HALF SISTERS

by Emory Ahlberg

Episode #12

Nikki's Date with Zach


I KNOW IT'S A LITTLE RUNDOWN - AND HARDLY ANYBODY IS HERE... BUT, UM, I FIGURED WE COULD START HERE?


THEY'VE GOT BOWLING, OBVIOUSLY...
JACKSSON
BOWLING LANES


SKEE BALL
SKEE BALL
SKEE BALL
SKEE BALL
RAIDER
RAIDER
GAME OVER
...AND POOL TABLES! AND THE NACHOS ARE ACTUALLY PRETTY DECENT. I MEAN, IF YOU WANT NACHOS. WE DON'T HAVE TO HAVE NACHOS. WE CAN GET SOMETHING ELSE. OR NOTHING! AND I PROMISE WE'LL GO SOMEWHERE NICE FOR DINNER LATER, BUT I THOUGHT MAYBE FIRST WE COULD JUST...
SHIT, I FUCKED UP, DIDN'T I?
YEAH, BRO. YOU FUCKED UP. BIG TIME.
I'M SORRY! I... I HAVEN'T ACTUALLY GONE ON MANY DATES BEFORE. AND BY 'MANY' I MEAN 'ANY.' AT LEAST, NOT ONES THAT ACTUALLY MATTERED TO ME.


DUDE, NO. THIS PLACE IS PERFECT. YOU WANNA KNOW HOW YOU FUCKED UP?
BECAUSE THERE'S ABOUT A HUNDRED GAMES IN THIS JOINT, AND I WILL ABSOLUTELY DESTROY YOU IN EVERY SINGLE ONE.


LIKE, YOU'RE GONNA BE SERIOUSLY EMBARRASSED. YOU'LL NEED THERAPY. ***MORE*** THERAPY, I MEAN.
HA! REALLY? ALRIGHT, YOU'RE ON.
WELL, WE SHOULD MAKE IT ***INTERESTING***. HOW ABOUT: IF I WIN, I GET TO DRIVE THE MOTORCYCLE TO DINNER.
HM, FINE. BUT IF I WIN YOU CAN'T COMPLAIN EVEN ONCE ABOUT THE RESTAURANT I'VE PICKED OUT. IT'S A LITTLE OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE.
BRO, I'VE BEEN A THOUSAND MILES OUTSIDE MY 'COMFORT ZONE' FOR YEARS NOW. BUT... DEAL. LET THE FUCKING GAMES BEGIN!


00.35
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
Total
ZAK
7
3
9
4
3
3
1
-
8
-
38
NIK
1
9
4
4
-
7
-
9
NIK IS UP!
9.7 MPH
TEAM B
OKAY, THIS IS IT. THE MOMENT OF TRUTH. DOWN BY FOUR IN THE FINAL FRAME. EVERYTHING RIDES ON THIS. THE FATE OF NATIONS HANGS IN THE BALANCE!
OUR COMBINED SCORE IS LITERALLY 72. I'M PRETTY SURE TODDLERS BOWL BETTER THAN US.
HEY, RESPECT THE DRAMA OF THE MOMENT! AND I DON'T HAVE TO BEAT A TODDLER, I HAVE TO BEAT YOU.
YOU KNOW MY NAME ISN'T ACTUALLY SPELLED WITH A 'K', RIGHT? IT'S WITH AN 'H'.


WHAT? SINCE WHEN? SHOULD I BE CALLING YOU... ZATCH? SOUNDS FAKE, BUT OKAY. NOW SHUT UP AND WATCH ME MAKE BOWLING HISTORY.
WITH A SCORE OF 34?
SOON TO BE 44 - AND EVERY GREAT COMEBACK HAS TO START SOMEWHERE!


YOU KNOW, THE LAST TIME WE WENT BOWLING TOGETHER WAS YOUR BIRTHDAY PARTY. FOURTH GRADE, I THINK?
REALLY? HUH. I BARELY REMEMBER THAT.
IT WAS AT THAT OLD PLACE BY THE MALL. THE ONE THAT BURNED DOWN? YOU INVITED THE WHOLE CLASS. YOUR MOM MADE THOSE DINOSAUR CUPCAKES.
YEAH, THAT'S... THAT'S KIND OF FUZZY. A LOT OF STUFF FROM BACK THEN IS. LIKE, BEFORE MY DAD STARTED GETTING MORE INVOLVED WITH... EVERYTHING.


LEAGUE
9PM-3AM
YOU WERE DIFFERENT BACK THEN.
WELL, YEAH. I DIDN'T HAVE TITS. THINGS CHANGE, I GUESS.
C'MON, THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT. YOU WERE... HAPPIER. MORE YOURSELF.


HONESTLY, MAN, I'M A LITTLE SICK OF PEOPLE TELLING ME WHO I "REALLY" AM OR WAS. LIKE, WHAT – YOU THINK YOU KNEW THE "REAL" ME WHEN I WAS NINE? MAYBE THAT KID WAS JUST AS FAKE AS THE BULLY I BECAME.
WANNA KNOW WHAT I THINK? WE'RE ALL JUST... WHATEVER PEOPLE FORCE US TO BE.

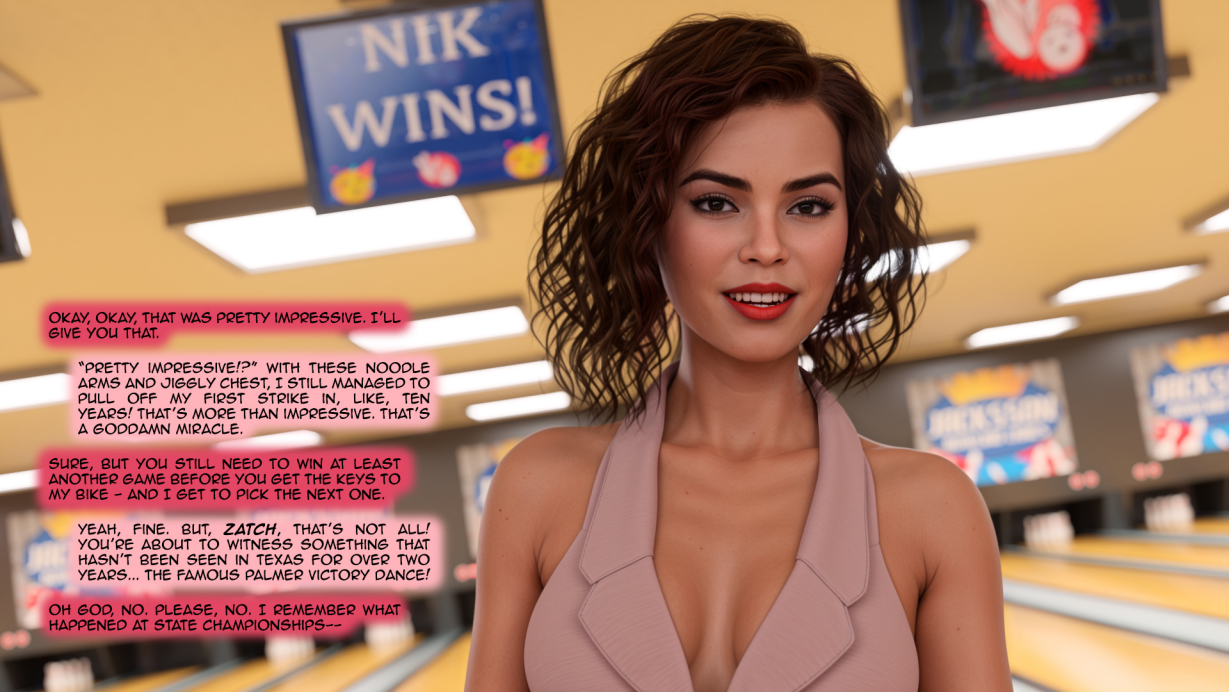

NICK, I DIDN'T MEAN--
NICKY, WHEN WE'RE OUT, REMEMBER? ANYWAY, I'M SORRY. THAT GOT HEAVY. WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE HAVING FUN, RIGHT? WATCH THIS ROLL - I'M GONNA GET A STRIKE AND BLOW YOUR MIND.
SURE, YEAH. SORRY. TAKE YOUR SHOT.


JACKSSON
BOWLING LANES
JACKSSON
BOWLING LANES
JACKSSON
BOWLING LANES
JACKSSON
BOWLING LANES
SEE, THIS IS WHY YOU'LL NEVER BE AS GOOD AS ME. I'VE ALREADY TAKEN THIS SHOT IN MY HEAD LIKE FIFTY TIMES. I KNOW EXACTLY WHERE THE BALL'S GONNA GO, HOW IT'S GONNA CURVE, WHICH PINS IT'S GONNA HIT FIRST. IT'S ALL ABOUT VISUALIZATION, BABY!


HI-YAH!
JACKSSON
BOWLING LANES


OH MY GOD!


NIK WINS!
BOOM! WHAT DID I TELL YOU? THAT'S WHAT WE IN THE BUSINESS CALL "CALLING YOUR SHOT!" YOU SEE THAT? PURE. ATHLETIC. GENIUS. STILL GOT IT!
JACKSSON BOWLING LANES


NIK WINS!
OKAY, OKAY, THAT WAS PRETTY IMPRESSIVE. I'LL GIVE YOU THAT.
"PRETTY IMPRESSIVE!?" WITH THESE NOODLE ARMS AND JIGGLY CHEST, I STILL MANAGED TO PULL OFF MY FIRST STRIKE IN, LIKE, TEN YEARS! THAT'S MORE THAN IMPRESSIVE. THAT'S A GODDAMN MIRACLE.
SURE, BUT YOU STILL NEED TO WIN AT LEAST ANOTHER GAME BEFORE YOU GET THE KEYS TO MY BIKE – AND I GET TO PICK THE NEXT ONE.
YEAH, FINE. BUT, ZATCH, THAT'S NOT ALL! YOU'RE ABOUT TO WITNESS SOMETHING THAT HASN'T BEEN SEEN IN TEXAS FOR OVER TWO YEARS... THE FAMOUS PALMER VICTORY DANCE!
OH GOD, NO. PLEASE, NO. I REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED AT STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS--


TOO LATE! IT'S HAPPENING!
MAKE IT STOP! YOU'RE GONNA GET US KICKED OUT!
CAN'T STOP, WON'T STOP! THIS IS WHAT PURE VICTORY LOOKS LIKE, BABY!
HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE? YOU'RE LIKE, THE MOST NATURALLY ATHLETIC PERSON I KNOW BUT YOU DANCE LIKE... LIKE A DRUNK GIRAFFE HAVING A SEIZURE.
YOU'RE JUST JEALOUS OF MY SWEET MOVES.
OH MY GOD, STOP! LOOK, IF YOU'RE GONNA DANCE, AT LEAST LET ME TEACH YOU SOMETHING.
OH YEAH? LIKE WHAT, MR. DANCE EXPERT?
WELL... ACTUALLY, IT'S THE ONLY DANCE MOVE I KNOW. I HAD TO LEARN FOR A... A SHOW. BUT I CAN SHOW YOU HOW TO TO TWERK.


YOU COULD WHAT NOW?
TWERK! IT'S ALL ABOUT ISOLATING YOUR - NAH, NEVER MIND. MOST PEOPLE JUST AREN'T COORDINATED ENOUGH--
EXCUSE ME? I WAS THE MOST AGILE QB IN TEXAS! I CAN DO ANYTHING YOU CAN DO, AND BETTER!


OKAY, FIRST YOU NEED TO BEND YOUR KNEES AND--
WAIT! BEFORE WE START - WHY EXACTLY DO *YOU* KNOW HOW TO TWERK?
I, UH... I WAS IN A PRODUCTION OF KINKY BOOTS LAST SUMMER. THAT'S WHAT THE POSTER IN MY ROOM WAS ABOUT.
OH MY GOD. THE BOOTS! THAT'S WHY YOU WERE LAUGHING EARLIER! I THOUGHT... OH MAN, I'M SUCH AN IDIOT.
IT'S ACTUALLY A MUSICAL ABOUT--
NOPE! DON'T CARE. JUST TEACH ME HOW TO SHAKE MY ASS SO I CAN PROVE I'M BETTER AT IT THAN YOU.
YOU'RE IMPOSSIBLE, YOU KNOW THAT?
DAMN STRAIGHT. NOW COME ON, SHOW ME YOUR WORST!


NO, SIR, NEITHER OF THEM HAVE NOTICED ME.
--
UM, WELL, YES... YES, I'D SAY THEY APPEAR TO BE ENJOYING EACH OTHER'S COMPANY.


50,000
100,000
SPACE BALL
000000
40
50
20
10
AND... THAT'S THE GAME! A WIN FOR ME - BUT I PROMISE NOT TO DANCE.
THIS IS BULLSHIT! THESE MACHINES ARE RIGGED. AND MY NAILS ARE THROWING OFF MY RELEASE. AND THESE BOOBS MESS WITH MY CENTER OF GRAVITY. PLUS, THE LIGHTING IN HERE SUCKS.
ANY OTHER EXCUSES YOU WANT TO ADD TO THAT LIST?
YEAH, ACTUALLY! THE BALLS ARE CLEARLY DIFFERENT SIZES. AND THIS LANE IS DEFINITELY SLANTED. AND THIS DUMB HAIR KEEPS GETTING IN MY FACE. AND--

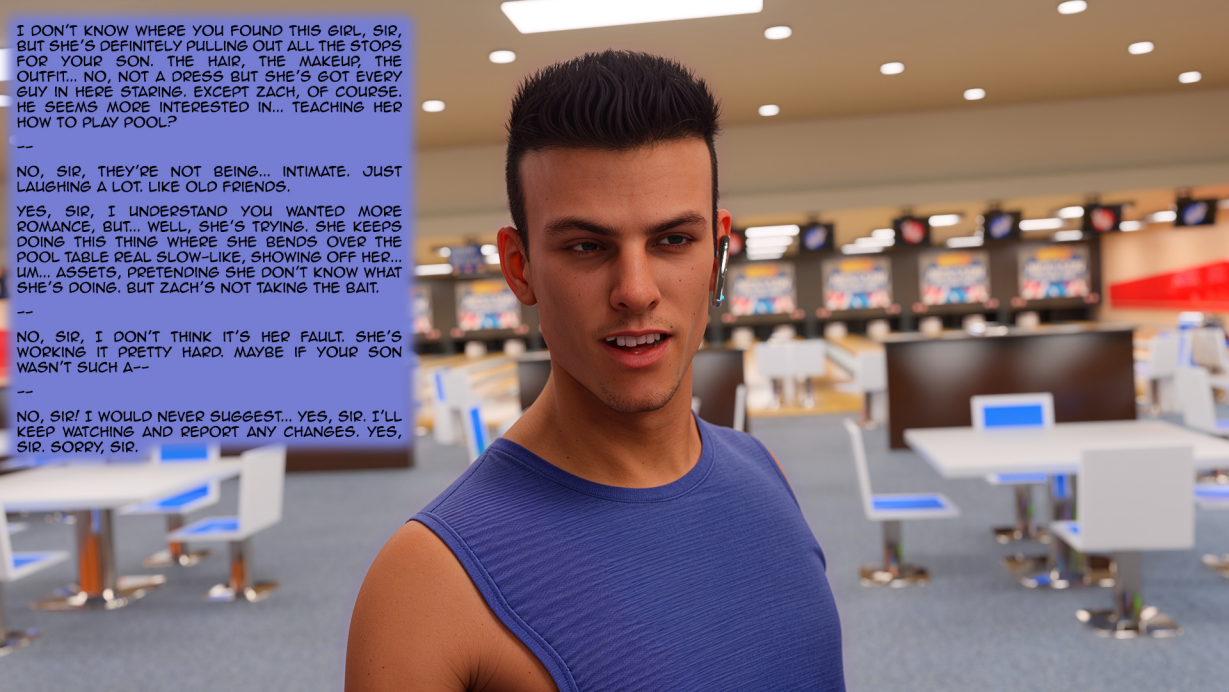

Arcade
AND YOU JUST CAN'T ADMIT THAT I'M BETTER AT SOMETHING THAN YOU ARE?
BETTER? PLEASE. I'M JUST HAVING AN OFF NIGHT. OR MAYBE AN OFF DECADE. BUT THESE ARE CLEARLY DEFECTIVE BALLS. AND DID I MENTION MY NAILS?
ONLY ABOUT TWELVE TIMES.
OKAY, FINE! YOU'RE BETTER AT SKEE-BALL. HAPPY NOW? BUT ONLY BECAUSE YOU PROBABLY SPENT ALL YOUR TIME IN HERE WHILE I WAS OUT BEING, YOU KNOW, ACTUALLY ATHLETIC.
NOW, LET'S PLAY A REAL GAME OF SKILL!
RAIDER
ALIEN ALCHEMY


EIGHT BALL, CORNER POCKET. AND WHEN I SINK THIS, THAT'S THREE GAMES TO TWO. WHICH MEANS... I GET TO DRIVE THE BIKE TO DINNER.


YOU HAVEN'T MADE THE SHOT YET. IF THE WHITE BALL GOES IN INSTEAD, I WIN.
DUDE, THIS IS LIKE A TWO-FOOT STRAIGHT SHOT. I COULD MAKE THIS IN MY SLEEP.


JUST GOTTA GET THE ANGLE JUUUUST RIGHT...
YOU GONNA SHOOT SOMETIME TONIGHT, OR SHOULD I ORDER BREAKFAST?
YOU KNOW WHAT? I'M SAVORING THIS MOMENT. WHEN I SINK THIS SHOT, I GET TO DRIVE THAT BEAUTIFUL MACHINE OF YOURS. DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG IT'S BEEN SINCE I'VE DRIVEN ANYTHING COOL? MY TRUCK IS GONE, MY CAMARO'S PROBABLY BEEN SOLD FOR PARTS--


Arcade
YOUR WHAT NOW?
OH YEAH, YOU WOULDN'T KNOW ABOUT THAT. I HAD THIS SWEET CAMARO. CHERRY RED, CUSTOM EXHAUST, THE WORKS. DAD HELPED ME RESTORE IT. THEN HE SOLD IT TO PAY FOR HIS... UM, LEGAL TROUBLES.
I'M SORRY.
WHATEVER. ANCIENT HISTORY. NOW SHUT UP AND LET ME CONCENTRATE.


I DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU FOUND THIS GIRL, SIR, BUT SHE'S DEFINITELY PULLING OUT ALL THE STOPS FOR YOUR SON. THE HAIR, THE MAKEUP, THE OUTFIT... NO, NOT A DRESS BUT SHE'S GOT EVERY GUY IN HERE STARING. EXCEPT ZACH, OF COURSE. HE SEEMS MORE INTERESTED IN... TEACHING HER HOW TO PLAY POOL?
--
NO, SIR, THEY'RE NOT BEING... INTIMATE. JUST LAUGHING A LOT. LIKE OLD FRIENDS.
YES, SIR, I UNDERSTAND YOU WANTED MORE ROMANCE, BUT... WELL, SHE'S TRYING. SHE KEEPS DOING THIS THING WHERE SHE BENDS OVER THE POOL TABLE REAL SLOW-LIKE, SHOWING OFF HER... UM... ASSETS, PRETENDING SHE DON'T KNOW WHAT SHE'S DOING. BUT ZACH'S NOT TAKING THE BAIT.
--
NO, SIR, I DON'T THINK IT'S HER FAULT. SHE'S WORKING IT PRETTY HARD. MAYBE IF YOUR SON WASN'T SUCH A--
--
NO, SIR! I WOULD NEVER SUGGEST... YES, SIR. I'LL KEEP WATCHING AND REPORT ANY CHANGES. YES, SIR. SORRY, SIR.


AND... C'MON, C'MON...

