

The Warrior's Tale

The RA Volume IV, Part Three

ISAAC BYRNE



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By Isaac Byrne

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“How about that, you guys, eh? That look straight to you?”

Aunt Julia spoke excellent English for a woman who'd not come to it until she was in her twenties, doing it on her own after her sister passed and she became responsible for raising her very English-fluent niece and nephew. She'd been content living in the barrio. Everything was close, everything was Spanish, it was affordable and there was always something going on.

Suddenly, though, her niece and nephew weren't just some cute little weirdos to visit on the weekends or babysit when her sister had errands to run, or, closer to the end, medical appointments to attend. So when those appointments became a past tense and caring for her newly adopted children pressingly present, she picked up a second job, moved to an apartment in a complex where she was one of the only Latinas she saw, and figured out how to raise kids.

She wasn't a perfect mother, but then, she'd never intended to be one in the first place. Ten years in, she felt like she was doing a pretty good job slapping condiments on the turd sandwich her family had been served.

“Little high on the left, Tía,” said Amy. “Don't you think, Benny?”

The boy hesitated, almost imperceptibly, then nodded. “Um. Yeah, little high on the left.”

Aunt Julia made a few micro-adjustments until her niece and her niece's friend thumbs-upped the new addition to her décor. “*¿Qué van a hacer ustedes hoy?*”

Ben looked at his girlfriend. She fielded the Spanish stuff. “We're gonna just hang out here. There's a new season of *Riverdale* on Netflix.”

“Bah, you two are young,” grumbled her aunt in her thick accent. “You should be out doing things, having fun, getting into trouble. Not sitting around here watching other kids do it on the TV.”

“It's like a hundred degrees outside, Tía! We'd melt, then you'd come home and find our puddles on the sidewalk, and then you'd yell at us about how I'm never careful and always making messes for my poor put-upon tía. So which is it?”

She didn't bother pointing out that her brother Jonah went out getting into trouble all the time, and that the DCS meeting Aunt Julia had been dragged to over it hadn't gone over well. Jonah staying home to watch Netflix would be a relief.

Aunt Julia laughed. “You are so like your mother. She would turn everything I said into a fight, too.” She said it affectionately, though. She always spoke of Julia's mother affectionately. It helped. Julia had been too young to remember very much of her. What she remembered, though, she treasured. There was a sense of safety and love attached to all those old memories that the real world seldom seemed to convey. It was bittersweet, but Amy suspected that her mother's knowledge that their years together would be cut short had helped her stuff more love into what few they'd had.

“Lucky for you, Tía, it's too hot for fighting, too. What about you? Working?”

“No work today – just catching up on all the *mierda* I wasn’t doing when I was working, which means there’s extra work. *¿Necesitas algo del supermercado?*”

“Um... I *think*–”

“Never mind. You think. I gotta go. Text me, yeah? You got a few hours, but if you forget, you gonna starve – worse than usual, skinny chica.”

Aunt Julia was at the door before she remembered her purse, whirled about and snatched it from the front table, and back. She stopped with the door open, one foot out. “*Este chico es lindo.*”

Amy gave her aunt a *look*. Ben had taken German in high school. (He was a *college boy*, something Amy had not yet tired of lording over her friends.) She was pretty sure the closest encounter he’d had with a native speaker was his family’s housekeeper, but still. “Tía...!”

“*¿Me arrepentiré de haberlos dejado solos aquí?*”

“*¿Puedes irte por favor?*” Amy groaned.

Aunt Julia blew a kiss. “Text me, OK?”

The door closed behind her. “Sorry about that.”

She expected to be asked for a translation, and was already prepared with suitable lies. It would be way too embarrassing to explain her aunt’s anxieties about leaving the young couple unchaperoned.

Instead, she got, “I don’t like it when you call me ‘Benny’ in front of people. I haven’t gone by Benny since I was twelve.” He sounded angry, for some reason.

“You didn’t mind it when I was moaning it last night,” she said, traipsing her fingers up his chest.

He brushed the fingers aside roughly. “When we’re alone, it’s different. Just don’t, OK? I don’t think that’s so much to ask.”

“All right, sorry, geez. *Ben*,” she said. “Let me make some popcorn. So we have something to spill later when you try another one of those cheesy moves like at the movies last week.”

That seemed to mollify him. He pinched her on the butt when she stood up, which she liked. He put his arm around her when she sat back down and hit play, which she also liked. He kissed her when Archie kissed Veronica, which she *really* liked.

“You know, I thought they’d be bigger,” he said when making out advanced to the level of getting Amy out of her shirt.

She did not like that.

“Um, I’m sorry...?” she said, immediately pulling it back down.

“Oh come on, don’t be like that. I like them.” Somehow, her shirt didn’t fly back off. “I said I liked them! I wasn’t trying to insult you. Just saying I always thought they looked bigger. Because you’re so pretty.”

Amy frowned. “What, a girl can only be pretty with big boobs?”

“Did I say that? Don’t put words in my mouth. Jesus, and I thought your aunt was a bitch.”

Her frown intensified by orders of magnitude. “What the hell did you just say?”

“I said, your *aunt*. Is a *bitch*,” he repeated, slowly. Somehow Ben didn’t seem to recognize until after he’d said it that he’d gone too far, grimacing at his overreach. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, Ames.”

“Amy.”

“What?”

“You said you don’t like being called Benny. I don’t like being called Ames.” She folded her arms imperiously, turning a shoulder to him.

“Oh my fucking god. Did I do something wrong? You know, you might be the first girl to invite me over for a Netflix and chill who actually didn’t mean it as a metaphor. Fuck, what a waste of time.”

He stood up, Amy presumed in order to leave. He didn’t leave. “Yeah, well, sorry to have wasted your valuable time on my tiny tits.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should be sorry. What I get for throwing a bone to some sheltered high school girl.”

“Maybe because you know I’m way hotter than any of the college chicks who probably won’t give you the time of day, *Benny*,” she snarled.

Ben hit her. Open-palmed, the coward’s hit, the way men who wanted to and knew how to hit a girl hit them. Amy looked up, stunned. There was a flash of regret in his eyes, though she surmised – correctly – it was fear of getting in trouble, not fear that he’d hurt her.

“I told you to call me Ben,” he said, like that excused it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lose my temper, but... You bring me over here, you wear that hot little outfit, and then it’s like you tried to make me mad on purpose. I didn’t mean to.”

Amy, meanwhile, was clutching her cheek and watching him in abject terror. In an objective sense, she’d known she’d been locked in a space with someone twice her size, biceps the size of her waist. It had simply never occurred to her that was cause for concern. Not until now. With him standing over her, muscles tense, thunderclouds darkening his face, she was a fox trapped in a den with a bear.

“You hit me,” she said, processing.

“I *slapped* you,” he corrected, though he’d been thinking of it exactly the way she said until she said it. “Are you OK? It wasn’t that hard. You’re OK.”

“You... you *hit* me!”

“You insulted me,” he countered, pathetically. “Look, I said I’m sorry. I am. Here, let me...” Ben leaned down. When she didn’t remove her hand from her face, he pulled it away – pried it away, one might say – and kissed her cheek. “There. All better.”

It was not all better. It still stung, and the loss of pressure on it made it sting. Why wasn't he leaving? He'd just done the one thing guys were never ever supposed to do to a girl – well, one of the two things – but he didn't seem scared. The door was ten feet away. The apartment wasn't that big. Somehow he didn't budge.

"Forgive me?" he pressed when she didn't say anything.

Amy wasn't sure what to say. She wanted him to leave, but what if saying that made him stay? It could start an argument. A fight. Pointing out what he'd done had only made him feel like he had a right to touch her, to put his lips on her. What if telling him to leave made him do something worse?

But... what if *not* telling him to leave accomplished the same thing?

Her eyes darted anxiously to the new wall hanging. No. No no no. This would *not* do. She wasn't the sort of person who let someone intimidate her. Not in her own house. Amy took to her feet and guided him, full force, toward the exit.

That evening, Ben helped Aunt Julia carry in the groceries – lugged the whole load up in one trip, the same macho way Jonah always tried to do it – and departed then without even a final kiss.

"*Nunca me enviaste un texto,*" complained Aunt Julia as she flopped into her chair. The woman was scarcely bigger than Amy (though nobody would ever call her flat, Amy thought bitterly) yet still the springs whined under her weight. It was a venerable chair.

Amy apologized. To Aunt Julia, she looked like she was looking at something on her phone. Really, she had the camera app open, triple-checking to make sure there was no bruise forming on her cheek.

Or her neck. Ben had thought it would be hot to be aggressive like that. Maybe it had been, for him.

No bruises, though. Not where anyone could see them, anyway.

"So? You two have fun...?"

There were a hundred things Amy wanted to say. Almost all of them began with a resounding *no*. All of which she knew would end with questions and drama and anger and making Ben pissed off at her again. Not that she was ever going to see him again. Of course, she'd have to see him at school. Plus, he was going to Lakeview, where Amy had also planned to go when she graduated the following summer. They had some mutual friends, too. Friends who'd set her up with him in the first place. Friends who had expressed their undying envy that she got invited to college parties at fraternities like they'd only seen in movies. Friends who thought she was so fucking lucky to have landed a guy like Ben.

Amy laughed, somehow. She was pretty sure that was the sound she'd made, at least. Why wouldn't her hands stop shaking? "Why do you think I didn't text?"

"Don't you go having *too* much fun, *sobrina.*"

“You were the one who wanted me getting into trouble.”

