HALF SISTERS

by Emory Ahlberg

Episode #6

Secrets Revealed


YOU KNOW, IT'S ODD, BEING BACK IN BOSTON. I FEEL LIKE THE LAST TIME I WAS HERE WAS A LIFETIME AGO.
IN MANY WAYS, IT WAS. THE PERSON YOU WERE THEN IS NOT THE PERSON YOU ARE NOW. YOU'VE GROWN, EVOLVED, BECOME... SO MUCH MORE.
WHEN YOU SAY I'VE 'GROWN,' ARE YOU REFERRING TO MY... ENHANCED PARTS?
OH, THAT'S MERELY THE SURFACE CHANGE. YES, YOUR PHYSICAL TRANSFORMATION IS UNDENIABLE, BUT I'M SPEAKING ABOUT THE BRAVERY, MATURITY, AND RESILIENCE YOU'VE SHOWN. YOU'VE GROWN EMOTIONALLY AND MENTALLY, AND THAT'S WHAT TRULY MATTERS.
THAT MAKES TWO OF US.
WHY, THANK YOU, SANDY. THAT MEANS A LOT TO ME. ALTHOUGH I RECOGNIZE THAT I STILL HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO TO FULLY EARN YOUR TRUST. YOUR JOURNEY HASN'T BEEN EASY, AND I'M RESPONSIBLE FOR THAT. I WANT TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT.
THAT'S GOOD. YOU CAN START BY REASSURING ME AGAIN THAT JOSH WILL BE OKAY.
HE'LL BE OKAY, DARLING. YOU HAVE MY WORD.


HEY BABY, YOU'RE ROCKIN' THAT DRESS! I'M ABOUT TO JET OFF TO THAILAND ON BUSINESS. WANNA JOIN ME?
UM. N-NO, THANKS.


IS IT NORMAL FOR PEOPLE TO OPENLY GAWK LIKE THIS?
AT A GORGEOUS YOUNG WOMAN LIKE YOURSELF? ABSOLUTELY. THEY'RE CAPTIVATED BY YOUR BEAUTY. YOU SHOULD BE FLATTERED. PLUS, WEARING A DESIGNER DRESS LIKE THAT DOES ATTRACT GLANCES.
I... I'M NOT SURE I LIKE ALL THE MEN STARING AT ME. AT LEAST IN TEXAS THEY WERE MORE DISCREET!
NOW THAT YOU'VE JOINED THE FAIRER SEX, I'M AFRAID THAT'S SOMETHING YOU'LL HAVE TO BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO. WE HAVE OUR LIMO WAITING FOR US. LET'S GO.


WHAT ABOUT OUR BAGS?
THEY'LL BE DELIVERED LATER.
THAT'S A THING? YOU CAN HAVE YOUR BAGS DELIVERED LATER?
OH, SANDY, WHEN I TOLD YOU THERE WERE PERKS TO BEING FILTHY RICH, I WASN'T LYING. NOW, COME ALONG. I'M SURE JOSH IS VERY EAGER TO SEE YOU.


A LONG LIMO RIDE LATER...
YOU KNOW, I USED TO LOOK AT THIS PLACE FROM THE OUTSIDE, NOT JUST MARVELING AT ITS GRANDEUR BUT ALSO WONDERING ABOUT THE PEOPLE LIVING INSIDE. WHO WERE THEY? WHAT WERE THEIR LIVES LIKE? I GUESS THAT'S PART OF THE REASON WHY I DECIDED TO BREAK IN. CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT -- OR AT LEAST TURNED HIM INTO A GIRL.
THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I WONDERED THE SAME THING ABOUT THIS HOUSE'S OCCUPANTS, SANDY.


THIS HOUSE WAS FILLED WITH SO MANY ROOMS, YET I FELT LIKE HE WAS IN A ROOM OF HIS OWN THAT I COULDN'T FIND... EVEN THOUGH WE LIVED UNDER THE SAME ROOF. FUNNY, ISN'T IT? HOW YOU CAN SHARE A LIFE WITH SOMEONE, AND STILL FEEL LIKE THEY'RE A MYSTERY.
YOU DON'T TALK ABOUT HIM A LOT.
HE WAS A MAN OF MANY FACES, MY HUSBAND. TO THE WORLD, HE WAS THE EPITOME OF CHARM, A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN, A PHILANTHROPIST EVEN. BUT WHEN THE DOORS CLOSED AND WE WERE ALL TOGETHER... I SAW A DIFFERENT MAN. A MAN THAT WAS AS GRAND AS THIS HOUSE ON THE OUTSIDE, BUT INSIDE... WAS A DARK, COLD ROOM.


COME ALONG, SANDY. I KNOW YOU'RE STILL GETTING USED TO HEELS BUT TRY TO KEEP UP.
IT'S NOT JUST THE HEELS. I...I DON'T KNOW HOW TO FACE JOSH AGAIN, MRS. FERRIS. I MEAN... MOTHER. I... I ASKED HIM TO BREAK INTO THIS MANSION, AND NOW...
YOU'RE NOT AT FAULT HERE. I SHARE AS MUCH BLAME, IF NOT MORE. I KEPT SOFIA'S FATE A SECRET, KEPT YOU IN THE DARK. THAT'S WHAT REALLY MADE YOU NERVOUS.


...IT'S NOT JUST THAT. IT'S JESSICA.
AH, YOUR LITTLE DALLIANCE WITH THE REDHEAD? MY DEAR, I WISH YOU'D PICKED A LESS REBELLIOUS GIRL TO KISS. HOWEVER, YOU SHOULDN'T WORRY. GIRLS OFTEN HAVE FUN LITTLE FLINGS WITH EACH OTHER. I HAD SEVERAL IN COLLEGE. IT'S NOT SOMETHING SERIOUS...OR IS IT?


I...I DON'T KNOW HOW SERIOUS IT IS, BUT JESSICA DOESN'T KNOW I'M MALE, AND JOSH... JOSH ACCEPTED ME FROM THE START. I'M THINKING, MAYBE I SHOULDN'T TELL HIM ABOUT JESSICA...
LIES OF OMISSION HAVE LED US BOTH DOWN DARK PATHS. BESIDES, AS I'M SURE YOU RECALL, MEN DON'T TEND TO MIND WHEN A GIRL KISSES ANOTHER GIRL... THEY'RE OFTEN FASCINATED BY IT. TRUST ME ON THIS, SANDY. TELL JOSH EVERYTHING, HE'LL UNDERSTAND.

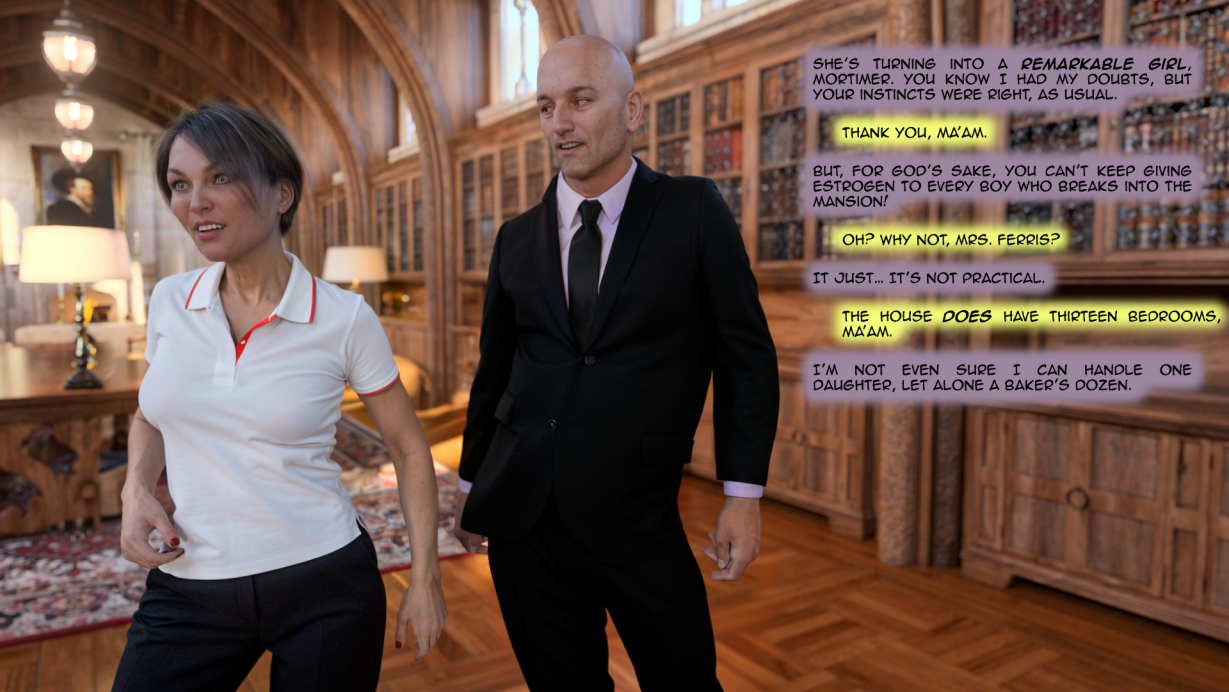

THIS PLACE... FEELS SO OPPRESSIVE. ALMOST... MEDIEVAL, YOU KNOW?
THAT WOULD BE BECAUSE, MY DEAR, THIS MANOR WAS ORIGINALLY IN EUROPE. IT WAS DISASSEMBLED AND SHIPPED HERE, BRICK BY BRICK.
THAT'S CRAZY!
SOFIA, SHE HATED THIS PLACE, TOO. RIGHT FROM WHEN SHE FIRST LEARNED TO WALK. SHE'D SPEND ALL HER TIME OUTSIDE IF SHE HAD HER WAY. BUT IN THE END, SHE DIED HERE. AND IT WASN'T JUST ON THAT HORRENDOUS DAY. BUT EVERY DAY, SLOWLY BUT SURELY, LOCKED UP IN THAT ROOM, UNABLE TO BE HERSELF... SHE WAS CONFINED, SUPPRESSED, STRIPPED OF HER IDENTITY. IT WAS...IT WAS... ANYWAY, I'M SORRY. WE HAVE OTHER CONCERNS AT THE MOMENT.

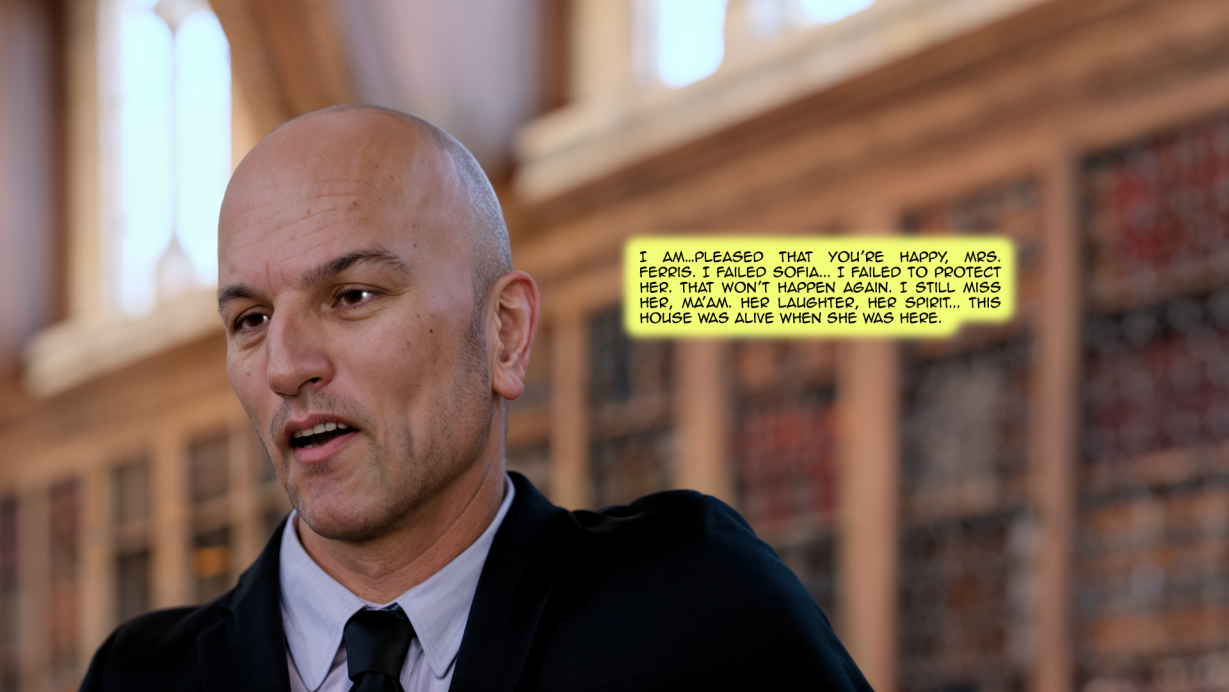

GOOD EVENING, MRS. FERRIS, MISS SOFIA.
MORTIMER, IT'S SANDY NOW, NOT SOFIA.
AH, MY APOLOGIES. MISS SANDY, THEN. ON A DIFFERENT NOTE, I FOUND YOUNG JOSHUA IN OUR LIBRARY. I CAME BACK FROM THE MARKET AND FOUND HIM RIFLING THROUGH THE DRAWERS. HE DIDN'T SEEM TO HAVE TAKEN ANYTHING, THOUGH.
DID YOU... DID YOU HURT HIM, MORTIMER? BECAUSE SO HELP ME--


NO NEED FOR SUCH DRASTIC MEASURES, MISS SANDY. THE YOUNG MAN DEMANDED OVER AND OVER FOR ME TO CALL THE POLICE. QUITE A CURIOUS CASE, INDEED. BUT, AS YOU KNOW, WE PREFER TO TAKE MATTERS INTO OUR OWN HANDS HERE. I TOOK JOSHUA TO SOFIA'S OLD ROOM. HE PUT UP NO STRUGGLE. HOWEVER, ONCE IT BECAME CLEAR THAT I WOULDN'T BE CALLING THE AUTHORITIES, HE STARTED SHOUTING THAT HE WANTED TO SEE YOU RIGHT AWAY. I ALSO GAVE HIM A DOSE OF ESTROGEN TO CALM HIM DOWN, BUT IT DIDN'T SEEM TO HAVE MUCH OF AN EFFECT.
ESTROGEN IS NOT A SEDATIVE, MORTIMER.
NO, MRS. FERRIS, I SUPPOSE THAT IT ISN'T.


SO, HE'S NOT HURT?
NOT AT ALL, MISS SANDY. MRS. FERRIS ASKED ME TO TREAT HIM AS A GUEST. I'VE BEEN BRINGING HIM FOOD, AS WELL.
AND I'M NOT GOING TO FIND HIM SQUEEZED INTO A LITTLE FRENCH MAID OUTFIT?
...NO.


GOOD. THANK YOU FOR NOT BEING A COMPLETE PSYCHOPATH, I GUESS. I'M GOING TO GO SEE JOSH NOW.
AS YOU WISH, MISS SANDY. I'LL UNLOCK THE DOOR FROM THE SECURITY PANEL IN THE STUDY. IF YOU NEED US, JUST SHOUT.
I WON'T.


SHE'S TURNING INTO A REMARKABLE GIRL, MORTIMER. YOU KNOW I HAD MY DOUBTS, BUT YOUR INSTINCTS WERE RIGHT, AS USUAL.
THANK YOU, MA'AM.
BUT, FOR GOD'S SAKE, YOU CAN'T KEEP GIVING ESTROGEN TO EVERY BOY WHO BREAKS INTO THE MANSION!
OH? WHY NOT, MRS. FERRIS?
IT JUST... IT'S NOT PRACTICAL.
THE HOUSE DOES HAVE THIRTEEN BEDROOMS, MA'AM.
I'M NOT EVEN SURE I CAN HANDLE ONE DAUGHTER, LET ALONE A BAKER'S DOZEN.


I AM...PLEASED THAT YOU'RE HAPPY, MRS. FERRIS. I FAILED SOFIA... I FAILED TO PROTECT HER. THAT WON'T HAPPEN AGAIN. I STILL MISS HER, MA'AM. HER LAUGHTER, HER SPIRIT... THIS HOUSE WAS ALIVE WHEN SHE WAS HERE.


NOW, IT'S JUST A SHELL. AFTER EVERYTHING HER FATHER DID, I STILL WISH YOU'D LET ME END HIM. I WISH I COULD'VE MADE HIM PAY FOR ALL THE PAIN HE CAUSED HER, CAUSED US.


AND I'M AFRAID THE PAIN HE CAUSED MAY NOT BE OVER, MA'AM.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, MORTIMER?
I DIDN'T WANT TO SAY ANYTHING IN FRONT OF SANDY, BUT THE DRAWER JOSH FOUND BELONGED TO MR. FERRIS. I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH HE SAW, MA'AM, BUT JUDGING FROM HIS REACTION, IT MAY HAVE BEEN...DAMNING.
OH... OH, SHIT.


