weren't together. She was *perfect*. Whorish. Submissive. A poet of vulgarity. Sexy as hell, and insatiably horny. At first he'd thought to use her stream of filth to cement her status as his sex slave, but he'd soon realized that not only was it totally unnecessary, attempting to do so might make things worse. She was perfect the way she was. Even when she displeased him, she begged to

be allowed to make amends, insisted that he punish her. She was yet to find any request too depraved, she was always in the mood, she was ceaselessly pleasing.

As the days ticked by in his second period, he realized he was too often sitting there surrounded by these other gorgeous girls, yet what he really wanted was his Hailey. She was a one-woman brothel and he had an all-admission pass. His class, on the other hand, was basically a study hall with trumpy clothes. He'd been all too content to simply walk around leering, knowing he could take out his lust on Hailey under the stage at lunch.

Still, looking was fun. So long as he didn't try to actually touch these girls, they let him stare down their shirts and up their skirts to his heart's content. He probably owed their acquiescence to "*When you look like us, you get really used to having dudes stare at you.*" – Sarah Stewart, but even before that they hadn't done much more than complain. It was a beautiful vice; their brains were telling them that teachers who behaved this way needed to be reported to someone, but per the poster... He was going to have that thing framed when the school year was over.

As for touching them, he'd found out quickly that actual physical contact resulted in a room full of angry, panicked girls ready to kick his ass – and that had been for a pat on the ass. For now, it was strictly looky no touchy, but with so much to look at, who could complain?

"So like, are we ever going to actually learn anything in here?" griped Stephanie Margulies, one of the few juniors in the class.

"Yeah, all we ever do is sit here dressed slutty. If you're going to be our teacher, then teach," added Maggie, crossing those dancer's legs of hers when she saw him looking.

"Seriously, 'teacher.'" MacKenzie, her nipples plainly visible through the paper-thin shame shirt, pussy presently making a break for it, had to add her two cents as well. "*If we have to retake this class, we want to learn stuff. And it's your job to teach us.*" – MacKenzie Wolfe

“Great work, Sydney,” Jordan said as she returned to her seat. He didn’t bother telling her that her cheerleading skirt was riding up so high in the back that her naked ass was showing; when she sat back down, her eyes widened in surprise as she felt the cold plastic of her desk chair against bare bottom.

“All right, so Sydney’s presentation taught us a little bit about the damage done by society’s hypersexualization of cheerleaders, and we thank her for that.” The class gave polite applause. It really hadn’t been much of an educational moment for them, but it had secured him “*Yes cheerleaders dress provocatively, and OK yes, we appreciate that guys are going to notice that and react to it.*” – Sydney Genovese. It wasn’t much, but Jordan hoped it’d make the cheerleaders were more receptive going forward. If nothing else they’d be more fun to look at.

He’d gone ahead and saved it as a new file, chcom&sg (cheerleader commentary and Sydney Genovese); trial and error had allowed him to discover that where a quote was saved could alter how it affected his classmates. Somehow TIOS had discerned that ccon2se was about his sex ed class specifically, and so far none of the quotes seemed to have had any effect beyond this specific classroom. He’d been working the last week or so trying to expand his capabilities outside of class, though he had to be careful not to draw attention to himself. If that fuckwit Fishers found out about him, it’d all be over.

He invited another volunteer to give their presentation next, bringing up Mary Buchanan’s file alongside ccon2se when she tepidly raised a hand. Mary wasn’t much of a talker, at least in this class, so he looked forward to this as an opportunity to accelerate her descent. These presentations on issues in modern sexuality had been a genius idea, if he did say so himself. It got the girls talking, which was always good, but more importantly it got them talking about sex.

He was only halfway through the class and already had garnered gems like Kirsten’s presentation on reclaiming language (“*The only reason we don’t call them tits and asses and cocks and cunts is because we’re taught to be ashamed of our bodies. We need to stop being ashamed.*”); Olivia’s bit on sex positivity (who’d opened with “*Sex is a good thing, end of story.*” then followed with “*Sexual arousal is a normal, natural condition.*”); and Sarah’s piece on online dating (“*Let’s face it: the hotter we look, the more interest guys are gonna show.*”) coupled beautifully with Ashley’s meandering treatise on hair and makeup tips (“*Every girl wants guys to be interested.*”). He restricted most of the comments to ccon2se to keep things under Fishers’ radar.

As yet, none of them were begging for his cock, but there had been noticeable changes in attitude. They were getting more flirtatious. They openly complimented one another’s tits and asses. Several of them had asked him out, and that slut Stacy Culpepper had put out enthusiastically – though not Hailey enthusiastically – after a cheap dinner. Last semester he’d flirted with her at a party and she’d told him to get bent. Last night he’d bent her over the pool table in his dad’s guest house and came in

her bareback. (There was no worries about STDs, thanks to a very accidental “*None of us are going to be spreading any diseases in here.*” – *Kirsten Vaughan* that had ironically stemmed from his more pedestrian request that they all get tested.)

Then there was the general arousal palpable in the room. Flushed cheeks, eyelashes that blinked in slow motion, crossed thighs rubbing together slowly, rhythmically. Erect nipples where the norm. Two days ago one seat had had a noticeable wet spot on it when the girls left for third period; closer observation yesterday had revealed it to be Heather’s. That frost queen thing was all an act, evidently. That slut got turned on by a mild breeze – or at least she did now. They all did, to one degree or another. An entire room full to the brim with gorgeous, horny, increasingly uninhibited teenage babes. If only most of them weren’t totally contemptuous of him.

He’d get past that. He looked forward to what the remaining presentations would yield.

“All right, Mary, what issue in modern sexuality will you be teaching us about?”

“Teen pregnancy?” The shy brunette said it like she wasn’t sure what she was actually going to say, fidgeting in place in her micro mini skirt. He couldn’t imagine what the conservative Catholic girl’s mother would say if she learned her daughter owned such a thing, much less wore it.

“Great. Go right ahead.”

She held up her notecards and began her rehearsed speech, rambling along in a wooden monotone. “Hello. My name is Mary Buchanan, and today I am going to talk to you about teen pregnancy. Teen pregnancy is where teenage girls get pregnant, and–”

“You don’t say,” said Kirsten snidely, rolling her eyes and tossing a thick wave of her blonde hair to one side. The casual gesture was enough to let her nipple pop free from the skimpy spandex sheathe she’d poured her body into today. She noticed after a moment and tucked it back in, though not before giving it a not-at-all-subtle tweak with her fingers, thighs clenching together in enjoyment. Even that would have been impossible just yesterday, but this morning’s “*Masturbation and other acts of sexual self-stimulation are nothing to be ashamed of.*” – *Joanna Pedretti* was already yielding results.

Mary continued. “–and that is not really a good thing. First off, a question is, why does this happen? And the answer is because even though none of us want to get pregnant and...” She squinted at what must have been a sloppily written word on the notecard. “Oh! And jeopardize our future, let’s face it.” She flipped to the next card and read on.

“*Some of us are going to have sex while we’re still in school.*” – *Mary Buchanan*

Her eyes were glued to her note cards; she failed to notice Jordan’s face as it split into a broad grin.

By the end of the January, Fishers own meddling with TIOS had ended the entire school's dress code. Jordan had even noticed in time to inject his own alterations before Fishers could realize the overreaction to his edits wasn't his own fault. Not that it was a "fault" at all, but that pussy sure saw it that way. Jesus Christ, he had Heather believing every word he said, and he'd even heard her say "*Sure, anything*" to his "*Can you do me a favor?*". But instead of making her his bitch, the loser fumbled around with his awkward, anonymous benefaction instead of making her his sex slave.

He supposed his ennui was his own doing. Creating a Northside where every girl could come in half-undressed – or less for those so-called Pride skanks – had seemed brilliant. The entire school was a parade of jiggling, barely concealed or tightly confined teen flesh. Yet as the bell rang to begin second period and his beauties took their seats, he looked around somewhat despondently. Yes, some of them still had to change, but now, many of them were simply wearing their school clothes to his class. Now, every jerk in school got to partake in the same feast he'd intended for his own gullet alone. It had cheapened it.

Presentations were done, and had been for a few days. In that time, he'd fucked nine of his students, just under a third. Not in class, of course. Nobody had yet given him the key to that door. He began to think they never would. But he'd been able to sneak off to a few unexplored nooks of the school, creeping around and stealth-dicking Olivia, Jennica, Kirsten, Maggie, others. He wasn't exactly a novice before TIOS, but he'd more than doubled the lifetime number of girls he'd slept with in this past week alone.

So why didn't he feel happier?

It was apparent enough that even his girls were picking up on it. "Something wrong, Mr. Lyons?" asked Stacy. "*It's weird to call teachers by their first name, especially in class.*" – *Mike Dougherty* saved as *mdmrl* had netted him the respectful term of address. Thankfully they still called him Jordan in the halls, which was good for keeping things covert.

"Not in a great mood, Stace." Almost like a conventional member of the faculty, he directed his scowl into his mug as he sipped some coffee and tried to ignore the class for a moment.

"Aw, sounds like somebody's got a little sand in their pussy," sneered Kirsten. Her little group of cronies snickered, and a few others, but as many looked scandalized.

"Kirsten, he's our teacher!" whispered Tamara Neal.

She snorted. "What's he gonna do? Call my mom? She already hates his ass after he pissed the bed after passing out drunk at a party last summer."

She eyed him challengingly; the rest of the class was now looking on in shock and wonder, unclear how this contest between the alpha of the pack and their unconventional teacher was going to be decided. He opted to try to avoid the

confrontation – usually the best option where Kirsten Vaughan was concerned. “Fuck off, Kirsten. I’m not in the mood for your shit today.”