Aunt Julia eyed the grocery bags on the counter grumpily. She hadn't meant it as a signal, but Amy hopped up anyway to put them away. If there was a sure way to get on Aunt Julia's good side, it was to put the groceries away.

“I think it's still crooked,” she said, eyeing that decorative sign Amy had made – made on her first date with Ben, in fact. She'd thought it was so classy, so romantic, attending a crafting class with him. She'd bragged about it to everybody who would listen. All the other couples were way older than them. Most of them were married. She'd seen the price tag, too, a ludicrous amount to put a little paint and a doodad or two on a piece of wood. And he'd been such a gentleman.

Had she called him Benny, there, in front of those people? Had he said anything? If only he'd said something, she would have known not to do it again.

Fucking asshole. Fucking fucking asshole.

Amy gave one corner a ghost of a nudge, watching for her aunt's reaction. “Eh. Good enough,” she said.

Amy studied it for a moment. Pink background, letters sponged on in this cool textured paint they'd had. A sunflower in the corner, a ladybug perched on the *R*. A border stenciled in so well even the instructor had said it was impressive for a first-timer. Amy's guidance counselor had tried to steer her toward the arts, once, but Aunt Julia had said under no circumstances would she permit it. Artists were poor, and they were all going to be replaced by AI in the next five years anyway, she said. Maybe she'd be able to take some classes as electives, or sneak in a minor.

She couldn't afford to go somewhere else, though. That scholarship was huge, and she'd only landed it because she was a townie. Maybe Ben would transfer. He always complained about how he hated living here.

Anyway, Ben brought flowers to their next date, to Aunt Julia's delight. “*Este me gusta*,” she said, thumbs-upping her niece behind his back as she let him in.

“C'mon, let's get going Ames. You're cute enough as it is – don't wanna make us late to the party, right?”

Maybe it was a one-time thing, she told herself. Just don't call him Ben.

“Yeah, well, go fuck yourself, you flat frigid fugly bitch.”

It ended far better than she'd hoped it would.

Amy wasn't stupid. She was actually pretty smart, as it so happened. When she graduated, it would be with honors. She hadn't realized her increasingly nightmarish relationship with Ben had been such a common thing, almost cliché, until she'd found some places online full of other women living it themselves.

Once she learned the vocabulary for it, read up on all the tactics and techniques guys like Ben used – consciously or no – it was easy to find people who'd been with abusers and manipulators and controllers. Easy to find advice. Encouragement. Empathy. She even appreciated the sad solace of not feeling alone while trying to rationalize what to make of Ben's threat to kill himself if she ever left him. Boy, was *that* trick on everybody's list.

Then again, any comfort in knowing she wasn't alone in spirit did nothing to make her less alone in practice. Her family liked Ben, even Jonah. So did her friends. On paper, if you didn't know what went on behind the scenes, he seemed great. Local college boy, also on academic scholarship, good-looking, not the worst conversationalist. He hailed from a respected family; his mom owned the local Target, the one up on the north side of town. He had "going places" written all over him in a dozen languages. (Spanish not included.)

They simply didn't hear the insults or the threats. They didn't see the menacing gleam in his eyes if another boy tried to talk to her, or feel the power in those muscles if she didn't cut it off fast enough. (Not that it always mattered if she did.)

It was one thing to believe in the principle that she didn't deserve this. It was, emphatically, not her fault. It was quite another to accept the stark reality that she didn't know how to get away. She'd tried to merely start a conversation about breaking up last Christmas. ("You know, do you really see us still being together long-term? You'll graduate two years before me, you know, and I'm sure you'll land some fancy new job way far away from here..." It had been made plain that if he left, she would go with. They were, Ben informed her, in love.)

Maybe if she bit the bullet and followed through, actually left him – if he let her go, which she had a hard time imagining – he'd likewise follow through and kill himself. But the chamber of his dad's gun (something he'd done a little show and tell with, super casual, a few days after the incident when she refused to give him the passcode to her phone) held nineteen bullets. That left eighteen for Amy before he got on with the main event. Maybe he'd split them evenly between Aunt Julia and Jonah and her, six apiece.

Aunt Julia was a big fan of all those murder shows. They used to watch them together, laugh and comment on the tropes that played out so often. "*Por supuesto que es el marido!*" they'd cry, one or the other or both.

It stopped being funny to Amy after that.

Amy told herself and told herself she should open up to her aunt. Aunt Julia was old school, and if she didn't drive out and smash in the windows of Ben's sports car with the baseball bat she still kept by her nightstand from the barrio, she knew some no-bullshit hombres who'd start there and then get serious if she asked them to. Which was in part why Amy held back. Everyone would know – except they'd only think they knew, without knowing jack shit. There would be the ones who thought she was

exaggerating about all Ben had done; the ones who thought she was outright lying, making shit up about him to avenge some petty slight; the ones who'd want to believe it all but were too adjacent to those other types. What was easier to believe, after all? That Amy hadn't gotten what she felt was her due for an anniversary gift and lashed out, or that Ben was a violent, controlling, manipulative sadist?

Worst of all, though, there would be the ones who would believe her completely. People who would understand how weak, and terrified, and helpless she'd been. How pathetic. Discover that she was afraid of even going to the hospital and showing them the bruises. Letting them involve the police. That was one thing the forums had in spades, testimonies from women who'd gone to the police. Stories where they actually helped instead of making everything worse were few and far between. So instead, Amy hid in her room and put a razor to her ankles or the tops of her feet.

Ben believed she never took her socks off because she had a huge hangup about her feet. It was something she could keep from him, a part of herself only *she* could hurt. That made no sense, Amy knew, but neither did constructing an elaborate web of protections for her abuser and she'd acclimated to that in a big fucking hurry.

Her fantasy was that Ben would cease to exist somehow, fall in a hole in the woods or be smashed by a meteor or drown in the middle of Bear Lake. Drown in the deep water, cold and murky. Ol' Ursula, the bear that lives at the bottom of the lake according to local legend, could just eat his body bones and all. He could just disappear, and people would wonder, and then forget. And so would she. And she'd be Amy again, not Ben's girlfriend.

Instead, her tits shrunk even smaller thanks to her frequent escapes to the Y and her infrequent escapes to the kitchen. (Food was a happy thing, and Amy was not happy.) So Ben finally just cheated on her with some bitch from some sorority at Lakeview. A college girl, not some immature high school senior like Amy. She "caught" him, which was to say Skyler sought her out and told her, rubbed it in her face like Amy would be anything but relieved to the bottom of her soul. Skyler had no idea what she was in for, because Amy had been just that goddamn good at making sure no one knew she'd spent 10 months 2 weeks and Memorial Day weekend shackled to a monster.

Skyler was exactly what she'd needed. She'd fantasized about it, often, and knew precisely how to proceed once daydreams manifested. Without batting an eyelash, for the first time in her relationship, Amy got clingy. Possessive. Texted Ben all the time, inane shit like *wyd?* or *miss you* or a picture of her lunch – especially if she had reason to think he was out with Skyler. Amy started drama on every social media platform the chick had an account for, passive aggressive laugh emojis on every sexy pic she'd ever posted. Drove by the Sigma Chi Epsilon house and took a shit on her porch in the middle of the night.

Amy had been in no condition to drive that night, but she'd begged her little brother. Jonah had taken his big sister on his moped, persuaded that a midnight trip to the ΣXE sorority house was worth the bother. He hadn't known what she meant to do there, but after Amy told him about the cheating, he marched right up those steps and left a pile of his own. Once in a while he wasn't such an asshole.

Skyler, in her ignorance, fought back, but she couldn't come close to matching Amy's intensity. Ben had enjoyed having a girlfriend he could control. Suddenly, she was completely out of anyone's control – including her own, as she demonstrated at a frat party at Kappa Nu, where Ben was a pledge. She'd convinced Ben she was PMSing too hard to attend, but sure enough, when she arrived anyway, there was Skyler grinding on him. Amy tackled her to the ground and was beating the shit out of her as convincingly as possible while trying her best not to really hurt the girl. (Except by giving her to Ben, that is.) The fiasco earned her a perma-ban from the KN house, and from there it had been a short walk to Ben deciding he didn't want a future with this unseemly embarrassment of a girl or her uninteresting shriveled chesticles.

Skyler's boobs were enormous. Good for him.

So Ben told her to fuck herself, called her a flat, frigid, fugly bitch, and Amy fell down and wept with relief. She also wept with self-loathing for what she'd foisted off onto Skyler. She didn't even like Skyler – a *junior* in college with an undeclared major? fucking seriously? – but nobody deserved that. There was no way to warn her, though. After how insane and obsessive Amy had been over the cheating during those final weeks, nobody would believe it was all an act meant to repulse Ben, the relationship equivalent of pissing on a jellyfish sting.

Or if Amy did warn her, and the warning tanked things between Skyler and Ben, he might find out. He wouldn't like that.

One time last fall he'd been making out with her in his car after a date. When he tried to take things further, Amy had said, somewhat bitterly, that since he'd refused to use lube the night before, she didn't think she was ready to have sex again. Knowing Ben, she'd quickly added that she would go down on him instead if he wanted. Without warning he'd punched her full force in the stomach and screamed at her that he shouldn't need it if only her cunt wasn't so frigid all the time. Then he had sex with her anyway. Raped her, she supposed, but thinking of it in those terms only made her want to cut more.

Amy wouldn't endanger that breakup for anything, no matter what. If Ben found out how far she'd gone to be rid of him, he'd come for her, and it would be a race to see which one of them killed Amy first.

Maybe Skyler would have better luck. Maybe it really was Amy's fault he got so angry and possessive somehow, and with Skyler he'd be happier. Maybe.