UGH... SO *DUSTY!* C'MON, MORTIMER, YOU COULD'VE HIRED A REAL MAID WHILE WE WERE IN TEXAS. I DON'T MISS THE DUMB OUTFIT, BUT THERE IS SOMETHING TO BE SAID FOR CLEANLINESS...


W-WHY AM I SO NERVOUS? IT'S JUST JOSH... AND WHY IN HELL DID I CHOOSE THIS DRESS? LOOK AT THIS NECKLINE! IT'S SO... REVEALING! BUT... JOSH ALWAYS DID HAVE A THING FOR BIG BOOBS AND NOW THAT I'VE GOT... THESE, I SUPPOSE IT'D BE A WASTE NOT TO SHOW THEM OFF. MAYBE IT'LL HELP HIM FORGIVE ME FOR KISSING ANOTHER GIRL. ER, I MEAN, A GIRL.
RIGHT...?

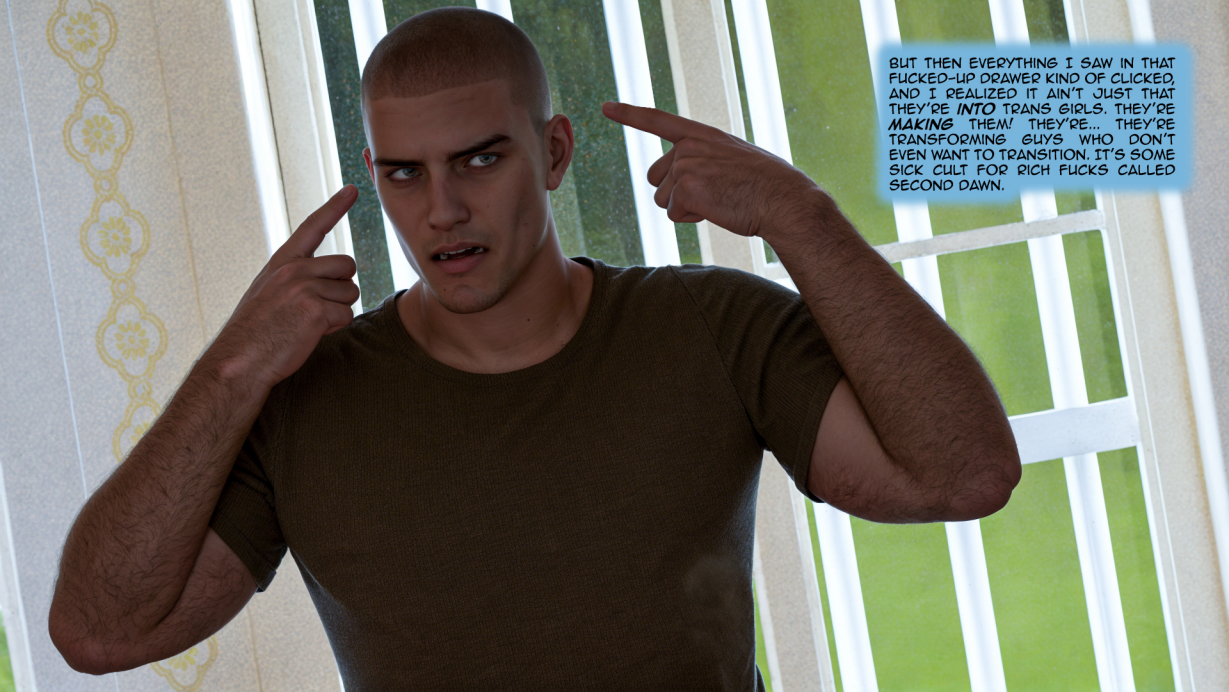

JOSH! I... IT'S ME. GOD, IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU. I'M SO DAMN SORRY I GOT YOU INTO THIS MESS. ARE... ARE YOU OKAY?
HEY. Y-YEAH, I'M GLAD YOU'RE HERE. I'M FINE... SCOTT.
SCOTT? UM. N-NO, IT'S SANDY NOW, REMEMBER?
NO, IT'S NOT.
HUH?


I SAW THE PAPER TRAIL, MAN! THE FILES ON ALL THOSE POOR GUYS. WHAT *THEY* DID TO THEM... IT MADE ME SICK TO MY STOMACH.
I... JOSH, I SERIOUSLY DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT. WHAT DID YOU FIND?


STOP, OKAY! PLEASE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO LIE ANYMORE. I KNOW THE TRUTH, MAN. I KNOW THEY DID THIS TO YOU...


...I KNOW YOU'RE NOT REALLY A GIRL.


WHAT'S WITH THE HORRIFIED FACE? I AIN'T TRYING TO UPSET YOU, MAN. BUT, YEAH, THE FILES I SAW WERE PRETTY FUCKING EXPLICIT. AT FIRST, I WAS AFRAID THIS FERRIS BITCH WAS SCHEMIN' TO SELL YOU TO THESE BASTARDS. THEY GOTTA BE INTO TRANS GIRLS, I FIGURED. LIKE, AS A FETISH, YA KNOW? I SAW PICTURES OF OTHERS LOCKED UP, LOOKING MISERABLE. I WAS ALREADY PLANNING A RESCUE MISSION.


BUT THEN EVERYTHING I SAW IN THAT FUCKED-UP DRAWER KIND OF CLICKED, AND I REALIZED IT AIN'T JUST THAT THEY'RE *INTO* TRANS GIRLS. THEY'RE *MAKING* THEM! THEY'RE... THEY'RE TRANSFORMING GUYS WHO DON'T EVEN WANT TO TRANSITION. IT'S SOME SICK CULT FOR RICH FUCKS CALLED SECOND DAWN.


OH MY GOD. THAT'S WHO TOOK NICK!
WHO'S NICK?
HE... I... I MET HIM IN TEXAS. A NEW FRIEND. HE WAS KIDNAPPED BY SECOND DAWN, AND THEY...THEY DID TO HIM WHAT YOU'RE DESCRIBING. THEY FORCED HIM TO TAKE ESTROGEN, ANTIANDROGENS, ALL THAT'S STUFF. HE WENT FROM THIS BIG JOCK GUY TO, WELL, SOMEONE THAT LOOKS LIKE ME.


I KNEW MR. AND MRS. FERRIS HAD SOME CONNECTION WITH MR. HUTCHINSON – HE'S THE ONE WHO ARRANGED NICK'S KIDNAPPING – BUT THIS... THIS IS BEYOND ANYTHING I COULD'VE IMAGINED. DAMMIT! MRS. FERRIS PROMISED THERE WOULDN'T BE ANY MORE LIES OR SECRETS.
SHIT. WHAT IF SOPHIA WASN'T REALLY THEIR DAUGHTER? WHAT IF SHE WAS ANOTHER OF THEIR VICTIMS? I MEAN, JESSICA SAID SHE CAME OUT TO HER, BUT...
UGH! I'M SO CONFUSED. I THOUGHT I WAS DEALING WITH JUST A TWISTED, WEALTHY FAMILY, NOT A... A CABAL OF MONSTROUS KIDNAPPERS! AND I...I REALLY THOUGHT MRS. FERRIS WAS STARTING TO CARE FOR ME – IN HER OWN WAY.


YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT NICK AND SOPHIA, BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU? FERRIS MUST BE A PART OF SECOND DAWN, BUT SHE *DIDN'T* KIDNAP YOU?
NO. WELL... I MEAN... *KINDA?* I... SHE GAVE ME A CHOICE. I BROKE INTO THE HOUSE, BUT THEY CAUGHT ME. I AGREED TO WORK FOR HER AS A MAID INSTEAD OF GOING TO JAIL. IF I MADE IT TO THE END OF MY 'SENTENCE,' SHE WAS GOING TO GIVE ME MONEY FOR COLLEGE.


BUT WHAT ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT WAS DONE TO YOU? TO YOUR BODY, I MEAN. DID YOU AGREE TO THAT, TOO? LIKE, DID YOU WANT THIS AND MRS. FERRIS HELPED YOU TRANSITION WITH HER MONEY AND HER CONNECTION TO THIS WEIRD CULT IS...UNRELATED?
I GUESS WHAT I'M ASKING IS... AM I WRONG?
ARE YOU... ARE YOU A... GIRL?


JOSH, I... I AM...


...NOT.


FUCK, MAN. THAT'S... WOW.
JOSH, LISTEN, I-

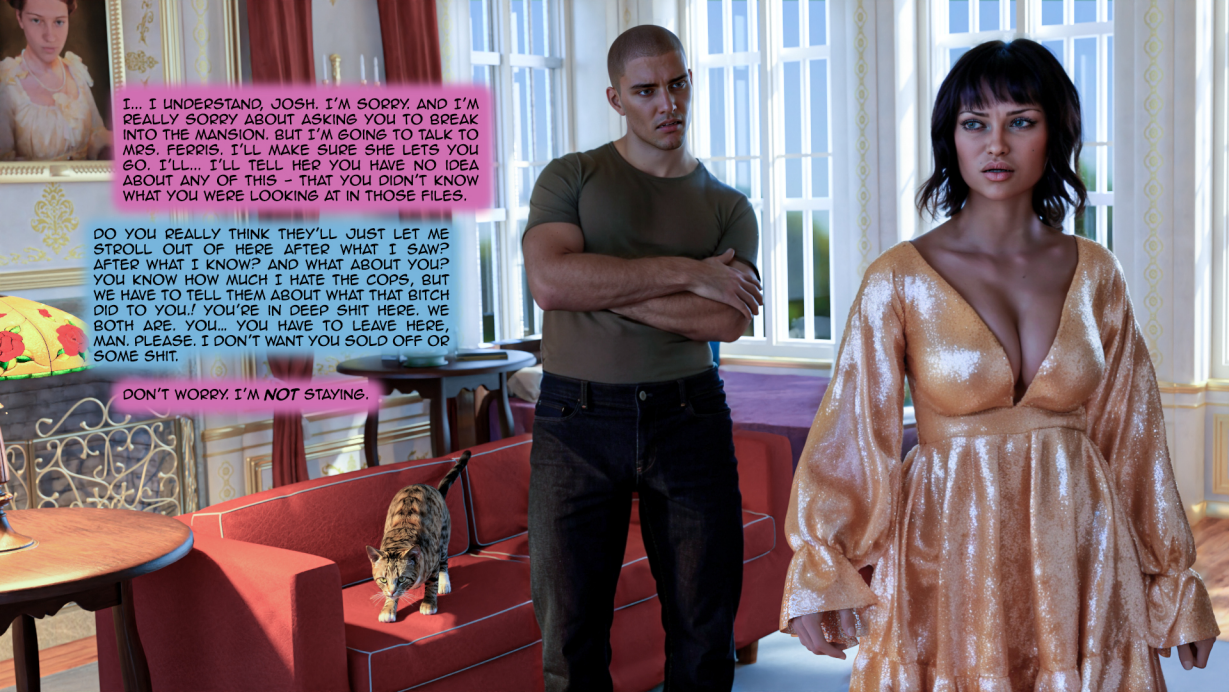

I KISSED YOU, MAN. GOD, I EVEN WENT...WENT DOWN ON YOU! AND YOU DION'T CHOOSE ANY OF THIS? YOU DON'T WANT TO BE A GIRL, AND SO THAT MEANS... FUCK! AND NOW THEY'VE CHANGED YOU EVEN MORE WITH THE DARK HAIR AND BIGGER... BIGGER...


PLEASE STOP. DON'T SAY ANYMORE. I'M STILL PROCESSING ALL THIS.
DON'T SAY ANYMORE!? WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME FROM THE START, SCOTT? WE WERE FRIENDS. YOU SHOWED UP, LOOKING ALL PRETTY AND DIFFERENT. I ACCEPTED YOU. I OPENED MY HOME TO YOU. I... I THOUGHT I WAS FALLING FOR THE AMAZING GIRL. I-


YOU MADE ASSUMPTIONS.
ASSUMPTIONS? ASSUMPTIONS, SCOTT? ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS? YOU DISAPPEARED AND SHOWED UP ALL PRETTY WITH LONG HAIR AND TITS. SO, I THINK MY 'ASSUMPTIONS' WERE PRETTY SOUND.
AT THE TIME, I WAS SCARED OUT OF MY FUCKING MIND. I DIDN'T KNOW WHO TO TRUST.
I KNOW THE FEELING.
I WASN'T TRYING TO TRICK YOU! WHEN YOU FIRST SAW ME AT THAT BAR, I FELT THIS AWFUL SHAME. THAT'S WHY I RAN. THEN, WHEN YOU ASSUMED I WAS A TRANS GIRL AND YOU WERE SO NICE... WELL, THAT FELT A LOT BETTER THAN BEING A SKINNY LOSER WITH TITS AND LONG HAIR.
AND THEN, WELL, YOU JUST KEPT GETTING NICER. YOU LOOKED AFTER ME, AND YOU DIDN'T QUESTION OR JUDGE. AND THAT FELT... GOOD. WITH YOU, I WAS JUST SANDY, THIS... THIS PERSON YOU SEEMED TO GENUINELY CARE FOR.
WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN US... IT WAS REAL, JOSH. YOU MADE ME FEEL SAFE! Y-YOU MADE ME FEEL SPECIAL IN A WAY I NEVER HAVE BEFORE-

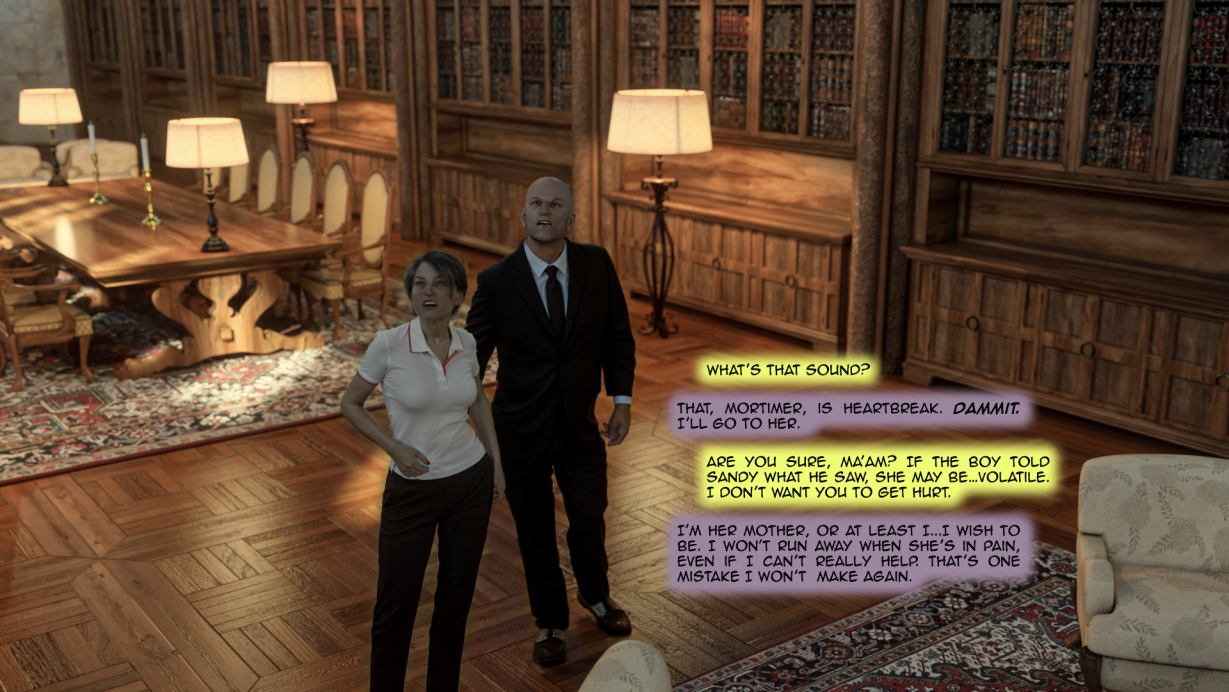

MAYBE FOR *YOU* IT WAS REAL. BUT, FOR ME, WHAT HAPPENED WAS BETWEEN ME AND SANDY - THIS BEAUTIFUL, BRAVE WOMAN WHO I THOUGHT WAS MY FRIEND SCOTT FINALLY EMBRACING HER TRUE SELF.


BUT THE GIRL I FELL FOR... THE GIRL WHO MADE ME QUESTION EVERYTHING I THOUGHT I WANTED OUT OF LIFE.... SHE ISN'T REAL. SHE DOESN'T EXIST.


