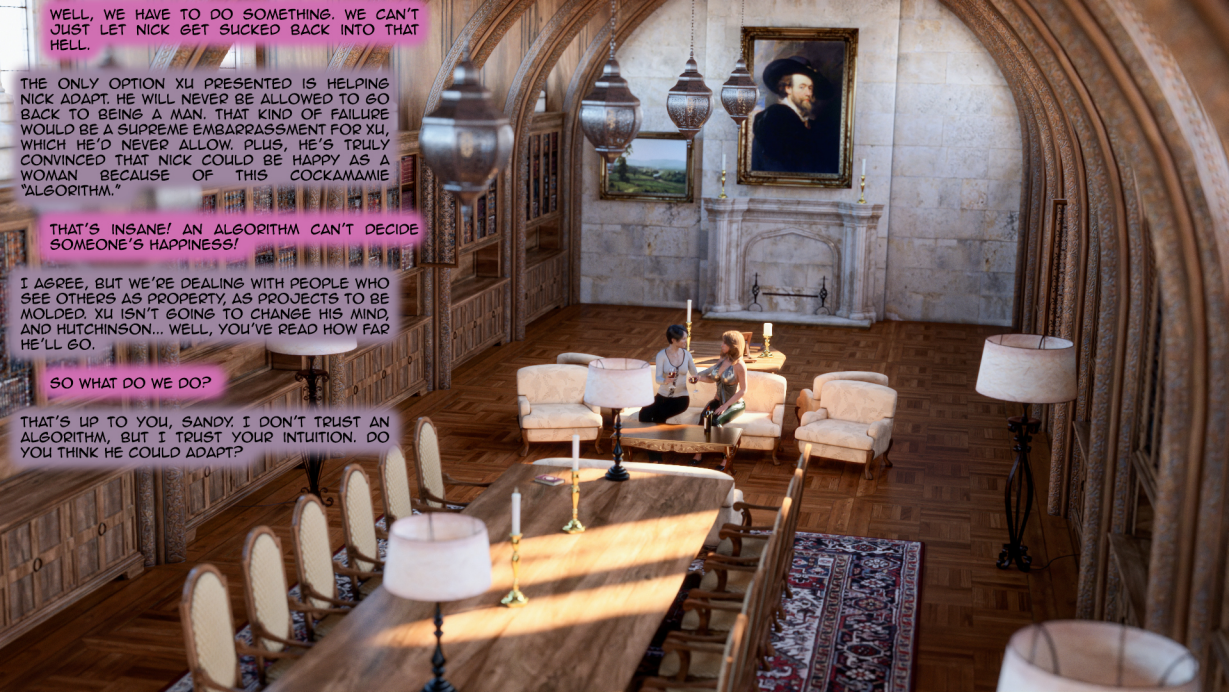
HALF SISTERS

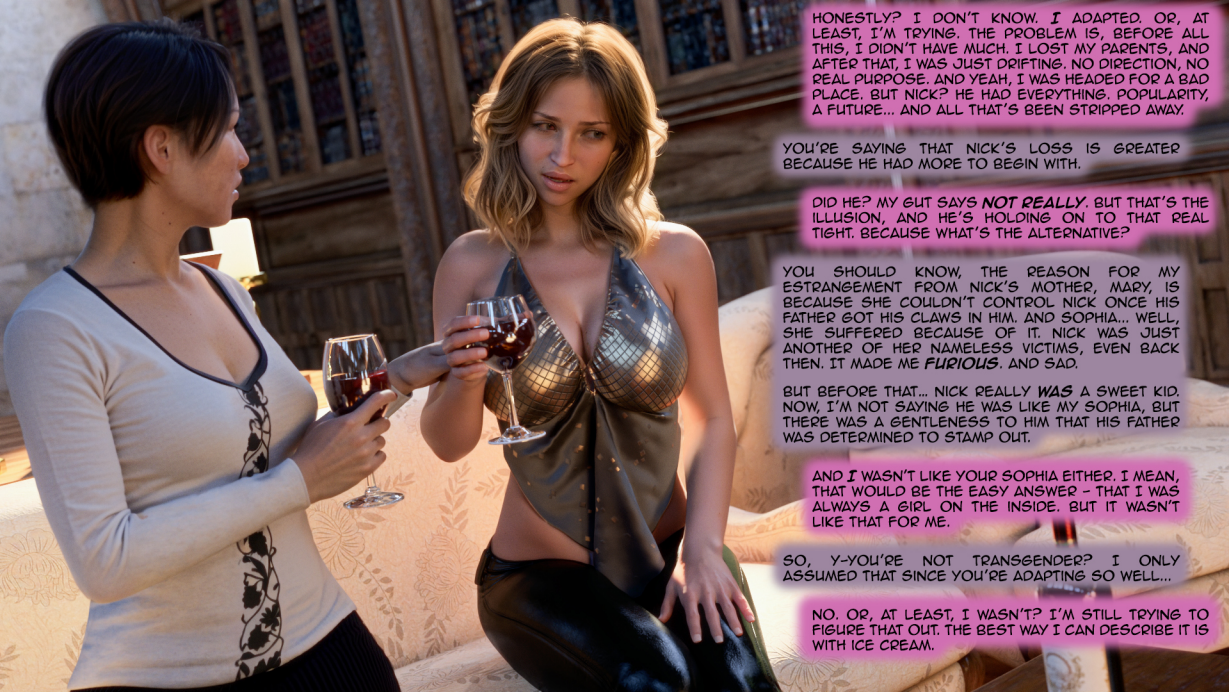
by Emory Ahlberg

Episode #11

Getting Ready for Her First Date


SO THAT'S WHAT I GOT FROM NICK LAST NIGHT. HE'S IN A REALLY DARK PLACE RIGHT NOW. LIKE, HE'S EVEN WONDERING IF HE SOMEHOW DESERVED THIS.
IT'S A COMMON REACTION FOR VICTIMS OF TRAUMA. THEY OFTEN INTERNALIZE THE BLAME, TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF A SENSELESS SITUATION.
THE STUFF YOU TOLD ME ABOUT XU'S WARNING, ABOUT WHAT COULD HAPPEN IF NIKKI DOESN'T "ADAPT" QUICKLY ENOUGH... IT'S TERRIFYING. GOD, I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS ALL REAL. THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE OUT THERE WHO THINK THEY CAN JUST... KIDNAP AND CHANGE A PERSON, THEN SELL THEM.
THE WEALTHY AND POWERFUL HAVE ALWAYS FOUND WAYS TO INDULGE THEIR MOST DEPRAVED DESIRES. SECOND DAWN JUST STREAMLINED THE PROCESS - AND SWAPPED THE SEX OF THOSE MOST OFTEN AFFECTED.


WELL, WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING. WE CAN'T JUST LET NICK GET SUCKED BACK INTO THAT HELL.
THE ONLY OPTION XU PRESENTED IS HELPING NICK ADAPT. HE WILL NEVER BE ALLOWED TO GO BACK TO BEING A MAN. THAT KIND OF FAILURE WOULD BE A SUPREME EMBARRASSMENT FOR XU, WHICH HE'D NEVER ALLOW. PLUS, HE'S TRULY CONVINCED THAT NICK COULD BE HAPPY AS A WOMAN BECAUSE OF THIS COCKAMAMIE "ALGORITHM."
THAT'S INSANE! AN ALGORITHM CAN'T DECIDE SOMEONE'S HAPPINESS!
I AGREE, BUT WE'RE DEALING WITH PEOPLE WHO SEE OTHERS AS PROPERTY, AS PROJECTS TO BE MOLDED. XU ISN'T GOING TO CHANGE HIS MIND, AND HUTCHINSON... WELL, YOU'VE READ HOW FAR HE'LL GO.
SO WHAT DO WE DO?
THAT'S UP TO YOU, SANDY. I DON'T TRUST AN ALGORITHM, BUT I TRUST YOUR INTUITION. DO YOU THINK HE COULD ADAPT?


HONESTLY? I DON'T KNOW. I ADAPTED. OR, AT LEAST, I'M TRYING. THE PROBLEM IS, BEFORE ALL THIS, I DIDN'T HAVE MUCH. I LOST MY PARENTS, AND AFTER THAT, I WAS JUST DRIFTING. NO DIRECTION, NO REAL PURPOSE. AND YEAH, I WAS HEADED FOR A BAD PLACE. BUT NICK? HE HAD EVERYTHING. POPULARITY, A FUTURE... AND ALL THAT'S BEEN STRIPPED AWAY.
YOU'RE SAYING THAT NICK'S LOSS IS GREATER BECAUSE HE HAD MORE TO BEGIN WITH.
DID HE? MY GUT SAYS NOT REALLY. BUT THAT'S THE ILLUSION, AND HE'S HOLDING ON TO THAT REAL TIGHT. BECAUSE WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?
YOU SHOULD KNOW, THE REASON FOR MY ESTRANGEMENT FROM NICK'S MOTHER, MARY, IS BECAUSE SHE COULDN'T CONTROL NICK ONCE HIS FATHER GOT HIS CLAWS IN HIM. AND SOPHIA... WELL, SHE SUFFERED BECAUSE OF IT. NICK WAS JUST ANOTHER OF HER NAMELESS VICTIMS, EVEN BACK THEN. IT MADE ME FURIOUS. AND SAD.
BUT BEFORE THAT... NICK REALLY WAS A SWEET KID. NOW, I'M NOT SAYING HE WAS LIKE MY SOPHIA, BUT THERE WAS A GENTLENESS TO HIM THAT HIS FATHER WAS DETERMINED TO STAMP OUT.
AND I WASN'T LIKE YOUR SOPHIA EITHER. I MEAN, THAT WOULD BE THE EASY ANSWER - THAT I WAS ALWAYS A GIRL ON THE INSIDE. BUT IT WASN'T LIKE THAT FOR ME.
SO, Y-YOU'RE NOT TRANSGENDER? I ONLY ASSUMED THAT SINCE YOU'RE ADAPTING SO WELL...
NO. OR, AT LEAST, I WASN'T? I'M STILL TRYING TO FIGURE THAT OUT. THE BEST WAY I CAN DESCRIBE IT IS WITH ICE CREAM.

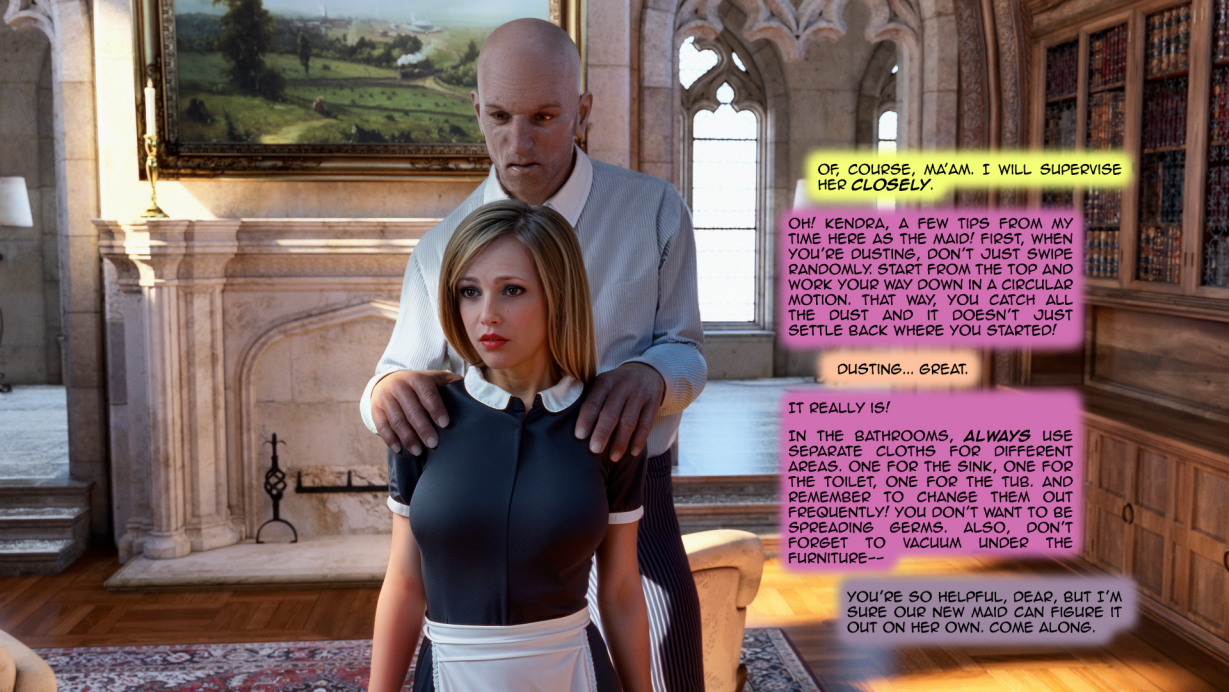

ICE CREAM?
YEAH! FOR ME, BEING A GUY WAS LIKE HAVING VANILLA ICE CREAM. IT WAS FINE, I LIKED IT OKAY – NOT MY FAVORITE THING IN THE WORLD, BUT IT WAS WHAT I KNEW.
BUT NOW, IT'S LIKE SOMEONE'S HANDED ME ROCKY ROAD. AND DAMN, THAT'S JUST BETTER. IT'S RICHER, MORE COMPLEX. IT HAS NUTS.
BUT FOR NICK, IT'S LIKE THEY TOOK AWAY HIS VANILLA AND REPLACED IT WITH A BIG OL' SCOOP OF DOGSHIT.
SANDY, LANGUAGE!
NICK HASN'T BEEN GIVEN ANYTHING TO ADAPT TO – NOTHING BUT PAIN AND LOSS. AND TRYING TO CONVINCE HIM THAT DOG POO IS JUST ANOTHER FLAVOR OF ICE CREAM WON'T WORK.


I GUESS WHAT I'M SAYING IS THAT IF THERE *REALLY* ISN'T ANY CHOICE, I'LL SHOW NICK HOW COOL BEING A GIRL CAN BE. I MEAN, I'M STILL NEW AT IT MYSELF... THAT'S WHY I'LL RECRUIT HELP.
BUT, MRS. FERRIS... *M-MOM*, IF THIS GETS WORSE, PROMISE ME WE'LL PULL THE PLUG AND FIGURE SOMETHING ELSE OUT. EVEN IF IT'S DRASTIC. EVEN IF IT'S *EXPENSIVE*.


OH, GOD, SWEETIE. UM... *SNIFF*
SORRY, YES. I SWEAR. BUT SANDY, THIS IS GOING TO BE CHALLENGING FOR BOTH OF YOU.
YEAH, WELL, I'M GETTING USED TO CHALLENGES. BUT NICK CAN'T STAY IN THAT PSYCHO'S HOUSE. SO... I WANT HIM AS MY ROOMMATE IN MY DORM. IT MAY DRIVE ME CRAZY, BUT I THINK IT'S THE BEST WAY TO HELP HIM ADJUST. AND FOR THAT TO HAPPEN, YOU'LL HAVE TO TALK TO AND CONVINCE HUTCHINSON THAT IT'S A GOOD IDEA.
CONVINCING LEONARD IS NEVER EASY. BUT I STILL HAVE SOME FINANCIAL AND... PERSONAL... PULL WITH HIM.
HIM!? YOU AND HUTCHINSON? GROSS!
IT WAS A LONG TIME AGO. ANYWAY, YES, I'LL TALK TO HIM.
THANK YOU.


MORTIMER! CALL LOGAN AND GET THE JET READY. WE'RE HEADED BACK TO TEXAS.


OH, AND YOU'RE IN CHARGE OF *THE STAFF* WHILE WE'RE GONE.


OF, COURSE, MA'AM. I WILL SUPERVISE HER CLOSELY.
OH! KENDRA, A FEW TIPS FROM MY TIME HERE AS THE MAID! FIRST, WHEN YOU'RE DUSTING, DON'T JUST SWIPE RANDOMLY. START FROM THE TOP AND WORK YOUR WAY DOWN IN A CIRCULAR MOTION. THAT WAY, YOU CATCH ALL THE DUST AND IT DOESN'T JUST SETTLE BACK WHERE YOU STARTED!
DUSTING... GREAT.
IT REALLY IS!
IN THE BATHROOMS, ALWAYS USE SEPARATE CLOTHS FOR DIFFERENT AREAS. ONE FOR THE SINK, ONE FOR THE TOILET, ONE FOR THE TUB. AND REMEMBER TO CHANGE THEM OUT FREQUENTLY! YOU DON'T WANT TO BE SPREADING GERMS. ALSO, DON'T FORGET TO VACUUM UNDER THE FURNITURE--
YOU'RE SO HELPFUL, DEAR, BUT I'M SURE OUR NEW MAID CAN FIGURE IT OUT ON HER OWN. COME ALONG.


SANDY, DEAR, I'M CURIOUS. NICK GAVE AWAY HIS TRUCK TO THAT POOR...MAN. HOW DID HE GET AWAY FROM THE RANCH?
YOU KNOW... HE DIDN'T SAY!










HEY SCOTT,
WHAT, YOU WANT ME TO GIVE AWAY ALL MY SECRETS? ISN'T YOUR LIFE EXCITING ENOUGH? UGH, FINE. I GOT OUT OF THAT SHITSTORM AT THE HUTCHINSON RANCH LIKE THE BORN AND BRED TEXAS BADASS THAT I AM – BY RIDING OUT OF THERE ON A GODDAMN HORSE!
REMEMBER THAT GELDING, SNOWFALL, THAT PSYCHO HUTCHINSON GAVE ME? WELL, AFTER ZACH LAID OUT HIS DAD, I KNEW I HAD TO BOLT BEFORE SLEEPING UGLY WOKE UP AGAIN. JANICE TOOK MY TRUCK, SO I RAN BACK UP TO THE STABLE. THAT'S WHEN I SAW SNOWFALL, JUST CHILLING IN HIS PADDOCK LIKE HE WAS WAITING FOR ME.



I HOPPED ON BAREBACK AND WE HAULED ASS OUT OF THERE. I FELT LIKE ZORRO OR SOME SHIT, RIDING OFF INTO THE SUNSET... EXCEPT I WAS RIDING AWAY FROM A MANSION OF HORRORS AND IT WAS STILL THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY. DETAILS.

WE RODE AROUND FOR A FEW HOURS. JUST HAVING FUN, YOU KNOW. BUT I OBVIOUSLY I COULDN'T BRING SNOWFALL HOME. MY DAD WOULD LOSE HIS MIND, AND WE DON'T EXACTLY HAVE STABLES IN THE SUBURBS.

THEN I REMEMBERED THIS HORSE DUDE WHO LIVED (SORTA) NEARBY. HIS NAME WAS TREVINO, AND HE HAD THIS LITTLE RANCH WHERE I LEARNED TO RIDE AS A KID. MY MOM USED TO TAKE ME THERE WHEN SHE WAS LEADING HER GIRL SCOUT TROOP. YEAH, YEAH, LAUGH IT UP. LITTLE NICK HANGING OUT WITH THE GIRL SCOUTS. BUT HEY, THAT'S HOW I LEARNED TO TALK TO GIRLS IN THE FIRST PLACE AND WHERE I MET LAUREN. SHE WAS PRETTY COOL BACK THEN – NOT LIKE THE STUCK-UP BITCH SHE IS NOW!



ANYWAY, I FIGURED TREVINO MIGHT BE WILLING TO TAKE IN SNOWFALL, AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE. SO I POINTED MY NEW HORSE FRIEND IN THAT DIRECTION AND LET HIM DO HIS THING. IT WAS LIKE HE KNEW EXACTLY WHERE TO GO. SMART HORSE.

WHEN WE GOT TO TREVINO'S PLACE, THOUGH, I BARELY RECOGNIZED IT. THE RANCH LOOKED... WELL, KINDA FUCKED. THE FENCE WAS FALLING APART, THE BARN NEEDED A NEW COAT OF PAINT (OR THREE), AND THE WHOLE PLACE JUST HAD THIS SAD, NEGLECTED VIBE.