Ben left her. He left, and he was gone, and he was out of her life, and he wasn't there any more, and Amy told herself that over and over and over again in a hundred ways that were all lies, because all the iterations failed to acknowledge that he was inside her head and was never going to leave. No matter how many times she repeated it, the cutting and the starving and the exercise mania and the pills she'd scored from this sketchy guy in her second period that she couldn't afford but she couldn't sleep couldn't concentrate couldn't stop crying all the time until giving some gross dude a handjob for drugs was the only way but even those didn't stop the terror... That all stayed, to do Ben's job for him now that he was off torturing Skyler. Which was Amy's fault.

Wasn't it supposed to be better now?

It made no sense at all. Maybe life wasn't supposed to make sense. That made no sense either.

"Amy? *¿Puedo pasar?*"

"One second, I'm changing," Amy said hastily. It wasn't technically a lie. She hastily hid her knife under her bed, then donned her emergency socks from under her pillow. It stung like hell, but they were the perfect color to hide the seepage from fresh blood.

Trying to study for her finals this afternoon so she didn't blow her scholarship in the home stretch was probably the first thing she'd done in weeks that wasn't purely self-destructive, and it had been stressing her the fuck out. If she lost that money, bye bye Lakeview. Part of her – a big part – wanted to lose it. Ben went to Lakeview. She'd tried telling herself that it was a huge school, that there were tens of thousands of students at Lakeview, that her odds of randomly running into Ben were lower than bumping into him at a dozen other places they used to frequent. More convincingly, though, she told herself that Ben had taken enough from her, and she would *not* give up her scholarship, too.

Still, sometimes she needed to just blow off some steam.

Amy invited her aunt in, sitting criss crossed to try to hide her feet, just in case. "What's up?"

"Not decent, huh?"

"Yeah, why?" Amy effortlessly summoned the attitude of the affronted teenager.

"You're wearing the same clothes you been wearing the last two days, *sobrina*, and I know your lazy butt hasn't been doing no laundry."

"You're monitoring what I wear now?"

"Amy, I don't need to monitor what you wearing when I can smell it from all the way over here. You're starting to make your brother seem like a neat freak."

Amy could feel the wetness against her thigh, a trickle of blood beginning to soak through her crimson sock. “Did you actually need something, Tía, or did you just swing by to run me down?”

Her aunt’s expression softened. “*Lo siento*. I wanted to see if you wanted to have dinner with me tonight. Maybe some drinks, relax, have a good night. I know you’ve been *deprimida* lately since Benny.”

Aunt Julia had always been permitted to call him Benny. Amy had corrected her once by reflex, but Ben had laughed it off and said it was fine. Apparently Amy was the only one who got hit for offenses of nomenclature.

“Drinks? I’m eighteen, Tía. Barely.”

“I didn’t say we were going to get hammered, did I? Just a few, to help you relax and remember my Amy. It’s a stupid law anyway. Dude can fight a war, but not down a few *cerveza*.”

“I’m studying,” Amy said. “It’s finals week next week.”

“C’mon, you got your scholarship already. Why you need to study so much?”

Amy wasn’t ready to tell her she was going to fail three classes if she didn’t ace the finals. The math shouldn’t permit it, but school policy held that even if you flunked a quarter, if you earned an A the other quarter and on the finals, you got credit for the semester. It didn’t come up often, her guidance counselor said during a lengthy lecture, but it was still possible to pass and graduate. He said it with barely disguised apathy, as if Amy had finally revealed herself to be the disappointment he’d always thought deep down she really was.

Ben had liked having a smart girlfriend. It helped his parents get on board with his decision to date a high school girl two grades behind him. (She remembered how they’d laughed about it one time, how silly they’d been in hindsight not to see Amy was more than mature enough for their son. She remembered wishing they’d found her a little less mature. She’d been 17 then, but was recuperating from her first abortion before their eyes so maybe they were right and she *was* mature for her age.)

Stressed as she’d been while they were together, Amy’s studying had been a way to get a night off once in a while. Though he was merely a B student himself, she tried to nurture his impression that he was smarter than her, and therefore she had to study more than he did. Now that he was out of the picture, though, she’d lost all academic motivation and had fallen apart overnight.

Amy snapped at her aunt, “I just have to, OK? Maybe find an actual friend your own age for once?” She had to graduate. She had to ace these tests. She had to learn five months of material in two weeks. It was that, or let Ben win, again.

The rejection stung, as it had been meant to. It worked. “*Buena suerte con tu estudio, sobrina*.”

Aunt Julia left to get shit-faced by herself. Her hooligan nephew was out partying; her bitch niece had no use for her; her dead sister had abandoned her here in this iron maiden of obligation. For once, she was taking the night off.

Ironically, Amy didn't have any friends of her own any more. Classic abuser that he was, Ben had made sure he was her entire social circle. Anyone she might have reclaimed on the far side had been repulsed by her manic behavior during the breakup. Word had gotten out about the dump at ΣXE somehow, too. Probably had security cameras. Still, Lukas, her pervy dealer with the hair trigger cock, he thought of her as a friend. She texted to ask what he was up to, and he invited her to a house party later that night.

Three hours later, drunk to the gills and high as shit on whatever those pills were (different color than usual but felt as good or better), Amy had had time to reflect on her aunt's advice. She really did need to unwind a little, to look for a scrap of happiness in this shitty world. Fuck studying. If she was fucking up high school this badly, she wouldn't make it in college anyway.

"DO YOU WANT TO FUCK ME?" she yelled at Lukas over the music. A handful of nearby party-goers, strangers all, made out her offer and cheered them on.

Lukas spoke right into her ear. "Serious? Let's just dance!"

"I WANT TO FUCK!" Amy whined.

"You're pretty wasted," he replied. Lukas put his hands on her hips, pulled her closer, but when she made to kiss him, he dodged it. Gentlemanly, for a guy trading his grandma's medicine cabinet for a handjob.

Amy was done dancing. "WHO WANTS TO FUCK ME?!" she screeched.

The guy who got to her first made it good and clear that Lukas better keep out of the way, then allowed Amy to drag him down some hallway to some room. Not a bedroom, but there was a loveseat. It would do.

"You're so fucking hot," the guy said as she took her shirt off. That felt nice. "By the way I'm—"

"Take your pants off," she commanded as she started on the slutty little shorts she'd worn. Ben had loved the way her ass looked in these things. He'd gone berserk when he caught her wearing them to visit Kappa Nu unannounced, paranoid she was trying to flirt with some of his brothers. She'd told him she'd thrown them away, then hid them in the cardboard box labeled "FROM MOM" where she used to store pictures and hand-me-downs. It was where she started storing all the things Ben disapproved of but she wasn't ready to throw away. She'd moved the actual keepsakes to Jonah's closet, only to find months later he hadn't known what they were and had thrown them out.

Whoever this boy was, he was good-looking and obedient, two traits Amy admired in that moment. He'd gone ahead and shed his underwear, too, and his cock

was already nice and hard for her. Bigger than Ben's for sure. She wished she could take a picture of it. In fact...

Amy dropped her knees.

"Uh, you want me to..." He gestured to join her.

"Never had your dick shucked before?" She giggled at her slurred speech. God, she was drooling. When was the last time she'd sucked a cock other than Ben's? For a guy who was grateful and didn't take it as a matter of divine right. She couldn't remember right then that she never had. Who cared. She pounced on his cock, forcing it down her throat on the first go. Ben loved that. It made him feel powerful. Let him mix his twin passions of fucking Amy and hurting Amy. Tears flooded down her cheeks in seconds as the boy gasped and groaned at her gusto.

She'd never sucked a cock like this before. Desperate. Slutty. Like some porno – Ben had *loved* to make her watch porn with him, make her do what the professional whores did. It was sloppy. She gagged. She moaned like the taste of his sweaty, funky shaft brought her genuine pleasure.

Which it did. This guy was going nuts for it. He was shaking so hard he could barely stand. Maybe just the alcohol, but Amy decided to award herself some credit. She was so hot Ben had been ready to kill for her. This guy was so fucking lucky to have blundered into a hot slut like her.

I hope Aunt Julia's not mad at me any more. The stray thought cost Amy her balance, and she fell backward on her ass.

"Whoa, hey, are you OK?" The boy rushed to help her up.

Amy took his arm in both hands. While he'd been exerting gentle pressure to help a 95 pound girl up, she jerked with the force she'd need to drop a boy twice that size to his knees. He wasn't ready, and he fell onto her. She needed this. She deserved this. Never mind that she didn't know where this room was, where this house was, didn't know this guy's name, that she'd definitely gotten a vibe like he meant to lock them in together and do whatever he wanted to her.

Wasn't that rape?

Amy kissed him. She didn't like kissing, but she'd gotten good at it. If she rebuffed Ben's kisses it invariably started a fight, which she invariably lost. She'd gotten very, very good at pretending to like kissing. The boy finally needed to breathe, eyes wide, shocked by the sexual tornado sucking him into its vortex.

"I, ah, don't have a condom...?" He was confused by his own admission. He'd intended to take the drunken girl and fuck the hell out of her in this secluded room, maybe come on her face, and leave her there to dry off. But this girl was a slut's slut. Now he was worried he needed a condom for his own sake – which Amy found very funny.

She giggled. “Joke’s on you, Benny. You can’t rape the willing.” That was *really* funny to her in that moment.

His eyes flew wide open. “My name’s not... Whoa wait, did you say–!”

Nothing like the feeling of a tight, wet, warm, snug, smooth, silky pussy to shut a guy up. Apparently. She’d only ever initiated with Ben when he’d made it clear he wanted her to. As Amy’s head rolled back in, at last, a taste of true pleasure, this lesson was burned into her brain.