“Or else what? The big strong teacher boy gonna dock my participation grade?”

“You do know teachers can punish students, right?”

“You can’t punish shit, Mr. Lyons.”

There were two purposes for which Jordan found Kirsten Vaughan useful. One was the obvious. Even if he never got to fuck her, the sight of that body would be in his dreams for life. The other, however, was the one he seized on in that moment. Namely, she was very handy for inspiring his most malicious instincts.

He glowered for a moment, but her smirk deflected it completely. “All right, class, let’s solicit some suggestions. Today’s participation assignment – what can teachers do to discipline a student for misbehaving? Everybody write your answer down on a scrap of paper. Don’t forget your name.”

He read them as they were collected. Kirsten’s said “kiss their asses” with a little heart. Olivia’s, of course, echoed the sentiment. Common answers from the rest of the class included detention, suspension, and calling their parents. Amanda suggested keeping them after school to clean the classroom; Stacy slyly suggested an after school rendezvous, maybe her place at 3:30?; Neveah simply wrote “don’t.” At last, he hit pay dirt.

*“Teachers basically punish us however they want.” – Amanda Carpenter*

He kept this one confined to the ccon2se file, not relishing the prospect of his other teachers given free rein to treat him as they liked. But he typed it in right then and there.

“Kirsten, get up here. I’ve figured out your punishment.”

She frowned, but without seeming to even realize why, she approached his desk. “What, you gonna make me clap out some erasers?”

“Bend over.”

Her jaw literally dropped. “Excuse me?!”

“You’ve never heard of corporal punishment?”

“But... you can’t... you wouldn’t...” She whimpered, her voice suddenly small. “Please? I’m sorry Mr. Lyons, OK? It won’t happen again – *please* don’t spank me! Especially not...” She whispered the words not for privacy, which was a moot point with all eyes on them, but because she couldn’t bear the thought. Tears welled up in those big blue eyes. “Not in front of everybody!”

For the past four weeks, Jordan had gotten used to having an hour a day to ogle the hottest girls at Northside, dress them like sluts, turn them on and keep them horny, even get some of them to fuck him. Yet none of it, not even at the most delicious, salacious moments, rivaled this for how insanely fucking hard it made him.

“Bend. Over.”

Kirsten slowly obeyed, placing her palms face down on his desk. Her dress was so short that it was already revealing half of her ass. Not enough for him, though. “Bare it. All of it.”

With one hand, she reached back and flipped the dress up over her ass. There it was, that impossibly perfect ass, time and a half as wide as her waist, perky and round, the perfect blend of toned and bootylicious. He rested his palm on it, gave it a squeeze. Withdrew.

“No, please,” she begged. “You can’t do this to me! Do you even know who I am?!”

Some part of Jordan was wondering whether it was the pain or the humiliation that was the greater contributor to the river of tears flowing down her angelic face. Had he bothered to look back, he’d see the rest of the class watching on alternately in horror, shock, or in a few cases of girls who had themselves been on the wrong side of the titanness, grim satisfaction.

At his bidding, the girl counted each blow. The teacher took his time about it, giving himself time to savor each sob, each percussive *crack*, each hypnotic quaking of her golden tanned ass cheeks. He didn’t care that his hand was starting to hurt. He didn’t care that she would obviously have bruises, maybe even welts. He didn’t care that several of her lackeys were crying out, pleading for him to show her mercy, that she was herself shamelessly begging for him to stop between each count. This, having this haughty bitch, this condescending cunt, at his mercy... this was better than he’d ever dreamed it could be.

Until she gave him something better.

“You can do anything else you want to me, just stop spanking me!”

Finally. The prize of Northside, the angel face with a demon’s heart, had offered herself to him. For a moment Jordan got so lightheaded from the sudden rush of adrenaline that he thought he might faint – and thank god he didn’t, because it wasn’t over.

“Yeah, me too!” cried Olivia. “Stop, please!”

He didn’t know what TIOS would make of a me too, but in that moment, he seized on the possibilities. “Anyone else want to add their support to the offer?” Nobody seemed quite clear on what he was asking, precisely, but as he drew back his hand in preparation for another wallop on Kirsten’s shivering body, suddenly there was a chorus of echoes. He tried to get names, but they came too fast. Jennica. Heather. Maggie. Stacy. Lauren. Hannah. Kiara. Vivian. Amanda. Lindsay. More. Too many.

“All right, let me put it this way – anyone *not* willing to put their name on that petition?”

He knew he wasn’t phrasing it well; to them it was all mere pleading, sounds made to get him to leave her be. But it was Kirsten who spurred them into action. “Just



say yes, you stupid cunts! Anybody who says no, I will remember you and I will ruin your fucking life if it's the last mother fucking thing I do!"

She was considerably less intimidating than usual, blotchy red ass cheeks exposed, bent over and trembling in shame and impotent rage, but her reputation preceded her. Rumor had it that during sophomore year, a campaign of relentless bullying that Kirsten had levied against Mandy Bradshaw had culminated in the girl transferring to Central after, it was whispered, she'd attempted suicide. No one who really knew Kirsten doubted it; those who didn't know her gave it enough credence to steer clear of her.

*"You can do anything you want to me!" – Kirsten Vaughan*

*"Me too!" – the girls of Coach Conrad's second period sex ed class, unanimously*

“Hey, Kirsten, I was wondering if you’d wanna go to King of Hearts with me? I forgot to ask anybody, and I know you were holding out for the best of the best.” Jordan flashed his most charming smile. It worked pretty well on most girls.

Kirsten Vaughan was not among that group. “Fuck off, Jordan.” She brushed past him into the classroom.

“Suit yourself.” He followed her in.

A few minutes later, as he savagely ass-fucked her on his desk, he wondered if she connected the two events. Gripping the far edge with white knuckles, she grunted in that superb mixture of pain and pleasure that she and her classmates had gotten to know so well the past week. Heather, Maggie, Danielle, Courtney and Hannah were watching closely, taking notes – he couldn’t imagine on what, but *“Watch and learn, bitches”* – *Angelica Buck* had somehow culminated in his honor roll students regarding his depredations as lessons to be studied.

It didn’t take long for Kirsten’s tight little ass to get him off. It never did. As a teacher he knew it was wrong to play favorites, but really, the only bitch he’d yearned to hate fuck for as long as Hayleigh McKnight was Kirsten Vaughan. Since he couldn’t bring himself to hate this new, incredibly sexy Hayleigh, that meant Kirsten was getting some attention several times a week. It might have bothered him that so many of his little sex puppets went underfucked, except that *“Damn, Jordan, your cock never gets tired of us, does it?”* – *Lauren Tommassini* made for boundless stamina. He’d tucked that one in o8eltom – a nod to her volleyball number – and ever since, he could fuck ten girls easy in a given class period, if he felt like it.

Once he came, he left a quivering Kirsten on his desk and made his way to Olivia, shoving his cock in her mouth without warning in the middle of a sentence, some bullshit about her plans for the dance that ended in a squeak of indignation trailing off into a wail of disgust. But if anyone had more experience taking Kirsten’s shit, he didn’t know her.

The class had become accustomed to this sort of thing – they quickly acclimated to everything, as TIOS normalized every perversion he threw at it. Most days, he simply walked around grabbing whatever girl caught his eye and using her however he wanted. Nobody was allowed to get through class without at least a fondle or two. The comparisons never got tiresome. Amanda’s cute little pink outfit, a kitten-themed sports bra with these unbelievably skimpy little spandex shorts, seemed worthy of his attention, so he dragged the leggy redhead to his desk, flipped the sports bra over her tits and began to fuck them. She lay there, drumming her fingers with impatience, as he titty-fucked his yearbook supervisor at his leisure.

But today, he actually had something to announce. His cock still plunging in and out of her ample tits, he cleared his throat and called out to the class.

“Hey, sit down and listen up you stupid sluts.” (“*We don’t care what [Mr. Lyons] calls us.* – *Mary Buchanan* had probably been unnecessary, given the extent of his leverage over them, but he thought it had reduced their grumbling over it. Regardless, like everything else, they didn’t hold any of it against him the moment they stepped outside the classroom.)

The class quickly fell silent – no one was eager to see what punishment he might come up with today – and he continued. Amanda, whose head had been lolling off the far side of the desk, craned her slender neck to gaze up attentively. “So, mid-term grades have come out, as I know you know, and I realize some of you aren’t thrilled with the grade you’ve earned so far in this class.”

A rumble of discontent went through the class. Coach Conrad had emailed to remind Jordan that he had to file grades before midterms, so Jordan had entered random percentages into a spreadsheet with their names and sent it back. He didn’t have a clue who had what, nor did he much care. All he knew was that a 78% was the highest he’d assigned. “So, I realize you bimbos have had a bit of a learning curve, and I don’t want to see you flunk out of school over it this close to the home stretch. So. I’m going to be providing an extra credit opportunity. Hey, Amanda, do your fucking job and hold these funbags together for me, all right?”

“Sorry, Mr. Lyons,” she answered, quickly taking hold of her tits and keeping them in place for fucking.

“Uh, extra credit...?” prompted Heather as he lost himself in that squishy valley.

“Oh, right. So, as you’re aware, the King of Hearts Dance is this weekend, and since you’ve all been learning so much about how to pleasure a man, I’m going to give you the opportunity to practice your skills in the field. Any girl... girl, who...”