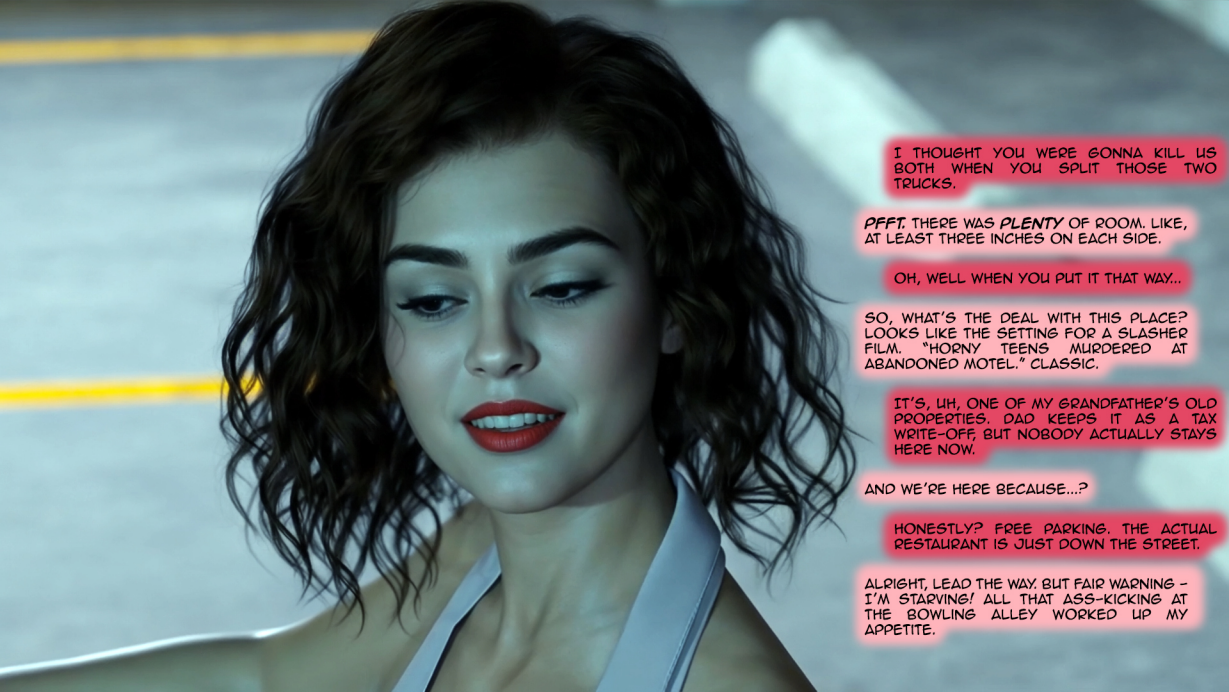

OW!
OH MY GOD, I WON!


YES! IN YOUR FACE! I AM THE KING OF POOL! I AM THE MASTER OF ALL GAMES EXCEPT SKEE-BALL! I AM – OH SHIT! YOUR ACTUAL FACE! ARE YOU OKAY?
I'M FINE, I'M FINE. YOUR VICTORY DANCE IS STILL AS DANGEROUS AS EVER.
FUCK, I'M SO SORRY! LET ME SEE – DID I BREAK YOUR NOSE?
NAH. GETTING HIT BY YOU ISN'T AS BAD AS IT USED TO BE. 'NOODLE ARMS,' REMEMBER? NOW, ABOUT THAT MOTORCYCLE...
OH HELL YES! GIVE ME THOSE KEYS, BABY! DADDY'S GOT SOME SPEED DEMONS TO RELEASE!


WAIT A SECOND. IT'S BEEN WHAT, TWO YEARS? ARE YOU SURE YOU STILL REMEMBER HOW TO--
DUDE, I'M THE REASON YOU EVEN GOT INTO BIKES! REMEMBER? YOU WERE SO JEALOUS OF MY DUCATI THAT YOU WENT OUT AND GOT THIS BEAUTY.
YEAH, BUT THAT WAS BEFORE... YOU KNOW. IT'S BEEN AWHILE!
IT'S LIKE RIDING A BIKE. YOU NEVER FORGET!
THIS IS A BIKE. A VERY EXPENSIVE, VERY POWERFUL BIKE.
EXACTLY! NOW HAND OVER THOSE KEYS BEFORE I HAVE TO WRESTLE YOU FOR THEM.
YOUR MOM WILL MURDER ME ME IF ANYTHING HAPPENS--
OH MY GOD, YOU SOUND JUST LIKE HER! WHAT SHE DOESN'T KNOW WON'T HURT HER. BESIDES, THIS BABY AND I NEED SOME QUALITY TIME TOGETHER.
JUST... BE CAREFUL WITH THE CLUTCH. IT'S SENSITIVE.
BRO, I GOT THIS. NOW GET ON AND HOLD TIGHT - I'M ABOUT TO SHOW YOU HOW A REAL BIKER HANDLES CURVES.
THAT'S WHAT I'M AFRAID OF.


OH, HELL YES! LET'S SEE IF WE CAN GET HER UP TO 100!
HOLD TIGHT, ZACH!

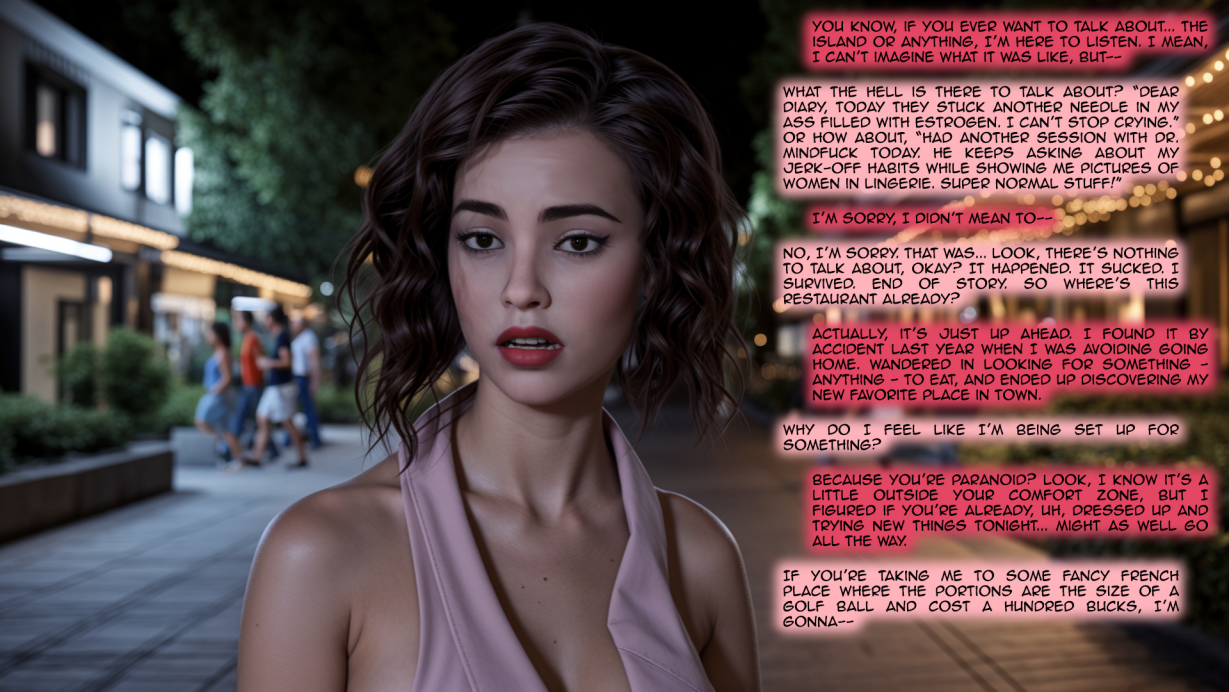

HOLY SHIT, THAT WAS FUCKING AMAZING! DID YOU SEE HOW FAST WE TOOK THAT CURVE? THE WAY THIS BABY HUGS THE ROAD IS INSANE. GOD, I MISS HAVING WHEELS. I'M GONNA GET MYSELF ANOTHER BIKE WHEN ALL THIS BULLSHIT IS OVER.
YEAH, IF WE SURVIVE THAT LONG. JESUS CHRIST, NICK! YOU WERE GOING 90 IN A 45 ZONE!
OH, COME ON! DON'T BE SUCH A PUSSY. I HAD IT TOTALLY UNDER CONTROL. SERIOUSLY, THOUGH, THIS BABY IS A WORK OF ART. THE THROTTLE RESPONSE, THE TORQUE... IT'S LIKE IT READS YOUR MIND.

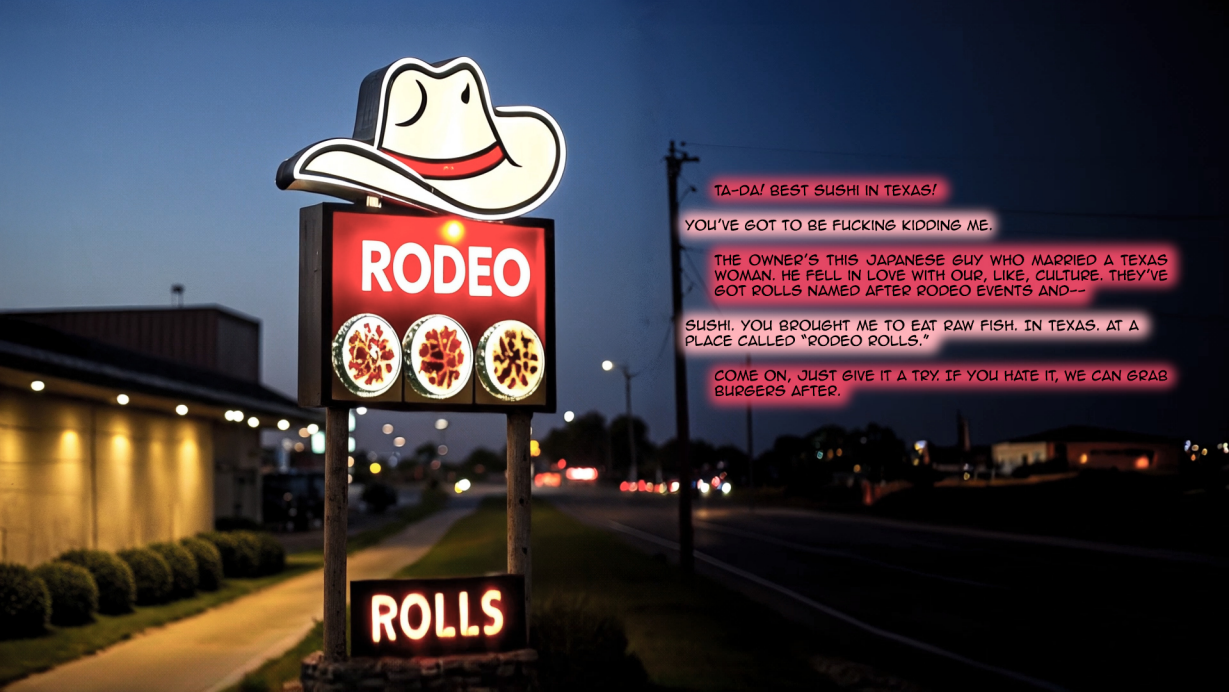

I THOUGHT YOU WERE GONNA KILL US BOTH WHEN YOU SPLIT THOSE TWO TRUCKS.
PFFT. THERE WAS *PLENTY* OF ROOM. LIKE, AT LEAST THREE INCHES ON EACH SIDE.
OH, WELL WHEN YOU PUT IT THAT WAY...
SO, WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH THIS PLACE? LOOKS LIKE THE SETTING FOR A SLASHER FILM. "HORNY TEENS MURDERED AT ABANDONED MOTEL." CLASSIC.
IT'S, UH, ONE OF MY GRANDFATHER'S OLD PROPERTIES. DAD KEEPS IT AS A TAX WRITE-OFF, BUT NOBODY ACTUALLY STAYS HERE NOW.
AND WE'RE HERE BECAUSE...?
HONESTLY? FREE PARKING. THE ACTUAL RESTAURANT IS JUST DOWN THE STREET.
ALRIGHT, LEAD THE WAY. BUT FAIR WARNING - I'M STARVING! ALL THAT ASS-KICKING AT THE BOWLING ALLEY WORKED UP MY APPETITE.


SO, MYSTERY MAN, WHERE EXACTLY ARE YOU TAKING ME?
ALMOST THERE. JUST AROUND THIS CORNER.
BETTER NOT BE SOME FANCY-ASS PLACE WHERE I NEED TO KNOW WHICH FORK TO USE. THAT KIND OF SHIT GIVES ME HIVES.
NAH, NOTHING LIKE THAT. ALTHOUGH IT'S PROBABLY A LOT DIFFERENT THAN THE PLACES YOU'VE EATEN BEFORE.


WHOA...THAT'S A LOT OF...PEOPLE.
WELL, IT'S A FRIDAY NIGHT DOWNTOWN...
YEAH. COOL. SUPER COOL.
YOU OKAY?
I'M FINE. TOTALLY FINE. JUST, UH... SHIT, I JUST REALIZED THAT EVERYONE'S GONNA SEE ME LIKE THIS. LIKE, ACTUAL PEOPLE. A LOT OF PEOPLE. WHAT IF SOMEONE RECOGNIZES ME? WHAT IF THEY TAKE PICTURES? WHAT IF THIS ENDS UP ONLINE AND THE GUYS FROM THE TEAM SEE IT? FUCK, FUCK, FUCK.
YOU'VE GONE REALLY PALE.
YEAH, NO, I'M GOOD. IT'S JUST – JUST GIVE ME A SECOND. DO THOSE GUYS LOOK FAMILIAR TO YOU? ARE THEY FROM ST. CHRIS?
WHAT GUYS?
BY THE TACO STAND.
I DON'T THINK SO. I'VE NEVER SEEN THEM BEFORE.
FUCK, IS IT HOT OUT HERE? IT FEELS REALLY HOT. AND LOUD. WHY IS EVERYTHING SO GODDAMN LOUD?


THIS HAPPENED THAT DAY AT MY APARTMENT TOO, DIDN'T IT? WHEN YOU TOOK OFF THE--
THIS IS SO FUCKING STUPID. I'M NOT SOME DELICATE LITTLE FLOWER. I'VE TAKEN HITS FROM 300-POUND LINEMEN.
AND THIS ISN'T THE FIRST TIME, IS IT? I MEAN, BESIDES BACK AT MY PLACE.
NO. IT... IT HAPPENED WHEN I HAD TO BUY A BRA FOR THE FIRST TIME. STANDING THERE IN THE FUCKING LINGERIE STORE WITH LAUREN, STARING AT ALL THESE... THESE THINGS I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND. I JUST... I FROZE UP. COULDN'T BREATHE. FELT LIKE MY HEART WAS GONNA EXPLODE.
AND THEN THERE WAS THE FIRST TIME I HAD TO USE THE WOMEN'S BATHROOM. AND WHEN THAT GIRL AT STARBUCKS CALLED ME "MISS" AND I ACTUALLY RESPONDED. AND... ON THE ISLAND. A LOT ON THE ISLAND. SO FUCKING MANY TIMES.
I JUST NEED TO... LOCK IT DOWN. YOU KNOW? JUST PUSH IT ALL AWAY. PRETEND IT'S NOT HAPPENING.
THAT DOESN'T SOUND VERY HEALTHY.
OH, I'M SORRY, DR. PHIL. YOU GOT A BETTER IDEA? I GOT THIS. I JUST GOTTA... DISASSOCIATE A LITTLE. PRETEND THIS ISN'T REALLY HAPPENING TO ME.
SEE? ALL BETTER. LET'S GO GET SOME FOOD. I'M STARVING.
ARE YOU SURE? WE CAN GO SOMEWHERE ELSE.
POSITIVE! WE HAVE TO DO THIS DATE, AND YOU PROMISED ME AMAZING FOOD. I'M GONNA HOLD YOU TO IT.

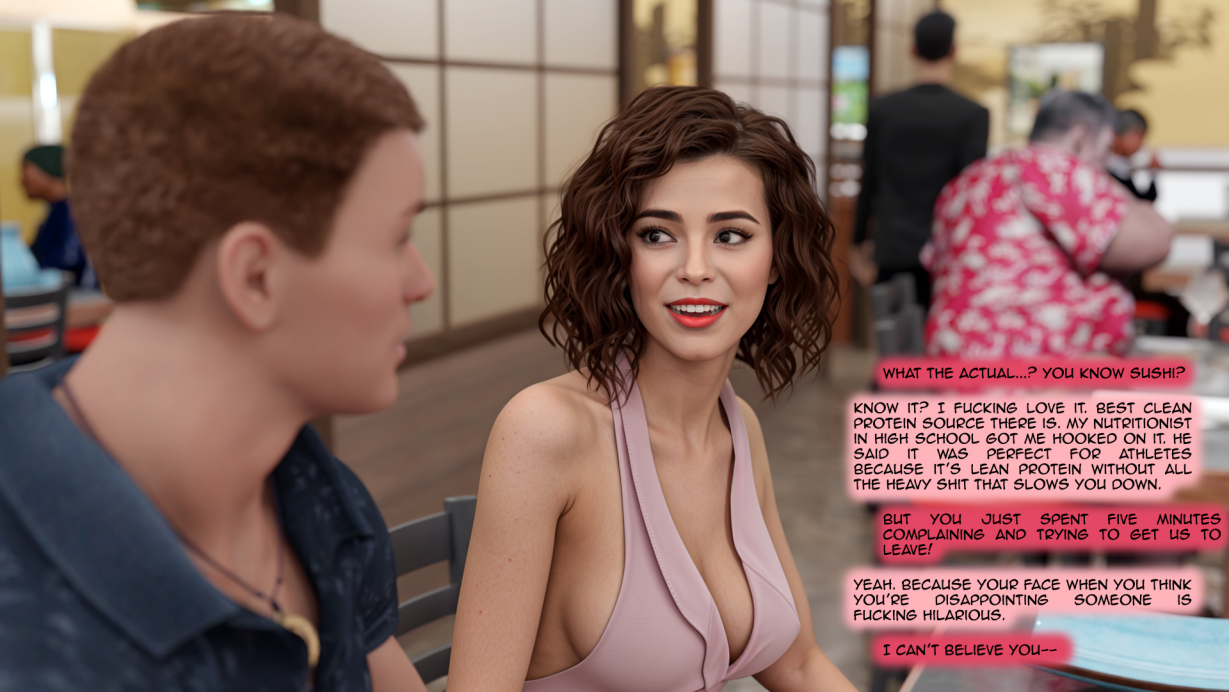

YOU KNOW, IF YOU EVER WANT TO TALK ABOUT... THE ISLAND OR ANYTHING, I'M HERE TO LISTEN. I MEAN, I CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT IT WAS LIKE, BUT--
WHAT THE HELL IS THERE TO TALK ABOUT? "DEAR DIARY, TODAY THEY STUCK ANOTHER NEEDLE IN MY ASS FILLED WITH ESTROGEN. I CAN'T STOP CRYING." OR HOW ABOUT, "HAD ANOTHER SESSION WITH DR. MINDFUCK TODAY. HE KEEPS ASKING ABOUT MY JERK-OFF HABITS WHILE SHOWING ME PICTURES OF WOMEN IN LINGERIE. SUPER NORMAL STUFF!"
I'M SORRY, I DIDN'T MEAN TO--
NO, I'M SORRY. THAT WAS... LOOK, THERE'S NOTHING TO TALK ABOUT, OKAY? IT HAPPENED. IT SUCKED. I SURVIVED. END OF STORY. SO WHERE'S THIS RESTAURANT ALREADY?
ACTUALLY, IT'S JUST UP AHEAD. I FOUND IT BY ACCIDENT LAST YEAR WHEN I WAS AVOIDING GOING HOME. WANDERED IN LOOKING FOR SOMETHING - ANYTHING - TO EAT, AND ENDED UP DISCOVERING MY NEW FAVORITE PLACE IN TOWN.
WHY DO I FEEL LIKE I'M BEING SET UP FOR SOMETHING?
BECAUSE YOU'RE PARANOID? LOOK, I KNOW IT'S A LITTLE OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE, BUT I FIGURED IF YOU'RE ALREADY, UH, DRESSED UP AND TRYING NEW THINGS TONIGHT... MIGHT AS WELL GO ALL THE WAY.
IF YOU'RE TAKING ME TO SOME FANCY FRENCH PLACE WHERE THE PORTIONS ARE THE SIZE OF A GOLF BALL AND COST A HUNDRED BUCKS, I'M GONNA--


RODEO
ROLLS
TA-DA! BEST SUSHI IN TEXAS!
YOU'VE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME.
THE OWNER'S THIS JAPANESE GUY WHO MARRIED A TEXAS WOMAN. HE FELL IN LOVE WITH OUR, LIKE, CULTURE. THEY'VE GOT ROLLS NAMED AFTER RODEO EVENTS AND--
SUSHI. YOU BROUGHT ME TO EAT RAW FISH. IN TEXAS. AT A PLACE CALLED "RODEO ROLLS."
COME ON, JUST GIVE IT A TRY. IF YOU HATE IT, WE CAN GRAB BURGERS AFTER.