Then she blacked out. She didn’t know if he finished in her or not, but he definitely took her panties as a trophy, so probably. Once she woke up, Amy went to the clinic the next day and got the morning after pill just to be sure. The lady at the counter was so nice. She never judged, never said more than she needed to and always politely.

Aunt Julia was passed out on the sofa when Amy got home. She slept past unnoticed, slapped herself in the face for being such a stupid weak stupid stupid slut, and told herself that Ben might have won that round, but she would *not* throw her future away and let him win the fight.

With the aid of enough caffeine to give a gorilla a heart attack, and perhaps further assistance of some tearful pleading to her teachers, Amy snagged two out of those three needed A’s. Learning a semester’s worth of calculus in a weekend turned out to be more than she was up for. 86%, a solid and worthless B. Amy laughed to see it, peering down the neckline of her shirt at her worthless A’s.

Mr. Glasco, however, proved persuadable by this new lesson of hers. Not the most conventional way to get an A, but at least Ben hadn’t been able to keep her from Lakeview after all.

At least she didn’t keep on with the drinking after that. Alcohol was full of crap nutrients. A single shot could have upwards of a hundred calories, which the anorexic in her was not having. (Anorexia was something the doctor at the clinic diagnosed on one of her myriad morning-after check-ins. She promised to scale it back, at least enough to make sure her hair stopped falling out. Not much of it had, though. Amy was still fucking hot – not that the doctor gave the anorexia due credit for *that* side effect.)

The slut thing? Well, it was a hobby at first. She still lived at home and took the city bus, but most students lived on or near campus. Dorm rooms were easy to come by. As she started classes at Lakeview – assiduously avoiding Greek row, obviously – she started making friends again. The only sort of friend she had any room for that is. The pills made it hard to always remember who was who, but if a strange number texted her 🍆, Amy answered the eggplant with a prompt 🍑. The only one complaining was Aunt

Julia, who of course didn't know why she kept such late hours or whose texts she was always jumping to answer, but knew it was atypical.

"A boy," she'd say.

"Must be some boy," Aunt Julia would mutter as Amy hustled into her room to freshen up. The sex was better when she blew their minds. For them, at least. Amy didn't care how it felt for her. Sometimes she came. Sometimes. But knowing she was giving herself to someone not Ben was the ultimate aphrodisiac. *Look at this pussy I'm giving away, Benny boy, a pussy you only ever took. I never gave.* He'd be so devastated, she told herself while she rocked yet another world.

Diminishing returns were a problem. Oh well. Not like a college campus was shy of guys who'd want to fuck a babe like her with minimal questions asked.

As it so happened, the solution to that problem coincided with the solution to her other. It wasn't academics this time. She was doing fine in school. Almost straight A's, actually. Amy even had a couple professors she really liked. Unlike that slag Skyler, she set her major going into semester break as a freshman – psychology. Maybe it would help her make sense out of all those broken pieces drifting around in the limbo of her brain.

Still, school was also expensive. Amy had no savings, and she knew damn well Aunt Julia didn't have the money to help out. If she even still wanted to, considering how awful Amy had been to her the whole past year. The expenses never seemed to end. A computer. Activity fees. Lab fees. Athletics fees, as apparently athletics weren't an activity. A bus pass. The e-books – holy *god*, the e-books. And of course at the end of it all was the tuition fee with its insurmountable legion of O's. Her scholarship covered a lot, but not everything, and she still needed to eat and whatnot.

She needed a job.

"¿Qué es eso?" asked Aunt Julia, stumbling out of her bedroom to switch on the coffee pot.

Amy was lying on the sofa, scarred feet waving in the air (in socks, obviously), laptop propped up in front of her. "Job hunting, Tía."

"Yeah? I thought you were a professional student. You always complaining you got no time left over from all your classes and studies and everything."

Her aunt wasn't wrong except by omission of all the partying and fucking she was doing, and all the nights where she went into her room and downed some pills and passed out for half a day. "I know. I'm looking for something where I can work from home."

Aunt Julia rounded the corner, peeling a banana. "Oh? You find something good, you let me know. Fucking buses in this city, *son una mierda.*"

"Bleh. They all need a degree, or like ten years experience or some shit."

“You could start one of those Lonely Fans, you know? You a serious cutie.” Aunt Julia laughed before Amy could retort. “But seriously, put on a blanket or something before your pervert brother wakes up and sees your little booty in those boxers, chica. You gonna make him *blanquear sus bombachos*, and that’s more laundry for me.”

“Gross!” Amy giggled.

The smell of coffee began to fill the apartment. Aunt Julia took a bite, talking casually around the mushy mouthful. “But seriously, you oughta get into waitressing. You don’t even gotta do the Hooters. Looking like that, you could be raking in the tips, *serio*.”

So she found a little Lakeview sports bar, Mother Bear’s, and walked in for an application. They hired her on the spot, and the manager didn’t do much of a job of hiding that it was for exactly the reason her aunt suggested. It was convenient, easy walking distance from campus, and most of the staff were students so the place was used to being flexible about classes. The money was pretty decent. Her spreadsheet said she’d need to get more hours to keep up, though, so Amy sucked it up, stopped eating out, and cut back on the drugs.

In only a few short weeks, Amy started feeling better. She was eating more thanks to the chefs at Mother Bear’s, and her system was crawling out of the shallow grave she’d been keeping it in. Even the random hookups scaled back just because of time constraints, and not feeling particularly sexy reeking of wing sauce.

“Hi, welcome to... fuck.” Amy’s blood froze. As she walked up to the table, the guy sitting there had his back to her, and she hadn’t been paying close attention. Only when she arrived at the tableside did he turn, and there he was.

“Hey, Ames.”

Run. Run. Run. You’ll have a head start. Run. He’s here to kill you. He’s finishing the job. Run. Why the fuck won’t you run. Why won’t your muscles move? He’s RIGHT. THERE. FUCKING RUN. RUN. RUN OR DIE. RUN OR DIE.

“Um, hello...?” Skyler snapped her fingers as Amy seemed to zone out. “Oh my god, Benny, she’s like losing her mind right now. Relax, I’m not mad any more. Water under the bridge. Gosh, how long has it been?”

Ben – *Benny? Oh fuck. He’s BEN not Benny BEN. He was going to beat the shit out of her* – smiled at her. “A long time.”

She couldn’t talk. Inwardly, she knew it was a panic attack. She’d read about these in class, and had experienced them plenty of times when she’d still been with Ben. Or Benny. *Please don’t kill me. I’ll call you whatever you want.*

“Um, hello...? Ooookay, can we just order then, or...?” Skyler wrinkled her nose. “She’s gonna spit in our food, Benny. We should go.”

"HE DOESN'T LIKE IT WHEN YOU CALL HIM BENNY!" Amy shrieked. She hadn't really meant to say it out loud, she thought, or maybe she had. Skyler had deserved a warning. Not giving her one had cost Amy a lot of sleep and a lot of tears.

The whole restaurant was watching now. Thank god. He couldn't kill her with everyone watching. Couldn't kill Skyler either.

"Whoa," said Skyler, gaping.

"Amy, hey. Are you OK?" asked Ben, frowning.

Her heart thundered. She couldn't speak. If she tried, she'd scream. She was sure of it.

Only Ben had seen her act like this before. The time Jonah scratched Ben's car with his bike handle. When they were having a nice night out and she forgot herself and told a story about her previous boyfriend. The time Ben couldn't get it up and the harder she tried the limper he got, until he forced his flaccid dick into her mouth and told her if she tried to breathe before she stopped teasing him he'd choke her in a much less pleasant manner. Which she couldn't. Which he did.

He spoke in a calm voice. The voice people were used to hearing him speak in. "You look good, Amy. Really. Put a little meat on your bones like I always said you should."

Her jaw chattered. She meant to speak, to agree – *Agree before he chokes you, before he squeezes until you die on the shitty floor of this shitty bar, why didn't I fucking mop when it was slow earlier, it's disgusting, I'm going to die on this disgusting floor* – but she couldn't.

Ben went on. She knew him. He couldn't have everyone know she was afraid of him. "Have you been working here long? I don't think I've seen you. I mean, of course I would have seen you." Skyler glared at him, then much more intensely at her. He ignored her.

Run Skyler, fucking RUN

"We come in here pretty regularly, so I guess I'm just surprised to see you. I guess it's been a couple weeks?"

"We were in here Saturday, baby."

She saw that twitch, that twitch that meant someone would pay for this later. *WHY WAS NOBODY RUNNING OR AT LEAST SCREAMING WAS THE WHOLE WORLD INSANE.* She started to wonder if her heart could actually stop on its own.

"Yeah, I guess we were, but with a bunch of the guys. I meant just the two of us. But yeah, nice to see you again. I guess we'll be seeing more of you, then. But yeah, hey, just a couple Fat Tires for now, OK?"

Somehow, Amy found the will to force a smile. "Coming right up."

She didn't run. She walked. Walked *fast*. Right into the manager's office, where she quit and promptly ran out the back door of the restaurant, sprinting down the alley

and around a corner and down some sidewalks and through a park until she was in an unfamiliar neighborhood, panting and sobbing in someone's front yard.

Her shirt was gone? Right, she'd quit, thrown it at her former boss along with her apron in case he tried to make her come back to return it. Or something like that. She hadn't really been reasoning at that point.

So... Right. Ben ate, sometimes. So restaurant work was out of the question.