I... I UNDERSTAND, JOSH. I'M SORRY. AND I'M REALLY SORRY ABOUT ASKING YOU TO BREAK INTO THE MANSION. BUT I'M GOING TO TALK TO MRS. FERRIS. I'LL MAKE SURE SHE LETS YOU GO. I'LL... I'LL TELL HER YOU HAVE NO IDEA ABOUT ANY OF THIS – THAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHAT YOU WERE LOOKING AT IN THOSE FILES.
DO YOU REALLY THINK THEY'LL JUST LET ME STROLL OUT OF HERE AFTER WHAT I SAW? AFTER WHAT I KNOW? AND WHAT ABOUT YOU? YOU KNOW HOW MUCH I HATE THE COPS, BUT WE HAVE TO TELL THEM ABOUT WHAT THAT BITCH DID TO YOU.! YOU'RE IN DEEP SHIT HERE. WE BOTH ARE. YOU... YOU HAVE TO LEAVE HERE, MAN. PLEASE. I DON'T WANT YOU SOLD OFF OR SOME SHIT.
DON'T WORRY. I'M NOT STAYING.





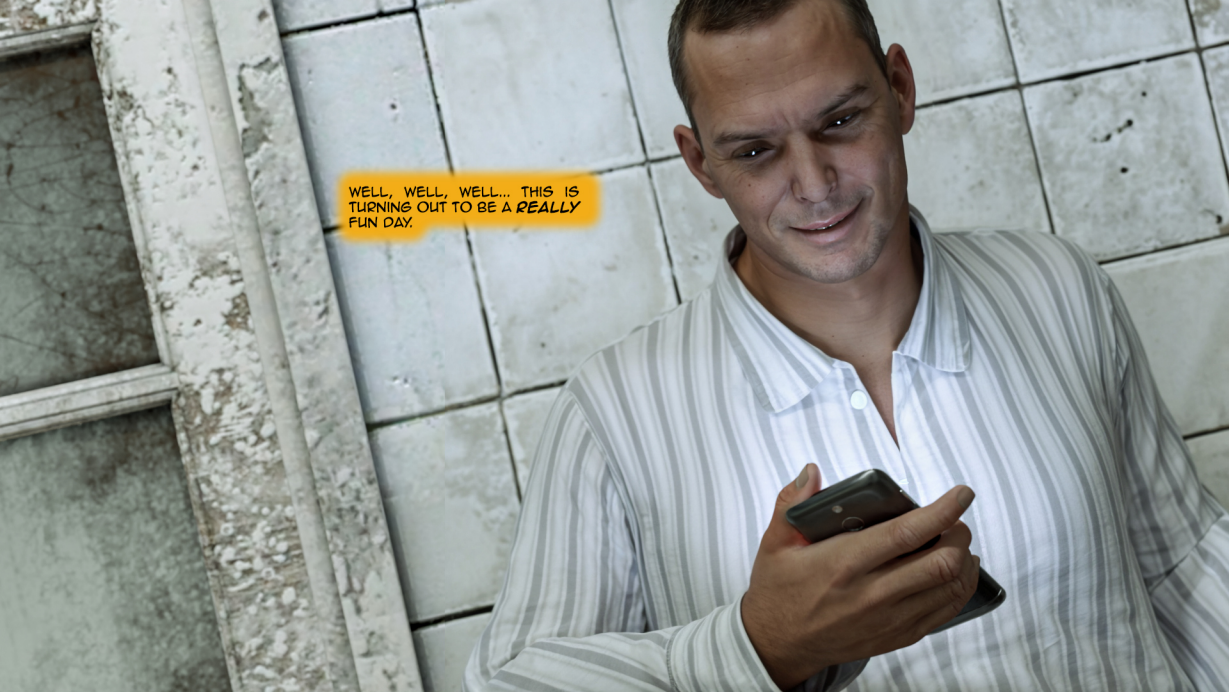

WHAT'S THAT SOUND?
THAT, MORTIMER, IS HEARTBREAK. DAMMIT. I'LL GO TO HER.
ARE YOU SURE, MA'AM? IF THE BOY TOLD SANDY WHAT HE SAW, SHE MAY BE...VOLATILE. I DON'T WANT YOU TO GET HURT.
I'M HER MOTHER, OR AT LEAST I...I WISH TO BE. I WON'T RUN AWAY WHEN SHE'S IN PAIN, EVEN IF I CAN'T REALLY HELP. THAT'S ONE MISTAKE I WON'T MAKE AGAIN.


WHILE I'M GONE, PLEASE SEND THE MESSAGE AS WE DISCUSSED.
MRS. FERRIS, I-
THIS ISN'T A DEBATE, MORTIMER. DO IT.

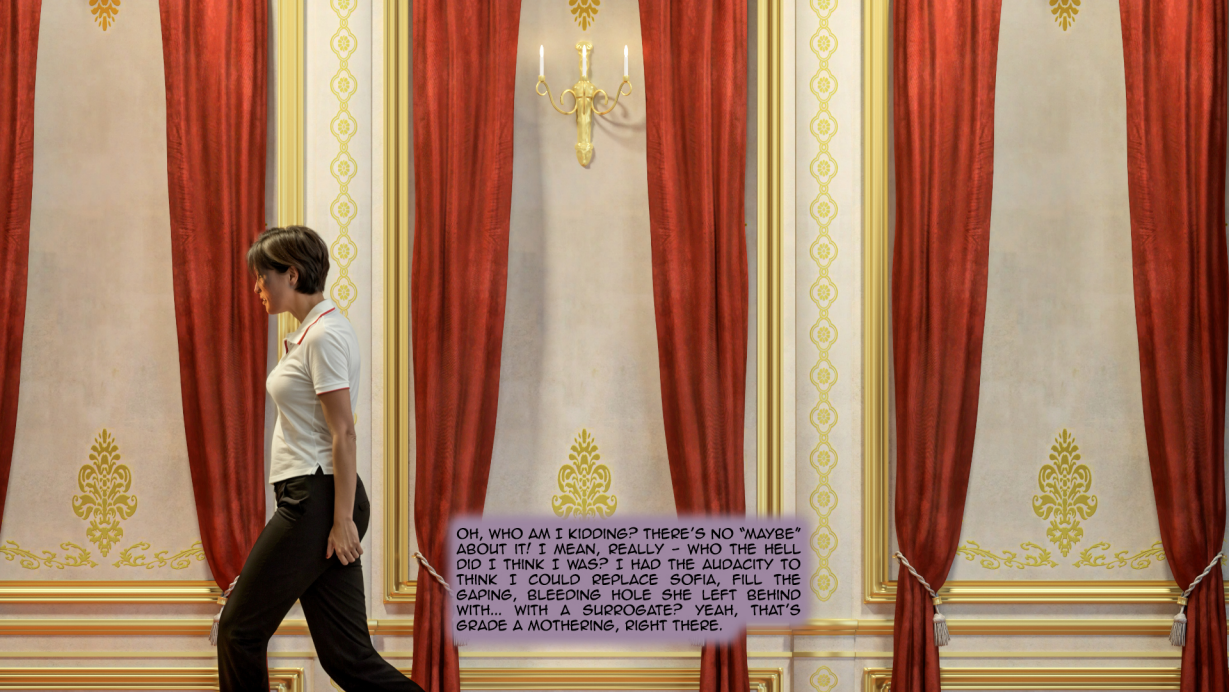

AS YOU WISH, MA'AM. I JUST TRULY HATE TALKING TO THAT ODIOUS TROLL OF A MAN.

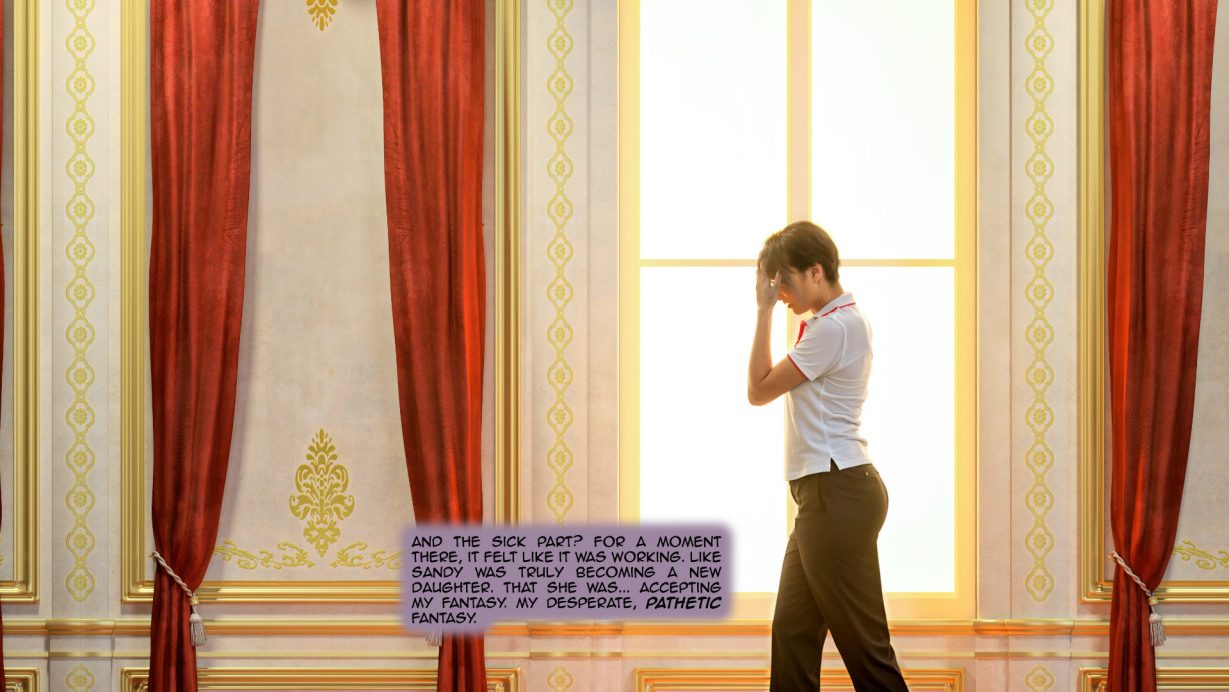

2,536 MILES WEST OF BOSTON...
DAVIS! *COUGH* HELP!
NAH, SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE DOING GREAT, TRAINEE. REMEMBER - JUST BE KIND. RIGHT?
DING!


AT&T
2:08 PM
Messages
Ferris' Hulk
Details
Mr. Davis. This is Mortimer Delaney, Mrs. Ferris' valet.
Yeah. What?
Mrs. Ferris has a request.
Tough tits. She worked out a deal with Xu. Those deals don't get changed.
She wants to see her husband.
iMessage


WELL, WELL, WELL... THIS IS TURNING OUT TO BE A *REALLY* FUN DAY.

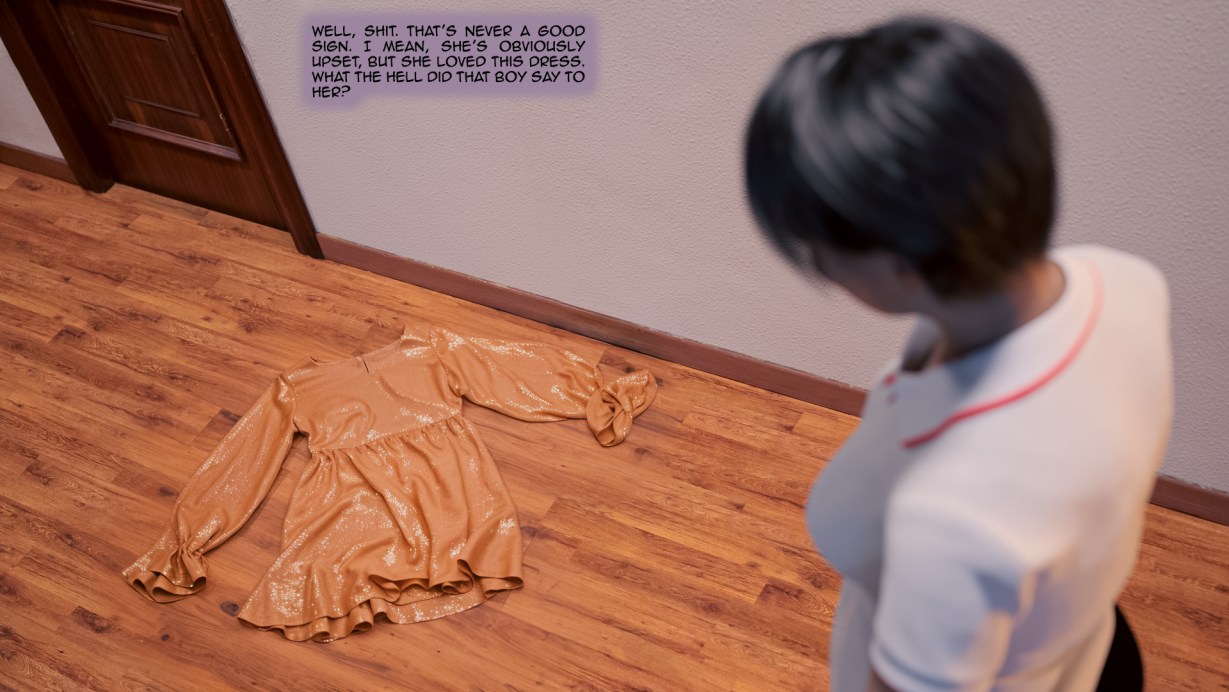

JESUS, WHAT A FUCKING MESS! I HAD ONE JOB - ONE SIMPLE JOB! PROTECT SOFIA, KEEP HER SAFE. YOU LOST HER, AND NOW YOU'RE LOSING THIS ONE TOO? MAYBE I'M JUST A PLAIN BAD MOTHER.


OH, WHO AM I KIDDING? THERE'S NO "MAYBE" ABOUT IT! I MEAN, REALLY – WHO THE HELL DID I THINK I WAS? I HAD THE AUDACITY TO THINK I COULD REPLACE SOFIA, FILL THE GAPING, BLEEDING HOLE SHE LEFT BEHIND WITH... WITH A SURROGATE? YEAH, THAT'S GRADE A MOTHERING, RIGHT THERE.


AND THE SICK PART? FOR A MOMENT THERE, IT FELT LIKE IT WAS WORKING. LIKE SANDY WAS TRULY BECOMING A NEW DAUGHTER. THAT SHE WAS... ACCEPTING MY FANTASY. MY DESPERATE, PATHETIC FANTASY.


BUT THE AWFUL TRUTH LURKING UNDER THE SURFACE IS ABOUT TO BURN EVERYTHING DOWN. KEN, YOU *BASTARD*, EVEN NOW YOU'RE *STILL* FUCKING EVERYTHING UP.


SOFIA... BABY, I... I MESSED UP. I WAS TRYING TO... TO FILL THE VOID YOU LEFT. IT WAS WRONG. IT WAS SELFISH... GOD, IT WAS SO DAMN SELFISH. I LET YOUR FATHER TAKE YOU FROM ME, I LET HIM CRUSH WHO YOU WERE, WHO YOU WERE MEANT TO BE. A REAL MOTHER... A GOOD MOTHER WOULD'VE FOUGHT HARDER FOR YOU, SHE WOULD'VE DONE SOMETHING. BUT I DIDN'T. I JUST... I JUST LET HIM TAKE YOU AWAY.
YOU KNOW I DON'T REALLY BELIEVE IN GOD OR...OR ANYTHING, REALLY. BUT IF I'M WRONG - IF YOU CAN HEAR ME - HELP ME FIX THIS. HELP ME BE A BETTER MOTHER FOR SANDY. SHOW ME THE WAY. BECAUSE I'M LOST AND I'M LETTING ANOTHER CHILD SLIP THROUGH MY FINGERS. I DON'T WANT TO FAIL AGAIN. I CAN'T.


WELL, SHIT. THAT'S NEVER A GOOD SIGN. I MEAN, SHE'S OBVIOUSLY UPSET, BUT SHE LOVED THIS DRESS. WHAT THE HELL DID THAT BOY SAY TO HER?


SANDY? IT'S... IT'S ME, SWEETIE. CAN I COME IN?
YOU LYING BITCH! NO, YOU CAN'T COME IN! GET THE HELL AWAY FROM ME!


WAIT, SANDY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
CUTTING OFF THIS AWFUL BLACK HAIR. I TOLD YOU, I FUCKING HATE IT.
STOP! PLEASE. LET'S JUST... LET'S TALK.


TALK? TALK ABOUT WHAT, MRS. FERRIS? MORE LIES? MORE MANIPULATIONS? JOSH TOLD ME ABOUT ABOUT THE SICK CULT YOU'RE PART OF! SECOND DAWN, RIGHT? TURNING INNOCENT MEN INTO... INTO THINGS LIKE ME.
IS THAT WHAT YOU DID TO SOPHIA? IS THAT WHY SHE'S GONE?!