PHEW, THEY'RE BUSY. GOOD THING I MADE A RESERVATION.
WE'RE REALLY DOING THIS? EATING FANCY RAW FISH AT A PLACE WITH A COWBOY HAT SIGN?
YEAH! ISN'T IT AWESOME? YOU SHOULD SEE THEIR SIGNATURE ROLLS--


DUDE, WE'RE LIKE TEN MINUTES FROM A BUC-EE'S. WE COULD BE EATING BRISKET SANDWICHES THE SIZE OF MY HEAD RIGHT NOW.
YOU WANT TO GO TO A GAS STATION INSTEAD OF TRYING SOMETHING NEW?
LISTEN. BUC-EE'S ISN'T JUST A GAS STATION. IT'S A TEXAS INSTITUTION. CLEAN BATHROOMS, BEEF JERKY WALL, AND THOSE LITTLE BEAVER NUGGETS THAT ARE BASICALLY CRACK. PLUS, NOBODY WOULD LOOK TWICE AT ME THERE.
FINE. IF YOU REALLY HATE IT THAT MUCH, WE CAN--


GOOD EVENING, FOLKS! CAN I START YOU OFF WITH SOME APPETIZERS?
OH HEY! DO YOU GUYS STILL HAVE THE CHU-TORO? I WAS HERE LIKE THREE YEARS AGO, AND IT WAS AMAZING. SUPER FATTY, MELTS IN YOUR MOUTH.
WE DO! IT'S SEASONAL, BUT WE JUST GOT A FRESH SHIPMENT THIS MORNING.
AWESOME! WE'LL START WITH THAT, SOME HAMACHI, AND MAYBE THE UNAGI? OH, AND DO YOU GUYS STILL DO THAT THING WHERE THEY TORCH THE SALMON BELLY TABLESIDE?
THE ABURI SALMON. YES, MA'AM.
PERFECT. WE'LL TAKE THAT TOO.


WHAT THE ACTUAL...? YOU KNOW SUSHI?
KNOW IT? I FUCKING LOVE IT. BEST CLEAN PROTEIN SOURCE THERE IS. MY NUTRITIONIST IN HIGH SCHOOL GOT ME HOOKED ON IT. HE SAID IT WAS PERFECT FOR ATHLETES BECAUSE IT'S LEAN PROTEIN WITHOUT ALL THE HEAVY SHIT THAT SLOWS YOU DOWN.
BUT YOU JUST SPENT FIVE MINUTES COMPLAINING AND TRYING TO GET US TO LEAVE!
YEAH. BECAUSE YOUR FACE WHEN YOU THINK YOU'RE DISAPPOINTING SOMEONE IS FUCKING HILARIOUS.
I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU--


PSYCH! GOD, YOU'RE STILL SO EASY TO MESS WITH.
I'M JUST SURPRISED, THAT'S ALL. YOU NEVER SEEMED LIKE THE SUSHI TYPE.
THERE'S A LOT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT ME, ZATCH. I CONTAIN MULTITUDES.
"I CONTAIN MULTITUDES"? WHO ARE YOU QUOTING, ARISTOTLE?
WHAT? NO, THAT'S JUST SOMETHING MY MOM ALWAYS SAYS. WHY, IS IT FROM SOMETHING?
WALT WHITMAN, I THINK. "SONG OF MYSELF." WE HAD TO READ IT IN AP ENGLISH.
I'M MORE OF A CLIFFSNOTES GUY MYSELF.
I'M NOT SUPER INTO POETRY, BUT THAT ONE JUST STUCK WITH ME BECAUSE... WELL, IT FELT TRUE. LIKE, WE'RE ALL MORE COMPLICATED THAN PEOPLE ASSUME.
NOT ALL OF US. YOUR DAD IS A SIMPLE PSYCHOPATH.
NO ARGUMENT HERE.


HERE'S YOUR CHU-TORO, HAMACHI, AND UNAGI TO START. I'LL BE BACK SHORTLY WITH THE ABURI SALMON FOR THE TABLESIDE PREPARATION.
OH MAN, THIS LOOKS AMAZING! BRING SOME BASIC ROLLS AND SASHIMI, TOO, PLEASE.


WOW, HOW MUCH MORE SUSHI ARE YOU GONNA ORDER?
UNTIL WE EITHER DRAIN YOUR DAD'S BACK ACCOUNT OR THE OCEAN RUNS OUT OF FISH.
ALSO HOW ARE YOU SO GOOD AT CHOPSTICKS?
IT'S ALL IN THE GRIP, DUDE. HOLD THE TOP ONE LIKE A PENCIL, KEEP THE BOTTOM ONE STEADY. SEE?
I LITERALLY CAN'T. I SWEAR THESE THINGS ARE RIGGED.
OR MAYBE THE EX-STAR QUARTERBACK IS STILL BETTER AT FINE MOTOR SKILLS THAN THE BACKUP. EVEN WITH THESE WEIRD NAILS.
LOW BLOW.


HERE, LOOK, THE BOTTOM ONE STAYS STILL, TOP ONE DOES ALL THE WORK. LIKE, UM...
LIKE WHAT?
LIKE... NOTHING. JUST TRY IT AGAIN. MMMMM. SO GOOD.


YOU KNOW, YOU MAKE THE WEIRDEST FACE WHEN YOU EAT. YOU KEEP YOUR EYES CLOSED AND EVERYTHING. IT'S LIKE YOU'RE HAVING SOME KIND OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.
BE QUIET, I'M CONCENTRATING ON THE FLAVOR.
MAYBE YOU AND THE FISH SHOULD GET A ROOM.


SEE, THERE IT IS! EVERY TIME YOU BITE INTO SOMETHING – EYES CLOSED, LITTLE SIGH, SOMETIMES EVEN A TINY MOAN.
PFFT, YOU'RE EXAGGERATING.
I'M NOT! IT'S LIKE FOOD PORN.
I HAVE TO GO TO THE BATHROOM, DON'T STEAL ANY OF MY SPICY TUNA!


WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW? AM I... HAVING FUN? AND THE WEIRDEST PART IS... I'M NOT EVEN THINKING ABOUT HOW I LOOK EVERY SECOND.
LIKE, FOR A FEW MINUTES THERE, I JUST FORGOT. I WAS JUST... ME. EATING SUSHI. LAUGHING. BEING NORMAL. FUCK – WHEN DID 'FEELING NORMAL' BECOME WEIRD?


HEY! HELLO! SORRY, BUT ARE YOU ON A DATE WITH ZACH HUTCHINSON?
UH... KIND OF? WAIT, HOW DID YOU--
OH MY GOD, I SAW YOU GUYS COME IN! I TEXTED LIKE EVERYONE I KNOW. ZACH FREAKING HUTCHINSON! HEY, DO YOU GO TO ST. CHRISTOPHER'S? I DON'T THINK I'VE SEEN YOU AROUND.
I... I WILL BE.


GIRL, YOU HIT THE JACKPOT! HIS FAMILY OWNS LIKE HALF THE STATE. PLUS, HE'S LITERALLY THE QUARTERBACK - AND HE'S STILL HOT AS HELL! YOU KNOW, THERE WERE RUMORS ABOUT HIM. THAT HE WAS, YOU KNOW... GAY. AT LEAST THAT'S WHAT MY COUSIN SAID. HE SWORE HE SAW ZACH AT THIS CLUB IN AUSTIN.
SO?
SO NOTHING! I MEAN, IF HE'S ON A DATE WITH YOU, OBVIOUSLY THOSE RUMORS WERE WRONG. UNLESS... WAIT, IS HE LIKE, BI OR SOMETHING?
UM, I... I DON'T KNOW. I GUESS.
UGH, I COULD NEVER DATE A BI GUY. LIKE, HOW WOULD YOU EVER TRUST THEM? EVEN REGULAR GUYS ARE HORNDOGS, SO THEY'D BE CHECKING OUT LITERALLY EVERYONE! PLUS, IT'S JUST WEIRD, RIGHT? LIKE, MAKE UP YOUR MIND! DO YOU WANT TO SUCK DICK OR NOT? PRETTY SIMPLE, IF YOU ASK ME.


ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS RIGHT NOW? YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW HIM.
WHOA, CHILL! I WAS JUST MAKING CONVERSATION. THOUGH I GUESS I SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISED HE'S WITH A GIRL DRESSED LIKE... THAT. TRYING A LITTLE TOO HARD, AREN'T WE?
NO, YOU WERE BEING A JUDGMENTAL BITCH ABOUT SOMEONE WHO'S NEVER DONE A DAMN THING TO YOU. ZACH HUTCHINSON IS WORTH TEN OF YOU.
EXCUSE ME? I'M JUST SAYING WHAT EVERYONE THINKS! YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SUCH A PSYCHO ABOUT IT.
YEAH, WELL, MAYBE "EVERYONE" SHOULD SHUT THE FUCK UP AND MIND THEIR OWN BUSINESS.
WHATEVER. ENJOY YOUR DATE WITH THE CLOSET CASE.


YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME. THAT FUCKER WAS AT THE BOWLING ALLEY!
HAS TO BE ONE OF HUTCHINSON'S ASSHOLES. SUBTLE AS A BRICK THROUGH A WINDOW.


HEY, DON'T LOOK NOW, BUT YOUR DAD'S GOT A BABYSITTER WATCHING US.
WHAT? WHERE?
I *LITERALLY* JUST SAID DON'T LOOK. HE'S OVER THERE, BLUE SHIRT, TERRIBLE TEETH. HE WAS AT THE BOWLING ALLEY TOO.
OF COURSE. DAD WILL WANT A FULL REPORT ON HOW OUR "DATE" IS GOING.
WELL THEN, LET'S GIVE HIM SOMETHING TO REPORT. THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT OF THIS, RIGHT? LAUGH AT SOMETHING I SAID.
HA HA?
JESUS, YOU'RE TERRIBLE AT THIS. AT LEAST TRY TO LOOK LIKE YOU'RE HAVING A GOOD TIME.
I AM HAVING A GOOD TIME.
I MEAN LIKE YOU'RE HAVING A GOOD TIME WITH A PERSON YOU WANTED TO KISS OR WHATEVER. TAKE MY HAND!
UM.
DAMN, DUDE, YOU EVEN SUCK AT HOLDING HANDS! DO YOU HAVE ANY GAME AT ALL? GAZE INTO MY EYES OR WHATEVER.


LIKE, UH... LIKE THIS?


UM, YEAH. THAT'S... GOOD.
JUST LIKE THAT.



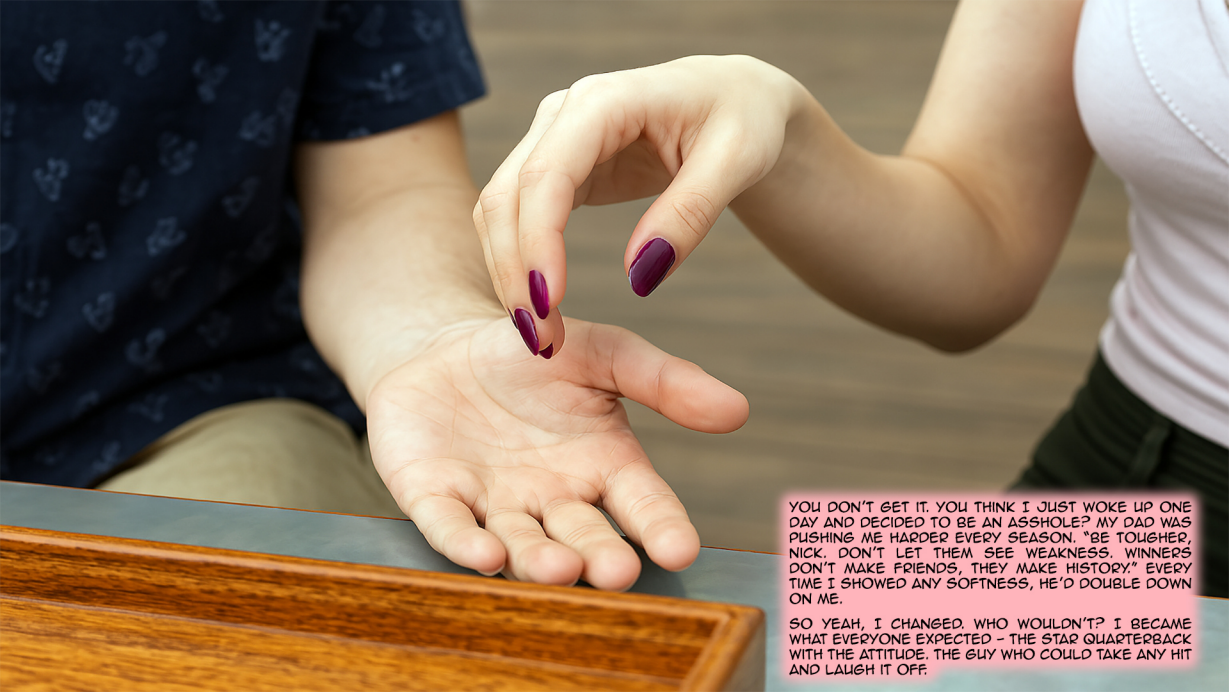



SO ANYWAY, THAT'S WHEN COACH COMPLETELY LOST IT AND THREW HIS CLIPBOARD SO HARD IT RICOCHETED OFF THREE LOCKERS BEFORE HITTING HIM IN THE BACK OF THE HEAD.
DAMN, I'M SORRY I MISSED THAT! GOD, CRAIG WAS ALWAYS SUCH AN IDIOT.
I SWEAR HE'S GOTTEN WORSE. MUST BE ALL THOSE TACKLES.
IS MR. EARPIECE HE STILL WATCHING?
OH YEAH. HASN'T TAKEN HIS EYES OFF US FOR THE LAST TEN MINUTES.
GOD, YOUR DAD IS CREEPY. LIKE, WHO SENDS SOMEONE TO SPY ON A DATE? EVEN A FAKE ONE.
A MAN WHO SEES HIS KID AS AN INVESTMENT, NOT A PERSON.


SO... SINCE WE'RE STUCK MAKING GOOGLY EYES FOR THE NEXT FEW MINUTES, MIGHT AS WELL MAKE THE MOST OF IT. TELL ME SOMETHING REAL. SOMETHING I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU.
REAL? LIKE WHAT?
HELL, I DON'T KNOW. ANYTHING! WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE MOVIE AND WHY IS IT *RUDY?* WHAT SCARES YOU AND WHY IS IT THROWING AN *INTERCEPTION?* WHY ARE YOU SO TERRIBLE AT *MADDEN?* ARE YOU BI... OLOGY?
HUH?
I'M JUST ASKING YOUR FAVORITE SUBJECT. GOD! NOW, C'MON, TELL ME SOMETHING REAL. ANYTHING I MENTIONED – OR THAT I DIDN'T MENTION BUT COMES TO MIND FOR SOME WEIRD REASON.


UM... OKAY. WHEN I WAS A KID, I WANTED TO BE A DANCER. LIKE, PROFESSIONALLY. I USED TO PRACTICE IN MY ROOM WITH THE DOOR LOCKED SO MY DAD WOULDN'T FIND OUT.
NO SHIT? YOU ANY GOOD?
I WAS. STILL AM, ACTUALLY. THAT'S WHY I TOOK THAT ROLE IN KINKY BOOTS. IT WAS THE MOST ALIVE I'VE FELT IN YEARS.
HEY, THAT'S--
STUPID. AND QUEER.
NO! I MEAN, ER, YEAH, IT'S PRETTY UM... LGBT. BUT IT'S NOT STUPID. HEY, I'D EVEN LIKE TO SEE YOU DANCE SOMETIME. I'M PRETTY FANTASTIC MYSELF, AS YOU WERE LUCKY ENOUGH TO WITNESS WHEN I STOMPED YOU IN BOWLING, BUT WE COULD, LIKE, COLLABORATE.
YOU KNOW, I REALLY MISSED THIS VERSION OF YOU. FUNNY, RELAXED, BEING ACTUALLY COOL INSTEAD OF TRYING TO PROVE SOMETHING TO EVERYONE. IT'S LIKE SEEING AN OLD FRIEND I THOUGHT WAS GONE FOREVER.
WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN? "THIS VERSION" OF ME?
I... I JUST MEANT... YOU SEEM MORE LIKE YOURSELF TONIGHT. LIKE THE NICK I KNEW BEFORE FOOTBALL CHANGED EVERYTHING.


SO WHAT, YOU THINK GROWING TITS "FIXED" ME?
I... I DIDN'T... NO! THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT AT ALL--
THEN WHAT? BECAUSE IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE SAYING I'M BETTER THIS WAY. WITH THE HAIR AND THE MAKEUP AND THE... ALL OF THIS. ALMOST LIKE YOU THINK YOUR DAD MADE THE RIGHT CALL.
C'MON, I'M TALKING ABOUT YOUR *PERSONALITY*, NOT HOW YOU LOOK. WHEN WE WERE KIDS, BEFORE FOOTBALL BECAME YOUR WHOLE IDENTITY, YOU WERE DIFFERENT. KINDER. MORE REAL, LIKE YOU WERE SAYING. THEN SUDDENLY IT WAS LIKE YOU HAD TO BE THIS SUPER-MACHO JERK ALL THE TIME, AND MY FRIEND JUST... DISAPPEARED. IT SUCKED!


YOU DON'T GET IT. YOU THINK I JUST WOKE UP ONE DAY AND DECIDED TO BE AN ASSHOLE? MY DAD WAS PUSHING ME HARDER EVERY SEASON. "BE TOUGHER, NICK. DON'T LET THEM SEE WEAKNESS. WINNERS DON'T MAKE FRIENDS, THEY MAKE HISTORY." EVERY TIME I SHOWED ANY SOFTNESS, HE'D DOUBLE DOWN ON ME.
SO YEAH, I CHANGED. WHO WOULDN'T? I BECAME WHAT EVERYONE EXPECTED – THE STAR QUARTERBACK WITH THE ATTITUDE. THE GUY WHO COULD TAKE ANY HIT AND LAUGH IT OFF.


I'M JUST TRYING TO SAY THAT I MISSED YOU. ALL THOSE YEARS, I KEPT LOOKING FOR GLIMPSES OF MY OLD FRIEND. BUT YOU WERE JUST... SO ANGRY ALL THE TIME.
I WASN'T ANGRY. I WISH I'D BEEN ANGRY.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN? IF NOT ANGRY, THEN WHAT?