She started her first shift waitressing at Jumping Jack's three days later. No top to return if she had to panic-quit again, just a little elastic band they called a halter top that even on Amy's modest bust was too immodest by far. She learned to giggle at bad jokes and awkward compliments while she sat on laps and poured shots down customers' throats. The money was significantly better than she'd made during her weeks at Mother Bear's, with fewer responsibilities and in fewer hours. She could easily get more whenever she wanted. The manager, Jack, was perfectly happy to pay \$2.13 an hour for one of his hottest employees to float around smiling and flirting and keeping the drink orders coming.

Six weeks later she moved to the stage. Those girls made *way* more money than her, and while Amy might not have the boobs of a stripper, the mountain of garbage floating atop the ocean of her soul held more than enough of the right stuff to excel. Objectification and sexualization were familiar friends. She did some research and ordered a g-string from Amazon that featured these stretchy interior pockets for maximum cash space, almost as an inside joke with herself for how much she intended to earn. She made sure Aunt Julia didn't intercept the package in their mailbox. That was the only real threat to her at this job.

There, dancing almost-but-not-quite-completely naked on a grimy stage in a grimy shithole like Jumping Jack's, she felt safe. Like his parents, Ben was afflicted with a crippling case of smug superiority. She'd mistaken it for "class," as people often did, but she remembered those significant looks his parents had shared when they'd found out he was dating a high school girl. A Puerto Rican. A poor. Amy spoke without an accent, though, and she was white, and she was going to college (with that fancy shmancy academic scholarship), and she was *very* pretty. She'd checked enough boxes to earn their approval despite the marks against her, and provided Ben the benignly neglectful approval that was the hallmark of their parenting.

But they'd raised him well enough that he'd never *ever* set foot in a grubby, seedy, nasty little strip club like Jumping Jack's. College kids seldom did. Amy had known Jumping Jack's by reputation as a running gag from high school. It was somewhere girls joked that they'd work at if college, trade school, the military, and peddling meth all failed.

Even through the fog of drugs numbing her mind to what she was doing – she was back on those again, bigtime, thanks Lukas – she would never forget that first night dancing.

The stage lights came up. Some thumping soundtrack to some generic song with a dance-worthy tempo and heavy bass started. Some guy old enough to be her father in the front row saw Amy's soft round ass doused with glitter and couldn't stop himself from letting out a very audible "Damn, baby!"

He could actually be her father, she supposed. She had no idea who he was, not a name or a face or anything.

Amy's pussy started to sizzle by pure reflex, and her ass began to shake by design. She'd paid some of the dancers for a little tutoring – in pills, their preferred currency – and picked up some basic moves. Learned others from the porn-adjacent corners of youtube. Bit by bit, Amy's skimpy, sparkling, skanky clothes – "clothes" – melted off of her body. She felt nothing. The older strippers there at Jack's had taken years to become as disaffected as Amy was on her opening night. It was only a body after all. A fragile, weak, sexy body, a means of making money no more precious to her than a wrench was to a plumber.

The tune – "tune" – was familiar from waitressing. As it drew close to the end, a naked, glistening Amy crawled toward the spellbound churl, tiny tits not so much dangling beneath her as simply pointing at the stage with its chipped, fading wax job in token recognition of the law of gravity. She stopped in front of him, on her knees, thighs spread wide, hips gyrating, her pelvis thrusting toward his face, toward the wad of money clenched in his fist.

"Hi, Daddy," she purred. She was the youngest girl working there, and she looked it. Fucking pigtails, for fuck's sake. That could be her whole vibe, she decided as he licked his lips, transfixed by the shimmying of her ass cheeks in his face. The helpless little schoolgirl who needed a firm hand to control her.

It was, after all, a role she knew well. It felt almost like that was the real Amy, and this weird nerd who wanted to go to classes and have a future was the roleplay.

Amy guided his hand and the \$20 bill he'd offered into her g-string, into what she would soon begin to call her hot pocket. It came out damp and empty. Amy moaned. A few more of those would pay off her calculus book – no sucking off the professor, this time. Unless she felt like it, which, she supposed, she might. What was the fucking difference. This was simply another currency, a good to be exchanged. And it was *very* good.

Amy climbed down into his lap and humped his middle-aged dick through his jeans. "Do you think you could raise my allowance, Daddy?"

The man's cock twitched. She literally felt it twitch at her through three layers of fabric (although one of them was the translucently thin fabric of her g-string). "You

gotta finish your chores first, baby girl,” he said with a leer, hands clenched to keep from pawing this little tease. Or choking her. Whatever. A man wants what he wants.

Amy wasn't afraid. For one, there was Seiji, the little Japanese bouncer who looked scarcely bigger than Amy but had muscles like steel cables. He didn't speak much English, but he had an unhealthy dose of little man syndrome and was happy for any occasion to try out his black belt (black belts? the girls weren't sure) on some handsy dickwad.

For two, Amy just didn't care what they did to her. It was just a job. A means to an end. And god, did she spend a lot of time fantasizing about ends.

Amy grinded on his lap, smiling the worshipful smile she'd learned for Ben, deferential and needy and adoring. That scored her another bill. It was too dark off-stage to see the denomination, but she told herself this was a learning opportunity, so if she was getting singles to take a guy's finger in her mouth and fellate the whiskey-soaked thing, she'd at least learn not to try this again.

The DJ restarted the same shitty track since she wasn't done yet. Hump by hump, suck by suck, she parted the guy with his money. She was surprised when he lifted a fifty between her eyes. (Amy had seen enough Asian porn with Ben to recognize an opportunity to go full *ahogao* with it floating at the end of her nose.)

“If you can pull it out of my hand with those skeeter bites, it's yours, baby girl.”

God, it hurt. God it fucking hurt. Her tits were not built for gripping a cock, much less something 2-dimensional. So he grunted, and she whined, and finally the fellow let her have it. It fell out of her cleavage – “cleavage” – the moment he let go, but Amy just shoved it into her hot pocket and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thanks, Daddy,” she cooed. “I love you.”

With that, she relinquished the limelight. Usually girls just sort of hung out on the stage, idly shook her bits until they got bored or tired or sober. It was her first time, though, and she was *damn* hot, so Jack had made it a little event. The DJ switched on the mic. “Damn – looks like we got a new star at Jumpin Jack's, eh? Give a big round to Maritza!”

Muh-REET-suhhhhh, he said it.

Her mother's name. Jack had asked her for a stage name and it was the first one she thought of. Why the fuck not – not like she wasn't shaming the shit out of her a dozen other ways. And it was sort of weirdly nice, a little, to hear it said.

Two months later, Jack gave her the go-ahead to work the back room one night a week. His business wasn't exactly a Chick-Fil-A, thronged with needy customers, so there were only so many cocks to be satisfied. The girls were contentious over it, so that was as much as he could give her. He almost took it back when she asked if it could be a different night instead. It was Aunt Julia's birthday. They were supposed to go out to dinner and she had this whole weird axe-throwing thing she was into that actually

sounded pretty fun. Oh, well. Her aunt was getting too suspicious and intrusive about where Julia's sudden influx of cash was coming from anyway.

"Oh come on, now, sweetheart. What's a pretty little thing like you crying for? I'm not so ugly, am I?" The man laughed. He really wasn't. He was actually sort of good-looking, at least compared to the usual clientele of Jumping Jack's. Which made her wonder what was so rotten in his heart that he'd paid Jack \$200 for first rights on a private dance from the hot new backroom girl. Amy would get her 75% share once she was done, which also made her wonder what travesties had befallen dancers – "dancers" – past that he'd seen the need to hold onto the money for them.

Amy sniffled. "I'm sorry. It's not you. It's... It's my aunt's birthday, but I'm here, and she doesn't even know, and..." She collapsed onto the strange man's shoulder, sobbing.

"Oh. Oh shit. Um."

But Amy's pelvis was working by instinct, grinding her little cunt on his crotch like she was supposed to. She cried through the whole song. Every time she came close to getting her shit together, her vision began to clear and she saw herself in one of the mirrors in the little booth. Two-way, the other girls said, so Jack could watch if he wanted – though they assured her he hardly did that any more. They thought this was reassuring. Amy didn't care what he was looking at. What *she* was looking at was a nineteen-year-old orphan who was burning through her genetic gift with her shitty, scummy lifestyle to distract her from her masochistic ex and the worthlessness which she only understood as wrong in an intellectual never emotional sense, humping a stranger for money she was splitting with a guy who was little more than a pimp for broken souls, while the only people left in the world who would give a shit if and when she died got older together without her.

"Do you want to fuck me?" she asked, wiping her dribbling tears and snot on her arm.

"I, um, I think I might need to hit the ATM first...? But–"

She shook her head. "Not for money. Just for fun."

The man cocked his head back. "Seriously?" It was his turn to ponder what festered inside of this pitiful, frail thing.

Amy nodded. "Yeah."

She was broadcasting *damaged goods* in visible, audible and palpable spectra. "Um, no thanks. I, um... You take care, Ms. Maritza." As he left the booth, he turned back to her and fished his last \$10 out of his wallet. "I know it's not much of a tip, but, you know, maybe you can get your aunt, I don't know, a card or something."

Amy didn't cry for the next one, and he fucked her without batting an eye. She made \$485 that night, after Jack took his cut. It wouldn't happen often, he told her – correctly – but he turned a blind eye to her indiscretions so long as she never charged

for sex. So Amy wasn't a prostitute, technically, just a bottom-feeding low-life sex worker piece of shit slut.