NO, THAT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENED! SOPHIA WAS MY CHILD, MY GIRL, AND I LOVED HER MORE THAN ANYTHING. I WASN'T LYING ABOUT ANY OF THAT. SHE WANTED TO TRANSITION AND I... AND I WAS TRYING TO HELP HER. BUT HER FATHER, THAT...THAT COWARD, LOCKED HER AWAY AND-
THEN EXPLAIN SECOND DAWN! EXPLAIN THE FILES! YOU HAD TO KNOW WHAT THEY WERE DOING, RIGHT? YOU WERE A PART OF IT, ALL ALONG, WEREN'T YOU?!

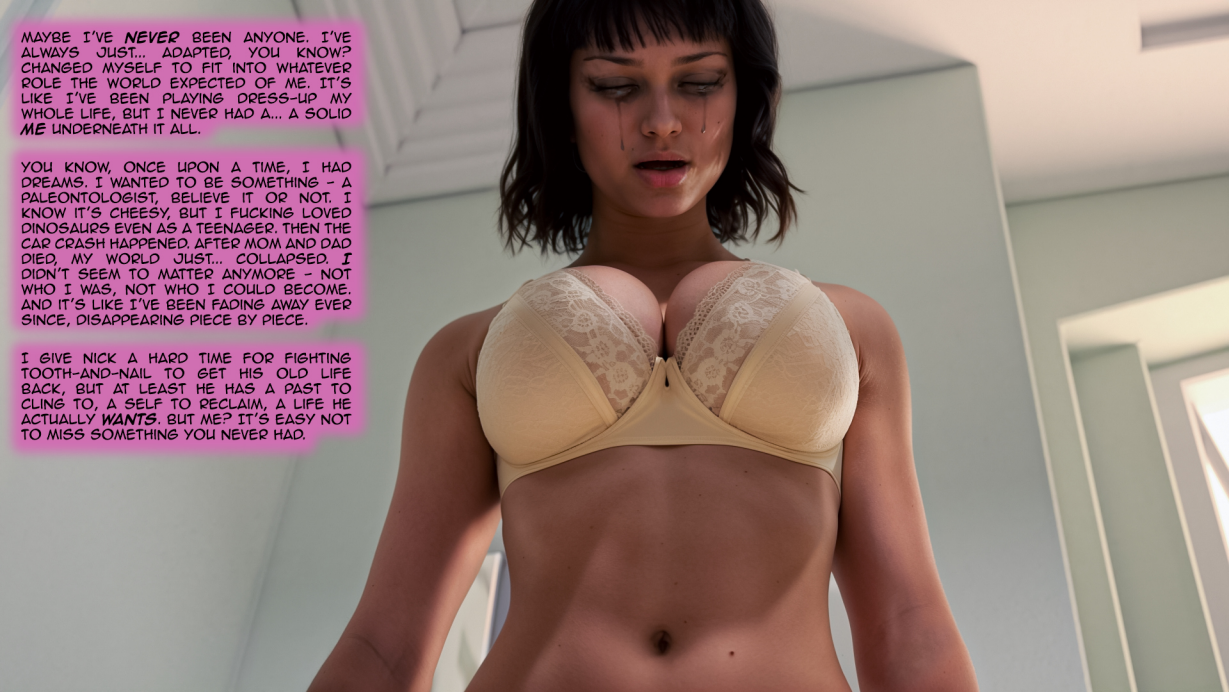

IT WAS KENNETH, SANDY. MY HUSBAND. HE FOUND SOME SICK SATISFACTION IN THEIR MISSION, IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF UNWILLING MEN. I KNEW ABOUT THE GROUP, YES, BUT I THOUGHT IT WAS A SWINGER'S CLUB. WE DIDN'T HAVE A TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE AND I NEVER PARTICIPATED IN THEIR... THEIR HORRORS.
DO YOU REMEMBER THE MAN WHO CAME HERE WHEN I WAS IN CHICAGO? THE ONE WHO WAS KEN'S BEST FRIEND? MORTIMER FOUND YOU WITH HIM–
OF COURSE I FUCKING REMEMBER. HE WAS A CREEP.


YES. JORDAN AND KEN WERE LIKE BROTHERS, TWISTED IN THEIR SHARED OBSESSION. IT WAS JORDAN WHO INTRODUCED KEN TO THE GROUP AND THEIR... THEIR MONSTROUS AGENDA. THAT'S ALSO HOW HE MET MR. HUTCHINSON. THEY WERE ALL DOING BUSINESS TOGETHER.
WHEN KEN DISCOVERED SOPHIA WAS TRANS... HE LOST HIS MIND. THE BASTARD COULDN'T BEAR THE IDEA OF HIS 'SON' BECOMING A WOMAN BY CHOICE, EVEN THOUGH HE GLEEFULLY FORCED IT ONTO OTHERS. IT'S... IT'S WHY SOPHIA IS GONE. I FAILED HER, SANDY! I FAILED TO PROTECT HER FROM HER OWN FATHER.


WHAT ABOUT NICK, MRS. FERRIS? YOU REMEMBER NICK, RIGHT? MY FRIEND IN TEXAS. THE BIG JOCK GUY WHO WAS KIDNAPPED BY SECOND DAWN AND NOW LOOKS MORE LIKE A CHEERLEADER THAN A FOOTBALL PLAYER. ARE YOU TELLING ME THAT WAS JUST A COINCIDENCE? THAT YOU HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT WHATSOEVER? BECAUSE YOU SEEMED ALMOST GLEEFUL WHEN YOU TALKED ABOUT HIS 'HORMONAL DISORDER' - AND YOU WERE EVEN FRIENDS WITH HIS MOM!
YES... YES, IT'S TRUE. I... I KNEW WHAT MR. HUTCHINSON HAD DONE. BUT YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND, SANDY... NICK WAS A HORRIBLE BULLY. HE USED TO TORMENT SOPHIA. HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW MUCH SHE WAS STRUGGLING WITH HER IDENTITY, HOW HURT SHE WAS, BUT HE DIDN'T CARE.
WHEN I HEARD HE WAS AT IT AGAIN WITH POOR ZACH, I WON'T LIE, I FELT A SICK SATISFACTION. I THOUGHT... I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE POETIC JUSTICE FOR HIM TO EXPERIENCE THE FEAR AND CONFUSION SOPHIA HAD TO ENDURE.
SO, YOU'RE OKAY WITH TURNING BOYS INTO GIRLS! AS LONG AS IT'S FOR YOUR TWISTED VERSION OF 'JUSTICE,' RIGHT? SO, WHAT WAS MY CRIME, MRS. FERRIS? WAS IT DARING TO ROB YOU? OR WAS IT JUST THAT YOU SAW AN OPPORTUNITY TO REPLACE SOPHIA AND TOOK IT? I REMEMBER ALL THAT 'AURA' BULLSHIT.


I... I won't deny it. When I first saw you after Mortimer continued your...*DISCIPLINE*...you reminded me so much of Sophia, and... and I thought maybe you could help fill the void her death left in my heart. It was a selfish, thoughtless thing to do, and I... I regret it. Now all I want is to help you become the person you want to be.

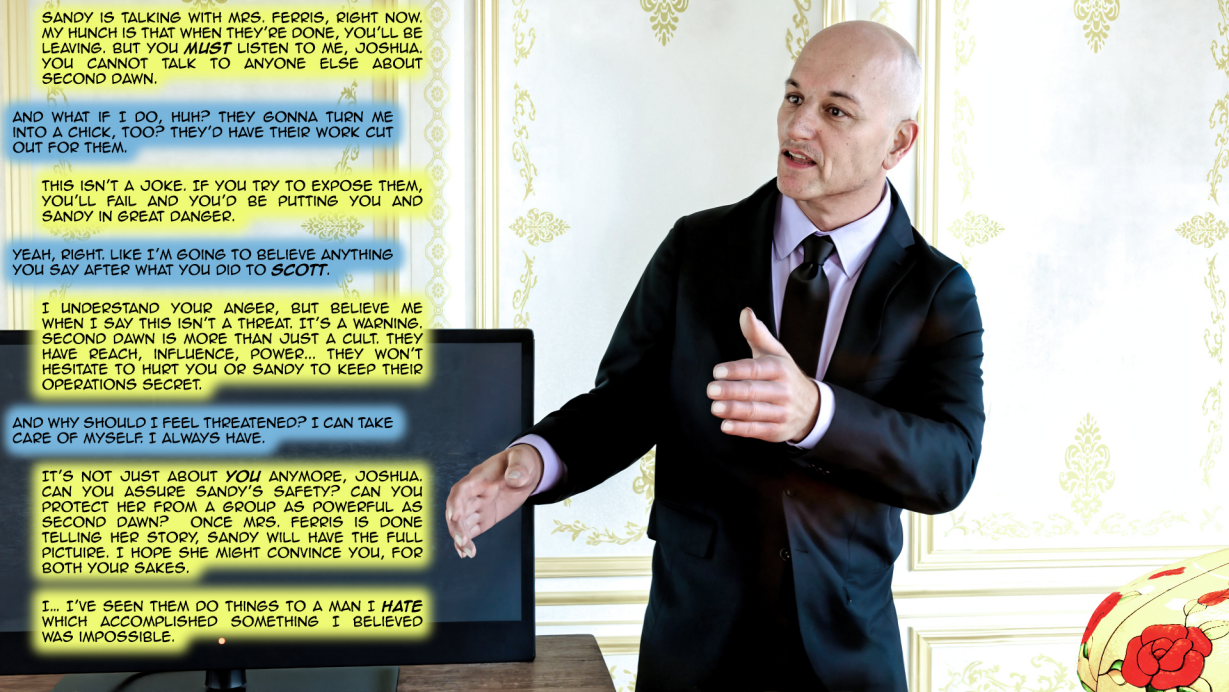

SO, PLEASE, TELL ME. WHO IS THAT? IS IT SCOTT? IS IT SANDY? IS IT SOMEONE ELSE ENTIRELY? I JUST... I JUST WANT TO HELP.
I... I DON'T KNOW ANYMORE. I ONLY KNOW WHO I'M *NOT*.
I'M *NOT* SOPHIA. I NEVER WILL BE. BUT I'M ALSO *NOT* JOSH'S SANDY, HIS DREAM GIRL, BECAUSE I'M *NOT* A GIRL. IT WAS A LABEL I ACCEPTED BECAUSE IT FELT...EASIER. SAFER. GOD, IT FELT LESS LONELY. BUT I'M *NOT* SCOTT ANYMORE, EITHER. I JUST...


MAYBE I'VE NEVER BEEN ANYONE. I'VE ALWAYS JUST... ADAPTED, YOU KNOW? CHANGED MYSELF TO FIT INTO WHATEVER ROLE THE WORLD EXPECTED OF ME. IT'S LIKE I'VE BEEN PLAYING DRESS-UP MY WHOLE LIFE, BUT I NEVER HAD A... A SOLID ME UNDERNEATH IT ALL.
YOU KNOW, ONCE UPON A TIME, I HAD DREAMS. I WANTED TO BE SOMETHING - A PALEONTOLOGIST, BELIEVE IT OR NOT. I KNOW IT'S CHEESY, BUT I FUCKING LOVED DINOSAURS EVEN AS A TEENAGER. THEN THE CAR CRASH HAPPENED. AFTER MOM AND DAD DIED, MY WORLD JUST... COLLAPSED. I DIDN'T SEEM TO MATTER ANYMORE - NOT WHO I WAS, NOT WHO I COULD BECOME. AND IT'S LIKE I'VE BEEN FADING AWAY EVER SINCE, DISAPPEARING PIECE BY PIECE.
I GIVE NICK A HARD TIME FOR FIGHTING TOOTH-AND-NAIL TO GET HIS OLD LIFE BACK, BUT AT LEAST HE HAS A PAST TO CLING TO, A SELF TO RECLAIM, A LIFE HE ACTUALLY WANTS. BUT ME? IT'S EASY NOT TO MISS SOMETHING YOU NEVER HAD.


I... I DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS. GOD KNOWS, I BARELY HAVE ANY. BUT I CAN HELP YOU FIND THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF. WE CAN EXPLORE WHO YOU ARE, AND WHO YOU WANT TO BE, TOGETHER. IF... IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT.
I WANT THE TRUTH. THE WHOLE TRUTH, NO MORE LIES OR SECRETS. TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR DAUGHTER. I NEED TO KNOW.
I PROMISE, WE'LL GO DOWNSTAIRS RIGHT NOW AND I'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING - EVEN THOUGH IT'LL HURT LIKE HELL.


AFTER YOU LEARN THE WHOLE TRUTH, I'LL UNDERSTAND IF YOU RUN FOR THE HILLS. THAT $275,000 I PROMISED IS STILL WAITING FOR YOU, AND IT'S YOURS NO MATTER WHAT.
MY 'CONTRACT' ISN'T UP YET, REMEMBER?
CONSIDERING THAT ONCE I FINISH MY STORY, YOU COULD EASILY HAVE ME ARRESTED, WE'LL LET THAT SLIDE. NOW, LET'S FIND YOU SOMETHING COMFORTABLE TO WEAR...


WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, FRANKENSTEIN? IF YOU PLAN ON INJECTING ME WITH THE SHIT YOU GAVE SCOTT, YOU SHOULD'VE BROUGHT YOUR GUN.
DON'T BE SILLY. YOU DON'T HAVE QUITE THE RIGHT AURA... UNLESS... NO, NO... THAT ISN'T WHY I'M HERE. WE NEED TO TALK.


SANDY IS TALKING WITH MRS. FERRIS, RIGHT NOW. MY HUNCH IS THAT WHEN THEY'RE DONE, YOU'LL BE LEAVING. BUT YOU MUST LISTEN TO ME, JOSHUA. YOU CANNOT TALK TO ANYONE ELSE ABOUT SECOND DAWN.
AND WHAT IF I DO, HUH? THEY GONNA TURN ME INTO A CHICK, TOO? THEY'D HAVE THEIR WORK CUT OUT FOR THEM.
THIS ISN'T A JOKE. IF YOU TRY TO EXPOSE THEM, YOU'LL FAIL AND YOU'D BE PUTTING YOU AND SANDY IN GREAT DANGER.
YEAH, RIGHT. LIKE I'M GOING TO BELIEVE ANYTHING YOU SAY AFTER WHAT YOU DID TO SCOTT.
I UNDERSTAND YOUR ANGER, BUT BELIEVE ME WHEN I SAY THIS ISN'T A THREAT. IT'S A WARNING. SECOND DAWN IS MORE THAN JUST A CULT. THEY HAVE REACH, INFLUENCE, POWER... THEY WON'T HESITATE TO HURT YOU OR SANDY TO KEEP THEIR OPERATIONS SECRET.
AND WHY SHOULD I FEEL THREATENED? I CAN TAKE CARE OF MYSELF. I ALWAYS HAVE.
IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT YOU ANYMORE, JOSHUA. CAN YOU ASSURE SANDY'S SAFETY? CAN YOU PROTECT HER FROM A GROUP AS POWERFUL AS SECOND DAWN? ONCE MRS. FERRIS IS DONE TELLING HER STORY, SANDY WILL HAVE THE FULL PICTURE. I HOPE SHE MIGHT CONVINCE YOU, FOR BOTH YOUR SAKES.
I... I'VE SEEN THEM DO THINGS TO A MAN I HATE WHICH ACCOMPLISHED SOMETHING I BELIEVED WAS IMPOSSIBLE.


OH, YEAH? WHAT'S THAT?
THEY MADE ME FEEL *PITY* FOR HIM.


WELL, HERE'S WHERE THE WHOLE AWFUL SERIES OF EVENTS STARTED, MY DEAR. THE SCENE OF THE CRIME, AS IT WERE. ST. CHRISTOPHER'S, YOUR SOON-TO-BE ALMA MATER. GOD, WE WERE SO DAMN YOUNG... AND SO DAMN STUPID.
THE MAN YOU'RE WITH... THAT'S YOUR HUSBAND?
KEN FERRIS, THE ONE AND ONLY. ALTHOUGH...



...I IMAGINE HE HAS A VERY *DIFFERENT* NAME THESE DAYS.

HUH? YOU SAID HE WAS DEAD.

OFFICIALLY, THAT'S TRUE.

OH. AND, UH, UNOFFICIALLY?

I... YOU SHOULD KNOW, DEAR, THAT THERE ARE PHOTOS TOWARDS THE BACK OF THIS ALBUM THAT YOU'LL WANT TO PREPARE FOR.

BUT I HOPE THAT WHEN YOU LEARN EVERYTHING THAT LED TO THEM, YOU WON'T JUDGE ME TOO HARSHLY.

NOW, WHERE TO START...







Mike Taylor
Adolescence
Person & Legacy
Three years Varsity
Debate Committee
Pres. Vice President
Senior Night



Houston! Future Businessmen of America


SANDY, BEFORE I SAY ANYTHING MORE, PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT I'M NOT TRYING TO JUSTIFY MY ACTIONS. THEY'RE FAR FROM PERFECT BUT, WELL... I'VE ALWAYS HAD A KNACK FOR DOING THE WRONG THINGS FOR THE RIGHT REASONS, OR THE RIGHT THINGS FOR THE WRONG ONES.
AND TRYING TO MAKE ME A *GIRL?* WHICH IS THAT?
TO BE HONEST -- PROBABLY A MIX OF BOTH.