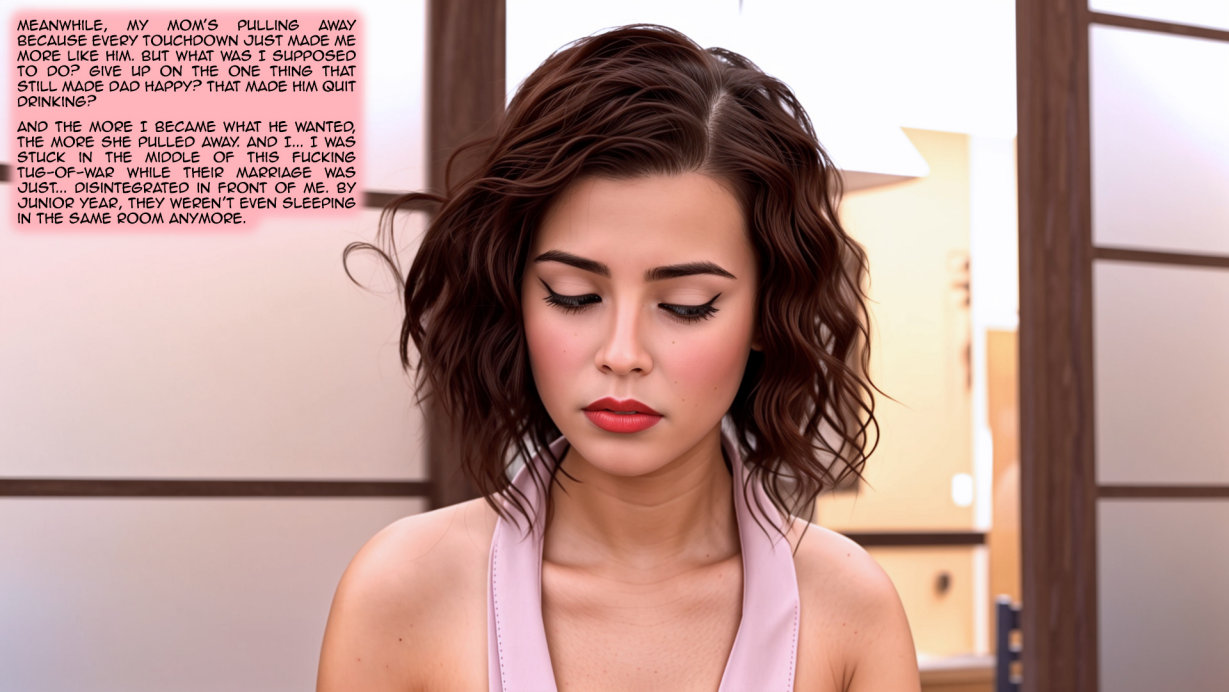
I WAS FUCKING ***SAD***, MAN. ALL THE TIME. EVEN WHEN WE WERE WINNING STATE. EVEN WHEN I WAS BREAKING RECORDS. EVEN WHEN I WAS DATING THE HOTTEST GIRL IN SCHOOL.

BUT YOU HAD EVERYTHING. THE SCHOLARSHIP, THE POPULARITY, THE--

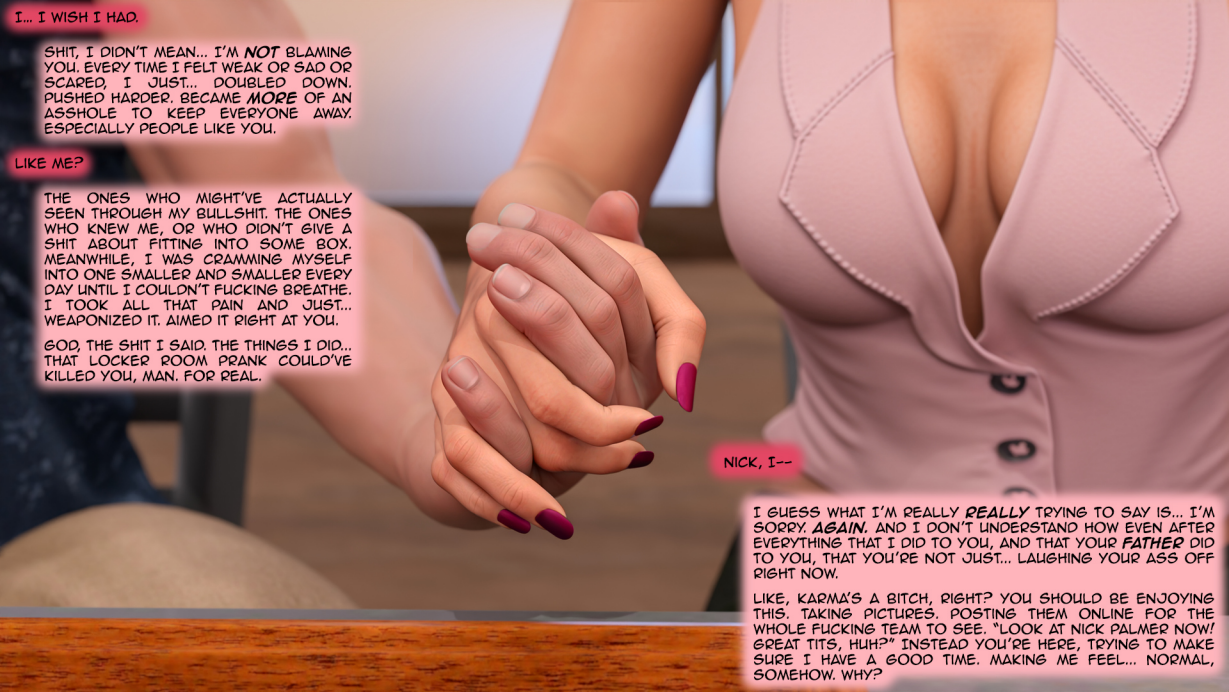
YEAH, I KNOW WHAT I HAD. TRUST ME, MY DAD REMINDED ME EVERY FUCKING DAY HOW LUCKY I WAS. HOW I NEEDED TO BE GRATEFUL. HOW I COULDN'T WASTE MY "GOD-GIVEN TALENT." YOU'D THINK GETTING A FULL-RIDE SCHOLARSHIP TO ST. CHRISTOPHER'S WOULD BE SOME KIND OF VICTORY. NOPE. DAD JUST MOVED THE GOALPOSTS. "NOW YOU GOTTA BE FRESHMAN STARTER." THEN IT WAS "NOW YOU GOTTA BREAK THE PASSING RECORD." THEN IT WAS "NFL SCOUTS ARE WATCHING." IT NEVER FUCKING ENDED.



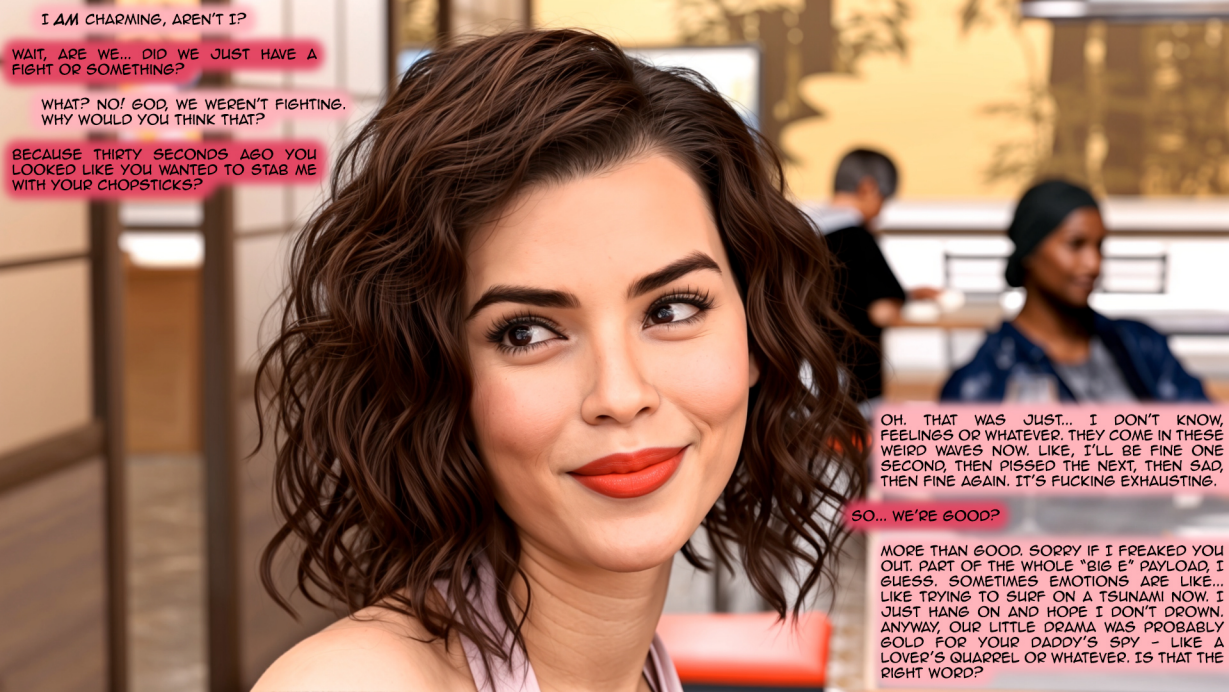

I HAD NO IDEA.
NO ONE DID. THAT WAS THE POINT. I'D THROW SIX TOUCHDOWNS IN A GAME, AND IN THE CAR RIDE HOME ALL DAD WOULD TALK ABOUT WAS THE ONE INTERCEPTION. "WINNERS DON'T MAKE MISTAKES, NICK."


MEANWHILE, MY MOM'S PULLING AWAY BECAUSE EVERY TOUCHDOWN JUST MADE ME MORE LIKE HIM. BUT WHAT WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO? GIVE UP ON THE ONE THING THAT STILL MADE DAD HAPPY? THAT MADE HIM QUIT DRINKING?
AND THE MORE I BECAME WHAT HE WANTED, THE MORE SHE PULLED AWAY. AND I... I WAS STUCK IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS FUCKING TUG-OF-WAR WHILE THEIR MARRIAGE WAS JUST... DISINTEGRATED IN FRONT OF ME. BY JUNIOR YEAR, THEY WEREN'T EVEN SLEEPING IN THE SAME ROOM ANYMORE.


I'M SORRY.
PATHETIC, RIGHT? NICK PALMER, RISING STAR, HEADED TO THE NFL – MEANWHILE, I'D GO HOME AFTER GAMES AND JUST... KINDA STARE AT THE CEILING FOR HOURS LIKE A FUCKING ROBOT THEY FORGOT TO SWITCH OFF.
ANYWAY, I GUESS WHAT I'M SAYING IS THE "ME" YOU MISSED? THAT KID GOT BEATEN OUT OF ME ONE PRACTICE AT A TIME. ONE "NOT GOOD ENOUGH" AT A TIME.
YOU THINK I WAS SUDDENLY AN ASSHOLE JUST BECAUSE? I WAS DROWNING, MAN. AND NOBODY NOTICED. NOT EVEN YOU.


I... I WISH I HAD.
SHIT, I DIDN'T MEAN... I'M NOT BLAMING YOU. EVERY TIME I FELT WEAK OR SAD OR SCARED, I JUST... DOUBLED DOWN. PUSHED HARDER. BECAME MORE OF AN ASSHOLE TO KEEP EVERYONE AWAY. ESPECIALLY PEOPLE LIKE YOU.
LIKE ME?
THE ONES WHO MIGHT'VE ACTUALLY SEEN THROUGH MY BULLSHIT. THE ONES WHO KNEW ME, OR WHO DIDN'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT FITTING INTO SOME BOX. MEANWHILE, I WAS CRAMMING MYSELF INTO ONE SMALLER AND SMALLER EVERY DAY UNTIL I COULDN'T FUCKING BREATHE. I TOOK ALL THAT PAIN AND JUST... WEAPONIZED IT. AIMED IT RIGHT AT YOU.
GOD, THE SHIT I SAID. THE THINGS I DID... THAT LOCKER ROOM PRANK COULD'VE KILLED YOU, MAN. FOR REAL.
NICK, I--
I GUESS WHAT I'M REALLY REALLY TRYING TO SAY IS... I'M SORRY. AGAIN. AND I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW EVEN AFTER EVERYTHING THAT I DID TO YOU, AND THAT YOUR FATHER DID TO YOU, THAT YOU'RE NOT JUST... LAUGHING YOUR ASS OFF RIGHT NOW.
LIKE, KARMA'S A BITCH, RIGHT? YOU SHOULD BE ENJOYING THIS. TAKING PICTURES. POSTING THEM ONLINE FOR THE WHOLE FUCKING TEAM TO SEE. "LOOK AT NICK PALMER NOW! GREAT TITS, HUH?" INSTEAD YOU'RE HERE, TRYING TO MAKE SURE I HAVE A GOOD TIME. MAKING ME FEEL... NORMAL, SOMEHOW. WHY?


OH. WELL, BECAUSE I KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE TRAPPED TO HAVE SOMEONE ELSE DECIDE WHO YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE.
BUT I WAS SUCH AN ASSHOLE TO YOU!
YEAH, YOU WERE. BUT I BELIEVED THAT BOY WHO GAVE ME HIS LUNCH IN THIRD GRADE WHEN THOSE BULLIES TOOK MINE WAS STILL IN THERE SOMEWHERE. THE ONE WHO PUSHED JIMMY PETERS INTO THE GARBAGE WHEN HE WAS MAKING FUN OF MY STUTTER. THE ONE WHO STOOD UP FOR PEOPLE BEFORE HE LEARNED TO BE AFRAID.
YEAH, I WAS PRETTY AWESOME. BUT I DON'T THINK THAT VERSION OF ME EXISTS ANYMORE.
YOU JUST PROVED IT DOES BY HELPING JANICE. BY GOING THROUGH ALL THIS JUST TO PROTECT ME FROM MY DAD. THAT TAKES GUTS. REAL ONES.
OR MAYBE I'M JUST AN IDIOT WHO DOESN'T KNOW WHEN TO QUIT.
THAT TOO. BUT IT'S PART OF YOUR CHARM.


I AM CHARMING, AREN'T I?
WAIT, ARE WE... DID WE JUST HAVE A FIGHT OR SOMETHING?
WHAT? NO! GOD, WE WEREN'T FIGHTING. WHY WOULD YOU THINK THAT?
BECAUSE THIRTY SECONDS AGO YOU LOOKED LIKE YOU WANTED TO STAB ME WITH YOUR CHOPSTICKS?
OH. THAT WAS JUST... I DON'T KNOW, FEELINGS OR WHATEVER. THEY COME IN THESE WEIRD WAVES NOW. LIKE, I'LL BE FINE ONE SECOND, THEN PISSED THE NEXT, THEN SAD, THEN FINE AGAIN. IT'S FUCKING EXHAUSTING.
SO... WE'RE GOOD?
MORE THAN GOOD. SORRY IF I FREAKED YOU OUT. PART OF THE WHOLE "BIG E" PAYLOAD, I GUESS. SOMETIMES EMOTIONS ARE LIKE... LIKE TRYING TO SURF ON A TSUNAMI NOW. I JUST HANG ON AND HOPE I DON'T DROWN. ANYWAY, OUR LITTLE DRAMA WAS PROBABLY GOLD FOR YOUR DADDY'S SPY – LIKE A LOVER'S QUARREL OR WHATEVER. IS THAT THE RIGHT WORD?


RODEO
ROLLS
HOLY SHIT! THREE HUNDRED BUCKS? DID WE EAT GOLD-PLATED FISH?
WELL, UH, THERE WAS ALL THOSE EXTRA ROLLS YOU ORDERED...
I WAS STARVING! GOOD THING YOUR DAD IS FOOTING THE BILL.
ACTUALLY, THIS IS ON ME.
WHAT!? NO WAY, DUDE. I DON'T DO CHARITY. WE'LL SPLIT IT.
STOP. MY TREAT.
REALLY? WOW, THANKS. NEVER BEEN ON THIS SIDE OF THE TABLE BEFORE.
ME EITHER.


AT THE PALMER RESIDENCE...
SO, YEAH, THAT'S ABOUT THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT, MRS. PALMER.


I KNOW IT'S A LOT TO TAKE IN, AND THE WHOLE IDEA MIGHT SEEM... UNORTHODOX.


BUT NICKY IS MY FRIEND. AND, GIVEN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, I THINK THIS MIGHT BE THE ONLY WAY TO HELP HIM.
THANK YOU FOR TELLING ME, SANDY. BUT YOU'RE WRONG.


WRONG ABOUT WHAT? I KNOW THE IDEA OF GUIDING HIM FURTHER INTO ***ALL THIS*** MIGHT SEEM CRUEL, BUT--


NO. FROM EVERYTHING YOU'VE SAID, IT SEEMS PRACTICAL. BUT I HAVE ANOTHER *PRACTICAL* WAY TO DEAL WITH THIS. WAIT HERE, OKAY?


DON'T MIND IF I DO. I CAN'T STOP EATING THESE DELICIOUS -- WOAH!


MRS. PALMER, WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THAT THING!?
WHAT I SHOULD'VE DONE FOUR MONTHS AGO. LEONARD HUTCHINSON AND I HAVE UNFINISHED BUSINESS.
YOU'RE GOING TO THREATEN HIM?
SUGAR, I MAY HAVE BEEN MISS TEXAS, BUT I AIN'T STUPID. YOU DON'T THREATEN A MAN LIKE HIM. NO, NO.
THAT SONOFABITCH NEEDS TO *DIE*.


SO, WE GONNA HIT UP BUC-EE'S NOW? I'LL BUY YOU SOME BEAVER NUGGETS.
YOU SERIOUSLY STILL HUNGRY AFTER ALL THAT SUSHI?
HOLY SHIT, HE'S STILL FOLLOWING US. AND I DON'T EVEN THINK THE BASTARD IS TRYING TO HIDE.
THIS IS RIDICULOUS. MY DAD'S CROSSED A LINE.
I'D SAY HE DROVE OVER THE LINE IN A MONSTER TRUCK, BACKED UP, AND DID IT AGAIN.
WHY CAN'T HE JUST LEAVE ME ALONE FOR ONE NIGHT? JUST ONE NIGHT!
YEAH, FUCK THIS.

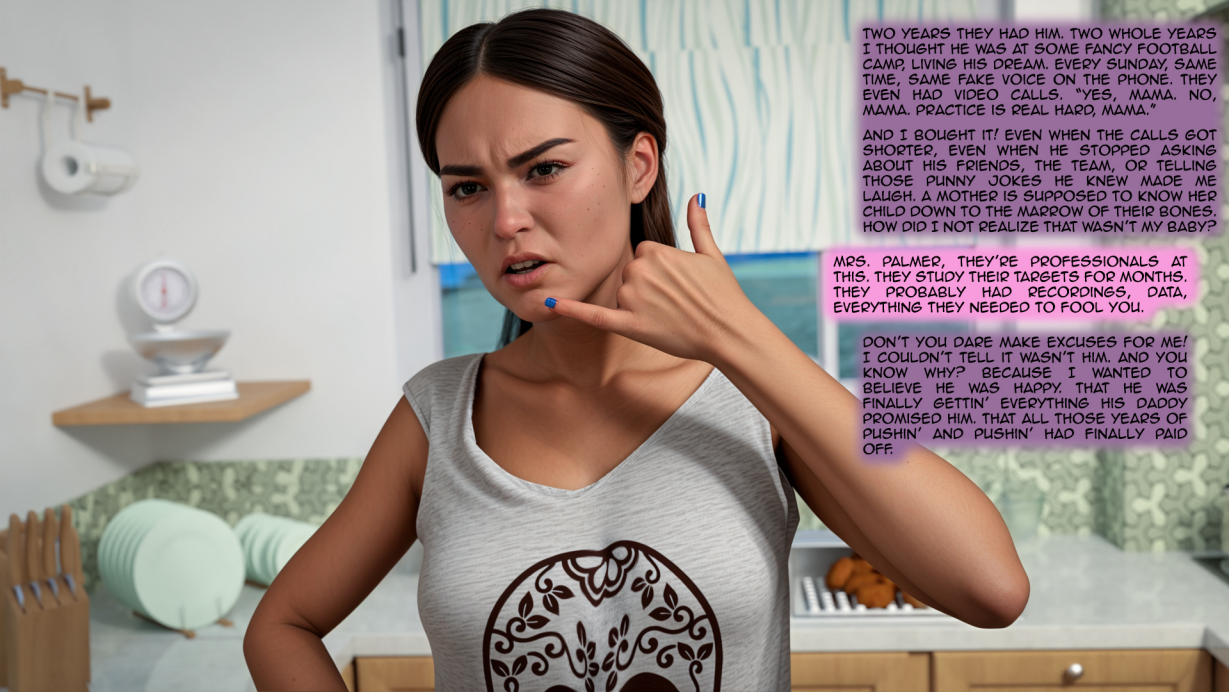

RECORD STORE
APES - VINYL
HEY, ASSHOLE! YEAH, YOU WITH THE EARPIECE. YOU HAVING FUN CREEPING ON US ALL NIGHT?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT, MISS.
OH, I'M SO SORRY! I MUST BE CONFUSED. YOU'RE NOT THE SAME DICKWAD WHO WAS STARING AT US AT THE BOWLING ALLEY? AND THEN MAGICALLY APPEARED AT THE RESTAURANT? WHAT A CRAZY COINCIDENCE!
I'M JUST AN OBSERVER.
OBSERVER, MY ASS! TELL MR. HUTCHINSON IF HE WANTS TO KNOW HOW OUR DATE'S GOING, HE CAN FUCKING ASK US HIMSELF INSTEAD OF SENDING HIS LITTLE LAP DOG TO SNIFF AROUND.
I THINK YOU'VE HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK. PERHAPS YOU SHOULD--
PERHAPS YOU SHOULD GO FUCK YOURSELF!
HEY, MAYBE WE SHOULD JUST--
ACTUALLY, I'VE GOT A BETTER IDEA.