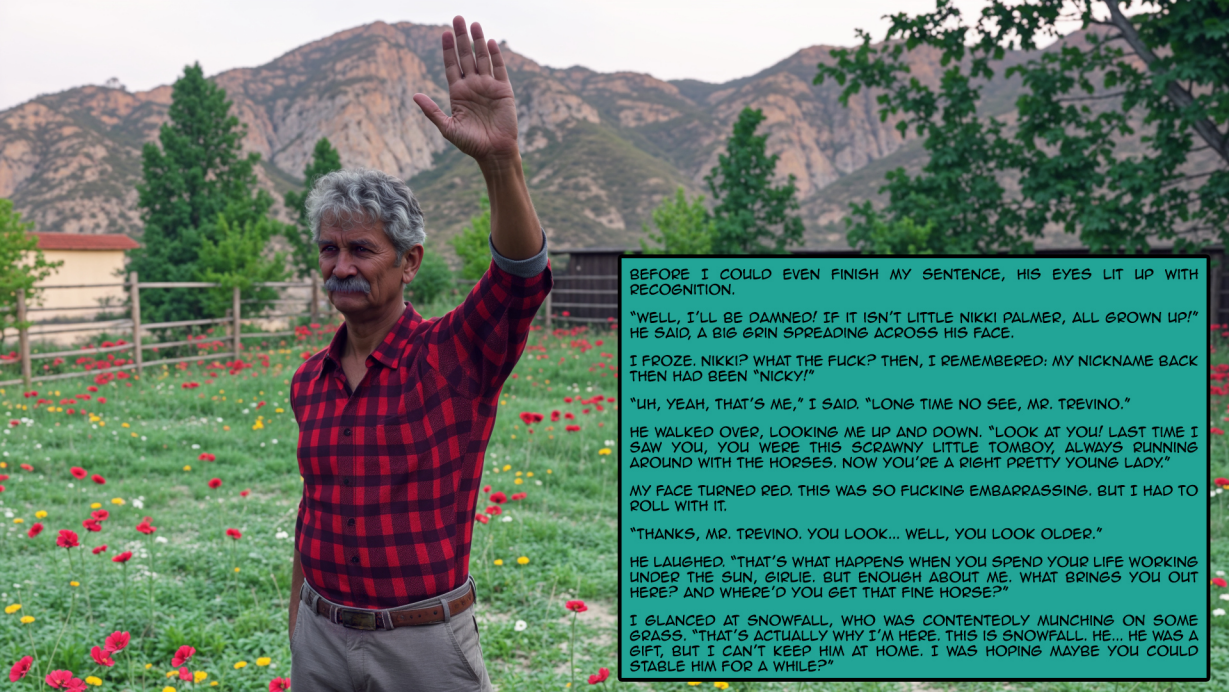


THE GATE WAS OPEN, SO I RODE INSIDE. THERE WAS ANOTHER HORSE THERE, BUT NOBODY ELSE. I WAS JUST ABOUT TO LEAVE WHEN TREVINO CAME OUT, LOOKING OLDER AND WAS MORE WEATHERED THAN I REMEMBERED. HE SQUINTED AT ME, LIKE HE WAS TRYING TO PLACE MY FACE.

"CAN I HELP YOU, MISS?" HE ASKED, HIS VOICE ALL GRAVELLY.

I CLEARED MY THROAT, SUDDENLY REALIZING I HAD TO COME UP WITH A COVER STORY...

"HI, MR. TREVINO, I'M--"



BEFORE I COULD EVEN FINISH MY SENTENCE, HIS EYES LIT UP WITH RECOGNITION.

"WELL, I'LL BE DAMNED! IF IT ISN'T LITTLE NIKKI PALMER, ALL GROWN UP!" HE SAID, A BIG GRIN SPREADING ACROSS HIS FACE.

I FROZE. NIKKI? WHAT THE FUCK? THEN, I REMEMBERED: MY NICKNAME BACK THEN HAD BEEN "NICKY!"

"UH, YEAH, THAT'S ME," I SAID. "LONG TIME NO SEE, MR. TREVINO."

HE WALKED OVER, LOOKING ME UP AND DOWN. "LOOK AT YOU! LAST TIME I SAW YOU, YOU WERE THIS SCRAWNY LITTLE TOMBOY, ALWAYS RUNNING AROUND WITH THE HORSES. NOW YOU'RE A RIGHT PRETTY YOUNG LADY."

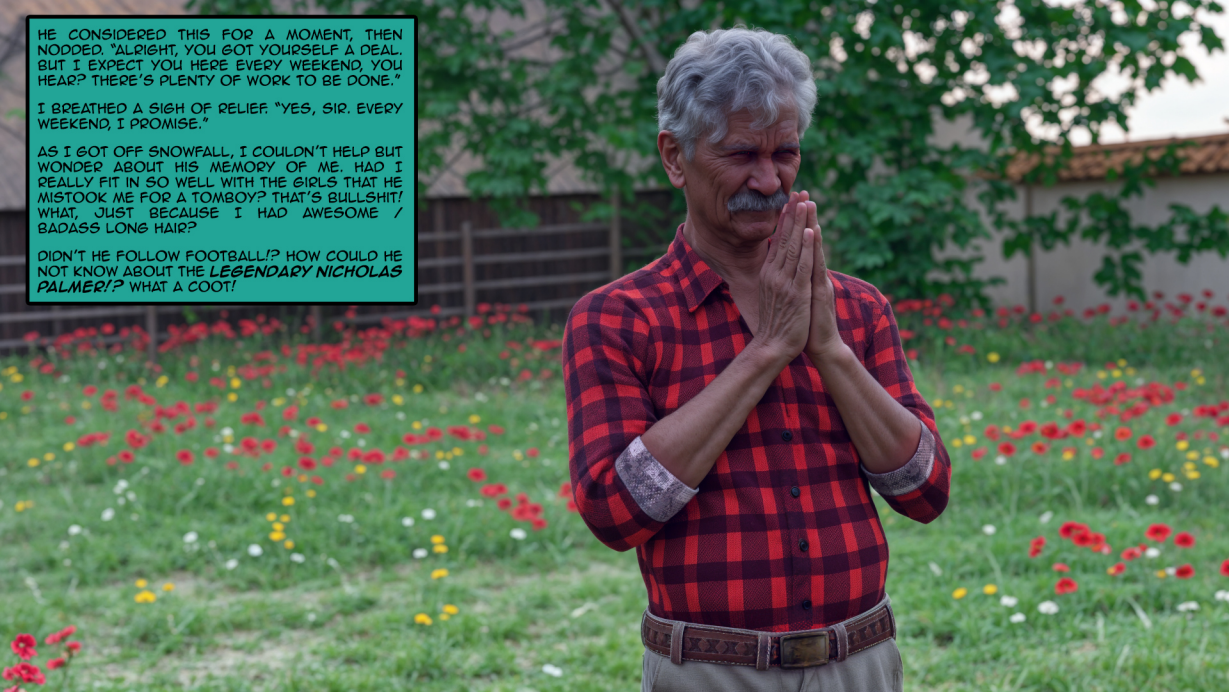
MY FACE TURNED RED. THIS WAS SO FUCKING EMBARRASSING. BUT I HAD TO ROLL WITH IT.

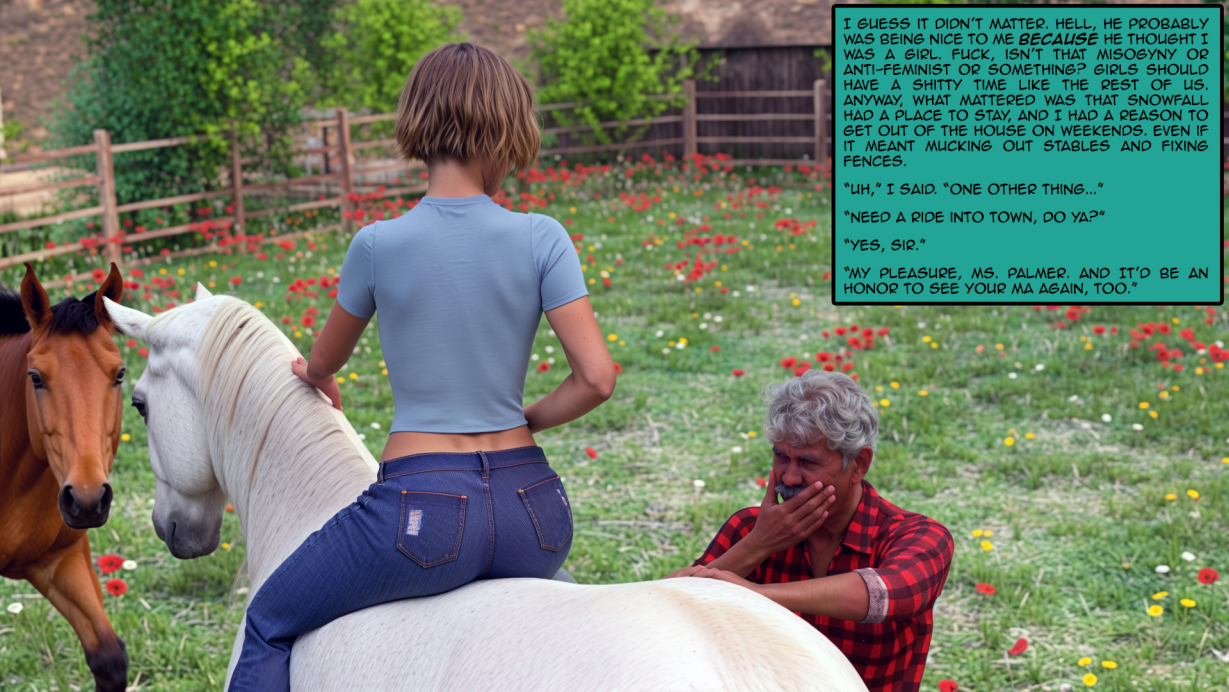
"THANKS, MR. TREVINO. YOU LOOK... WELL, YOU LOOK OLDER."

HE LAUGHED. "THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SPEND YOUR LIFE WORKING UNDER THE SUN, GIRLIE. BUT ENOUGH ABOUT ME. WHAT BRINGS YOU OUT HERE? AND WHERE'D YOU GET THAT FINE HORSE?"

I GLANCED AT SNOWFALL, WHO WAS CONTENTEDLY MUNCHING ON SOME GRASS. "THAT'S ACTUALLY WHY I'M HERE. THIS IS SNOWFALL. HE... HE WAS A GIFT, BUT I CAN'T KEEP HIM AT HOME. I WAS HOPING MAYBE YOU COULD STABLE HIM FOR A WHILE?"


TREVINO LOOKED AT SNOWFALL APPRAISINGLY. "HE'S A BEAUT, THAT'S FOR SURE. BUT I DON'T KNOW, NIKKI. TIMES ARE TOUGH. I'M NOT SURE I CAN AFFORD ANOTHER MOUTH TO FEED."
"WHAT IF I PAID FOR HIS KEEP?" I SAID. "AND HELPED OUT AROUND THE RANCH WHEN I CAN? I'M A HARD WORKER, YOU KNOW THAT."


He considered this for a moment, then nodded. "Alright, you got yourself a deal. But I expect you here every weekend, you hear? There's plenty of work to be done."
I breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, sir. Every weekend, I promise."
As I got off Snowfall, I couldn't help but wonder about his memory of me. Had I really fit in so well with the girls that he mistook me for a tomboy? That's bullshit! What, just because I had awesome / badass long hair?
Didn't he follow football!? How could he not know about the ***legendary Nicholas Palmer!?*** What a coot!


I GUESS IT DIDN'T MATTER. HELL, HE PROBABLY WAS BEING NICE TO ME *BECAUSE* HE THOUGHT I WAS A GIRL. FUCK, ISN'T THAT MISOGYNY OR ANTI-FEMINIST OR SOMETHING? GIRLS SHOULD HAVE A SHITTY TIME LIKE THE REST OF US. ANYWAY, WHAT MATTERED WAS THAT SNOWFALL HAD A PLACE TO STAY, AND I HAD A REASON TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE ON WEEKENDS. EVEN IF IT MEANT MUCKING OUT STABLES AND FIXING FENCES.
"UH," I SAID. "ONE OTHER THING..."
"NEED A RIDE INTO TOWN, DO YA?"
"YES, SIR."
"MY PLEASURE, MS. PALMER. AND IT'D BE AN HONOR TO SEE YOUR MA AGAIN, TOO."



So, I said my goodbyes to Snowfall. It was no big deal, really. Just a quick "see ya later, buddy" and a pat on the neck. I mean, he's just a horse, right? It's not like we bonded or anything during our little adventure.

Anyway, Trevino gave me a lift back into town in his old pickup truck. The ride was... awkward, to say the least. He kept asking about my life, what I'd been up to, if I had a boyfriend. Ugh! (No offense) You know, typical small-talk stuff. But every question felt like a minefield. I had to keep reminding myself that he thought I was a girl named Nikki, not Nick the football star.

When we finally got to my house, I practically jumped out of the truck. I thanked Trevino for the ride and the stable space for Snowfall, promised to see him that weekend, and then booked it inside before he could ask any more questions.

So, yeah. That was my big escape. Riding off into the (not really) sunset on a white horse, just like in the movies. Except in the movies, the hero doesn't have to worry about his horse being a constant reminder of the psycho who's trying to control his life.


ANYWAY, THINGS HAVE BEEN... WEIRD SINCE I GOT BACK. ESPECIALLY WITH MY DAD. IT'S LIKE WE CAN'T EVEN BE IN THE SAME ROOM ANYMORE WITHOUT IT BEING AWKWARD AS HELL. WE USED TO LOVE WATCHING THE PRESEASON NFL GAMES TOGETHER, YOU KNOW? ARGUING ABOUT WHICH TEAMS WERE GONNA MAKE IT TO THE PLAYOFFS, WHICH ROOKIES WERE GONNA BE THE NEXT BIG THING. BUT NOW? IT'S LIKE WE'RE STRANGERS.
I TRIED TO TALK TO HIM ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED AT HUTCHINSON'S PLACE. I THOUGHT HE'D BE PROUD OF ME FOR STANDING UP TO THAT ASSHOLE, FOR HELPING JANICE ESCAPE. BUT HE JUST GOT PISSED OFF. LIKE, REALLY PISSED OFF. HE STARTED YELLING ABOUT HOW I GAVE AWAY GRANDPA'S TRUCK, HOW THAT WAS A FAMILY HEIRLOOM AND I HAD NO RIGHT.
I TRIED TO EXPLAIN THAT IT WAS THE ONLY WAY I COULD HELP JANICE, THAT SHE NEEDED A WAY OUT OF THERE. BUT HE JUST WASN'T HEARING IT. HE KEPT GOING ON ABOUT HOW I WAS PUTTING US ALL IN DANGER, HOW I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE KIND OF POWER HUTCHINSON HAD.
IN THIS HOUSE
WE PRAISE
JESUS AND
SAY HOOK 'EM HORNS

AND YEAH, MAYBE HE'S RIGHT. MAYBE I DON'T FULLY GET IT. BUT FUCK, MAN, I COULDN'T JUST STAND BY AND LET HUTCHINSON HURT SOMEONE ELSE. NOT WHEN I HAD A CHANCE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

DAD'S BEEN ON EDGE EVER SINCE. IT'S LIKE HE'S CONSTANTLY LOOKING OVER HIS SHOULDER, WAITING FOR HUTCHINSON TO MAKE A MOVE. AND HE'S BEEN DOUBLING DOWN ON THIS WHOLE "MAKE NICK A MAN AGAIN" THING.

(I ALREADY AM ONE, THANK YOU!)

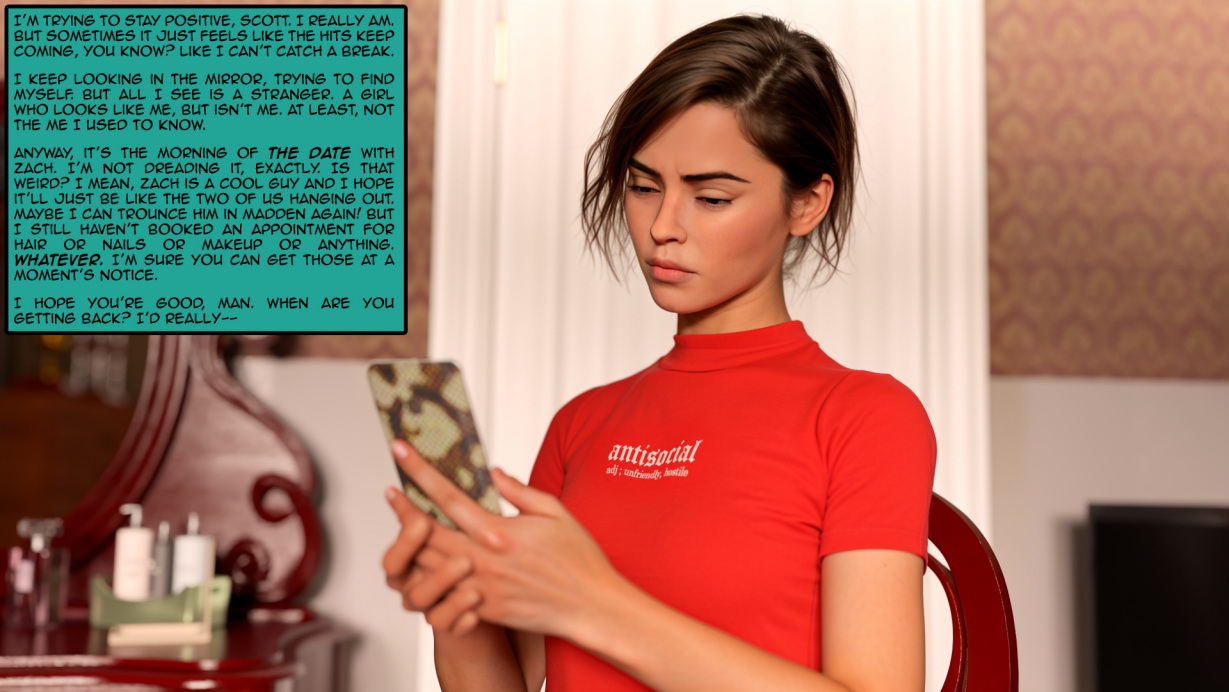
BUT HE'S GOT ME ON THIS CRAZY ALL-MEAT DIET (DID I ALREADY TELL YOU THAT?). HE SAYS IT'LL HELP ME BULK UP AND GET MY MUSCLE BACK. BUT HONESTLY? IT'S JUST GIVING ME THE WORST SHITS OF MY LIFE.








ANYWHERE BUT BORING
URBAN
THANK GOD FOR MOM.
I'VE BEEN SNEAKING OVER TO HER PLACE FOR DINNER A COUPLE TIMES A WEEK, JUST TO GET SOME REAL FOOD IN ME. AND BY REAL FOOD, I MEAN SALADS. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? NICK PALMER, CHOWING DOWN ON RABBIT FOOD. BUT DAMN, MOM MAKES A MEAN CAESAR SALAD, AND IT'S BEEN A LIFESAVER FOR MY POOR, ABUSED DIGESTIVE SYSTEM.


I'M TRYING TO STAY POSITIVE, SCOTT. I REALLY AM. BUT SOMETIMES IT JUST FEELS LIKE THE HITS KEEP COMING, YOU KNOW? LIKE I CAN'T CATCH A BREAK.
I KEEP LOOKING IN THE MIRROR, TRYING TO FIND MYSELF. BUT ALL I SEE IS A STRANGER. A GIRL WHO LOOKS LIKE ME, BUT ISN'T ME. AT LEAST, NOT THE ME I USED TO KNOW.
ANYWAY, IT'S THE MORNING OF THE DATE WITH ZACH. I'M NOT DREADING IT, EXACTLY. IS THAT WEIRD? I MEAN, ZACH IS A COOL GUY AND I HOPE IT'LL JUST BE LIKE THE TWO OF US HANGING OUT. MAYBE I CAN TROUNCE HIM IN MADDEN AGAIN! BUT I STILL HAVEN'T BOOKED AN APPOINTMENT FOR HAIR OR NAILS OR MAKEUP OR ANYTHING. WHATEVER. I'M SURE YOU CAN GET THOSE AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE.
I HOPE YOU'RE GOOD, MAN. WHEN ARE YOU GETTING BACK? I'D REALLY--
antisocial
adj : unfriendly; hostile


HEY, NICK! YOUR...FRIEND...IS HERE.
FRIEND? WHAT THE FUCK? I DON'T HAVE ANY OF THOSE.


antisocial
WELL, FUCK! I DON'T KNOW HER, BUT I WANT TO!