The class waited for him to finish coming on Amanda. He snapped his fingers and gestured for Miranda Whitehead (Whitehall? something like that) to lap up the spunk on the redhead’s face, and then to Angelica to suck the dribbles off the floor. (She’d balked at such demands at first, but a few minutes with a riding crop he’d bought at a sex shop and she’d learned to take the easy way. She had an ass made to be seen crawling, naked, and it had the added benefit of being Fisher’s stepsister. Every humiliation he inflicted on her was a strike at that lucky fuck.)

“Yeah, so, extra credit. Anybody who finds me at the dance and gets me off at least once...” He paused for dramatic effect. “Will go up one full letter grade.”

There were a few gasps. Most teachers dribbled out a few points here and there; a full letter grade was a thing unheard of. “Is that a letter grade now, or onto our final grade for the quarter?”

“The second one.”

He saw Heather's eyes brighten at the prospect of not losing her grandpa's money. Eh. Maybe if she put in a little effort and learned to give a halfway decent blowjob he'd consider giving her that A. For old time's sake.

Mary raised her hand. "Wait. But what about..." She gestured to Coach Conrad's poster and it's now iconic status. "I can't do... *this...* out *there...*!"

"And nobody's making you. It's extra credit, not an assignment. Those of you who care about your grades, come find me, I'll give you a chance to show me your stuff. Sound good?" There was some grumbling, but in the end, nobody felt like making a big deal over a non-assignment.

The dance came; the dance went. He fucked every single one of the honor roll squad that night, plus five others. Six? Seven? He stopped counting at some point. He got to watch Heather dance with Fishers in that invisible dress, not knowing that she'd only wiped Jordan's cum off of it not half an hour earlier; the dork's lustful stare at Amanda commingled with feigned dislike was all the excuse he needed to corner Amanda afterwards and dangle that extra credit in front of her. He didn't bother avoiding a liberally smeared cumstain on the black portion of her dress. Let the bitch wear it with pride – as far as he was concerned, she didn't have feelings anyway.

Still, he didn't like the way Fishers seemed to be watching him all night. On the dance floor, in the lobby, in the parking lot, at the tables... it was giving him the creeps. Did he suspect? Was his extra credit pushing it too far? Just in case, he darted down to the journalism room afterward, using the key he'd copied from Amanda to get in.

Jordan couldn't decide between a red herring or a gift horse, so he went with some of both. Let him watch that ginger loser best friend of his stick it in half the hot pieces of ass in school; he'd never in a million years think Jordan was the one doling out charity pussy. A few lines of that pathetic delusional rant of Owen Gibson's and the kid would have more access to top notch trim than any guy in school except maybe Jordan himself. Then he used Miranda's helpful line about how Heather had been ready to fuck him in their little dance, figuring some time between those mighty tetons would give him more interesting things to do with his time than snoop around after stray hookups. He decided then and there to give her that A, if only so he could have a chance to see Fishers weeping like a little bitch when she left him for Berkeley.

Wouldn't you know it? The first time Jordan made any effort to do anything for someone other than himself, the asshole had to go and ruin it. First he barges in to find him editing the program, only narrowly escaping behind the curtain in the yearbook room with no time to hide the quote from Gibson; then, he goes and fucks Hailey! *Jordan's* Hailey. His perfect, sexy, servile fuck toy. Fishers couldn't even know what to do with as girl like that. Worst of all, the son of a bitch changed his password, and like that, Jordan's days editing his classmates were over.

Jordan had felt contempt for the guy for a long while now, as far back as he could remember. Fishers wasn't a bad-looking dude, but he'd rather sit around making scrapbooks with his mommy – who was serious MILF material herself – than make a move on anybody. Then when he does, the bitch fainted! Even before this, that had been a high point in Jordan's year.

Now, though, it was different. Now it was rage. Hatred. That mother fucker had moved in on his Hailey.

Jordan had had plans. Getting his harem more enthused with the fucking, letting him use them outside of class whenever he wanted, bringing more mares into the stable... that dream was dead now. Plus all the fine-tuning he'd sketched out! He'd been intending to remove that unsightly surgery scar Mary had on her abdomen, digitally wax every pussy in the lot, fix Olivia's ever-so-slightly lopsided boobs, maybe even give Kirsten a nice big tattoo that said "SLUT" or something equally demeaning across her lower back. Butt slut? Tramp? Fuck toy? Village bicycle? He'd thought a lot about it, but it didn't matter now.

For an hour a day, he could do anything he wanted with these girls with no questions asked, and some were receptive to further opportunities outside the classroom. Had he wound up with a harem of perfect Hailey slaves, beautiful and dotting and desperate to please? No. But it wasn't nothing, he supposed. He'd still have Hailey sometimes, when Fishers was off enjoying his free gift of Heather Blake instead. Things were what they were, and Jordan would have to learn to settle for it.

And to keep himself from killing Conner Fishers.

Two months later, Jordan stumbled into his classroom tired and annoyed almost two full minutes after the bell. It might not sound like much, but when he'd started teaching, he'd been there early and eager every single morning. He wanted to be on hand to watch his bitches change, to undress them, to see if Heather's tits felt bigger today, to unleash a special degradation for Kirsten, to reassure himself that Jennica's pussy still gripped his cock like a smooth wet glove.

Today though, they were already changed (or simply undressed for that handful who'd simply decided they'd been seen naked enough times to prefer nudity to the slutty costumes demanded by his class's dress code). He bristled at Stacy's "*About time, Mr. Lyons! That was a long weekend, and we can't wait for you to fuck us.*" He'd heard a hundred statements like that since King of Hearts.

"*I don't care where you fuck me.*" – *Neveah Kinslan*. She'd meant in what orifice, but TIOS had a way of interpreting things the way the editor-in-chief wanted them interpreted. He could have modified a word or two and slapped close to two dozen names at the end.

"*Of course we wanna have a good time in here.*" – *Lauren Tommassini*. Right there, the passion missing from all but the biggest sluts among them. His flagging energy and increasing apathy to the curriculum had not gone unnoticed, and some of the type A's among them had been pushing him to make things more fun.

"*[Jordan Lyons has] got the biggest cock we've ever been fucked with.*" – *Abby Couch*. This had come out during an impromptu oral survey he'd conduct about who had begun the semester a virgin, and with her silver purity ring gleaming on her ring finger, Abby had giggled playfully as she'd said it. A joke, but more than enough. Not that he couldn't have simply snapped a picture and edited it himself, but he didn't really relish the idea of spending four hours with a giant digital cock in his face.

"*I swear, women should be able to make their tits bigger and smaller at will.*" – *Kiara deBartolo*. An empathetic comment during some side conversation when Heather was complaining (again) about her genetic gift.

"*This class should be three hours longer.*" – *Tracy Dunham*. She'd had tests in her first, third and fourth periods that day.

"*I wish I had Mr. Lyons as a teacher for all of my classes.*" – *Danielle Belle*. This was the only class she wasn't flunking, to be fair.

"*We act like a bunch of weak-willed sluts that Mr. Lyons dresses up however he wants and uses and fucks however he wants, and we just let him do it whenever wherever?*" – *Stacy Culpepper* It left off the "Huh, did you ever kinda think that, like..." portion of it, but it had been an epiphany for her, and a manifesto for Jordan. Or it could have been. If that son of a bitch Fishers hadn't changed his goddamn password.

It was an infuriating problem. Jordan couldn't risk drawing attention to himself by snooping it out, for one; he'd already been far too forward with that snow day visit

back in January where he'd stolen it the first time. Secondly, he'd gotten cagey about it, too. He didn't log in if someone was even questionably had line of sight. He'd overheard an altercation during yearbook a while back in which he'd accused Amanda of using his computer while he stepped out. It seemed to have been a reaction, the twerp's expression going from bland to bewildered when she walked in the door. Only a good amount of trial and error, the same sort he'd had to do to notice Hailey's new body, had allowed him to see the improvements to Amanda. The sort of improvements *he* should have been making to *all* of his bitches. She'd gone from near the bottom of the class to giving Kirsten a run for her money. She was probably hotter now, honestly; the only reason he still gave Kirsten the edge was how much fun it was taking the cunt down a dozen pegs, while Amanda was as bland as her co-editor-in-chief himself.

Still, only after that did he realize that was what he himself could have been doing, sneaking a quick line or two into his computer when his back was turned. But after the incident with Amanda, he never left it accessible when he stepped away.

It was like Moses, allowed to see into the Promised Land but denied the freedom to access it. Meanwhile, that dumb fuck was restricting himself to only two pussies. Heather he could share – Jordan preferred her tits to her cunt, anyway. But that of all the girls in Northside, he'd had to go after Jordan's Hailey. His prize filly. Frankly, the only thing he'd ever truly loved.

There was no logic behind it that he could see, but somehow, some way, Hailey preferred Fishers. She never said as much – she rarely said anything that wasn't begging for more cock, inviting him to plaster her whore face with cum, to fuck her harder, to make her stupid little brain dribble out her ears with pleasure. But he could tell she did. She'd get a text, and suddenly she was feeling tired. He had to park around the corner so that, if they heard the doorbell, he could dart out the backdoor and walk-of-shame it back to his SUV while Fishers came in to take his place. She was on call for the bastard at all times; he was something she did in her free time. Happily, yes, but he was second fiddle.