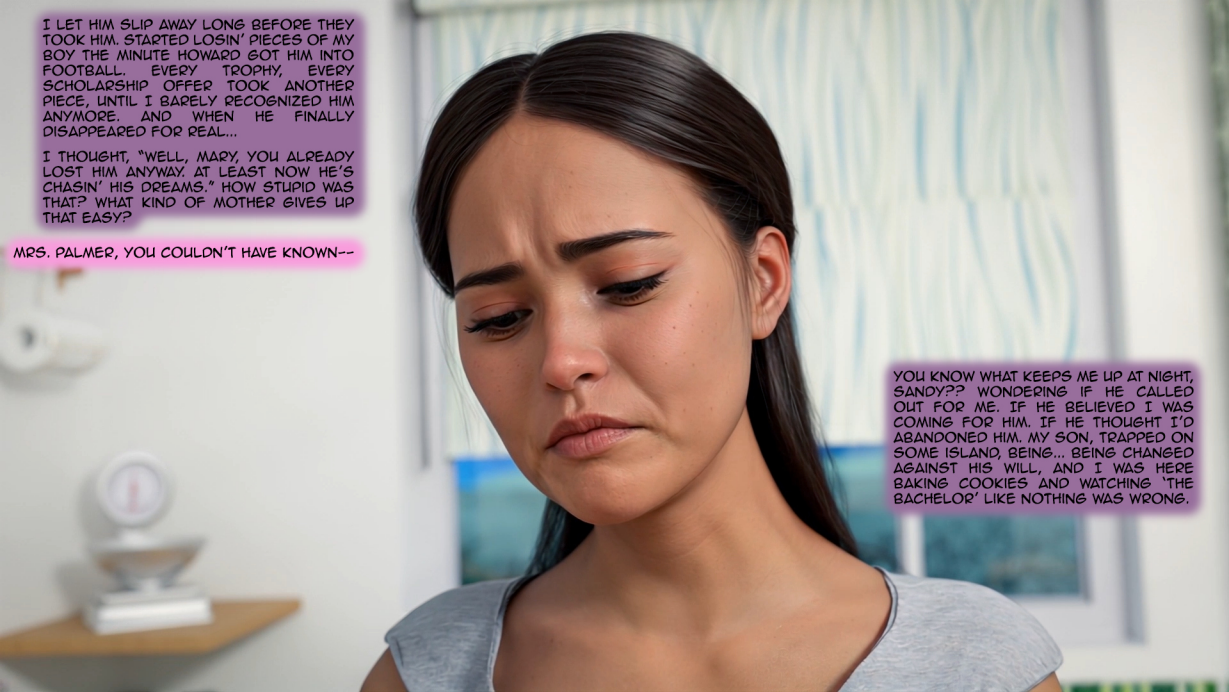

--RUN!
WAIT, WHAT ARE WE DOING?!
LOSING THE TAIL! COME ON, QB, THOSE CHICKEN LEGS CAN MOVE FASTER THAN THAT!


WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO? HOME?
DUDE, NO WAY. I'M TOO AMPED UP. TAKE ME SOMEWHERE, ANYWHERE..


...JUST GO FAST! YES!


KILL HIM!? YOU'LL END UP IN JAIL! AND WHAT GOOD WOULD THAT DO NICK? HE NEEDS YOU FREE, NOT BEHIND BARS!
YOU THINK I GIVE A GOOD GODDAMN ABOUT JAIL? THAT MONSTER TOOK MY BABY! TOOK MY BEAUTIFUL BOY AND... AND MUTILATED HIM! AND NOW YOU'RE TELLING ME THERE'S SOME WHOLE SECRET ORGANIZATION BEHIND IT? AND THAT THEY'VE GOT TRACKERS INSIDE MY CHILD LIKE HE'S SOME... SOME HUNTIN' DOG?
MRS. PALMER, PLEASE. I UNDERSTAND--
NO, HONEY, YOU DON'T. WHEN YOU CARRIED A CHILD INSIDE YOU, FELT EVERY KICK AND HICCUP, WHEN YOU HELD THAT TINY LITTLE PERSON AND PROMISED TO PROTECT THEM WITH YOUR DYING BREATH... THERE IS NOTHING - NOTHING! - A MOTHER WON'T DO. MAYBE ONE DAY WHEN YOU- ER, SORRY, I FORGOT.
THAT'S... THAT'S OKAY. BUT THIS ISN'T JUST ABOUT LEONARD HUTCHINSON. SECOND DAWN HAS CONNECTIONS EVERYWHERE. IF YOU GO AFTER HIM, THEY'LL COME AFTER YOU, EVEN IN JAIL. AFTER NICK.

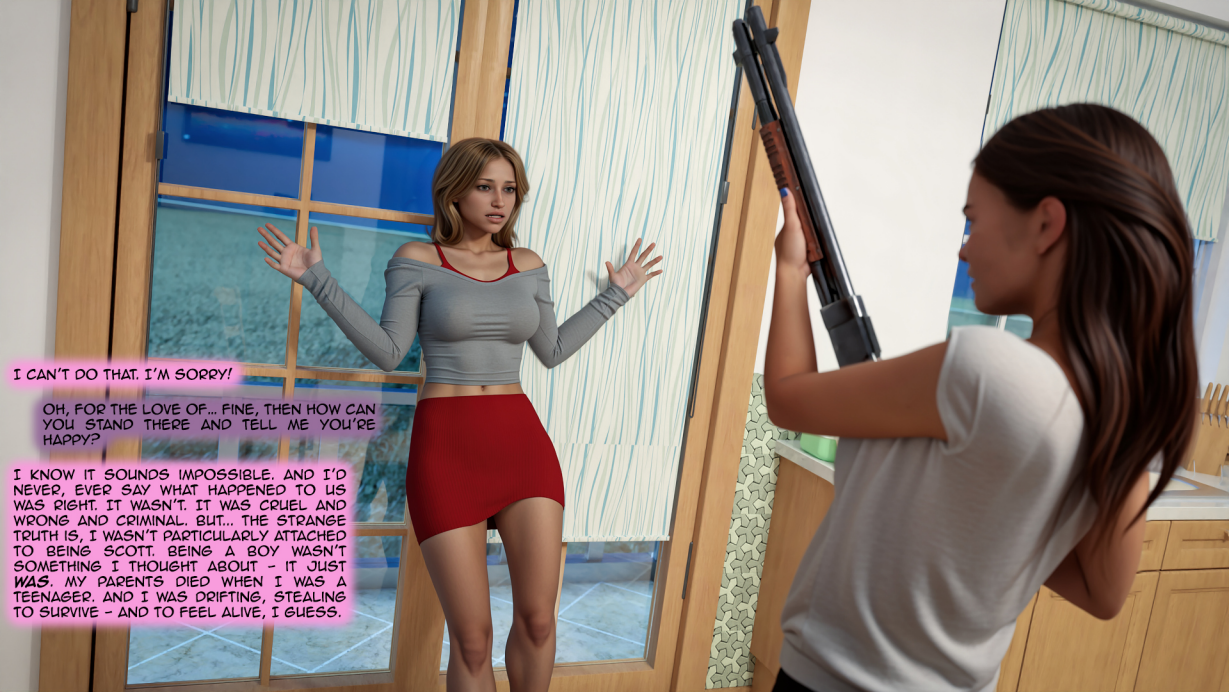

TWO YEARS THEY HAD HIM. TWO WHOLE YEARS I THOUGHT HE WAS AT SOME FANCY FOOTBALL CAMP, LIVING HIS DREAM. EVERY SUNDAY, SAME TIME, SAME FAKE VOICE ON THE PHONE. THEY EVEN HAD VIDEO CALLS. "YES, MAMA. NO, MAMA. PRACTICE IS REAL HARD, MAMA."
AND I BOUGHT IT! EVEN WHEN THE CALLS GOT SHORTER, EVEN WHEN HE STOPPED ASKING ABOUT HIS FRIENDS, THE TEAM, OR TELLING THOSE PUNNY JOKES HE KNEW MADE ME LAUGH. A MOTHER IS SUPPOSED TO KNOW HER CHILD DOWN TO THE MARROW OF THEIR BONES. HOW DID I NOT REALIZE THAT WASN'T MY BABY?
MRS. PALMER, THEY'RE PROFESSIONALS AT THIS. THEY STUDY THEIR TARGETS FOR MONTHS. THEY PROBABLY HAD RECORDINGS, DATA, EVERYTHING THEY NEEDED TO FOOL YOU.
DON'T YOU DARE MAKE EXCUSES FOR ME! I COULDN'T TELL IT WASN'T HIM. AND YOU KNOW WHY? BECAUSE I WANTED TO BELIEVE HE WAS HAPPY. THAT HE WAS FINALLY GETTIN' EVERYTHING HIS DADDY PROMISED HIM. THAT ALL THOSE YEARS OF PUSHIN' AND PUSHIN' HAD FINALLY PAID OFF.

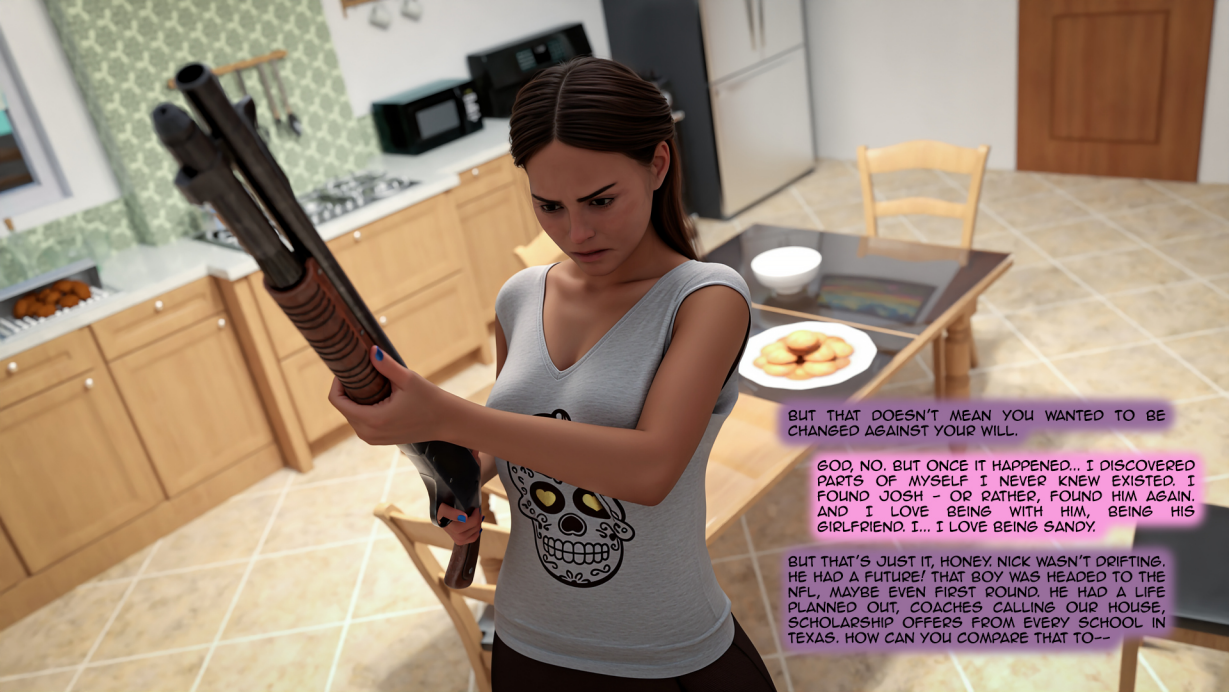

I LET HIM SLIP AWAY LONG BEFORE THEY TOOK HIM. STARTED LOSIN' PIECES OF MY BOY THE MINUTE HOWARD GOT HIM INTO FOOTBALL. EVERY TROPHY, EVERY SCHOLARSHIP OFFER TOOK ANOTHER PIECE, UNTIL I BARELY RECOGNIZED HIM ANYMORE. AND WHEN HE FINALLY DISAPPEARED FOR REAL...
I THOUGHT, "WELL, MARY, YOU ALREADY LOST HIM ANYWAY. AT LEAST NOW HE'S CHASIN' HIS DREAMS." HOW STUPID WAS THAT? WHAT KIND OF MOTHER GIVES UP THAT EASY?
MRS. PALMER, YOU COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN--
YOU KNOW WHAT KEEPS ME UP AT NIGHT, SANDY?? WONDERING IF HE CALLED OUT FOR ME. IF HE BELIEVED I WAS COMING FOR HIM. IF HE THOUGHT I'D ABANDONED HIM. MY SON, TRAPPED ON SOME ISLAND, BEING... BEING CHANGED AGAINST HIS WILL, AND I WAS HERE BAKING COOKIES AND WATCHING 'THE BACHELOR' LIKE NOTHING WAS WRONG.

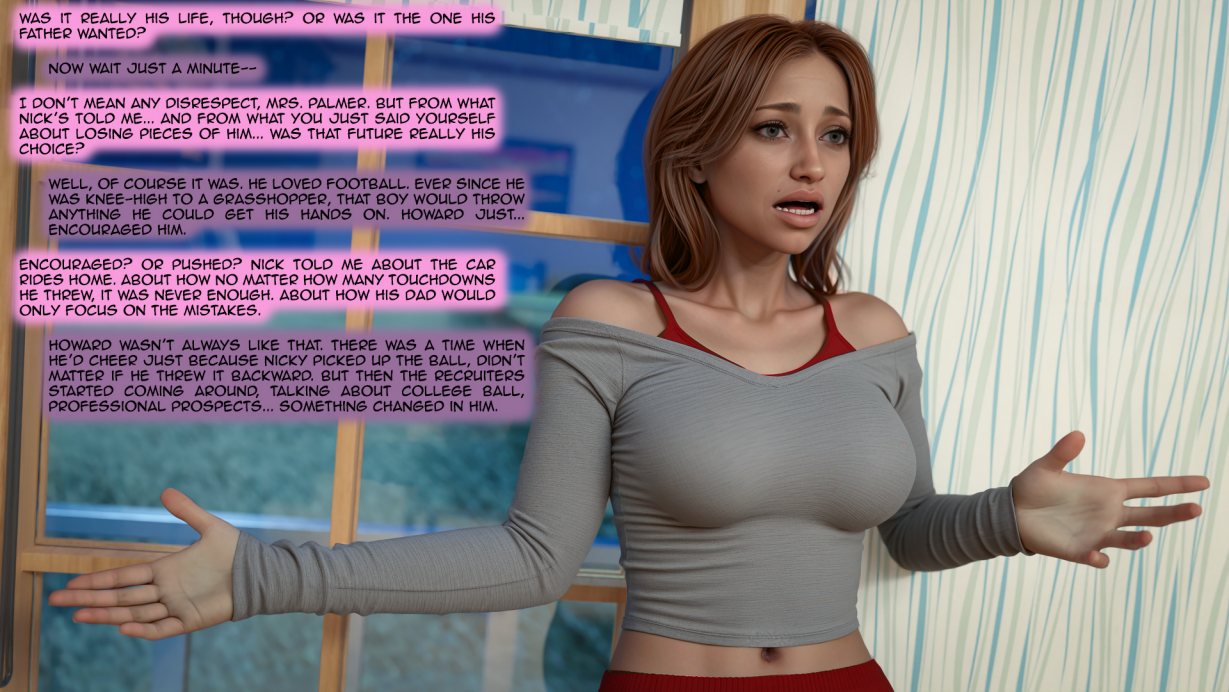

SO NO, I DON'T CARE ABOUT JAIL. I DON'T CARE ABOUT SECOND DAWN OR THEIR CONNECTIONS. LEONARD HUTCHINSON IS GOING TO ANSWER FOR WHAT HE'S DONE. AND IF THOSE SECOND DAWN PEOPLE WANT TO COME AFTER ME NEXT? LET 'EM TRY.

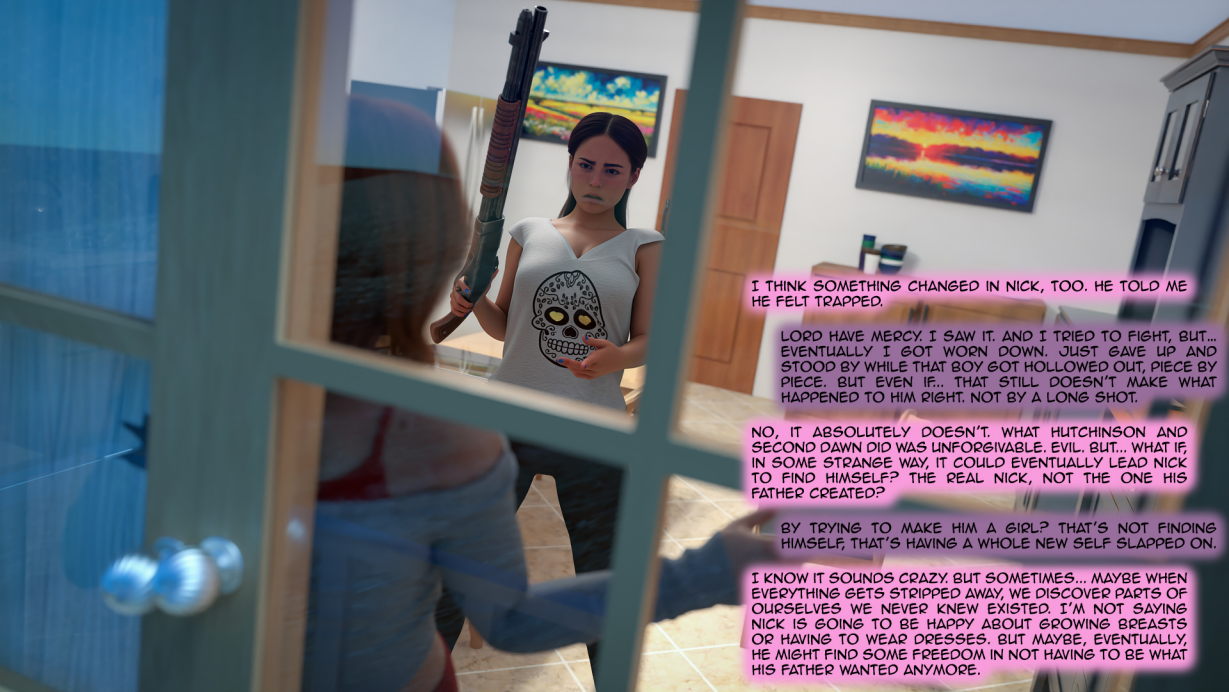

MRS. PALMER, PLEASE. NICK WON'T BE BETTER OFF WITH YOU IN JAIL. OR DEAD, FOR THAT MATTER! HUTCHINSON HAS ARMED BODYGUARDS.
THEN WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST? THAT I JUST SIT HERE WHILE THOSE MONSTERS GET AWAY WITH WHAT THEY DID? WHILE THEY KEEP THEIR HOOKS IN NICK? THAT AIN'T HAPPENING.
I KNOW IT SOUNDS COMPLETELY CRAZY - MAYBE EVEN IMPOSSIBLE - BUT... I REALLY THINK NICK COULD FIND HIS WAY THROUGH THIS. FIND HAPPINESS, EVEN. I DID.


HAPPY? HOW IN GOD'S GREEN EARTH CAN YOU BE HAPPY ABOUT HAVING YOUR WHOLE LIFE STOLEN FROM YOU? YOUR CHOICES RIPPED AWAY? YOUR VERY BODY CHANGED AGAINST YOUR WILL?
TRUST ME, I'VE ASKED MYSELF THAT SAME QUESTION ABOUT A THOUSAND TIMES. I WASN'T... I WASN'T LIKE SOFIA. I WASN'T TRANS BEFORE ALL THIS HAPPENED. NEVER FELT WRONG IN MY SKIN OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT.
WELL, SWEETIE, FRANKLY THAT SOUNDS LIKE HORSESHIT. NOW PLEASE GET THE HELL OUT OF MY WAY.