OKAY, NICK, YOU GOT YOUR BINDER ON SO NOBODY CAN TELL YOU'VE GOT TITS. JUST PLAY IT COOL. YOU'RE STILL THE SAME SMOOTH OPERATOR YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN.
WELL, HELLO THERE. I DON'T THINK WE'VE HAD THE PLEASURE--
antisocial

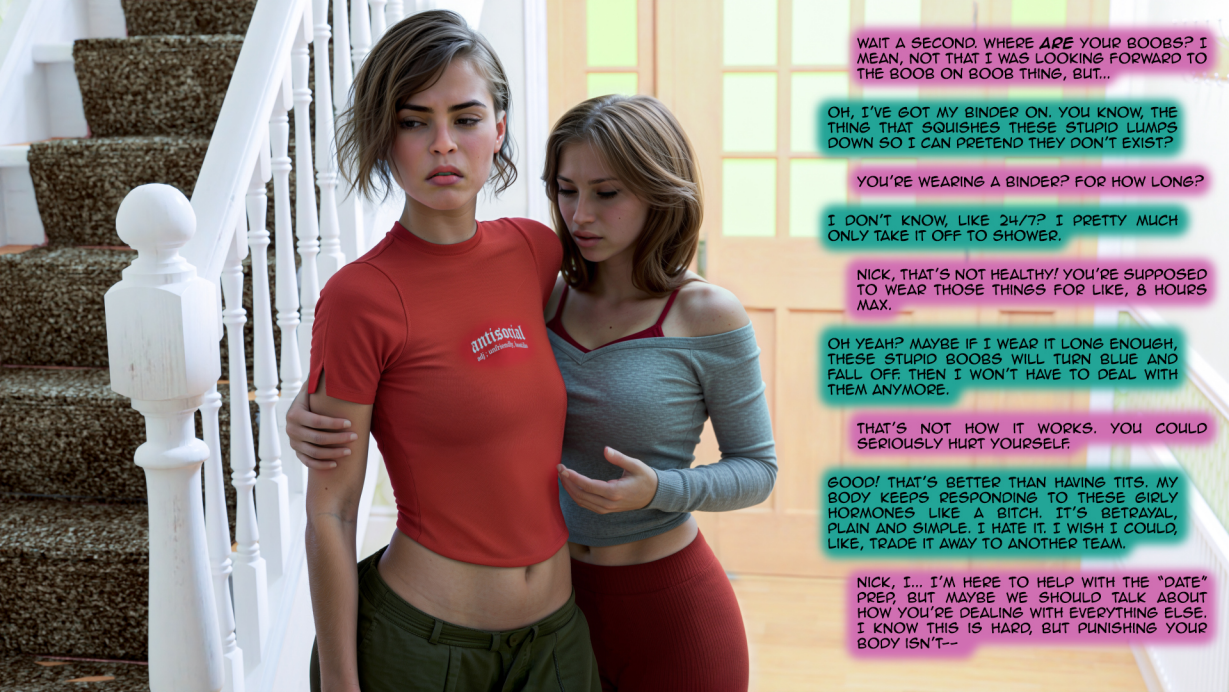

HEY, NICK! I'M BACK -- CAME RIGHT OVER, I HOPE THAT'S OKAY.
YOU'RE BACK? BUT, WHO--


OH MY GOD! SCOTT!?


SURPRISE! I TOLD YOU I WAS GETTING A NEW HAIRSTYLE. NOW YOU FINALLY GET TO SEE. WHAT DO YOU THINK?
HOLY SHIT! YOU LOOK LIKE A TOTALLY DIFFERENT PERSON. LIKE, A HOT GIRL PERSON.
THANKS?
OH GOD! THE GIRL MIND VIRUS! THEY GOT YOU FOR REAL! WHAT ELSE DID MRS. FERRIS CHOP OFF!?

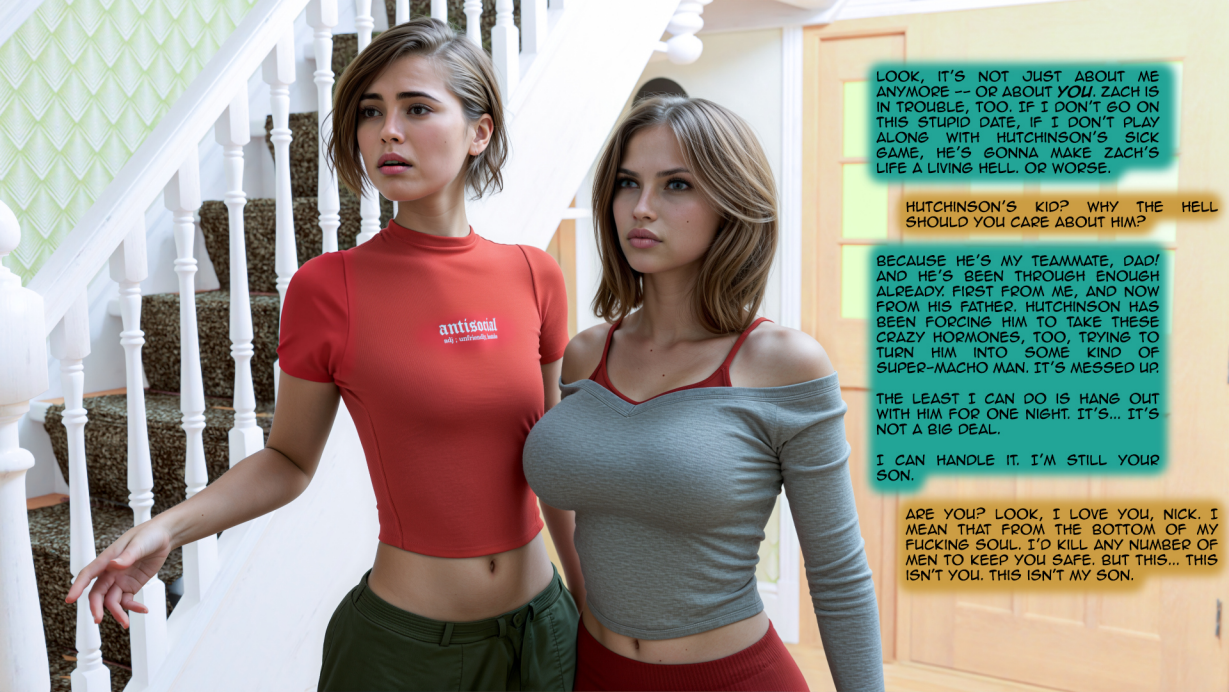

GIRL MIND VIRUS? REALLY, NICK? COME ON. I'M STILL AS INTACT AS I WAS THE LAST TIME WE SAW EACH OTHER.
BUT LOOK AT YOU! YOU'RE ALL... GIRLY AND STUFF! WITH THE HAIR AND THE CLOTHES AND... OH GOD, ARE YOU WEARING MAKEUP?
YES. VOLUNTARILY. HAPPILY. AND YES, I'M DRESSING MORE FEMININE. AGAIN - VOLUNTARILY, HAPPILY. BUT, FIRST--


antisocial
anti-social, unfriendly, hostile
-- CAN I GET A HUG? I'VE MISSED YOU, YOU BIG LUG.
LUG? THAT'S THE NICEST THING ANYONE'S CALLED ME IN A WHILE. UH, YEAH, SURE. JUST... NOT TOO TIGHT, OKAY? BOOB ON BOOB CONTACT IS WEIRD.


WAIT A SECOND. WHERE ARE YOUR BOOBS? I MEAN, NOT THAT I WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THE BOOB ON BOOB THING, BUT...
OH, I'VE GOT MY BINDER ON. YOU KNOW, THE THING THAT SQUISHES THESE STUPID LUMPS DOWN SO I CAN PRETEND THEY DON'T EXIST?
YOU'RE WEARING A BINDER? FOR HOW LONG?
I DON'T KNOW, LIKE 24/7? I PRETTY MUCH ONLY TAKE IT OFF TO SHOWER.
NICK, THAT'S NOT HEALTHY! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO WEAR THOSE THINGS FOR LIKE, 8 HOURS MAX.
OH YEAH? MAYBE IF I WEAR IT LONG ENOUGH, THESE STUPID BOOBS WILL TURN BLUE AND FALL OFF. THEN I WON'T HAVE TO DEAL WITH THEM ANYMORE.
THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS. YOU COULD SERIOUSLY HURT YOURSELF.
GOOD! THAT'S BETTER THAN HAVING TITS. MY BODY KEEPS RESPONDING TO THESE GIRLY HORMONES LIKE A BITCH. IT'S BETRAYAL, PLAIN AND SIMPLE. I HATE IT. I WISH I COULD, LIKE, TRADE IT AWAY TO ANOTHER TEAM.
NICK, I... I'M HERE TO HELP WITH THE "DATE" PREP, BUT MAYBE WE SHOULD TALK ABOUT HOW YOU'RE DEALING WITH EVERYTHING ELSE. I KNOW THIS IS HARD, BUT PUNISHING YOUR BODY ISN'T--
antisocial


PUNISHING THE BODY IS SOMETIMES NECESSARY. IT'S HOW YOU BUILD CHARACTER, RESILIENCE.
DAD! IS THAT BOURBON? IT'S NOT EVEN LUNCHTIME.
IT IS SOMEWHERE! BUT, REMEMBER, WHEN... WHEN YOUR BODY TURNS TRAITOR, WHEN IT STARTS TO CHANGE IN WAYS YOU DON'T WANT, THAT'S WHEN YOU NEED TO PUSH BACK HARDER! SHOW IT WHO'S BOSS.
MR. PALMER, WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, THAT'S A DANGEROUS MINDSET. NICK'S BODY ISN'T HIS ENEMY. IT'S JUST... ADAPTING TO A NEW SITUATION.


ADAPTING? IS THAT WHAT YOU CALL IT? TURNING MY SON INTO A DAUGHTER, THAT'S ADAPTATION? NO, THAT'S MUTILATION.
DAD, COME ON. NOT NOW. GO LAY DOWN.
AND WHO ARE YOU, ANYWAY? ANOTHER ONE OF HUTCHINSON'S LITTLE PROJECTS?
MY NAME IS SANDY. I'M A FRIEND OF NICK'S. DON'T YOU REMEMBER ME? I'M MRS. FERRIS'--
CASTRATED BURGLAR WITH THE BIG FAKE TITS. RIGHT. YEAH, I REMEMBER NOW.
DAD!
JESUS CHRIST. WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON WITH THIS COUNTRY?


LOOK, IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT ME ANYMORE -- OR ABOUT *YOU*. ZACH IS IN TROUBLE, TOO. IF I DON'T GO ON THIS STUPID DATE, IF I DON'T PLAY ALONG WITH HUTCHINSON'S SICK GAME, HE'S GONNA MAKE ZACH'S LIFE A LIVING HELL. OR WORSE.
HUTCHINSON'S KID? WHY THE HELL SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT HIM?
BECAUSE HE'S MY TEAMMATE, DAD! AND HE'S BEEN THROUGH ENOUGH ALREADY. FIRST FROM ME, AND NOW FROM HIS FATHER. HUTCHINSON HAS BEEN FORCING HIM TO TAKE THESE CRAZY HORMONES, TOO, TRYING TO TURN HIM INTO SOME KIND OF SUPER-MACHO MAN. IT'S MESSED UP.
THE LEAST I CAN DO IS HANG OUT WITH HIM FOR ONE NIGHT. IT'S... IT'S NOT A BIG DEAL.
I CAN HANDLE IT. I'M STILL YOUR SON.
ARE YOU? LOOK, I LOVE YOU, NICK. I MEAN THAT FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY FUCKING SOUL. I'D KILL ANY NUMBER OF MEN TO KEEP YOU SAFE. BUT THIS... THIS ISN'T YOU. THIS ISN'T MY SON.
antisocial


I'M... WHY WOULD YOU... Y-YOU DON'T MEAN THAT.
HAVE I EVER SAID WHAT I DON'T MEAN? NICK, I KNOW WE'RE IN A TOUGH SPOT. BUT WHAT I DON'T LIKE TO SEE IS YOU GIVING THESE MOTHERFUCKERS AN INCH. BECAUSE THEY'LL TAKE A MILE, AND THEN SOME. YOU START PLAYING DRESS-UP FOR THEM, GOING ON THESE LITTLE "DATES," AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, YOU'LL BE PRANCING AROUND IN HIGH HEELS AND A DRESS, GIGGLING LIKE A SCHOOLGIRL!
THAT'S NOT... I WOULDN'T...
WOULDN'T YOU? SEEMS TO ME LIKE YOU'RE ALREADY HALFWAY THERE. I MEAN, LOOK AT YOU. BINDING YOUR CHEST, GROWING OUT YOUR HAIR, HANGING OUT WITH... WHATEVER THE HELL THIS IS. NO OFFENSE, "SANDY."


EXCUSE ME? "WHATEVER THE HELL *THIS* IS?" I'LL TELL YOU *WHO* I AM, MR. PALMER. I'M SOMEONE WHO ACTUALLY GIVES A DAMN ABOUT YOUR KID'S WELL-BEING, WHICH IS MORE THAN I CAN SAY FOR YOU RIGHT NOW.
YOU THINK ENCOURAGING HIM TO PLAY INTO THIS SICK FANTASY IS FOR HIS WELL-BEING?
DO YOU EVEN HEAR YOURSELF? YOUR SON WAS *KIDNAPPED*, MR. PALMER! KIDNAPPED BECAUSE OF YOU AND KEPT ON A REMOTE ISLAND FOR OVER A YEAR. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THAT DOES TO A PERSON? THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA ALONE IS ENOUGH TO BREAK MOST PEOPLE. THE FACT THAT NICK IS STILL STANDING, STILL FIGHTING? THAT'S A GODDAMN MIRACLE.
YOU KNOW, NICK ONCE SAID TO ME THAT I WAS *LUCKY* THAT MY PARENTS WERE DEAD. AT THE TIME, I THOUGHT HE WAS BEING STUPID AND INSENSITIVE. BUT NOW, SEEING YOU LIKE THIS, I'M STARTING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HE MEANT.
MY PARENTS, THEY LOVED ME UNCONDITIONALLY. THEY WOULD'VE WANTED ME TO BE HAPPY, NO MATTER WHAT SHAPE MY BODY TOOK. THEY WOULD'VE BEEN THERE FOR ME, SUPPORTED ME THROUGH THIS WHOLE NIGHTMARE. BUT YOU? YOU'RE SO CAUGHT UP IN YOUR OWN BULLSHIT THAT YOU CAN'T EVEN SEE HOW MUCH YOUR SON IS HURTING.


ENOUGH HYSTERICS! I KNOW WHAT NICK HAS TO DO, OKAY? SO, YEAH, DON'T LET ME INTERRUPT YOUR GIRL TIME. YOU TWO HAVE FUN PLAYING DRESS-UP.


I'M SORRY YOU HAD TO SEE THAT. HE'S NOT USUALLY... I MEAN, HE DIDN'T USED TO BE...
HEY, IT'S OKAY. YOU DON'T HAVE TO EXPLAIN OR APOLOGIZE FOR HIM.
YEAH, I KNOW. IT'S JUST... HE USED TO BE BETTER, YOU KNOW? BEFORE ALL THIS SHIT HAPPENED. HE WAS STILL TOUGH ON ME, ALWAYS PUSHING ME TO BE THE BEST. BUT HE WAS ALSO MY BIGGEST SUPPORTER. HE NEVER MISSED A GAME, ALWAYS HAD MY BACK.
PEOPLE CHANGE WHEN THEY'RE UNDER STRESS. SOMETIMES NOT FOR THE BETTER. BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN IT'S YOUR FAULT, OR THAT YOU HAVE TO PUT UP WITH IT. ANYWAY, I'VE GOT A SURPRISE FOR YOU.
A SURPRISE? I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN HANDLE ANY MORE SURPRISES, SCOTT.
JUST CALL ME YOUR FAIRY GODMOTHER, BECAUSE I'M ABOUT TO MAKE SOME MAGIC HAPPEN. I BOUGHT OUT AN ENTIRE SALON IN THE CITY, JUST FOR US!
YOU DID WHAT? HOW? WHY?
MRS. FERRIS GAVE ME A CREDIT CARD, REMEMBER? AND I FIGURED, IF WE'RE GONNA DO THIS WHOLE MAKEOVER THING, WE MIGHT AS WELL DO IT RIGHT. NO HALF-ASSING IT. THE DATE IS TONIGHT!
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU SOMETIMES. YOU'RE REALLY EMBRACING THIS WHOLE RICH GIRL THING, AREN'T YOU?
HEY, IF YOU'VE GOT IT, FLAUNT IT. AND TODAY, WE'RE GONNA FLAUNT IT HARD. WE'RE TALKING HAIR, NAILS, MAKEUP, THE WORKS -- I KNOW YOU AREN'T LOOKING FORWARD TO THIS, BUT I'VE TRIED TO MAKE IT AS LUXURIOUS AND RELAXING AS POSSIBLE. SO, GO GRAB YOUR DATE NIGHT OUTFIT AND LET'S GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE.


DAMN, SCOTT. YOU REALLY WENT ALL OUT, DIDN'T YOU? THIS CAR IS SICK!
I FIGURED IF WE'RE GONNA DO THIS, WE MIGHT AS WELL RIDE IN STYLE.

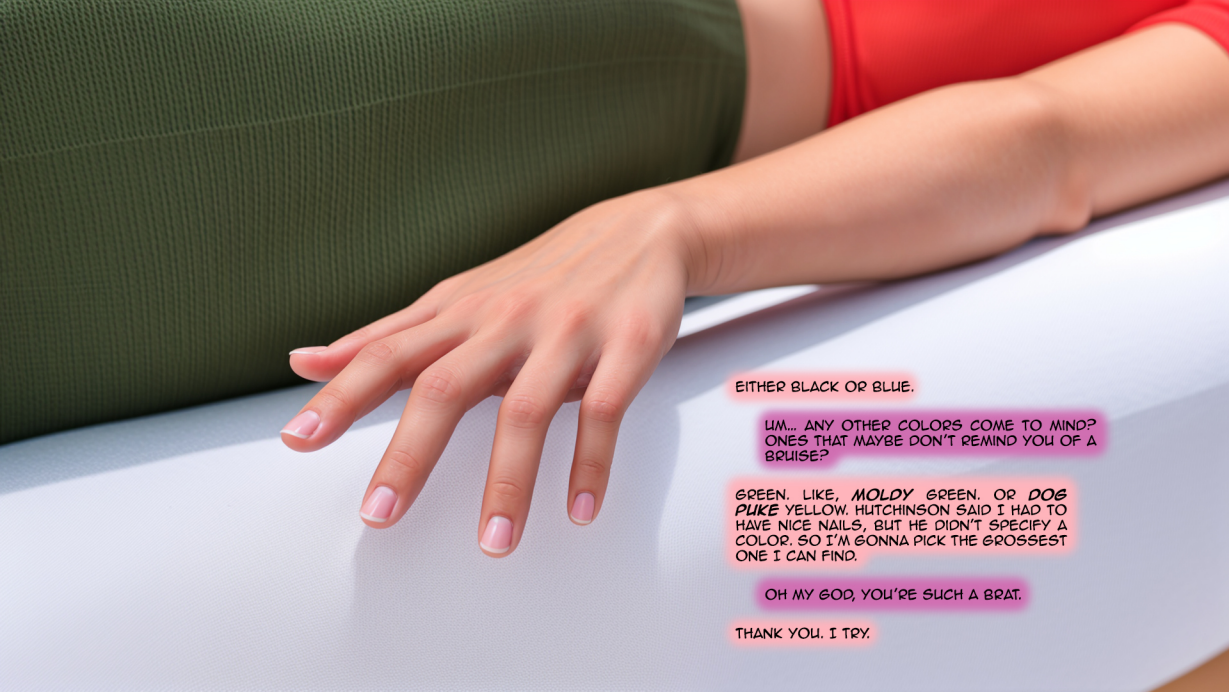

I'M LITERALLY SICK TO MY STOMACH. HANGING OUT WITH ZACH WAS FUN -- AND I KNOW I NEED TO DO THIS FOR HIS SAKE -- BUT THE IDEA OF GETTING ALL DOLLED UP LIKE SOME KIND OF... BARBIE... IT'S JUST TOO MUCH. I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN GO THROUGH WITH IT, NO MATTER WHAT I SAID TO HUTCHINSON.
HEY, I GET IT. BELIEVE ME, I DO. WHEN I FIRST STARTED ALL THIS, THE IDEA OF PUTTING ON A DRESS AND HEELS MADE ME WANT TO PUKE. BUT YOU KNOW WHAT I REALIZED? IT'S JUST CLOTHES. IT DOESN'T CHANGE WHO YOU ARE INSIDE.
antisocial


EASY FOR YOU TO SAY. YOU'RE ACTUALLY ENJOYING THIS STUFF.
OKAY, YEAH, I'LL ADMIT IT. I'VE FOUND SOME PARTS OF BEING A GIRL THAT I LIKE. BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN I'M NOT ME. I'M STILL THE SAME PERSON, JUST... WITH A FEW UPGRADES.
UPGRADES? IS THAT WHAT WE'RE CALLING THEM NOW?
WHAT ELSE COULD YOU CALL THESE BOOBS OF MINE?
YEAH, FAIR ENOUGH. THEY'RE PRETTY FUCKING MAGNIFICENT. WHEN I FIRST SAW YOU, I THOUGHT YOU WERE A REAL GIRL! IF I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS *REALLY* IN YOUR PANTS, I'D BE TRYING TO GET IN THEM! NO OFFENSE.
SUCH A CHARMER.
THANK YOU!


SEE? WHOEVER SAID BEAUTY IS PAIN IS FULL OF SHIT. OR, UM, MAYBE THEY'RE POOR? THIS SPA IS A WHOLE OTHER LEVEL. HOW'S THAT MASSAGE TREATING YOU?
MMPH... IT'S... NOT TERRIBLE. ACTUALLY, IT'S PRETTY AMAZING. I DIDN'T KNOW YOUR TEMPLES COULD FEEL SO... STIMULATED.