Why couldn't he be fucking Amanda? She'd been throwing herself at him ever since the dance, but it was like he had some kind of hard two-woman limit. Three, if he was still fucking Miss C, though he doubted the little boy scout had it in him. Amanda, though, was stunningly gorgeous, plenty eager, and had even joined Heather's little skank brigade as an excuse to tart herself up for the guy. Yet still, he was sticking it to Hailey instead. *Jordan's Hailey.*

That morning, as the rest of the class was chitchatting or changing into what they'd come to dub sex-ed-wear, Amanda was diligently clacking away on her keyboard; since Fishers had disappeared from class for a while now, the entire workload had fallen on her bare, smooth shoulders. She'd not bothered to change for class, but her schoolgirl outfit with its see-through top, crimson bra, and the high-riding farce of a skirt were

more than satisfactory attire. It was that flaming red coat of lipstick that decided him. He shed his pants as he walked over and shoved his cock in her mouth before she realized he was standing there. Like Fishers should be doing every day if he had a single testicle in his shriveled little scrote.

“What, a schoolgirl with no pigtails? You fucking retarded?” he snapped, gesturing for Yuri and Hannah to add some while he fucked Amanda’s airbrushed face. They rolled their eyes and snapped to it lest they lose their participation credit for the day. They should be scurrying to obey, but no. They grudgingly humored him. He hammered the bitch’s face harder, stabbing into her throat without regard to those fretful sounds she kept making.

Glancing down, he expected to see that baneful but familiar image of TIOS. Editor-in-chief in name only, Amanda; her copy couldn’t do what Fishers could do. That thought only made him seize her freshly woven pigtails and go harder. Goddamn Amanda. Goddamn Fishers. Goddamn TIOS!

He hadn’t even realized he was subconsciously reading her email – invading his students’ privacy was another side hobby of his, seeing who’d they been texting and sexting – but then he saw that acronym, and he remembered a world outside of her warm, squealing mouth. What was this?

She tried to squirm loose when he bent to read; annoyed by her resistance, he seized her by the pigtails and marched her right up to the side of the room and slammed his cock in full force, knocking her head against the cabinetry so hard the class went dead silent. He held it there, even as she sputtered and thrashed – not defensively, but in pain and panic – and set her laptop on the counter right above her pretty, weeping face.

“1.0 files... maintain edits post graduation... upgrade to...” He froze. “Is this legit, Amanda?” She merely wailed incomprehensibly around his shaft. “Jesus fuck, moron, blink once for yes, twice for no.”

It took her a moment, but as her air supply dwindled, she realized the only escape was to answer his question. She squinted her eyes shut exactly once.

He came. Skipping the mouth and right into the throat, he came. Only after he was good and drained did he withdraw, and Amanda collapsed onto her back, gasping for air, looking at him with terror and resentment as she coughed up a mouthful of spunk. Angelica, resident jizz mop, was too stunned by the brutality of what she’d witnessed to do her job and lap it up. There went her participation points for the day.

“Did you enjoy that, Miss Carpenter?”

A shake of the head was her sole reply. He wasn’t even sure she *could* respond after what he’d just put her through.

“Well I tell you what. I’m going to give you an extra credit assignment.”



“That’s not fair!” blurted Heather. She was always whining about her fucking grade. He’d given her an A last quarter, as usual to avoid worrying her boy toy, but with graduation looming he’d been keeping her at a 59% all quarter. He couldn’t wait to see the look on her face when she saw she flunked sex ed and was going to wind up a top-heavy waitress in some shithole diner for the rest of her life, just like her mother. Why take her away from Fishers when he could just tank her life instead?

“And Heather just lost her participation points for interrupting.” That was all it took to silence any further protest. He kept his eyes on Amanda’s trembling body, inching slowly away from him along the wall. “Now, as I was saying. You’re getting an assignment – and this one is for outside class.”

“W-what is it?” she whispered.

“You make this happen. You make Conner upgrade your account and come find me the second he does. Do *whatever* it takes. You hear me? Beg, if you have to. Whore yourself out to him. Whore yourself to the whole town and pay the proceeds to his favorite fucking charity, I don’t care. But you do this for me, and I’ll never lay another finger on you again.”

This could work. If he could get her account, he could finally make things right. Make this class what it should have been all along. Better yet, he could keep this going beyond graduation. He could own these bitches for life. Yes, it would mean another editor-in-chief, but Amanda wasn’t the threat to him that Fishers was. Plus even if the boy got wise to the alterations Jordan made using her account, he’d go after her, not him. Good luck trying to bring her to account for it with TIOS’s power at her – and his – fingertips.

“I... I don’t think he’ll...” She grimaced and coughed up another little wad of cum. A little whimper passed her lips at the memory of how it’d gotten there. “He doesn’t like me.”

“Or fail,” he continued, “and what I just did there? Imagine that, times a hundred, every morning of every day until graduation. I’ll make that there seem like a good night kiss. Bitch, you’ll *beg* me to go as light as that on you. And if you don’t think I’m creative enough to pull that off, just know that I’m excited to try.”

She frowned at him. “OK, fine. I’ll try, Mr. Lyons. But... why? Why do you even care?”

Jordan extended a hand to her. “I’m surprised you even have to ask, madame editor-in-chief. We’re in the business of making memories, after all, and have I ever got a story to tell.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Conner felt a little guilty for the way he'd grilled Hailey. She obviously hadn't wanted to talk about her relationship with Jordan; the only responses he'd been able to get out of her were mumbles through her tears. All he'd really learned was that they'd been fooling around for most of the semester, that they'd agreed not to tell anyone, and that he and Conner were the only two boys she'd been with. Seeing how uncomfortable the topic was making her, he relented and apologized. To her, it must have seemed like a fit of jealousy, but really, it was panic that someone had been able to part the veil and see Hailey for what she really looked like.

Cognizant that she knew full well he was also fooling around with Heather, he assured her he wasn't upset and restated she could do as she liked as well. That she might do so with Jordan Lyons of all people bothered him more than a little, but that wasn't her fault. After all, considering how ineffectual he'd been at deflecting such attention from attractive women, he could hardly fault Hailey for hooking up with one of the hottest guys in school. Really, it was impressive she'd been able to keep the secret for so long.

To smooth things over, he stayed over and cuddled with her until it was time for her mom to come home, then made his exit. The rest of the evening was devoted to pondering the implications of this news. How had Jordan found out? Had he discovered any other edits? Had he told anyone? Was it some sort of odd immunity to the program that others might have as well? It was hard to imagine, but Conner remembered the time in second grade when Owen had somehow made it all the way to the bus stop with no pants on. People could fail to notice some pretty remarkable things.

The real question, though, was what to do about it. Jordan and Hailey were consenting adults, and he had no right to condemn either for their sexual conduct. Considering what he'd been up to lately, he was running preciously low on his moral right to condemn much of anyone for their promiscuity. Yet there was no way Jordan just so happened to be sleeping with Hailey without knowing she had changed. Sure, she was adventurous and all sorts of eager to please, but even Conner had rejected her on her appearance, and it wasn't hubris to say he was nowhere near as superficial as Jordan. He had to know she'd changed, and like anyone who knew him would have been certain he'd do, Jordan had used her for his gratification without a second thought.

He knew what his id was telling him to do, which was to walk up to Jordan and confront him. But to say what exactly? "I know you found out Hefty Hailey suddenly turned hot and decided to have sex with her." It was exactly what Conner himself had done, wasn't it? It was pure hypocrisy. Foolishness. Stupid, macho, chest-thumping.

It was shortly after eight o'clock when Conner found himself ringing the Lyons' doorbell. Mrs. Lyons – Jordan's stepmother – answered the door, a

maybe-30-something voluptuous bombshell. Conner would have been taken aback if he hadn't heard some of the guys in yearbook teasing Jordan about having a stepmother closer to his age than his father's. She was gorgeous, and in that cheap, surgical kind of way. Still, she smiled graciously as she opened the door, and Conner quelled his anger long enough to be polite.

"Why hello there! Are you a friend of Jordan's?"

"Um yeah." It didn't seem productive to clarify their relationship status to this woman. "Is he home, by chance?"

"He sure is. Come on in, sweetie." She ushered him into the spacious foyer, helping him off with his jacket unbidden. "You can just kick your shoes off right over there now, and I'll go get Jordan for you, OK?"

"Great. Thank you."

"You're very welcome." She stepped in and patted his cheek, and only this close did he smell the alcohol on her breath. But then she was gone deeper into the house.

A moment later he heard a mighty cry of "*Jordan! One of your friends is here!*" He couldn't make out Jordan's reply, but hers was a bellow of "*How the fuck should I know? Now get your ass down here!*"

Conner swiftly kicked off his shoes before setting foot on the carpet.

"Fishers?"

Conner looked up to see Jordan looking down over a half wall. His hair was wet like he'd just showered, and Conner tried not to think what he might have done that evening to work up a sweat. He'd certainly left Hailey unsatisfied after his own departure several hours ago. "Hey, Jordan."

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?" he asked dryly from his roost.

"We need to talk about some things. Got a minute?"

"For you, chiefy? Any time." Jordan jerked his head to beckon his guest and walked away down the upstairs hallway, disappearing from sight. So up Conner went.

The whole scale of the house was intimidatingly massive. The stairwell was so broad it seemed like the architect's instructions had been to make sure at least two couches could be moved in at a time. Conner was already feeling ill at ease and wondering if this had been a mistake. But it was too late now.

He found Jordan in an enormous entertainment room at the end of the hall, a man cave if ever there was one. A billiards table sat center stage, with an air hockey table cluttered with miscellany that bespoke of disuse at the side. There was a fully stocked bar at the back of the room, adjacent to a pair of plush leather arm chairs pointed at a curved TV that Conner swore looked as wide as his car. Jordan was sitting in one of the chairs; as Conner entered, he gestured for him to sit in the other.

