HALF SISTERS

by Emory Ahlberg

Episode #5

Nikki and Zach Reconnect


HEY, HEY, HEY, SCOTTY M'BOY!
HOPE YOU'RE HANGING LOOSE AND KEEPING IT CHILL. HOW'S JESSICA? YOU TWO STILL GETTING DOWN AND DIRTY?
I NEVER KNEW HER REALLY WELL BECAUSE WHY EVEN GET TO KNOW A LESBIAN? LIKE, WHAT'S THE POINT BEING FRIENDS WITH HER IF SHE ISN'T INTO ME AND MY MOVES?
ANYWAY, SHE'S HOT, BRO. I JUST HOPE SHE DOESN'T CUT OFF YOUR DICK WHEN SHE FINDS OUT YOU GOT ONE. 😉
TEXAS
LHD-8448


I KNOW IT'S BEEN A MINUTE SINCE I LAST WROTE. BUT THINGS ARE LOOKING UP FOR YOUR PAL NICK. LIVING WITH MY DAD HAS BEEN A TOTAL GODSEND. HE'S HELPING ME GET BACK IN TOUCH WITH THE OLD ALPHA ME, WHICH FEELS FANTASTIC.
DUDE! WE WENT HUNTING! I HAVEN'T GONE SHOOTING SINCE I WAS A KID, BUT DAD THOUGHT GETTING OUT IN THE WILD AND KILLING SOMETHING WOULD BE GOOD. I WASN'T A FAN OF HOW EARLY WE HAD TO GET UP TO GET THERE, BUT HEY, IT WAS WORTH IT. I EVEN GOT A BIG OL' BUCK! CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT? EVEN WITH ALL THE ESTROGEN FLOODING MY VEINS, I CAN STILL KICK ASS!


THE BEST PART IS I CAN TOTALLY BE MYSELF AROUND MY DAD. I DON'T HAVE TO ACT LIKE A GIRL OR DRESS UP IN SKIRTS AND STUFF. I CAN USE MY REGULAR VOICE, TALK ABOUT FOOTBALL, DRINK BEERS, AND JUST HANG OUT.
HEY, YOU TRIED BINDING YOUR BREASTS LIKE ME YET? IT'S GREAT! I MEAN, YOU'LL NEED SOMETHING ON THE LEVEL OF NASA ENGINEERING TO DEAL WITH THE MONSTER IMPLANTS THAT HAG PUT IN YOU--BUT THINK ABOUT IT, BRO.


ALRIGHT, NICHOLAS. SEE HIM UP THERE ON THE RIDGE?
YEAH, I GOT HIM. WOW, HE'S BEAUTI-I MEAN, BIG!
YEAH, IT LOOKS LIKE A PRIZE BUCK. NOW, TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND SLOWLY EXHALE. KEEP YOUR FINGER ON THE TRIGGER, BUT WAIT TO SQUEEZE IT.
WHAT IF I MISS? WE DON'T WANT HIM TO SUFFER.


DO YOU CARE IF THE COW YOUR HAMBURGER CAME FROM SUFFERED? DON'T BE A HYPOCRITE, SON. YOU'RE EITHER A CARNIVORE OR A SALAD EATER.
RIGHT. YEAH. SORRY. I... I GUESS I'M READY.
WHAT DO I ALWAYS TELL YOU? DON'T BE SORRY--
--BE BETTER. I GOT IT.
GOOD. I KNOW YOU LIKE ANIMALS OR WHATEVER, TARZAN, BUT YOU GOTTA REMEMBER--
--IT'S KILL OR BE KILLED. I KNOW, DAD. LET'S DO THIS.


WOW, THIS SCOPE IS AWESOME. IT'S LIKE CALL OF DUTY IN REAL LIFE. OKAY, HE'S LINED UP.
GOOD. NOW--
SHIT, HE'S LOOKIN' RIGHT AT ME. I--
PULL THE TRIGGER!
THE WIND'S STARTING TO--
NICHOLAS! PULL. THE. TRIGGER.


R-RIGHT!


DAMN. I THINK I MISSED.
JE-SUS CHRIST! THAT'S NOT A MISS, THAT'S FUMBLE ON THE ONE-YARD LINE! HOW IN HELL DID YOU NOT HIT HIM AT THIS DISTANCE WITH THAT RIFLE?
THE WIND SHIFTED!
THANK GOD YOUR AIM WITH A FOOTBALL IS BETTER THAN WITH A BULLET.
HE'S RUNNING. SHIT, LOOK AT HIM GO. HE'S BASICALLY FLYING.
GIVE ME THAT GUN.
HERE. BUT HE'LL BE IN MEXICO BY THE TIME WE CATCH UP TO HIM. MAYBE--


YES! GOT THE FUCKER. ONE SHOT, ONE KILL.
WOW! THAT'S, UH, IMPRESSIVE.
HELL, YEAH. SEE, WHEN YOU HAVE AN INSTINCT FOR THE KILL, YOU GOTTA FOLLOW IT. DON'T BACK DOWN, AND DON'T LET UP. YOU USED TO KNOW ALL THIS! REMEMBER HOW YOU WERE ALWAYS PICKED ON WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER? YOU WERE ALL SKINNY AND AWKWARD, BUT I KNEW YOU HAD THE SPIRIT OF A FIGHTER IN YOU. DON'T FORGET IT NOW, EVEN WITH ALL THIS SHIT WE'RE GOING THROUGH.
YEAH, YOU'RE RIGHT. THANKS, DAD.


SHOULD WE GO AND, LIKE, GET HIM?
YOU KIDDING? HE PROBABLY WEIGHS A GOOD 300 POUNDS. I DON'T WANT TO DRAG HIM HERE AND GET MY BACK ALL JACKED UP. YOU KNOW HOW BAD WORKING ON THE RIGS FUCKED UP MY SPINE. LET'S JUST LEAVE HIM FOR THE COYOTES. ANYWAY, VENISON TASTES LIKE ASS.
YEAH, I...GUESS YOU'RE RIGHT.
OF COURSE I'M RIGHT. NOW, LET'S GET SOME BREAKFAST. I'M STARVING. AND DON'T WORRY, NO ONE WILL RECOGNIZE YOU OUT HERE IN THE ASS-END OF TEXAS.


AND, SCOTT MY BRO, IT'S BEEN GOOD JUST TO DO LIKE NORMAL SHIT AT MY DAD'S NEW HOUSE. LIKE, WHEN WE GOT BACK FROM HUNTING, WE TOSSED THE FOOTBALL AROUND. I BET THAT DOESN'T SOUND LIKE MUCH, BUT IT FELT LIKE A FUCKING MIRACLE, YOU KNOW? LIKE I WAS ME AGAIN. KINDA.


DAD, GO LONG.
I'M TOO OLD FOR THAT SHIT!
COME ON, GIVE ME SOMETHING TO AIM FOR. I HAVE TO KEEP THE CANNON IN SHAPE.
ALRIGHT, BUT IF I HURT MYSELF YOU'RE GONNA FEEL IT.
HUT, HUT! HIKE!


LOOK AT HIM GO! STILL GOT IT, HUH?
LOOK OUT, WORLD! THE OLD MAN STILL HAS SOME GAS IN THE TANK. NOW THROW ME THE BALL!
COMING YOUR WAY.


AARGH!

OH, PERFECT SPIRAL!

GREAT TECHNIQUE...




TOO BAD IT WAS THROWN WITH ALL THE POWER OF A TODDLER. THAT PASS FELL SHORT BY AT LEAST TWENTY YARDS! SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DON'T WORK OUT?
BUT I HAVE BEEN WORKING OUT. YOU'VE SEEN ME!
OBVIOUSLY NOT ENOUGH. WE HAVE TO *TRIPLE* OUR EFFORTS. I MEAN, WE'RE FIGHTING A WAR AGAINST BIOLOGY HERE, NICHOLAS.


AND BY THE LOOKS OF THINGS, WE'RE NOT ONLY NOT WINNING, WE'RE GETTING AN ASS WHOOPING. THESE HORMONES HAVE UNDONE ALL THE YEARS AND YEARS OF PHYSICAL CONDITIONING WE DID. I LOOK AT YOU AND IT'S LIKE IT WAS ALL FOR NOTHING.
C'MON. DON'T SAY THAT.
I JUST FUCKING HATE WHAT THOSE BASTARDS DID TO YOU.


DAD, I KNOW. I'M TRYING MY BEST. BUT I'M STILL ME, RIGHT? DEEP DOWN, NOTHING HAS REALLY CHANGED.
YOU SURE ABOUT THAT?
HUH? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
I MEAN, ARE YOU STILL THE SAME NICHOLAS AS BEFORE THIS SHIT HAPPENED? ARE YOU STILL A BADASS READY TO TAKE ON ANY MAN AND NEVER BACK DOWN? WOULD YOU STILL TEAR A GUY'S HEAD OFF IF IT MEANT WINNING A CHAMPIONSHIP RING?
YOU FUCKING KNOW IT.
GOOD. BECAUSE I'VE BEEN DOING RESEARCH ON THE INTERNET, AND I'VE GOT IDEAS TO COUNTERACT THE HORMONES YOU HAVE TO TAKE. I BELIEVE WE CAN GET YOU BACK ON THE FIELD. BUT YOU'VE GOT TO BE WILLING TO FIGHT FOR IT. OKAY?
YOU GOT IT! I WON'T LET YOU DOWN.
HELL YEAH! LET'S GET TO WORK.


I CAN'T EAT ANOTHER BITE.
WHAT? YOU BARELY FINISHED HALF OF THE FIRST STEAK. YOU NEED TO EAT AT LEAST SIXTEEN MORE OUNCES OF RIBEYE. WE NEED TO PUT SOME MEAT ON THOSE BONES, AND THE WEIGHTLIFTING FORUMS ALL SAY THAT RED MEAT BOOSTS TESTOSTERONE LEVELS.
AND WHAT THE HELL ARE THESE ROUND THINGS YOU FRIED UP?
ROCKY MOUNTAIN OYSTERS. BULL TESTICLES.
UGH. YOU WANT ME TO EAT BULL TESTICLES?
YOU KNOW HOW MANY COWS A BULL CAN FUCK IN A YEAR?
WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING?
TESTOSTERONE! IT'S *ALL* ABOUT TESTOSTERONE. THESE LITTLE DELICACIES WILL GET YOU BACK IN SHAPE AND MAKE SURE THE ESTROGEN IS KEPT IN CHECK.
WELL, IF IT'LL HELP ME GET BACK ON THE GRIDIRON, I GUESS I DON'T HAVE A CHOICE.


OF COURSE YOU HAVE A CHOICE. YOU CAN EITHER MAN THE FUCK UP OR LET HUTCHINSON TURN YOU INTO HIS QUEER SON'S GIRLFRIEND. NOW, WHAT'S IT GONNA BE?
UGH. GIVE ME THE BULL BALLS. WAIT, THERE'S AIN'T ANY, LIKE, COW JIZZ IN THESE, RIGHT?
UH, NOT TO MY KNOWLEDGE. BUT I'LL CHECK MY PHONE TO BE SURE -- OH, SHIT! HOW'D IT GET SO LATE? HUTCHINSON AND SON ARE GONNA BE HERE IN TWO HOURS. BASTARDS!
GOD DAMN. DID YOU REALLY HAVE TO LET THEM COME FOR DINNER?
NICK, IT'S JUST ONE NIGHT. PLAY ALONG, AND I PROMISE WE'LL PUT A STOP TO ALL THIS NONSENSE SOON. ANYWAY, THAT'S WHY I'M FEEDING YOU NOW. HUTCHINSON EXPECTS YOU TO BE EATING CARROTS AND HUMMUS OR SOME OTHER BULLSHIT. SO GO INSIDE, TAKE A SHOWER AND MAKE YOURSELF LOOK... YOU KNOW... AND... UH...
I HAVE TO WEAR THE DRESS HE SENT OVER?
JUST FOR TONIGHT.
BUT--
GO ON. I ALREADY KNOW FROM YOUR MOTHER THAT MAKEUP TAKES FOREVER.
FUCK. FUCK. FUCK!


ANYWAY, SCOTTY THE BODY, I GOTTA GO. HUTCH AND GAY ZACH ARE ON THEIR WAY OVER HERE. MAN, I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M ABOUT TO HAVE DINNER WITH THE GUY WHO RUINED MY LIFE.
BUT THE BIG NEWS IS I THINK MY DAD'S CARNIVORE-CURE TO BEATING THESE HORMONES IS GONNA WORK! I'M, LIKE, 95% SURE THESE DUMB BITCH TITS ARE SHRINKING AND NOTHING ELSE HIS GROWING. SO MAYBE THERE'S HOPE AFTER ALL.
ANYWAY, STAY COOL, KEEP FUCKING YOUR GIRL OR SCISSORING OR WHATEVER THE LEZZIES DO, AND DON'T FORGET WHO YOU ARE. THAT'S THE ONLY WAY WE CAN BEAT THESE BASTARDS.
TAKE IT EASY,
NICK 🤘


UGH. I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME. THE LAST TIME I HAD TO GO TO DINNER WITH DAD AND MRS. FERRIS, IT TOOK FOREVER TO GET READY, AND THAT WAS WITH MOM HELPING. OKAY, WELL, I'D BETTER HUSTLE. DON'T WANT TO BE LATE FOR A HUMILIATING NIGHT WITH GAY ZACH AND HIS BASTARD FATHER.
OKAY. TIME TO RELEASE THE KRAKEN...


OW. ARE THEY SUPPOSED TO BE RED LIKE THAT? MEH. I'M SURE IT'S OKAY. AT LEAST THEY'RE STILL PRETTY SMALL COMPARED TO, SAY, LAUREN'S OR--GOD FORBID--SCOTT'S *MONSTER MELONS.*
OH, WHO THE FUCK AM I KIDDING? SMALL OR NOT, THESE ARE TITS. I DON'T CARE HOW LONG I'VE HAD THEM, I'LL NEVER GET USED TO THIS--AND I DON'T WANT TO!

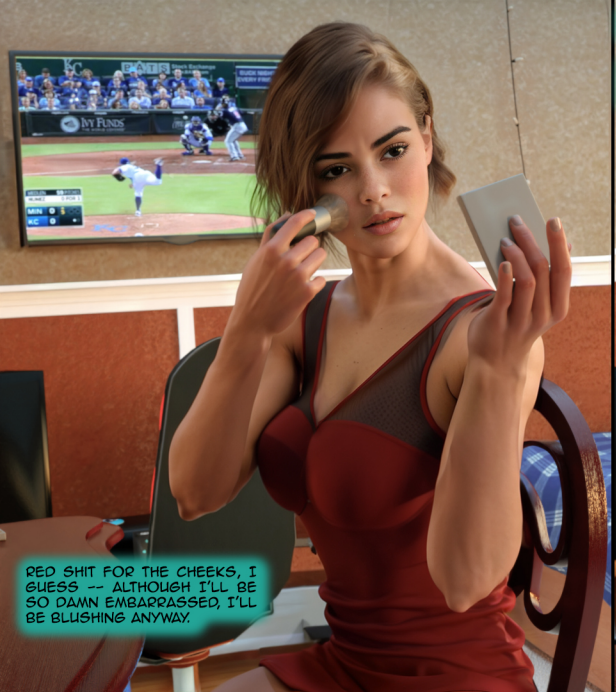

AFTER THE WAR
I'M NOT SURE I CAN DO THIS. WHEN I STEPPED OFF THAT DUMB JET, AND HE SAW WHAT THEY'D DONE... THE LOOK IN DAD'S EYES WAS DEVASTATING. IT WAS THE SAME WITH THE DINNER WITH SCOTT AND MRS. FERRIS. EVERY TIME HE SEES ME DRESSED LIKE A CHICK, HIS RESPECT FOR ME MELTS AWAY JUST A BIT MORE. AND HOW CAN I BLAME HIM? I'M A FREAK. I'VE BUILT BACK SOME CRED WITH HIM THESE LAST COUPLE WEEKS, BUT THAT'LL ALL GO AWAY THE SECOND HE SEES ME IN THAT FUCKING DRESS HUTCHINSON SENT OVER. GOD. WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?
UGH. STOP WHINING LIKE A BITCH, NICK, THAT'S WHAT! HUTCHINSON AND THAT NO-TALENT PUNK ZACH ARE COMING FOR DINNER. THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT. IT SUCKS, BUT DAD IS ONLY DOING WHAT HE HAS TO DO TO KEEP THAT PIECE OF SHIT SATISFIED SO HE WON'T FUCK OVER OUR FAMILY EVEN MORE. SO, MAN UP, GET YOUR HEAD IN THE GAME, AND FIGHT THROUGH THIS.


OKAY, HERE'S THE PLAY: TAKE A SHOWER, PUT ON THE DRESS, DO THE MAKEUP (MOM SAID YOU HAVE TO PUT ON THE DRESS FIRST SO IT WON'T GET RUINED), AND THEN GRIT YOUR TEETH AND GET THROUGH THE NIGHT. HOW HARD CAN IT BE?
THERE HAVE BEEN PLENTY OF NIGHTS WHEN I HAD TO SUIT UP AND FACE DOWN THE TOUGHEST LINEBACKERS IN THE NCAA, ALL THE WHILE KNOWING MY FRONT LINE WAS READY TO COLLAPSE AT ANY SECOND. THIS'LL BE A CAKEWALK BY COMPARISON. AT LEAST I CAN'T BREAK MY NECK LIKE I COULD ON THE FIELD--IT'S JUST A STUPID DINNER! NO PROBLEMO.


I'M AN ATHLETE, A FIGHTER, A WARRIOR. I AM NOT SCARED OF A STUPID DRESS. IT'LL JUST BE LIKE WHEN THE TEAM DRESSED UP AS CHEERLEADERS FOR THE POWDERPUFF GAME.
BUT DAMN IT LOOKS TIGHT! AND... SHIT! THIS IS THE WRONG KIND OF BRA. I NEED THE, UH, STRAPLESS KIND. LAUREN SAID SHE'D THROW SOME OF THOSE IN... WHERE'D I PUT THEM?
Jed Lowrie 4 | 58
HOUSTON


I GUESS I SHOULD BE THANKFUL MOM LEFT THIS MAKEUP TABLE HERE AT THE OLD HOUSE. OTHERWISE, I'D HAVE TO TRY AND DO THIS IN THE BATHROOM MIRROR, AND THAT'S A RECIPE FOR DISASTER.
HM. DAD DIDN'T BUY ME NEARLY AS MUCH MAKEUP AS MOM HAD--BUT I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT 99% OF THAT SHIT WAS FOR ANYWAY.


LIP PAINT...
EYELASH GUNK...
EYEBROW BOLDER...


RED SHIT FOR THE CHEEKS, I GUESS -- ALTHOUGH I'LL BE SO DAMN EMBARRASSED, I'LL BE BLUSHING ANYWAY.


...AND BOOM GOES THE DYNAMITE.
GOD, WHY DO I HAVE TO BE SO GOOD AT EVERYTHING?


THEY'RE HERE! OKAY. GAME TIME, BITCHES. I'M GEARED UP AND READY. I CAN DO THIS. I WON'T LET THEM SEE ME SWEAT. THEY CAN'T BREAK ME. EVEN WITH TITS, I'M THE TOUGHEST GUY IN THE ROOM.


REMEMBER, PLAY THE GAME. SHOW NO WEAKNESS, NO FEAR. YOU CAN DO THIS, NICK. JUST DON'T BE YOURSELF.


AH, HOWARD, THANK YOU FOR THE INVITATION TO DINNER!
NO PROBLEM, LEONARD. YOUR HOME IS MY HOME.
YES, QUITE LITERALLY, IF YOUR COMPANY STILL CAN'T FIND OIL ON THE LAND WE SOLD YOU. STILL, I'M PLEASED YOU DIDN'T MAKE THIS DIFFICULT WITH MACHO NONSENSE. ZACH, NOW DON'T BE RUDE. GREET OUR HOST.


HI, MR. PALMER.
HELLO, ZACH.
ISN'T THIS SO NICE AND CIVIL? AREN'T WE JUST ONE BIG, HAPPY FAMILY? NOW, WHERE IS YOUR LOVELY DAUGHTER TO COMPLETE THE PICTURE?
AREA


HERE--*COUGH*--
HERE I AM, UM, MR. HUTCHINSON.
WELL, WELL, WELL! IF IT ISN'T NICHOLAS.
IT'S NIKKI NOW. REMEMBER?


AH! OF COURSE, OF COURSE. HOW COULD I FORGET? MY APOLOGIES.
OH, GOD! NICHOLAS, Y-YOU LOOK--
UTTERLY BEAUTIFUL, HOWARD! I'M PLEASED THOSE HORMONES WE'VE BEEN HAVING DELIVERED ARE STILL WORKING THEIR WONDERS. THEY'RE EXPENSIVE AS HELL, STRAIGHT FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT SECOND DAWN. BUT CLEARLY, THAT'S MONEY WELL SPENT! ZACH, DOESN'T YOUR GIRLFRIEND LOOK RAVISHING?
YEAH, UM, REALLY GOOD.
"REALLY GOOD?" THAT HARDLY DOES HER JUSTICE. AND THAT DRESS! PHEW. ZACH PICKED IT OUT, YOU KNOW. YOU REALLY KNOW HOW TO DRESS YOUR GIRL, SON. NOW YOU JUST NEED TO WORK ON YOUR COMPLIMENTS.


HOWARD, DO YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN NOW ABOUT YOUR DAUGHTER'S UNMISTAKABLE "FEMININE AURA?" THIS REALLY IS THE BEST FOR ALL INVOLVED. DON'T YOU AGREE?
I, UH...
HO, HO, HO! SHE STILL NEEDS A BIT OF PRACTICE WITH THOSE HEELS, THOUGH. YOU'RE STILL A BIT WOBBLY, NIKKI.
I DIDN'T HAVE THE BEST COACH. SHE WAS KIND OF A BITCH, TO BE HONEST.
THAT'S VERY DISAPPOINTING CONSIDERING HOW MUCH I PAID! NO MATTER, MY DEAR. YOU'LL HAVE THE REST OF YOUR LIFE TO PRACTICE. JUST DON'T--


--FALL!
SHIT! DAD, I'M GONNA BREAK MY NECK!


GOT YA! YOU OKAY?
I... UM...
GREAT REFLEXES, ZACH! WELL NOW! THAT WAS QUITE THE APPETIZER, HOWARD. WHAT'S THE MAIN COURSE?
I NEED A BOURBON.