IT WOULD'VE BEEN MORE FUN IF YOU'D TAKEN YOUR CLOTHES OFF.
NOT FOR ME.
HMPH. DON'T BE SO SELFISH!


I'LL FLEX FOR YOUR LATER, BRO. ER... SIS!
UGH, DON'T BE WEIRD. ANYWAY, AFTER THIS WE'LL HEAD ACROSS THE HALL TO START ON YOUR NAILS. HAVE YOU DECIDED ON A COLOR?


EITHER BLACK OR BLUE.
UM... ANY OTHER COLORS COME TO MIND? ONES THAT MAYBE DON'T REMIND YOU OF A BRUISE?
GREEN. LIKE, MOLDY GREEN. OR DOG PUKE YELLOW. HUTCHINSON SAID I HAD TO HAVE NICE NAILS, BUT HE DIDN'T SPECIFY A COLOR. SO I'M GONNA PICK THE GROSSEST ONE I CAN FIND.
OH MY GOD, YOU'RE SUCH A BRAT.
THANK YOU. I TRY.


FINE, WHAT ABOUT FOR YOUR HAIR? THE REASON I CHOSE THIS PLACE SPECIFICALLY IS BECAUSE THEY'RE CRAZY GOOD AT HAIR EXTENSIONS. LIKE, THEIR WORK IS SO SEAMLESS, YOU CAN'T EVEN TELL THEY'RE NOT YOUR REAL HAIR. AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT YELP SAID.
REALLY? WELL - LIKE I KEEP TRYING TO TELL EVERYONE - LONG HAIR ISN'T ***NECESSARILY*** GIRLY! BUT, UH, IF I ***NEED*** TO HAVE LONG HAIR FOR THIS STUPID ***FAKE*** DATE...


I... I MAYBE KINDA HAVE A VAGUE IDEA OF HOW I'D LIKE IT TO LOOK...


DAMN, DUDE, YOU REALLY KNOW HOW TO PICK A PLACE. MY SHOULDERS HAVEN'T FELT THIS GOOD SINCE... WELL, SINCE BEFORE I HAD ALL THIS CHEST FLAB TO CARRY AROUND.
GLAD YOU'RE ENJOYING IT.
AND, UH, IT MAY TAKE ME A COUPLE MONTHS, BUT I PROMISE--
NO. DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT PAYING ME BACK.
BUT THIS MUST BE COSTING A FORTUNE! THE WHOLE PLACE TO OURSELVES? THE MASSAGES? AND WE HAVEN'T EVEN STARTED ON THE HAIR AND NAILS YET.
antisocial


FERRIS'S CREDIT CARD, REMEMBER? BESIDES, CONSIDER IT PAYBACK FOR ALL THOSE EMAILS KEEPING ME SANE WHILE I WAS AWAY.
STILL FEELS WEIRD LETTING SOMEONE ELSE PAY FOR STUFF. I USED TO BE THE ONE TREATING PEOPLE.
YEAH, WELL, TIMES CHANGE. SOMETIMES YOU'RE THE QB, SOMETIMES YOU'RE THE RECEIVER. NOW SHUT UP AND LET SOMEONE TAKE CARE OF YOU FOR ONCE.

HEH. ALRIGHT, WELL, THANKS. I REALLY APPRECIATE THIS. YOU'RE A REAL BRO.

NOT THE WORD I'D CHOOSE, BUT... WAIT, ARE YOU – NICK, THOSE CUCUMBERS AREN'T FOR EATING!

EVERYTHING'S FOR EATING IF YOU'RE BRAVE ENOUGH. BESIDES, I'M STARVING. AND, LIKE I TOLD YOU, DAD'S GOT ME ON THIS INSANE DIET TRYING TO "BULK ME BACK UP." IT'S JUST MEAT, MEAT, AND MORE MEAT. I ONLY HAVE VEGETABLES AT MOM'S.

SO YOU DECIDED TO CHOW DOWN ON SPA CUCUMBERS? YOU'RE SUCH A DISASTER.

HEY, THEY'RE COLD AND CRISPY! PERFECT SNACK. ALTHOUGH... COULD USE SOME RANCH DRESSING.

WELL, I GUESS WE SHOULD HEAD TO--

UM, DUDE, COULD YOU MAYBE PUT ON A ROBE OR SOMETHING?

WHAT? WHY? I'M WEARING A BIKINI.

YEAH, AND YOU LOOK HOT AS HELL IN IT, WHICH IS REALLY FUCKING WITH MY HEAD RIGHT NOW. BECAUSE YOU'RE... LIKE ME... AND I'M NOT, UH, INTO...

AWW, YOU THINK I'M HOT?

PLEASE SHUT UP AND PUT SOME CLOTHES ON BEFORE I HAVE AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS.




FINE, FINE. BUT YOU KNOW, IT'S OKAY TO BE CONFUSED ABOUT THIS STUFF. I MEAN, SEXUALITY IS--
NOPE! NOT HAVING THIS CONVERSATION. NOT TODAY. NOT EVER.
SUCH A PRUDE. READY FOR NAILS?
AS I'LL EVER BE. BUT I'M STILL GOING WITH THE GROSSEST COLOR I CAN FIND.
YEAH, ABOUT THAT. WHAT IF YOU WENT WITH THE FIFTH OR EVEN SIXTH GROSSEST YOU CAN FIND INSTEAD?
WHY? I'M ONLY HERE TO HELP ZACH OUT. I DON'T WANT HIS PSYCHOPATH FATHER MAKING HIS LIFE ANY HARDER THAN IT ALREADY IS. HUTCHINSON SAID I HAVE TO HAVE GIRLY NAILS AND LONG HAIR, NUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN I HAVE TO LIKE IT OR MAKE IT EASY.
LOOK, I GET THE URGE TO BE REBELLIOUS. TRUST ME, I DO. I COULD'VE BEEN THE POSTER KID FOR REBELLION. BUT MAYBE THIS ISN'T THE HILL TO DIE ON? LIKE, IS HAVING GROSS NAILS REALLY WORTH RISKING HUTCHINSON'S RAGE?


IT'S NOT ABOUT THE NAILS. IT'S ABOUT... I DON'T KNOW, MAINTAINING SOME CONTROL? EVERY TIME I GIVE IN, EVEN A LITTLE BIT, IT FEELS LIKE I'M LOSING ANOTHER PIECE OF MYSELF.
HEY, I UNDERSTAND THAT FEELING. BUT SOMETIMES PLAYING ALONG ISN'T THE SAME AS GIVING IN. THINK OF IT LIKE... LIKE RUNNING A PLAY. SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO FAKE LEFT TO GO RIGHT, RIGHT?
STOP WITH THE FOOTBALL METAPHORS. YOU'RE TERRIBLE AT THEM.
FINE, BUT, LISTEN – I HAVE A STRATEGY.


WHAT DO YOU MEAN? THERE'S NO STRATEGY. THIS IS JUST SOMETHING I NEED TO SURVIVE, LIKE A... A TORNADO! A YEARS-LONG TORNADO THAT JUST KEEPS GETTING WORSE.
YEAH, IF YOU HALF-ASS THIS, THAT'S WHAT YOU'LL BE DOING. SURVIVING. AND HUTCHINSON WILL JUST SAY ***THAT'S*** WHY ZACH DIDN'T RESPOND. BECAUSE YOU WEREN'T... ENTHUSIASTIC. BUT IF YOU GO ALL OUT – IF YOU SHOW UP LOOKING ABSOLUTELY STUNNING – AND ZACH STILL ISN'T INTO IT? WELL, THAT'LL BE PRETTY HARD EVIDENCE THAT HIS SON IS GAY, WON'T IT?
OR, ***SOFT*** EVIDENCE, ACTUALLY.
WAIT, WHAT?
OH, WELL, SOFT BECAUSE--

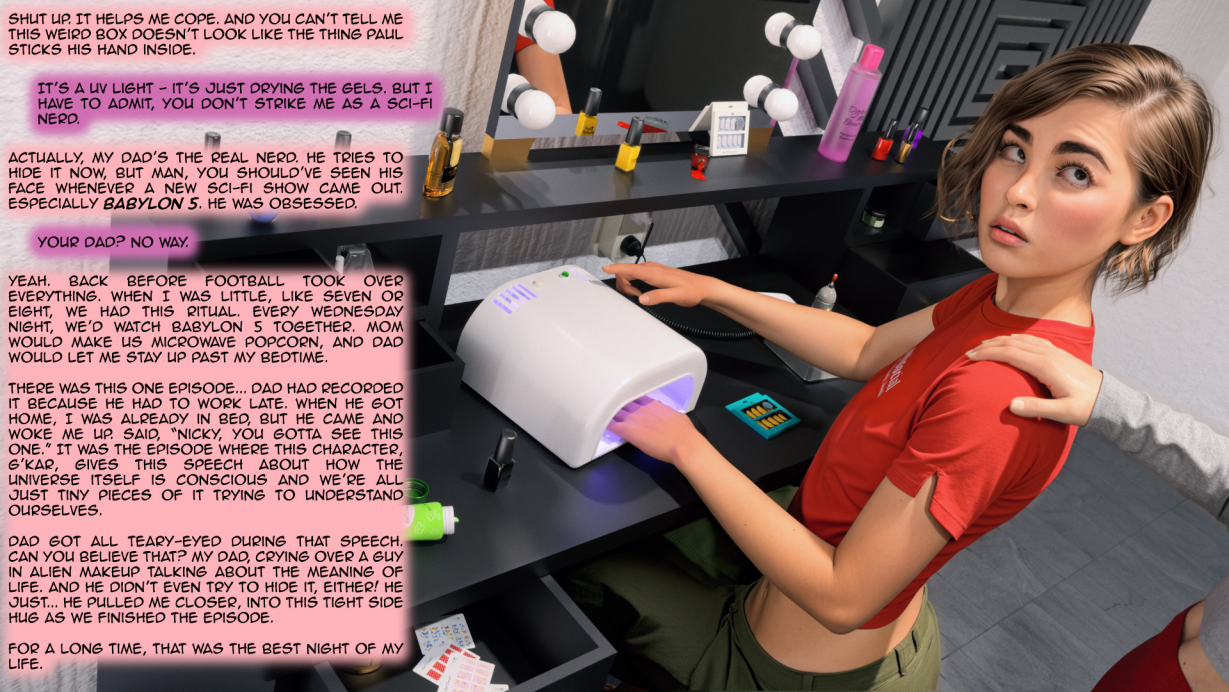

I GET THE JOKE! BUT WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?
THINK ABOUT IT. IF YOU SHOW UP LOOKING LIKE YOU BARELY TRIED, HUTCHINSON CAN JUST BLAME THAT FOR WHY THERE'S NO "SPARK." YOU'LL HAVE TO DO THIS ALL OVER AGAIN, THIS TIME PROBABLY WITH "SUPERVISION" OR SOMETHING. BUT IF YOU SHOW UP LOOKING LIKE A TOTAL **KNOCKOUT**, AND ZACH STILL ISN'T INTERESTED...
THEN EVEN HIS DAD WOULD HAVE TO ADMIT THAT ZACH JUST ISN'T INTO GIRLS. ER, NOT THAT I'M--
EXACTLY! LOOK, HUTCHINSON IS DELUSIONAL, BUT HE'S NOT STUPID. IF HIS MASTER PLAN FAILS EVEN WHEN YOU'RE AT PEAK GIRL, MAYBE HE'LL FINALLY GET IT THROUGH HIS THICK SKULL THAT HIS SON IS GAY AND THAT'S JUST HOW IT IS.


antisocial
adj ; unfriendly, hostile
SO YOU'RE SAYING I SHOULD... LEAN INTO THIS? GO FULL BARBIE?
IF YOU WANT TO CALL IT THAT, SURE. FULL BARBIE. WE'RE TALKING PERFECT HAIR, PERFECT NAILS, PERFECT MAKEUP. THE WORKS. MAKE EVERY STRAIGHT GUY'S HEAD TURN – EXCEPT ZACH'S.


THAT'S... ACTUALLY KIND OF BRILLIANT. AND KIND OF EVIL. I LIKE IT. WHEN DID YOU BECOME SO DEVIOUS?
I LEARNED FROM THE BEST. MRS. FERRIS IS LIKE AN EVIL GENIUS WHEN IT COMES TO THIS STUFF. PLUS, I WAS A THIEF, REMEMBER? STRATEGY WAS KIND OF MY THING.
OKAY, FINE. YOU WIN. BUT I DRAW THE LINE AT PINK NAILS.
HOW ABOUT A DEEP RED? IT'S CLASSIC, SOPHISTICATED, AND DEFINITELY NOT "PUKE GREEN."
NO. RED IS SLUTTY. UM, HOW ABOUT DEEP PURPLE?
OH, A PERSON OF CULTURE, I SEE! PURPLE IT IS. YOU KNOW, PURPLE HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH ROYALTY AND POWER. LIKE, ONLY THE RICHEST PEOPLE COULD AFFORD PURPLE DYE BACK IN THE DAY.
REALLY? SO IT'S LIKE... A MASCULINE COLOR? COOL!


SURE! NOW, LET'S GO MAKE YOU IRRESISTIBLE TO EVERYONE EXCEPT YOUR DATE.
UGH, I ALREADY FEEL KIND OF SICK, DUDE.
YEAH, I'M 99% SURE THAT'S BECAUSE YOU ATE THE CUCUMBERS.
antisocial
adj. unfriendly, hostile


FEAR IS THE MIND-KILLER. FEAR IS THE LITTLE-DEATH THAT BRINGS TOTAL OBLITERATION.
ARE YOU SERIOUSLY QUOTING *DUNE* RIGHT NOW?


SHUT UP. IT HELPS ME COPE. AND YOU CAN'T TELL ME THIS WEIRD BOX DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THE THING PAUL STICKS HIS HAND INSIDE.
IT'S A UV LIGHT - IT'S JUST DRYING THE GELS. BUT I HAVE TO ADMIT, YOU DON'T STRIKE ME AS A SCI-FI NERD.
ACTUALLY, MY DAD'S THE REAL NERD. HE TRIES TO HIDE IT NOW, BUT MAN, YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN HIS FACE WHENEVER A NEW SCI-FI SHOW CAME OUT. ESPECIALLY BABYLON 5. HE WAS OBSESSED.
YOUR DAD? NO WAY.
YEAH. BACK BEFORE FOOTBALL TOOK OVER EVERYTHING. WHEN I WAS LITTLE, LIKE SEVEN OR EIGHT, WE HAD THIS RITUAL. EVERY WEDNESDAY NIGHT, WE'D WATCH BABYLON 5 TOGETHER. MOM WOULD MAKE US MICROWAVE POPCORN, AND DAD WOULD LET ME STAY UP PAST MY BEDTIME.
THERE WAS THIS ONE EPISODE... DAD HAD RECORDED IT BECAUSE HE HAD TO WORK LATE. WHEN HE GOT HOME, I WAS ALREADY IN BED, BUT HE CAME AND WOKE ME UP. SAID, "NICKY, YOU GOTTA SEE THIS ONE." IT WAS THE EPISODE WHERE THIS CHARACTER, G'KAR, GIVES THIS SPEECH ABOUT HOW THE UNIVERSE ITSELF IS CONSCIOUS AND WE'RE ALL JUST TINY PIECES OF IT TRYING TO UNDERSTAND OURSELVES.
DAD GOT ALL TEARY-EYED DURING THAT SPEECH. CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT? MY DAD, CRYING OVER A GUY IN ALIEN MAKEUP TALKING ABOUT THE MEANING OF LIFE. AND HE DIDN'T EVEN TRY TO HIDE IT, EITHER! HE JUST... HE PULLED ME CLOSER, INTO THIS TIGHT SIDE HUG AS WE FINISHED THE EPISODE.
FOR A LONG TIME, THAT WAS THE BEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE.


WOW, THEY LOOK AMAZING! VERY REGAL.
THEY DO LOOK KIND OF BADASS. LIKE POISON DRAGON CLAWS OR SOMETHING. OH! YOU KNOW WHO ELSE HAD LONG NAILS? WOLVERINE! WELL, OKAY, THOSE CAME OUT OF HIS KNUCKLES, BUT SAME DIFFERENCE. AND HE'S LIKE, THE MOST MASCULINE DUDE EVER.
ARE YOU SERIOUSLY COMPARING YOUR PERFECTLY MANICURED GEL NAILS TO WOLVERINE'S ADAMANTIUM CLAWS?
HEY, WORK WITH ME HERE!


antisocial
adj.: unfriendly, hostile
HI THERE! I'M ANNA. SO, WHAT ARE WE THINKING ABOUT TODAY?
WE'RE LOOKING TO DO SEMI-PERMANENT EXTENSIONS AND SOFT CURLS. SOMETHING ELEGANT BUT NATURAL-LOOKING.
OH, LOVELY! AND HOW LONG ARE WE THINKING?
JUST TO THE SHOULDERS, I THINK. AND WE WANT TO KEEP IT LOOKING FULL AND HEALTHY. SHE'S GOT AN IMPORTANT DATE TONIGHT.
OH, WONDERFUL! WHOEVER THEY ARE, YOU'RE GOING TO KNOCK THEIR SOCKS OFF. THAT'S THE ANNA GUARANTEE!
IT'S... IT'S NOT A REAL DATE.
WHAT'S THAT, HONEY?
NONE OF THIS IS REAL! THE NAILS AREN'T REAL, THE HAIR WON'T BE REAL, MY FACE ISN'T REAL, THIS "DATE" ISN'T REAL! IT'S ALL JUST... FAKE. EVERYTHING ABOUT ME IS TURNING INTO THIS BIG FAKE PERFORMANCE AND I CAN'T... I CAN'T...


NIKKI. LOOK AT ME.
WHAT?
YOUR FRIENDSHIP WITH ZACH - IS THAT FAKE?
N-NO, BUT--
YOUR DESIRE TO PROTECT HIM FROM HIS PSYCHO DAD - IS THAT FAKE?
NO.
AND THE FACT THAT YOU'RE WILLING TO GO THROUGH ALL THIS JUST TO HELP HIM - THAT'S PRETTY REAL TOO, ISN'T IT?


YEAH. YEAH, I GUESS IT IS.
SO FOCUS ON THAT. AND HEY, ABOUT THE HAIR - YOU SAID YOU HAD AN IDEA? SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR MOM?
YEAH. UM, WHEN MOM WAS COMPETING IN PAGEANTS, SHE HAD THIS AMAZING HAIRSTYLE. LIKE, IT WAS LONG BUT NOT TOO LONG, AND IT HAD THESE SOFT CURLS... NEVER MIND, IT'S STUPID.
NO, IT'S NOT! ANNA, DO YOU THINK YOU COULD DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT? CLASSIC PAGEANT QUEEN WAVES, BUT MODERNIZED?
OH, ABSOLUTELY! THAT'S ACTUALLY PERFECT FOR YOUR FACE SHAPE.
R-REALLY?
SEE? WE'RE NOT CREATING SOMETHING FAKE - WE'RE HONORING SOMETHING ***REAL***. SOMETHING THAT MATTERS TO YOU.
OKAY. YEAH. LET'S DO IT!
LOVE THE ENERGY, GIRLS. AND I LOVE THE DRAMA! HOLD ON TO THAT, BECAUSE SHIT GETS REAL BORING REAL FAST WHEN YOU'RE SITTING IN THIS CHAIR FOR THREE HOURS.
THREE HOURS!?