Awkwardly, Conner sat almost sideways in the offered seat so that he could look at his host, made all the more awkward by the way the thickly padded chair tended to make one sink back into it, a natural slouching posture that was comfortable but not at all ideal for conversing. Jordan, meanwhile, was pouring a syrup-colored liquid from a glass, or maybe crystal, decanter into a short glass. He swirled it a few times before taking a sip, making a face Conner recognized from seeing his friends drink hard liquor. “Care for a drink?”

“No thanks, I drove.”

“Oh come on, one won’t kill ya. Or if it does, hey, you’ve had a good run, eh?” Jordan held out a second glass to Conner, but he declined to reach for it.

“Had a good run? You trying to get me killed?” Conner snapped.

Jordan gave him a bemused look. “Relax, Fishers. I was just fucking with ya, man.”

As he took another sip – whiskey? that was what it smelled like, Conner thought – his guest tried to show a little politeness. Just in case this could be resolved civilly. “This is a really nice house, Jordan.”

“Yeah, they say the best things in life are free, but that has definitely not been my experience.”

Conner forced himself to smile, politely. “So... your parents don’t care if you drink in the house?”

“My dad doesn’t care what I do, and Stepmom Barbie doesn’t get a say. Not that she usually notices anyway.”

“She... seemed nice,” Conner said, unsure how to respond.

“She... seems like a trophy wife,” Jordan corrected. “But yeah, she makes a good first impression, all right. Two, actually, thanks to her anniversary present to him.” He chuckled into his glass as he took another drink.

So much for keeping things polite. “Right. Well. Look, I wanted to talk to you about something, and I realize it’s somewhat personal—”

“Hailey.” Conner stopped, mouth open. “She texted earlier, said you two had had a little chat.”

“Did she.”

“Sure did.”

Conner waited for him to continue, but he seemed content with the looming silence. “Well?”

“Well what, Fishers?”

Conner struggled to get upright, positioning himself on his knees in the seat. “Well, why are you sleeping with Hefty Hailey McManus?”

Jordan laughed, as if the question were absurd. It would have been a year ago. “Why? Same reason you are, I expect. Bitch is a real diamond in the rough, right?”

Conner weighed his words. He hadn't confessed, quite. "I don't usually see you slumming when it comes to female companionship."

"Something else you and I have in common then, eh?" How long Conner had wanted to knock that insufferable smirk off this guy's face, he couldn't have said. But at that moment, the desire was stronger than at any previous moment he could recall.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that you seem to have pretty good taste in pussy, that's all. It's a compliment."

Conner scowled. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You come over here to pitch a fit that I'm sleeping with your girl, I praise her punani and you get offended?"

"Oh. I thought you meant..."

"Heather?"

Conner's eyes narrowed. "Why would you think I meant that?"

"Because she's been your sidepiece for the past two months?" Jordan tapped his chin pensively. "Or is Hailey the sidepiece, and Heather's the main? Semantics, I suppose..."

"Why are you sleeping with Hailey?!" Conner demanded.

But Jordan only laughed off his outburst. "You already asked, and I already answered."

"Come on, do you think I'm stupid? You and Hefty Hailey McManus?"

"What a hurtful nickname."

"One that I believe you came up with back in middle school, didn't you?"

"Did I?" This time Jordan looked like he might actually be thinking. "You know, to be fair, I think it only stuck because McKnight liked being called Hottie Hayleigh."

His coy act was infuriating – and Conner knew full well that was why he was doing it. Clinging to what calmness he had left, he kept his voice even. "Look, just be straight with me. I'm sincerely curious why a guy like you would give a girl like her a chance."

"Seriously? She's crazy hot. Most guys would kill to get with a girl like that."

Conner's head snapped back, but then he realized he'd just referenced Hayleigh McKnight in the previous sentence. Was he playing games? "No, I meant, McManus," he clarified.

"Ah, my bad. Well hey, you've been with her. Why the fuck do you need the appeal spelled out for you? That girl is the most enthusiastic lay at Northside, bar none."

"You'd know, wouldn't you."

This time, though, it was Jordan's turn to narrow his eyes. "What're you trying to say, Fishers?"

Conner was surprised he took offense; he'd had a reputation as a player since puberty. "Only that people say you... have a good time."

He downed the rest of his drink; once the whiskey face faded, the suspicious look was gone. "That I do, chiefy. That I do. Is that all you came down here to talk about? Looking for advice?" He was already pouring another.

"No. Just... surprised that a guy like you and a girl like Hailey would... you know..."

"Fuck?"

"Yeah. Fuck."

"Well, don't be. Maybe there was a time when I might have called her a fugly minotaur, but now, I like to think my eyes have been opened to what the little slutbag really has to offer. Now I see her for the prize she really is."

"Are you fucking with me or what?" Conner snapped.

"You sound upset, Fishers. You don't like being cucked, is that it? Well if you wanna settle this the old-fashioned way, we can do that."

The sudden edge in his tone made it clear what that way entailed. Conner wasn't afraid of Jordan; if Jordan was bigger, it wasn't by much, and they were of similar strength. A fight could go either way. But for one, Jordan was also friends with a good number of guys who could break Conner in half, and might be willing to do so for the hell of it. For two, it also wouldn't bring him any closer to knowing what he wanted to know.

"Look, if you really like Hailey, I won't try to get in your way, even if yeah, part of me wants to. I just didn't get it, and I was trying to get a feel for it."

"Maybe some things can't be explained," said Jordan turning that smirk on full strength.

That was as far as Conner ever got. He was only there for a few more minutes after that, only long enough to make a few more failed attempts at goading him into saying something and eventually to be intruded upon by Mrs. Lyons. She halfheartedly chastised her stepson for drinking from his father's bar – as if the source of the alcohol was her concern rather than the behavior itself – and Conner used her arrival to excuse himself. Jordan never budged from his seat, turning on the TV and propping his feet up as Conner departed.

"You're not staying?" asked Mrs. Lyons as she walked him downstairs.

"No. We didn't have that much to talk about."

In the foyer, she helped him back on with his jacket, her breasts brushing against his back as she adjusted his sleeves. "Don't be a stranger," she purred into his ear, then pinched him on the butt as he stumbled, confused, into the cool spring evening.

No wonder that guy was so messed up. But Conner knew his ignorance was feigned, which only made him more suspicious.

“Meh.” That response was the one that sealed it for him. Something wasn’t merely suspect; something was *wrong*.

It had started the previous night at home. Angelica had come in, and he pretended not to notice her disheveled outfit. She’d somehow gotten her own lipstick on part of the exposed portion of her chest – she was lucky their parents hadn’t been up to greet her.

“Have a good evening?” he asked.

“Not especially. And if you keep grinning like that, I’m going to punch you in the dick.”

So much for a little teasing. “Sorry. Hey, real quick,” he said, interposing himself in her path as she headed for her room, “can I ask you something?”

“Oh god, here we go.” She brushed past him and went right into her room, but to his surprise, she poked her head back into the hallway and gestured impatiently for him to follow.

“Thanks, Angelica.” He closed the door behind him, keeping his voice low. “You hang out with Hayleigh and Kirsten and Olivia and Jayce and Jordan and all them, right?”

“Yeah, sometimes. In school, anyway. Why? I can’t invite you to Kirsten’s party Saturday, all right? She gets fucking pissed when uninvited people show up, and... suffice to say I put up with enough shit from her as it is.” She suddenly seemed to notice the pink smear on her chest, and suddenly pulled her top up to conceal it.

“No, it’s not that. I actually wanted to ask you about somebody.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Oook. What’s up? You beefin’ with somebody?”

“No, not that. I just wondered if you’d noticed if Jordan’s been at all... different. Lately.”

“Eh. Not that I noticed.”

“Nothing weird? Is he seeing anybody that you know of?”

“Why would it be weird for him to be seeing someone?”

“No, it’s not, just... is he?”

She shrugged. “Iunno.”

“Got his eye on anybody?”

“Look, I really don’t have time to talk about this. If you just came to ask me about single guys, trust me, I got more than enough as it is. Not that it’s ever actually enough.” She flashed a mild glare, then brushed him right out the door.

The next morning, he vented to Owen by their lockers before class, telling him in hushed tones about Jordan and Hailey. “Huh.”

“Yeah, fucking creepy, right? I mean... do you think he knows? He *has* to know. But how?”

“Eh. Look, I gotta go – Kirsten gets pissy if I don’t walk her to first period.”

“Oh. Um, all right. We’ll talk over lunch.” But over lunch, Conner once more broached the subject, and Owen once more rolled his eyes and made an excuse to leave the table and join the cool kids. That was weird. Not sitting with Kirsten and them; that was normal, and if he sometimes missed his friend’s company, he wasn’t worried. The guy still lived across the street and they’d gotten better about making bro time as they adjusted to active sex lives. It was weird, however, for Owen to pass on an opportunity to vent about their shared dislikes. And when Conner tried to ask the rest of the gang who Jordan had been seeing lately, if anyone, they one and all ignored the question and started talking about how brutal the test in Dr. Laugherty’s class had been.

He texted Hailey. *Hey – you busy this afternoon?*

She replied quickly. *Nope! Why u wanna get busy w me? lol*

*haha just wondered if you and Jordan were doing anything – didn’t wanna be in the way*

She didn’t respond.

What the hell.

An hour later he got a reply of *so did you wanna do stuff? (if so im changing my name 2 stuff lol)* but he tabled it for the time being.

He got to yearbook early and pulled Kristy into the editor’s office. “Quick question, Kristy.”