LOOKS LIKE I'M STILL YOUR GO-TO RECEIVER, NICK.


UM, HI ZACH.
HELLO, NICK.
COULD YOU DO ME A FAVOR?
PROBABLY. WHAT'S UP?


PUT ME DOWN BEFORE I PUT *YOU* DOWN.
YEAH, I REMEMBER A TIME WHEN THAT WOULD'VE BEEN INTIMIDATING...
NOW, DAMN YOU. OR I'LL KNEE YOU IN THE BALLS SO HARD YOU'LL BE THE NEXT ONE GROWING TITS.
THAT'S, UM, NOT HOW--
PUT. ME. ***DOWN!***
OKAY! JEEZ, STOP WRIGGLING.


THAT'S FINE. I DIDN'T EXPECT A THANK YOU ANYWAY. I DON'T THINK YOU'VE EVER THANKED ANYONE IN YOUR WHOLE LIFE.
I THANKED *YOUR MOM* LAST NIGHT.
MOM JOKES? SERIOUSLY? LOOK, I'M SORRY IF I EMBARRASSED YOU. BUT WHEN I HEARD YOU SHRIEK, MY INSTINCTS KICKED IN.
FUCK YOU, I *DIDN'T* SHRIEK.
UH HUH. THAT WAS JUST A CAR ALARM GOING OFF EXACTLY WHEN YOU TRIPPED.
FORGET IT! I JUST WANT TO GET THIS DINNER OVER WITH SO I CAN TAKE THIS GUNK OFF MY FACE AND GO BACK TO MY REAL CLOTHES.
YOU AND ME BOTH. BUT WHATEVER HAPPENS TONIGHT, I'M SORRY TO SAY THIS WON'T BE OUR LAST DINNER TOGETHER. DID YOUR FRIEND SANDY PASS ON MY MESSAGE?


SCOTT DID, YEAH. HE ALSO SAID YOU WERE A REAL PIECE OF SHIT TO HIM AND JESSICA AKIN.
I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO THEM. IT WAS CRAIG AND RON. ANYWAY, C'MON, NICK. WE BOTH KNOW YOU DON'T HAVE A LEG TO STAND ON THERE. YOU REMEMBER WHAT THE GUYS WERE LIKE. HELL, YOU WERE THE WORST OF THEM. DON'T YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU AND SOME LINEMEN LOCKED ME IN THE EQUIPMENT CLOSET?
THAT WAS A JOKE AND YOU KNOW IT! WE WERE ALL DRUNK. IT WAS A STUPID PRANK.
YEAH, IT WAS A PRANK UNTIL YOU ALL LEFT. I WAS IN THERE UNTIL THE NEXT MORNING.
I... I WAS PROTECTING YOU, MAN. THE OTHER GUYS WANTED TO BEAT YOUR ASS WHEN THEY FOUND THAT GAY DATING PROFILE OF YOURS. I TALKED THEM DOWN. AND IT WASN'T EASY! HELL, EVEN YOUR OWN DAD DOESN'T WANT YOU TO BE QUEER.
WOW. YOU KNOW, MOST OF THE TIME I FEEL PRETTY BAD FOR YOU. RIGHT NOW, THOUGH, I KIND OF HOPE YOU'RE STUCK IN HEELS FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE. C'MON, LET'S GET TO THE TABLE BEFORE THEY COME LOOKING FOR US.
AREA


HEY, SCOTT THE THOT.
FIRST OF ALL, YOU OKAY? BECAUSE USUALLY YOU REPLY REAL FAST BUT I HAVEN'T HEARD BACK FROM YOU. DID I PISS YOU OFF AGAIN AND MISS IT? I WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED, MAN.
THE DINNER WAS A FUCKING DISASTER, AND IT'S ALL MY FAULT.


AT FIRST, EVERYTHING WAS GOING ALRIGHT. OR, AT LEAST, AS ALRIGHT AS IT COULD BE WITH ME IN A DRESS AND MAKEUP.
I WAS PLAYING THE GAME, ZONING OUT AND LETTING EVERYTHING WASH OVER ME. THAT'S A SKILL I PICKED UP A LONG TIME AGO--THE ABILITY TO DISAPPEAR INTO MYSELF. COMES IN HANDY AS A QB. ANYWAY, I NOTICED MY DAD WAS DRINKING BOURBON. AND I SHOULD'VE KEPT MY BIG MOUTH SHUT, BUT LIKE USUAL, I COULDN'T HELP MYSELF. THIS WAS MISTAKE #1.
UM, DAD--I MEAN--DADDY? ISN'T THAT THE EXPENSIVE BOURBON WE WERE SUPPOSED TO SHARE AFTER MY FIRST NFL GAME?
I GUESS SO, YEAH.
WELL, WHY ARE YOU--
FUCK. DON'T GET ALL EMOTIONAL, OKAY? IT WAS THE ONLY BOURBON IN THE HOUSE. YOUR MOTHER MADE ME FLUSH IT ALL, REMEMBER? JEEZ, THE SHIT I DID TO KEEP THAT DAMN WOMAN HAPPY! AND STILL, SHE HAS THE BALLS TO KICK ME OUT OF MY OWN HOUSE? UNBELIEVABLE.


YEAH, IT'S NOT LIKE YOU DID ANYTHING CRAZY OR ILLEGAL TO PISS HER OFF. RIGHT?
NOW, NOW, ZACH. I KNOW YOU LIKE TO TEASE, BUT WE'RE GUESTS IN HOWARD'S HOUSE. I TAKE HOSPITALITY VERY SERIOUSLY, AND SO SHOULD YOU. BESIDES, NOTHING ILLEGAL HAPPENED. ALL THE PAPERWORK FOR YOUR GIRLFRIEND'S 'TREATMENT' WAS ABOVE-BOARD. WELL, ALL BUT FOR THE SMALL MATTER OF HER ACTUALLY CONSENTING. BUT, AFTER SEEING THE RESULTS, I THINK WE CAN ALL AGREE THAT I WAS RIGHT TO BYPASS THAT TECHNICALITY.
#1


HOWARD, I KNOW IT'S PAINFUL TO ADMIT WHEN YOU'RE WRONG, BUT I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT FOR YOUR DAUGHTER TO HEAR THE TRUTH. DON'T YOU THINK SHE'S BETTER OFF AS A GIRL?
THAT BASTARD WAS BAITING MY DAD. HE WANTED TO START A FIGHT BY HUMILIATING ME EVEN MORE THAN HE ALREADY HAD. I TELL YA, SCOTT, IT TOOK EVERYTHING IN ME NOT TO LEAP ACROSS THE DINING ROOM TABLE WITH MY STEAK KNIFE. GOD, THAT WOULD'VE BEEN SATISFYING.


SHE SURE MAKES FOR A BETTER GIRL THAN I EVER THOUGHT MY SON WOULD, I'LL SAY THAT.
MY POOR DAD WAS HAVING A TOUGH TIME. HE WAS DRINKING THAT BOURBON LIKE IT WAS WATER. MY MOM ALWAYS THOUGHT HE DRANK TOO MUCH, BUT HE WAS JUST TRYING TO GET BY, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. SHE MADE HIM QUIT BOOZE AFTER WE MOVED OUT OF THE OLD HOUSE, ACTING LIKE HE WAS A CRAZY ALCOHOLIC OR SOMETHING. BUT THIS IS TEXAS, YOU KNOW? EVERYBODY DRINKS. IT'S NOT A BIG DEAL UNLESS YOU MAKE IT ONE. WHICH I DID, BY STARING. MISTAKE #2.


MISTAKE #3 HAPPENED BECAUSE I LOST FOCUS. I HADN'T TOUCHED THE DUMB SALAD THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE MY DINNER BECAUSE I WAS STILL STUFFED WITH STEAK. HONESTLY, IT'S A MIRACLE I EVEN FIT INTO THAT STUPID DRESS. ANYWAY, EVERYBODY ELSE WAS FINISHED, AND THAT'S WHEN HUTCHINSON SPOKE UP, AND I JUST... I DON'T KNOW WHY, SCOTT, BUT IT WAS JUST THE LAST FUCKING STRAW.
NIKKI, COULD YOU CLEAR AND WASH THE PLATES? YOUR FATHER, ZACH, AND I HAVE BUSINESS TO DISCUSS. DON'T WORRY, IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU THIS TIME. JUST OIL FIELDS, DRILLING CONTRACTS, AND OTHER DULL STUFF YOU DON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT.
WASH THE PLATES? WHAT? DON'T BOSS ME AROUND YOU UGLY, PERVERTED PIECE OF DOGSHIT STUCK ON THE BOTTOM--

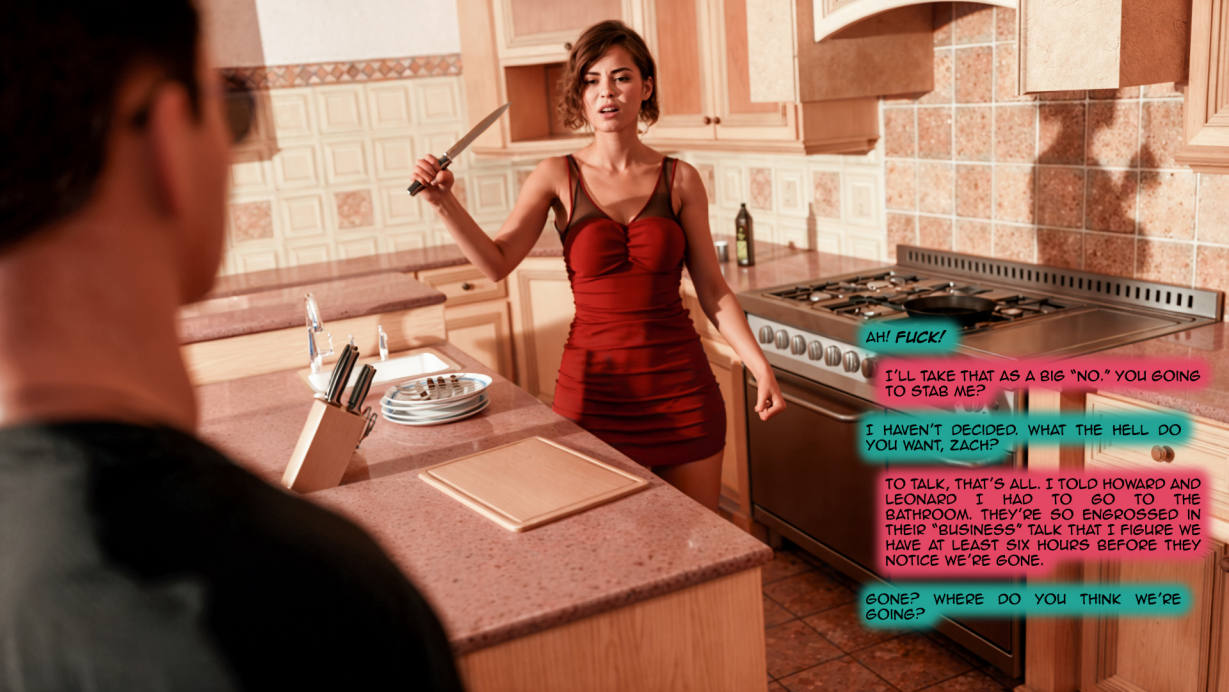

I MESSED UP. DAD SLAMMED HIS FIST ON THE TABLE AND USED THE TONE HE USED WITH MY MOM WHEN THEY WERE IN A FIGHT.
NIKKI! HOW MANY TIMES DO YOU NEED TO HEAR THIS? MR. HUTCHINSON'S WORD IS AS GOOD AS MY OWN. DO AS HE FUCKING SAYS. NOW.
CA. BEAUJOLAIS


R-RIGHT. SORRY, DADDY.
AW, DON'T BE TOO HARSH HOWARD. SHE'S STILL ACCLIMATING TO HER NEW ROLE. THAT'S WHY WE NEED TO GET HER AND ZACH ON MORE DATES! HE'S A NATURAL LEADER, AS SHE'LL SOON DISCOVER. BUT, NIKKI, I WARN YOU -- ZACH WON'T BE CHOOSING THE OUTFIT AGAIN. YOU NEED TO DEVELOP YOUR OWN SENSE OF STYLE. NOW, OFF YOU GO.


YOU IDIOT. YOU LET THEM WIN! THE WHOLE POINT WAS TO STAY COOL, CALM, AND COLLECTED -- AND YOU FUCKED THE WHOLE THING UP. YOU COULDN'T KEEP YOUR EMOTIONS IN CHECK FOR ONE DAMN NIGHT, COULD YOU? FUCKING ***LOSER***.


IS IT ANY WONDER DAD'S DRINKING AGAIN? YOU CAN'T HANDLE THIS, AND HE KNOWS IT! YOU'LL CAVE, DAD WILL END UP IN PRISON, AND HUTCHINSON WILL GOBBLE UP HIS COMPANY OR WHATEVER HE'S TRYING TO DO. MOM WILL HAVE NO MONEY, AND YOU'LL BE LEFT WITH A RUINED BODY AND NO WAY BACK TO PEAK PHYSICAL CONDITION. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK!


NO. NO! DON'T CRY. YOU'RE NOT SOME... SOME BITCH NO MATTER HOW MUCH OF THAT POISON THEY PUMP INTO YOUR VEINS. YOU'RE A MAN. YOU'RE IN CONTROL OF YOUR MIND, YOUR BODY, AND YOUR FEELINGS. YOU HAVE TOTAL AND COMPLETE--
NICK? ARE YOU OKAY?


AH! FUCK!
I'LL TAKE THAT AS A BIG "NO." YOU GOING TO STAB ME?
I HAVEN'T DECIDED. WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT, ZACH?
TO TALK, THAT'S ALL. I TOLD HOWARD AND LEONARD I HAD TO GO TO THE BATHROOM. THEY'RE SO ENGROSSED IN THEIR "BUSINESS" TALK THAT I FIGURE WE HAVE AT LEAST SIX HOURS BEFORE THEY NOTICE WE'RE GONE.
GONE? WHERE DO YOU THINK WE'RE GOING?


WE'RE MISSING A GORGEOUS SUNSET. I THOUGHT WE COULD GET OUT OF THE HOUSE AND GO FOR A WALK. JUST YOU AND ME. WE HAVEN'T REALLY HAD A CHANCE TO TALK SINCE... WELL, SINCE EVERYTHING.
I DON'T WANT TO GO ANYWHERE WITH YOU -- ESPECIALLY NOT ALONE, AND VERY ESPECIALLY NOT IN THIS DRESS.
NICK, DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND YET? I'M NOT INTO GIRLS.
YEAH, AND I AIN'T A GIRL!


R-RIGHT. LOOK, YOU SAID YOU HAD A BAD COACH WHEN THEY TAUGHT YOU HOW TO WALK IN HEELS. WELL, TAKE A WALK WITH ME, AND I'LL COACH YOU. I HAVE A FANTASTIC STRUT, BELIEVE IT OR NOT.
THIS IS MY SHOCKED FACE.
SO, YOU'LL WALK WITH ME?
I'M SUPPOSED TO BE NICE TO YOU, RIGHT? PRETEND YOU'RE MY... SIGNIFICANT OTHER OR WHATEVER? SO, YEAH, I GUESS I WILL. BUT IF YOU TRY TO KISS ME? BRO, I SWEAR TO GOD THEY WON'T FIND YOUR BODY.
RIGHT BACK AT YOU.
PFFT. DON'T LIE. IF I KISSED YOU, YOU'D INSTANTLY CREAM YOUR JEANS.
ARE YOU, UM, BRINGING THE KITCHEN KNIFE?
YOU THINK I'M DUMB? I'VE WATCHED UNSOLVED MYSTERIES. THIS IS HOW THEY ALL START: ATTRACTIVE PERSON IN A DRESS GOES SOMEWHERE ALONE WITH A PERV AND VANISHES. NO THANKS! NOW, C'MON, IF WE'RE GONNA DO THIS, LET'S DO THIS.


WHAT ARE WE DOING OUT HERE?
I TOLD YOU. IT'S A BEAUTIFUL EVENING AND I'M GONNA HELP YOU LEARN TO STRUT.
UGH. BUT WHY? SO YOUR DAD CAN FORCE US TO GO TO A FANCY PARTY AND YOU CAN SHOW ME OFF LIKE SOME BIMBO?


I HATE PARTIES. AT LEAST THE KIND MY FATHER THROWS. ALSO, UM, IF YOU DON'T WANT TO ATTRACT ATTENTION, YOU MIGHT WANT TO PUT THAT BIG-ASS KNIFE AWAY.
HELL NO. AFTER THE WHOLE KIDNAPPING THING, I DON'T WANT TO GO ANYWHERE WITHOUT A WEAPON. ESPECIALLY NOT WITH THE ASSHOLE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WHOLE THING!
NICK, I CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT YOU WENT THOUGH. I'M SORRY. BUT IT'S NOT LIKE MY FATHER ASKED MY PERMISSION.
SO, WHAT HAPPENED? YOU BITCHED ABOUT ME RIBBING YOU IN THE LOCKER ROOM AND HE DECIDED THAT WAS GOOD ENOUGH REASON TO HAVE ME TURNED INTO...THIS!?


MY FATHER DIDN'T GIVE TWO SHITS ABOUT YOU MAKING FUN OF ME. HE SAID I DESERVED WHAT I GOT. HE SAID I DIDN'T BELONG ON THE TEAM -- THAT I WAS A DISGRACE AND THE ONLY REASON I WAS EVEN WARMING THE BENCH WAS BECAUSE OF HIS FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO ST. CHRISTOPHER'S.
OH. W-WELL, THAT'S NOT TRUE, MAN. I MEAN, YOU NEEDED TO WORK ON YOUR FUNDAMENTALS, BUT I'VE SEEN WORSE PLAYERS GET--


IT *IS* TRUE, NICK. AND THAT'S OKAY. ANYWAY, MY FATHER DIDN'T FREAK OUT ABOUT *YOU* UNTIL I TOLD HIM THE TRUTH.
WHICH WAS?
THAT I DIDN'T GIVE A SHIT IF I WAS GOOD AND I WASN'T THERE TO PLAY FOOTBALL. NOT REALLY.
AREA


I ONLY JOINED THE TEAM BECAUSE I HAD THE BIGGEST, DUMBEST CRUSH ON THE QB, NICK PALMER.
I MEAN, IF YOU'RE INTO DUDES, IT'S ONLY NATURAL TO BE ATTRACTED TO THE BEST-LOOKING ONE.
YEAH, UM, IT WASN'T YOUR LOOKS. NOT ENTIRELY. BUT, UH, WE'LL TALK ABOUT THAT SOME OTHER TIME.
WHATEVER. I GUESS I... I KIND OF ALWAYS KNEW YOU WERE INTO ME. YOU WERE ALWAYS FOLLOWING ME AROUND, WANTING TO SPOT ME IN THE WEIGHT ROOM...
YEAH, IT WAS PRETTY PATHETIC. WHEN I BROKE DOWN AND TOLD MY FATHER, HE... HE WENT FUCKING CRAZY.


He pretends he's this free market libertarian, but when it comes to me, there's no freedom to be anything but straight. He started babbling about your "feminine aura," and said you'd **BEWITCHED** me.
How'd he drag my dad into it?
My father's a land developer, so they were already in business together.


MY FATHER JUST MADE SURE THE DEAL WENT SOUTH, BROUGHT YOUR DAD'S COMPANY TO THE BRINK OF BANKRUPTCY -- THEN TOSSED HIM A LIFELINE WITH SOME VERY ILLEGAL STRINGS ATTACHED. AFTER A FEW MONTHS, HE THREATENED TO LEAK THE DETAILS TO THE COPS UNLESS YOU WERE... YOU KNOW... TAKEN.
SON OF A BITCH!
MY DAD OR YOURS?
WHAT!? YOURS!
YOU KNOW, YOU CAN USE YOUR REAL VOICE AROUND ME.
IT'S TOO ANNOYING TO SWITCH AND I'M WORKING ON MY ***VOICE STAMINA***. DAMN! THESE HEELS ARE KILLING ME.
TAKE 'EM OFF.


WHAT?
I TOLD YOU I'D TEACH YOU TO STRUT. I WASN'T KIDDING. I'LL TRADE YOU FOR MY SNEAKERS. AND, UM, I'M SERIOUS -- PUT DOWN THE KNIFE BEFORE SOMEONE CALLS THE POLICE.
FINE! BUT IF YOU TOUCH ME, YOU'LL BE SO STABBED.


ARE YOU PAYING ATTENTION?
YEAH, SURE. W-WAIT, DO THE HEELS DO *THAT* TO *MY* BUTT?
ABSOLUTELY. ALRIGHT, FIRST, STAND UP STRAIGHT AND KEEP YOUR SHOULDERS BACK.


THE KEY IS BALANCE. OKAY? YOU NEED TO BALANCE ON THE BALLS OF YOUR FEET AND TAKE SMALL, PRECISE STEPS.
HOLY CRAP! YOU REALLY CAN WALK IN THOSE THINGS.


I'M NOT WALKING, I'M *GLIDING*. THIS IS GRACE. THINK OF IT LIKE A FOOTBALL DRILL. YOU HAVE TO STAY LIGHT ON YOUR FEET, WITH YOUR WEIGHT EVENLY DISTRIBUTED. IT'S THE SAME CONCEPT WITH HIGH-HEELS. YOU DON'T WANT TO PUT TOO MUCH WEIGHT ON YOUR HEELS OR YOU'LL LOSE YOUR BALANCE.
OKAY, SO, IT'S KIND OF LIKE OUR QUARTERBACK FOOTWORK?
EXACTLY! YOU WANT TO MAINTAIN YOUR CENTER OF GRAVITY AND MOVE WITH PURPOSE. NOW, TO BE FAIR, I DON'T KNOW IF THIS IS HOW *WOMEN* WALK IN HEELS. I LEARNED FROM WATCHING EVERY SEASON OF DRAG RACE.


JEEZ, MAN. IF ONE OF US SHOULD'VE BEEN TURNED INTO A *CHICK*, IT'S *YOU*. YOU'RE A NATURAL! TOO BAD YOU'VE GOT ALL THOSE MUSCLES NOW. REMEMBER WHEN YOU JOINED THE TEAM? YOU PROBABLY WEIGHED ABOUT 130 POUNDS SOAKING WET BACK THEN! WHAT ARE YOU NOW, 200?