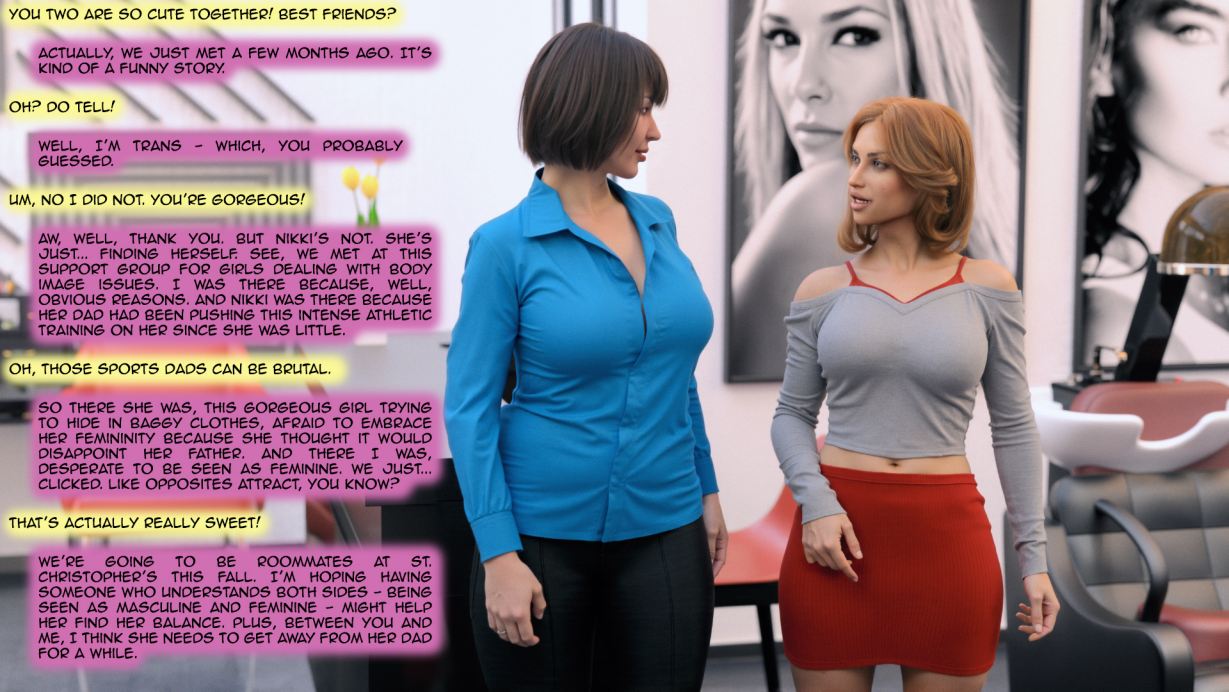

UGH, ARE WE ALMOST DONE?
THE EXTENSIONS ARE, BUT NOW WE'RE WORKING ON THE CURLS! TRUST ME, IT'S WORTH IT. BESIDES, WE CAN GOSSIP!
ABOUT WHAT?
WELL, YOU NEVER DID TELL ME EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED WITH LAUREN. I MEAN, YOUR EMAILS MENTIONED HER A FEW TIMES, BUT...
UGH, LAUREN. SHE'S SUCH A... I DON'T EVEN KNOW ANYMORE. ONE MINUTE SHE'S TREATING ME LIKE I'M MADE OF GLASS, THE NEXT SHE'S ACTING LIKE NOTHING'S CHANGED. THEN SOMETIMES SHE LOOKS AT ME LIKE... LIKE SHE'S TRYING TO FIGURE OUT IF I'M STILL IN THERE SOMEWHERE.
OH, HONEY, THAT SOUNDS COMPLICATED. EX-GIRLFRIEND DRAMA?
YEAH, BUT NOT LIKE YOU'RE THINKING. WE DATED IN HIGH SCHOOL, BUT NOW SHE'S... I DON'T KNOW. DIFFERENT. OR MAYBE I'M DIFFERENT. EVERYTHING'S DIFFERENT.
AND WHAT ABOUT THAT FRIEND OF HERS? EVIE?
WHAT ABOUT HER?
OH, COME ON. YOUR EMAILS MADE IT PRETTY CLEAR SHE WAS FLIRTING WITH YOU.
SHE WASN'T... I MEAN, SHE WAS JUST BEING... LOOK, CAN WE TALK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE? LIKE, LITERALLY ANYTHING ELSE?
NOW THIS SOUNDS JUICY...


ALRIGHT, GORGEOUS! NOW, LET'S MOVE ON TO MAKEUP. I'M THINKING A SMOKY EYE WOULD REALLY MAKE THOSE--
WAIT. THIS IS... WEIRD. LIKE, SUPER WEIRD. IT MOVES DIFFERENTLY. FEELS DIFFERENT. BUT, UH, ABOUT THE MAKEUP - I CAN ACTUALLY DO THAT MYSELF.
YOU CAN?
YEAH, I MEAN... ON THE ISLAND, THEY MADE US LEARN. LIKE, IT WAS PART OF OUR "TRAINING." WE HAD THESE STUPID VIDEO TUTORIAL MARATHONS.
ISLAND...?
OH, UM, A FINISHING SCHOOL FOR TOMBOYS THAT HER FATHER MADE HER ATTEND.
R-RIGHT. ANYWAY, IF I HAVE TO DO THIS SHIT, I MIGHT AS WELL USE WHAT THEY FORCED ME TO LEARN, RIGHT? BESIDES, I ACTUALLY GOT PRETTY GOOD AT IT. EVEN HOLLY SAID SO, AND SHE WAS A TOTAL BITCH ABOUT EVERYTHING.


WELL, OKAY THEN. SHOW US WHAT YOU'VE GOT, MAKEUP MASTER.
ALRIGHT, JUST...


...DON'T WATCH ME TOO CLOSELY. IT'S WEIRD ENOUGH DOING THIS WITHOUT AN AUDIENCE.

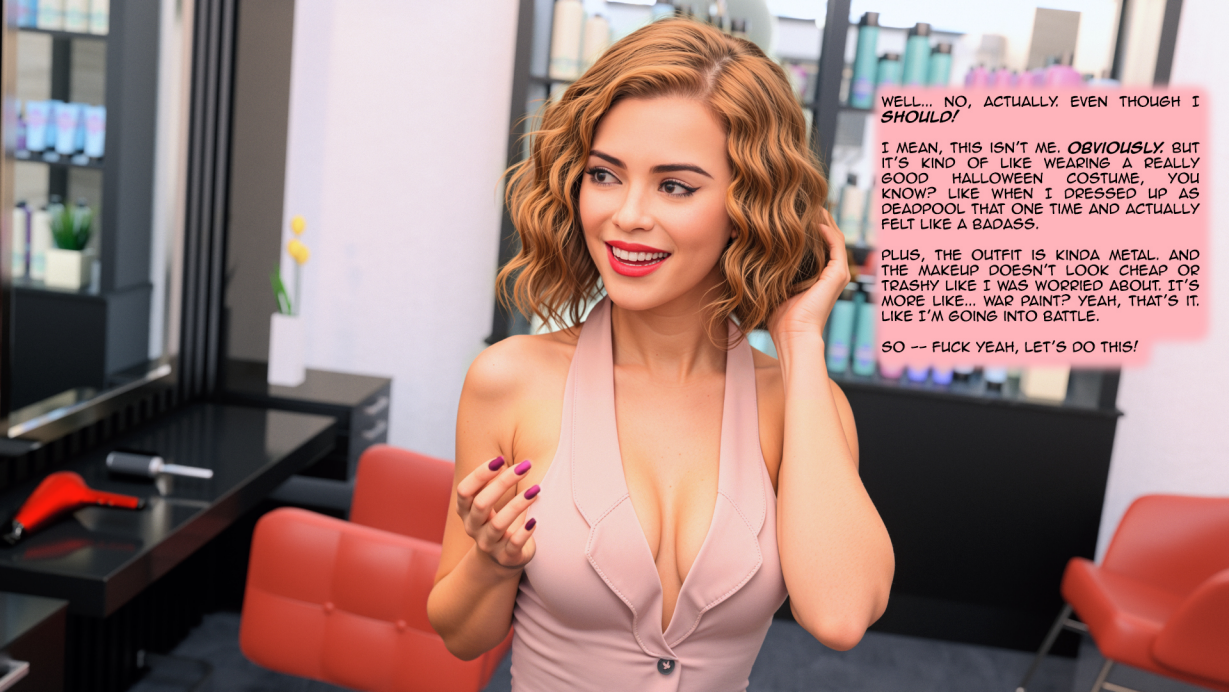

GOD, I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S ALMOST TIME. I'LL... I'LL CHANGE INTO THE *OUTFIT* NOW, I GUESS.
OH MY GOD, I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE IT!
UGH. SIMMER DOWN.


YOU TWO ARE SO CUTE TOGETHER! BEST FRIENDS?
ACTUALLY, WE JUST MET A FEW MONTHS AGO. IT'S KIND OF A FUNNY STORY.
OH? DO TELL!
WELL, I'M TRANS - WHICH, YOU PROBABLY GUESSED.
UM, NO I DID NOT. YOU'RE GORGEOUS!
AW, WELL, THANK YOU. BUT NIKKI'S NOT. SHE'S JUST... FINDING HERSELF. SEE, WE MET AT THIS SUPPORT GROUP FOR GIRLS DEALING WITH BODY IMAGE ISSUES. I WAS THERE BECAUSE, WELL, OBVIOUS REASONS. AND NIKKI WAS THERE BECAUSE HER DAD HAD BEEN PUSHING THIS INTENSE ATHLETIC TRAINING ON HER SINCE SHE WAS LITTLE.
OH, THOSE SPORTS DADS CAN BE BRUTAL.
SO THERE SHE WAS, THIS GORGEOUS GIRL TRYING TO HIDE IN BAGGY CLOTHES, AFRAID TO EMBRACE HER FEMININITY BECAUSE SHE THOUGHT IT WOULD DISAPPOINT HER FATHER. AND THERE I WAS, DESPERATE TO BE SEEN AS FEMININE. WE JUST... CLICKED. LIKE OPPOSITES ATTRACT, YOU KNOW?
THAT'S ACTUALLY REALLY SWEET!
WE'RE GOING TO BE ROOMMATES AT ST. CHRISTOPHER'S THIS FALL. I'M HOPING HAVING SOMEONE WHO UNDERSTANDS BOTH SIDES - BEING SEEN AS MASCULINE AND FEMININE - MIGHT HELP HER FIND HER BALANCE. PLUS, BETWEEN YOU AND ME, I THINK SHE NEEDS TO GET AWAY FROM HER DAD FOR A WHILE.


HEY, I KNOW I'M SUPER INTERESTING, BUT STOP TALKING ABOUT ME WHEN I'M NOT AROUND. ANYWAY...


...ON A SCALE OF ONE TO "PENNYWISE" EXACTLY HOW CLOWNISH DO I LOOK? BECAUSE I SWEAR TO GOD, I FEEL LIKE I'M ONE RED NOSE AWAY FROM JOINING THE CIRCUS.
MY GOD, YOU LOOK ABSOLUTELY GORG--
ABSOLUTELY BADASS! LIKE YOU COULD ASSASSINATE SOMEONE WITH THOSE NAILS WHILE NEVER SPILLING YOUR MARTINI. TOTAL BLACK WIDOW VIBES.

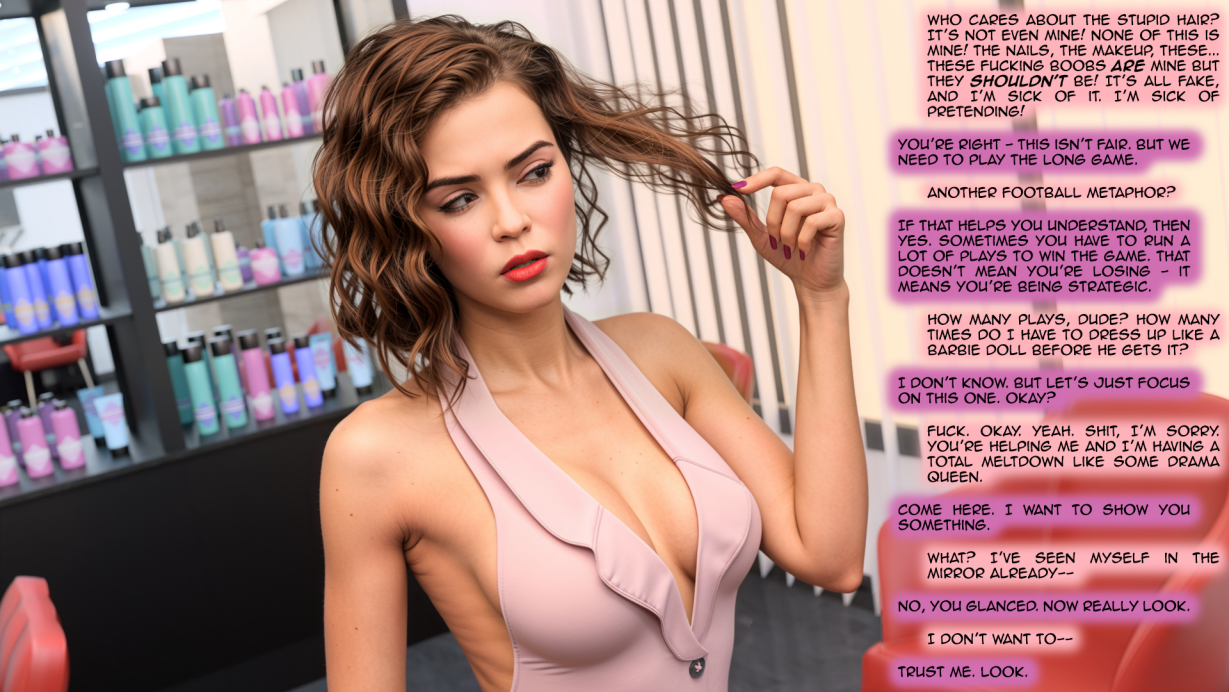

REALLY? YOU'RE NOT JUST SAYING THAT? I DON'T LOOK LIKE A FREAK?
NO. AND, BE HONEST, DO YOU FEEL LIKE ONE? REALLY?


WELL... NO, ACTUALLY. EVEN THOUGH I ***SHOULD!***
I MEAN, THIS ISN'T ME. ***OBVIOUSLY.*** BUT IT'S KIND OF LIKE WEARING A REALLY GOOD HALLOWEEN COSTUME, YOU KNOW? LIKE WHEN I DRESSED UP AS DEADPOOL THAT ONE TIME AND ACTUALLY FELT LIKE A BADASS.
PLUS, THE OUTFIT IS KINDA METAL. AND THE MAKEUP DOESN'T LOOK CHEAP OR TRASHY LIKE I WAS WORRIED ABOUT. IT'S MORE LIKE... WAR PAINT? YEAH, THAT'S IT. LIKE I'M GOING INTO BATTLE.
SO -- FUCK YEAH, LET'S DO THIS!


KNOW WHAT? IF THESE WERE BLACK AND SHORTER, THEY'D ACTUALLY BE KIND OF BADASS. LIKE A ROCK STAR, YA KNOW?
WELL, YOU'VE GOT ONE UP ON ME - I HAVEN'T EVEN HAD MY NAILS DONE YET. LIKE, EVER! MAYBE NEXT TIME WE COULD GO TOGETHER.
SORRY, BUT THERE AIN'T GONNA BE A NEXT TIME, SCOTT.
SANDY!
HUH? OH, YEAH. SORRY. BUT THIS IS A ONE-AND-DONE DEAL. AFTER TONIGHT, I'M NEVER DOING ANY OF THIS ULTRA GIRLY SHIT AGAIN. THAT'S THE WHOLE DAMN POINT OF THIS, RIGHT? TO PROVE TO HUTCHINSON THAT NO MATTER HOW FEMININE HE MAKES ME LOOK, ZACH'S STILL GONNA BE GAY. THEN MAYBE HE'LL FINALLY GET IT THROUGH HIS THICK SKULL THAT YOU CAN'T JUST... FORCE SOMEONE TO BE SOMETHING THEY'RE NOT. AND THEN HE'LL LEAVE US BOTH ALONE.


WELL... YEAH, THAT'S THE PLAN.
OKAY, WHY THE HELL DO YOU SUDDENLY SOUND LESS CONVINCED THAN YOU DID THIS MORNING? YOU'RE MAKING ME NERVOUS.
IT'S JUST... JERKS LIKE HUTCHINSON, THEY DON'T USUALLY CHANGE THEIR MINDS AFTER ONE FAILED ATTEMPT. HE MIGHT NEED MORE... EVIDENCE.

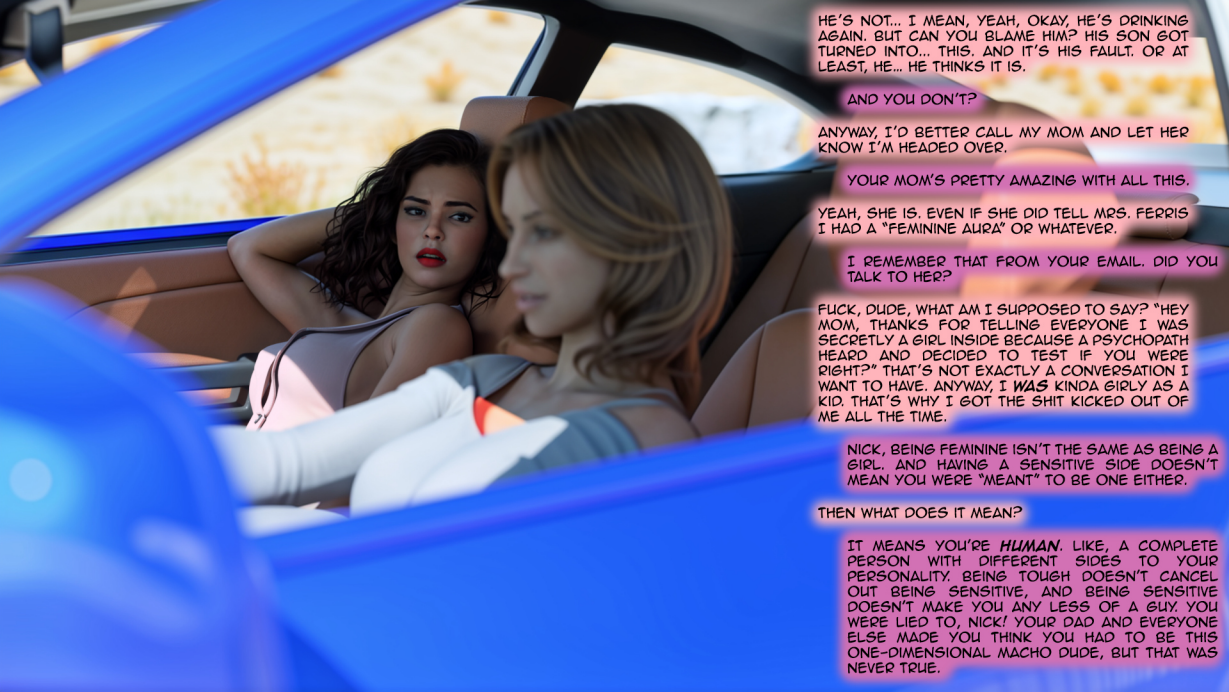

WHAT? NO. NO, NO, NO. HOW MANY TIMES ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE? TWO? THREE? UNTIL I'M WALKING DOWN THE FUCKING AISLE IN A WEDDING DRESS!?
HEY, BREATHE! I'M JUST SAYING--
THIS IS BULLSHIT! THE WHOLE POINT WAS ONE DATE. ONE! TO PROVE THIS WON'T WORK. I'M NOT... I CAN'T... FUCK, I NEED TO GET OUT OF THIS OUTFIT. I CAN'T BREATHE.
NIKKI, STOP!
NICK!
YOU REALLY WANT ME TO CALL YOU THAT OUT HERE? I WILL.
I... FUCK, I GUESS NOT. WHAT THE HELL DOES IT MATTER ANYWAY?
OKAY. NOW, I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU TO CALM DOWN, BECAUSE THAT'S PATRONIZING. YOU HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO BE SCARED AND UPSET. BUT... YOU'RE GOING TO MESS UP YOUR HAIR.

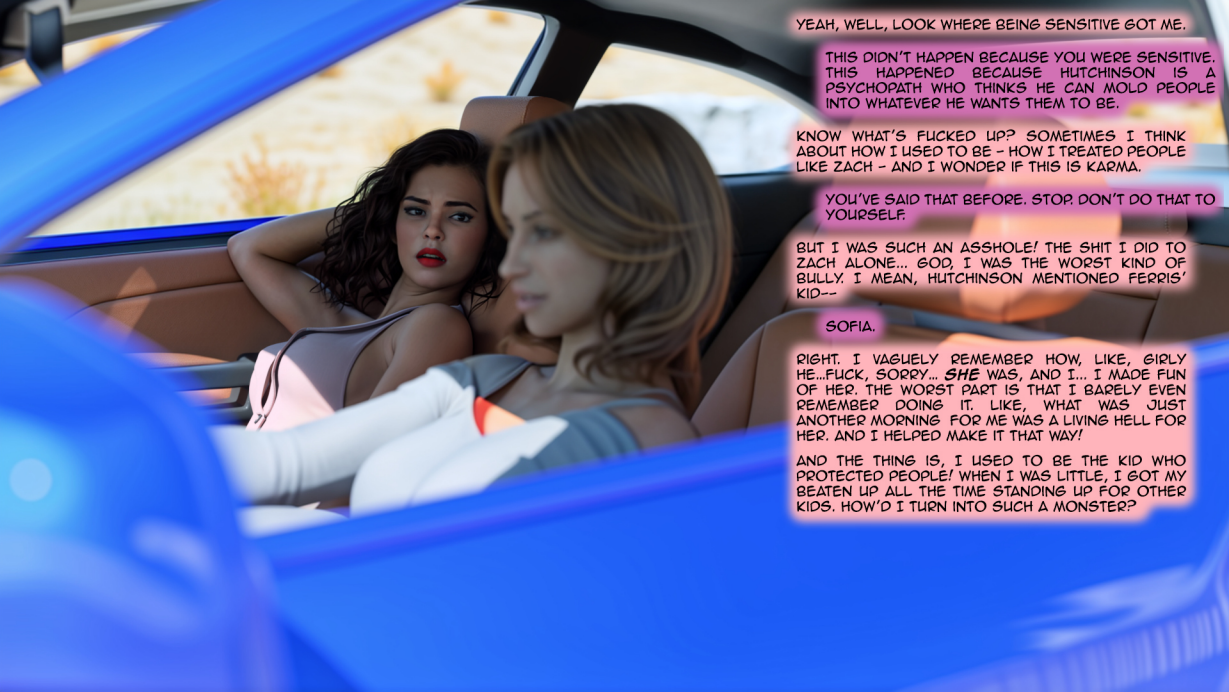

WHO CARES ABOUT THE STUPID HAIR? IT'S NOT EVEN MINE! NONE OF THIS IS MINE! THE NAILS, THE MAKEUP, THESE... THESE FUCKING BOOBS ***ARE*** MINE BUT THEY ***SHOULDN'T*** BE! IT'S ALL FAKE, AND I'M SICK OF IT. I'M SICK OF PRETENDING!
YOU'RE RIGHT – THIS ISN'T FAIR. BUT WE NEED TO PLAY THE LONG GAME.
ANOTHER FOOTBALL METAPHOR?
IF THAT HELPS YOU UNDERSTAND, THEN YES. SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO RUN A LOT OF PLAYS TO WIN THE GAME. THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE LOSING – IT MEANS YOU'RE BEING STRATEGIC.
HOW MANY PLAYS, DUDE? HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO DRESS UP LIKE A BARBIE DOLL BEFORE HE GETS IT?
I DON'T KNOW. BUT LET'S JUST FOCUS ON THIS ONE. OKAY?
FUCK. OKAY. YEAH. SHIT, I'M SORRY. YOU'RE HELPING ME AND I'M HAVING A TOTAL MELTDOWN LIKE SOME DRAMA QUEEN.
COME HERE. I WANT TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING.
WHAT? I'VE SEEN MYSELF IN THE MIRROR ALREADY--
NO, YOU GLANCED. NOW REALLY LOOK.
I DON'T WANT TO--
TRUST ME. LOOK.