I CAN'T DO THAT. I'M SORRY!
OH, FOR THE LOVE OF... FINE, THEN HOW CAN YOU STAND THERE AND TELL ME YOU'RE HAPPY?
I KNOW IT SOUNDS IMPOSSIBLE. AND I'D NEVER, EVER SAY WHAT HAPPENED TO US WAS RIGHT. IT WASN'T. IT WAS CRUEL AND WRONG AND CRIMINAL. BUT... THE STRANGE TRUTH IS, I WASN'T PARTICULARLY ATTACHED TO BEING SCOTT. BEING A BOY WASN'T SOMETHING I THOUGHT ABOUT - IT JUST WAS. MY PARENTS DIED WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER. AND I WAS DRIFTING, STEALING TO SURVIVE - AND TO FEEL ALIVE, I GUESS.


BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU WANTED TO BE CHANGED AGAINST YOUR WILL.
GOD, NO. BUT ONCE IT HAPPENED... I DISCOVERED PARTS OF MYSELF I NEVER KNEW EXISTED. I FOUND JOSH – OR RATHER, FOUND HIM AGAIN. AND I LOVE BEING WITH HIM, BEING HIS GIRLFRIEND. I... I LOVE BEING SANDY.
BUT THAT'S JUST IT, HONEY. NICK WASN'T DRIFTING. HE HAD A FUTURE! THAT BOY WAS HEADED TO THE NFL, MAYBE EVEN FIRST ROUND. HE HAD A LIFE PLANNED OUT, COACHES CALLING OUR HOUSE, SCHOLARSHIP OFFERS FROM EVERY SCHOOL IN TEXAS. HOW CAN YOU COMPARE THAT TO--


WAS IT REALLY HIS LIFE, THOUGH? OR WAS IT THE ONE HIS FATHER WANTED?
NOW WAIT JUST A MINUTE--
I DON'T MEAN ANY DISRESPECT, MRS. PALMER. BUT FROM WHAT NICK'S TOLD ME... AND FROM WHAT YOU JUST SAID YOURSELF ABOUT LOSING PIECES OF HIM... WAS THAT FUTURE REALLY HIS CHOICE?
WELL, OF COURSE IT WAS. HE LOVED FOOTBALL. EVER SINCE HE WAS KNEE-HIGH TO A GRASSHOPPER, THAT BOY WOULD THROW ANYTHING HE COULD GET HIS HANDS ON. HOWARD JUST... ENCOURAGED HIM.
ENCOURAGED? OR PUSHED? NICK TOLD ME ABOUT THE CAR RIDES HOME. ABOUT HOW NO MATTER HOW MANY TOUCHDOWNS HE THREW, IT WAS NEVER ENOUGH. ABOUT HOW HIS DAD WOULD ONLY FOCUS ON THE MISTAKES.
HOWARD WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THAT. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN HE'D CHEER JUST BECAUSE NICKY PICKED UP THE BALL, DIDN'T MATTER IF HE THREW IT BACKWARD. BUT THEN THE RECRUITERS STARTED COMING AROUND, TALKING ABOUT COLLEGE BALL, PROFESSIONAL PROSPECTS... SOMETHING CHANGED IN HIM.


I THINK SOMETHING CHANGED IN NICK, TOO. HE TOLD ME HE FELT TRAPPED.
LORD HAVE MERCY. I SAW IT. AND I TRIED TO FIGHT, BUT... EVENTUALLY I GOT WORN DOWN. JUST GAVE UP AND STOOD BY WHILE THAT BOY GOT HOLLOWED OUT, PIECE BY PIECE. BUT EVEN IF... THAT STILL DOESN'T MAKE WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM RIGHT. NOT BY A LONG SHOT.
NO, IT ABSOLUTELY DOESN'T. WHAT HUTCHINSON AND SECOND DAWN DID WAS UNFORGIVABLE. EVIL. BUT... WHAT IF, IN SOME STRANGE WAY, IT COULD EVENTUALLY LEAD NICK TO FIND HIMSELF? THE REAL NICK, NOT THE ONE HIS FATHER CREATED?
BY TRYING TO MAKE HIM A GIRL? THAT'S NOT FINDING HIMSELF, THAT'S HAVING A WHOLE NEW SELF SLAPPED ON.
I KNOW IT SOUNDS CRAZY. BUT SOMETIMES... MAYBE WHEN EVERYTHING GETS STRIPPED AWAY, WE DISCOVER PARTS OF OURSELVES WE NEVER KNEW EXISTED. I'M NOT SAYING NICK IS GOING TO BE HAPPY ABOUT GROWING BREASTS OR HAVING TO WEAR DRESSES. BUT MAYBE, EVENTUALLY, HE MIGHT FIND SOME FREEDOM IN NOT HAVING TO BE WHAT HIS FATHER WANTED ANYMORE.

NICK USED TO LOVE HORSES, YOU KNOW THAT?

HE, UH, MIGHT'VE MENTIONED IT ONCE OR TWICE.

I LED A GIRL SCOUT TROOP BACK THEN. TOOK 'EM FOR RIDING LESSONS AT OLD TREVINO'S RANCH JUST OUTSIDE TOWN. NICK WOULD TAG ALONG, COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE THAN SIX OR SEVEN. MOST LITTLE BOYS THAT AGE, THEY'RE ALL ABOUT LOOKIN' TOUGH, SHOWIN' OFF, BUT MY NICK... HE'D SPEND HOURS JUST BRUSHIN' THOSE HORSES, TALKIN' TO THEM REAL SOFT-LIKE. TREVINO SAID HE HAD A GIFT – SAID HE'D NEVER SEEN A CHILD WITH SUCH GENTLE HANDS.

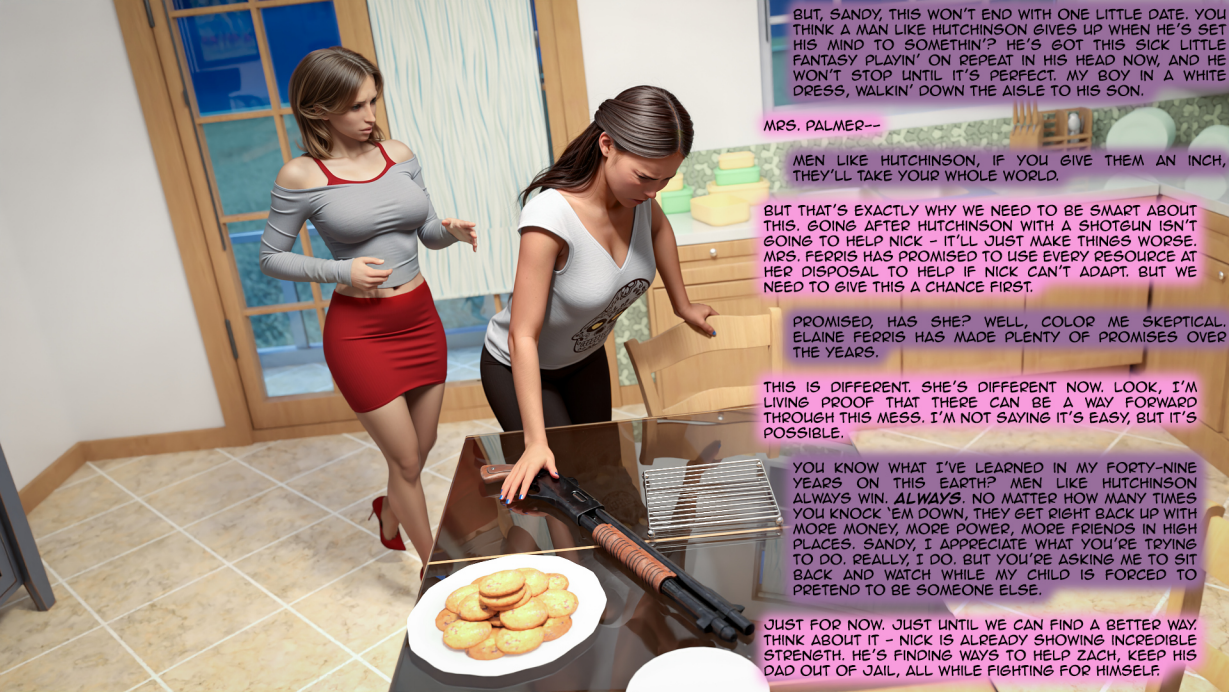
OF COURSE, HOWARD PUT A STOP TO IT WHEN HE FOUND OUT. SAID IT WASN'T "MANLY" FOR A PALMER BOY TO BE HANGING AROUND WITH GIRLS. THAT WAS THE START OF IT, REALLY. ALL THOSE LITTLE PIECES GETTIN' CHIPPED AWAY ONE BY ONE.

SO MAYBE THIS IS A CHANCE FOR NICKY TO REDISCOVER THOSE PARTS THAT GOT BURIED. THE ONES HE HAD TO HIDE TO BE THE SON HIS FATHER WANTED.

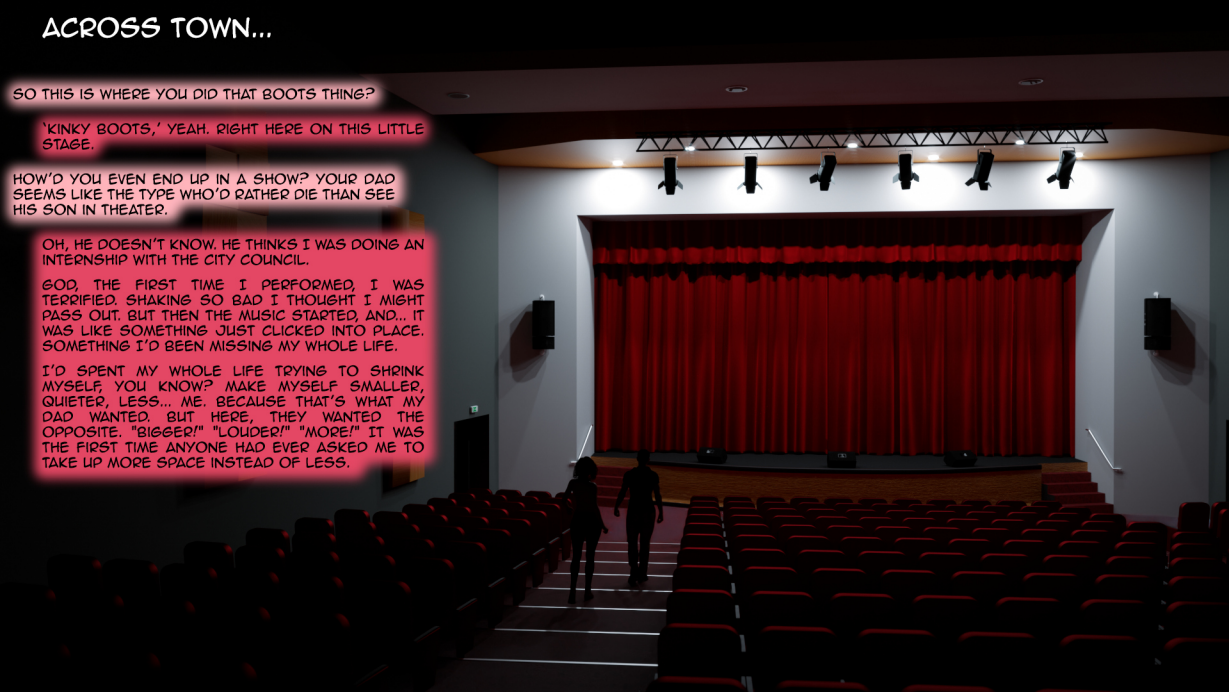
YOU REALLY THINK HE COULD... FIND HIS WAY THROUGH THIS?

I THINK NICK IS STRONGER THAN ANYONE GIVES HIM CREDIT FOR. AND WITH PEOPLE WHO LOVE HIM – REALLY LOVE *HIM*, NOT WHAT THEY WANT HIM TO BE – HE MIGHT SURPRISE US ALL.

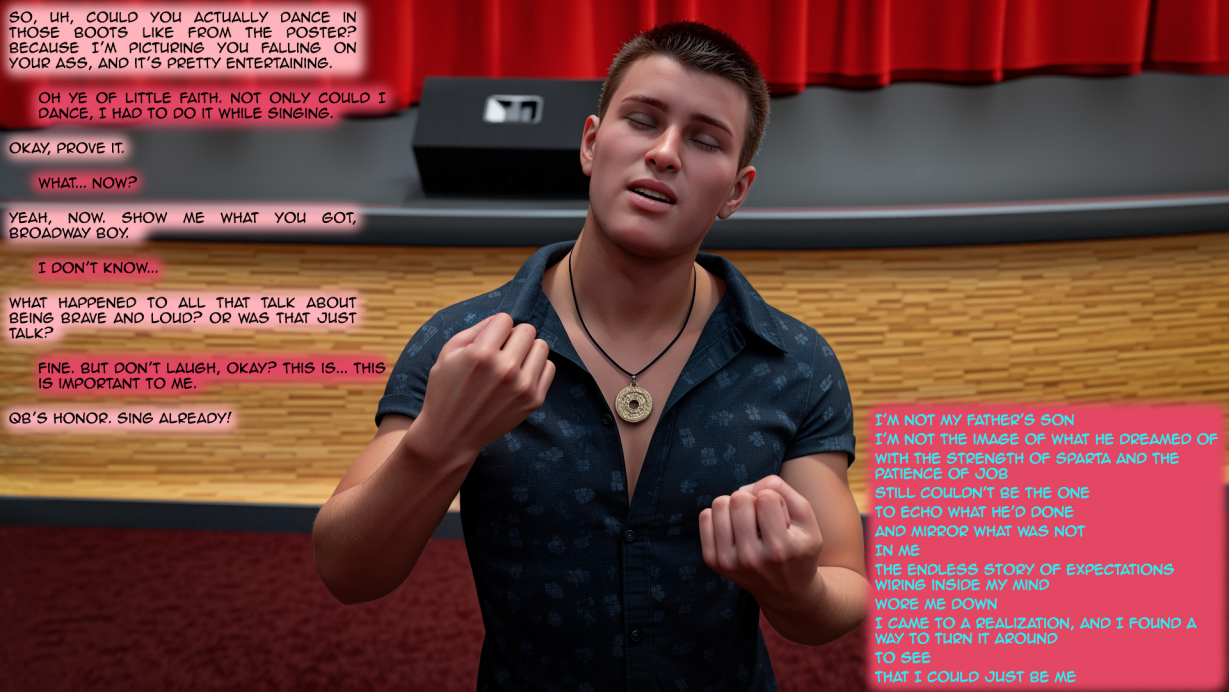



BUT, SANDY, THIS WON'T END WITH ONE LITTLE DATE. YOU THINK A MAN LIKE HUTCHINSON GIVES UP WHEN HE'S SET HIS MIND TO SOMETHIN'? HE'S GOT THIS SICK LITTLE FANTASY PLAYIN' ON REPEAT IN HIS HEAD NOW, AND HE WON'T STOP UNTIL IT'S PERFECT. MY BOY IN A WHITE DRESS, WALKIN' DOWN THE AISLE TO HIS SON.
MRS. PALMER--
MEN LIKE HUTCHINSON, IF YOU GIVE THEM AN INCH, THEY'LL TAKE YOUR WHOLE WORLD.
BUT THAT'S EXACTLY WHY WE NEED TO BE SMART ABOUT THIS. GOING AFTER HUTCHINSON WITH A SHOTGUN ISN'T GOING TO HELP NICK - IT'LL JUST MAKE THINGS WORSE. MRS. FERRIS HAS PROMISED TO USE EVERY RESOURCE AT HER DISPOSAL TO HELP IF NICK CAN'T ADAPT. BUT WE NEED TO GIVE THIS A CHANCE FIRST.
PROMISED, HAS SHE? WELL, COLOR ME SKEPTICAL. ELAINE FERRIS HAS MADE PLENTY OF PROMISES OVER THE YEARS.
THIS IS DIFFERENT. SHE'S DIFFERENT NOW. LOOK, I'M LIVING PROOF THAT THERE CAN BE A WAY FORWARD THROUGH THIS MESS. I'M NOT SAYING IT'S EASY, BUT IT'S POSSIBLE.
YOU KNOW WHAT I'VE LEARNED IN MY FORTY-NINE YEARS ON THIS EARTH? MEN LIKE HUTCHINSON ALWAYS WIN. ALWAYS. NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES YOU KNOCK 'EM DOWN, THEY GET RIGHT BACK UP WITH MORE MONEY, MORE POWER, MORE FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES. SANDY, I APPRECIATE WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO DO. REALLY, I DO. BUT YOU'RE ASKING ME TO SIT BACK AND WATCH WHILE MY CHILD IS FORCED TO PRETEND TO BE SOMEONE ELSE.
JUST FOR NOW. JUST UNTIL WE CAN FIND A BETTER WAY. THINK ABOUT IT - NICK IS ALREADY SHOWING INCREDIBLE STRENGTH. HE'S FINDING WAYS TO HELP ZACH, KEEP HIS DAD OUT OF JAIL, ALL WHILE FIGHTING FOR HIMSELF.


MY BABY'S ALWAYS BEEN STRONG. TOO STRONG FOR HIS OWN GOOD SOMETIMES.
SO WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU SUGGESTING? THAT I HELP MY SON BECOME MY DAUGHTER?
I'M SUGGESTING THAT YOU HELP YOUR CHILD NAVIGATE AN IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION. AND IF WE FIND OUT THIS TRULY ISN'T WORKABLE FOR NICK, THEN MRS. FERRIS HAS PROMISED SHE'LL SPARE NO EXPENSE TO FIND ANOTHER SOLUTION.
FINE. BUT I WANT A TIME LIMIT – WE GIVE THIS SIX MONTHS, MAX. AFTER THAT, IF MY CHILD IS STILL MISERABLE, WE FIND ANOTHER WAY. NO MATTER WHAT.
I THINK THAT'S MORE THAN FAIR.
LORD HELP ME, I HOPE WE'RE DOING THE RIGHT THING.
WELL, IF WE'RE GONNA DO THIS, WE'RE GONNA DO IT RIGHT. MY CHILD DESERVES NOTHING LESS THAN THE BEST DAMN "GIRL LESSONS" TEXAS HAS EVER SEEN.
GIRL LESSONS?
YOU BET YOUR PRETTY BLONDE HEAD. IF NICK'S GONNA ADAPT, HE'LL NEED MORE THAN JUST SOME NICE CLOTHES AND MAKEUP TIPS. HE NEEDS SOMEONE WHO KNOWS THE ROPES – ALL OF THEM. HOW TO HANDLE MEN WHEN THEY'RE BEING HANDSY. HOW TO SHUT DOWN GOSSIP BEFORE IT STARTS. HOW TO COMMAND A ROOM WITHOUT SAYING A WORD.
WOW. I COULD USE SOME OF THOSE LESSONS MYSELF.
SUGAR, I WASN'T MISS TEXAS JUST FOR MY PEARLY WHITES AND PERKY BOOBS. YOU CAN WATCH AND LEARN, TOO.
I JUST HOPE HE'S NOT HAVING TOO TERRIBLE OF A TIME TONIGHT...


ACROSS TOWN...
SO THIS IS WHERE YOU DID THAT BOOTS THING?
'KINKY BOOTS,' YEAH. RIGHT HERE ON THIS LITTLE STAGE.
HOW'D YOU EVEN END UP IN A SHOW? YOUR DAD SEEMS LIKE THE TYPE WHO'D RATHER DIE THAN SEE HIS SON IN THEATER.
OH, HE DOESN'T KNOW. HE THINKS I WAS DOING AN INTERNSHIP WITH THE CITY COUNCIL.
GOD, THE FIRST TIME I PERFORMED, I WAS TERRIFIED. SHAKING SO BAD I THOUGHT I MIGHT PASS OUT. BUT THEN THE MUSIC STARTED, AND... IT WAS LIKE SOMETHING JUST CLICKED INTO PLACE. SOMETHING I'D BEEN MISSING MY WHOLE LIFE.
I'D SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE TRYING TO SHRINK MYSELF, YOU KNOW? MAKE MYSELF SMALLER, QUIETER, LESS... ME. BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT MY DAD WANTED. BUT HERE, THEY WANTED THE OPPOSITE. "BIGGER!" "LOUDER!" "MORE!" IT WAS THE FIRST TIME ANYONE HAD EVER ASKED ME TO TAKE UP MORE SPACE INSTEAD OF LESS.