HEY, WHAT'S THE MATTER? AW, C'MON, I WAS ONLY TEASING. DON'T BE SO SENSITIVE.
I WEIGH 205. MY BODY FAT PERCENTAGE IS 6.5%.
WOW. THAT'S, UM... THAT'S IMPRESSIVE. NICE WORK, ZACH.
WANT TO SEE?

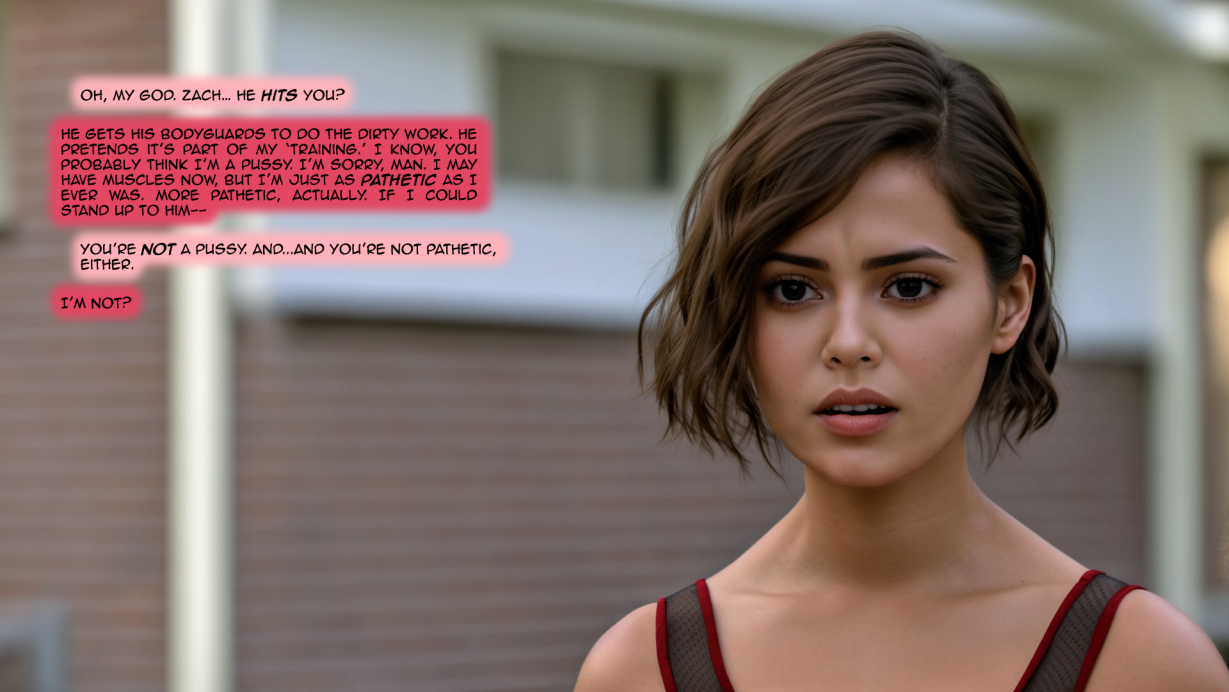

UH, NO, BRO. I'M GOOD.
JUST A PEEK.
H-HEY, PUT THE SHIRT BACK ON! I'LL GET THE KNIFE! I...


I... DAMN!


ER, I MEAN -- COVER YOURSELF UP, DAMMIT. I'M NOT INTO MEN. I SWEAR, YOU QUEERS --
RELAX. I'M NOT TRYING TO SEDUCE YOU. IT'S JUST... WHAT YOU SAID A SECOND AGO SET ME OFF. THIS ISN'T HOW I'M SUPPOSED TO LOOK. I HATE WHAT I'VE BECOME.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
EVERY TIME I LOOK IN THE MIRROR, I FEEL LIKE A MONSTER. I MISS SKINNY ZACH. I NEVER WANTED THIS, NICK.
SO QUIT THE TEAM! STOP WORKING OUT.
MY FATHER HAS MADE IT ABUNDANTLY CLEAR THAT'S NOT AN OPTION. AND I BARELY WORK OUT. IT'S THE SHOTS.
SHOTS?
YEAH, THE SAME SPECIALTY ONES THEY'RE GIVING YOU, ONLY FOR GUYS. MY FATHER MADE ME GO ON THEM AS SOON YOU WERE TAKEN. I STARTED PUTTING ON MUSCLE AND... HERE WE ARE.


DUDE, JUST REFUSE. YOU OUTWEIGH YOUR PSYCHOTIC DAD BY, LIKE, A HUNDRED POUNDS OF PURE MUSCLE. KICK HIS ASS AND GET US BOTH OUT OF THIS INSANE SITUATION.
I HAVE REFUSED HIM. LOTS OF TIMES, ACTUALLY. I DID JUST LAST WEEK. DON'T YOU WONDER WHY I'M ALWAYS IN THOSE DUMB AVIATORS? TURNS OUT...


...BOTH OF US HAVE A REASON TO USE CONCEALER.


OH, MY GOD. ZACH... HE *HITS* YOU?
HE GETS HIS BODYGUARDS TO DO THE DIRTY WORK. HE PRETENDS IT'S PART OF MY 'TRAINING.' I KNOW, YOU PROBABLY THINK I'M A PUSSY. I'M SORRY, MAN. I MAY HAVE MUSCLES NOW, BUT I'M JUST AS *PATHETIC* AS I EVER WAS. MORE PATHETIC, ACTUALLY. IF I COULD STAND UP TO HIM--
YOU'RE *NOT* A PUSSY. AND...AND YOU'RE NOT PATHETIC, EITHER.
I'M NOT?


NO. YOUR FATHER IS PATHETIC. AND HE'S A PIECE OF SHIT BULLY. MOTHERFUCKER!
HEY, YOU'RE YELLING. THE NEIGHBORS --
HE CAN'T DO THAT TO YOU! HE CAN'T DO THIS TO EITHER OF US! BRO, LISTEN, WE'RE GONNA --
HEY, QB!


THAT VOICE... NO. NO! OH, FUCK! IT'S CRAIG...AND FAT FUCK RON IS WITH HIM. WHAT THE HELL ARE THEY DOING HERE? WE'RE MILES FROM TOWN. IF THEY SEE ME, I...I... FUCK!
HEY, IT'S OKAY. BREATHE. LET ME HANDLE THIS. JUST...TURN AROUND.


YO, ZACH. HEY, WHO'S THE GIRL? AND WHAT WAS WITH THE -- WAIT. BRO, ARE YOU WEARING, LIKE, *STILETTOS?*
GREAT OBSERVATION, MAN. YEP, I SURE AM.
FUCKING WHY?
I MADE A BET. MY GIRLFRIEND HERE SAID I COULDN'T WALK A MILE IN HER SHOES WITHOUT FALLING OVER. SHE LOST BIG TIME. HOW DOES MY ASS LOOK?

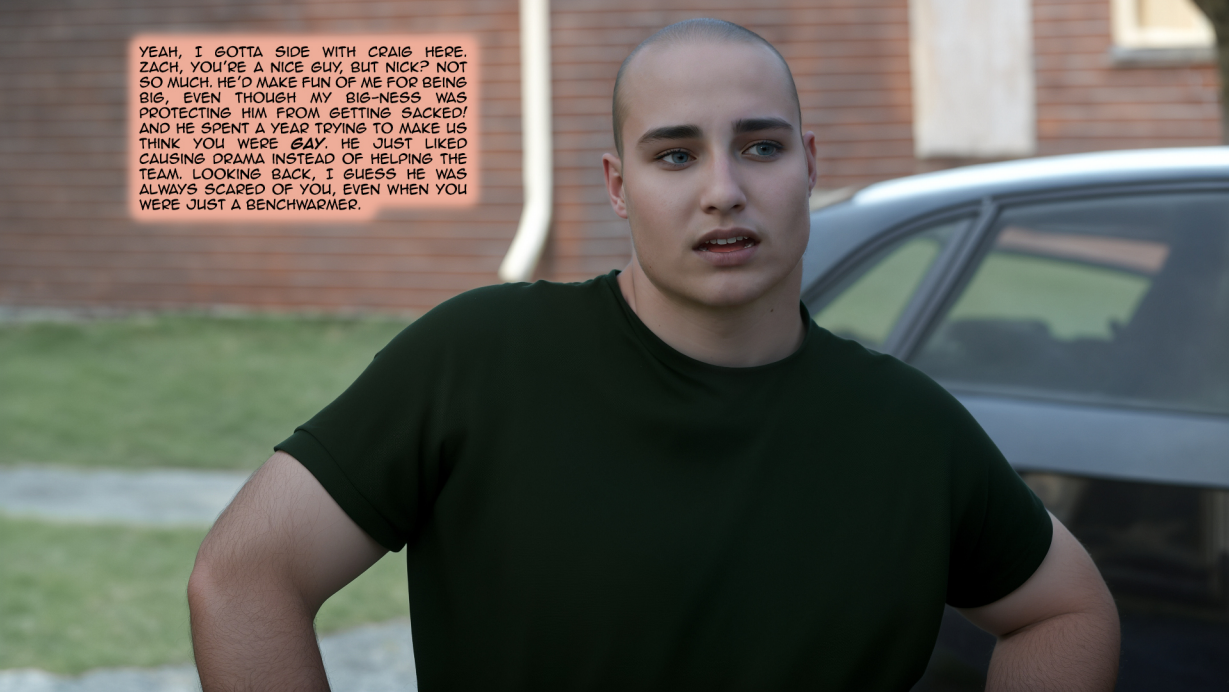

HA! NOT HALF-BAD, TO BE HONEST. WHAT'D YOU BET?
LET'S JUST SAY WE'LL BE BUSY TONIGHT BREAKING IN A NEW MATTRESS
SO IT'S A WIN-WIN. NICE! OH, SHIT, WHERE'S OUR MANNERS? MISS, I'M CRAIG --
HEY, BRO, DO ME A FAVOR AND STAY OVER THERE. SHE'S AS RED AS HER DRESS RIGHT NOW WITH EMBARRASSMENT AND SHE SAID SHE WANTS TO MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION. COOL?

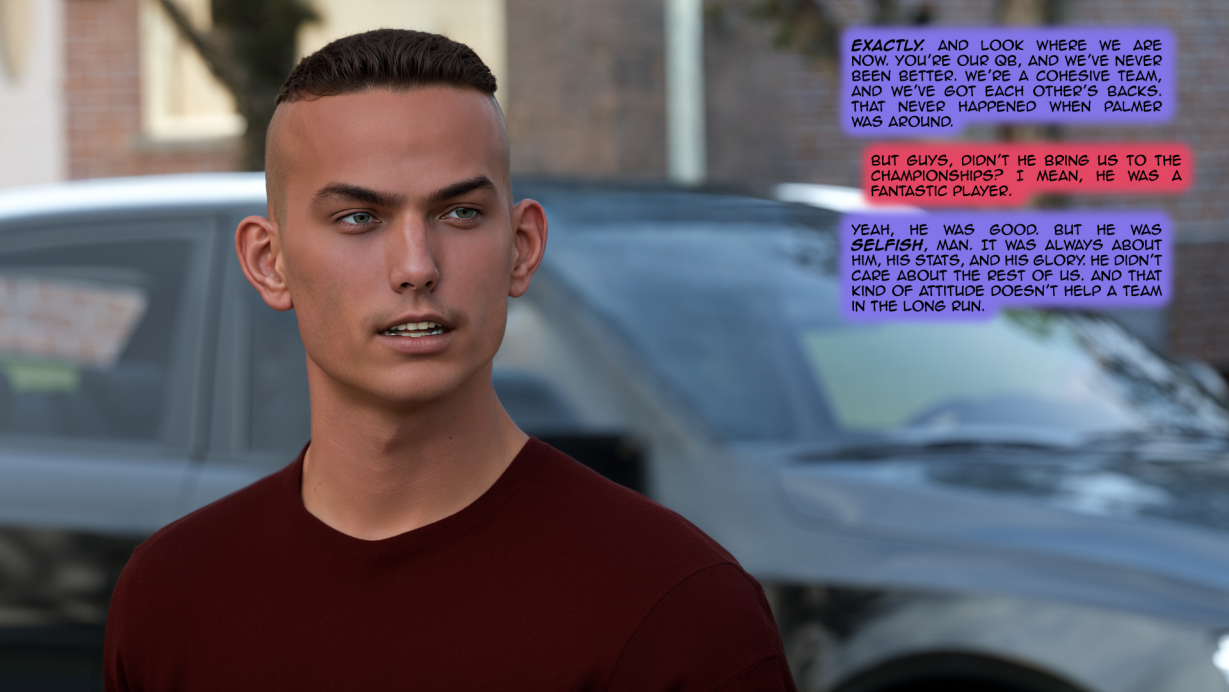

UH, YEAH. SURE. NICE TO MEET YOU, MISS!
WE'LL DO FORMAL INTRODUCTIONS LATER. WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING HERE, ANYWAY? YOU USUALLY STICK PRETTY CLOSE TO TOWN.
HUH? WE GOT ***YOUR*** WEIRD FUCKING TEXT, BRO! YOU SENT AN ADDRESS AND SAID TO HURRY THE FUCK UP BECAUSE ***NICK*** WAS BACK IN TOWN!

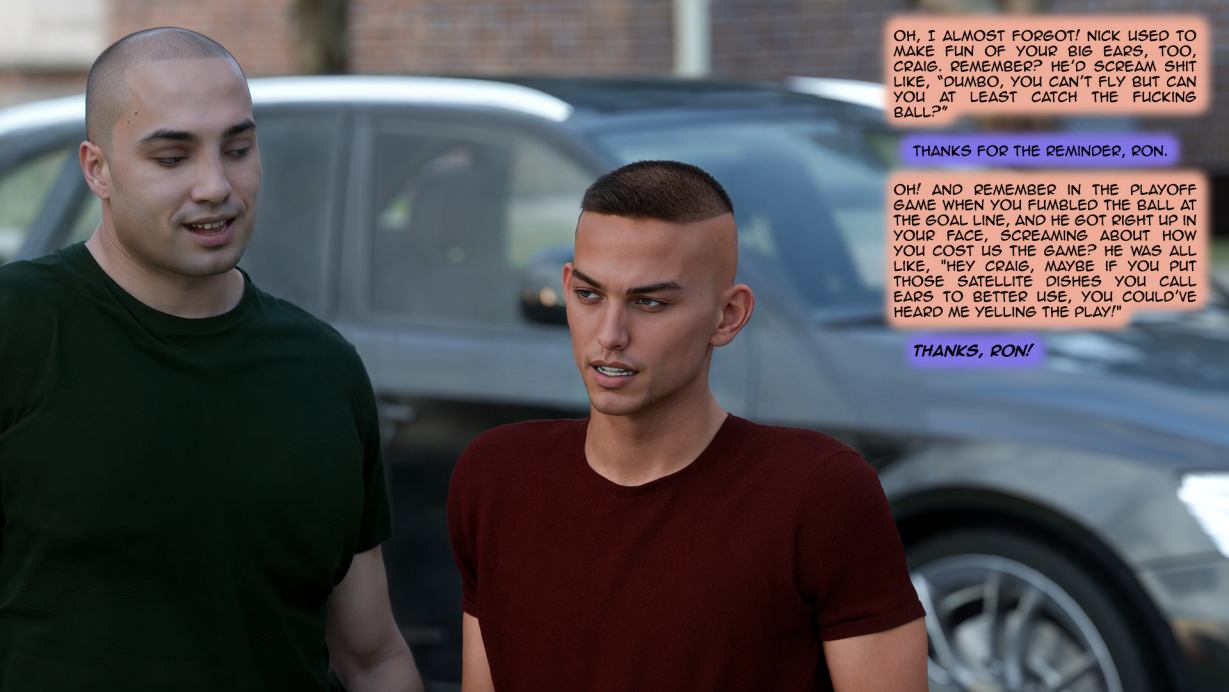

SO, WHERE'S NICK, DUDE? DID HE BOUNCE BACK FROM THAT SO-CALLED "HORMONE IMBALANCE" OF HIS?
YOU MEAN ***DRUGS***, RIGHT? THAT'S WHERE MY MONEY'S AT.
SEEMS LIKE WE'RE ALL ON THE SAME PAGE, RON. I MEAN, THE GUY WAS THE STAR QB FOR ONE OF THE FINEST COLLEGE TEAMS IN TEXAS--
--MORE LIKE THE FINEST IN THE ***ENTIRE NATION!***
THEN, JUST LIKE THAT, HE VANISHES FROM THE SPOTLIGHT? NO TEXTS, NO INSTA POSTS, ***NADA***. SMELLS LIKE DRUGS TO ME. OR MAYBE HE'S IN WITNESS PROTECTION OR SOMETHING. SO, WHAT'S THE DEAL? IS OUR GOLDEN ***BOY*** REALLY BACK?


HANG ON, IS THAT A BLACK EYE, QB? DID NICK FREAKIN' CLOCK YOU OR SOMETHING, MAN?
WHAT? NO, NO. I WAS PRACTICING, AND I, UH, SLIPPED AND SMACKED MY FACE ON THE PUSH SLED.
GEEZ, BE CAREFUL. WE CAN'T AFFORD YOU GETTING A CONCUSSION.
APPRECIATE IT. ANYWAY, MY GIRL LIVES NEARBY. WE WERE GRABBING A BITE AT APPLEBEE'S, AND I'M, LIKE, 90% SURE I SPOTTED NICK IN THE PARKING LOT. I DASHED OUT TO TALK TO HIM, BUT HE JUST SPED OFF.


DID HE EVEN SEE YOU?
I WAS YELLING AT HIM, SO YEAH, I THINK HE DID.
MAN, I HOPE PALMER DOESN'T THINK HE CAN JUST WALTZ BACK IN HERE AND RECLAIM HIS OLD POSITION. HE LEFT US HANGING, YOU KNOW?
YEAH, BUT IF HE REALLY IS BACK, IT'D BE GOOD TO HAVE HIM BACK ON THE TEAM THOUGH.
WOULD IT?


YEAH, I GOTTA SIDE WITH CRAIG HERE. ZACH, YOU'RE A NICE GUY, BUT NICK? NOT SO MUCH. HE'D MAKE FUN OF ME FOR BEING BIG, EVEN THOUGH MY BIG-NESS WAS PROTECTING HIM FROM GETTING SACKED! AND HE SPENT A YEAR TRYING TO MAKE US THINK YOU WERE GAY. HE JUST LIKED CAUSING DRAMA INSTEAD OF HELPING THE TEAM. LOOKING BACK, I GUESS HE WAS ALWAYS SCARED OF YOU, EVEN WHEN YOU WERE JUST A BENCHWARMER.


EXACTLY. AND LOOK WHERE WE ARE NOW. YOU'RE OUR QB, AND WE'VE NEVER BEEN BETTER. WE'RE A COHESIVE TEAM, AND WE'VE GOT EACH OTHER'S BACKS. THAT NEVER HAPPENED WHEN PALMER WAS AROUND.
BUT GUYS, DIDN'T HE BRING US TO THE CHAMPIONSHIPS? I MEAN, HE WAS A FANTASTIC PLAYER.
YEAH, HE WAS GOOD. BUT HE WAS SELFISH, MAN. IT WAS ALWAYS ABOUT HIM, HIS STATS, AND HIS GLORY. HE DIDN'T CARE ABOUT THE REST OF US. AND THAT KIND OF ATTITUDE DOESN'T HELP A TEAM IN THE LONG RUN.


OH, I ALMOST FORGOT! NICK USED TO MAKE FUN OF YOUR BIG EARS, TOO, CRAIG. REMEMBER? HE'D SCREAM SHIT LIKE, "DUMBO, YOU CAN'T FLY BUT CAN YOU AT LEAST CATCH THE FUCKING BALL?"
THANKS FOR THE REMINDER, RON.
OH! AND REMEMBER IN THE PLAYOFF GAME WHEN YOU FUMBLED THE BALL AT THE GOAL LINE, AND HE GOT RIGHT UP IN YOUR FACE, SCREAMING ABOUT HOW YOU COST US THE GAME? HE WAS ALL LIKE, "HEY CRAIG, MAYBE IF YOU PUT THOSE SATELLITE DISHES YOU CALL EARS TO BETTER USE, YOU COULD'VE HEARD ME YELLING THE PLAY!"
THANKS, RON!


LOOK GUYS, I GET IT. HE WASN'T THE BEST TEAMMATE OR FRIEND, BUT PEOPLE CAN CHANGE. MAYBE HE REALIZED HIS MISTAKES AND WANTS TO MAKE AMENDS OR SOMETHING.
OR MAYBE HE'S REALIZED HE SCREWED UP HIS CHANCES AT GOING PRO AND NOW HE WANTS HIS OLD SPOT BACK. BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER. THIS IS *OUR* TEAM NOW. WE'VE WORKED TOO HARD TO GET WHERE WE ARE JUST TO LET HIM STEP IN AND RUIN EVERYTHING WE'VE BUILT. THE POINT I'M TRYING TO MAKE IS THAT IF HE TRIES TO COME FOR YOUR SPOT, THE TEAM HAS YOUR BACK. I GUESS WHAT I'M REALLY SAYING IS, *FUCK NICK PALMER.*
T-THANKS, CRAIG.


DON'T GET ALL SAPPY ON ME, QB. ANYWAY, WE'RE PROBABLY BORING YOUR GIRLFRIEND TO TEARS. WE'LL HEAD OUT. LET US KNOW IF YOU SEE HIM AGAIN. OH, AND FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, STOP SHOWING OFF FOR YOUR GIRL AND PUT YOUR SHIRT BACK ON.
DON'T BE JEALOUS!
OF COURSE I'M JEALOUS. YOU PACK ON MUSCLE LIKE IT'S NOTHING AND NOW SOMEHOW SNAGGED A BEAUTIFUL GIRLFRIEND? SOME BASTARDS HAVE ALL THE LUCK. ANYWAY, SEE YOU AT THE ASS CRACK OF DAWN FOR PRATICE.


YEAH, SEE YOU LATER. GET IN YOUR CAR. THAT'S RIGHT. OKAY, YEP, NOW DRIVE AWAY. I'LL KEEP WAVING AND FLEXING UNTIL YOU DO. AND BUH-BYE YOU HOMOPHOBIC JERKS.