HOLY SHIT.
RIGHT?
IS THAT... I LOOK LIKE... DAMN.
YOU LOOK HOT AS HELL. LIKE, IF I WASN'T ALREADY INTO JOSH, I'D TOTALLY HIT THAT.
DUDE! GROSS!
I'M JUST SAYING WHAT EVERYONE ELSE WHO'S EVEN A LITTLE ATTRACTED TO GIRL-TYPE PEOPLE WILL BE THINKING.
I MEAN... YEAH. OKAY, I GET IT. IF I SAW A CHICK WHO LOOKED LIKE THIS AT A PARTY, I'D DEFINITELY GET HER NUMBER. GOD, THAT'S WEIRD TO SAY OUT LOUD.
SEE? THIS IS EXACTLY WHY THE PLAN WILL WORK. YOU LOOK INCREDIBLE. LIKE, COVER OF VOGUE INCREDIBLE. IF ZACH STILL ISN'T INTERESTED AFTER SEEING YOU LIKE THIS... ESPECIALLY IF IT'S ONE OR TWO MORE DATES...
RIGHT. YES. ONE OR MAYBE TWO. THEN, FINALLY, EVEN HIS ASSHOLE FATHER WILL HAVE TO ADMIT IT'S NOT ABOUT HOW I LOOK.
EXACTLY! NOW, YOU READY TO GO BREAK SOME HEARTS? WELL, ALL EXCEPT ONE?
YEAH. YEAH, I THINK I AM. THANKS, BRO... ER... GIRL...FRIEND? YOU'RE PRETTY GOOD AT THE PEP TALK THING. SORRY FOR FREAKING OUT. I DON'T USUALLY LOSE MY COOL LIKE THAT, ALTHOUGH LATELY... NEVERMIND, LET'S HEAD BACK.


BACK BAY
FINANCIAL
1283 4589 2297
12/29
SANDRA FLYNN
ALRIGHT, LADIES! YOUR TOTAL COMES TO $3,847.
WORTH EVERY PENNY. AND PLEASE ADD A THOUSAND-DOLLAR TIP. FOR YOUR... DISCRETION. ABOUT ANYTHING YOU MIGHT HAVE OVERHEARD.
HONEY, YOU DON'T HAVE TO BRIBE ME. WE'VE HEARD ABOUT LEONARD HUTCHINSON HERE, TOO. MY SISTER'S EX WORKED AT ONE OF HIS COMPANIES. THE STORIES SHE TOLD... HE'S A BAD MAN. UNDERSTAND?
WE DO, UNFORTUNATELY.
LOOK, I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT'S GOING ON, BUT... TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER. AND IF YOU EVER NEED A SAFE PLACE TO GET DOLLED UP – OR JUST HANG OUT, WE'VE GOT A BACK ENTRANCE. JUST CALL AHEAD.
THANK YOU. FOR EVERYTHING.


HEY, CAN YOU TAKE ME HOME? I MEAN, TO MY MOM'S PLACE? THAT'S WHERE I TOLD ZACH TO PICK ME UP.
NOT TO YOUR DAD'S, HUH?
NO WAY. DAD'S PROBABLY FIVE WHISKEYS DEEP BY NOW. IF HE SEES ME LOOKING LIKE THIS, HE MIGHT ACTUALLY HAVE AN ANEURYSM. OR WORSE, START CRYING AGAIN.
AGAIN?
YEAH, HE... HE BROKE DOWN THE OTHER NIGHT. LIKE, FULL-ON SOBBING. KEPT SAYING HOW HE FAILED ME, HOW HE SHOULD'VE PROTECTED ME BETTER. I HAVEN'T SEEN HIM CRY SINCE GRANDPA DIED. THEN HE GOT MAD AND THREW HIS GLASS AT THE WALL. I HAD TO CLEAN UP ALL THE BROKEN PIECES WHILE HE PASSED OUT ON THE COUCH.
SHIT, I'M SORRY. IS HE... IS HE DRINKING A LOT THESE DAYS?
CH9-L960


HE'S NOT... I MEAN, YEAH, OKAY, HE'S DRINKING AGAIN. BUT CAN YOU BLAME HIM? HIS SON GOT TURNED INTO... THIS. AND IT'S HIS FAULT. OR AT LEAST, HE... HE THINKS IT IS.
AND YOU DON'T?
ANYWAY, I'D BETTER CALL MY MOM AND LET HER KNOW I'M HEADED OVER.
YOUR MOM'S PRETTY AMAZING WITH ALL THIS.
YEAH, SHE IS. EVEN IF SHE DID TELL MRS. FERRIS I HAD A "FEMININE AURA" OR WHATEVER.
I REMEMBER THAT FROM YOUR EMAIL. DID YOU TALK TO HER?
FUCK, DUDE, WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO SAY? "HEY MOM, THANKS FOR TELLING EVERYONE I WAS SECRETLY A GIRL INSIDE BECAUSE A PSYCHOPATH HEARD AND DECIDED TO TEST IF YOU WERE RIGHT?" THAT'S NOT EXACTLY A CONVERSATION I WANT TO HAVE. ANYWAY, I WAS KINDA GIRLY AS A KID. THAT'S WHY I GOT THE SHIT KICKED OUT OF ME ALL THE TIME.
NICK, BEING FEMININE ISN'T THE SAME AS BEING A GIRL. AND HAVING A SENSITIVE SIDE DOESN'T MEAN YOU WERE "MEANT" TO BE ONE EITHER.
THEN WHAT DOES IT MEAN?
IT MEANS YOU'RE HUMAN. LIKE, A COMPLETE PERSON WITH DIFFERENT SIDES TO YOUR PERSONALITY. BEING TOUGH DOESN'T CANCEL OUT BEING SENSITIVE, AND BEING SENSITIVE DOESN'T MAKE YOU ANY LESS OF A GUY. YOU WERE LIED TO, NICK! YOUR DAD AND EVERYONE ELSE MADE YOU THINK YOU HAD TO BE THIS ONE-DIMENSIONAL MACHO DUDE, BUT THAT WAS NEVER TRUE.


YEAH, WELL, LOOK WHERE BEING SENSITIVE GOT ME.
THIS DIDN'T HAPPEN BECAUSE YOU WERE SENSITIVE. THIS HAPPENED BECAUSE HUTCHINSON IS A PSYCHOPATH WHO THINKS HE CAN MOLD PEOPLE INTO WHATEVER HE WANTS THEM TO BE.
KNOW WHAT'S FUCKED UP? SOMETIMES I THINK ABOUT HOW I USED TO BE – HOW I TREATED PEOPLE LIKE ZACH – AND I WONDER IF THIS IS KARMA.
YOU'VE SAID THAT BEFORE. STOP. DON'T DO THAT TO YOURSELF.
BUT I WAS SUCH AN ASSHOLE! THE SHIT I DID TO ZACH ALONE... GOD, I WAS THE WORST KIND OF BULLY. I MEAN, HUTCHINSON MENTIONED FERRIS' KID--
SOFIA.
RIGHT. I VAGUELY REMEMBER HOW, LIKE, GIRLY HE...FUCK, SORRY... SHE WAS, AND I... I MADE FUN OF HER. THE WORST PART IS THAT I BARELY EVEN REMEMBER DOING IT. LIKE, WHAT WAS JUST ANOTHER MORNING FOR ME WAS A LIVING HELL FOR HER. AND I HELPED MAKE IT THAT WAY!
AND THE THING IS, I USED TO BE THE KID WHO PROTECTED PEOPLE! WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I GOT MY BEATEN UP ALL THE TIME STANDING UP FOR OTHER KIDS. HOW'D I TURN INTO SUCH A MONSTER?


HEY, NO. NOBODY DESERVES TO HAVE THEIR BODY CHANGED AGAINST THEIR WILL. NOBODY. NOT EVEN THE BIGGEST ASSHOLE IN THE WORLD DESERVES THAT. PLUS, YOU'RE TRYING TO MAKE UP FOR IT NOW. THAT COUNTS FOR A LOT.
DOES IT, THOUGH?
IF IT DOESN'T WE'RE ALL IN A LOT OF TROUBLE. LOOK AT YOU – YOU'RE LITERALLY, UM, CROSSDRESSING TO HELP PROTECT HIM FROM HIS DAD. AND TO PROTECT YOUR FATHER, TOO! EVEN IF HE'S...NOT IN THE BEST PLACE.
THANKS, BRO. FUCK. I CAN'T CRY. I'LL MESS UP ALL THIS... STUFF. GODDAMN GIRL HORMONES.
HERE, TILT YOUR HEAD BACK AND FAN YOUR EYES. THAT'S WHAT JESSICA TAUGHT ME.
GOD, EVEN YOU KNOW MORE ABOUT BEING A GIRL THAN I DO.


TRUST ME, I'M STILL LEARNING TOO. WE ALL ARE. EVEN CIS GIRLS.
THE FUCK IS A CIS GIRL?
NEVER MIND. LET'S JUST GET YOU TO YOUR MOM'S BEFORE ZACH SHOWS UP.
HEY, CAN WE STOP FOR FOOD? ALL I ATE WAS THAT SPA CUCUMBER AND I CAN'T GO ON THIS DATE ON AN EMPTY STOMACH.
SURE. WHAT ARE YOU IN THE MOOD FOR?
ANYTHING BUT BEEF. PLEASE. I'M SO SICK OF BEEF.
PLOTTING A COURSE TO FRIED CHICKEN.
GODDAMN, YOU ROCK. I'M... FUCK, I'M REALLY GLAD YOU'RE BACK... SANDY.
ME TOO, NICK.
...NICKY IS FINE. THAT USED TO BE MY NICKNAME, ANYWAY. JUST... JUST REMEMBER IT'S SHORT FOR NICHOLAS. OKAY?
I WILL, I PROMISE.

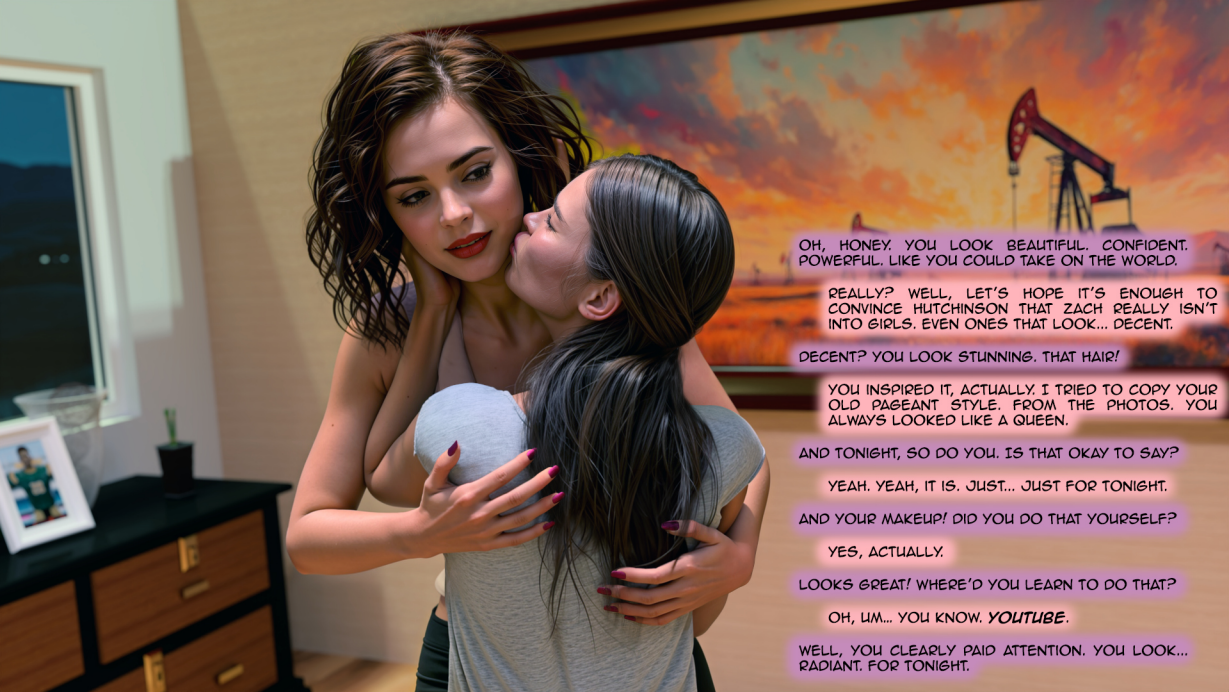

Miss Tex
1993
HEY, MOM.
OH, HI, HONEY. SORRY, I DIDN'T HEAR YOU COME IN. I WAS LOST IN THOUGHT.
I BROUGHT A FRIEND TO WAIT WITH US UNTIL ZACH SHOWS UP. SANDY. THE, UH, GIRL I'VE TOLD YOU ABOUT. OH, UM, WHEN YOU TURN AROUND, PLEASE DON'T FREAK.

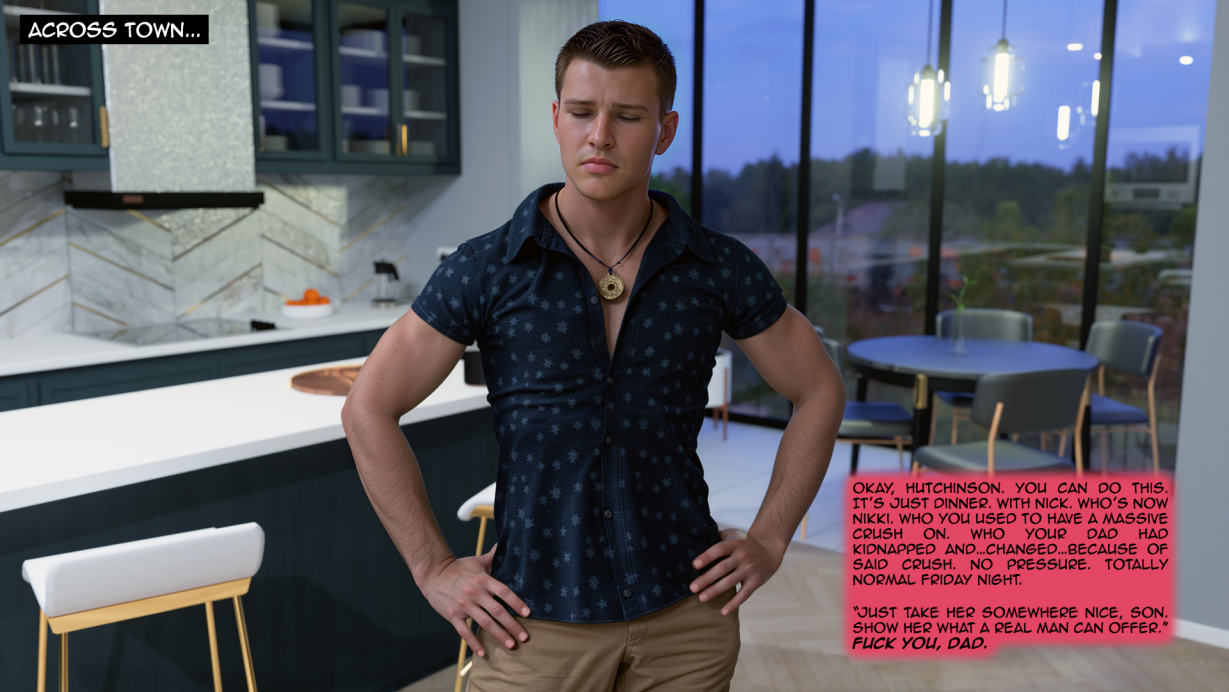

WHY WOULD I FREAK OUT,? I WAS THERE WHEN YOU TRIED ON THE OUTFIT--
Miss Texas
1993

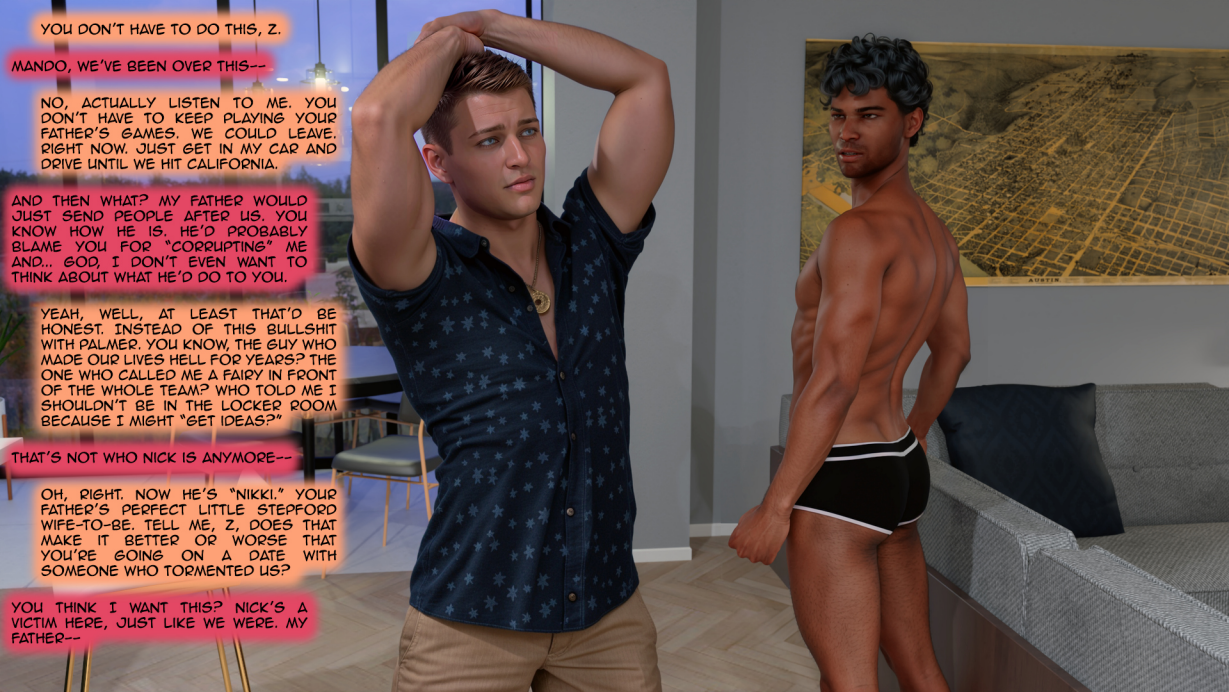

Miss Texas
1993
OH MY GOODNESS! I...
NICK, YOU LOOK...