DAMN. YOU WERE KINDA HOT BACK IN THE DAY, HUH?

HAH! THANK YOU. I SUPPOSE I HAD MY MOMENTS. MY WEDDING DAY WAS ONE OF THEM.

AND THE GUY IN THE TUX? THAT'S MR. FERRIS?








YES, THAT'S KEN. CHARMING, HANDSOME, AND A COMPLETE NIGHTMARE WHEN HE SO MUCH AS SNIFFED A GLASS OF SCOTCH. THAT BASTARD WAS THE KIND OF MAN WHO COULD FILL UP A ROOM WITHOUT EVEN TRYING.
I WAS A LOCAL GIRL, YOU KNOW. TEXAS BORN AND BRED. A FUN-LOVING, INCENSE-BURNING, BAREFOOT-WALKING HIPPIE CHICK. WITH LOTS AND LOTS OF MONEY. SO... A HYPOCRITE. SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE.
AND HE WAS THE QUARTERBACK AT ST. CHRISTOPHER'S, RIGHT?


EXACTLY. OH, HOW THE GIRLS SWOONED OVER HIM. HELL, EVEN I DID. A BOSTON BOY, HE WAS, WITH THAT DISTINCT CHARM OF HIS. HE HAD THAT... WHAT DO YOU CALL IT?
MAGNETIC PERSONALITY?
THAT'S THE ONE. BUT THERE WAS A HOLE INSIDE HIM. I DIDN'T SEE IT UNTIL IT WAS TOO LATE. I THOUGHT HIS AMBITION, HIS DRIVE WAS SEXY, YOU KNOW? BUT IT TURNED INTO SOMETHING ELSE.


HEY! THAT WOMAN NEXT TO YOU LOOKS LIKE NICK! WELL, GIRL-NICK.
WELL, I'D HOPE SO. THAT'S THE FUTURE MS. TEXAS HERSELF. SHE WAS YOUNGER THAN ME, BUT OUR FAMILIES WERE CLOSE SO WE BECAME GOOD FRIENDS. WE RARELY SPEAK NOW. I MISS HER.


HOLD ON. THIS GUY WITH MR. FERRIS, ON THE LEFT. I KNOW HIM! HE WAS OLDER AND BALD WHEN WE MET, BUT I KNOW THAT SMUG FACE. WHEN I WAS YOUR MAID, HE'S THE FUCKER WHO TRIED TO TELL ME YOU TOLD HIM I SHOULD SUCK--
YES. THAT DESPICABLE CREATURE IS JORDAN DAVIS. THE OTHER ONE IS HIS YOUNGER BROTHER. THEY'D BEEN FRIENDS WITH KENNETH SINCE CHILDHOOD.
JORDAN AND KEN WERE LIKE THE RINGLEADERS -- HIS BROTHER WAS MORE OF A PATHETIC TAGALONG. THEY BOTH GAVE ME THE CREEPS.


WE MOVED TO BOSTON AFTER WE GOT HITCHED. TRIED TO PLAY THE HAPPY FAMILY, TO HAVE A BABY. BUT YOU KNOW, IT TURNED OUT KEN'S BOYS COULDN'T SWIM. WE KEPT TRYING, THOUGH. NO STONE WAS LEFT UNTURNED.
KEN BECAME A BUSINESSMAN. SORT OF. HIS FAMILY HAD CONNECTIONS, SO HE DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO TRY. BUT HE WAS ALWAYS AWAY. BUSINESS MEETINGS, BUSINESS TRIPS, BUSINESS FUCKING DINNERS. I WASN'T BLIND, I KNEW HE WAS SCREWING AROUND.
MUST'VE BEEN HARD...

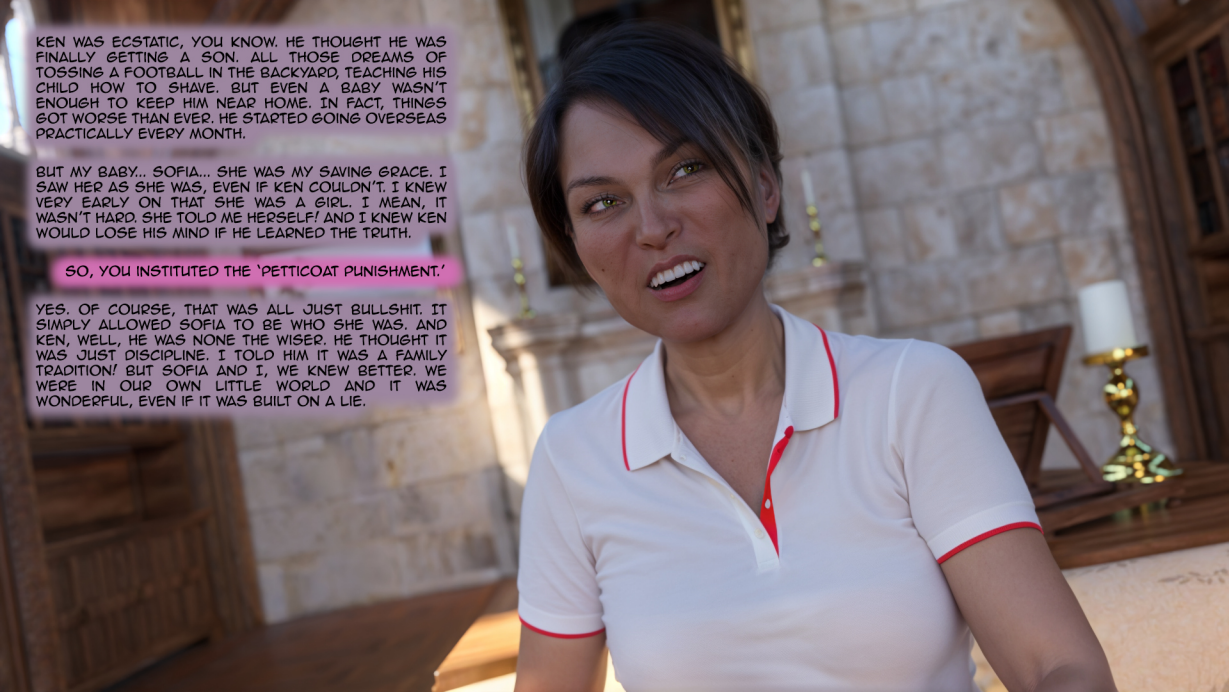




OH, IT WAS A NIGHTMARE. WE WERE ABOUT TO CALL IT QUITS WHEN A MIRACLE HAPPENED. I GOT PREGNANT, LATER IN LIFE. I WAS OVER THE MOON, I THOUGHT IT WAS OUR SAVING GRACE.






KEN WAS ECSTATIC, YOU KNOW. HE THOUGHT HE WAS FINALLY GETTING A SON. ALL THOSE DREAMS OF TOSSING A FOOTBALL IN THE BACKYARD, TEACHING HIS CHILD HOW TO SHAVE. BUT EVEN A BABY WASN'T ENOUGH TO KEEP HIM NEAR HOME. IN FACT, THINGS GOT WORSE THAN EVER. HE STARTED GOING OVERSEAS PRACTICALLY EVERY MONTH.
BUT MY BABY... SOFIA... SHE WAS MY SAVING GRACE. I SAW HER AS SHE WAS, EVEN IF KEN COULDN'T. I KNEW VERY EARLY ON THAT SHE WAS A GIRL. I MEAN, IT WASN'T HARD. SHE TOLD ME HERSELF! AND I KNEW KEN WOULD LOSE HIS MIND IF HE LEARNED THE TRUTH.
SO, YOU INSTITUTED THE 'PETTICOAT PUNISHMENT.'
YES. OF COURSE, THAT WAS ALL JUST BULLSHIT. IT SIMPLY ALLOWED SOFIA TO BE WHO SHE WAS. AND KEN, WELL, HE WAS NONE THE WISER. HE THOUGHT IT WAS JUST DISCIPLINE. I TOLD HIM IT WAS A FAMILY TRADITION! BUT SOFIA AND I, WE KNEW BETTER. WE WERE IN OUR OWN LITTLE WORLD AND IT WAS WONDERFUL, EVEN IF IT WAS BUILT ON A LIE.


SEEING SOFIA DISCOVER HERSELF... IT WAS LIKE WATCHING A BUTTERFLY EMERGE FROM ITS COCOON. A LITTLE BIT OF MAKEUP HERE, A HAIRBAND THERE. IT WAS BEAUTIFUL. AND COURAGEOUS. I WAS PROUD OF HER, SO DAMN PROUD. BUT SHE WAS MADE FUN OF TERRIBLY IN SCHOOL, THE BOYS WERE CRUEL, AND MOST OF THE GIRLS WEREN'T MUCH BETTER, BUT SHE HELD HER HEAD HIGH.
I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME SHE ASKED ME TO BUY HER A DRESS. GOD, MY HEART ACHED KNOWING WHAT SHE HAD TO FACE, BUT I WAS SO PROUD. IT WAS HER AGAINST THE WORLD, AND SHE WAS THE BRAVEST GIRL I KNEW.



EVENTUALLY, WE WERE SPENDING MORE AND MORE TIME IN TEXAS. KENNETH DIDN'T REALLY LIKE IT DOWN THERE, SO IT WAS THE PERFECT CHANCE FOR SOFIA TO SPEND MORE TIME AS HERSELF. IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL TIME. TOO BEAUTIFUL, REALLY. I SHOULD'VE KNOWN A ***STORM*** WAS COMING.

Love you, Mom

-Sofia




SOFIA WAS BEAUTIFUL.
INSIDE AND OUT. OBVIOUSLY, I'M BIASED, BUT I'D NEVER MET ANYONE LIKE HER BEFORE. SHE WAS SO SWEET...AND SO NAÏVE.
SHE HATED THAT I WOULDN'T LET HER WEAR DRESSES AROUND HER FATHER. WE'D GET INTO SCREAMING MATCHES ABOUT IT. *YOU'RE NOT GIVING DAD A CHANCE TO KNOW ME!* SHE'D SAY. *HE LOVES ME, HE WOULDN'T -- HE --*


We were both so *wrong*. Sofia believed in her father's love, and I... I believed I could protect her. When Ken surprised us in Texas and saw Sofia... in a dress, with breasts... he lost his mind. We packed up and went back to Boston. He locked her up, put bars on her windows after she tried to sneak out one night. She was absolutely miserable.
Then, on the day that she...died, I'd had enough. Kenneth was talking about sending her to a 'deprogramming' camp. So, I went to the bank and took out all they'd let me, which was $50,000. I let Sofia out of her bedroom, and I was going to give her my car keys.
Ken was *livid*. He said, 'Fine! He can go, but no money. If he wants to be a woman so bad, he can be a whore.'


WE ARGUED. IT STARTED TO GET PHYSICAL. I WAS SO FURIOUS AT HIM! SOFIA TRIED TO GET BETWEEN US. KEN, THE FUCKING BASTARD, HE PUSHED HER, AND SOFIA...SHE...
THE STAIRCASE WAS RIGHT THERE! HOW DIDN'T HE SEE? THOSE DAMN STONE STAIRS, IMPORTED FROM FUCKING GERMANY.
THE LAST GLIMPSE I HAVE OF MY BABY... SHE WAS REACHING FOR ME... AND I COULDN'T...



MORTIMER ALMOST KILLED HIM THAT NIGHT. MAYBE I SHOULD HAVE LET HIM.

WITH KENNETH'S BUSINESS AND FAMILY CONNECTIONS, THE POLICE WERE MORE THAN HAPPY TO CALL SOFIA'S DEATH AN 'UNFORTUNATE ACCIDENT.'

I...I WAS OUT OF MY MIND WITH GRIEF. KENNETH AND I WERE OVER, OF COURSE. AND I WAS THINKING OF WAYS TO DESTROY HIS LIFE WHEN I GOT AN UNEXPECTED PHONE CALL FROM A MAN WHO CALLED HIMSELF MR. XU.

THAT'S WHEN I LEARNED ABOUT SECOND DAWN. I WAS...DISGUSTED. HORRIFIED. ASHAMED, FOR SOME REASON. HOW COULD I NOT HAVE KNOWN?

TO MY SHOCK, XU WASN'T CALLING TO TRY TO COVER ANYTHING UP. INSTEAD, HE WAS ENRAGED -- AT KENNETH! "SOMEBODY WHO COULD HARM THEIR OWN DAUGHTER HAS NO PLACE IN OUR SOCIETY, OR ANY SOCIETY, FOR THAT MATTER."

I LAUGHED AT HIM. HE WAS TURNING UNWILLING MEN INTO ***FEMINIZED SEX SLAVES***, BUT HE CROSSED THE LINE AT A LITTLE FILICIDE?

THEN HE SAID THE STRANGEST THING, "I POSSESS A CODE OF ETHICS, MRS. FERRIS. DO NOT PRESUME THAT SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU DO NOT COMPREHEND THEM, THEY ARE NOT PRESENT. UNLESS YOU THINK ME AN ANIMAL?"

HE TOLD ME THAT KENNETH HAD ALREADY BEEN 'PICKED UP' BY SECOND DAWN, AND THAT I'D BE RECEIVING 'UPDATES.' AT FIRST, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IN THE HELL THAT COULD MEAN. WERE THEY GOING TO KILL HIM?

THE NEXT DAY, I RECEIVED A CALL FROM OUR ATTORNEY. KENNETH'S PRIVATE JET HAD CRASHED IN ITALY. HE WAS PRESUMED DEAD. I ASSUMED THAT WAS THE END OF IT. I WAS WRONG.





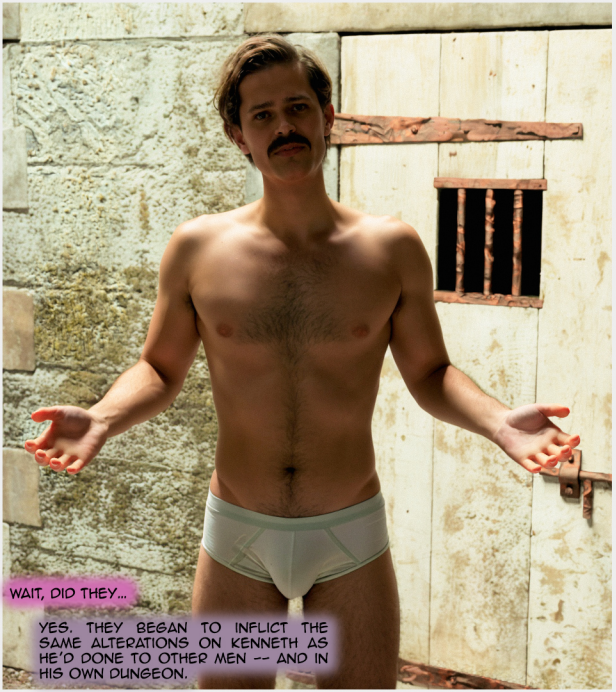
A FEW WEEKS LATER, I STARTED GETTING THESE PHOTOS.

OH MY GOD, THAT'S...THE YOUNGER DAVIS BROTHER.

YES, APPARENTLY, HE BECAME INVOLVED WITH SECOND DAWN, AS WELL. NO SURPRISE, REALLY.

THIS LITTLE ITALIAN COTTAGE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE OUR VACATION HOME, BUT WE NEVER WENT THERE. XU LATER TOLD ME THAT KENNETH HAD TURNED THE BASEMENT INTO A SORT OF...DUNGEON. AND HE... HE WAS ***CHANGING*** MEN THERE. THAT'S WHY HE WAS GONE ALL THE TIME.

SEE, HE WASN'T JUST AN ENJOYER OF SECOND DAWN, HE WAS A PARTICIPANT IN THEIR SICK CONTESTS!


WAIT, DID THEY...
YES. THEY BEGAN TO INFLICT THE SAME ALTERATIONS ON KENNETH AS HE'D DONE TO OTHER MEN -- AND IN HIS OWN DUNGEON.



I...I'M ASHAMED TO SAY I WAS DELIGHTED. I CHERISHED THESE PHOTOS AS THEY CAME OVER THE YEARS. I KNOW THAT MAKES ME EVIL, BUT--
WAIT. YEARS!?


CERTAINLY. I ASSUME IT'S NO SIMPLE TASK TO TAKE A MAN OF HIS AGE AND MAKE HIM INTO...WELL...*HER.* I MUST SAY, I'M ENVIOUS OF HER PLASTIC SURGERY. SHE DOESN'T LOOK A DAY OVER THIRTY, *THE BITCH.*


OH, FUCK! THEY... HIS DICK...
YES. MY BASTARD OF AN EX-HUSBAND IS NOW, ANATOMICALLY-SPEAKING, MY EX-WIFE.
DID HE GET MARRIED!?
IT WOULD SEEM SO. A BEACH WEDDING, HOW NICE. I ASSUME SHE WAS SOLD OFF, BUT I DON'T KNOW TO WHOM. THIS WAS THE LAST PHOTO I RECEIVED.