OH MY GOD. NICK, I SWEAR I DIDN'T TEXT THEM. MY DAD CLONED MY PHONE TO STOP ME FROM GOING ON LGBT APPS. HE MUST'VE TEXTED RON AND CRAIG. THIS IS HIS WARNING SHOT. HE REALLY WANTS US TO GET OUT IN THE PUBLIC EYE. FUCK!
AND...YOU PROBABLY DON'T BELIEVE A SINGLE WORD I'M SAYING.
NO, I...I DO BELIEVE YOU.


REALLY? YOU DO?
I HAVE TO, ZACH. BECAUSE IF YOU'RE SCREWING WITH ME TOO... LIKE, BRINGING THE TEAM OUT TO CATCH ME IN A DRESS AND...AND WITH TITS, WHAT CHANCE DO I HAVE? I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. I MIGHT AS WELL--
HEY! I'M NOT. I SWEAR.
OKAY. GOOD. ALSO, IT'D BE DUMB TO PUT ON THOSE HEELS AND PRANCE AROUND IF YOU KNEW TWEEDLEDEE AND TWEEDLEDUMB-ASS WERE COMING.
YEAH. ALTHOUGH I'VE GOTTEN PRETTY GOOD AT "PLAYING IT STRAIGHT" OVER THE YEARS. YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WHO EVER CALLED ME OUT, MAYBE BECAUSE BACK WHEN WE WERE... ERM, NEVERMIND.
HEY, IF YOUR DAD CLONED YOUR PHONE, DOES THAT MEAN HE'S ALSO GETTING THE PICS HE MAKES ME SEND YOU?
WELL... YEAH. SORRY, BRO.
SON OF A BITCH. I KNEW HE PROBABLY WOULD. BUT IT MAKES ME SICK TO MY STOMACH TO HEAR YOU SAY IT OUT LOUD. I HATE HIM.
ME TOO.
GREAT. NOW WE HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON. WE SHOULD START A CLUB.

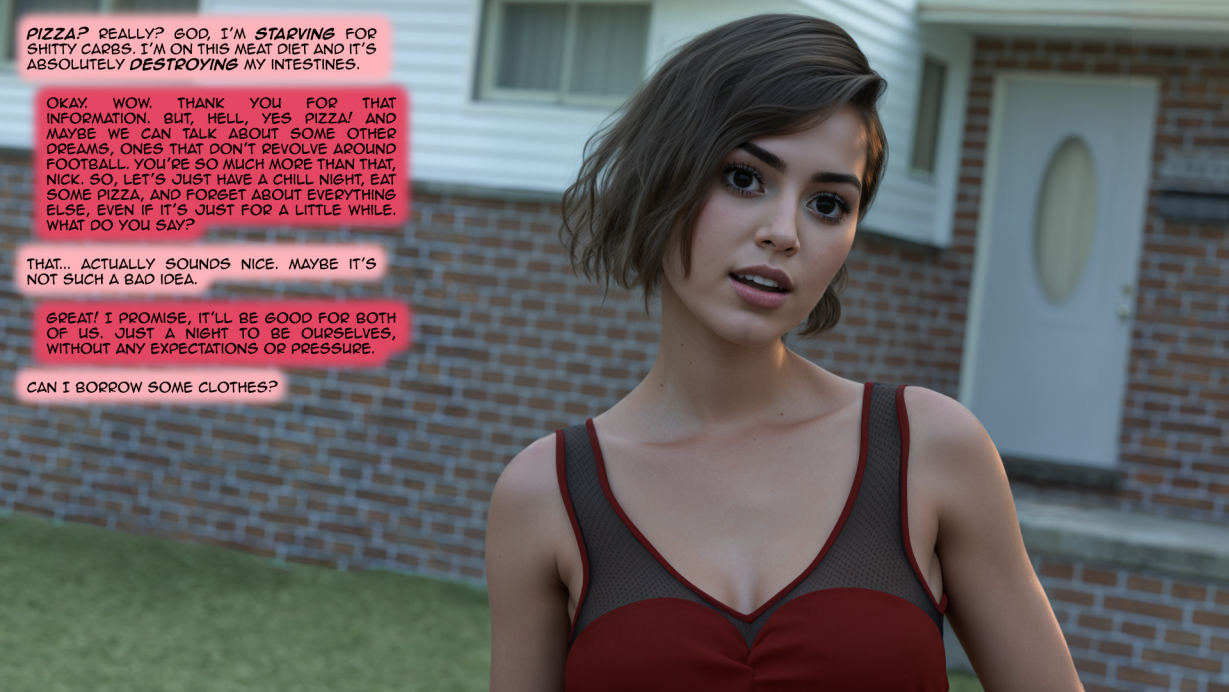

AND THE TEAM. THEY HATE ME!
NICK--
I HONESTLY BELIEVED YOU WERE JUST JEALOUS OF WHAT I WAS, BEFORE THEY MADE ME INTO...THIS. BUT EVERYTHING YOU SAID IS TRUE. LIKE, RON AND CRAIG EVEN RESPECTED YOU IN THOSE DUMB SHOES. HOW!? BEFORE THIS, I THOUGHT I WAS A LEADER! I THOUGHT I HAD FRIENDS! I THOUGHT I HAD A FUTURE! I THOUGHT I HAD A FATHER WHO...


...BUT I DIDN'T.
AND I DON'T.


WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S *PATHETIC?* ALL THOSE IMAGINARY THINGS ARE WHAT KEPT ME GOING ON THE FUCKING ISLAND. THEY DID TERRIBLE THINGS TO ME THERE. I DON'T TALK ABOUT IT BECAUSE... ANYWAY, THEY TRIED TO *BRAINWASH* ME. AND IT ALMOST WORKED. A BUNCH OF TIMES, I WAS SO CLOSE TO GIVING UP. BUT THEN I'D REMEMBER ALL THE PEOPLE I HAD BACK HOME, WAITING FOR ME. *ROOTING* FOR ME, EVEN IF THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHERE I WAS. BUT I WAS WRONG. THE STANDS WERE EMPTY. NO ONE MISSED ME. I WAS HOLDING ON FOR NOTHING.
I STILL AM.


HEY, DON'T TALK LIKE THAT. YOU'RE NICK PALMER! YOU'RE --
AM I? WHO AM I KIDDING, MAN? LOOK AT ME. MY BODY IS RUINED. EVEN IF YOUR FATHER MAGICALLY DECIDES TO LEAVE ME ALONE, HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO GET STRONG AGAIN? THREE YEARS? AT LEAST? BY THEN, I'M 23 OR 24 AND... WHAT? TRYING TO BE A QB AS A FRESHMAN SOMEWHERE? WHAT'D BE THE POINT? MY DREAMS OF GOING PRO ARE DEAD.
WAS THAT YOUR ONLY DREAM? CAN'T YOU SEE THERE'S MORE TO LIFE? AND MORE TO YOU?


FOOTBALL WAS MY LIFE, ZACH. IT WAS EVERYTHING. LISTEN, LET'S SWAP SHOES AND GET BACK TO THE HOUSE. I WANT TO BE ALONE UNTIL, LIKE, THE SUN EXPLODES.
NO, YOU ***THINK*** YOU DO, BUT YOU NEED SOME ***BRO TIME***. C'MON, WE'LL GET AN UBER BACK TO MY APARTMENT. I'LL TEXT MY FATHER. HE'LL BE ***THRILLED***.
YOUR APARTMENT? I DON'T KNOW, MAN.
C'MON. WE'LL ORDER PIZZA AND PLAY MADDEN ON PS5. YOU CAN KICK MY ASS ON A VIRTUAL GRID IRON.


PIZZA? REALLY? GOD, I'M STARVING FOR SHITTY CARBS. I'M ON THIS MEAT DIET AND IT'S ABSOLUTELY DESTROYING MY INTESTINES.
OKAY. WOW. THANK YOU FOR THAT INFORMATION. BUT, HELL, YES PIZZA! AND MAYBE WE CAN TALK ABOUT SOME OTHER DREAMS, ONES THAT DON'T REVOLVE AROUND FOOTBALL. YOU'RE SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT, NICK. SO, LET'S JUST HAVE A CHILL NIGHT, EAT SOME PIZZA, AND FORGET ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE, EVEN IF IT'S JUST FOR A LITTLE WHILE. WHAT DO YOU SAY?
THAT... ACTUALLY SOUNDS NICE. MAYBE IT'S NOT SUCH A BAD IDEA.
GREAT! I PROMISE, IT'LL BE GOOD FOR BOTH OF US. JUST A NIGHT TO BE OURSELVES, WITHOUT ANY EXPECTATIONS OR PRESSURE.
CAN I BORROW SOME CLOTHES?

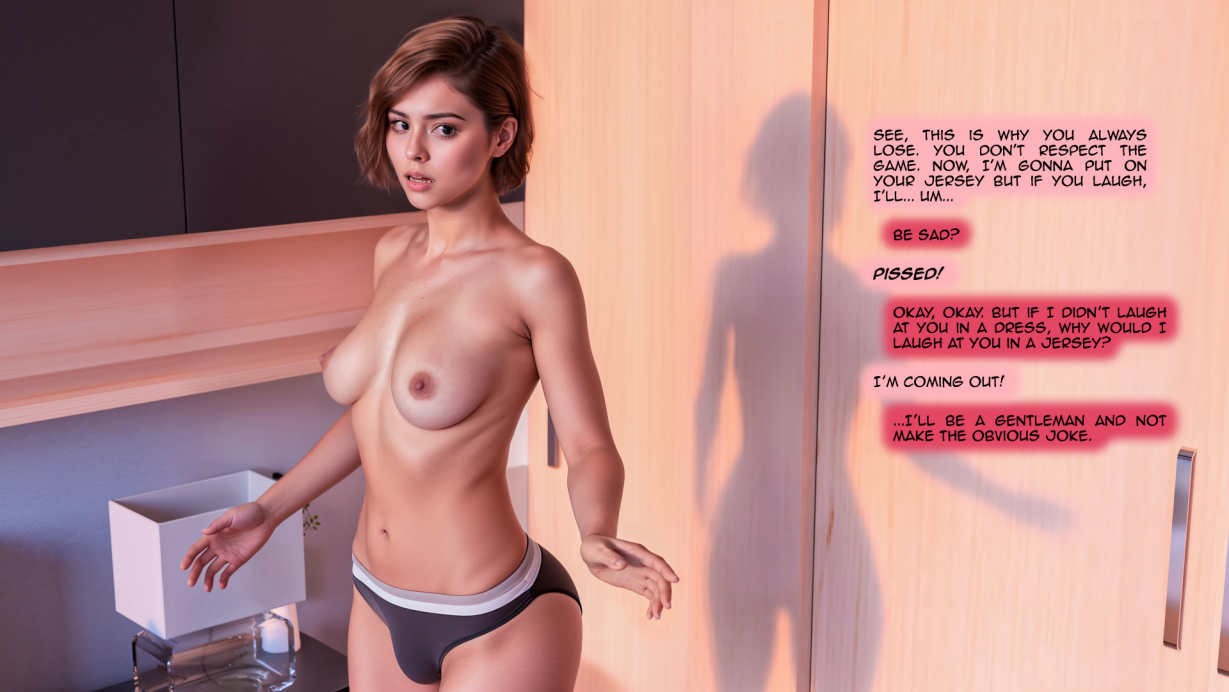

SURE THING. AND I'LL DO YOU ONE BETTER.
THAT FUCKING KEY!
MY FATHER ALWAYS WANTS ME TO HAVE IT ON ME. "BECAUSE YOU NEVER KNOW," WHATEVER THAT MEANS.


SO... I'M GOING TO PAUSE AND *NOT* JUMP TO THE CONCLUSION THAT YOU'RE PROPOSITIONING ME FOR SEX.
WOW! THERE'S HOPE FOR YOU YET. NO, I'M NOT PROPOSITIONING YOU. BUT I FIGURED YOU'D LIKE TO GIVE THE BOYS A CHANCE TO BREATHE. COOL?
I... YES. BUT I TAKE THE DAMN THING OFF MYSELF!
DEAL. LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE.


HEY, NICK! THE PIZZA IS HERE. SMELLS GREAT. HALF PEPPERONI FOR YOU AND HALF SAUSAGE FOR ME.
MAKES SENSE YOU'D GET SAUSAGE! HA!
OOOKAY. SO I GUESS IT'S BABY STEPS ON THE HOMOPHOBIA...

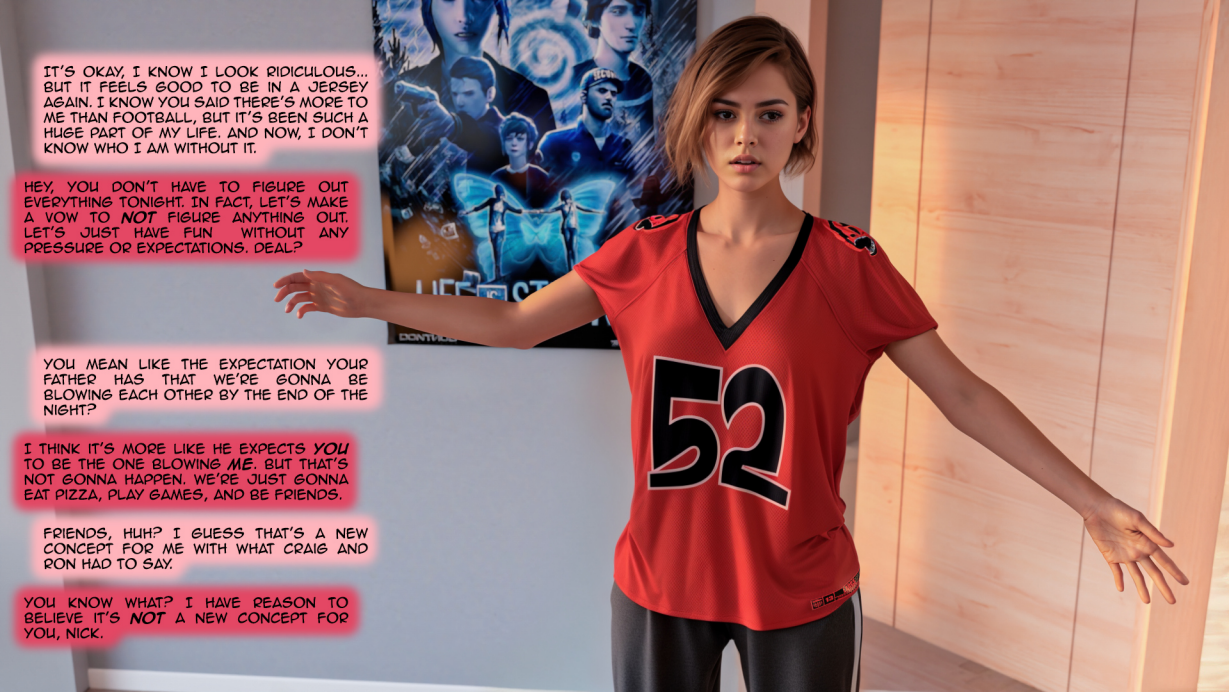

BRO, HOW'S THAT HOMOPHOBIC? YOU CAN MAKE FUN OF ME FOR LIKING BOOBS IF YOU WANT.
RIGHT, BUT... YOU KNOW WHAT? NEVERMIND.
COOL. HEY, YOU DON'T HAVE ANYTHING SMALLER? YOU USED TO WEIGH, LIKE, A BUCK TWENTY ON A GOOD DAY.
DON'T REMIND ME. BUT, SORRY, NO I DON'T. MY DAD DONATED ALL MY OLD CLOTHES.
SON OF A BITCH.


LIFE IS STRANGE
DONTNOD
SQUARE ENIX
WHY DO YOU NEED TO WEAR A FOOTBALL JERSEY ANYWAY? I HAVE SOME WORKOUT SHIRTS YOU COULD WEAR. THEY'RE MORE COMFORTABLE.
UM, HELLO? WE'RE PLAYING MADDEN, REMEMBER?
IT'S A VIDEO GAME, NICK. THE WHOLE POINT IS THAT WE GET TO PLAY FOOTBALL IN OUR PAJAMAS.

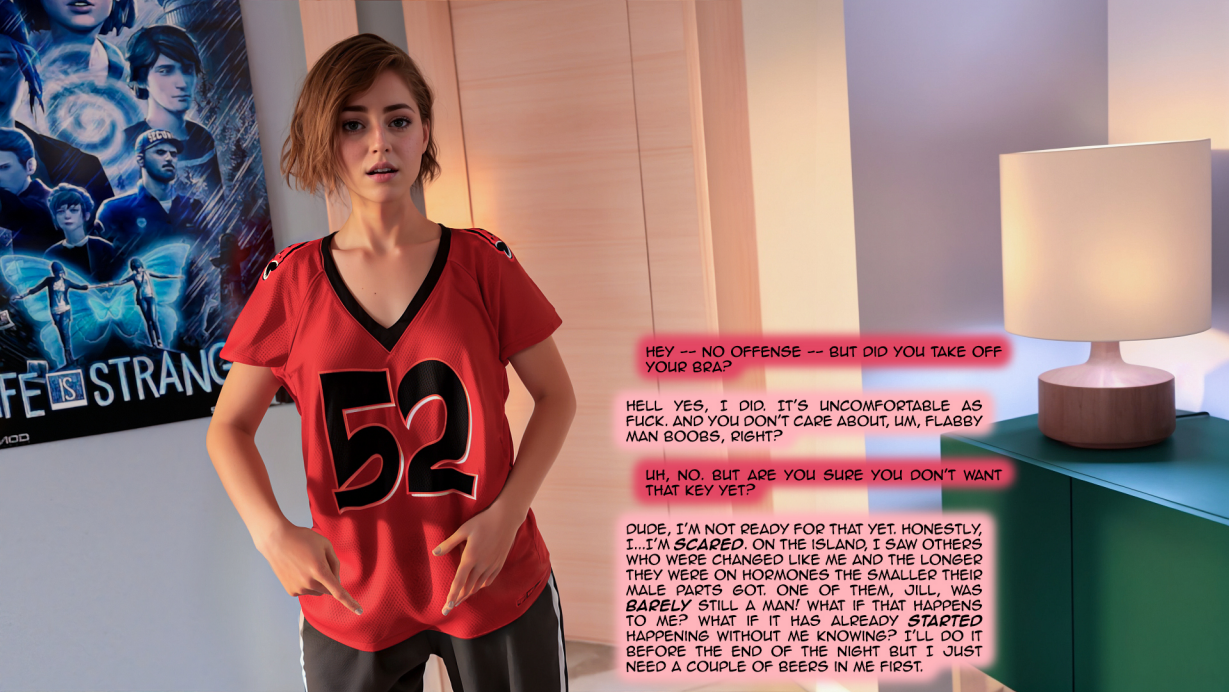

SEE, THIS IS WHY YOU ALWAYS LOSE. YOU DON'T RESPECT THE GAME. NOW, I'M GONNA PUT ON YOUR JERSEY BUT IF YOU LAUGH, I'LL... UM...
BE SAD?
PISSED!
OKAY, OKAY. BUT IF I DIDN'T LAUGH AT YOU IN A DRESS, WHY WOULD I LAUGH AT YOU IN A JERSEY?
I'M COMING OUT!
...I'LL BE A GENTLEMAN AND NOT MAKE THE OBVIOUS JOKE.


WHAT'S WITH THE FISH?
UM... WHAT? OH, THAT'S, UH... MY JUNIOR COLLEGE TEAM'S JERSEY. THE MASCOT WAS A PIRANHA.
THAT'S A REALLY DUMB -- WAIT, YOU'RE TRYING NOT TO LAUGH, AREN'T YOU?
I... NO.


I CAN SEE THE SMIRK!
THERE'S NO SMIRK. I DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO SMIRK. SEE? STRAIGHT FACE.
HA! THIS TIME I'LL LET THE JOKE SLIDE.
YOU LITERALLY SAID "HA." THAT'S NOT -- AGAIN, NEVERMIND.
DANCE OF THE SHADOW
BLANK STARE


IT'S OKAY, I KNOW I LOOK RIDICULOUS... BUT IT FEELS GOOD TO BE IN A JERSEY AGAIN. I KNOW YOU SAID THERE'S MORE TO ME THAN FOOTBALL, BUT IT'S BEEN SUCH A HUGE PART OF MY LIFE. AND NOW, I DON'T KNOW WHO I AM WITHOUT IT.
HEY, YOU DON'T HAVE TO FIGURE OUT EVERYTHING TONIGHT. IN FACT, LET'S MAKE A VOW TO NOT FIGURE ANYTHING OUT. LET'S JUST HAVE FUN WITHOUT ANY PRESSURE OR EXPECTATIONS. DEAL?
YOU MEAN LIKE THE EXPECTATION YOUR FATHER HAS THAT WE'RE GONNA BE BLOWING EACH OTHER BY THE END OF THE NIGHT?
I THINK IT'S MORE LIKE HE EXPECTS YOU TO BE THE ONE BLOWING ME. BUT THAT'S NOT GONNA HAPPEN. WE'RE JUST GONNA EAT PIZZA, PLAY GAMES, AND BE FRIENDS.
FRIENDS, HUH? I GUESS THAT'S A NEW CONCEPT FOR ME WITH WHAT CRAIG AND RON HAD TO SAY.
YOU KNOW WHAT? I HAVE REASON TO BELIEVE IT'S NOT A NEW CONCEPT FOR YOU, NICK.
52


BLANK STARE
52
I JUST THINK YOU GOT SO WRAPPED UP IN FOOTBALL AND YOUR OWN EGO THAT YOU FORGOT WHAT REAL FRIENDSHIP IS LIKE. BUT NOW, YOU HAVE A CHANCE TO START OVER AND MAKE GENUINE CONNECTIONS WITH PEOPLE.
GOD, YOU SOUND LIKE SCOTT. I THINK HE SECRETLY LOVES HIS BIG TITS. I MEAN, I GUESS THEY HELPED HIM LAND JESSICA AKIN.
MAYBE... MAYBE WE SHOULD ALL HANG OUT SOME TIME. ALTHOUGH, I KNOW JESS HATES ME THESE DAYS. AND FOR GOOD REASON, HONESTLY.


52
IS STRANG
HEY -- NO OFFENSE -- BUT DID YOU TAKE OFF YOUR BRA?
HELL YES, I DID. IT'S UNCOMFORTABLE AS FUCK. AND YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT, UM, FLABBY MAN BOOBS, RIGHT?
UH, NO. BUT ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T WANT THAT KEY YET?
DUDE, I'M NOT READY FOR THAT YET. HONESTLY, I...I'M SCARED. ON THE ISLAND, I SAW OTHERS WHO WERE CHANGED LIKE ME AND THE LONGER THEY WERE ON HORMONES THE SMALLER THEIR MALE PARTS GOT. ONE OF THEM, JILL, WAS BARELY STILL A MAN! WHAT IF THAT HAPPENS TO ME? WHAT IF IT HAS ALREADY STARTED HAPPENING WITHOUT ME KNOWING? I'LL DO IT BEFORE THE END OF THE NIGHT BUT I JUST NEED A COUPLE OF BEERS IN ME FIRST.