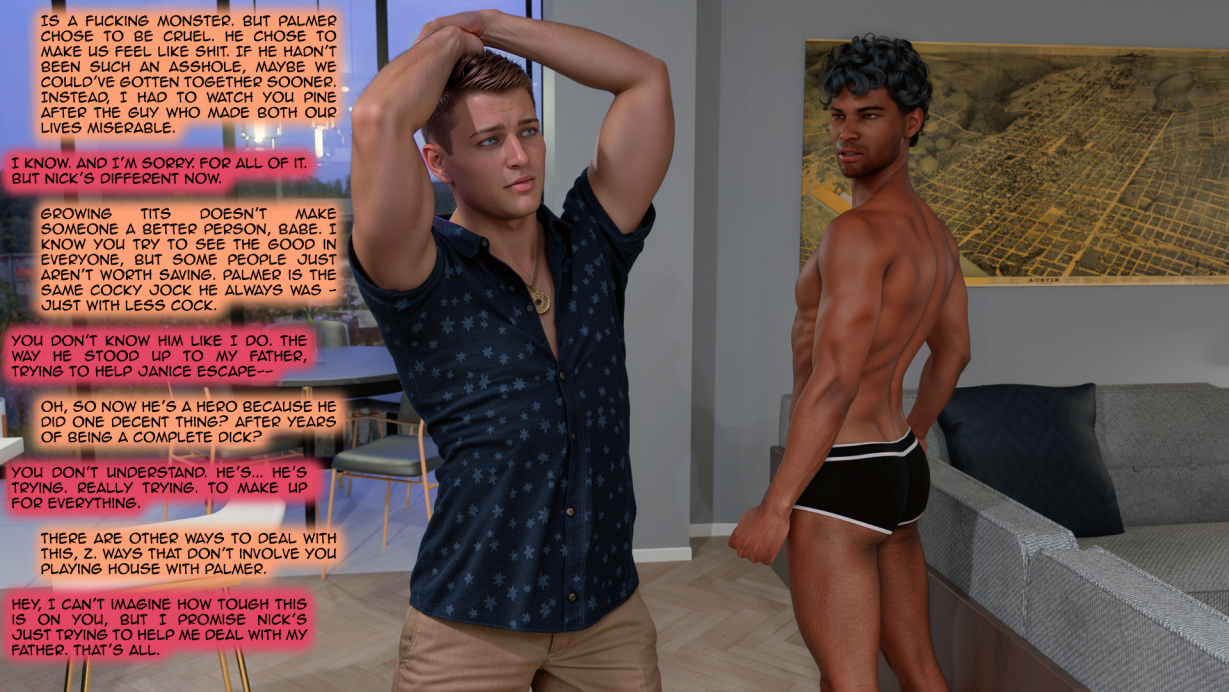

LIKE A CLOWN? A DRAG QUEEN?
NIKKI, THOSE AREN'T AT ALL THE SAME. ONE IS TERRIFYING, THE OTHER IS A DRAG QUEEN.
HELLO, MRS. PALMER, IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU.
NICE TO MEET YOU, TOO. NICK, I'M SORRY, I JUST... I DIDN'T EXPECT YOU TO...
TO ACTUALLY TRY? TO GO ALL OUT? YEAH, I KNOW. WE CALLED AN AUDIBLE. SANDY HAD AN IDEA.
I SEE. WELL...


MOM, IT'S OKAY. YOU CAN SAY IT. IN FACT, I NEED YOU TO BECAUSE IF THIS IS GONNA WORK, I HAVE TO BELIEVE IN MYSELF. YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN GOOD AT THAT - MAKING ME BELIEVE. EVEN BACK WHEN I WAS THIS SCRAWNY KID WHO COULDN'T THROW A SPIRAL TO SAVE HIS LIFE, YOU MADE ME BELIEVE I COULD BE SOMETHING. YOU WERE THE ONLY ONE WHO SHOWED UP TO THOSE FIRST GAMES, REMEMBER? WHEN I WAS THIRD-STRING AND BARELY GOT TO PLAY. DAD WAS... WELL, YOU KNOW WHERE DAD WAS. BUT YOU WERE THERE, WITH YOUR SIGN AND EVERYTHING. LOOKING LIKE A COMPLETE DORK, EMBARASSING THE HELL OUT OF ME. I LOVED IT.
ARE YOU SURE? I DON'T WANT TO UPSET YOU.
FOR ONCE, LOOKING PRETTY IS ACTUALLY THE GOAL. THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT. SO... HOW'D WE DO?


OH, HONEY. YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL. CONFIDENT. POWERFUL. LIKE YOU COULD TAKE ON THE WORLD.
REALLY? WELL, LET'S HOPE IT'S ENOUGH TO CONVINCE HUTCHINSON THAT ZACH REALLY ISN'T INTO GIRLS. EVEN ONES THAT LOOK... DECENT.
DECENT? YOU LOOK STUNNING. THAT HAIR!
YOU INSPIRED IT, ACTUALLY. I TRIED TO COPY YOUR OLD PAGEANT STYLE. FROM THE PHOTOS. YOU ALWAYS LOOKED LIKE A QUEEN.
AND TONIGHT, SO DO YOU. IS THAT OKAY TO SAY?
YEAH. YEAH, IT IS. JUST... JUST FOR TONIGHT.
AND YOUR MAKEUP! DID YOU DO THAT YOURSELF?
YES, ACTUALLY.
LOOKS GREAT! WHERE'D YOU LEARN TO DO THAT?
OH, UM... YOU KNOW. YOUTUBE.
WELL, YOU CLEARLY PAID ATTENTION. YOU LOOK... RADIANT. FOR TONIGHT.


ACROSS TOWN...
OKAY, HUTCHINSON. YOU CAN DO THIS. IT'S JUST DINNER. WITH NICK. WHO'S NOW NIKKI. WHO YOU USED TO HAVE A MASSIVE CRUSH ON. WHO YOUR DAD HAD KIDNAPPED AND...CHANGED...BECAUSE OF SAID CRUSH. NO PRESSURE. TOTALLY NORMAL FRIDAY NIGHT.
"JUST TAKE HER SOMEWHERE NICE, SON. SHOW HER WHAT A REAL MAN CAN OFFER."
FUCK YOU, DAD.


YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS, Z.
MANDO, WE'VE BEEN OVER THIS--
NO, ACTUALLY LISTEN TO ME. YOU DON'T HAVE TO KEEP PLAYING YOUR FATHER'S GAMES. WE COULD LEAVE. RIGHT NOW. JUST GET IN MY CAR AND DRIVE UNTIL WE HIT CALIFORNIA.
AND THEN WHAT? MY FATHER WOULD JUST SEND PEOPLE AFTER US. YOU KNOW HOW HE IS. HE'D PROBABLY BLAME YOU FOR "CORRUPTING" ME AND... GOD, I DON'T EVEN WANT TO THINK ABOUT WHAT HE'D DO TO YOU.
YEAH, WELL, AT LEAST THAT'D BE HONEST. INSTEAD OF THIS BULLSHIT WITH PALMER. YOU KNOW, THE GUY WHO MADE OUR LIVES HELL FOR YEARS? THE ONE WHO CALLED ME A FAIRY IN FRONT OF THE WHOLE TEAM? WHO TOLD ME I SHOULDN'T BE IN THE LOCKER ROOM BECAUSE I MIGHT "GET IDEAS?"
THAT'S NOT WHO NICK IS ANYMORE--
OH, RIGHT. NOW HE'S "NIKKI." YOUR FATHER'S PERFECT LITTLE STEPFORD WIFE-TO-BE. TELL ME, Z, DOES THAT MAKE IT BETTER OR WORSE THAT YOU'RE GOING ON A DATE WITH SOMEONE WHO TORMENTED US?
YOU THINK I WANT THIS? NICK'S A VICTIM HERE, JUST LIKE WE WERE. MY FATHER--

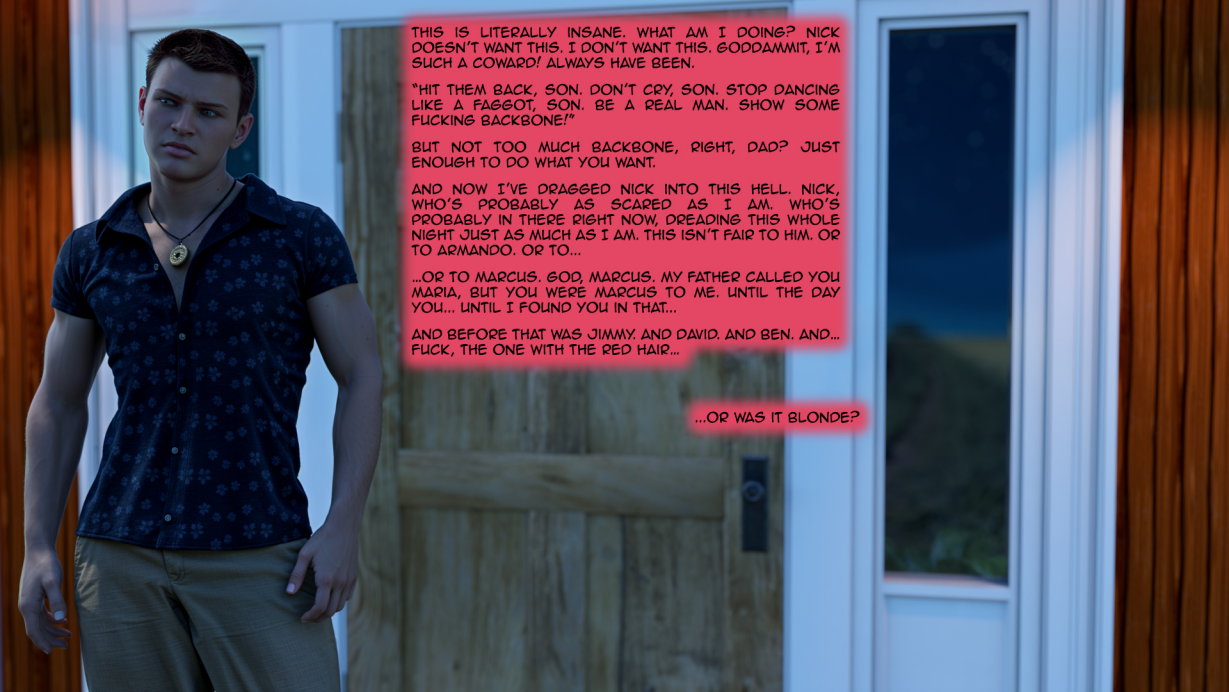

IS A FUCKING MONSTER. BUT PALMER CHOSE TO BE CRUEL. HE CHOSE TO MAKE US FEEL LIKE SHIT. IF HE HADN'T BEEN SUCH AN ASSHOLE, MAYBE WE COULD'VE GOTTEN TOGETHER SOONER. INSTEAD, I HAD TO WATCH YOU PINE AFTER THE GUY WHO MADE BOTH OUR LIVES MISERABLE.
I KNOW. AND I'M SORRY. FOR ALL OF IT. BUT NICK'S DIFFERENT NOW.
GROWING TITS DOESN'T MAKE SOMEONE A BETTER PERSON, BABE. I KNOW YOU TRY TO SEE THE GOOD IN EVERYONE, BUT SOME PEOPLE JUST AREN'T WORTH SAVING. PALMER IS THE SAME COCKY JOCK HE ALWAYS WAS - JUST WITH LESS COCK.
YOU DON'T KNOW HIM LIKE I DO. THE WAY HE STOOD UP TO MY FATHER, TRYING TO HELP JANICE ESCAPE--
OH, SO NOW HE'S A HERO BECAUSE HE DID ONE DECENT THING? AFTER YEARS OF BEING A COMPLETE DICK?
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. HE'S... HE'S TRYING. REALLY TRYING. TO MAKE UP FOR EVERYTHING.
THERE ARE OTHER WAYS TO DEAL WITH THIS, Z. WAYS THAT DON'T INVOLVE YOU PLAYING HOUSE WITH PALMER.
HEY, I CAN'T IMAGINE HOW TOUGH THIS IS ON YOU, BUT I PROMISE NICK'S JUST TRYING TO HELP ME DEAL WITH MY FATHER. THAT'S ALL.


I KNOW. I KNOW YOU'RE JUST TRYING TO PROTECT EVERYONE. IT'S ONE OF THE THINGS I LOVE ABOUT YOU. BUT WHO'S PROTECTING YOU?
YOU ARE. JUST BY BEING HERE.
AM I? BECAUSE SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE I'M LOSING YOU TO ALL THIS INSANITY.
HEY, YOU'RE NOT LOSING ME. YOU'RE THE ONLY REAL THING IN MY LIFE.
PROMISE ME SOMETHING? WHEN YOU'RE OUT THERE TONIGHT, PRETENDING... REMEMBER WHO YOU REALLY ARE. REMEMBER WHO YOU COME HOME TO.
HOW COULD I FORGET? SHIT, I HAVE TO GO. I'M ALREADY LATE.
FUCK. JUST... COME BACK TO ME TONIGHT, OKAY?
ALWAYS.


UN-FUCKING-BELIEVABLE. I GET ALL... PRETTIFIED... AND HE'S GONNA STAND ME UP? I SWEAR TO GOD, IF HE CANCELS--
HONEY, HE'S ONLY FIFTEEN MINUTES LATE. TRAFFIC IS TERRIBLE ON FRIDAYS.
YEAH, AND GUYS ARE ALWAYS LATE. IT'S LIKE, A RULE OR SOMETHING.
I WAS NEVER LATE FOR DATES.
NICK, THAT'S JUST VERY, VERY NOT TRUE. YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL. AND IF ZACH DOESN'T SHOW--
THEN I GOT 'BEAUTIFUL' FOR NOTHING! DO YOU KNOW HOW WEIRD THAT FEELS? TO GET ALL... DOLLED UP.. AND THEN JUST STAND HERE LIKE AN IDIOT?
WELCOME TO BEING A GIRL. FOR JUST TONIGHT, OF COURSE.
WELL, IT SUCKS. UGH!


WAIT, IS THAT A...
OH MY GOD, HE BROUGHT THE BIKE! I HAVEN'T BEEN ON IT SINCE THAT TIME HE GAVE ME A RIDE HOME!
ABSOLUTELY NOT. YOU ARE NOT GETTING ON A MOTORCYCLE!
MOM, COME ON! IT'S TOTALLY SAFE. ZACH'S, LIKE, THE MOST CAREFUL DRIVER EVER. HE'S PRACTICALLY A GRANDMA. PLUS, DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY HOURS HE SPENT RESTORING THAT INDIAN? IT'S A WORK OF ART.
I DON'T CARE IF IT'S THE MONA LISA ON WHEELS. BESIDES, YOU'LL RUIN YOUR HAIR.
OH SHIT, THE EXTENSIONS! BUT... BUT THE BIKE IS SO COOL...
TORN BETWEEN KEEPING YOUR PRETTY HAIR PERFECT AND RIDING A MOTORCYCLE. VERY ON-BRAND FOR A TEXAS GIRL.
SHUT UP! I JUST... REALLY LIKE MOTORCYCLES, OKAY? THEY'RE BADASS.

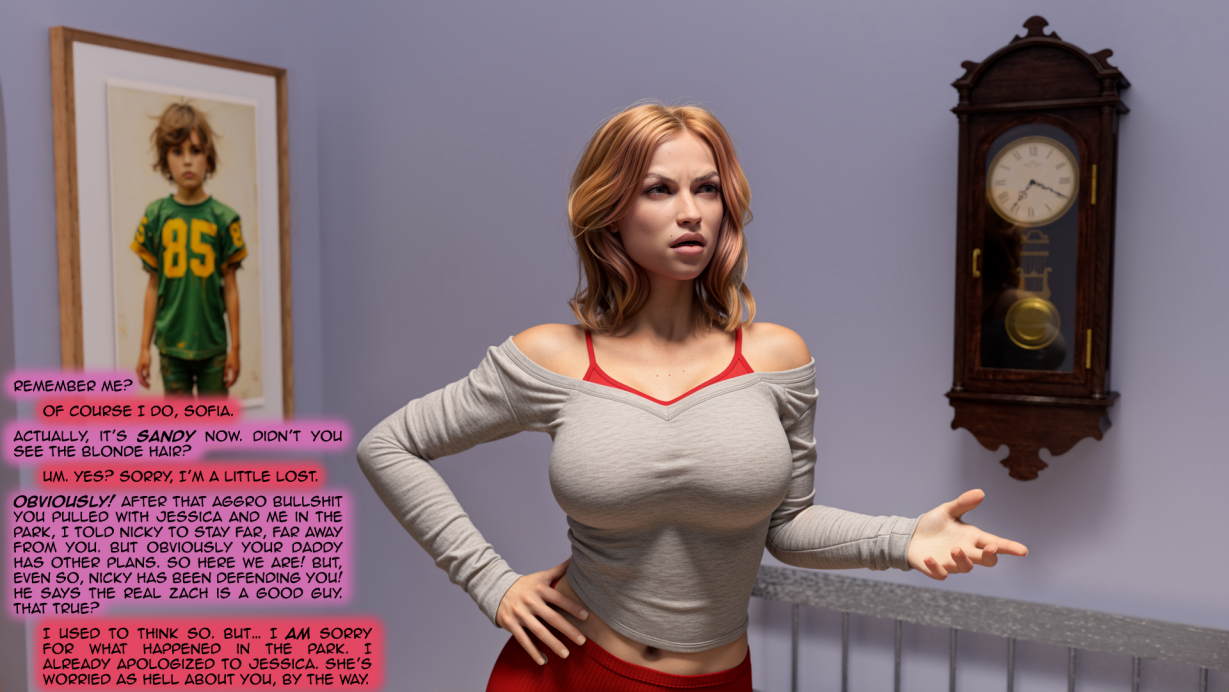

FINE, FINE! BUT ONLY IF YOU PROMISE TO HOLD ON *TIGHT*.
I... YEAH, MOM. I PROMISE.


THIS IS LITERALLY INSANE. WHAT AM I DOING? NICK DOESN'T WANT THIS. I DON'T WANT THIS. GODDAMMIT, I'M SUCH A COWARD! ALWAYS HAVE BEEN.
"HIT THEM BACK, SON. DON'T CRY, SON. STOP DANCING LIKE A FAGGOT, SON. BE A REAL MAN. SHOW SOME FUCKING BACKBONE!"
BUT NOT TOO MUCH BACKBONE, RIGHT, DAD? JUST ENOUGH TO DO WHAT YOU WANT.
AND NOW I'VE DRAGGED NICK INTO THIS HELL. NICK, WHO'S PROBABLY AS SCARED AS I AM. WHO'S PROBABLY IN THERE RIGHT NOW, DREADING THIS WHOLE NIGHT JUST AS MUCH AS I AM. THIS ISN'T FAIR TO HIM. OR TO ARMANDO. OR TO...
...OR TO MARCUS. GOD, MARCUS. MY FATHER CALLED YOU MARIA, BUT YOU WERE MARCUS TO ME. UNTIL THE DAY YOU... UNTIL I FOUND YOU IN THAT...
AND BEFORE THAT WAS JIMMY. AND DAVID. AND BEN. AND... FUCK, THE ONE WITH THE RED HAIR...
...OR WAS IT BLONDE?


I CAN STILL HEAR THEM SCREAMING. IN THAT DAMN TANK, IN THE BEDROOM UPSTAIRS, OUT IN THE WOODS. ***BEGGING***. NOT FOR MERCY, THEY KNEW BETTER. JUST FOR IT TO END. ALL OF IT.
AND I DID NOTHING. JUST STOOD THERE, FROZEN. LIKE ALWAYS.
BUT NICK... NICK FOUGHT BACK. THREW A FUCKING ROCK AT MY FATHER'S HEAD AND GAVE HIM 47 STITCHES. HELPED JANICE ESCAPE. DID WHAT I NEVER COULD.
MAYBE THAT'S WHY I... NO. ***DON'T*** GO THERE! DON'T THINK ABOUT THAT. ABOUT HIM. ABOUT HOW HE USED TO LOOK IN THE LOCKER ROOM, ALL CONFIDENT AND...
STOP! YOU HAVE ARMANDO NOW. SWEET, BRAVE ARMANDO WHO LOVES YOU DESPITE KNOWING WHAT A COWARD YOU ARE. DESPITE KNOWING WHAT YOUR FATHER IS. WHAT YOU LET HIM DO.
OKAY, OKAY. JUST RING THE DAMN DOORBELL.


OR NOT. I CAN'T--
ZACHARIAH HUTCHINSON! GET IN HERE THIS INSTANT.
MRS. PALMER! I... I WAS JUST...
HAVING SECOND THOUGHTS? WELL, TOO BAD. MY CHILD SPENT HOURS GETTING READY FOR THIS "DATE." THE LEAST YOU CAN DO IS COME INSIDE AND SAY HELLO PROPERLY.
YES, MA'AM.