Money was no longer a problem, at least. She saved up enough to pay down her school with enough left over to get her tits done the day after her last final exam that May. 2.9 GPA for her freshman year. Disappointing, but not bad considering how many nights Amy lie in bed pep talking herself out of killing herself.

The same old rationales eroded with repetition. She couldn't do that to Aunt Julia; that was usually her most effective argument. Her shithead brother would probably be glad she was gone, if he even noticed. He'd gotten his first arrest recently, but it was a non-violent offense, spray-painting tags on some cargo trains like he was Banksy the gang banger and not just some moody, pissed off loser. He was still 17 by a few months, lucky for him, so he got off with community service.

At least it kept Aunt Julia's energy focused on him and out of her business.

Thud thud thud. "Amy. Open the door."

Or so she'd thought.

"I'm in the middle of something," she said. That something was some serious misery, wallowing in it harder than usual. Her new tits were still new enough that the bandages hadn't come off. B cups only, cute and ultra-perky and perfectly round, nothing flashy but hot and slutty as fuck and undeniably an excellent business investment. Amy was splitting her attention between this, her latest assault on her body, and the picture frame she held in both hands.

Amy had kept on her nightstand since the day they'd moved here. It was a single photo, her mother holding a three-year-old Amy over her head at a carnival somewhere. The toddler she hardly internalized as herself was squealing in shock and delight, frog-eyed and stupid and precious, the way happy toddlers looked. Her mother's face was turned away from the camera, but the wind had her hair. It looked so perfect that Amy would have thought it were photoshopped if not for the even littler kid photo-bombing it at the side of the frame with his finger hovering an inch out of his nose. Reality was always there ready to assert itself with its grotesqueries.

THUD. THUD. THUD. "AMY."

"I said, I'm busy."

BANG. "Abre la maldita puerta antes de que la abra de una patada!"

Amy doubted her aunt was strong enough to make good on her threat, but it turned out she didn't need to be. It was unlocked. God, she'd gotten sloppy. Locking it before she cut had become second nature, but today she'd contented herself with gently scratching at the surgical incision sites through her bandages.

There was Aunt Julia, myriad expressions warring for supremacy on her face. Anger, at whatever had driven her to pound on the door in the first place.

Embarrassment to find her niece topless. Shock to find that her toplessness had more to reveal than it had a couple days ago. Mortification on top of the shock.

“What the *fuck?!?*” her aunt groaned in dismay. Dismay won out, evidently.

Amy wanted to throw her sheets over her chest, but she didn’t dare make any sudden moves or violent gestures. Her brain wasn’t working fast enough to separate photo from frame, and the prospect of breaking it was far more alarming than having her aunt see her stupid new tits.

So instead, she acted like it fazed her not at all. “Uh, excuse you,” she said snottily. She’d be twenty soon, if she lived that long, in which case she figured she ought to pump out all the teenage sass she had left in her before then.

“What did you do? What the fuck did you do?! What did you fucking do to yourself, *sobrina?*”

“What, these?” Like she had body parts surgically modified all the time. “They’re called tits, Tía.”

“What... You... They’re...” Her aunt shook her head, clearing cobwebs from her capacity to show anger at her usually quiet, reclusive ward. “Don’t you fucking *dare* ‘what, these’ me, Amy! Why would you do that to yourself? *How...* No, never fucking mind the how. Tell me why. Tell me why before I slap those fucking things the fuck off your chest!”

“It’s called an investment...?” said Amy as if her aunt were being deliberately obtuse. They were, she supposed, though that had little to do with why she’d gone through with it. It would shut up the girls at Jumping Jack’s, yeah, shut up the echoes of Ben and a dozen other men that always started up after the girls said something.

Why? It was a ball of yarn full of tangles, knots and barbed wire, and Amy didn’t know how to unravel it. To mutilate herself out of spite. To become a woman, finally. To become something other than the Amy who’d been Ben’s. To rip the asterisk off of hot girl*. To look outwardly like the slut she felt like inwardly. The slut she *was*. To hurt. To shut up the greedy fuckers who came in and got to have a babe like her make them come in their pants but still felt like they were entitled to tease her about her cup size. To take money away from the pointless waste of effort that was college, “bettering herself.” To make her life that little bit extra worse so she’d maybe have the guts or the shame to do something about it.

Most pressingly, to start this argument, so her aunt would understand she should hate Amy like she hated herself. She couldn’t articulate it, not even in feelings much less words, but there was a way in which hate and indifference had become easy to process and love only meant guilt and shame and reasons to live, which had somehow become a negative.

From the livid look on Aunt Julia’s face, it was working. “Investment? In what? Stripping?”

“Yeah, actually.” Amy shrugged, tits bouncing, achingly. “Where do you think all my new clothes, the new car came from? Tips for slinging mozzarella sticks and shitty beer?”

“When did this start? Never mind, because I tell you when it ends, and that’s right the fuck now.”

Amy stood, very carefully setting the picture face down on her bed. Her mother shouldn’t have to see this. Junkie instincts for when she was too stoned to process rationally immediately kicked in, reminding her she’d put Precious Thing on Soft Thing, so Be Careful next time she Soft Things.

“Or what?”

“Or what? There’s no ‘or,’ *niñita*. There’s you quitting that shit, to-fucking-day, and then you and me going to the hospital and getting that shit sucked back out of your *tetas* so you look like my Amy again! *That’s* what!”

“It’s my body. I can do whatever I want with it.”

“The fuck you can! *Eres mi sangre, y no te lo permitiré!*”

Amy sneered. “Good luck with that. I’m nineteen, not six. And you’re not my mother.”

The blow landed, a haymaker to the heart. “No. I’m not your mother. But I’m the closest fucking thing you got to it, and if you wanna live under my roof, then *no deshonrarás el alma de mi hermana!*”

“Fine. If that’s what you want, then I’m gone.” She knew damn well it wasn’t what Aunt Julia wanted, but accusing her of wanting it would hurt her more. It drove the wedge deeper, split the gap wider. Aunt Julia would be so much happier without Amy around anyway, and the more she could make her hate her the more relieved she’d be that her fucked up fuck-up of a niece was gone. It was kindness, in a way.

Three hours later, Amy finished stuffing her possessions into her car. Her aunt watched the whole time and helped not at all. Aunt Julia stopped her at the door on her first trip, jamming the wall hanging she’d made on her first date with Ben into an open box. “You gonna need this.”

Amy studied it for a moment. Had that really been there all this time? Going on two years now. “Yeah, I guess I will.” She flipped it upside down.

Jonah woke up sometime in the middle of it, scowled at the fuss and stormed out, slamming the door behind him and right in Amy’s face as she was lugging an armload of laundry. She yelled goodbye after him, but he only flipped her off and drove away on that noisy moped. She got it. At least his mom hadn’t had a choice about abandoning him.

Amy lived in her car for a couple days before one of the other girls at Jumping Jack’s saw the mountain of junk in her back seat and trunk and offered Amy a space on her flea-infested futon for a modest rent. Amy accepted. She started working three days

before her doctor said she should, if only to have something to do other than sit around cutting and listening to angry sad music and flirting with an OD on pain meds all day.

The summer passed that way. She'd almost forgotten she was enrolled at Lakeview until she got the bill for it, and an email from some university bureaucrat asking if she had any update on her contact information after receiving multiple bills returned to sender.

My bitch aunt kicked me out of her apartment, she replied candidly. Are sophomores allowed to live in the dorms?

She received an email – *Re: Fwd: Re: Update your address* – from someone named Bob, whose email signature identified him as Lakeview University's Director of the Office of Housing and Residence Life. Fucking mouthful.

Your sophomore status does not impede enrollment in campus housing. However, the enrollment period ended in July. Don't worry, though. I'm looking through what few openings we have left, and I think I've found something for you in Higgins Hall. It's a thematic coed community, so it does come with an added community fee, but if that's an impediment you let me know and I'll see if we can't get that waived. I'll hold it until I receive confirmation that you're interested. I'm sorry to hear about your aunt, but we'll make sure you have a place to stay. For more information on rates, check out our site (linked at the bottom).

Let me know how we can help.

– Bob

Winning at the fee and glad she only had the two tits to expand, Amy accepted. He waived the fee, at least. Higgins Hall, huh. A year at Lakeview, and it was one of the few dorms where she'd never fucked somebody. Girls dorm. Well, she'd be a hit with the guys on the floor for sure, she thought with a laugh.

Higgins Hall. At least for the first time in months, she'd have a home. ("Home.")

Her first day scored Amy a new friend.

"Whoa, bad ass!" said a girl from behind her.

Amy had thought the door was closed. Not that it needed to be shut tight; the thing creaked so loud it'd wake the dead. She'd hauled around half of her stuff up those wretched four flights of stairs and was taking a break to unload boxes. The Higgins parking lot was flooded with students and their families moving in. Amy had a family, but she hadn't spoken to them since leaving. She'd actually had been staring at that wall hanging, wishing it out of existence to no avail, when the voice startled her.

There was a person. A hot one. She looked as hot and sweaty as Amy. She was looking at where Amy's knife – her newest, a wicked looking thing she'd found online, a

curved black handle made out of animal horn and a carbon steel blade that was razor sharp and then some – sat on her bed. It had been on the top of her first box.

“Oh, shit. I’m, um, that’s just for cutting packing tape. I’m not keeping it in here,” Amy said quickly. She hadn’t read up on the rules, but she doubted a blade that looked more at home in a Jumanji movie than her dorm room was permitted.

The girl snorted. “Pff, I don’t care. I mean, you’re not going to kill anybody, right?”

Amy decided immediately that she liked this girl’s energy. “Not today,” she said, walking over and extending a hand. “Amy.”