LIFE IS STRANGE
SQUARE ENIX
52
Yummy PIZZA
OKAY, LIKE I SAID, THERE'S NO PRESSURE. BUT JUST SO YOU KNOW, I DON'T THINK HORMONES CAN ACTUALLY SHRINK YOUR PENIS. I'M NO EXPERT, THOUGH.
BUT THESE ARE LIKE SCI-FI SUPER-HORMONES, BRO. AND -- WAIT! YOU'RE ON THE MALE VERSION, RIGHT? SO HAVE YOU NOTICED ANY CHANGES DOWN THERE? DID YOU GET, UH, BIGGER?


UH, WELL... I DON'T REALLY WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT, NICK. IT'S KIND OF PERSONAL.
OH, OKAY. I JUST THOUGHT, YOU KNOW, WE COULD COMPARE--
DICKS?
NOTES!
RIGHT. NOTES. SAY, HOW ABOUT WE EAT THE PIZZA BEFORE IT GETS COLD? I'M STARVING.
I MIGHT BE DENSE, BUT I KNOW WHEN SOMEONE'S TRYING TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT. BUT...I ALSO HATE COLD PIZZA. LET'S EAT AND PLAY. HOLD ON, I NEED TO SWITCH BACK TO MY REGULAR VOICE. I AIN'T PLAYING MADDEN WHILE SOUNDING LIKE A DRAG QUEEN.
FIRST OF ALL, DRAG QUEENS ARE AMAZING AND FIERCE. SECOND OF ALL, YOU DON'T SOUND ANYTHING LIKE A DRAG QUEEN. YOU SOUND LIKE A GIRL.
THAT ACTUALLY DOESN'T -- HOLD ON *COUGH* UGH, THAT KEEPS GETTING HARDER. ANYWAY, THAT DOESN'T MAKE ME FEEL ANY BETTER. I ALMOST WISH I WAS WORSE AT THIS SO YOUR STUPID FATHER WOULD REALIZE THAT I'M NOT YOUR PERFECT BARBIE DOLL GIRLFRIEND.
DON'T BAD-MOUTH BARBIE. SHE'S AN ICON -- THAT GIRL HAS A PHD, SHE'S BEEN AN ASTRONAUT, A PRESIDENT, AND A MERMAID. SHE'S BASICALLY A BOSS BITCH.
I GUESS YOU WOULD KNOW. OKAY, LET'S EAT BEFORE I GET HANGRY. YOU WOULDN'T LIKE ME WHEN I'M HANGRY.
YUMMY PIZZA

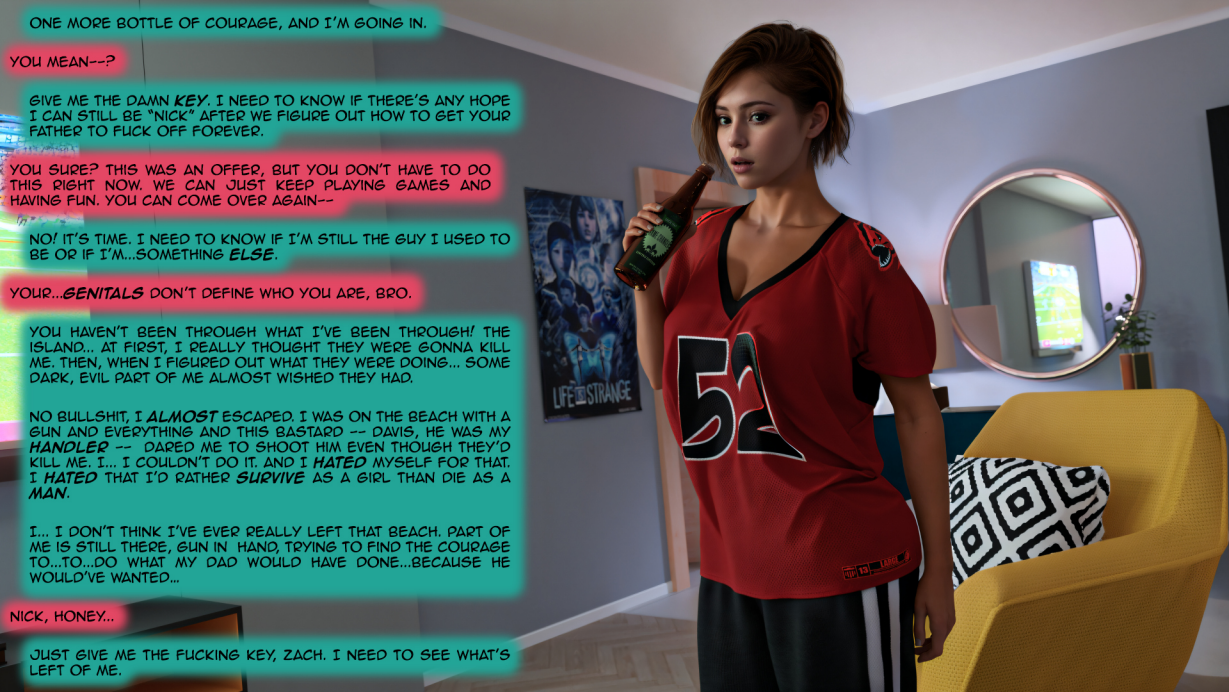

UGH, THAT WAS DELICIOUS. BUT I CAN ONLY EAT THREE SLICES BEFORE FEELING BLOATED. I MISS BEING ABLE TO DOWN A WHOLE PIZZA BY MYSELF!
WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF PORTION CONTROL, NICK. IT'S NOT SO BAD ONCE YOU GET USED TO IT. PLUS, IT MEANS WE GET TO HAVE LEFTOVERS FOR TOMORROW. AND THE NEXT DAY.
Yummy
PIZZA
Yummy
PIZZA


LIFE IS STRANGE
YOU'RE RUNNING TOO MUCH WITH YOUR QUARTERBACK. LOOK FOR THE OPEN RECEIVER! YOU GOTTA READ THE PLAY BETTER. LIKE, I'M NOT EVEN CONTROLLING MY D AND YOU'RE STILL NOT SEEING THE BLITZ COMING! COME ON, MAN!
I KNOW YOU'RE NOT CONTROLLING YOUR D BECAUSE IT'S LOCKED UP IN THAT LITTLE CAGE, NICK.
YOU BITCH, YOU GOT ME THERE! BUT SERIOUSLY, YOU GOTTA STEP UP YOUR GAME. THIS IS ALMOST EMBARRASSING.

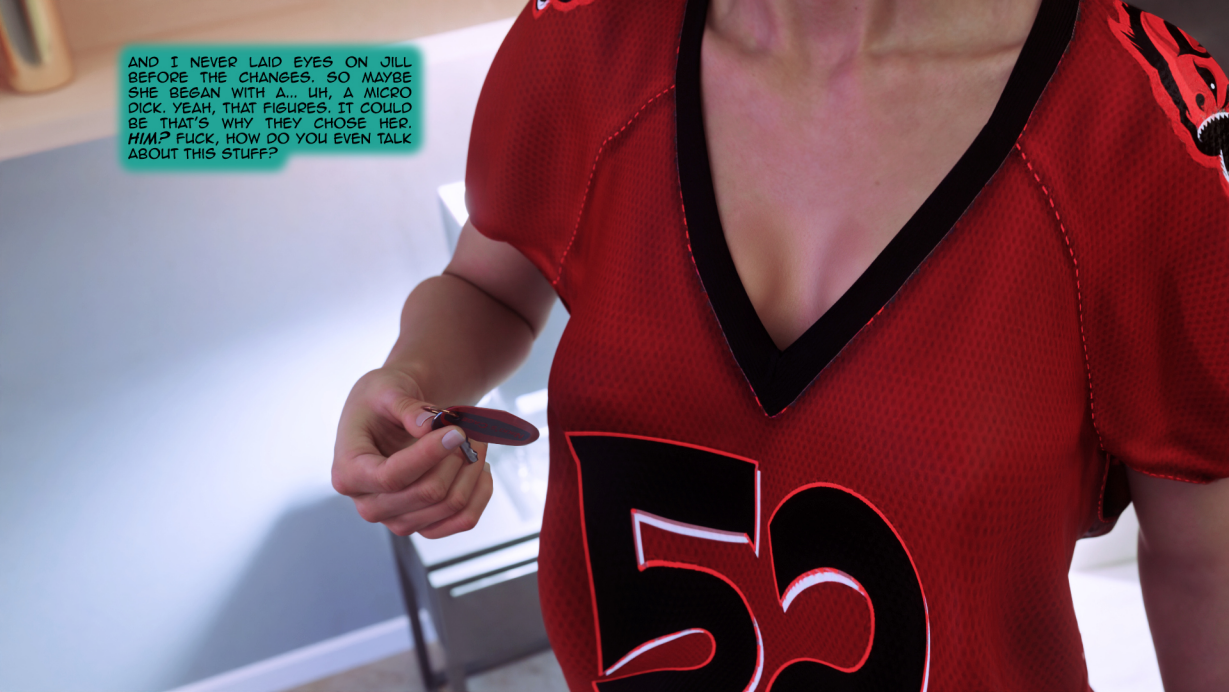

THE PROBLEM IS YOU'RE STILL THINKING LIKE A RECEIVER, NOT A QB -- NO OFFENSE BUT THAT'S WHERE YOU SHOULD'VE STAYED. YOU WERE ALWAYS A GOOD CATCHER
I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT OF MYSELF AS...VERSATILE.
HUH?
NOTHING. HEY, MAYBE YOU COULD BE A COACH ONE DAY!


YEAH, MAYBE. BUT FOR NOW, LET'S JUST FOCUS ON BEATING YOUR SORRY ASS.
JEEZ! HOW ARE YOU EVEN DOING THIS? EVERY PLAY IS PERFECT. FUCK!
TOLD YA, MAN. FOOTBALL IS IN MY BLOOD. OR MAYBE IT'S NOT ONLY FOOTBALL. I LIKE STRATEGY, COMPETITION, AND JUST BEING ABLE TO THINK ON MY FEET. ANNNND.... THAT'S ANOTHER TOUCHDOWN FOR THE SAN FRANCISCO QUEERS! SAY, DOES THAT MAKE ME AN ALLY?
YOU KNOW WHAT? I'LL TAKE IT.


DANCE OF SHADOW
BLANK STARE
AND THAT IS THE WAY THE GAME IS PLAYED! YOU LOSE, SIR, YOU LOSE. WHAT WAS THE FINAL SCORE? 35-7? THOSE ARE ROOKIE NUMBERS. YOU CAN TAKE THE PLAYER OUT OF THE GAME BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE THE GAME OUT OF THE PLAYER.
ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT, HOW ABOUT WE PLAY MARIO KART NEXT? I THINK I HAVE A CHANCE OF BEATING YOU IN THAT.
WHO DO YOU PLAY? LUIGI OR SOME SHIT? I'M BOWSER. I'LL THROW SO MANY SHELLS AT YOU, YOU'LL WISH YOU NEVER PICKED UP A CONTROLLER. BUT SURE, IF YOU WANT TO LOSE TWICE IN ONE NIGHT, I'M GAME. BUT FIRST--


ONE MORE BOTTLE OF COURAGE, AND I'M GOING IN.
YOU MEAN--?
GIVE ME THE DAMN KEY. I NEED TO KNOW IF THERE'S ANY HOPE I CAN STILL BE "NICK" AFTER WE FIGURE OUT HOW TO GET YOUR FATHER TO FUCK OFF FOREVER.
YOU SURE? THIS WAS AN OFFER, BUT YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS RIGHT NOW. WE CAN JUST KEEP PLAYING GAMES AND HAVING FUN. YOU CAN COME OVER AGAIN--
NO! IT'S TIME. I NEED TO KNOW IF I'M STILL THE GUY I USED TO BE OR IF I'M...SOMETHING ELSE.
YOUR...GENITALS DON'T DEFINE WHO YOU ARE, BRO.
YOU HAVEN'T BEEN THROUGH WHAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH! THE ISLAND... AT FIRST, I REALLY THOUGHT THEY WERE GONNA KILL ME. THEN, WHEN I FIGURED OUT WHAT THEY WERE DOING... SOME DARK, EVIL PART OF ME ALMOST WISHED THEY HAD.
NO BULLSHIT, I ALMOST ESCAPED. I WAS ON THE BEACH WITH A GUN AND EVERYTHING AND THIS BASTARD -- DAVIS, HE WAS MY HANDLER -- DARED ME TO SHOOT HIM EVEN THOUGH THEY'D KILL ME. I... I COULDN'T DO IT. AND I HATED MYSELF FOR THAT. I HATED THAT I'D RATHER SURVIVE AS A GIRL THAN DIE AS A MAN.
I... I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER REALLY LEFT THAT BEACH. PART OF ME IS STILL THERE, GUN IN HAND, TRYING TO FIND THE COURAGE TO...TO...DO WHAT MY DAD WOULD HAVE DONE...BECAUSE HE WOULD'VE WANTED...
NICK, HONEY...
JUST GIVE ME THE FUCKING KEY, ZACH. I NEED TO SEE WHAT'S LEFT OF ME.
LIFE IS STRANGE
52


OKAY. I CAN DO THIS. JUST TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND FACE THE MUSIC. NOT KNOWING IS WORSE THAN KNOWING. AND HORMONES CAN'T DO THAT MUCH DAMAGE. CAN THEY? THEY'RE JUST DUMB CHEMICALS.
52


AND I NEVER LAID EYES ON JILL BEFORE THE CHANGES. SO MAYBE SHE BEGAN WITH A... UH, A MICRO DICK. YEAH, THAT FIGURES. IT COULD BE THAT'S WHY THEY CHOSE HER. *HIM?* FUCK, HOW DO YOU EVEN TALK ABOUT THIS STUFF?


ALRIGHT, ENOUGH STALLING. DAMN, HOW DO YOU EVEN UNLOCK THIS CONTRAPTION? CRAP, ZACH'S DUMB OVERSIZED JERSEY'S BLOCKING MY VIEW.


MOMENT OF TRUTH, NICK. OPEN YOUR EYES AND SEE WHAT'S LEFT.


OH, MY GOD! NO! PLEASE, NO...

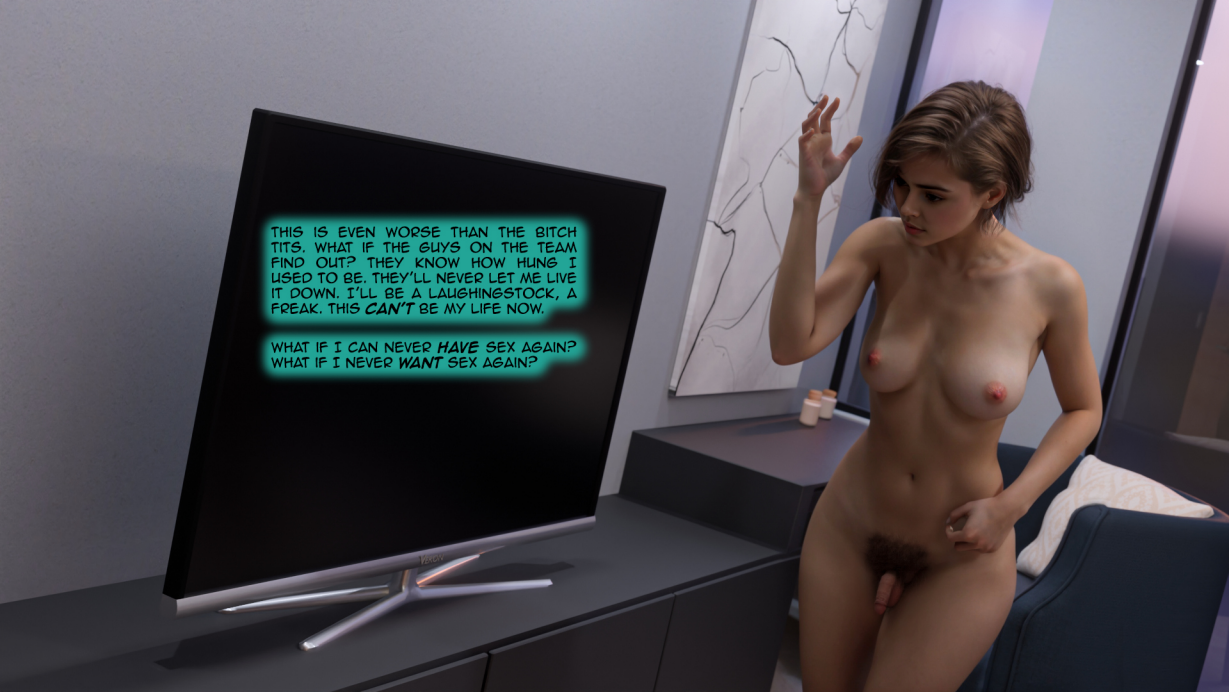

THIS... THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING. IT CAN'T BE. EVERYTHING ELSE, I COULD'VE... BUT THIS? FUCK, EVEN MY BALLS ARE SMALLER!


M-MAYBE IT'S JUST BECAUSE THE CAGE WAS TOO TIGHT? OR MAYBE IT'S TEMPORARY? IT HAS TO BE, RIGHT? PLEASE, LET IT BE *TEMPORARY*.
I KNOW, ALL I HAVE TO DO IS THINK OF A HOT *GIRL*, AND IT'LL BE BACK TO NORMAL. YEAH, IT'S LIKE WHEN YOU GET OUT OF THE POOL. OKAY, UM, WHO WOULD TURN ME ON?


OH, GOD, WHY CAN'T I PICTURE ANYONE? COME ON, BRAIN, DON'T FAIL ME NOW! LAUREN? NO, SHE WAS A BITCH TO ME. OKAY, OKAY -- UM, ZENDAYA, SHE'S PRETTY, RIGHT? YEAH, IF SHE'S HOT ENOUGH FOR PETER PARKER, SPIDER-MAN, SHE'S HOT ENOUGH FOR NICK PALMER, STAR QUARTERBACK.


SHIT! COME ON, GET HARD! YOU USED TO POP BONERS AT THE DROP OF A HAT, LIKE, TEN TIMES A DAY! IT WAS LEGITIMATELY EMBARASSING. NOW? NOT EVEN A TWITCH. IT'S EVEN KIND OF NUMB.
OH, GOD. WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO ME? WHAT IF IT KEEPS GETTING SMALLER AND SMALLER UNTIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT?


MAYBE I CAN TRY EXERCISES TO...TO MAKE IT BIGGER AGAIN? I MEAN, USE IT OR LOSE IT WORKS WITH MUSCLES, SO WHY NOT DICKS? OR THERE MUST BE SURGERIES! YEAH, WHAT DO THE GIRLS WHO WANNA BE GUYS DO? CAN THEY GROW YOU A NEW COCK LIKE THEY CAN GROW EARS ON MICE? GROSS! BUT THERE HAS TO BE SOMETHING.


THIS IS EVEN WORSE THAN THE BITCH TITS. WHAT IF THE GUYS ON THE TEAM FIND OUT? THEY KNOW HOW HUNG I USED TO BE. THEY'LL NEVER LET ME LIVE IT DOWN. I'LL BE A LAUGHINGSTOCK, A FREAK. THIS CAN'T BE MY LIFE NOW.
WHAT IF I CAN NEVER HAVE SEX AGAIN? WHAT IF I NEVER WANT SEX AGAIN?


OH, SHIT, I... I FEEL SO FUCKING DIZZY ALL OF A SUDDEN... MY HEART FEELS LIKE IT'S POUNDING OUT OF MY CHEST.



NICK? I DON'T WANT TO PRY, MAN, BUT ARE YOU OKAY IN THERE?

I... I DON'T KNOW. I THINK I'M HAVING A HEART ATTACK.

SHIT. CAN I COME IN?

I'M NAKED!

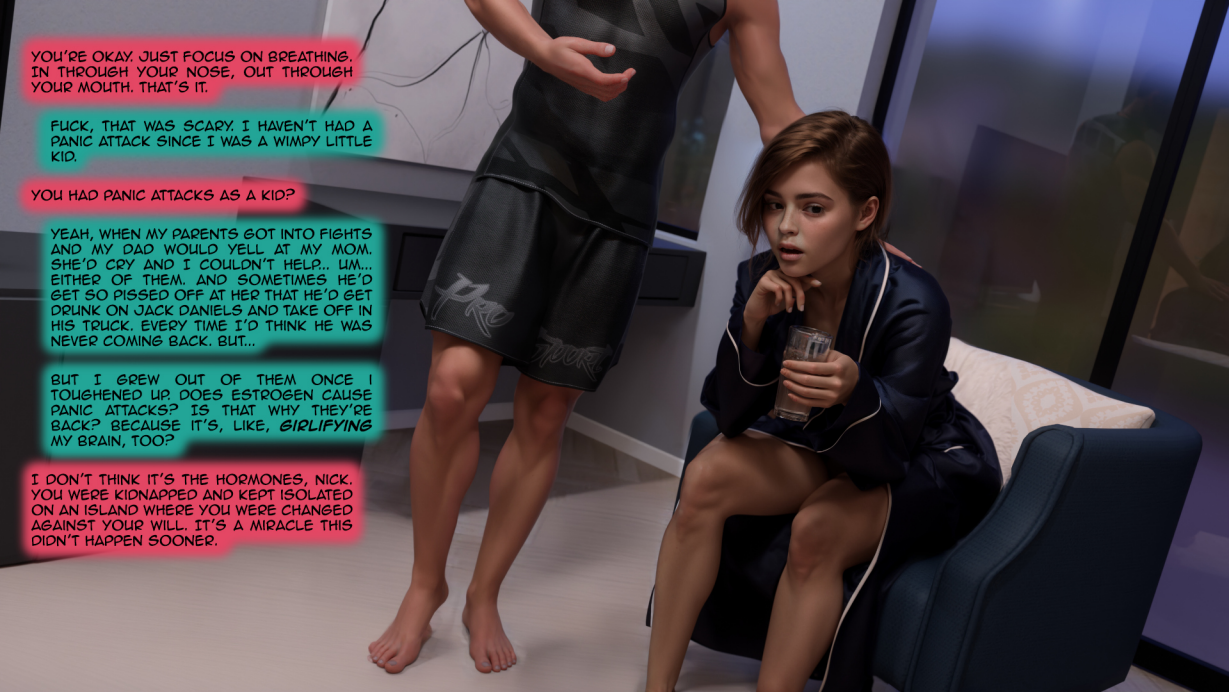
OKAY, BUT YOU USED TO PRANCE AROUND NAKED ALL THE TIME IN THE LOCKER ROOM.