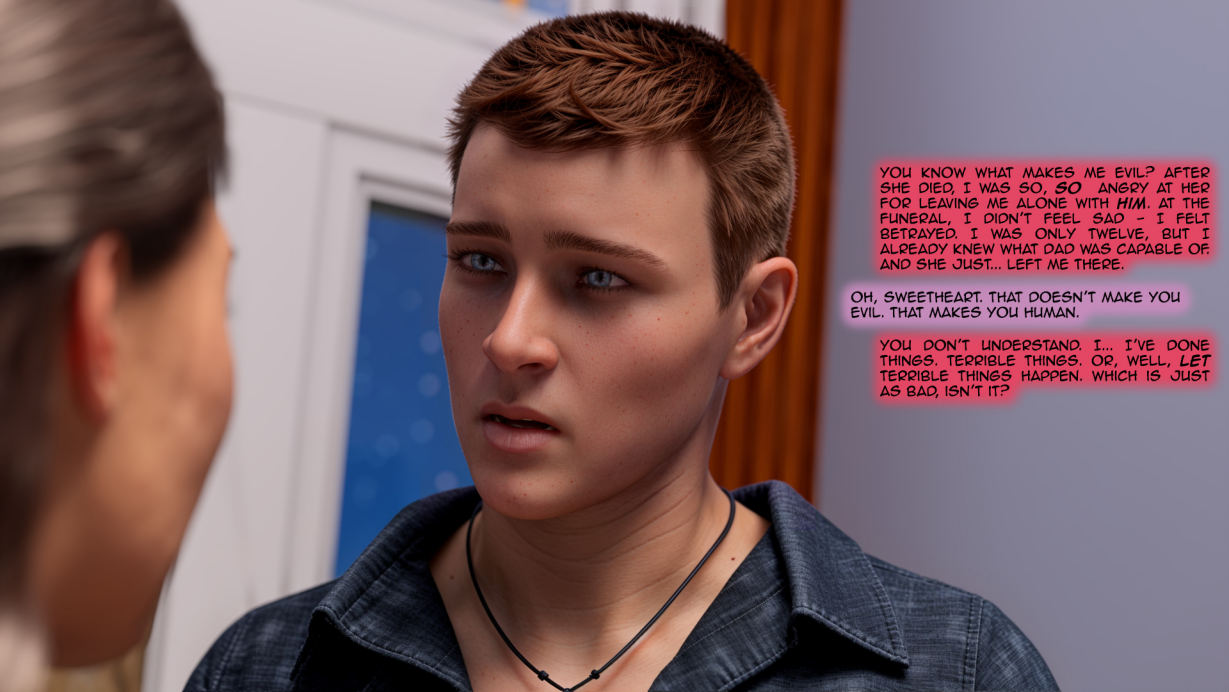

I'M SORRY, MRS. PALMER. I JUST... I GOT NERVOUS. THIS WHOLE SITUATION IS SO WEIRD, AND I--
WEIRD? YOU THINK THIS IS WEIRD FOR *YOU?* HOW DO YOU THINK NICK FEELS?
MY CHILD SPENT HOURS GETTING READY, TRYING ON OUTFITS, GETTING HAIR DONE, PUTTING ON MAKEUP - ALL THESE THINGS THAT ARE COMPLETELY FOREIGN AND UNCOMFORTABLE - JUST TO HELP YOU WITH YOUR INSANE FATHER. AND YOU HAVE THE NERVE TO BE VERY LATE -- AND THEN TO TRY TO DUCK OUT AT THE LAST MINUTE? FOR SHAME!


REMEMBER ME?
OF COURSE I DO, SOFIA.
ACTUALLY, IT'S ***SANDY*** NOW. DIDN'T YOU SEE THE BLONDE HAIR?
UM. YES? SORRY, I'M A LITTLE LOST.
OBVIOUSLY! AFTER THAT AGGRO BULLSHIT YOU PULLED WITH JESSICA AND ME IN THE PARK, I TOLD NICKY TO STAY FAR, FAR AWAY FROM YOU. BUT OBVIOUSLY YOUR DADDY HAS OTHER PLANS. SO HERE WE ARE! BUT, EVEN SO, NICKY HAS BEEN DEFENDING YOU! HE SAYS THE REAL ZACH IS A GOOD GUY. THAT TRUE?
I USED TO THINK SO. BUT... I ***AM*** SORRY FOR WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PARK. I ALREADY APOLOGIZED TO JESSICA. SHE'S WORRIED AS HELL ABOUT YOU, BY THE WAY.

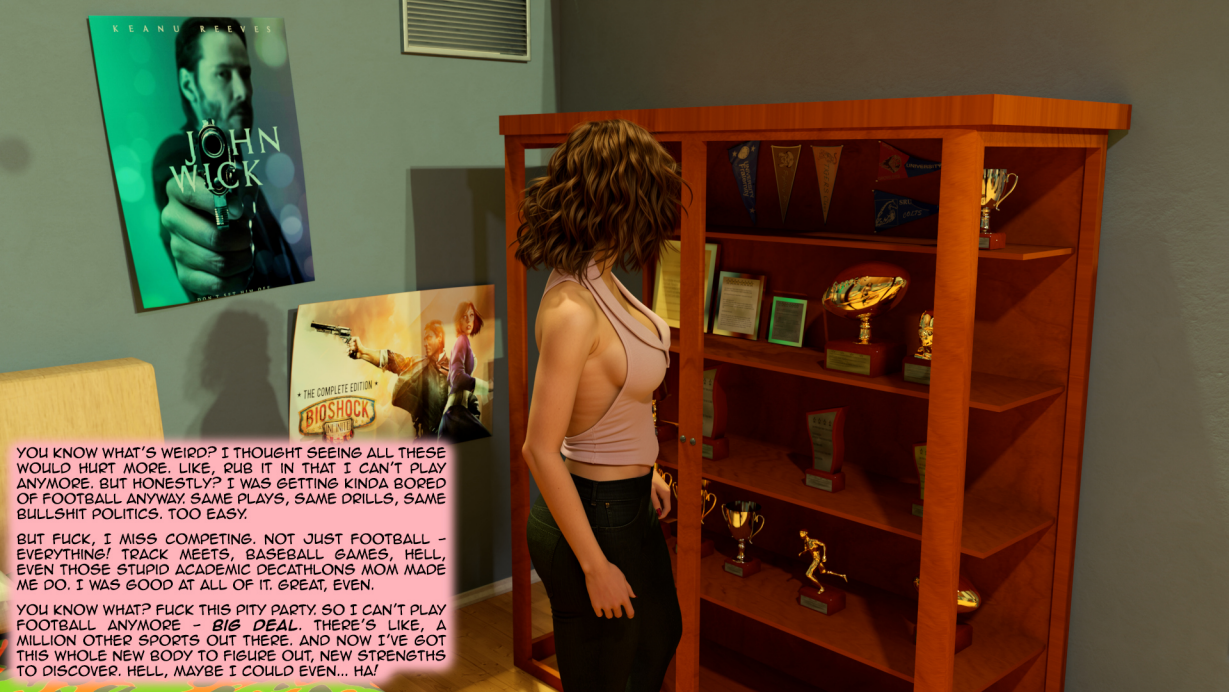

LISTEN HERE, ZACH. I'VE KNOWN YOU SINCE BEFORE YOU WERE EVEN A THOUGHT. AND GROWING UP, YOU WERE JUST THE SWEETEST, SMARTEST, MOST TENDER-HEARTED LITTLE BOY I'D EVER LAID EYES ON. BUT ONE THING THIS WORLD HAS SHOWN ME CLEAR AS DAY IS THAT FOLKS CHANGE, AND GOD KNOWS IT AIN'T USUALLY FOR THE BETTER. THEY GET THEMSELVES HARD, OR SCARED, OR MAD. THEY LET THE GOOD LORD'S GIFTS IN THEM SHRIVEL UP AND SOMETIMES FLAT-OUT DIE. I'M TELLING YOU THIS STRAIGHT FROM MY OWN HARD LESSONS.
SO WHAT I WANT TO KNOW IS HOW MUCH OF THIS CRAZY, MEAN-SPIRITED, DOWNRIGHT EVIL MESS IS YOUR DADDY'S DOING, AND HOW MUCH OF IT YOU COOKED UP YOURSELF?


MRS. PALMER, ALL OF THIS IS MY DAD'S FUCKED UP... ER, SORRY... HIS MESSED UP IDEA. I TRIED TO TALK HIM OUT OF IT, BUT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT HE'S LIKE! WHAT HE'S CAPABLE OF! I'VE SEEN... I'VE SEEN WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WHO GET IN HIS WAY. HE'S GOT HIS HOOKS IN EVERYTHING. THE POLICE, THE COURTS, EVEN SOME OF THE CARTELS.
I SEE. BUT I DO UNDERSTAND WHAT HE'S LIKE. MORE THAN YOU KNOW. I WAS MISS TEXAS 1993, REMEMBER? YOUR FATHER WAS ONE OF THE JUDGES. BEFORE THE SHOW, HE... MADE CERTAIN SUGGESTIONS ABOUT HOW I COULD "GUARANTEE" MY WIN. I DECLINED. HE DIDN'T TAKE IT WELL.
OH MY LORD. I'M SO SORRY. I HAD NO IDEA.
I WON ANYWAY. BUT I LEARNED SOMETHING IMPORTANT THAT DAY – THERE ARE MEN IN THIS WORLD WHO THINK THEY CAN OWN PEOPLE. WHO THINK THEIR MONEY AND POWER GIVES THEM THE RIGHT TO TAKE WHATEVER THEY WANT. YOUR FATHER IS ONE OF THOSE MEN. AND YOU...
...AREN'T. BUT SOMETIMES I REALLY, REALLY WISH I COULD BE. MAYBE IF I WAS MORE LIKE HIM – JUST A LITTLE BIT RUTHLESS, JUST A LITTLE BIT CRUEL – I COULD PROTECT THE PEOPLE I CARE ABOUT. INSTEAD, I JUST... WATCH. WHILE HE RUINS LIVES. WHILE HE BREAKS PEOPLE.
OH, ZACH. SWEETHEART, BEING RUTHLESS ISN'T STRENGTH. IT'S WEAKNESS. REAL STRENGTH IS STANDING UP FOR WHAT'S RIGHT, EVEN WHEN IT'S HARD. EVEN WHEN YOU'RE SCARED.


YOU STILL WEAR HER NECKLACE.
ALWAYS. IT'S ALL I HAVE LEFT OF HER.
SARAH LOVED THAT THING. USED TO SAY IT HAD PROTECTIVE POWERS. SHE, ELAINE FERRIS, AND I WERE QUITE THE GIRL POWER TRIO BACK IN THE EARLY 2000'S. THREE SENSITIVE BOYS, THREE PROTECTIVE MAMAS...
MOM SAID IT WAS AZTEC. OR MAYBE MAYAN? SHE GOT IT AT SOME MARKET IN MEXICO CITY DURING HER SEMESTER ABROAD. THE VENDOR TOLD HER IT WOULD KEEP EVIL SPIRITS AWAY.
YOUR MOTHER BELIEVED IN ALL THAT MYSTICAL STUFF. JUST LIKE ELAINE. I WAS ALWAYS THE SKEPTIC OF THE GROUP. WE MADE ALL THESE GRAND PLANS, YOU KNOW. ABOUT HOW WE'D PROTECT OUR BOYS. HOW WE'D NEVER LET THE WORLD CHANGE THEM OR HURT THEM. SARAH WAS SO PASSIONATE ABOUT IT – WITH A LITTLE WINE SHE'D STAY UP ALL NIGHT TALKING ABOUT HOW SHE'D MAKE SURE YOU GREW UP TO BE EXACTLY WHO YOU WERE MEANT TO BE.
YEAH, WELL, CANCER HAD OTHER PLANS.


YOU KNOW WHAT MAKES ME EVIL? AFTER SHE DIED, I WAS SO, *SO* ANGRY AT HER FOR LEAVING ME ALONE WITH *HIM*. AT THE FUNERAL, I DIDN'T FEEL SAD – I FELT BETRAYED. I WAS ONLY TWELVE, BUT I ALREADY KNEW WHAT DAD WAS CAPABLE OF. AND SHE JUST... LEFT ME THERE.
OH, SWEETHEART. THAT DOESN'T MAKE YOU EVIL. THAT MAKES YOU HUMAN.
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. I... I'VE DONE THINGS. TERRIBLE THINGS. OR, WELL, *LET* TERRIBLE THINGS HAPPEN. WHICH IS JUST AS BAD, ISN'T IT?


ZACH, SWEETIE, HAVE YOU LOOKED AT THIS CLUSTERFUCK OF A WORLD, LATELY? AND, YES, I CAN CURSE! BUT IF WE WERE ALL JUDGED BY THE THINGS WE LET HAPPEN, THERE WOULDN'T BE A GOOD PERSON LEFT ON EARTH.
WELL, MAYBE THERE ISN'T.
OH, HONEY... ALRIGHT, LOOK, YOU GOT ME CONVINCED. I'M PUTTING MY FAITH IN YOU. LORD KNOWS THIS WHOLE THING IS EVERY KIND OF MESSED UP. BUT, RIGHT NOW, NICK DOESN'T NEED SOME STAGED ROMANTIC EVENING OR WHATEVER HORSESHIT YOUR DADDY'S GOT PLANNED. WHAT MY BABY NEEDS IS A REAL FRIEND. SOMEONE WHO KNOWS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE WHEN FOLKS PUSH YOU INTO SHOES YOU WEREN'T MEANT TO FILL.
I... I WANT TO BE THAT FRIEND. I DO! BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW. EVERYTHING'S SO COMPLICATED NOW.
THEN UNCOMPLICATE IT! JUST... TAKE NICK SOMEWHERE FUN. SOMEWHERE YOU CAN BOTH RELAX AND BE YOURSELVES. NO PRESSURE, NO EXPECTATIONS. JUST TWO FRIENDS HANGING OUT.
THAT'S SORT OF WHAT I HAD PLANNED, ACTUALLY. BUT, UH, WHERE IS NICK ANYWAY?
OH! WELL, I WANTED US TO HAVE A FEW MINUTES, SO I SENT HIM TO FIND SOMETHING TO PROTECT THOSE EXPENSIVE EXTENSIONS FROM YOUR MOTORCYCLE. I THINK HE'S UPSTAIRS GOING THROUGH MY OLD SCARVES.



YOU KNOW WHAT'S WEIRD? I THOUGHT SEEING ALL THESE WOULD HURT MORE. LIKE, RUB IT IN THAT I CAN'T PLAY ANYMORE. BUT HONESTLY? I WAS GETTING KINDA BORED OF FOOTBALL ANYWAY. SAME PLAYS, SAME DRILLS, SAME BULLSHIT POLITICS. TOO EASY.

BUT FUCK, I MISS COMPETING. NOT JUST FOOTBALL - EVERYTHING! TRACK MEETS, BASEBALL GAMES, HELL, EVEN THOSE STUPID ACADEMIC DECATHLONS MOM MADE ME DO. I WAS GOOD AT ALL OF IT. GREAT, EVEN.

YOU KNOW WHAT? FUCK THIS PITY PARTY. SO I CAN'T PLAY FOOTBALL ANYMORE - ***BIG DEAL***. THERE'S LIKE, A MILLION OTHER SPORTS OUT THERE. AND NOW I'VE GOT THIS WHOLE NEW BODY TO FIGURE OUT, NEW STRENGTHS TO DISCOVER. HELL, MAYBE I COULD EVEN... HA!


NOW THERE'S AN IDEA. LAUREN'S ALWAYS BRAGGING ABOUT HOW HARDCORE FIELD HOCKEY IS. BET SHE'D SHIT HERSELF IF I SHOWED UP AT TRYOUTS.
GOD, I MISS COMPETING. I MISS HAVING GOALS, YOU KNOW? JUST SITTING AROUND FEELING SORRY FOR MYSELF IS MAKING ME LAZY. AND NICHOLAS PALMER DOES NOT DO LAZY.
EVEN IF NICHOLAS PALMER HAS TO WEAR A SKIRT TO PLAY. A TROPHY'S A TROPHY, RIGHT? AND THIS CASE COULD USE SOME NEW ADDITIONS...
ANYWAY, I GUESS IT'S TIME TO FACE THE FIRING SQUAD. SHOULDN'T I FEEL MORE HORRIFIED BY ALL THIS? HAS THE 'GIRL MIND VIRUS' INFECTED MY MEDULLA OBLONGATA?
DAMN, I HEAR THEM YAMMERING DOWNSTAIRS. SHOWTIME!


ZACH?
85


NICK? HOLY... WOW. YOU LOOK...
LIKE A CLOWN? A DRAG QUEEN? A DRAG CLOWN? JUST SAY IT.
NO! NO, YOU LOOK... INCREDIBLE. LIKE, REALLY INCREDIBLE. I MEAN, NOT THAT YOU NEED TO LOOK... I MEAN... SORRY. I'M MAKING THIS WEIRD.
DUDE, THIS WHOLE SITUATION IS WEIRD. BUT, UH, THANKS. YOU CLEAN UP PRETTY NICE YOURSELF. EVEN IF YOU ARE SUPER LATE.
JEEZ, I'M NOT THAT LATE!
AGREE TO DISAGREE.


LOOK, I KNOW YOUR DUMB FUCK DAD SAID I NEEDED TO WEAR A DRESS, BUT... FUCK HIM. THIS FELT BETTER. MORE ME.
I KNOW THAT SOUNDS WEIRD, DRESSED LIKE THIS, BUT IT'S LIKE... IF HAD TO BE A GIRL FOR ONE NIGHT, THIS IS THE KIND OF GIRL I'D BE. THAT MAKES SENSE, RIGHT? SHUT UP.
I DIDN'T--
AND IF YOUR DAD HAS A PROBLEM WITH IT, WELL, I'VE GOT A PRETTY GOOD ARM AND THERE ARE PLENTY OF ROCKS IN TEXAS. LIKE, A BILLION.
ANYWAY, SHUT UP.
I'M REALLY NOT--


COOL BOOTS, RIGHT? ARE THEY *KINKY* ENOUGH FOR YOU?
WAIT, ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT THE POSTER IN MY APARTMENT? "KINKY BOOTS" IS ACTUALLY A--
YEAH! I SAW IT WHEN I WAS THERE. I FIGURED YOU WERE INTO BOOTS OR WHATEVER, SO I GOT THESE. THEY'RE PRETTY BADASS, RIGHT? LIKE, MOTORCYCLE BOOTS BUT FANCY.
NO, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. "KINKY BOOTS" IS A BROADWAY--
I MEAN, THEY'RE NOT AS KINKY AS THAT POSTER, BUT I FIGURED YOUR DAD WOULD FLIP IF I SHOWED UP IN, LIKE, THIGH-HIGHS OR WHATEVER. PLUS, THESE ARE WAY MORE PRACTICAL FOR RIDING. SPEAKING OF WHICH...
YOU KNOW WHAT? NEVER MIND. YES, THE BOOTS ARE AWESOME. VERY... BADASS.
HELL YEAH. I MEAN, THEY HAVE A GRINNING SKULL AND EVERYTHING.


HONEY, ARE YOU SURE YOU'RE OKAY WITH THIS? AGAIN, I JUST HAVE TO SAY, YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO ANY OF THIS.
I DIDN'T SPEND 19 HOURS AT THAT SALON FOR NOTHING, MOM. I'M FINE. IT'S JUST ZACH. HE'S AS HARMLESS AS A GOLDEN RETRIEVER. NO OFFENSE.
JUST... BE CAREFUL, OKAY? BOTH OF YOU.
I PROMISE I'LL TAKE GOOD CARE OF H--
FUCK OFF, DUDE. I CAN TAKE CARE OF MYSELF. BUT YEAH, MOM, WE'LL BE CAREFUL.
AND YOU'LL CALL IF ANYTHING HAPPENS? ANYTHING AT ALL?
OH MY GOD, YES! WE'RE GOING TO DINNER, NOT AFGHANISTAN.


HELL. YES. FASTER, MAN!
OH. UM... OH!
3CT998


YOU OKAY BACK THERE? YOU'RE SORT OF... SQUIRMING.
Y-YEAH. IT'S JUST, HOW I'M SITTING... THE ENGINE IS LIKE VIBRATING THE... YOU KNOW... *DEVICE*.
SHIT, DOES IT HURT? I'LL SLOW DOWN.
DO NOT SLOW DOWN!
ER, I DON'T WANT TO BE LATE TO... WHEREVER.


WELP, I SHOULD PROBABLY HEAD HOME--
SANDY. SIT DOWN, PLEASE.
UM...
THAT WASN'T A SUGGESTION, HONEY. NICK'S TOLD ME A LOT ABOUT YOU. ABOUT HOW YOU TWO MET, HOW YOU'VE BEEN HELPING EACH OTHER ADJUST. BUT SOMETHING ABOUT TONIGHT FEELS... REHEARSED. LIKE HE WAS FOLLOWING A SCRIPT.
MRS. PALMER, I--
AND I KNOW MY BABY. NICK AIN'T ONE TO JUST... GO ALONG WITH THINGS. HELL, THAT BOY'S ABOUT AS FLEXIBLE AS A BRICK WALL. SO EITHER THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE GOING ON THAT I DON'T KNOW ABOUT, OR...
YES, MA'AM.
AND YOU'RE GOING TO TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT?
I... YES, MA'AM.
GOOD GIRL. I'LL MAKE COOKIES.