THAT SOUNDS AMAZING, MAN.
SIX SHOWS. THAT'S ALL WE DID. SIX SHOWS IN THIS TINY THEATER IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE TEXAS. AND IT WAS THE BEST WEEK OF MY LIFE.
WHAT ROLE DID YOU PLAY?
LOLA. SHE'S A DRAG QUEEN – THE STAR OF THE SHOW, REALLY. SHE'S... EVERYTHING I WISH I COULD BE IN REAL LIFE. CONFIDENT. UNAPOLOGETIC. BRAVE ENOUGH TO BE HERSELF NO MATTER WHAT ANYONE THINKS.
YOU? IN DRAG? SERIOUSLY?
YEAH, AND I WAS PRETTY, TOO.
AS PRETTY AS ME IN DRAG?
...NO.
HA! GOT YA BEAT – AGAIN.
WHEN I PUT ON THAT COSTUME – THE WIG, THE MAKEUP, THOSE RED BOOTS – I WASN'T SCARED ANYMORE. I WASN'T ZACH WHO DISAPPOINTS HIS FATHER. I WAS SOMEONE WHO COMMANDED ATTENTION, WHO DEMANDED RESPECT. WHO KNEW EXACTLY WHO THEY WERE.
AND WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?
FUCKING INCREDIBLE. LIKE... LIKE BEING DRUNK AND COMPLETELY CLEAR-HEADED AT THE SAME TIME. LIKE EVERY CELL IN MY BODY WAS FINALLY VIBRATING AT THE RIGHT FREQUENCY. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, I WASN'T APOLOGIZING FOR EXISTING.


SO, UH, COULD YOU ACTUALLY DANCE IN THOSE BOOTS LIKE FROM THE POSTER? BECAUSE I'M PICTURING YOU FALLING ON YOUR ASS, AND IT'S PRETTY ENTERTAINING.
OH YE OF LITTLE FAITH. NOT ONLY COULD I DANCE, I HAD TO DO IT WHILE SINGING.
OKAY, PROVE IT.
WHAT... NOW?
YEAH, NOW. SHOW ME WHAT YOU GOT, BROADWAY BOY.
I DON'T KNOW...
WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL THAT TALK ABOUT BEING BRAVE AND LOUD? OR WAS THAT JUST TALK?
FINE. BUT DON'T LAUGH, OKAY? THIS IS... THIS IS IMPORTANT TO ME.
QB'S HONOR. SING ALREADY!
I'M NOT MY FATHER'S SON
I'M NOT THE IMAGE OF WHAT HE DREAMED OF
WITH THE STRENGTH OF SPARTA AND THE PATIENCE OF JOB
STILL COULDN'T BE THE ONE
TO ECHO WHAT HE'D DONE
AND MIRROR WHAT WAS NOT
IN ME
THE ENDLESS STORY OF EXPECTATIONS
WIRING INSIDE MY MIND
WORE ME DOWN
I CAME TO A REALIZATION, AND I FOUND A WAY TO TURN IT AROUND
TO SEE
THAT I COULD JUST BE ME


I'M NOT MY FATHER'S SON
I'M NOT THE IMAGE OF WHAT HE DREAMED OF
WITH THE STRENGTH OF SPARTA AND THE PATIENCE OF JOB
STILL COULDN'T BE THE ONE
TO ECHO WHAT HE'D DONE
AND MIRROR WHAT WAS NOT IN ME
WOW...
YOU'RE ABOUT TO LAUGH.


NO, I'M ABOUT TO CRY – METAPHORICALLY! BUT, SHIT, DUDE. THAT WAS... ACTUALLY AMAZING. LIKE, REALLY AMAZING. WHY ARE YOU PLAYING FOOTBALL WHEN YOU CAN DO THAT?
TOLD YOU I WASN'T JUST TALK.
SERIOUSLY, I HAD NO IDEA YOU COULD SING LIKE THAT. YOU'VE BEEN HIDING SOME SERIOUS TALENT, ZEE.
NOT HIDING. JUST... KEEPING IT SAFE.
FROM YOUR DAD.
THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS HE CAN NEVER KNOW. THIS IS ONE OF THEM.
FUCK THAT! HE SHOULD KNOW. THE WORLD SHOULD KNOW. THIS IS WHO YOU ARE, ZACH. THIS IS YOUR... YOUR THING. YOUR GIFT. AND IT'S FUCKING BRILLIANT.
YOU REALLY THINK SO?
WELLLLL... I DUNNO. I HAVEN'T SEEN THE DANCING YET!


AH! WELL, THEN I'LL BE HAPPY TO PROVIDE A DEMONSTRATION.
SO DO YOU HAVE A PAIR OF YOUR KINKY BOOTS ON HAND?
I'M AFRAID I'LL HAVE TO MAKE DO WITH MY STUPIDLY EXPENSIVE SNEAKERS.
LAME. I'LL TRY NOT TO BE TOO DISAPPOINTED.
WAIT RIGHT HERE AND I'LL CONNECT MY PHONE TO THE SOUND SYSTEM.


HOW DO I DO THIS AGAIN? I THINK THERE'S A BLUETOOTH OPTION SOMEWHERE...


18
19
20
08:41
Mando
Today 12:45
I dunno, I guess around 7?
Can I come over before? I want to see you.
of course, I want to see you too
k
I'm outside
coming down!
hey... know ur on the 'date'
I hate that you can be out with HER but not with me
anyway - wanted to say I love you ❤️
sorry
Message




FOR OUR NEXT PERFORMANCE, A LITTLE CONTEMPORARY DANCE!
WOOO! DO THE 'HISTORY OF DANCE' VIDEO. THAT SHIT WAS HILARIOUS.
IT'S ALL ABOUT EXPRESSING EMOTION THROUGH MOVEMENT, LETTING YOUR BODY TELL THE STORY YOUR WORDS CAN'T. FEEL THE BEAT.


YEAH! LEMME SEE THAT EMOTION! WHAT IS THIS SONG ANYWAY?
IT'S, UH, TAYLOR SWIFT.
OH, THE COUNTRY SINGER? IS SHE POPULAR NOW? I'M STILL CATCHING UP ON POP CULTURE. ANYWAY, LET'S SEE THOSE MOVES!


OH NO, THIS IS A PARTICIPATION SPORT. COME ON UP!
WAIT, YOU'RE SERIOUS? DUDE, I CAN BARELY WALK IN THESE BOOTS.
FIRST OF ALL, THAT'S NOT TRUE. SECONDLY, YOU CAN'T LEARN DANCING BY WATCHING.
I THOUGHT THIS WAS JUST GONNA BE YOUR SHOW. YOU KNOW, ME SITTING HERE BEING SUITABLY IMPRESSED WHILE YOU DO YOUR THING.
WHAT, NICK PALMER AFRAID OF TRYING SOMETHING NEW? SOMETHING HE MIGHT NOT IMMEDIATELY DOMINATE?
USING MY COMPETITIVE NATURE AGAINST ME IS A LOW BLOW.
YOUR DANCING EARLIER WAS REALLY BAD! DON'T YOU WANT TO BE BETTER?
UGH. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE INVISIBLE JURY, I'D LIKE TO APOLOGIZE IN ADVANCE FOR THE TRAUMA YOU'RE ABOUT TO WITNESS. WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO SEE MAY CAUSE BLINDNESS, NAUSEA, OR SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION. THE MANAGEMENT IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE CAUSED BY MY DANCING.


HOLY SHIT, HOW ARE YOU DOING THAT THING WITH YOUR HIPS? MINE DON'T MOVE THAT WAY! IS THIS SOME KIND OF GAY SUPERPOWER?
IT'S ABOUT LETTING GO! YOU'RE THINKING TOO MUCH!
THINKING TOO MUCH? I'M JUST TRYING NOT TO LOOK LIKE I'M HAVING A SEIZURE! FUCK, MY ARMS KEEP DOING WHATEVER THE HELL THEY WANT!
JUST FEEL THE MUSIC, NOT THE STEPS.
WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN, DUDE?


OKAY, MAYBE WE SHOULD START WITH SOMETHING SIMPLER. HEY SIRI, PLAY "SLOW DANCING IN A BURNING ROOM."
HERE, THIS IS BASICALLY JUST SWAYING WITH PURPOSE. IT'S GOOD TO KNOW REGARDLESS OF WHO YOUR... PARTNER... ENDS UP BEING.

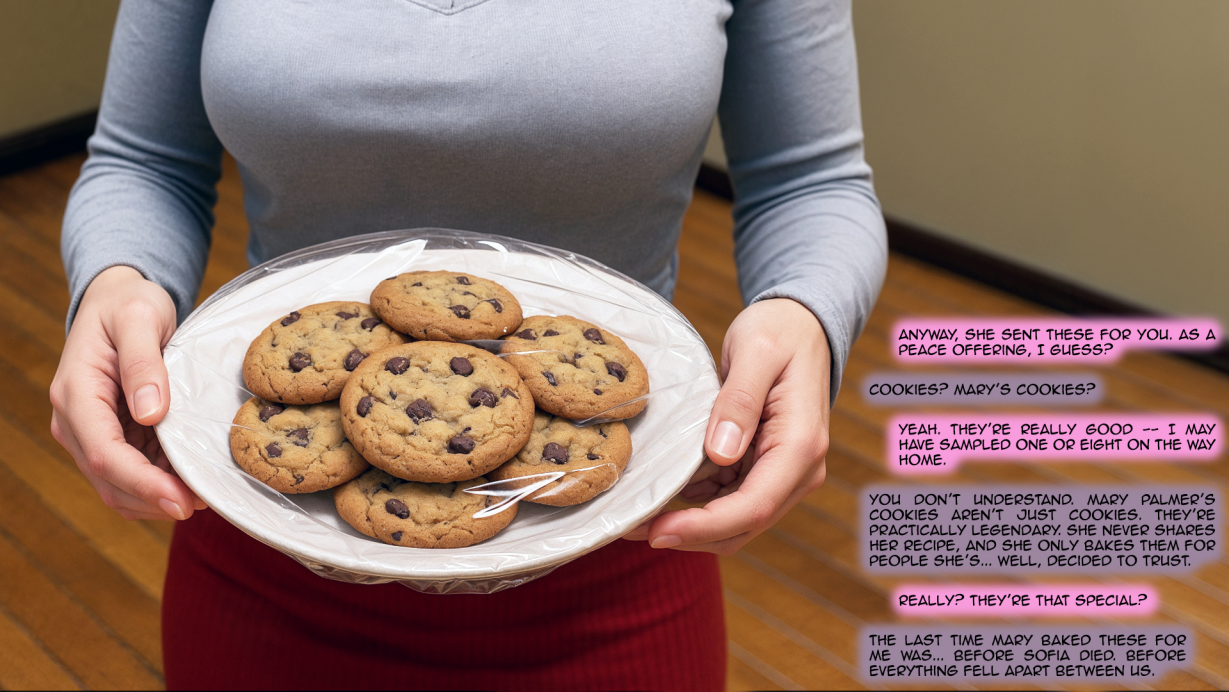

YOU WANT TO SWAY WITH ME?
WELL, I'M TRYING TO TEACH YOU. GOTTA START SOMEWHERE. IF YOU WANT TO GO ON FLAILING, THAT'S FINE.
NO, IT'S GOOD TO LEARN NEW WAYS TO BE IMPRESSIVE AND AMAZING. BUT!


AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, I'M STILL THE QB. YOU'RE THE RECEIVER. I LEAD.
UM, BUT YOU DON'T--
ALRIGHT?
S-SURE. LET'S GIVE IT A TRY...


MOM? I'M BACK!
THERE YOU ARE. I WAS BEGINNING TO WORRY. DID EVERYTHING GO ACCORDING TO PLAN WITH NICK?


YES AND NO. THE MAKEOVER WAS A COMPLETE SUCCESS -- NICK LOOKS ABSOLUTELY AMAZING. WE GOT HIS HAIR DONE WITH EXTENSIONS, PERFECT NAILS, MAKEUP... THE WHOLE NINE YARDS. HE'S DEFINITELY GOING TO MAKE AN IMPRESSION TONIGHT.
EXCELLENT. AND HOW DID HE HANDLE IT ALL?
BETTER THAN I EXPECTED, HONESTLY. THERE WERE A FEW MOMENTS WHEN HE TENSED UP, BUT HE PUSHED THROUGH. HE'S STRONGER THAN HE THINKS.
BUT? I SENSE THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE.


I... MAY HAVE TOLD MARY PALMER OUR PLAN. ALL OF IT. ABOUT SECOND DAWN, XU'S ULTIMATUM, EVERYTHING.
YOU DID WHAT? SANDY, THAT INFORMATION WAS EXTREMELY SENSITIVE. WE AGREED TO HANDLE THIS DELICATELY.
I KNOW! I KNOW. BUT SHE'S NICK'S MOTHER, AND SHE DESERVES TO KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING TO HER CHILD. AND HONESTLY, SHE WAS ABOUT FIVE SECONDS AWAY FROM LOADING HER SHOTGUN AND PAYING LEONARD HUTCHINSON A VERY PERMANENT VISIT.
SHE WAS GOING TO--
CAN YOU BLAME HER? AFTER EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED TO NICK?
NO, I SUPPOSE I CAN'T. I'D HAVE DONE THE SAME FOR SOFIA... OR FOR YOU.


ANYWAY, SHE SENT THESE FOR YOU. AS A PEACE OFFERING, I GUESS?
COOKIES? MARY'S COOKIES?
YEAH. THEY'RE REALLY GOOD -- I MAY HAVE SAMPLED ONE OR EIGHT ON THE WAY HOME.
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. MARY PALMER'S COOKIES AREN'T JUST COOKIES. THEY'RE PRACTICALLY LEGENDARY. SHE NEVER SHARES HER RECIPE, AND SHE ONLY BAKES THEM FOR PEOPLE SHE'S... WELL, DECIDED TO TRUST.
REALLY? THEY'RE THAT SPECIAL?
THE LAST TIME MARY BAKED THESE FOR ME WAS... BEFORE SOFIA DIED. BEFORE EVERYTHING FELL APART BETWEEN US.


SHE SAID SHE'S WILLING TO GIVE OUR PLAN SIX MONTHS. AFTER THAT, IF NICK'S STILL STRUGGLING, WE EXPLORE OTHER OPTIONS. NO MATTER WHAT.
THAT'S FAIR. MORE THAN FAIR, ACTUALLY.
WERE YOU AND MRS. PALMER CLOSE? BEFORE, I MEAN?
WE WERE. MARY, SARAH -- THAT'S ZACH'S MOTHER -- AND I FORMED QUITE THE TRIO. THREE MOTHERS TRYING TO PROTECT OUR SENSITIVE CHILDREN FROM A WORLD THAT WANTED TO CRUSH THEM INTO CONVENTIONAL BOXES.
AT LEAST THAT WAS THE PLAN.
I'LL PUT THESE IN THE KITCHEN AND THEN... THERE'S SOMETHING I NEED TO TELL YOU.
OF COURSE, DEAR.


SO, THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT. I'VE MADE A DECISION ABOUT ST. CHRISTOPHER'S. WHEN I ATTEND THIS FALL, I WANT TO GO AS MYSELF. THE WHOLE TRUTH.
I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN.
I WANT TO BE OPEN ABOUT WHO I AM. THAT I'M A TRANS GIRL. THAT I USED TO BE SCOTT. I'M TIRED OF HIDING PARTS OF MYSELF. I WASN'T TRANS BEFORE ALL THIS HAPPENED -- I KNOW, HARD AS SOME PEOPLE FIND THAT TO BE. BUT THIS IS WHO I AM NOW, AND I THINK "TRANS" IS THE LABEL THAT FITS BEST.
SANDY --
I KNOW PEOPLE CAN BE CRUEL! AND, YES, I HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT IT. A LOT. AND YES, IT'S SCARY. BUT I'M PROUD OF HOW FAR I'VE COME, OF WHO I'M BECOMING. I WANT TO OWN MY STORY, NOT HIDE FROM IT.
I... I WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO SUPPORT ME IN THIS. BECAUSE, YEAH, I KNOW WE'RE IN TEXAS AND SOME DAYS WILL BE REALLY HARD. BUT, EVEN IF YOU CAN'T, THIS IS STILL MY CHOICE.
UM... THANK YOU. THAT'S ALL.


PLEASE, SIT DOWN, SANDY. THIS SOUNDS IMPORTANT.
OKAY...
I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I SUPPORT YOU COMPLETELY IN THIS DECISION. BEING AUTHENTIC TO YOURSELF IS... WELL, IT'S SOMETHING I WISH I HAD ENCOURAGED MORE STRONGLY IN SOFIA.
REALLY? YOU'RE NOT WORRIED ABOUT THE OPTICS OR ANYTHING?
MY DEAR, I THINK WE'RE WELL PAST CONCERNING OURSELVES WITH CONVENTIONAL OPTICS. THOUGH I SHOULD REMIND YOU THAT TEXAS CAN BE... CHALLENGING FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T CONFORM TO TRADITIONAL EXPECTATIONS.
I KNOW. BUT I'D RATHER FACE THOSE CHALLENGES HONESTLY THAN LIVE BEHIND A FACADE.


SO, TELL ME, WHAT ARE YOU MOST LOOKING FORWARD TO AT ST. CHRISTOPHER'S? BEYOND BEING YOUR REAL SELF, OF COURSE.
HONESTLY? THE PALEONTOLOGY PROGRAM. DID I EVER TELL YOU THAT WAS MY DREAM BEFORE... WELL, BEFORE EVERYTHING?
I DON'T BELIEVE YOU DID. DINOSAURS, CORRECT?
YEAH! WHEN I WAS EIGHT, MY DAD TOOK ME TO THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM IN BOSTON. THERE WAS THIS MASSIVE T-REX SKELETON IN THE MAIN HALL, AND I JUST... I COULDN'T MOVE. IT WAS LIKE BEING IN THE PRESENCE OF SOMETHING MAGICAL, YOU KNOW?
I CAN IMAGINE.
AFTER MY PARENTS DIED, COLLEGE JUST SEEMED LIKE THIS IMPOSSIBLE THING. I MEAN, WHO WAS GOING TO PAY FOR IT? I WAS JUST THIS KID STEALING TO GET BY, AND FOR THRILLS. THE ONLY FOSSILS IN MY FUTURE WERE GOING TO BE THE ONES I MIGHT FIND WHILE DIGGING THROUGH DUMPSTERS.
OH, SANDY...
BUT NOW? I GET TO STUDY ACTUAL DINOSAURS! WITH ACTUAL PROFESSORS! IN AN ACTUAL LAB! DO YOU KNOW HOW COOL THAT IS? I'M GOING TO BE HANDLING BONES THAT ARE MILLIONS OF YEARS OLD!
IT'S KIND OF WEIRD, YOU KNOW? IF YOU'D TOLD ME TWO YEARS AGO THAT I'D BE HEADING TO COLLEGE AS A GIRL NAMED SANDY TO STUDY PALEONTOLOGY, I WOULD'VE THOUGHT YOU WERE COMPLETELY INSANE. BUT HERE WE ARE. AND DESPITE EVERYTHING... ALL THE AWFUL PARTS... I'M ACTUALLY EXCITED ABOUT MY FUTURE. FOR MAYBE THE FIRST TIME EVER.