“Am I wearing underwear? You tell me.” She grinned, stepping into him and giving a smoking hot kiss.

He couldn’t help but indulge the woman, groping her ass beneath her dress. “No you are not.”

“Rrrrr! Sorry, contestant, but the answer we were looking for was ‘thong.’” She pivoted, flashing her ass quickly to show him.

God, how could he be thinking of Jordan Lyons at a time like this. “And I look forward to learning more about it later, but I do have a question. Have you noticed anything weird about Jordan lately? Like the past few months.”

She shrugged. That was it. No words, just a shrug.

“What does that mean? I think there might be something wrong. He might have found out about TIOS, or at least part of it. Think hard – have you noticed *anything?*”

“Meh.”

Something was definitely wrong.

He gave it one last try as the classroom filled with the noise of the staff arriving. “Kristy, it would make me so, so happy if you could tell me anything you’ve noticed out of the ordinary about Jordan. Like, happier than I’ve ever been.”

She made a face to show how strange she found the statement, but she didn’t miss his obvious eagerness for information. “I don’t care enough about what he does to talk about it,” she said. “Sorry.”



It was like his stomach had dropped out of his belly and landed in his feet. This was unnatural – like she, and the others, were all under some sort of spell. Whenever he mentioned Jordan's name, they lost interest completely. While Conner wasn't exactly a theologian, he knew of only one power on earth that could have that effect on people. It was the one that had made Hailey McManus a sexual goddess, as Jordan had somehow discovered.

Jordan didn't so much as look at him as Kristy started class. His mind was racing so quickly he couldn't hear anything she was saying. Heather and Amanda strode in together, each wearing what was for the Pride a fairly modest outfit consisting of a spaghetti strap tank top two sizes too small and cut-off denim shorts. Conner barely noticed. Amanda smiled brightly at him as she took a seat at his side, but he couldn't return it. Not now.

In the middle of whatever their teacher was saying, he stood up and practically bolted for the editor's office. Heedless of the way everyone was looking after him, he threw himself into his desk and logged in. He was so impatient he mistyped his password twice before getting it right.

Nobody would talk about Jordan. He'd begged Kristy, and she refused. Why? Conner brought up Jordan's profile in TIOS, trying to see if he'd somehow written any quotes that might have this kind of an effect. At the top was the standard school picture with that unctuous smile, then the usual links to demographic information and the like, stuff Conner had long suspected he wasn't meant to have access to, but he'd never abused. At the bottom followed links to the spreads Jordan was tagged in. Track, homecoming court, Spanish club, yearbook... and then around a dozen others, each of them with gibberish titles. o8eltom, sofaab, ccon2se, cstacdx2...

There they were again. Those rogue files that alleged Conner himself had written them. They were blank though – he checked each of them and none of them had a word written. So why was Jordan tagged in them? TIOS' tagging system was brilliant. It recognized names, pictures, quotes, authors, editors, pretty much any connection between a person and a spread. He'd yet to see it get one wrong. So why were these blank pages registering a connection to Jordan?

He stared at the screen, but there was nothing to see. An empty white spread. He tabbed to the next, and other than the title, the screen didn't change. Then the next, then the next, then...

Wait.

He glanced at the title. ccon2se. Something had changed. He switched back and forth quickly until his eyes finally seized on the change, minute though it was. The scroll bar at the side had shortened, indicating that this spread had greater length. Sure enough, this one wasn't just blank... it was pages and pages of blank.

Curious, he tried double-clicking. Nothing. It only highlighted the nonexistent first character. Tried hitting ctrl+a to highlight the entire text to the same effect. Tried scrolling to the bottom to see what was extending the slide so much, and...

There it was. Or wasn't. It was still white space, but suddenly the cursor was blinking in the middle of a line that wasn't there – like someone had hit the space bar fifty times and he'd clicked in the middle of it. He hit the up button, and the blinking cursor steadily moved up the page until, near the top, it disappeared. He hit the down arrow and it reappeared; up and it was gone again. Years of experience editing similar files had taught Conner what that meant – something over the typed page. A text box, he soon realized. Sure enough, with a little fine adjustments of the mouse, he was able to locate the borders of it, and once he triple-checked to make sure it was blank, he deleted it. Not that TIOS would let him delete edits anyway.

Behind the text box, of all things, was a picture. From the color of the paint and the size of the bricks in the wall, he recognized it was somewhere in Northside, though he'd never seen this particular poster before. Students, leaning forward interestedly, a teacher standing by some anatomy diagrams. Zooming in, he made out the caption on the poster. *What happens in sex ed stays in sex ed.*

What was this? He remembered hearing how a number of students had to re-take sex ed, something about some licensure technicality involving Coach Conrad. But Conner had the Coach for class every day in his health and fitness class, and neither his office, nor the weight room, nor the gym, nor his classroom displayed such a poster. The thing was just creepy enough that he was sure he'd have remembered it.

But there was plenty more blank space to account for. Holding down the right arrow key, he watched as the cursor sped through the nothingness, noting how the length varied from line to line. What was this? He hit ctrl+a again to highlight it all, but it simply turned the typed-in areas light blue. It gave shape to this ghost spread, but nothing more. Why could he not see it? He even slowed down, highlighting one character at a time until he was certain some of them were different widths. This wasn't blank space. There were letters there, but he couldn't see them. Almost like...

Like they were the same color as the background.

He highlighted all text on the page and went to the menu to alter text color. Sure enough, it was set to white. Heart hammering in his chest, he altered it to black.

*“Jordan Lyons is the teacher of record for [Coach Conrad’s second period sexual education course].” – Deborah Prendergast*

*“You listen up when your teacher’s talking to you.” – Coach Conrad*

*“We’re not willing to fail sex ed!” – Maggie Bray*

*“Of course I’m going to give this class my best effort.” – Stacy Culpepper*

*“All students shall adhere to the following guidelines while present in this space: tops must show cleavage or closely outline the breasts. Bottoms must either end before*

*reaching the wearer's fingertips with arms hanging loosely at her sides, or must be leggings, stockings, or otherwise hold tightly against the skin. Undergarments may not be detectable by any means. Grooming, skin care and use of makeup is required. Legs and armpits must be shaved daily or waxed.*" – sex ed dress code, as read by Angelica Buck

Angelica?!

He read on and on, apprehension blooming into full-blown nausea. This was insane. Degrading. Impossible. Or, as Mr. Adler would have called it: unethical.

Jordan had turned Coach Conrad's sex ed period into his own private harem. And in that harem, he saw names too familiar. Angelica. Heather. Amanda. Kirsten. No Hailey, but somehow he must have managed to enslave her even outside the classroom. He sighed in relief that Kristy didn't seem to have been involved, but there were other girls he knew quoted here. Nice people. People who didn't deserve to be made into Jordan Lyon's sex ed practice dummies.

He switched to the other files, disabling their secrecy methods in the same fashion, and slowly getting some sense as to the file nomenclature. The spread named ccon2se seemed to deal with Coach Conrad's second period sex ed. cstacdx2 was entirely focused on Stacy Culpepper, beginning "*My boobs are basically just as big as Jennica's.*" Had they gotten bigger? With the shift in dress style by the Lady Nighthawks – the source of which he discovered as he continued reading – it was easy to get lost in all the skin casually displayed. sofaab was quotes from and about Abby Couch. DJfingablazt was a spread devoted to Jordan himself, though it seemed he'd used it sparingly. He saw there how he'd suppressed everyone's interest in talking to him with a snotty quote from Kirsten Vaughan, and a couple other compliments about Jordan's good looks and stamina to improve upon his baseline.

He saw in one file, dcna, how Jordan had sabotaged his efforts to banish the dress code. How could Conner have been so stupid? The creation date was the very same as the one Conner had made; he must have uploaded it that very same day, so that when his classmates came in dressed so alluringly, Conner would believe it had been a miscalculation on his end. The cunning behind Jordan's concealment of his misdeeds was rivaled only by the ambition of their reach.

It was hard to imagine how some of these words had ever been uttered ("*Why does [Abby's] mouth never smell like jizz after she sucks a guy off?*" – Olivia Snyder) but he could only imagine how these sorts of depraved, sexually charged alterations could snowball. Just being with Heather, Kristy and Hailey had given him a hundred different lines he could have used to do these kinds of things, if he'd shared Jordan's taste for such.

As he finished the spreads tagged under Jordan's name, he realized that wasn't all of the aberrant spreads. He brought up the master list of spreads for which Conner

himself was listed as author, and saw that among the scores of legitimate ones, there were half again as many more. Of course. Jordan's page would include spreads with his own name in them, but he'd made plenty of alterations that didn't involve himself. He stared at the coded names, trying to imagine how many lives had been transformed. How much shame and violation had transpired because of these pages.

He couldn't think right then how Jordan had gotten his password, or what had inspired him to try in the first place. The files all seemed to have save dates from mid-February or earlier, which was some relief. His password change must have succeeded in thwarting his usurper. To think it had been Jordan who'd made Owen in high demand by the women of Northside. Conner couldn't fathom the why of it in that moment, but it must have been something slimy. Still, for what looked to be a good five or six weeks, Jordan had enjoyed the unfettered power to turn any offhanded comment in his earshot into a hard reality. It appeared he'd even begun using his rudimentary image editing skills to begin to make some adjustments as well. He had done terrible things with his power.

Conner had to help these girls, to find the right quote and...

The nature of this bizarre alternate reality slammed home in an instant. TIOS didn't allow even the editor-in-chief to undo edits. Once these changes were made, they were final. That meant... no. It couldn't.