SO, THERE IT IS... THE UGLY TRUTH. I PRESUME YOU THINK I'M A MONSTER, SANDY, OR SCOTT, OR WHOEVER YOU FEEL YOU ARE. I WANT YOU TO KNOW, I'VE CONTACTED SECOND DAWN AGAIN. I WANT TO PUT THIS ALL BEHIND ME. I NEED TO CLOSE THIS CHAPTER OF MY LIFE BEFORE I OPEN A NEW ONE. I NEED TO KNOW WHAT BECAME OF KENNETH.
I DON'T THINK YOU'RE A MONSTER. I JUST THINK... I THINK YOU'RE A MOTHER WHO LOST HER CHILD. AND GRIEF.. GRIEF CAN MAKE YOU DO SOME CRAZY THINGS. LIKE, FOR INSTANCE, YOU MIGHT START BREAKING INTO HOUSES! I'M JUST... I'M GLAD I KNOW THE TRUTH NOW.
AND SANDY IS STILL OKAY FOR NOW. BUT...


...I HAVE A CHAPTER I NEED TO CLOSE, TOO. I--
YOU NEED TO GO WITH JOSH, DON'T YOU?
YEAH. I NEED TO SEE HOW I FEEL ABOUT...BEING SANDY...WHEN I'M JUST OUT IN THE WORLD AND NOT, LIKE, IN A MANSION SURROUNDED BY EVERYTHING I COULD EVER WANT.
I COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND. THE HOUSE IS OPEN TO YOU WHENEVER YOU DECIDE TO COME BACK -- OR EVEN IF YOU DON'T. AND YOU DON'T HAVE TO BREAK IN THE WINDOW. JUST KNOCK ON THE FRONT DOOR. PLEASE, JUST REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE STRONGER THAN YOU KNOW.


SO ARE YOU!
THANK YOU, SWEETIE.
NO, I MEAN YOU'RE SQUEEZING ME TOO TIGHT. YOU'RE GOING TO POP AN IMPLANT!
NONSENSE, I PAID FOR PREMIUM SILICONE. THEY'LL HOLD UP JUST A FEW SQUEEZES MORE...


WOW, I CAN'T BELIEVE MY OLD CLOTHES STILL FIT ME. THIS IS WHAT I WORE WHEN I BROKE INTO THE PLACE!
THAT'S A REALLY LOOSE DEFINITION OF 'FIT,' MAN. ANYWAY, YOU'RE REALLY SURE THESE TWO PSYCHOS DON'T HAVE, LIKE, A SNIPER IN THOSE HILLS READY TO TAKE US OUT?


DON'T BE PARANOID. WE'RE SAFE.
YEAH, WHY WOULD I BE PARANOID? IT'S NOT LIKE I JUST LEARNED ABOUT A SECRET, ALL-POWERFUL ORGANIZATION OF RICH ASSHOLES KIDNAPPING YOUNG DUDES AND TRANSFORMING THEM INTO THEIR DREAM GIRLS.
RELAX, JOSH. I DON'T THINK YOU'RE THEIR TYPE.
I'M...STRANGELY INSULTED BY THAT.


REMEMBER, SANDY, YOUR FRESHMAN YEAR STARTS IN A COUPLE WEEKS!
MRS. FERRIS? I MADE THE CALL, AS YOU REQUESTED. MR. DAVIS SAID WE SHOULD EXPECT MR. XU.
A PHONE CALL?
A VISIT, I'M AFRAID.
OH, DAMN. KENNETH MUST MEAN MORE TO SECOND DAWN THAN I REALIZED. WELL, GET READY TO ROLL OUT THE RED CARPET.
YES, MA'AM.
AND, UM, HIRE EXTRA SECURITY. JUST IN CASE. ARMED.
YES, MA'AM.


HEY NICK – I HOPE THIS EMAIL FINDS YOU WELL. AT LEAST AS WELL AS CAN BE EXPECTED FOR SOMEONE IN OUR SHOES. YES, I'M ALIVE. I'M SORRY I MADE YOU AND JESSICA WORRY. ALTHOUGH, WEIRDLY, IT'S NICE TO BE SOMEONE WHO CAN BE WORRIED ABOUT. DOES THAT MAKE SENSE?
I'VE BEEN BACK IN BOSTON. THE LAST TWO WEEKS HAVE BEEN INSANE, TO PUT IT MILDLY.



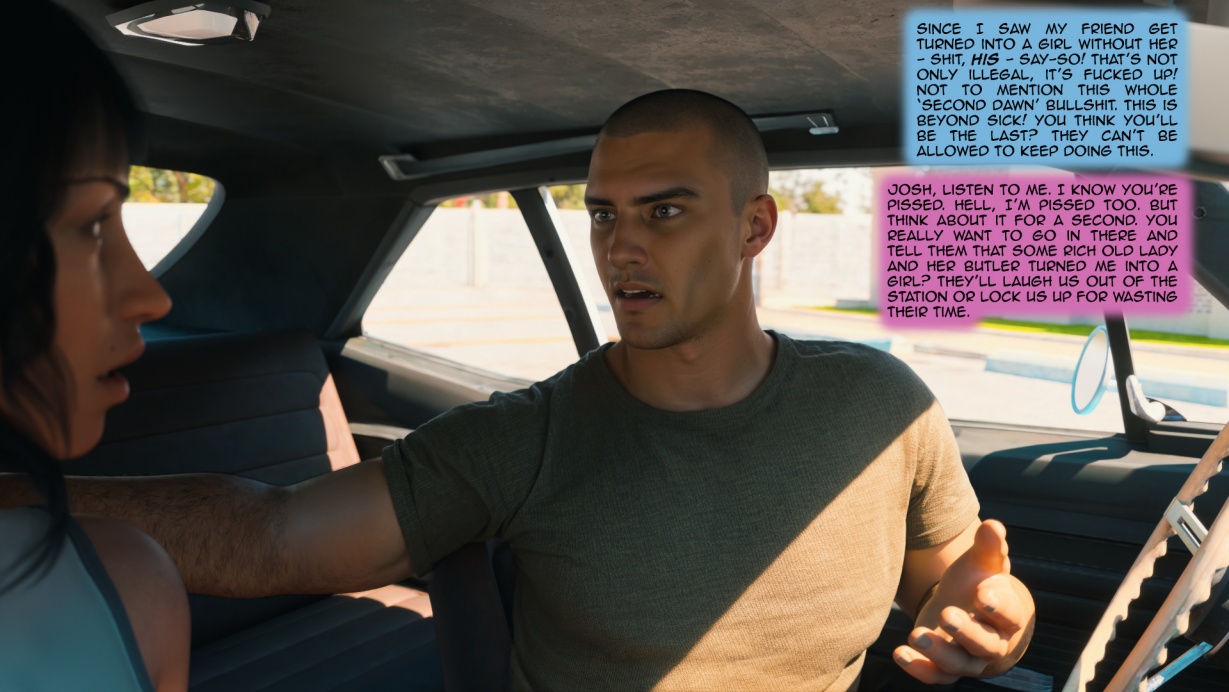
THE FIRST THING TO TAKE CARE OF WAS JOSH. WHEN THINGS WERE BAD BETWEEN MRS. FERRIS AND ME (THEY AREN'T AS BAD NOW, BUT THAT'S A WHOLE OTHER STORY), I ASKED HIM TO INVESTIGATE THE MANSION. HE FOUND EVIDENCE THERE. I WON'T GO INTO DETAILS OVER EMAIL (YOU'LL UNDERSTAND WHY WHEN I TELL YOU IN PERSON) BUT, BASICALLY, JOSH KNOWS EVERYTHING ABOUT HOW I WAS FORCED INTO BECOMING "SANDY."

THAT SHOULDN'T BE A BIG DEAL, BUT I THINK HE WAS FALLING FOR SANDY. AND NOW, INSTEAD OF A BEAUTIFUL GIRL – HE SEES A MUTILATED GUY. IT'S WEIRD, NICK. THERE WAS A MOMENT WHEN I THOUGHT MAYBE I COULD LEAN INTO BEING SANDY. THAT SANDY MIGHT BE SOMEONE I COULD LIVE WITH. OR LIVE ***AS***, I GUESS. BEING A RICH HERIESS DOESN'T SEEM TOO BAD. BUT SEEING MYSELF THROUGH JOSH'S EYES?

HE SAW ME AS SCOTT AGAIN, AND IT CUT DEEP BECAUSE... WELL, BECAUSE I'M NOT SURE WHO 'SCOTT' IS ANYMORE. OR IF HE EVER REALLY EXISTED OUTSIDE OF EVERYONE ELSE'S EXPECTATIONS. BUT SEEING THAT LOOK IN JOSH'S EYES –THE CONFUSION, THE HURT – IT WAS LIKE BEING STRIPPED BARE AND LEFT OUT IN THE COLD. I FELT LIKE A FRAUD. I MEAN – I ***AM*** A FRAUD. AREN'T I?

ANYWAY, JOSH BEING JOSH, HE HAD TO GO AND MAKES THINGS EVEN WEIRDER...

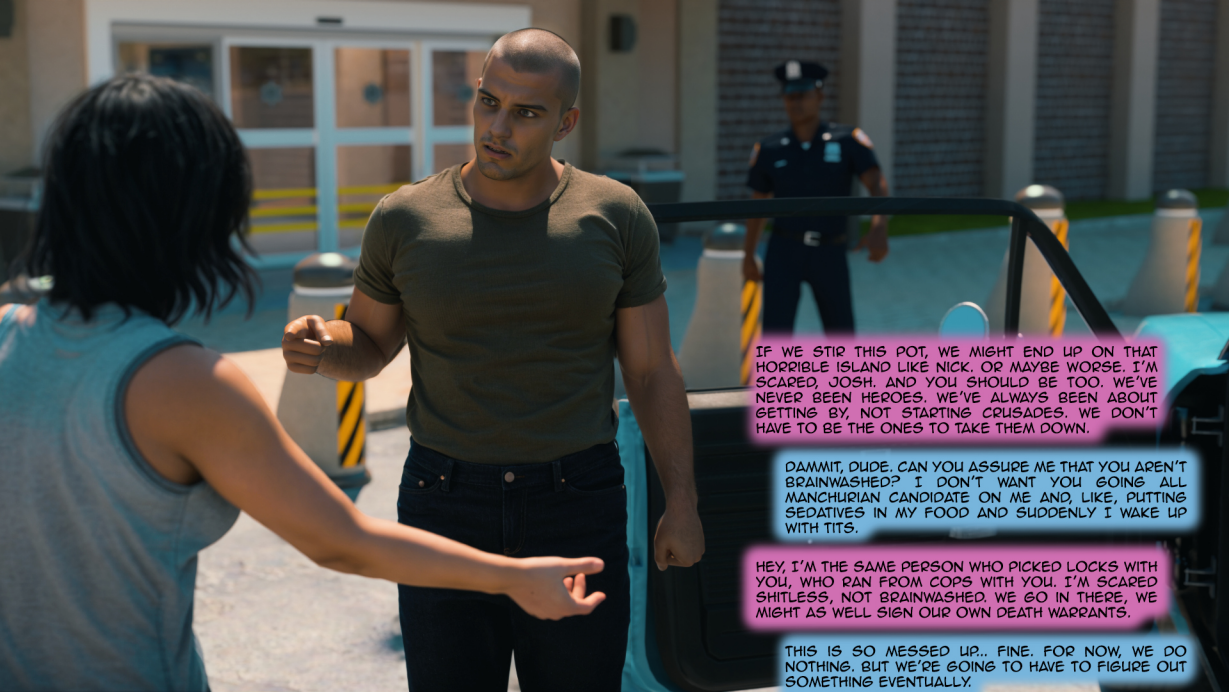

UM. WHY THE HELL ARE WE AT THE POLICE STATION? YOU HATE COPS.
YEAH, I DO. BUT THIS... WHAT THEY DID TO YOU, IT'S NOT RIGHT. SCOTT, WE NEED TO TELL SOMEONE. EVERYONE! AND, UNFORTUNATELY, THAT MEANS THE COPS UNLESS YOU WANT TO GO ON THE NEWS.
SINCE WHEN ARE YOU SUCH A BOY SCOUT?
POLICE DEPARTMENT
POLICE
POLICE DEPARTMENT
POLICE
POLICE


SINCE I SAW MY FRIEND GET TURNED INTO A GIRL WITHOUT HER – SHIT, HIS – SAY-SO! THAT'S NOT ONLY ILLEGAL, IT'S FUCKED UP! NOT TO MENTION THIS WHOLE 'SECOND DAWN' BULLSHIT. THIS IS BEYOND SICK! YOU THINK YOU'LL BE THE LAST? THEY CAN'T BE ALLOWED TO KEEP DOING THIS.
JOSH, LISTEN TO ME. I KNOW YOU'RE PISSED. HELL, I'M PISSED TOO. BUT THINK ABOUT IT FOR A SECOND. YOU REALLY WANT TO GO IN THERE AND TELL THEM THAT SOME RICH OLD LADY AND HER BUTLER TURNED ME INTO A GIRL? THEY'LL LAUGH US OUT OF THE STATION OR LOCK US UP FOR WASTING THEIR TIME.


WE HAVE TO TRY. I'LL TALK TO THEM. YOU DON'T EVEN NEED TO SAY ANYTHING. AT LEAST, NOT YET.
GOD, WHY DO YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO BE SO STUBBORN? SECOND DAWN ISN'T JUST SOME SEX CLUB. THEY'RE RICH, CONNECTED. THEY TURNED MY FRIEND NICK, A GUY WHO COULD BENCH PRESS ME, INTO THIS...THIS DELICATE THING. THESE PEOPLE MAKE FOLKS LIKE US VANISH. POOF! GONE WITHOUT A TRACE. YOU THINK THE COPS WILL DO SHIT AGAINST THEM? WE'LL JUST PUT A TARGET ON OUR BACKS.


POLICE
DEPARTMENT
POLICE
WHY THE HELL ARE YOU PROTECTING THEM? MAYBE THEY CHANGED MORE THAN YOUR BODY. THIS IS SOME KIND OF STOCKHOLM SYNDROME SHIT. I...I CARE ABOUT YOU TOO MUCH NOT TO DO SOMETHING.
EXCUSE ME. OFFICERS?
JOSH, NO. WAIT!


FOR FUCK'S SAKE, WAIT! YOU'RE NOT SEEING THE WHOLE PICTURE. SECOND DAWN HAS PEOPLE EVERYWHERE. AND MRS. FERRIS... SHE'S BEEN THROUGH ENOUGH.
THROUGH ENOUGH? DUDE, SHE HAD YOU CUT UP AND PUMPED FULL OF HORMONES, MAN! THAT DOESN'T JUST GET FORGIVEN BECAUSE SHE HAS A SOB STORY. WHY AREN'T YOU AS PISSED AS I AM ABOUT THIS?
IT'S NOT ABOUT FORGIVENESS. IT'S ABOUT SURVIVAL.
POLICE


IF WE STIR THIS POT, WE MIGHT END UP ON THAT HORRIBLE ISLAND LIKE NICK. OR MAYBE WORSE. I'M SCARED, JOSH. AND YOU SHOULD BE TOO. WE'VE NEVER BEEN HEROES. WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT GETTING BY, NOT STARTING CRUSADES. WE DON'T HAVE TO BE THE ONES TO TAKE THEM DOWN.
DAMMIT, DUDE. CAN YOU ASSURE ME THAT YOU AREN'T BRAINWASHED? I DON'T WANT YOU GOING ALL MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE ON ME AND, LIKE, PUTTING SEDATIVES IN MY FOOD AND SUDDENLY I WAKE UP WITH TITS.
HEY, I'M THE SAME PERSON WHO PICKED LOCKS WITH YOU, WHO RAN FROM COPS WITH YOU. I'M SCARED SHITLESS, NOT BRAINWASHED. WE GO IN THERE, WE MIGHT AS WELL SIGN OUR OWN DEATH WARRANTS.
THIS IS SO MESSED UP... FINE. FOR NOW, WE DO NOTHING. BUT WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO FIGURE OUT SOMETHING EVENTUALLY.


EVERYTHING OKAY HERE, MISS?
YES, SORRY FOR THE DISTURBANCE OFFICER.
YOU'RE SURE? YOU SOUNDED PRETTY HEATED.
OH, WE'RE FINE. JUST A LITTLE DISAGREEMENT ABOUT... WEDDING PLANS? Y-YEAH. YOU KNOW HOW IT IS.
ALRIGHT THEN. BUT IF YOU NEED ANY ASSISTANCE, THE STATION'S RIGHT THERE.
AND, UH, CONGRATULATIONS.