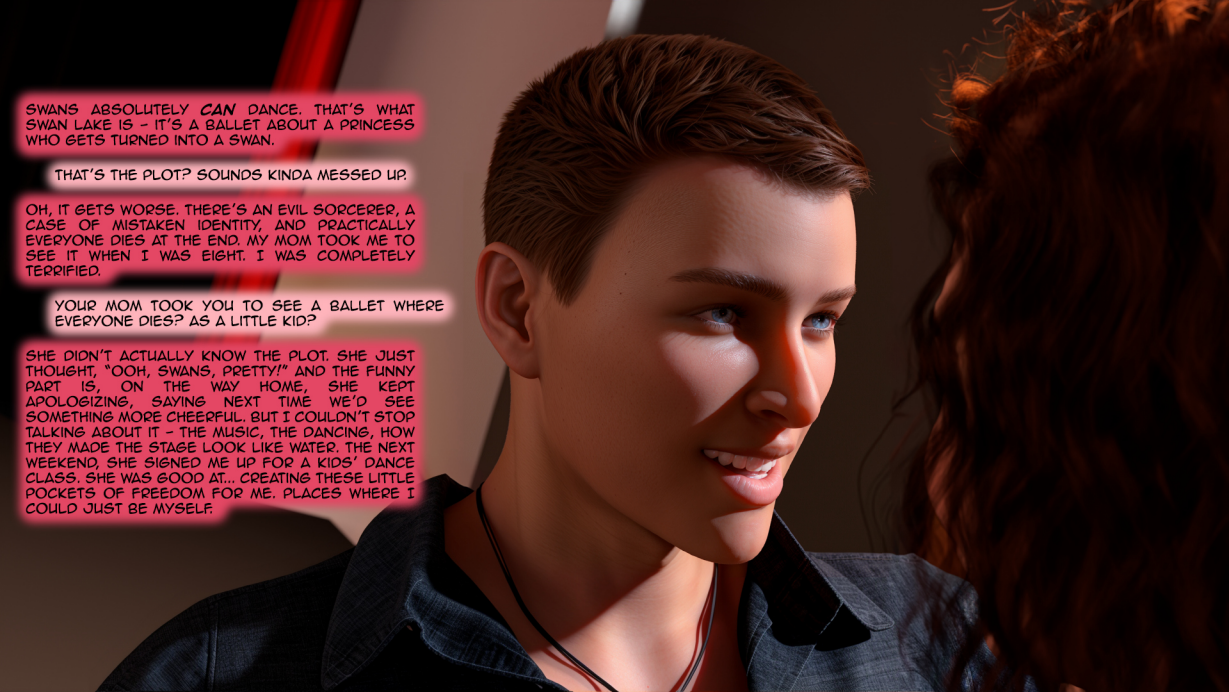

I KNOW IT'S A CLICHÉ, BUT SOMETIMES LIFE REALLY DOES TAKE US ON THE MOST UNEXPECTED JOURNEYS. WHAT MATTERS IS WHERE WE END UP.
IN MY CASE, HOPEFULLY COVERED IN DUST IN SOME DIG SITE, CAREFULLY EXTRACTING THE SKULL OF A PREVIOUSLY UNDISCOVERED SPECIES OF CERATOPSIAN THAT I'LL GET TO NAME SOMETHING RIDICULOUS.
"SANDYSAURUS," PERHAPS?
MORE LIKE "DEATHCLAW REX" OR SOMETHING EQUALLY METAL. YOU KNOW, TO MAINTAIN MY STREET CRED.
I... I NEVER THOUGHT I'D GET THIS SECOND CHANCE. AT LIFE, AT EDUCATION... AT HAVING A FAMILY AGAIN.
I NEVER THOUGHT I'D HAVE A SECOND CHANCE AT BEING A MOTHER, EITHER.


SO IT SEEMS WE'VE BOTH BEEN GRANTED UNEXPECTED GIFTS.
YEAH. I GUESS WE HAVE.


DO YOU REALLY THINK WE'RE DOING THE RIGHT THING? WITH NICK, I MEAN. SOMETIMES I WONDER IF WE'RE JUST... I DON'T KNOW, PLAYING WITH SOMEONE'S LIFE.
THE TRUTH IS, I DON'T KNOW. BUT WHAT I DO KNOW IS THAT SECOND DAWN WON'T SIMPLY LET HIM GO BACK TO BEING NICK. AND AT LEAST THIS WAY, HE HAS SUPPORT. HE HAS PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND.
I HOPE IT'S ENOUGH.
SO DO I. BUT I ALSO BELIEVE THAT AFTER EVERYTHING... WELL, THE UNIVERSE OWES ME ONE. IT'S ABOUT TIME SOMETHING WENT RIGHT.
THE UNIVERSE DOESN'T REALLY WORK THAT WAY.
NO. I SUPPOSE IT DOESN'T.


HEY, CHECK IT OUT -- THREE WHOLE MINUTES AND I HAVEN'T STEPPED ON YOUR TOES ONCE. I'M A NATURAL -- NATURALLY!
I'D SAY IT'S MORE LIKE I'VE GOTTEN BETTER AT MOVING MY FEET OUT OF THE WAY AT THE LAST SECOND, BUT I'LL GIVE YOU CREDIT FOR IMPROVEMENT.


OH PLEASE, YOU'RE JUST JEALOUS OF MY NEWFOUND GRACE AND ELEGANCE. BY THE END OF THE NIGHT, I'LL BE THE ONE TEACHING YOU.
WHOA THERE, BARYSHNIKOV. MAYBE MASTER THE BASICS BEFORE YOU AUDITION FOR SWAN LAKE.
SWANS CAN'T DANCE, DUDE.


SWANS ABSOLUTELY CAN DANCE. THAT'S WHAT SWAN LAKE IS – IT'S A BALLET ABOUT A PRINCESS WHO GETS TURNED INTO A SWAN.
THAT'S THE PLOT? SOUNDS KINDA MESSED UP.
OH, IT GETS WORSE. THERE'S AN EVIL SORCERER, A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY, AND PRACTICALLY EVERYONE DIES AT THE END. MY MOM TOOK ME TO SEE IT WHEN I WAS EIGHT. I WAS COMPLETELY TERRIFIED.
YOUR MOM TOOK YOU TO SEE A BALLET WHERE EVERYONE DIES? AS A LITTLE KID?
SHE DIDN'T ACTUALLY KNOW THE PLOT. SHE JUST THOUGHT, "OOH, SWANS, PRETTY!" AND THE FUNNY PART IS, ON THE WAY HOME, SHE KEPT APOLOGIZING, SAYING NEXT TIME WE'D SEE SOMETHING MORE CHEERFUL. BUT I COULDN'T STOP TALKING ABOUT IT – THE MUSIC, THE DANCING, HOW THEY MADE THE STAGE LOOK LIKE WATER. THE NEXT WEEKEND, SHE SIGNED ME UP FOR A KIDS' DANCE CLASS. SHE WAS GOOD AT... CREATING THESE LITTLE POCKETS OF FREEDOM FOR ME. PLACES WHERE I COULD JUST BE MYSELF.


I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'D DO WITHOUT MY MOM RIGHT NOW.
SHE SEEMS AMAZING.
SHE IS. YOU KNOW, GROWING UP, I ALWAYS THOUGHT SHE WAS KINDA... I DON'T KNOW, WEAK? BECAUSE SHE NEVER STOOD UP TO MY DAD. BUT NOW I'M REALIZING SHE WAS FIGHTING BATTLES I NEVER EVEN KNEW ABOUT. SHE'S THE ONLY ONE WHO LOOKS AT ME AND STILL SEES... ME. NOT SOME PROJECT OR PROBLEM OR WHATEVER.
THAT'S WHAT GOOD MOMS DO.


OKAY, SO THIS IS THE SEVENTH TIME WE'VE LISTENED TO THIS SONG AND THERE'S SOMETHING I KEEP WANTING TO TRY AT THE END.
OH, YEAH? WHAT?
DO YOU TRUST ME?
GENERALLY? YES. WHEN IT COMES TO DANCING? HELL NO.


WELL, TOO BAD! OKAY, HERE IT COMES. WATCH YOUR FEET AND...


...DIP!
WHOA! HEY, THAT WASN'T HALF BAD.
YEAH, BECAUSE IT WAS WHOLE GOOD!
HEY, DON'T DISCOUNT HOW MY DIPPING TECHNIQUE HELPED YOU OUT.
SURE, BUT YOU HAVE TO ADMIT IT'S IMPRESSIVE I STILL HAVE THE UPPER BODY STRENGTH--


--WHAT THE FUCK?


NICK? WHAT'S WRONG? YOU LOOK LIKE--


NO! UH... NOTHING'S WRONG! I'M OKAY. I'M OKAY. I'M OKAY.
BUT YOUR HAND IS SLIPPING, SHOULD I – WHOA! OW.

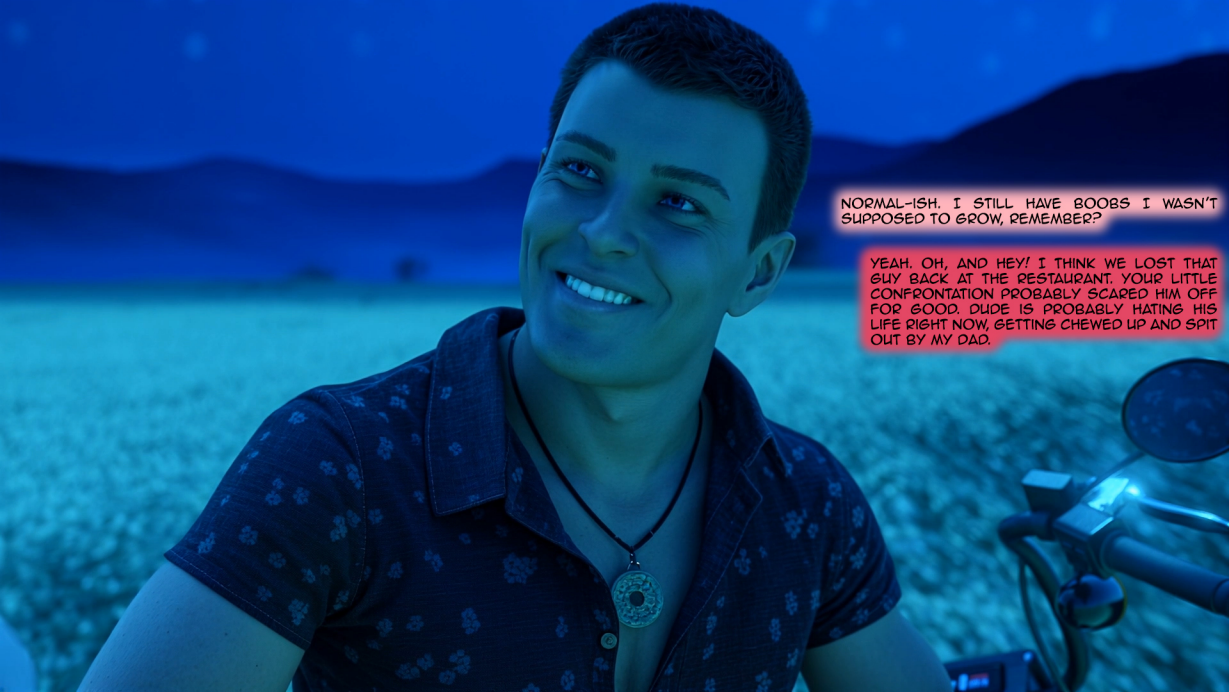

I'M... OKAY.
I'M OKAY.


WELL, I'M NOT. OW!
SORRY, MAN. I... I THOUGHT I SAW A GHOST.
WHAT? A GHOST?
SURE. ANYWAY, I THINK I'M JUST TIRED. MY DAY STARTED WITH A SALON VISIT AND THAT FEELS LIKE FIVE MONTHS AGO.
YEAH, IT'S LATE AND I HAVE FOOTBALL PRACTICE IN THE MORNING. I'LL DRIVE YOU HOME.
HOW ABOUT I DRIVE ME HOME?
JUST PLEASE DON'T KILL US.
NO PROMISES!



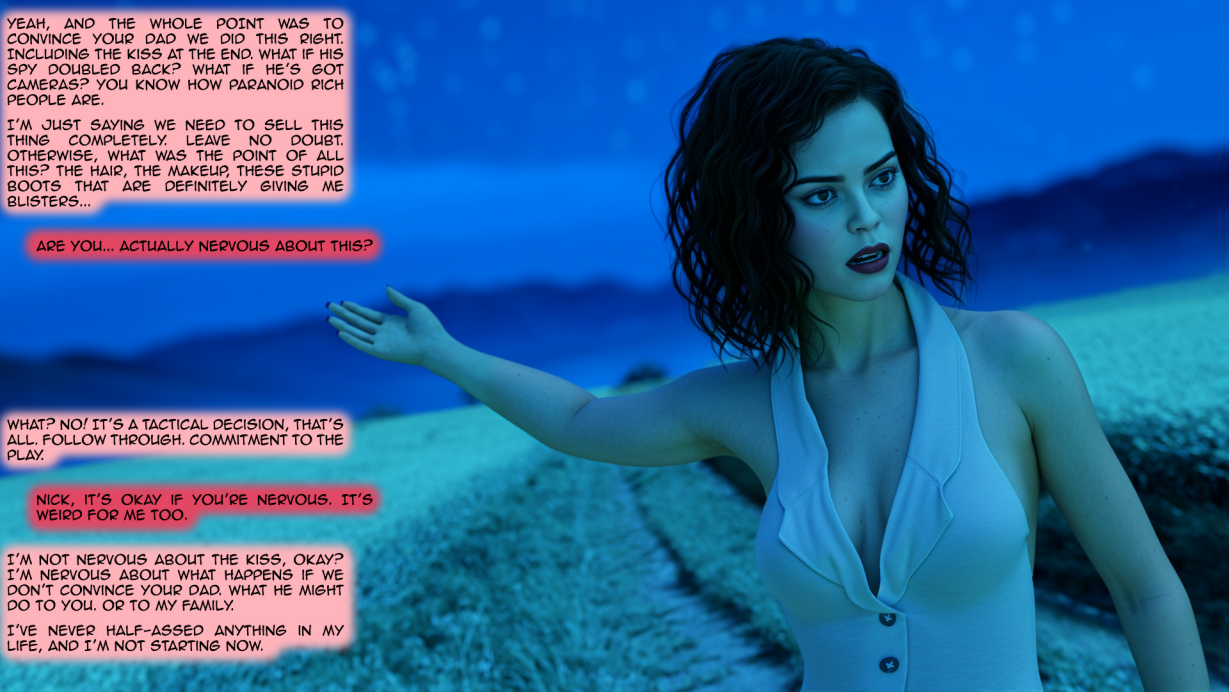

DAMN, I FORGOT HOW MUCH I LOVE RIDING. THANKS FOR LETTING ME DRIVE. I PROMISE THE SCRATCHES ON YOUR BIKE WILL BUFF RIGHT OUT.
WHAT SCRATCHES?
GOTCHA! YOUR PRECIOUS BABY IS FINE. THOUGH I THINK SHE LIKES ME BETTER -- SHE REALLY OPENED UP ON THAT STRAIGHTAWAY.
OH, UM, THAT WASN'T A GAY JOKE.


MAN, I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M SAYING THIS, BUT I ACTUALLY HAD FUN TONIGHT. LIKE, GENUINE FUN. NOT JUST PRETENDING-FOR-YOUR-PSYCHO-DAD'S-SPY FUN.
YEAH, ME TOO. WHO KNEW WE COULD STILL... YOU KNOW, JUST HANG OUT? LIKE NORMAL PEOPLE.


NORMAL-ISH. I STILL HAVE BOOBS I WASN'T SUPPOSED TO GROW, REMEMBER?
YEAH. OH, AND HEY! I THINK WE LOST THAT GUY BACK AT THE RESTAURANT. YOUR LITTLE CONFRONTATION PROBABLY SCARED HIM OFF FOR GOOD. DUDE IS PROBABLY HATING HIS LIFE RIGHT NOW, GETTING CHEWED UP AND SPIT OUT BY MY DAD.


WHICH MEANS... WE PROBABLY DON'T NEED TO DO THE WHOLE GOODNIGHT KISS THING. I MEAN, THERE'S NO ONE WATCHING, SO...
ARE YOU SERIOUS RIGHT NOW?
UH. YES?


WE CAN'T FUMBLE ON FOURTH AND GOAL! WE'VE COME THIS FAR. PLAYED THE WHOLE GAME. WE CAN'T JUST WALK OFF THE FIELD BEFORE THE FINAL WHISTLE. GOD, NO WONDER THE TEAM LOST THREE GAMES LAST SEASON.
HEY! LOOK, I MEAN, TECHNICALLY WE COMPLETED THE MISSION. WE WENT ON A DATE, HAD DINNER, LOOKED LIKE WE WERE ENJOYING OURSELVES--


YEAH, AND THE WHOLE POINT WAS TO CONVINCE YOUR DAD WE DID THIS RIGHT. INCLUDING THE KISS AT THE END. WHAT IF HIS SPY DOUBLED BACK? WHAT IF HE'S GOT CAMERAS? YOU KNOW HOW PARANOID RICH PEOPLE ARE.
I'M JUST SAYING WE NEED TO SELL THIS THING COMPLETELY. LEAVE NO DOUBT. OTHERWISE, WHAT WAS THE POINT OF ALL THIS? THE HAIR, THE MAKEUP, THESE STUPID BOOTS THAT ARE DEFINITELY GIVING ME BLISTERS...
ARE YOU... ACTUALLY NERVOUS ABOUT THIS?
WHAT? NO! IT'S A TACTICAL DECISION, THAT'S ALL. FOLLOW THROUGH. COMMITMENT TO THE PLAY.
NICK, IT'S OKAY IF YOU'RE NERVOUS. IT'S WEIRD FOR ME TOO.
I'M NOT NERVOUS ABOUT THE KISS, OKAY? I'M NERVOUS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS IF WE DON'T CONVINCE YOUR DAD. WHAT HE MIGHT DO TO YOU. OR TO MY FAMILY.
I'VE NEVER HALF-ASSED ANYTHING IN MY LIFE, AND I'M NOT STARTING NOW.


ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT. IF YOU'RE SURE.
DIDN'T I JUST SAY THAT I'M SURE? DAMMIT, LET'S JUST... GET IT OVER WITH. GOD, YOU CAN BE REALLY DIFFICULT SOMETIMES.
SORRY, I GUESS.


SO, UM, SHOULD I JUST...?
GOD, THIS IS SO STUPID. IT'S JUST A KISS, NOT NUCLEAR PHYSICS. I'VE KISSED DOZENS OF GIRLS. IT'S NOT COMPLICATED. PUT YOUR HAND OVER HERE.
DOZENS?


YEAH, DOZENS. MAYBE HUNDREDS. I WAS VERY POPULAR.
HUNDREDS? REALLY?
SHUT UP. THE POINT IS, I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING. PUT YOUR OTHER HAND OVER HERE.


THIS IS WEIRD.
IT'S WEIRD BECAUSE YOU'RE WEIRD.
I'M WEIRD?
YOU HEARD ME.
I'M... SORRY?


DON'T BE. *PLEASE,* DON'T BE. LOOK, YOU'RE PRETTY FUCKING AMAZING, OKAY?
I AM?
YEAH. I MEAN, THE WAY YOU HANDLED YOUR DAD TAKES SERIOUS BALLS. AND YOU'RE TALENTED AS HELL. THAT SINGING THING? JESUS CHRIST, DUDE. AND THE DANCING. AND JUST... THE WAY YOU KEPT GOING WITH YOUR LIFE DESPITE ALL THE SHIT YOUR DAD PUT YOU THROUGH.


AND... YOU NEVER GAVE UP ON ME. EVEN WHEN I WAS THE BIGGEST ASSHOLE ON THE PLANET, YOU STILL SAW SOMETHING... I DUNNO, WORTH SAVING OR WHATEVER. WHEN EVERYONE ELSE JUST SAW QB1, YOU KEPT LOOKING FOR THE KID WHO SHARED HIS LUNCH WITH YOU.
YOU'RE JUST... YOU'RE A GOOD GUY, ZACH HUTCHINSON. LIKE, GENUINELY GOOD. MAYBE THE BEST I'VE EVER MET.
NICK...
OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE...






THERE! MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. AND IF YOUR DAD'S CREEPY LITTLE SPY WAS WATCHING, I'M SURE HE GOT AN EYEFUL.
WELL, UM, THAT WAS--
AMAZING, RIGHT? BEST EVER? I TOLD YOU I'VE KISSED LIKE HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE.
IT WAS CERTAINLY UNIQUE.


3C1998
SEEYA FOR THE NEXT FAKE DATE, MAN. I'LL PICK THE RESTAURANT AND FUN STUFF THIS TIME.
HAVE A GOOD PRACTICE TOMORROW!






OH, GOD, NO!


NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!