Only it did. Coach Conrad's second period class was permanently purposed to being a sexual playground for Jordan Lyons. These girls were physically and mentally formed into willing recipients of his attention. Until TIOS wore off, they—

He darted to the door to the office. "Kristy, Amanda, can I see the two of you in here?"

Miss C had been in the middle of a sentence when he'd interrupted her, and the whole class was staring up from their laptops, perplexed at his behavior and his use of their teacher's first name. "Why certainly, Mr. Fishers. Can it wait a few minutes?"

Her levity had seemed to relax the class, though he didn't miss the suspicious glare from Jordan. Good. Let him fester. "Sure. Sorry."

He went back to his desk and forced himself to continue seeing the alterations. They were entered now, but maybe he could find a way to mitigate them somehow. Some of them. At the very least, he had to make himself know. The Nighthawks deserved at least that much from him. So he read about Ashley LeBeau and her candy-flavored pussy. How Sydney Genovese would fuck anyone who offered to buy her dinner. That his own Heather Blake would do practically anything for an A. What exceeded "practically anything" he didn't know, but he'd seen enough to be sure Jordan had used Heather, as he had Hailey and Amanda and Angelica and the rest.

He looked again at dp18, the earliest file created. What on earth was it that Jordan and Mrs. Prendergast had done? Perhaps the guidance counselor had somehow

been complicit in setting up his so-called class, though he couldn't imagine why she'd agree to such a thing. He'd have to spend more time piecing things together later.

He was most of the way through these nightmarish discoveries when the door swung open, and in came Amanda and Kristy. Oh, Amanda. He hadn't seen a file devoted to her, but that she'd been in the class! And what she must have endured without him knowing!

"Can you shut the door?" he asked. According to the clock, class was nearly over. He needed to be quick, and be able to be blunt.

Kristy complied. "Sure. Everything OK, Conner? You look kinda pale."

"I'm... look, it doesn't matter. We need to talk about this situation with the ASAL."

Both women smiled brightly. "We sure do. Great work on that, Amanda. I owe you – the yearbook owes you," said Kristy, patting her pupil's bare shoulder.

"Thanks. I was thinking we may want to schedule time with Carrie in the next couple weeks so Conner and I can go over some of the higher tier functionalities of the software with her. It's mostly the same, but even since yesterday when my account was upgraded to editor-in-chief I've seen new—"

"We can't continue it," he interjected.

Both looked at him with stunned expressions. "What? Why not?"

Kristy nodded. "Yeah. Coming from you, that's rather unexpected. I thought you'd been rather... *happy* with TIOS. I know *I* have been."

He hadn't had time to think about her feelings on the subject, though he wasn't at all surprised she'd want to keep going. It might be weird to acknowledge it, but Conner knew that her time with him was Kristy's biggest motivating factor waking up in the morning, and no doubt she'd miss it next year.

"I... we can't. Neither of you responded to the email yet, right?"

"I told them it sounded great, but I'd need time to confer with the two of you."

He winced. "Amanda?"

"I gave it my blessing, actually," answered Amanda. "You seemed so excited about it yesterday, and I never... I'm sorry. I didn't realize there was more to discuss."

"I know. But... some of the *files* have been corrupted." He looked hard at Kristy, trying to speak through his eyes. "Big-time. And there doesn't seem to be a way to uncorrupt them without resetting everything to 1.0 status, or however they put it."

"I'm sure there's a way," argued Amanda. "Conner, giving up this software, it'd be shooting ourselves in the foot. Or rather, shooting Carrie and next year's staff in theirs."

"Carrie's not going to be an editor-in-chief."

"Well yeah, but she'll still benefit from all the enhanced operations."

He looked again to their teacher. "I'm telling you, there are *real problems* and they need to be allowed to be reset."

Kristy picked up on his inflection. “Amanda, can you give us a minute?”

“Um sure. The bell’s about to ring, actually – you going to need me for anything after?”

“No, we’ll figure out that other thing Monday. Take the weekend off.”

She grabbed her bag from her desk but stopped at the door and looked back at Conner. “And, um, did you want me for anything else?”

In the chaos of the past twenty-four hours, he’d nearly forgotten their moment together the day before. Little had been said, but more certainly needed to be. After what she’d suffered at Jordan’s hands, she deserved someone who actually cared about her, and whom she cared about in return. A connection not forced by some ghastly software bug.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind waiting for me, I very much want to talk to you.” He had a lot to tell her, actually, and he didn’t even know what he was going to say when it came to any romantic feelings they might share.

She smiled. Lord, she was beautiful, though. “K. I’ll wait for you in the hall.”

Only when the door was closed again behind her did he speak again, and it was to show Kristy what he had discovered. She gaped in horror at it, though he didn’t even take the time to show her the worst of it. That horrid ccon2se spread would be a permanent stain in the history of Northside High.

“That’s why we need it to reset. You can see all of it later, but... you see why we need to end it, right?”

“But can’t you just delete the files? Edit them yourself?”

“No. I tried. Believe me, I tried. The files think I wrote and edited them – crazy as that sounds – so they won’t let anyone modify them again. Same as when I, erm, edited you, back in October. Now we need to figure out what we’re going to do about Jordan. He can’t be allowed to get away with this.”

Suddenly, Kristy had to cover a yawn. “Bleh, sorry. What were you saying?”

Right. Even now, she couldn’t bring herself to talk about Jordan. “Never mind. I’ll handle him myself.”

“Eh, whatever floats your boat.” She kissed his forehead. Her disgust over what she’d read was already gone from her face, as if the reminder that it had been Jordan’s doing had made her lose all interest.

She preceded him into the classroom, and the bell rang right as she stepped out. “All right gang – remember, quiz Monday on the six required elements. But for now, you’re just required to have a good weekend!”

Several students spoke parting words to her in return as they grabbed their things and made for the door. Kristy followed after them, for once attending to her expectation of hall monitoring instead of necking with her favorite student. Jordan, however, didn’t get up from his seat, nor did he look up from whatever he was doing; his desk was

pointed right at where Conner was standing, but his attention was entirely directed at the screen in front of him. From anyone else on staff, Conner would have been pleased to see such a look of dedication to their work.

“Jordan, can I see you in my office?”

“I’m kind of in the middle of something here, chiefy. If you got something to say, here is as good as anywhere.”

Fine. Let the little son of a bitch pick the site of his grave. Conner gave it a moment for the last couple stragglers to leave, following to the door and shutting it. The two of them were alone.

“I know what you did,” Conner said.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Jordan said, still typing.

“I found what you tried to hide in ccon2se. And the rest. I’ve seen it all, Jordan. I know.”

With a final few keystrokes, Jordan looked up, grinning like a toddler who’d figured out how to get at the cookie jar and couldn’t comprehend he wasn’t meant to. “Took you long enough. You know, I always figured that once you put your mind to it, you’d figure me out in no time. Looks like I was right after all. To think, if that dumb cunt Hailey hadn’t ripped my boxers off, you might never have been burdened with the truth.”

“You’re not as sneaky as you think you are. I’ve been onto you for a while now. Your little stunt, making the girls here dress like this? Making Owen irresistible to girls?”

“*Some* girls.”

“How’d you sneak by me at King of Hearts? Into the ceiling tiles?”

Jordan snorted. “Nothing so impressive.” He pointed to the curtain by the yearbook room. “Turns out it’s not only useful for listening to pussies get shut down by girls outside their league. Makes for a damn good hiding spot, too.”

Conner glared at the curtain; that was twice it had foiled him by concealing Jordan Lyons. But he hadn’t forgotten what the real target of his wrath was. “Well at least I was able to get Heather to want me for who I am. I didn’t need to use TIOS to make her submit to being raped.”

“You didn’t?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You sure?” That smirk.

“What do you mean?” He supposed that while his password had been compromised, Jordan had had as much access to his own edits as he now had to Jordan’s. “Oh, that whole ‘I trust you’ thing? That had nothing to do with it.”

“I know it didn’t. Wanna know what did?”

“I don’t what you’re trying to pull, but I’m not falling for it.”

“It’s right there in black and white, Conner. In the King of Hearts spread. The normal one, no stupid codes. Go on, look.”

Conner eyed him hard, but when he didn’t flinch he irritably retrieved his laptop from his office and pulled up the indicated spread. Pictures of people dancing, a few quotes, that pic of the new and improved Amanda, a couple paragraphs about the occasion... nothing.

“There’s nothing here.”

“Oh come on. Look closer. Show me you’re capable of learning as well as lecturing, chiefy.”

Conner looked for a moment, then realized what he needed to do. Sure enough, there at the end, white text on a white background...

“No. This isn’t real. You faked this. Somehow.”

“How – and why – would I fake that, Fishers.”

“You had to. This isn’t why...”

*“That girl Conner was dancing with, she’s super into him.” – Miranda Whitehall*

He’d danced with three girls that night. First Kristy before heading up to the gym. Then Heather on the dance floor, and finally Amanda in the lobby. Less than a week later, Kristy had opened her home and her bed to him, and Heather had recanted her rejection. And... oh god. Amanda. All this time, all her hurt feelings over his slights, the way she’d been throwing herself at him, that dinner date joke that he could see now had been anything but!

“See, Fishers? Felt pretty good, didn’t it? And you don’t hear your bitches complaining about it either. Victimless crimes, one and all. Nobody but you and me knows it’s anything but hormones run amok. You got your bitches, and I got mine.”

“It’s not the same!” Conner roared. Because it couldn’t be.

“What’s the difference, then? ‘Cause I don’t see it.”

“The difference is, you made people do this. You knowingly turned these girls into sex objects!”