The other girl shook it firmly. “Quinn. I’m across the hall in 302 with the valedictorian.”

“Valedictorian of what?”

“I have no idea, but she included it in her introduction so it must be a core part of her identity. I haven’t seen any signs of a secret service detail yet, so maybe she’s full of it.”

“If your room’s the same size as mine, I hope those guys sleep in the closet or you’re boned.”

Quinn laughed. “Depending on the agent, I could make space, ya know wha O’m sayin’?”

Amy laughed, too. Holy shit, when was the last time she laughed? Other than part of some bullshit flirtation for tips? Strangely, guys tipped better for happy laughing girls than weepy messes. Though those guys still tipped.

“Speaking of, did you see our RA downstairs?” the girl went on.

Amy shook her head. “What’s an RA?” Later on she could be embarrassed that she’d spent a whole year as a college student and talked to so few people that she’d never picked up such a basic acronym.

“I don’t know exactly, but I think it’s like the floor boss or something like that. Here, let me…” Quinn made for the window. Amy had shoved her bed up against it. She liked waking up with the sun on her face. Weird, she supposed, but far from the most fucked up thing about her. The knife bounced with the girl’s movements, but she didn’t seem to care. Amy hastily snatched it and shoved it in a drawer before somebody less chill saw it. That thing was no mere decoration.

Quinn pointed, and Amy followed her finger. They were four stories up, so she couldn’t see him well, but now that he’d been pointed out she thought she remembered seeing him. He was the guy who’d said something about how the third floor was really the fifth floor when she was on her way up with her first load. He had been cute, she supposed, though the top of his head from a hundred feet off didn’t do much for him.

“I had my hands full. So we have a guy RA?”

“Yep. I guess the coed floor is run by the enemy.”

Amy grinned. “Don’t tell anybody, but I’m actually a mole. I’ve been in bed with the renegade forces for some time now. They don’t have any clue I’m hostile.”

“Well you look fucking dangerous to me, Amy...”

“Molina.”

Like that, the girl had her phone out. “Why am I not finding... M-o-l-i-n-a...?”

Amy understood her. “I’m not on social media.” She’d deleted her accounts after Ben. She never wanted him to be able to find her or see her or know anything about her, ever. Ever.

“Oh. Look at you, too cool for shit. We are going to run this joint, you and me. But do you mind if...?”

Unprompted, Quinn put an arm around Amy’s shoulders and took a pic for her feed, captioning it “boss bitches.” She told herself it was uptight to worry that Ben followed this particular random freshman, and gave her blessing to post it. They looked pretty hot together. And happy, even if Amy had barely had time to flash a smile before Quinn snapped the pic. By the time her new friend helped her move the rest of her stuff up, half the floor had liked it; Quinn had been friending people as she met them, which made it feel all the nicer that she’d singled Amy out to hang with.

How long had it been since somebody was just... nice to her? Maybe the dorms wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“I need to borrow your knife,” Quinn demanded the following afternoon. The door groaned and un-groaned as she let herself in.

“Make yourself at home, why don’t you,” grumbled Amy only semi-seriously, setting down her phone. She hadn’t been doing anything important, just shopping online for some essentials she’d forgotten to buy. The idea of making a trip to Target, where the prospect of bumping into Ben or his mother or someone who might recognize her and tell Ben or his mother, who might tell Ben, filled Amy with terror. It was old terror, though, deeply etched. Compared to that, Quinn’s dark request and matching expression were a nervous curiosity at worst. In the meantime, she could wait a couple days for Amazon to deliver toothpaste and some shower shoes.

“I’m gonna cut her. I am gonna fucking cut that bitch.” Quinn was pacing. She looked like she’d already been pacing, carried across the hall into Amy’s room by sheer momentum.

“Use your words, Quinn. Cut which bitch. Remember, there’s like twice the bitches we were promised.”

This goddamn floor. All girls? Amy had been looking forward to not having to go up or down stairs for a quickie. There was the RA, she supposed, but she very much

didn't trust him. For one, Aunt Julia had raised her right with a healthy distrust of authority figures. Plus, Amy thought this guy had that same darkness behind bright eyes that Ben had. She was probably projecting, but so what? She didn't owe anybody a fair shake. She sure as shit hadn't gotten one. This Spencer dude had been trying so fucking hard to be nice to everybody that it made her nervous. Nobody was that nice without an ulterior motive.

She hadn't had a panic attack since that night a few months ago when one of the other dancers yelled "hey Jen" but with the music and the trauma she misheard. At least the customers hadn't seen it. She didn't need more causes for anxiety.

"Leigh," growled Quinn.

"Which one's Leigh...?"

"The blonde Barbie doll."

"Which narrows it to like 8 girls on this floor."

"You know which one I mean. The one who's like six feet tall with the quintuple D's, with the little toady freckled bitch with the octuple D's following her around, fucking *smirking* at me. Fuck, I'm gonna need *two* knives."

"You've made the rounds here way faster than me," said Amy, who had no intention of making the rounds. She and Quinn had been up half the night talking and – she could still hardly believe it – giggling. Quinn was more than enough drama for her. Hooking up with the RA on the first day? No *way* that guy's cum hit the ceiling. No fucking way. Amy – Maritza Amy – had seen a lot of guys coming really hard, but her best was maybe a couple feet. Quinn had to be exaggerating, though she swore she wasn't.

And what kind of pent-up pussy shot off like that just from a finger up the ass?

Amy moved on to the core issue. "What did they do? Besides smirk. Unless smirking is a knifeable offense?"

"I told her. I fucking *told* her I was into him. I didn't get all detailed about what we did, but I took her aside, real chill, and told her we'd had some fun, back off, quit shaking your big fat fucking ass at him."

"You're not saying he already hooked up with *another* girl on the floor? Jesus." And people said *Amy* was a slut. Not people around here, but the other strippers.

"What? No! Not for lack of that fucking ho trying, though! I was just taking a shit and I could hear her in the shower, giggling about how she's gonna snatch him up – and he was in there in the next goddamn stall! She's practically *begging* for it! As we fucking speak."

"Did she know he was there? Wait, how did *you* know he was in there?"

"Unless you think one of these bougie bitches is using Old Spice body wash," said Quinn with a roll of her eyes. "Smells like a sexy grandpa. God, I want to taste him. Last night was... God. *God*." Her eyes squeezed shut. "How is it that *I'm* the one who put a

finger in *him*, but somehow it's me that's losing my shit over him? I can't stop thinking about him, I swear."

Amy planted her hands on Quinn's shoulders, halting her pacing. "Hey. You want him, you take him. She's Barbie? You're a fucking Bratz doll. You're a million degrees hot. So just go down there and—"

"Fuck yeah! Fuck yeah! Who needs a goddamn knife when you got deez guns, yeah?!" Quinn flexed. She wasn't weak, Amy noted. The girl worked out.

Amy had been going to tell her to simply go down there and tell Leigh to back off, but she was out the door. "Take no prisoners," she called behind her with a laugh.

With her room way down at the end of the hall, Amy didn't hear the fight until it was over. Truthfully, she didn't miss it. The only reason she even saw the stupid video of it was because Quinn begged her to download a copy. It was... interesting? Sort of? Miles down the list of anything she'd ever fantasized about in terms of cock utility, but it was new, Amy supposed. Neato.

She overheard girls in the halls – and in the bathroom, in the stairwells, at the food court, fucking everywhere it seemed – raving about the guy, heroically defending Princess Leigha with his lightsaber dick. It didn't spark anything for her, though. Why the fuck was he still there? He'd done that thing with Quinn, yes, but he was also a dude on a girls floor. He'd shown the whole floor his cock. He was only there because Bobby the Housing Dictator or one of his goons fucked up.

So why hadn't the head dorm lady fired him? It didn't sit right with her. To Amy's mind, the phenomenon of a man getting special treatment from women for no reason was a short walk to dark places.

Quinn was quickly banished, and she supposed she could see why, even if it sucked. She'd helped Amy move in, so Amy repaid the favor by helping her move out. Then Amy channeled her energy into helping Quinn find an apartment. If only she and Aunt Julia were talking, she probably could have let this girl crash there for a bit while she figured shit out. The bus ride to campus was annoying, but free housing was free housing. Instead, Amy found one of those pull-tab ads hanging on a message board in the union advertising what was clearly way too good of an offer. It turned out to be a little place off-campus with six roommates. Quinn's bedroom was a closet just big enough to fit a futon. The rent wasn't cheap, either, walking distance from the stadium.

The first night of classes, the two found themselves lying together in the claustrophobic space after installing shelving units on the closet walls. There was no AC in there, obviously, so Amy grubhubbed ice cream sundaes. She'd sweat the calories off in there anyways. They talked, and in that shitty place for the shitty events that had brought them there, Amy let Quinn vent about how magnanimous Leigh had been in informing her she wouldn't press charges (but really because she didn't want that video being entered into evidence).

That segued into more venting, and more urgent, about how Quinn was broke, and jobless, and afraid. She'd gotten hired by the campus IT office after applying over the summer and had been excited to get a job doing tech support for the Higgins computer lab. Quinn's first job, actually – or it would have been. That very morning her training was supposed to have started, but the job which was obviously no longer available to her. Amy didn't say much, just let her talk, and basked in the opportunity to think about anyone else's problems but hers.

Quinn eventually got self-conscious about how pitiful she sounded and dropped it, then treating Amy to re-tellings about the dreams she was still having about Spencer. Nobody liked hearing people blather on about their dreams, usually, but these came with graphic and salacious details. Excellent stories. Amy wasn't gay or anything, but if Quinn made a move...? She never did though.