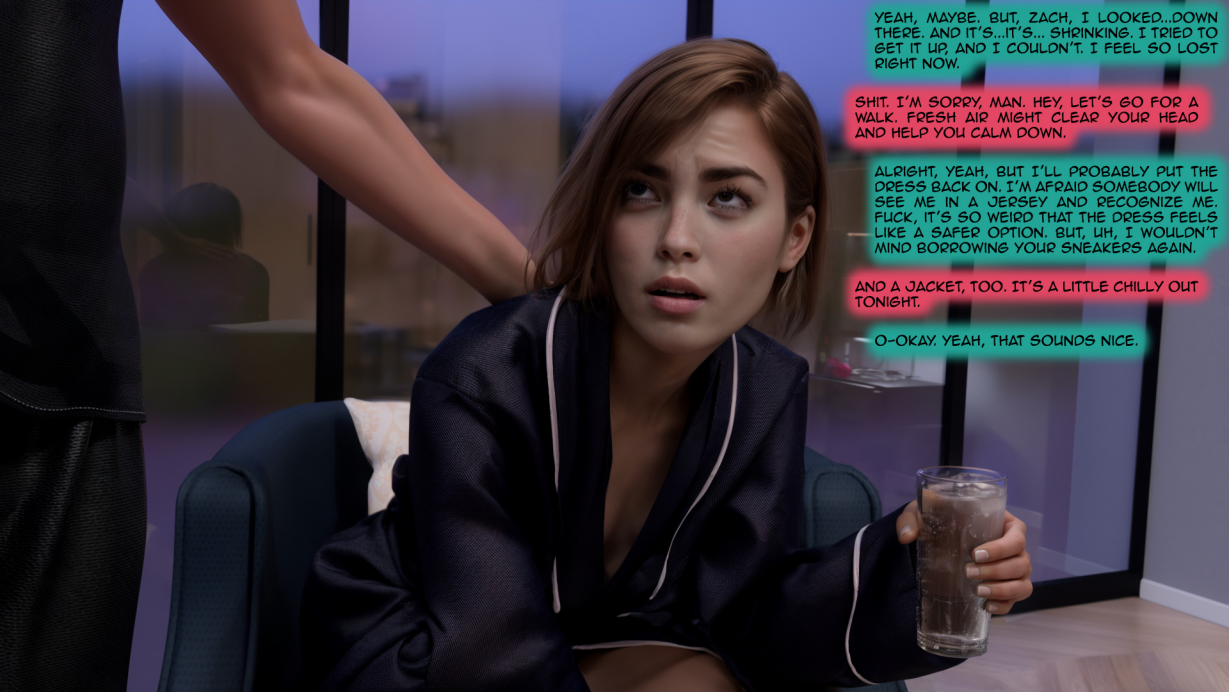
IT'S DIFFERENT NOW. I'M DIFFERENT. YOU'RE DIFFERENT. ***EVERYTHING*** IS DIFFERENT AND... AND... FUCK, I CAN'T ***BREATHE***.

NICK!

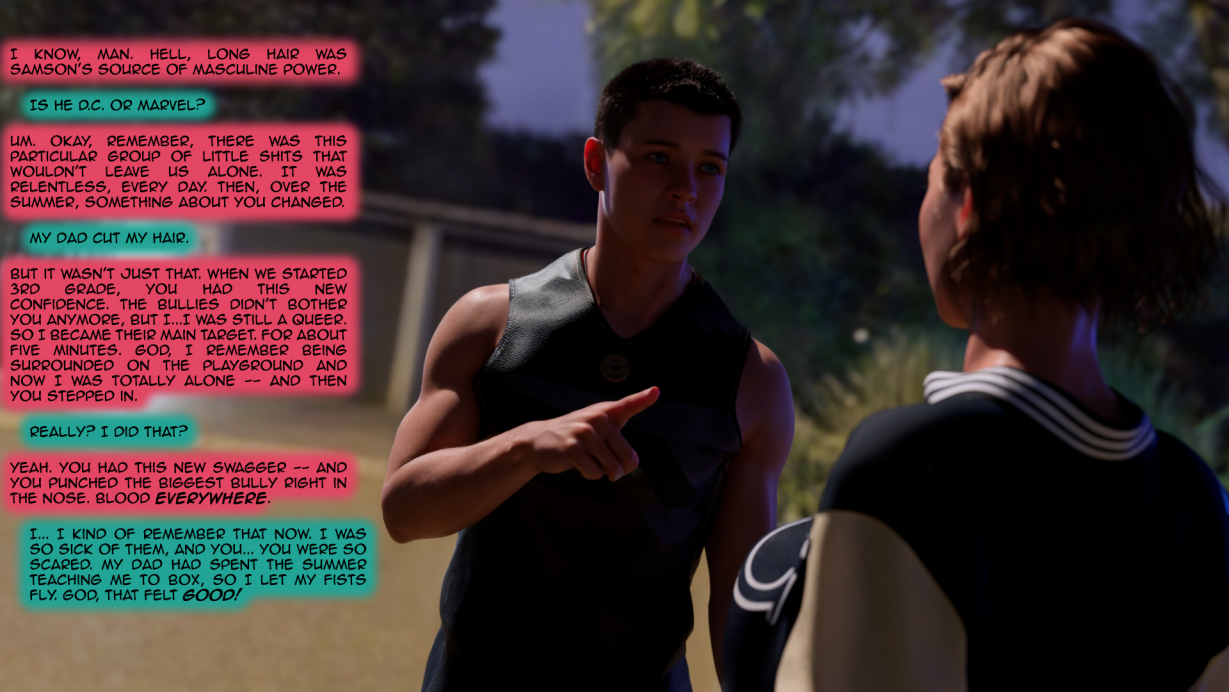
OKAY, OKAY. COME IN. SHIT, I'M SCARED, MAN.

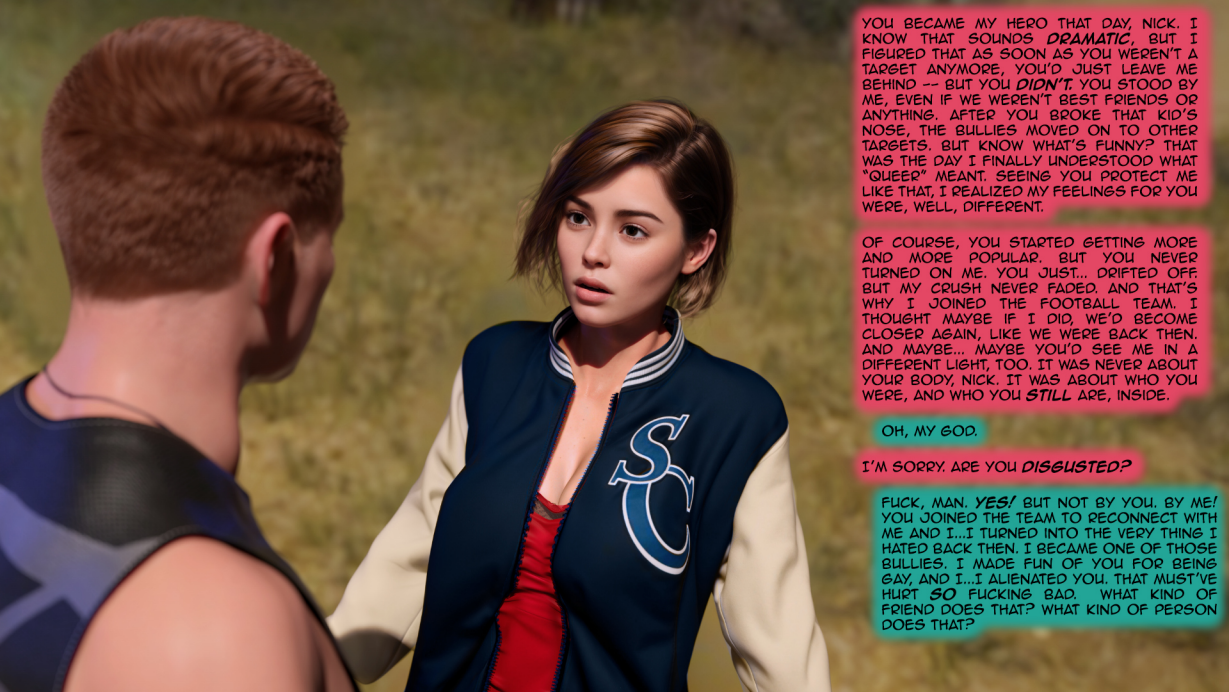

NICK! WHAT'S WRONG?
FUCKING *EVERYTHING!*
YEAH, FAIR POINT, BUT I MEANT SPECIFICALLY RIGHT NOW.
I-I DON'T KNOW. MY...MY HEART IS RACING AND... I CAN'T GET ENOUGH OXYGEN. I THINK I'M DYING.
OKAY, OKAY. DEEP BREATHS, NICK. COUNT TO TEN. I THINK YOU'RE HAVING A PANIC ATTACK. HERE, SIT ON THE CHAIR. I'LL GET YOU MY ROBE AND SOME WATER.


YOU'RE OKAY. JUST FOCUS ON BREATHING. IN THROUGH YOUR NOSE, OUT THROUGH YOUR MOUTH. THAT'S IT.
FUCK, THAT WAS SCARY. I HAVEN'T HAD A PANIC ATTACK SINCE I WAS A WIMPY LITTLE KID.
YOU HAD PANIC ATTACKS AS A KID?
YEAH, WHEN MY PARENTS GOT INTO FIGHTS AND MY DAD WOULD YELL AT MY MOM. SHE'D CRY AND I COULDN'T HELP.. UM... EITHER OF THEM. AND SOMETIMES HE'D GET SO PISSED OFF AT HER THAT HE'D GET DRUNK ON JACK DANIELS AND TAKE OFF IN HIS TRUCK. EVERY TIME I'D THINK HE WAS NEVER COMING BACK. BUT...
BUT I GREW OUT OF THEM ONCE I TOUGHENED UP. DOES ESTROGEN CAUSE PANIC ATTACKS? IS THAT WHY THEY'RE BACK? BECAUSE IT'S, LIKE, GIRLIFYING MY BRAIN, TOO?
I DON'T THINK IT'S THE HORMONES, NICK. YOU WERE KIDNAPPED AND KEPT ISOLATED ON AN ISLAND WHERE YOU WERE CHANGED AGAINST YOUR WILL. IT'S A MIRACLE THIS DIDN'T HAPPEN SOONER.

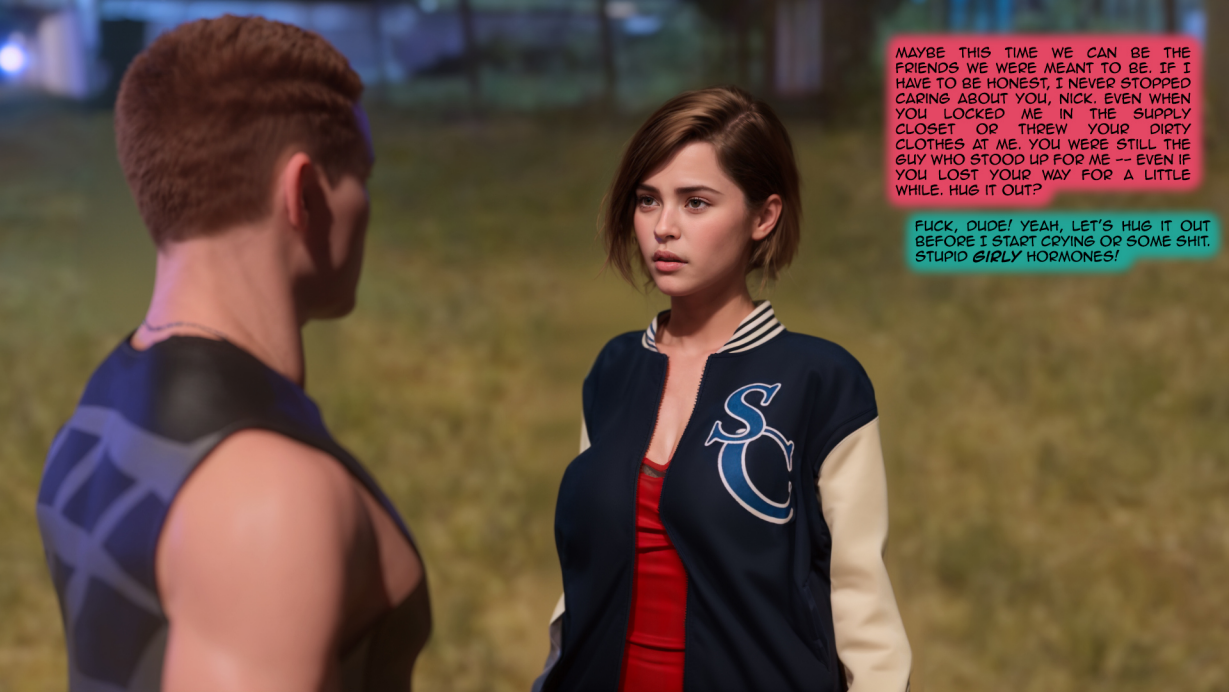

YEAH, MAYBE. BUT, ZACH, I LOOKED...DOWN THERE. AND IT'S...IT'S... SHRINKING. I TRIED TO GET IT UP, AND I COULDN'T. I FEEL SO LOST RIGHT NOW.
SHIT. I'M SORRY, MAN. HEY, LET'S GO FOR A WALK. FRESH AIR MIGHT CLEAR YOUR HEAD AND HELP YOU CALM DOWN.
ALRIGHT, YEAH, BUT I'LL PROBABLY PUT THE DRESS BACK ON. I'M AFRAID SOMEBODY WILL SEE ME IN A JERSEY AND RECOGNIZE ME. FUCK, IT'S SO WEIRD THAT THE DRESS FEELS LIKE A SAFER OPTION. BUT, UH, I WOULDN'T MIND BORROWING YOUR SNEAKERS AGAIN.
AND A JACKET, TOO. IT'S A LITTLE CHILLY OUT TONIGHT.
O-OKAY. YEAH, THAT SOUNDS NICE.


CAN'T BEAT TEXAS NIGHTS, HUH? EVEN WHEN MY WORLD'S FALLING APART, THAT SKY IS SO BIG AND CLEAR, IT MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE. EVEN...I DUNNO, COMING BACK FROM THIS.
HEY, UM, MAYBE THIS IS A TERRIBLE TIME BUT CAN I TELL YOU WHY I JOINED THE FOOTBALL TEAM?
YEAH, SURE. I MEAN, I COULD USE THE DISTRACTION. YOU SAID YOU HAD A CRUSH ON ME. UNDERSTANDABLE, TO BE HONEST. IF I WAS GAY, I'D HAVE A CRUSH ON ME TOO.
RIGHT. BUT THAT'S NOT THE WHOLE STORY. GOD, THIS IS EMBARRASSING, BUT DO YOU REMEMBER MS. EAVES?
HELL, YEAH. SHE WAS AWESOME. BEST 2ND GRADE TEACHER EVER. OH, SHIT! YEAH, YOU WERE IN MY CLASS! SORRY, I TOTALLY FORGOT.
SEE? THIS IS WHY THIS IS SO DAMN EMBARRASSING. I'VE NEVER FORGOTTEN. BACK THEN, WE BOTH GOT OUR FAIR SHARE OF BULLYING. KIDS CALLED ME "QUEER" EVEN THOUGH I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT MEANT. AND YOU...
AND ME? WHAT ABOUT ME?
YOU HAD LONG HAIR, REMEMBER? SOME OF THE BOYS SAID YOU "LOOKED LIKE A GIRL." IRONIC, HUH?
NOT *IRONIC!* BULLSHIT! TARZAN AND CONAN AND HE-MAN HAD LONG HAIR! THEY WERE BADASS! LONG HAIR DOESN'T MAKE YOU A GIRL!


I KNOW, MAN. HELL, LONG HAIR WAS SAMSON'S SOURCE OF MASCULINE POWER.
IS HE D.C. OR MARVEL?
UM. OKAY, REMEMBER, THERE WAS THIS PARTICULAR GROUP OF LITTLE SHITS THAT WOULDN'T LEAVE US ALONE. IT WAS RELENTLESS, EVERY DAY. THEN, OVER THE SUMMER, SOMETHING ABOUT YOU CHANGED.
MY DAD CUT MY HAIR.
BUT IT WASN'T JUST THAT. WHEN WE STARTED 3RD GRADE, YOU HAD THIS NEW CONFIDENCE. THE BULLIES DIDN'T BOTHER YOU ANYMORE, BUT I...I WAS STILL A QUEER. SO I BECAME THEIR MAIN TARGET. FOR ABOUT FIVE MINUTES. GOD, I REMEMBER BEING SURROUNDED ON THE PLAYGROUND AND NOW I WAS TOTALLY ALONE -- AND THEN YOU STEPPED IN.
REALLY? I DID THAT?
YEAH. YOU HAD THIS NEW SWAGGER -- AND YOU PUNCHED THE BIGGEST BULLY RIGHT IN THE NOSE. BLOOD EVERYWHERE.
I... I KIND OF REMEMBER THAT NOW. I WAS SO SICK OF THEM, AND YOU... YOU WERE SO SCARED. MY DAD HAD SPENT THE SUMMER TEACHING ME TO BOX, SO I LET MY FISTS FLY. GOD, THAT FELT GOOD!


YOU BECAME MY HERO THAT DAY, NICK. I KNOW THAT SOUNDS ***DRAMATIC***, BUT I FIGURED THAT AS SOON AS YOU WEREN'T A TARGET ANYMORE, YOU'D JUST LEAVE ME BEHIND -- BUT YOU ***DIDN'T.*** YOU STOOD BY ME, EVEN IF WE WEREN'T BEST FRIENDS OR ANYTHING. AFTER YOU BROKE THAT KID'S NOSE, THE BULLIES MOVED ON TO OTHER TARGETS. BUT KNOW WHAT'S FUNNY? THAT WAS THE DAY I FINALLY UNDERSTOOD WHAT "QUEER" MEANT. SEEING YOU PROTECT ME LIKE THAT, I REALIZED MY FEELINGS FOR YOU WERE, WELL, DIFFERENT.
OF COURSE, YOU STARTED GETTING MORE AND MORE POPULAR. BUT YOU NEVER TURNED ON ME. YOU JUST... DRIFTED OFF. BUT MY CRUSH NEVER FADED. AND THAT'S WHY I JOINED THE FOOTBALL TEAM. I THOUGHT MAYBE IF I DID, WE'D BECOME CLOSER AGAIN, LIKE WE WERE BACK THEN. AND MAYBE... MAYBE YOU'D SEE ME IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT, TOO. IT WAS NEVER ABOUT YOUR BODY, NICK. IT WAS ABOUT WHO YOU WERE, AND WHO YOU ***STILL*** ARE, INSIDE.
OH, MY GOD.
I'M SORRY. ARE YOU ***DISGUSTED?***
FUCK, MAN. ***YES!*** BUT NOT BY YOU. BY ME! YOU JOINED THE TEAM TO RECONNECT WITH ME AND I...I TURNED INTO THE VERY THING I HATED BACK THEN. I BECAME ONE OF THOSE BULLIES. I MADE FUN OF YOU FOR BEING GAY, AND I...I ALIENATED YOU. THAT MUST'VE HURT ***SO*** FUCKING BAD. WHAT KIND OF FRIEND DOES THAT? WHAT KIND OF PERSON DOES THAT?

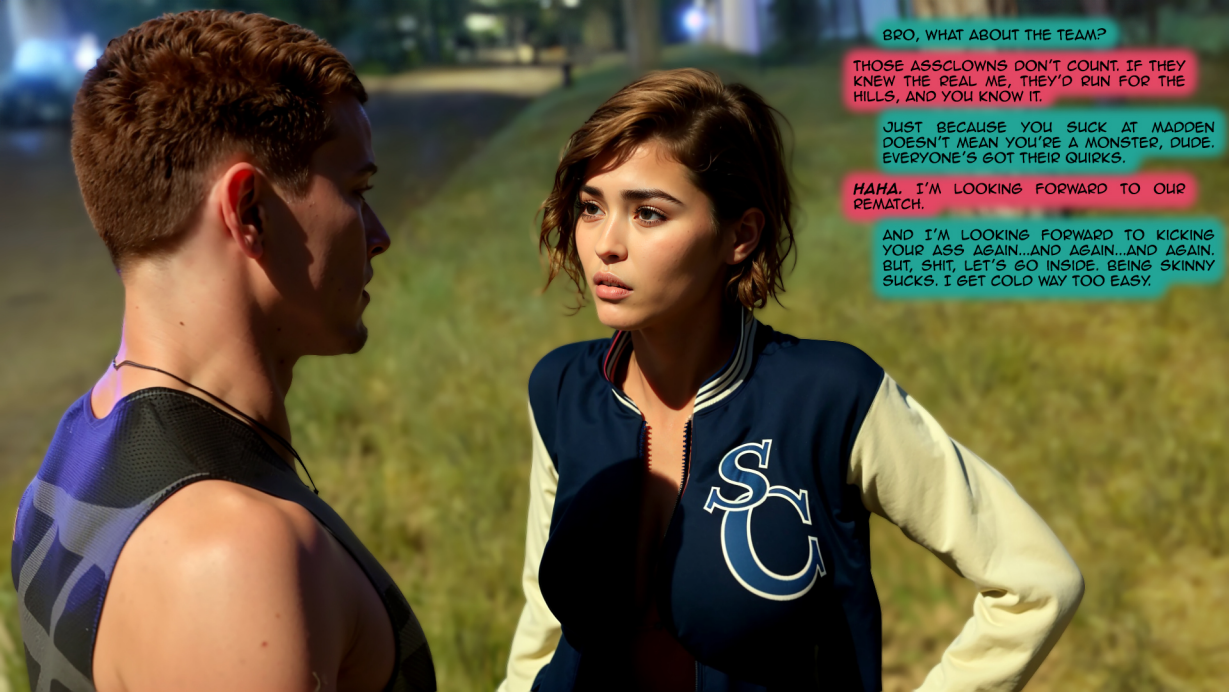

I'M SO DAMN SORRY, ZACH.
IT'S OKAY, NICK. YOU WERE TRYING TO FIT IN, JUST LIKE THE REST OF US.
THANKS, MAN. BUT IT'S NOT JUST THAT. ALL OF THIS... IT'S LIKE KARMA, YOU KNOW? MAYBE IF I'D BEEN A BETTER FRIEND, IF I'D BEEN MORE OPEN-MINDED, I WOULDN'T BE IN THIS SITUATION.
NOBODY DESERVES TO GO THROUGH WHAT YOU'RE GOING THROUGH. BUT EVEN THOUGH THIS WHOLE SITUATION IS SHITTY, I CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL GRATEFUL FOR ONE THING. IT BROUGHT US BACK TOGETHER.