“I prefer the term fuck toys.”

“I never did that! If things with me and Heather have any connection to TIOS, it’s because you made her do that, too!”

“Only Heather? What about when you fucked Miss C? Right there in your office, wasn’t it? The first time, anyway. The way she was purring, I bet it wasn’t the last, you dog, you. How was she? I always figured she’d sag without a bra on. Was I wrong?”

“How... how did you know about that?”

“You don’t remember? The little cunt said I had to apologize for showing everybody what a little pussy you were after Heather shot your ass down, or else I’d get suspended for a week. They were supposed let me out of the in-school suspension room



to do it during class, but they didn't, so I tried to catch you after school. Imagine my surprise when I find you balls deep in that slut's throat."

Jordan scratched some small itch on his chin with a look of intense satisfaction as he continued. "But I'm sure she'd have blown you if not for 'all I want is to make you happy, Conner.'" He imitated Kristy's voice in a mocking falsetto. "And before you give me more shit for how it's different, tell me again what you did once you realized you turned Hefty Hailey into a babe. Was that on purpose, by the way? I've been dying to ask."

Conner's mind was reeling so fast, he answered without thinking. "No. I... felt bad for her. Switched them one afternoon just thinking, 'man, think how her life would have been different if she looked like *that*.' And then she did."

"And look how much her life changed!" Jordan declared, eyes twinkling. "Got not one, but two guys looking to fuck her nympho brains out. Best thing you ever did for her! And Hayleigh's still living her same bitchy life, too, content as ever. I'm telling you man—"

"Shut up!" Conner stormed to Jordan's desk, looming over him. "What I did and what you did are not the same thing. Sure, maybe I... took advantage. But Hailey had a crush on me even before I did that. And Heather and Kristy, those changes were accidents, too. Plus, I actually tried to do some good with TIOS. What good did you ever use this for except for your own?"

"Ya got me there. Say, why don't you give me your password again and I'll get right on that."

"It ends now," Conner said, glowering. "You outsmarted me, and you did some terrible things. But even if I can't undo the damage you've done, I can still stop you from doing any more. And after graduation, this is all undone anyway. I almost wish they'd remember what you've done to them, just to see you dragged out of that mansion of yours and dragged through town by every hot girl at Northside."

"Wait, it resets at graduation?" Jordan frowned unhappily. It was immensely satisfying.

"That's right, it does. We could extend it, if Miss C, Amanda and I unanimously wanted to, but there's no way I'm letting this go on for a second longer than I have to. And rest assured that between then and now, I'll be looking to disrupt everything you've put in motion as best I can."

"Hang on. So you're saying graduation will happen, and after that, people will go on with their lives not knowing or caring what either of us have done?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

"Then if it's all temporary and nobody gets to keep the memories, what the fuck does it matter how we used it?!"

"Uh, what?"

Jordan rolled his eyes at Conner's denseness. "You say you went out and played Mother Teresa. Great. But if it's all undone in two months, all you did was make yourself feel better! And all I've done was make myself feel better!"

"Spin this however you want, Jordan. But without my say-so, this all ends June 8<sup>th</sup>, and I'll never give this rape class you've created my consent."

Conner pointedly walked over to the sign out sheet for Miss C's laptops, writing his name and computer number and the date. He tucked the laptop casually into his backpack and slung it over his shoulder, all the while basking in the heat of Jordan's glower. Leave it to Jordan Lyons to feel like he'd been victimized under these circumstances.

"Wait."

Conner paused at the door. "I'm not changing my mind, Jordan. Nothing you say can make me. As soon as I get home, I'm going to start getting creative about how to wreck your little fun. Maybe I'll see if I can find a nice photo of you and digitally edit out your cock."

"You won't."

"You don't think I would?"

"No, I don't think you *can*." As Conner eyed him curiously, Jordan spun his laptop to face the editor-in-chief. TIOS was open. He had to walk closer to read it.

*"I won't try to get in your way [Jordan], even if yeah, part of me wants to."* –  
*Conner Fishers*

He frowned, not at all liking the way his name looked in that framework he'd been looking at for the past hour. "I did say that, didn't I. Too bad you don't have my password any more, though, or that might actually stop me."

Jordan stood up, too calmly retrieving his jacket from where it was slung over the back of his desk. "Oh, I don't need ito Not any more. You see, I got Amanda's."

Conner froze. "You... no."

"I yes, Fishers." He slapped Conner affably on the shoulder. "I named the spread bulletproof. I know, not as coded as most of 'em, but hey, why bother any more, right?"

Conner wanted to hit him, more than he'd ever wanted to hit anyone in his life. Instead, as Jordan started walking toward the door, Conner realized where he was standing, and quickly shuffled out of the boy's path.

"It's been fun, Fishers. And remember, before you go trying to get creative, remember, I can get all sorts of creative, too. So you leave me alone, and I won't ruin your life, OK? I mean probably." He laughed.

"You have nine weeks, Jordan. Nine weeks, and it's all over." Conner couldn't make himself take a swing at the son of a bitch, couldn't imagine actually acting on any of the threats he'd made mere moments ago, but that didn't mean he had to help him

along, either. He could let TIOS expire, and starting on June 8<sup>th</sup>, there would be plenty of time to settle scores. “Without my consent—”

“I know, I know, it takes both of you and Miss C to extend it,” he said, then explained, “Amanda was good enough to let me read her email while I was fucking that pretty face of hers yesterday. Which I recommend, by the way.”

“You’re a monster. And soon, you won’t have anywhere left to hide.”

“Hey, that’s your call, buddy. But before you make your determination, you may wanna take a good look at Amanda’s profile.” He opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. “Oh hey, Amanda. You look amazing today, by the way. Conner’ll be out soon; he just needs another minute.”

The door shut before there was a reply.

What could he mean by that?

He got his laptop back out and logged in. As he waited for TIOS to load, he could make out Amanda and Kristy’s voices in the hallway, talking shop. With the program loaded, he first went straight to the “bulletproof” spread. His finger hovered over the delete key, but... he couldn’t bring himself to press it. He didn’t even think it would let him if he did, but undoing this would definitely mean him getting in Jordan’s way.

It was done, and he was trapped.

Lightheaded from the implications, he took a few breaths and then did as Jordan had suggested. With a few keystrokes he arrives at Amanda’s profile. There was her picture; unlike other students, it was a shot of her sitting on a picnic bench outdoors somewhere, smiling at nothing. Clearly posed. While unusual, it wasn’t aberrant; new students wouldn’t have photos from picture day, and while for the others it meant a blank gray box until retake day later this month, Amanda, editor-in-chief of the yearbook, could easily insert one of herself. Nothing strange there.

He scrolled down and browsed through the spreads she was tagged in. It was significantly less than on his own page, but he had a semester more time as editor-in-chief. Plus she had a handful from all those horrors imposed by Jordan. He saw she was tagged in several of those as well; he’d read them all already, and didn’t have the stomach to reread them so soon.

So what had he been referencing? Was it her self-edits, the beautification? Yes, she was undeniably more attractive now, but she’d always been quite pretty. The prospect of her reverting to her old self was not worrisome to him in the least, especially considering that so far, the closest they’d come to intimacy was a single kiss, followed almost two months later by a back rub. At this rate, they might get around to some heavy petting by the time he finished college.

Something in Jordan’s tone, though, made him keep looking. Spread after spread yielded nothing, save for increasing his admiration for her skill at the craft. When he ran

out of spreads he started looking for other places to click. He could edit her picture, send her a message, comment on her work, suggest an edit, check her personal info...

At his wit's end, he clicked on that last button. There it was, the usual screenful of demographic information, a series of boxes that summarized a person in the least personal way possible. Weirdly, in here her profile picture wasn't a picture, but rather a link. He clicked on it, and it opened a browser showing the same picture of Amanda on the picnic bench, but strangely, the photo in the website seemed to be of the original Amanda, bereft of those subtle but unmistakable changes she'd made. Stranger still, the image was posted on a stock photo site. It was tagged *pretty teenage girl, smiling, outdoors, long legs, red hair*.

Was she in modeling? She'd never mentioned as such. And why hadn't this image changed like all the others had? Puzzled, he closed the browser window and went back to TIOS and began to read down the page. Yet with each line, his sense of foreboding only grew.

Name: Carpenter, Amanda Renee

Gender: F

Race: White/Caucasian

DoB: –

SS: ### ## ####

Mother's/Guardian 1 name: –

Mother's/Guardian 1 cell: –

Mother's/Guardian 1 email: –

Father's/Guardian 2 name: –

Father's/Guardian 2 cell: –

Father's/Guardian 2 email: –

Emergency contact: –

Address: –

Home phone: –

Cell: 248-0989

Email: arcarpe@student.northside.k12.us

Date of enrollment: 1/8/19

Previous schools attended: N/A

GPA: 0.0

Transfer Credit Hours Completed: 0

Credit Hours Completed: 0

Vaccinations: –

Free/reduced meal status: –

Additional Comments:

*“Wait, we’re getting a second editor-in-chief?”*

*“Yeah, that’s what I heard somebody saying. I guess she’s new.”*

*“Who is he?”*

*“She.”*

*“Whatever. Do we know anything about her?”*

*“Not much. I heard she’s basically like a female version of Conner.”*

*– Marisa Garcia and Don Egerton*

The door to the classroom swung open, and suddenly there she was, the new and improved her – not the original girl, the anonymous teen model whose likeness had been swiped and fed into TIOS. This girl, this Amanda Carpenter was smiling radiantly.

“Hey, Conner. You wanted to tell me something?”