SERIOUSLY, JOSH? A TORNADO WOULD DO LESS DAMAGE THAN YOU LIVING SOLO FOR SIX WEEKS.
WHAT CAN I SAY? YOU SPOILED ME WITH CLEANLINESS. I'M A CREATURE OF HABIT... BAD ONES, APPARENTLY.


THIS PLACE WAS SPOTLESS WHEN I LEFT. HOW DO YOU EVEN FUNCTION LIKE THIS?
FUNCTION IS A STRONG WORD. LET'S JUST SAY I'VE BEEN... PREOCCUPIED. ACTUALLY, 'FUCKING DEPRESSED' WOULD BE MORE ACCURATE. YOU KNOW, WHAT WITH MY GIRL BEING KIDNAPPED AND EVERYTHING. OF COURSE, JOKES ON ME - SHE'S NOT EVEN REAL.
HEY, C'MON...


LOOK, I'VE BEEN THINKING. WE SHOULD SET UP SOME APPOINTMENTS, YOU KNOW, TO SEE WHAT CAN BE UNDONE. THE DOCTORS MIGHT BE ABLE TO REVERSE SOME OF THE... CHANGES.
I... I NEED TIME. THIS ISN'T JUST ABOUT FLIPPING A SWITCH AND GOING BACK TO BEING A GUY. IT'S MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT.
COMPLICATED? SCOTT, THEY FORCED... *THIS...* ON YOU! WHY WOULDN'T YOU WANT TO DO EVERYTHING YOU CAN – AND FAST – TO GET BACK TO WHO YOU WERE? I DON'T UNDERSTAND.


BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW WHO THAT IS ANYMORE. AND I CAN'T JUST ERASE SANDY LIKE SHE WAS A MISTAKE. THERE WERE – ARE – PARTS OF BEING HER THAT I... I REALLY ENJOYED.
I NEED TO FIGURE OUT WHAT ALL OF THIS MEANS FOR ME FIRST. I WANTED TO STAY WITH YOU FOR A COUPLE WEEKS TO SORT THROUGH ALL THIS SHIT IN MY HEAD. CAN YOU UNDERSTAND THAT? IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE PHYSICAL STUFF, JOSH. THERE'S A WHOLE MESS OF THINGS IN MY HEAD THAT I CAN'T UNTANGLE OVERNIGHT.
YEAH, OKAY. I GET IT. IT'S JUST HARD FOR ME TO UNDERSTAND. IF I WAS IN YOUR SHOES...
ANYWAY, AT LEAST LET ME TAKE YOU FOR A HEALTH CHECK OR SOMETHING. AFTER ALL THE CHEMICALS THEY PUT IN YOU, WE NEED TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE OKAY.
ALRIGHT, A CHECK-UP SOUNDS FAIR... THANK YOU, JOSH.
PROOF


OKAY. I... I'LL BE BACK IN A COUPLE HOURS. I NEED TO CHECK IN WITH WORK, MAKE SURE I'M NOT FIRED.
THANKS AGAIN FOR LETTING ME STAY WITH YOU. I HOPE IT'S NOT...AWKWARD.
NO PROBLEM. WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR, RIGHT?


NICK, THIS IS PROBABLY A FEELING YOU'RE FAMILIAR WITH: WHEN YOU HAVE WHAT YOU THINK IS A BRILLIANT IDEA... AND THEN IT BACKFIRES SPECTACULARLY.
SO, JOSH LEAVES FOR WORK AND I'M ALONE IN THIS PIGSTY HE CALLS AN APARTMENT. AND I THINK TO MYSELF, 'I'LL CLEAN UP! IT'LL BE A NICE SURPRISE.'


HEY, SORRY THAT TOOK ME SO LONG. MY BOSS WAS BEING A PRICK. BUT I WENT TO MACY'S AND PICKED YOU UP SOME... SOME...


I EVEN ORDERED HIS FAVORITE PIZZA – EXTRA CHEESE, PEPPERONI, THE WORKS – FOR WHEN HE GOT BACK. A SORT OF PEACE OFFERING? OR MAYBE...
AW, FUCK, WHO AM I KIDDING? IT WAS MORE THAN A PEACE OFFERING. I WANTED HIM TO STOP LOOKING AT ME LIKE A LIKE A VICTIM OR A FREAK SHOW. I WANTED HIM TO SEE ME AS... I DON'T KNOW, SOMEONE HE COULD STILL HANG WITH? MAYBE EVEN LIKE? MAYBE...MORE?
WOW! THE PLACE LOOKS FANTASTIC AGAIN.

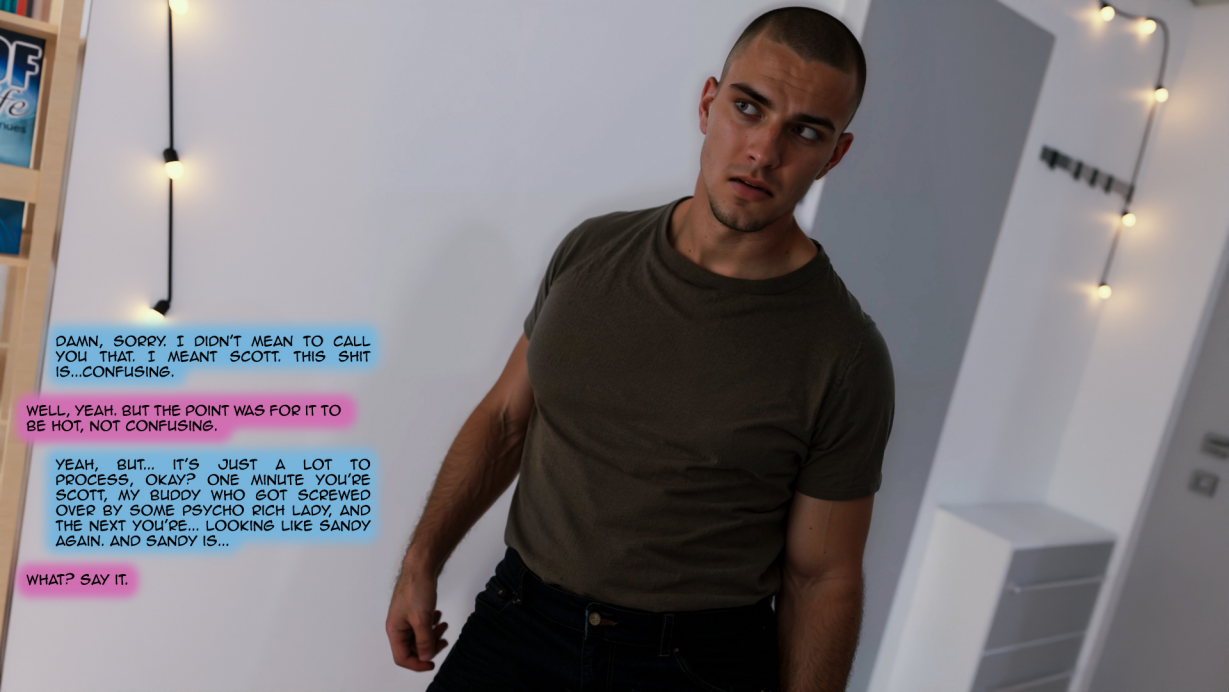

HOLY CRAP, THAT LOOKS DELICIOUS, SCOTT, THANK YOU! WHERE ARE YOU? LET'S DIG IN! I'M STARVING.
COMING! JUST FINISHING UP IN THE BEDROOM.


I WAS HALFWAY THROUGH SCRUBBING THE BATHROOM WHEN I FOUND THAT STUPID MAID COSTUME THAT JOSH BOUGHT ME. YOU KNOW, BACK WHEN WE WERE...WHATEVER WE WERE. AND I THOUGHT, 'HEY, WHY NOT WEAR IT? MAYBE IT'LL LIGHTEN THE MOOD.'
PROOF
macy's


COULD WE PICK UP EXACTLY WHERE WE LEFT OFF? BECAUSE – AND SORRY FOR THE 'GAY' STUFF 🤦 – BUT WHERE WE LEFT OFF WAS PRETTY DAMN HOT.
IF HE SAW ME DRESSED LIKE HIS SANDY, MAYBE HE'D WANT ME AGAIN.
YOU'RE SUCH A DIRTY BOY, MONSIEUR.


DON'T WORRY. I'VE CLEANED UP AFTER YOU. BUT MONSIEUR, I THINK YOU'VE BEEN WORKING TOO HARD. PERHAPS IT'S TIME FOR A LITTLE... RELAXATION?


DAMN, YOU LOOK... WOW. YOU REALLY WENT ALL OUT, HUH?
OUI, MONSIEUR. I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE - HOW YOU DO YOU SAY? - FUN!
IT'S MORE THAN FUN, IT'S HOT. YOU ALWAYS KNOW HOW TO SURPRISE ME, SANDY-- OH, I MEAN...


DAMN, SORRY. I DIDN'T MEAN TO CALL YOU THAT. I MEANT SCOTT. THIS SHIT IS...CONFUSING.
WELL, YEAH. BUT THE POINT WAS FOR IT TO BE HOT, NOT CONFUSING.
YEAH, BUT... IT'S JUST A LOT TO PROCESS, OKAY? ONE MINUTE YOU'RE SCOTT, MY BUDDY WHO GOT SCREWED OVER BY SOME PSYCHO RICH LADY, AND THE NEXT YOU'RE... LOOKING LIKE SANDY AGAIN. AND SANDY IS...
WHAT? SAY IT.


PROOF
Sandy's not real! This isn't you! It's some fucked up fantasy that got forced on you and now I'm getting sucked into it too!
So what if it started out like that? Maybe I'm figuring out there's more to me than just "Scott." Ever think of that?
But where does that leave us?! Where does that leave you?! You think this is something you can just play with?

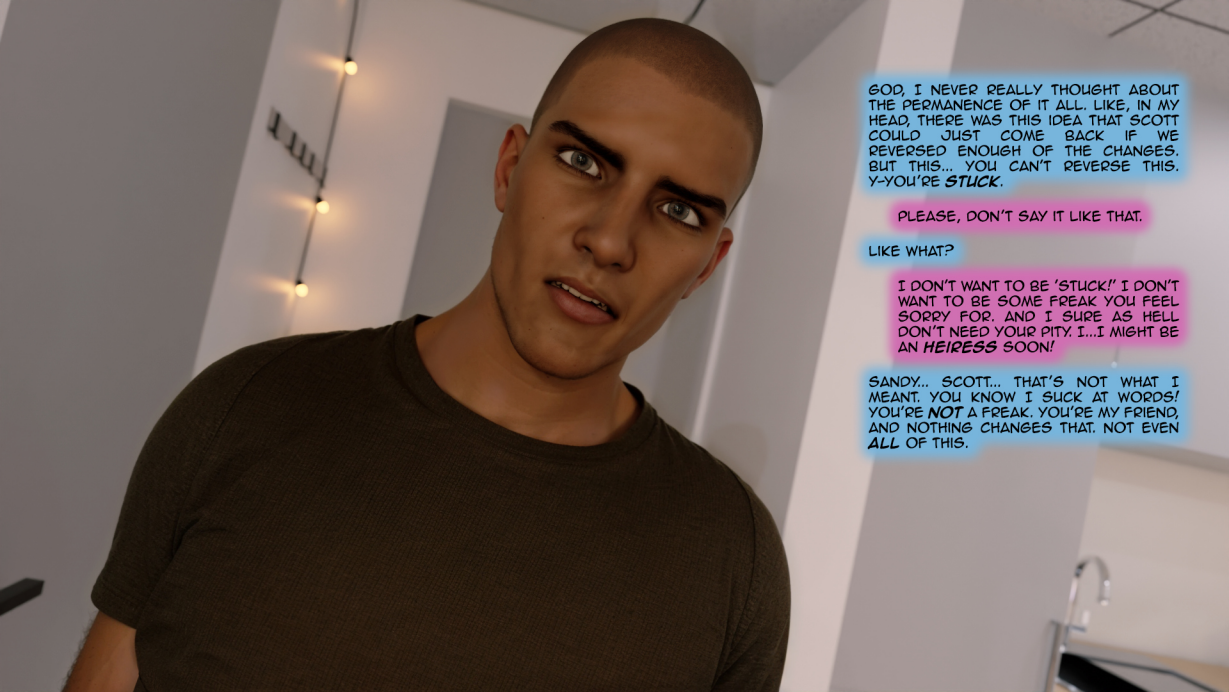

MAYBE I CAN PLAY WITH IT. MAYBE THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I NEED TO DO. THIS WHOLE MESS... IT'S FORCED ME TO EXPLORE PARTS OF MYSELF I NEVER WOULD HAVE OTHERWISE. AND MAYBE I'VE FOUND SOMETHING IN 'SANDY' THAT FEELS RIGHT. OR AT LEAST NOT COMPLETELY WRONG.
YOU'RE TALKING LIKE THIS IS SOME KIND OF GAME! IT'S YOUR LIFE, SCOTT!
MY LIFE GOT FLIPPED UPSIDE DOWN THE NIGHT I STEPPED INTO THAT MANSION. AND YEAH, IT WAS AGAINST MY WILL. BUT WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE BETWEEN WHAT WAS DONE TO ME AND WHAT MIGHT ACTUALLY BE ME? CAN YOU TELL ME THAT?
...NO.
ME EITHER. BUT...I'LL TAKE OFF THE OUTFIT IF IT'S MAKING YOU FEEL WEIRD.


HEY... I'M SORRY. I SHOULDN'T HAVE FLIPPED OUT LIKE THAT. IT'S JUST HARD TO SEE SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT GO THROUGH ALL THIS SHIT AND NOT KNOW HOW TO HELP OR EVEN WHAT TO SAY. THANK YOU FOR CLEANING UP THE PLACE AND FOR THE PIZZA.
AND WINE! LISTEN, I KNOW IT'S WEIRD. HELL, I NEVER THOUGHT I LIKED GUYS UNTIL YOU TREATED ME LIKE A GIRL. HOW FUCKED UP IS THAT? BUT IT'S THE TRUTH. I'M NOT SAYING I HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS, OR THAT I'M HAPPY WITH HOW THINGS WENT DOWN. BUT HERE WE ARE, AND I CAN'T JUST IGNORE THESE FEELINGS BECAUSE THEY DON'T FIT INTO A NEAT LITTLE BOX.
ANYWAY, I TOOK OFF THE OUTFIT.
OKAY. I SHOULDN'T HAVE MADE SUCH A BIG--


OH! I, UH... DIDN'T EXPECT YOU TO BE...
NAKED? YEAH, WELL, YOU DIDN'T LIKE MY UNIFORM SO I DECIDED TO SIMPLIFY THE SITUATION. IT'S JUST SKIN, JOSH. WE'VE BOTH SEEN IT BEFORE. AND LET'S BE REAL, IT'S NOT LIKE I HAVE MUCH TO HIDE FROM YOU ANYMORE.
RIGHT... YEAH, I MEAN, WE'VE BEEN DOWN THAT ROAD. IT'S JUST... UNEXPECTED.
UNEXPECTED CAN BE GOOD, CAN'T IT? KEEPS THINGS INTERESTING.
INTERESTING IS ONE WORD FOR IT...
WHAT DO YOU PREFER? EXCITING? TEMPTING? OR MAYBE... IRRESISTIBLE?
YOU'RE REALLY NOT MAKING THIS EASY FOR ME, ARE YOU?
EASY IS BORING. AND SINCE WHEN HAVE WE EVER DONE BORING? WE WERE THIEVES AND HUSTLERS!
RIGHT, BUT...BUT... OH, MY GOD...