MAYBE THIS TIME WE CAN BE THE FRIENDS WE WERE MEANT TO BE. IF I HAVE TO BE HONEST, I NEVER STOPPED CARING ABOUT YOU, NICK. EVEN WHEN YOU LOCKED ME IN THE SUPPLY CLOSET OR THREW YOUR DIRTY CLOTHES AT ME. YOU WERE STILL THE GUY WHO STOOD UP FOR ME -- EVEN IF YOU LOST YOUR WAY FOR A LITTLE WHILE. HUG IT OUT?
FUCK, DUDE! YEAH, LET'S HUG IT OUT BEFORE I START CRYING OR SOME SHIT. STUPID GIRLY HORMONES!


NO HOMO?
NAH, THIS IS *TOTALLY* HOMO. LIKE, 100% HOMO.
YOU BITCH -- BUT I... I REALLY AM GRATEFUL FOR YOU, MAN. IF I SAVED YOU BACK THEN, YOU'RE DEFINITELY SAVING ME NOW. FRIENDS?
FRIENDS. AND FOR THE RECORD, IT'S NOT JUST THE HORMONES. GUYS CAN CRY TOGETHER, TOO.


THERE'S THAT SON OF A BITCH.


YOU SEE THAT?
WHAT?
I COULD'VE SWORN SOMEBODY WAS WATCHING US FROM ACROSS THE STREET. LOOKED LIKE A CHICK. WAIT, DO YOU HAVE ANY CRAZY EX-GIRLFRIENDS I NEED TO WORRY WILL STAB ME IN A FIT OF PMS RAGE?
FIRST OF ALL -- UGH, NEVER MIND. BUT SO FAR, NICK, YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WHO SEEMS TO GET STABBY WHEN YOU'RE HORMONAL. ANYWAY, I'VE NEVER HAD A GIRLFRIEND. OR A BOYFRIEND. BARELY ANY 'FRIENDS' OF ANY GENDER, FOR THAT MATTER.


BRO, WHAT ABOUT THE TEAM?
THOSE ASSCLOWNS DON'T COUNT. IF THEY KNEW THE REAL ME, THEY'D RUN FOR THE HILLS, AND YOU KNOW IT.
JUST BECAUSE YOU SUCK AT MADDEN DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE A MONSTER, DUDE. EVERYONE'S GOT THEIR QUIRKS.
HAHA. I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO OUR REMATCH.
AND I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO KICKING YOUR ASS AGAIN...AND AGAIN...AND AGAIN. BUT, SHIT, LET'S GO INSIDE. BEING SKINNY SUCKS. I GET COLD WAY TOO EASY.

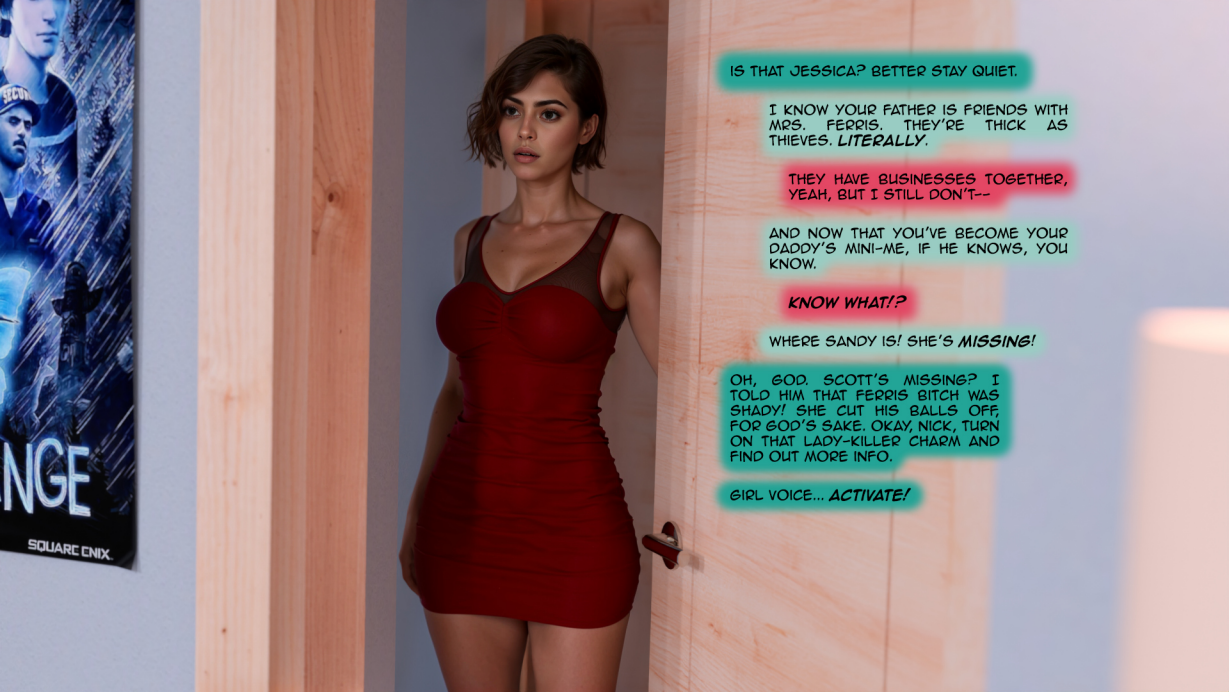

DAMN, IT'S GETTING LATE. I'D BETTER GET BACK HOME. I'LL PUT THE STUPID HEELS BACK ON AND THE...THE...YOU KNOW.
MAYBE YOU SHOULD KEEP IT OFF. I'LL TAKE THE HEAT FROM MY FATHER.
I APPRECIATE THAT, MAN. BUT THAT'S PROBABLY WHAT HE WANTS -- SOME EXCUSE TO MAKE THINGS EVEN WORSE FOR ME. IT'S FINE. I BARELY FEEL IT THESE DAYS. NOW I KNOW WHY, AT LEAST.
GOD, I'M SORRY, NICK.
ME FUCKING TOO, MAN. OKAY, I'LL BE OUT IN A SEC.


HOW DO I EVEN PUT THIS DAMN THING ON? I'VE NEVER HAD TO BEFORE! WELL, BETTER FIGURE IT OUT BECAUSE THERE'S NO WAY I'M ASKING ZACH TO HELP.
ALL RIGHT, LET'S SEE... OKAY, SO THIS LOOKS LIKE A PUZZLE. A PUZZLE FOR MY JUNK. GREAT, FANTASTIC. LET'S CRACK THE CODE.


POOR NICK. WHEN WILL THIS NIGHTMARE END FOR HIM? NOT UNTIL MY OWN DOES, I GUESS. MY FATHER WON'T STOP TRYING TO MAKE HIM INTO A GIRL UNTIL HE ACCEPTS THAT I WAS NEVER ATTRACTED TO NICK'S 'FEMININE AURA,' WHATEVER INCEL BULLSHIT THAT'S SUPPOSED TO MEAN.
ALTHOUGH, IT *IS* KIND OF NICE THAT HE'S BACK TO BEING SKINNY -- EVEN IF THE SKINNY COMES WITH ***BOOBS***. I NEVER LIKED MEATHEADS. IRONIC, CONSIDERING WHAT I LOOK LIKE NOW. BUT IT WAS NEVER ABOUT NICK'S BODY. AT LEAST, ***MOSTLY*** NOT ABOUT HIS BODY. IT WAS HIS... UM... YEAH, "AURA," I GUESS. BUT IT WASN'T FEMININE! IT WAS GENTLE. NOBLE, EVEN. UGH, WHAT AM I EVEN--
KNOCK-KNOCK
HUH? DID NICK ORDER AN UBER?


JESSICA!
FUCK YOU.
OH, UM, OKAY. HELLO TO YOU, TOO.
WHERE IS SHE, HUTCHINSON?
SORRY, AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT?
FUCK YOU!


AT LEAST WHEN I GET BACK TO DAD'S I WON'T HAVE TO WEAR THIS GIRLY SHIT FOR A WHILE. MAYBE NOT UNTIL THE 'DATE' I'M SUPPOSED TO HAVE WITH ZACH.
WAIT, WHO'S SHOUTING? SOUNDS LIKE A GIRL. OH, NO. IT'S THE CRAZY EX! I WAS RIGHT!


NGE
SQUARE ENIX
IS THAT JESSICA? BETTER STAY QUIET.
I KNOW YOUR FATHER IS FRIENDS WITH MRS. FERRIS. THEY'RE THICK AS THIEVES. LITERALLY.
THEY HAVE BUSINESSES TOGETHER, YEAH, BUT I STILL DON'T--
AND NOW THAT YOU'VE BECOME YOUR DADDY'S MINI-ME, IF HE KNOWS, YOU KNOW.
KNOW WHAT!?
WHERE SANDY IS! SHE'S MISSING!
OH, GOD. SCOTT'S MISSING? I TOLD HIM THAT FERRIS BITCH WAS SHADY! SHE CUT HIS BALLS OFF, FOR GOD'S SAKE. OKAY, NICK, TURN ON THAT LADY-KILLER CHARM AND FIND OUT MORE INFO.
GIRL VOICE... ACTIVATE!


JESSICA, I'M SORRY FOR WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PARK. OKAY? BUT DO YOU REALLY THINK I'D HELP KIDNAP A GIRL? OR KEEP IT SECRET OR WHATEVER YOU THINK I DID?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE CAPABLE OF ANYMORE. YOU SCARED US! I USED TO KNOW A ZACH HUTCHINSON WHO WOULD'VE RATHER DIED THAN BECOME LIKE HIS FATHER.
UM, JESSICA, I KNOW ZACH PRETTY WELL AND HE'S STILL THE BOY YOU USED TO KNOW. DEEP DOWN, AT LEAST.
SQUARE ENIX


AND JUST WHO IN HELL ARE--


--you?


LIFE IS STRANGE
OH, I'M SC -- SANDY'S FRIEND. NIKKI.
YOU'RE NIKKI?
Y-YES?
YOU'RE THE GIRL I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO WORRY ABOUT!?
I...DON'T KNOW HOW TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION. BUT IF SANDY IS REALLY MISSING, THAT WORRIES THE HELL OUT OF ME, TOO. CAN WE SIT DOWN AND HAVE COFFEE OR SOMETHING AND YOU CAN TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK HAPPENED?
UM. OKAY, YEAH. LET'S SIT DOWN, NIKKI.


...AND SO, I'VE BEEN TEXTING HER FOR, LIKE, A WEEK. I THOUGHT MAYBE SHE WAS GHOSTING ME. THAT WOULD'VE SUCKED, BUT I'M USED TO THAT KIND OF THING -- ESPECIALLY BACK HERE IN TEXAS. BUT, I DON'T KNOW, SHE DIDN'T SEEM LIKE THE TYPE TO CUT OFF COMMUNICATION LIKE THAT WITHOUT A WORD. SO, TODAY, I WENT OVER TO MRS. FERRIS'S HOUSE.


SHE'S GONE, NIKKI. THEY'RE **BOTH** GONE.
OKAY, UM, WELL DOESN'T MRS. FERRIS HAVE ANOTHER PLACE UP NEAR BOSTON?
YES! B-BUT THEY JUST GOT BACK HERE TO TEXAS. MRS. FERRIS WAS TELLING EVERYONE SHE WAS PLANNING ON STAYING HERE FOR GOOD. WHY WOULD THEY JUST UP AND LEAVE? AND WHY WOULDN'T SANDY HAVE SAID ANYTHING? I...I HAVE A TERRIBLE FEELING SHE'S GOING TO DO SOMETHING TO HER.
BUT WHY WOULD SHE DO THAT? I MEAN, YEAH, THE WHOLE SITUATION IS PRETTY STRANGE WHAT WITH THE WHOLE 'REPLACE MY DEAD DAUGHTER' ANGLE -- AND, COME TO THINK OF IT, I HAVEN'T GOTTEN A REPLY BACK TO MY EMAILS IN A WHILE. SHIT, ZACH, THIS IS MAYBE REALLY BAD.


THERE'S MORE. I TOLD SANDY A SECRET ABOUT SOPHIA.
MRS. FERRIS'S DAUGHTER WHO DIED, RIGHT?
SHE DIDN'T DIE. SHE WAS MURDERED. AND SANDY SEEMED OBSESSED WITH THE WHOLE STORY, EVEN AFTER I ASKED HER TO LET IT GO. AND THEN SHE SAID SOMETHING REALLY BIZARRE. SEE, SOPHIA WAS TRANS, BUT WHEN I SHOWED HER MY PICTURE OF SOPHIA BEFORE HER TRANSITION, SHE GOT THIS WILD LOOK IN HER EYE AND INSTANTLY THOUGHT MRS. FERRIS HAD TURNED HER CHILD INTO A GIRL. LIKE, THAT SOPHIA WAS FORCED TO TRANSITION. WHY WOULD SHE THINK THAT?
AND HOW DO YOU TWO KNOW EACH OTHER, ANYWAY? SANDY IS FROM UP NORTH BUT YOU'RE FROM TEXAS. I CAN HEAR YOUR ACCENT.
UM... WE...


AND HOW COME NEITHER OF YOU GORGEOUS GIRLS KNOWS HOW TO SIT IN A SKIRT?
I... I USED TO BE A TOMBOY.
THAT'S WHAT SANDY SAID!
RIGHT. UH. BECAUSE WE WERE IN A CLUB? A TOMBOY RECOVERY CLUB. OUR PARENTS MADE US GO.


SEE? T-THIS IS HOW THEY TAUGHT US TO SIT. PRETTY AS A PICTURE.
OKAY, THIS IS ALL REALLY, REALLY STRANGE. WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE? DON'T LIE TO ME. I HAVEN'T KNOWN SANDY FOR LONG, BUT I CARE ABOUT HER. DO YOU ACTUALLY KNOW WHERE SHE IS, NIKKI? IF SHE DOESN'T WANT TO SEE ME AGAIN, THAT'S FINE. I JUST NEED TO KNOW SHE'S OKAY. PLEASE. I CAN'T BEAR THE THOUGHT THAT I MAY HAVE TOLD HER SOMETHING THAT GOT HER INTO TROUBLE WITH THAT HORRIBLE WOMAN.


JESS, LEAVE NIKKI ALONE. SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHERE SANDY IS AND SHE'S JUST AS WORRIED AS YOU ARE ABOUT HER FRIEND. AND, NO, I DON'T KNOW WHERE SANDY IS, EITHER.
YOU'RE RIGHT -- MY DAD AND MRS. FERRIS ARE CLOSE. IF SHE LEFT TOWN, SHE WOULD'VE TOLD HIM WHERE TO AND FOR HOW LONG.
I'M DONE MAKING EXCUSES FOR THESE ASSHOLES. THEY THINK THEY CAN GET AWAY WITH ANYTHING.


GIRLS, I PROMISE I'LL FIND OUT WHERE SANDY IS -- EVEN IF I HAVE TO BEAT IT OUT OF MY OLD MAN.
I'LL BE IN TOUCH SOON, JESS. I PROMISE. I'VE BEEN REMINDED RECENTLY THAT PEOPLE CAN CHANGE. WELL, I GUESS IT'S TIME TO SEE IF I CAN BE AS BRAVE AS SOME OF THE AMAZING... **PEOPLE**... IN MY LIFE.
NIKKI, I'LL GIVE YOU A RIDE HOME. OKAY?
O-OKAY, SURE. I DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD A CAR.
HEH. I DON'T.


KEEP HOLDIN' TIGHT!


SO, WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE RIDE?
EH, IT WAS ALRIGHT. I MEAN, IT'S JUST A MOTORCYCLE.
ALRIGHT? YOU WERE HOLDING ONTO ME PRETTY TIGHT BACK THERE.
I WASN'T HOLDING *THAT* TIGHT. JUST... DIDN'T WANT TO FALL OFF OR ANYTHING.
WELL, I'M GLAD YOU DIDN'T. BUT DON'T WORRY, I WOULD'VE CAUGHT YOU.
OH, REALLY? YOUR REFLEXES ARE THAT GOOD, HUH? BECAUSE I SEEM TO REMEMBER A LOT OF FUMBLES WHEN YOU FIRST JOINED THE TEAM.
HEY, THOSE WERE THE EARLY DAYS! I'VE GOTTEN MUCH BETTER SINCE THEN.
GREAT! SO, YOU'RE ONLY FUMBLING... WHAT, LIKE HALF THE TIME NOW?
MAYBE THAT'S WHY COACH MADE ME THE QB. NOW I DON'T HAVE TO TRY TO CATCH THE DAMN BALL, THEY JUST HAND IT TO ME.


I'LL CALL YOU WHEN I LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO SANDY.
HIS REAL NAME IS *SCOTT*.
RIGHT. WELL, I'LL CALL YOU. AND, UH, I GUESS WE'LL FIGURE SOMETHING OUT FOR THIS STUPID DATE WE NEED TO GO ON, TOO.
'WE?' HELL NO. YOU FIGURE IT OUT. IF I HAVE TO PICK OUT THE DUMB OUTFIT FOR THIS FARCE, YOU NEED TO PICK THE STAGE.
HA. OKAY, FINE. NOTHING TOO FANCY, I PROMISE.
OH, WE HAVE ONE PIZZA NIGHT, AND NOW I'M A CHEAP DATE?
UH...
I'M SCREWING WITH YOU, Z. SORRY, SCOTT'S VANISHING ACT HAS GOT ME ALL ANXIOUS. I HOPE TO GOD HE'S OKAY. HE'S JUST A LITTLE GUY, YOU KNOW? NOT TOUGH LIKE YOU AND ME.
WANT ME TO WALK YOU TO YOUR DOOR?
DUDE, I CAN MANAGE THE TREACHEROUS 100 FEET AHEAD, EVEN IN THESE HEELS.


ALRIGHT, WELL... UH... HAVE A GOOD NIGHT.
RIGHT. YEAH. YOU... YOU TOO...


HOLD ON... DID IT ALMOST FEEL LIKE NICK WANTED ME TO KISS HIM JUST NOW? NO, THAT CAN'T BE RIGHT. THIS IS NICHOLAS PALMER WE'RE TALKING ABOUT. I'M JUST OVERTHINKING THINGS AGAIN.
AND, I MEAN, IT'S NOT LIKE I WAS CONSIDERING IT... OR WAS I? MAN, THIS IS ALL CONFUSING AS HELL!


WHAT A WEIRD NIGHT. AT LEAST THE MOTORCYCLE RIDE WAS PRETTY COOL. THOSE HAVE ALWAYS SCARED THE HELL OUT OF ME, BUT IT WASN'T SO BAD RIDING WITH ZACH. HE KNEW HOW TO HANDLE IT, THAT'S FOR SURE.
BUT THE WAY HE LOOKED AT ME RIGHT BEFORE I LEFT... GOD, DID HE WANT TO KISS ME OR SOMETHING? NO WAY, THAT'S CRAZY. HE KNOWS I'M NOT INTO GUYS, AND HE'S NOT INTO... WHAT I LOOK LIKE RIGHT NOW.


ALRIGHT NICK, TIME TO SWEAR OFF THE GIRLY STUFF FOR AT LEAST A WEEK. AS SOON AS I STEP INTO MY ROOM, THE FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS IS TO SHOOT AN EMAIL TO SCOTT, THEN I'LL SHOWER OFF THIS MAKEUP, THROW ON SWEATPANTS, AND CATCH THE LAST INNINGS OF TONIGHT'S ASTROS GAME.


HEY, PRETTY GIRL! LOOKIN' REAL GOOD TONIGHT! WANT SOME COMPANY?


WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST SAY TO ME YOU--


...UGH. WAIT. I SHOULDN'T MAKE WAVES RIGHT NOW...
UM, T-THANKS, BUT I HAVE A BOYFRIEND.
AW. WELL, HE'S A LUCKY FELLA. HE BETTER TREAT YOU GOOD!


WHAT KIND OF SADIST INVENTED HIGH HEELS? MY FEET ARE KILLING ME AND THIS DUMB UNDERWEAR IS RIDING UP MY ASS. OKAY, JUST HAVE TO MAKE IT UPSTAIRS AND I CAN DETOX FROM THIS STRANGE NIGHT.


HEY, NICHOLAS. WASN'T SURE IF YOU'D BE BACK TONIGHT. GLAD YOU ARE, THOUGH.



LEONARD LEFT A COUPLE HOURS AGO. HE WAS HAPPY AS A TICK ON A FAT DOG WITH YOU GOIN' HOME WITH HIS PERVERT SON. I'M SUPPOSED TO TELL YOU TO START LOOKING FOR A DRESS FOR YOUR 'OFFICIAL' DATE -- ALTHOUGH I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU'LL OUTDO THAT ONE HE FOUND YOU. YOU'RE EVEN ***PRETTIER*** THAN YOUR MOTHER WAS AT YOUR AGE.

DAD! DON'T SAY THAT!