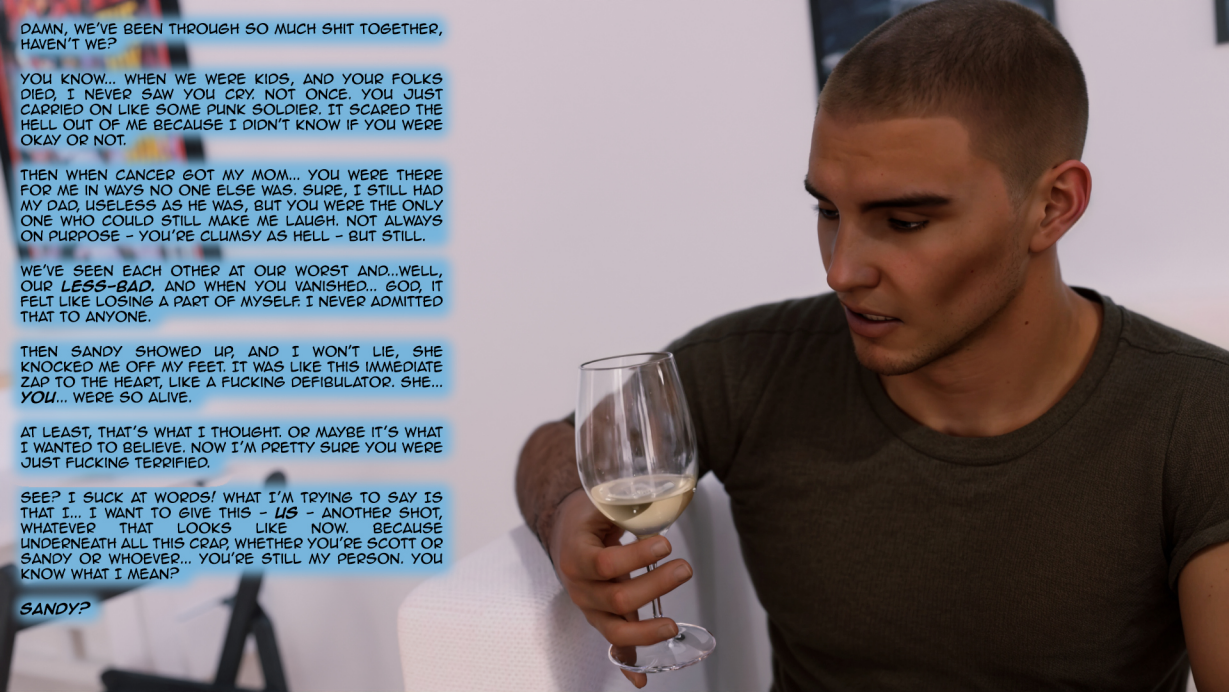

WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO... I MEAN... YOU'VE BEEN...
OH SHIT. I FORGOT YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THAT PART. YEAH, MRS FERRIS... SHE HAD ME CASTRATED.
SHE...WHAT!? AND YOU'RE JUST STANDING HERE LIKE IT'S NOTHING? HOW CAN YOU BE SO CALM? WHY DIDN'T YOU LET ME HAVE HER ARRESTED!?
BECAUSE FREAKING OUT WON'T GROW THEM BACK. I CRIED ABOUT IT, BELIEVE ME. BUT I'VE HAD SOME TIME TO COME TO TERMS WITH IT. IT'S DONE. IT'S PART OF ME NOW - OR, UM, NOT A PART OF ME.
THAT'S NOT SOMETHING SMALL!
NEITHER IS THE BOOB JOB. THANKS FOR NOTICING, BY THE WAY.
DUDE! THAT'S YOUR BODY! THEY HAD NO RIGHT!


NO, THEY DIDN'T HAVE ANY RIGHT. BUT IT HAPPENED. AND I'M DEALING WITH IT THE BEST I CAN. YOU THINK I WANTED THIS? EVERY MORNING I WAKE UP TO A BODY THAT STILL FEELS ALIEN TO ME. BUT THEN... THERE ARE MOMENTS WHEN IT DOESN'T FEEL SO WRONG. WHAT DOES THAT SAY ABOUT ME?
IT SAYS YOU'RE STRONGER THAN ANYONE I KNOW. BUT FUCK, MAN, THIS IS... THIS IS MUTILATION.
YEAH, AND NOW I HAVE TO LIVE WITH IT. FOREVER. LOOK, I'M NOT ASKING YOU TO UNDERSTAND OR ACCEPT ANY OF THIS OVERNIGHT. HELL, I HAVEN'T EITHER. ALL I'M ASKING IS FOR YOU TO MAYBE TRY SEEING THINGS FROM MY PERSPECTIVE.
YOUR PERSPECTIVE...
YES! FROM MY PERSPECTIVE WHERE EVERYTHING ISN'T BLACK AND WHITE ANYMORE! WHERE SANDY ISN'T JUST A COSTUME OR A ROLE FORCED UPON ME BUT... MAYBE A PART OF WHO I AM? OR COULD BE?


GOD, I NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT THE PERMANENCE OF IT ALL. LIKE, IN MY HEAD, THERE WAS THIS IDEA THAT SCOTT COULD JUST COME BACK IF WE REVERSED ENOUGH OF THE CHANGES. BUT THIS... YOU CAN'T REVERSE THIS. Y-YOU'RE **STUCK**.
PLEASE, DON'T SAY IT LIKE THAT.
LIKE WHAT?
I DON'T WANT TO BE 'STUCK!' I DON'T WANT TO BE SOME FREAK YOU FEEL SORRY FOR. AND I SURE AS HELL DON'T NEED YOUR PITY. I...I MIGHT BE AN **HEIRESS** SOON!
SANDY... SCOTT... THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT. YOU KNOW I SUCK AT WORDS! YOU'RE **NOT** A FREAK. YOU'RE MY FRIEND, AND NOTHING CHANGES THAT. NOT EVEN **ALL** OF THIS.


FRIENDS... YEAH. BUT PART OF ME STILL WANTS *MORE* THAN THAT. WITH YOU. IS THAT CRAZY?
IT'S NOT CRAZY. IT'S JUST... IT'S A LOT TO TAKE IN, YOU KNOW? AND I DON'T WANT TO HURT YOU, NOT MORE THAN YOU'VE ALREADY BEEN HURT. IT'S HARD TO APPRECIATE YOUR *AMAZING* BODY KNOWING IT WAS FORCED ON YOU.
BUT TAKING RISKS IS WHAT LIFE'S ABOUT. WE NEVER PLAYED IT SAFE BEFORE, WHY START NOW?
SURE, BUT LET'S START WITH SOMETHING SIMPLE. LIKE HOUSING THIS AMAZING SPREAD YOU PUT TOGETHER.
OKAY. YEAH, SIMPLE WOULD BE NICE FOR A CHANGE.
LET'S JUST EAT SOME PIZZA, DRINK SOME WINE... AND TALK. NO PRESSURE FOR ANYTHING ELSE.
TALKING IS GOOD. WE CAN DO TALKING. AND EATING. I'M ACTUALLY STARVING.
ME TOO. AND HEY, FOR THE RECORD? YOU'RE ONE HELL OF A COOK AND CLEANER. IF YOU EVER DECIDE TO DITCH THE HEIRESS GIG, YOU'VE GOT A SOLID FALLBACK AS A DOMESTIC GODDESS.
HA! THANKS... I THINK? NOW COME ON, LET'S EAT BEFORE IT GETS COLD. I HATE COLD PIZZA.
YEAH, SPEAKING OF COLD, WHY DON'T YOU GO PUT SOMETHING ON. I HAVE A WHOLE *WARDROBE* FULL OF CLOTHES FOR 'SANDY' FROM OUR TRIP TO THE DEPARTMENT STORE THAT ONE TIME. I'M STILL PAYING THAT OFF ON MY CREDIT CARD!
WELL! THEN I'D BETTER PUT THEM TO USE, SUGAR DADDY.

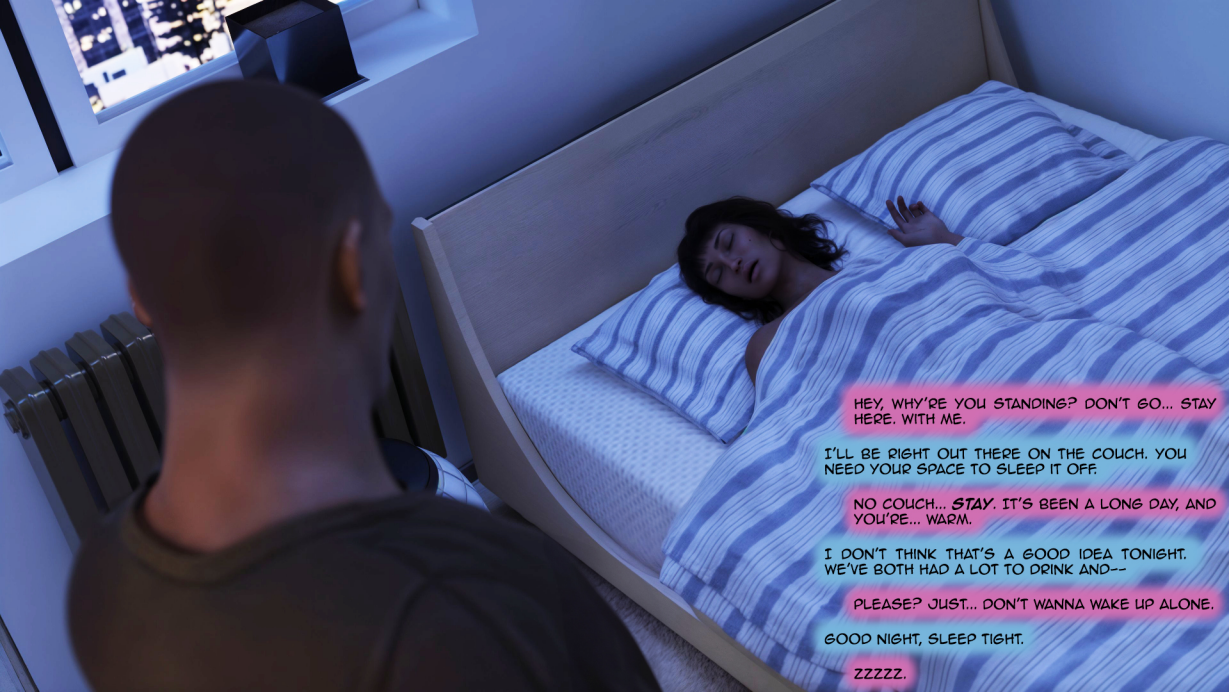

NICK, IT WAS... SURREAL. THERE WE WERE, JUST LAUGHING OUR ASSES OFF ABOUT THAT TIME WE TRIED TO STEAL WHAT WE THOUGHT WAS A PRICELESS VASE FROM OLD MR DALRYMPLE'S MANSION – TURNED OUT TO BE A CHEAP KNOCKOFF AND WE NEARLY GOT CAUGHT BECAUSE I TRIPPED OVER HIS DAMN PET PIG! THEN THE OLD BASTARD CHASED US WITH A GENUINE ANTIQUE KATANA/ GOD, WE WERE IDIOTS.
THAT NIGHT, FOR THE FIRST TIME, IT FELT LIKE I WASN'T SCOTT OR SANDY. I WAS BOTH. AND NEITHER. IT WAS FREEING.
WE DRANK WAY TOO MUCH WINE – I THINK JOSH IS TRYING TO SINGLE-HANDEDLY KEEP NAPA VALLEY IN BUSINESS – BUT SOMEHOW THE HAZE OF ALCOHOL MADE THINGS CLEARER.
WITH EVERY STUPID STORY, THERE WAS THIS BLENDING HAPPENING INSIDE ME; THE DULL EDGES OF 'SCOTT' AND THE CURVES OF 'SANDY' WERE MELDING INTO SOMETHING NEW. SOMETHING THAT DIDN'T NEED A LABEL OR AN EXPLANATION. AT LEAST, NOT RIGHT AWAY.
IT WAS LIKE TAKING A DEEP BREATH AFTER BEING UNDERWATER. I KNOW THERE'S STILL A LOT TO FIGURE OUT, AND SURE, SOME OF IT WAS WINE-INDUCED OPTIMISM. BUT THAT NIGHT FELT LIKE A BEGINNING. OR MAYBE AN ACCEPTANCE? HELL, I DON'T KNOW.
BUT NICK... IT FELT GOOD. REALLY GOOD.


DAMN, WE'VE BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH SHIT TOGETHER, HAVEN'T WE?
YOU KNOW... WHEN WE WERE KIDS, AND YOUR FOLKS DIED, I NEVER SAW YOU CRY. NOT ONCE. YOU JUST CARRIED ON LIKE SOME PUNK SOLDIER. IT SCARED THE HELL OUT OF ME BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW IF YOU WERE OKAY OR NOT.
THEN WHEN CANCER GOT MY MOM... YOU WERE THERE FOR ME IN WAYS NO ONE ELSE WAS. SURE, I STILL HAD MY DAD, USELESS AS HE WAS, BUT YOU WERE THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD STILL MAKE ME LAUGH. NOT ALWAYS ON PURPOSE - YOU'RE CLUMSY AS HELL - BUT STILL.
WE'VE SEEN EACH OTHER AT OUR WORST AND...WELL, OUR LESS-BAD. AND WHEN YOU VANISHED... GOD, IT FELT LIKE LOSING A PART OF MYSELF. I NEVER ADMITTED THAT TO ANYONE.
THEN SANDY SHOWED UP, AND I WON'T LIE, SHE KNOCKED ME OFF MY FEET. IT WAS LIKE THIS IMMEDIATE ZAP TO THE HEART, LIKE A FUCKING DEFIBULATOR. SHE... YOU... WERE SO ALIVE.
AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT. OR MAYBE IT'S WHAT I WANTED TO BELIEVE. NOW I'M PRETTY SURE YOU WERE JUST FUCKING TERRIFIED.
SEE? I SUCK AT WORDS! WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY IS THAT I... I WANT TO GIVE THIS - US - ANOTHER SHOT, WHATEVER THAT LOOKS LIKE NOW. BECAUSE UNDERNEATH ALL THIS CRAP, WHETHER YOU'RE SCOTT OR SANDY OR WHOEVER... YOU'RE STILL MY PERSON. YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?
SANDY?


ZZZ... ZZZZZZ... ZZZ...
YEAH, THAT CHECKS OUT.
ZZZ...


MMM... JOSH?
SHH, IT'S OKAY. JUST TAKING YOU TO BED. YOU CRASHED HARD.
'M NOT... 'M NOT A BABY...
NEVER SAID YOU WERE. BUT EVEN BADASSES NEED THEIR BEAUTY SLEEP.
YOU'RE... SUCH A DORK. HEY, TOMORROW, CAN YOU TAKE ME TO THE BARBER? DON'T WANNA BE A BRUNETTE ANYMORE. BRUNETTES ARE BORING. THEY DON'T GET LAID. THEY, LIKE, WORK IN H.R. UNTIL THEY DIE.
SURE. WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE THEN?


I GUESS BLONDE AGAIN? DUNNO. BLONDES GET ALL THE ATTENTION. MAYBE TOO MUCH ATTENTION? I COULD BE A REDHEAD! REDHEADS ARE FIERY AND MYSTERIOUS. I...I LIKE REDHEADS. A LOT.
BUT I WANT A WHOLE NEW STYLE. SOMETHING THAT I PICK FOR ME. NOT STUPID MRS FERRIS WITH HER AWFUL TASTE IN EVERYTHING. YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN THE UNDERWEAR SHE BOUGHT ME. THEY LOOK LIKE AN ADULT DIAPER.
THAT'S AN IMAGE I DIDN'T NEED. THANKS FOR THAT.
SHUT UP... YOU LOVE IT. YOU'RE WELCOME.


HEY, WHY'RE YOU STANDING? DON'T GO... STAY HERE. WITH ME.
I'LL BE RIGHT OUT THERE ON THE COUCH. YOU NEED YOUR SPACE TO SLEEP IT OFF.
NO COUCH... STAY. IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY, AND YOU'RE... WARM.
I DON'T THINK THAT'S A GOOD IDEA TONIGHT. WE'VE BOTH HAD A LOT TO DRINK AND--
PLEASE? JUST... DON'T WANNA WAKE UP ALONE.
GOOD NIGHT, SLEEP TIGHT.
ZZZZZ.


NICK, YOU KNOW WHEN YOU'RE HALF-ASLEEP AND EVERYTHING FEELS LIKE A DREAM? THAT'S HOW I FELT AS JOSH CARRIED ME TO BED. I THINK I BABBLED SOMETHING ABOUT HAIR COLORS. YEAH, NOT MY MOST ELOQUENT MOMENT.
BUT I REMEMBER I FELT SAFE, CARED FOR. IT'S A FEELING I HAVEN'T HAD IN A LONG, LONG TIME.


I BEGGED HIM TO STAY. HE WOULDN'T. I GUESS HE WAS TRYING TO BE A GENTLEMAN OR SOMETHING...


BUT NEITHER OF US HAS EVER BEEN GREAT WITH *IMPULSE CONTROL.*


I DIDN'T OPEN MY EYES, BUT I FELT HIS WARMTH, HIS WEIGHT ON THE MATTRESS... AND SOMETHING DECIDEDLY ***UNGENTLEMANLY*** POKING MY ASS.
THIS WASN'T MORNING WOOD. THIS WAS ***FULL-ON DESIRE***. GOD, IT'S THRILLING TO FEEL THAT KIND OF HUNGER FROM SOMEONE ELSE. MAKES YOU FEEL ALIVE, SEXY... ***POWERFUL***. TRY IT SOMETIME.
BEDTIME
SWEET DREAM
NOTHING HAPPENED. AT LEAST, NOT ***THAT*** NIGHT. 😉
BUT DON'T WORRY, I HAVE MORE TO TELL. AND WAIT UNTIL YOU SEE MY NEW HAIR STYLE!


1,742 MILES +
7 DAYS LATER...
GROSS, SCOTT. GAY STUFF!
...AND A CLIFFHANGER, TOO!? FUCKING LAME!