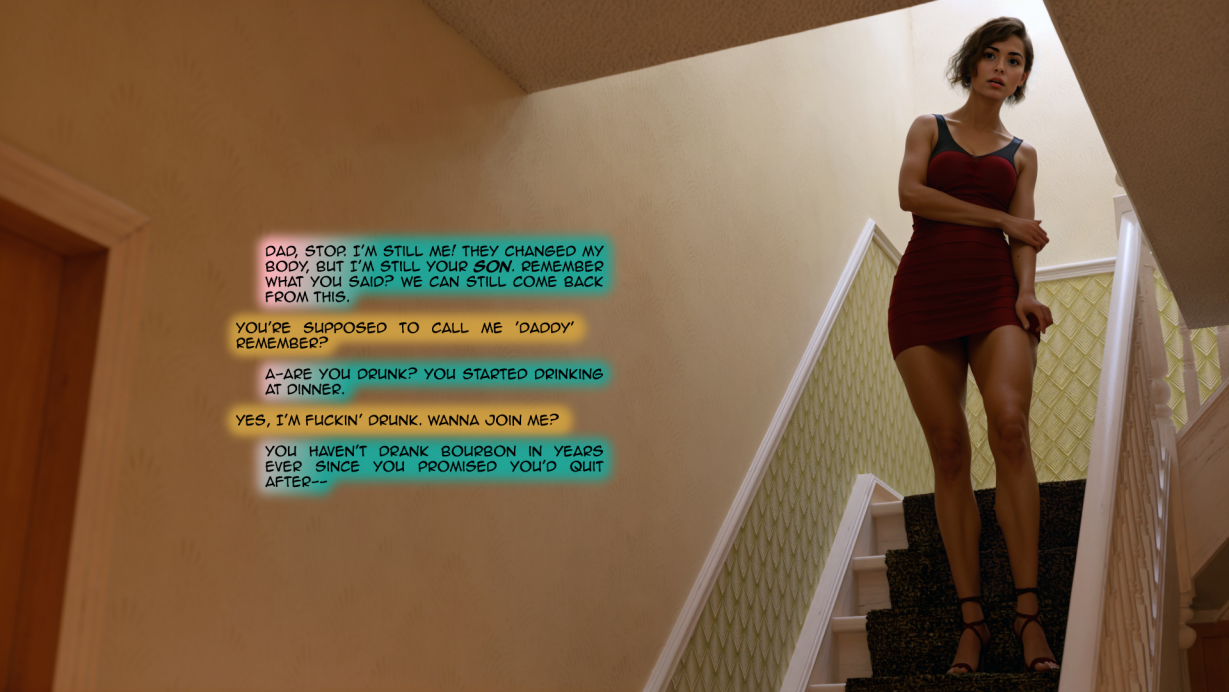
WHY? IT'S FUCKIN' TRUE. YOU GOT YOUR MOM'S FEATURES, AND THAT AIN'T SUCH A BAD THING. IT HELPED YOU WITH THE GIRLS, THAT'S FOR SURE. BUT, LET'S BE HONEST. IT AIN'T JUST YOUR PRETTY FACE YOU INHERITED. SHE'S ***SOFT***, NICHOLAS. THAT'S WHY SHE NEEDED ME TO PROTECT HER. AND, WELL, GROWING UP WITH HER RAISING YOU -- AND WITH ME AWAY ALL THE TIME -- HER SOFTNESS RUBBED OFF ON YA A BIT TOO MUCH. EVER SINCE YOU WERE KNEE-HIGH, I KNEW TRYING TO FIGHT AGAINST YOUR MOM'S GIRLY INDOCTRINATION WAS GONNA BE LIKE PUSHIN' A BOULDER UP A HILL. SHE'S HAD HER HOOKS IN YOU, BOY.

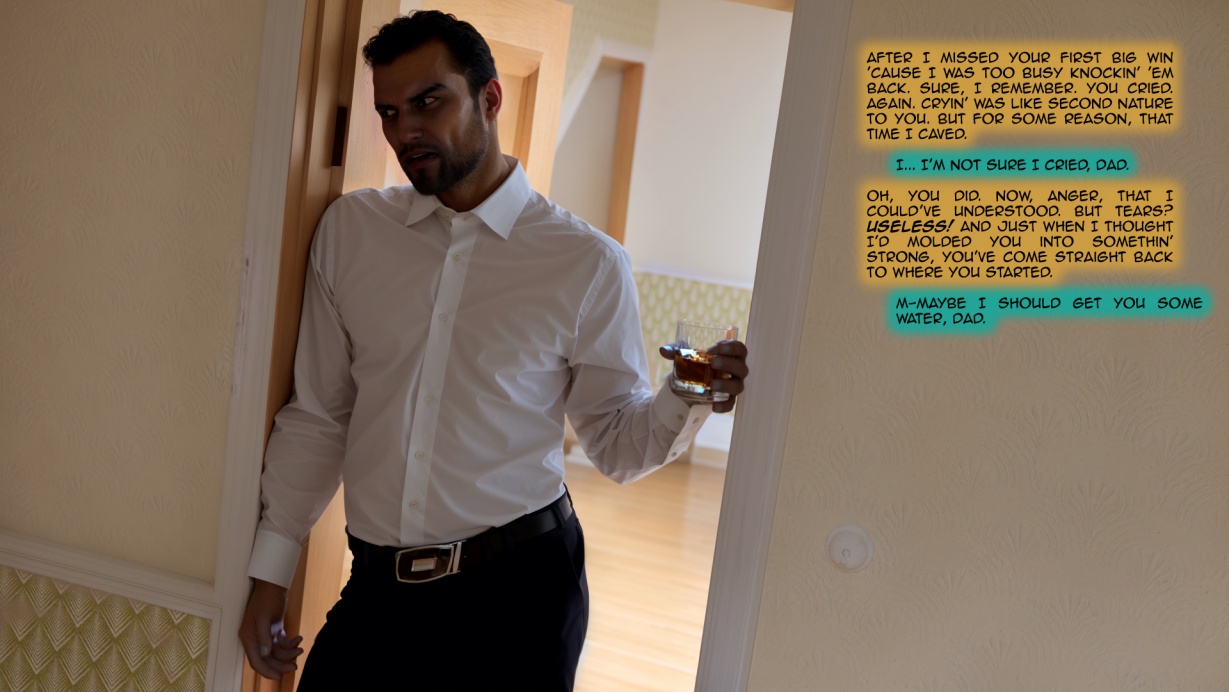
C'MON, THAT'S NOT TRUE.

THEN WHY ARE YOU ***SQUEAKING*** AT ME? WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR VOICE?

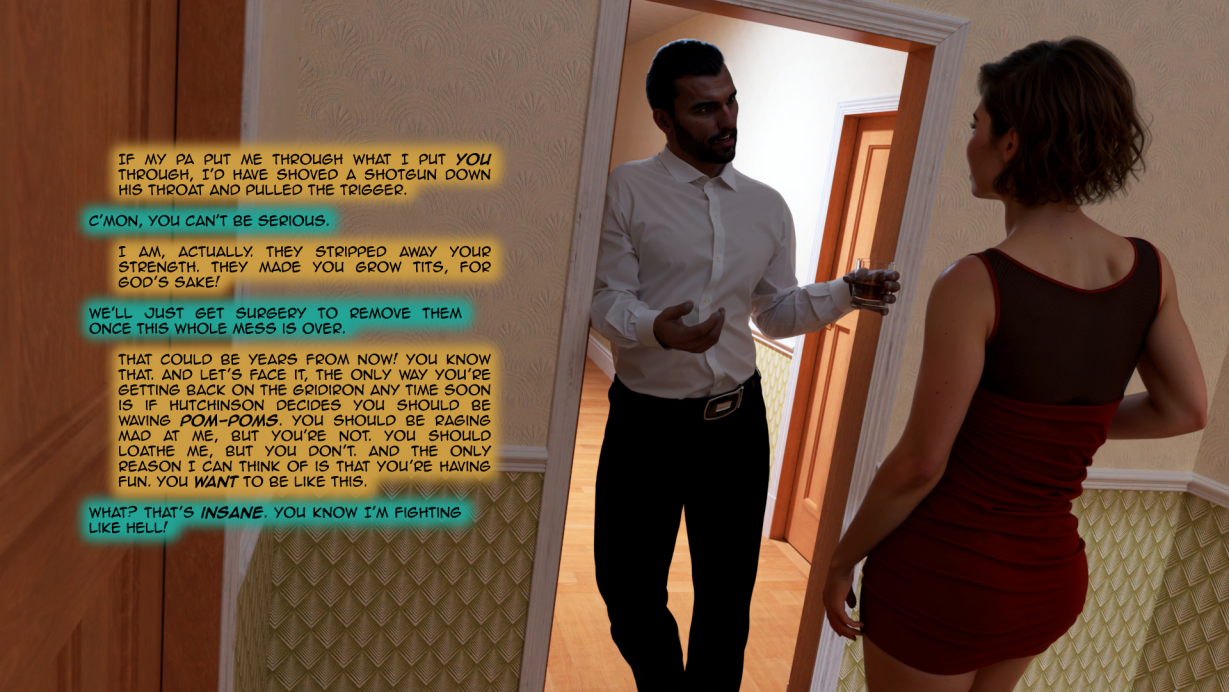
IT'S JUST... HARD TO SWITCH. HOLD ON...

IT'S ***HARD*** TO TALK LIKE A MAN NOW? JESUS CHRIST. HEY, YOU REMEMBER HOW HARD YOU HAD TO WORK JUST TO PUT SOME MUSCLE ON YOUR FRAME? LIKE YOUR BODY WAS FIGHTING AGAINST IT, WANTING TO STAY ALL SKINNY AND WEAK. I WANTED TO TELL LEONARD TO FUCK OFF WHEN HE MENTIONED YOUR ***"FEMININE AURA,"*** BUT SEEING YOU IN THAT DAMN DRESS, WALKING DOWN THOSE STAIRS... I HAD TO WONDER IF MAYBE HE WAS ONTO SOMETHING.


DAD, STOP. I'M STILL ME! THEY CHANGED MY BODY, BUT I'M STILL YOUR SON. REMEMBER WHAT YOU SAID? WE CAN STILL COME BACK FROM THIS.
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO CALL ME 'DADDY' REMEMBER?
A-ARE YOU DRUNK? YOU STARTED DRINKING AT DINNER.
YES, I'M FUCKIN' DRUNK. WANNA JOIN ME?
YOU HAVEN'T DRANK BOURBON IN YEARS EVER SINCE YOU PROMISED YOU'D QUIT AFTER--


AFTER I MISSED YOUR FIRST BIG WIN 'CAUSE I WAS TOO BUSY KNOCKIN' 'EM BACK. SURE, I REMEMBER. YOU CRIED. AGAIN. CRYIN' WAS LIKE SECOND NATURE TO YOU. BUT FOR SOME REASON, THAT TIME I CAVED.
I... I'M NOT SURE I CRIED, DAD.
OH, YOU DID. NOW, ANGER, THAT I COULD'VE UNDERSTOOD. BUT TEARS? USELESS! AND JUST WHEN I THOUGHT I'D MOLDED YOU INTO SOMETHIN' STRONG, YOU'VE COME STRAIGHT BACK TO WHERE YOU STARTED.
M-MAYBE I SHOULD GET YOU SOME WATER, DAD.

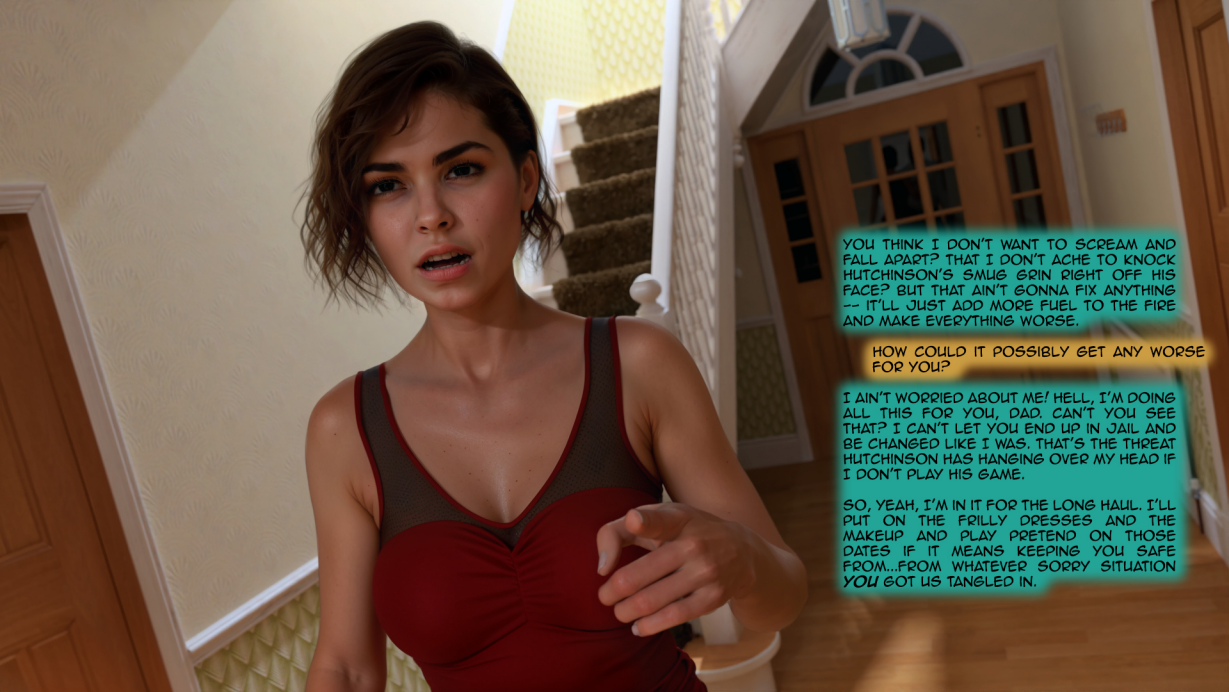

C'MON, DAD. GET OUT OF THE WAY. WE HAVE TO GET YOU TO BED
ANSWER ME A QUESTION FIRST. WHY AM I STILL ALIVE, NICHOLAS?
WHAT?

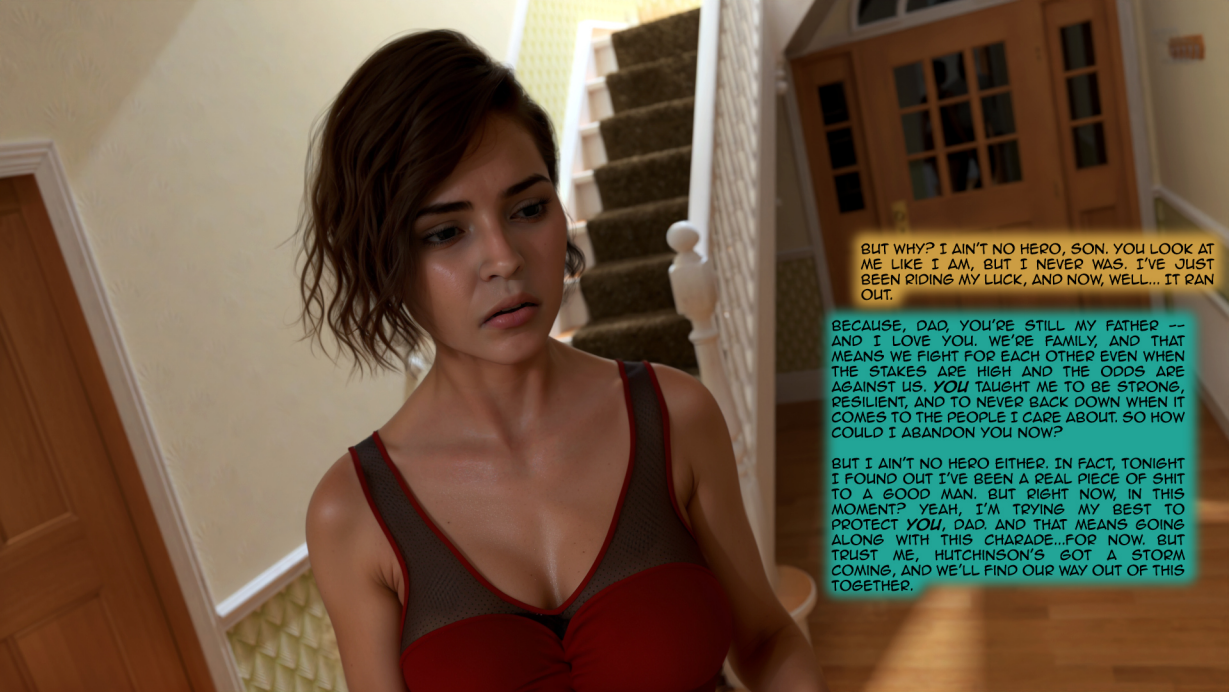

IF MY PA PUT ME THROUGH WHAT I PUT ***YOU*** THROUGH, I'D HAVE SHOVED A SHOTGUN DOWN HIS THROAT AND PULLED THE TRIGGER.
C'MON, YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS.
I AM, ACTUALLY. THEY STRIPPED AWAY YOUR STRENGTH. THEY MADE YOU GROW TITS, FOR GOD'S SAKE!
WE'LL JUST GET SURGERY TO REMOVE THEM ONCE THIS WHOLE MESS IS OVER.
THAT COULD BE YEARS FROM NOW! YOU KNOW THAT. AND LET'S FACE IT, THE ONLY WAY YOU'RE GETTING BACK ON THE GRIDIRON ANY TIME SOON IS IF HUTCHINSON DECIDES YOU SHOULD BE WAVING ***POM-POMS***. YOU SHOULD BE RAGING MAD AT ME, BUT YOU'RE NOT. YOU SHOULD LOATHE ME, BUT YOU DON'T. AND THE ONLY REASON I CAN THINK OF IS THAT YOU'RE HAVING FUN. YOU ***WANT*** TO BE LIKE THIS.
WHAT? THAT'S ***INSANE***. YOU KNOW I'M FIGHTING LIKE HELL!


NICHOLAS, CUT THE SHIT AND BE HONEST. DID YOU HAVE SEX WITH THAT PERVERT TONIGHT?


W-WHAT? HOW COULD YOU ASK ME THAT!?
HOW COULD I NOT? YOU LEFT WITH HIM! NOW, TELL ME THE TRUTH AND I WON'T BE MAD. IF WE'RE GONNA FIX YOU, I GOTTA KNOW HOW BAD THE DAMAGE IS. UNDERSTAND?


UH-OH, NICHOLAS IS *MAD* NOW.
GOOD! THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO SEE, SON. *RAGE*. YOU SHOULD BE PISSED AS FUCK AT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU -- ABOUT AT WHAT I *DID* TO YOU BECAUSE I'M A... I'M A BAD FATHER.
NOW, GO AHEAD AND TAKE A SWING. YOU GET FREE SHOT AT THE OLD MAN.


YOU THINK I DON'T WANT TO SCREAM AND FALL APART? THAT I DON'T ACHE TO KNOCK HUTCHINSON'S SMUG GRIN RIGHT OFF HIS FACE? BUT THAT AIN'T GONNA FIX ANYTHING -- IT'LL JUST ADD MORE FUEL TO THE FIRE AND MAKE EVERYTHING WORSE.
HOW COULD IT POSSIBLY GET ANY WORSE FOR YOU?
I AIN'T WORRIED ABOUT ME! HELL, I'M DOING ALL THIS FOR YOU, DAD. CAN'T YOU SEE THAT? I CAN'T LET YOU END UP IN JAIL AND BE CHANGED LIKE I WAS. THAT'S THE THREAT HUTCHINSON HAS HANGING OVER MY HEAD IF I DON'T PLAY HIS GAME.
SO, YEAH, I'M IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL. I'LL PUT ON THE FRILLY DRESSES AND THE MAKEUP AND PLAY PRETEND ON THOSE DATES IF IT MEANS KEEPING YOU SAFE FROM...FROM WHATEVER SORRY SITUATION YOU GOT US TANGLED IN.


BUT WHY? I AIN'T NO HERO, SON. YOU LOOK AT ME LIKE I AM, BUT I NEVER WAS. I'VE JUST BEEN RIDING MY LUCK, AND NOW, WELL... IT RAN OUT.
BECAUSE, DAD, YOU'RE STILL MY FATHER -- AND I LOVE YOU. WE'RE FAMILY, AND THAT MEANS WE FIGHT FOR EACH OTHER EVEN WHEN THE STAKES ARE HIGH AND THE ODDS ARE AGAINST US. YOU TAUGHT ME TO BE STRONG, RESILIENT, AND TO NEVER BACK DOWN WHEN IT COMES TO THE PEOPLE I CARE ABOUT. SO HOW COULD I ABANDON YOU NOW?
BUT I AIN'T NO HERO EITHER. IN FACT, TONIGHT I FOUND OUT I'VE BEEN A REAL PIECE OF SHIT TO A GOOD MAN. BUT RIGHT NOW, IN THIS MOMENT? YEAH, I'M TRYING MY BEST TO PROTECT YOU, DAD. AND THAT MEANS GOING ALONG WITH THIS CHARADE...FOR NOW. BUT TRUST ME, HUTCHINSON'S GOT A STORM COMING, AND WE'LL FIND OUR WAY OUT OF THIS TOGETHER.


HMPH. I DUNNO, SOUNDS LIKE TOO MANY FEELINGS RATTLING AROUND IN THAT HEAD OF YOURS. YOU CAN'T GO SOFT, SON. YOUR BODY IS RUINED AND IF YOUR MIND FOLLOWS, I GUARANTEE YOU'LL END UP ZACH'S GIRLFRIEND FOR REAL AND THEN NOBODY WILL BE ABLE TO SAVE YOU FROM -- HEY, WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING?
TO BED. I'VE HAD A LONG DAY AND YOU WON'T EVEN REMEMBER THIS TALK COME MORNING.
SEE? YOU'RE JUST LIKE YOUR MOTHER. SHE ALWAYS RAN FROM A FIGHT, TOO.


BETTER FOR EVERYONE IF I LOCK THE DOOR TONIGHT IN CASE HE WANTS TO CONTINUE THE ARGUMENT. DAMN, IT'S LIKE I'M TWELVE YEARS OLD AGAIN.
PAGING DR. SCOOTERINO MCPUFFYNIPS III,
BRO, WHERE THE HELL DID YOU GO!? AND WITHOUT TELLING ME?? DID YOU RUN AWAY FROM CRAZY MRS. FERRIS? JESSICA CAME LOOKING FOR 'SANDY' AND SHE'S ALL UPSET THAT YOU GHOSTED. CALL HER, MAN. AND CALL ME, TOO.
TO BE HONEST, I COULD USE ONE OF YOUR PEP TALKS ABOUT NOW.
- NICK




HEY. YEAH, IT'S ME. HEH, YEAH, SORRY IT'S LATE. NO, NO, EVERYTHING IS OKAY. GREAT, REALLY.
BUT, UM... YEAH, IT'S... IT'S REALLY GOOD TO HEAR YOUR VOICE TOO, MOM.