It was getting late. They weren't tired though, at least not of their conversation, so Amy reciprocated by opening up about herself. About why she'd stayed in the car while Quinn went into Target to pick out this futon. About Ben. About why she really had that knife.

Quinn listened, and didn't judge, and offered to break into Kappa Nu and find wherever Ben showered and beat his ass next. "No superhero RA to save that fucker's ass," she said, laughing, but tinged with commiseration.

One of Quinn's new roommates – Lurch, they dubbed him, both Addams Family fans – came and shut the door to keep their talking from interrupting her sleep on the living room couch. They shifted to a whisper, but giggled that it was a little too sexy for two nominally straight girls.

Amy yawned, and Quinn feigned that she was grossed out by her breath. It was hot fudge. Amy couldn't remember the last time she'd had chocolate.

"Sorry. Fuck, I'm tired," Amy said, yawning again. The girls were getting hoarse from talking so much, hours and hours into a night that was becoming morning.

"Are you OK to drive?"

Amy considered. Then she reconsidered. "Would you mind horribly if I crashed here?"

Quinn flashed that charming, sexy, one-sided grin of hers. How Spencer had ever let her go, Amy couldn't guess. What a fucking idiot. "Well I don't want to be the first person ever to kick you out of bed."

Amy grinned back. "It's a futon, not a bed, so you'd leave the distinction open."

"Right. Oh and shit – and of course you can stay, Lurch can't rape us both." Her eyes shot wide in mortification. "Oh fuck, I didn't mean to joke about that. I'm–"

Amy put a finger to the girl's lips. "You're fine. You were saying... something?" She smiled.

“Right. Let me know how much I owe you for the futon. I, um, don’t know if I can scare it up super soon, but I’ll get you back ASAP. I promise.”

“Take as long as you need.”

Quinn sighed with relief. Amy knew that feeling. Financial stress sucked. “Thanks, Amy. You’re seriously the shit. Now to just figure out how I’m gonna manage rent and food. Ugh. Fucking Leigh.”

“You’re going to be OK. Everything is going to be OK.”

Quinn smiled at that, and then she blinked, and Amy blinked, and they were asleep in seconds.

Before Amy left the next morning, she venmoed two month’s rent to Lurch. (Not his real name, but the bald giant really did look it, and a guy charging what he was charging for a closet deserved at least one unflattering nickname.) She’d tell Quinn in a couple days, once it felt like it was long enough that it would be weird to try to get a refund should she refuse Amy’s generosity. Amy drummed on her steering wheel, parroting one of those crappy tuneless techno songs from work and grinning ear to ear. Maybe she wouldn’t let Quinn pay her back at all.

God, that thought felt divine. All that booty-bumping and titty-jiggling actually doing some good for someone good for once. She was still smiling when she got to work that evening. It was so unlike her that Jack demanded to know what she was on now.

Huh. Come to think of it, she hadn’t used since move-in day. Fucking wild.

“I’m high on *life*, Jacky boy!” she chirped, shimmying on into the locker room to glue on her tassels. He didn’t believe her, but she didn’t care. Just because she knew it wouldn’t last was no reason not to feel good about it.

It didn’t last long. In the twenty-four hours or so she and Quinn had cohabitated on Higgins 3, Amy had quickly developed a swift distaste for her fellow residents. “Residents,” not “tenants.” At the second floor meeting, after Amy made the mistake of asking if tenants had to take their trash down to the dumpsters or what – way to not mention the goddamn trash room, Spencer, ya dick – and he corrected her in front of the whole floor. Then, lest anybody think (correctly) that he was being a douche about it, he apologized and promised to show it to her after the meeting. Like she was going to let this creepo get her alone in a room full of garbage. Garbage, like the way the sonofabitch treated Quinn after she rocked his stupid world.

Left with the options of opening her door and mingling with the other girls or staying in her room and getting too blissed out on oxy to dwell on her loneliness, Amy chose the latter. There was something weird about this whole thing. No, not *every* girl was a smoking hottie or anything like some of them made out, but there were plenty of

them for sure, and even the so-so girls were pretty. That, plus this boy RA situation, made her uncomfortable. It felt too much like they were trapped in a glass case, being monitored, window dressing for their pretty manager and his meaty cock.

Only then, without meaning to, Amy made herself popular.

“Are you allowed to do that?” someone asked from behind.

Amy scoped out the intruder in the bathroom mirror. That girl from a few doors down, with the nerdy glasses and incredible tits and the braid as thick as Amy’s arm. “Whuh? Bruth muh tuhth...?” she asked around a mouthful of spit.

“No, I mean... walk around... like *that*.” Embarrassed, the girl looked down at her feet. Or where she must assume her feet were with those mad perky titties in the way.

Amy’s gaze reverted to herself, and only then did she realize she’d not only walked down to the bathroom without any socks on, but in her bra and panties, too. At least it wasn’t pepperoni hot pocket – the one with the red polka dots that made her look like a skanky 12-year-old, always a crowd-pleaser – which she’d worn to work last night. She was usually pretty good about changing when she got home, but sometimes she was too high, or too depressed, or just too tired. Thankfully, she was wearing a pretty normal pair of panties. If they were a little skimpy, well, it wasn’t her fault she had such an amazing caboose. Better yet, it kept eyes from scrutinizing her feet. She’d have to be more careful.

Amy spit. “It’s a girl’s floor. Who cares.”

“But it’s not *just*...” the girl protested, though she let it trail off. If Lakeview didn’t want guys seeing Amy in her underwear, then they better transfer their boy. And find a way to make her quit her job. “Sorry, I don’t mean to stare. I’m Andi, by the way.”

As Amy rinsed out her mouth, she pondered if there was a way to brush this prude aside without responding. All these fucking bitches unfriended Quinn before she’d finished re-packing her stuff. Sure, Quinn had flown off the handle, but it was Leigh who brought her claws to bear and turned a shoving match into a fight. Nobody was revoking friendship with Leigh though. Now this prig chick wanted to be chummy.

Bah. Quinn had started it *and* finished it, and even if she personally liked Quinn and felt more comfortable with someone who was also a little crazy, Amy could concede that it wasn’t the most sympathetic position. Amy was quietly envious that her new friend was able to channel her issues outwardly rather than inwardly, but it *had* been pretty fucked up.

“Amy,” she replied. Andi smiled, headed for the showers, and that was that.

Only then, the next day, someone knocked at her door.

“Uh, yeah?”

Leigh had been smiling on the other side of the peephole, anticipating that Amy would be looking, but the squeal of the hinges shook it off her obnoxiously pretty face.

Two tits the size of volleyballs hovered right there at Amy's face level. The nerve. "You should really put in a work order for that."

"I did, on move-in day." Full stop.

"Oh." The smile re-asserted itself. "So you're Amy, right? Is it cool if I come in?"

Amy had been popular-ish once, before Ben. She still remembered enough of it to have a knee-jerk instinct to smile and invite her friend's enemy in, the spider welcoming a juicy fly. Did she know Amy and Quinn were friends? She couldn't see how. Despite Quinn trying to sell her on the wonders of tiktok, Amy had remained off the grid. Well, she had joined the floor discord servers, but only to get at that video everybody had been talking about, and that only as a favor to Quinn. That chick was even hornier than Amy, it seemed.

"Sure. Leigh, right?" Oh man. Aunt Julia had always loved *Survivor*. Jonah, too, weirdly, one of few things those two really clicked over. Amy saw enough just by being there. Look at her now, forming an alliance, preparing the blindside. Her tía would be proud.

Leigh made a little pose as she swept in, folding her hands under chin and smiling a pageant smile. "You've heard of me? Just kidding, obviously. Pretty sure everybody saw that freaking video of that psycho jumping me."

"Video...?" The attempt at feigned innocence was too much, and she couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I haven't found a buyer for it yet. Entertaining offers."

She'd meant to be kind of a cunt – not much for *Survivor* tactics – but Leigh only laughed. "Too bad some idiot's head was in the way, or you could have paid off your tuition peddling these puppies to Pornhub." She drummed on those absurd jugs of hers.

"Probably. Um, so yeah, what'd you want...?"

"I'm just making introductions. I hear you're making waves down here." Amy must have looked mystified, because Leigh seemed compelled to explain. "Reclaiming the north bathroom? Creating female space? And looking hella fine doing it, from what I hear. Strutting around in your undies, who cares who's looking."

"What?" Amy looked at her like she was crazy. Which she might be. "I just forgot where I was. I'm, um, kind of a low-clothing girl. Comfy in my skin or whatever you want to call it."

"Right? There's just something empowering about letting it hang. We were all thinking it, but *you* did it – and without thinking it, which is even *more* badass!"

"I'm a badass for brushing my teeth in my underwear?"

"You're a *game-changer* for brushing your teeth in your bra and underwear. Not just because you made it swell to swagger around comfy-like. Having to get fake dressed, *then* go do your routine, then back to your room to get actually dressed? F that."

Amy guesstimated that it had taken probably thirty seconds to snag a pair of shorts and a tank top and put it on before heading to the bathroom on the preceding mornings, but she let Leigh go on.

“But also, like... I don’t want to sound like *that* bitch or anything. But we’re *hot*, you know? Like, there’s just something *sexy* in the air around here. It’s like we’re in this special hot girl club, complete with our own hot boy servant. If you can’t skank around in your skivvies in hot girl club, what is even the point? Am I making any sense?”

Amy laughed in spite of herself. There was something about this chick, how self-aware she seemed of what a self-parody she was. The statuesque blonde with big tits and long legs and the gleaming white teeth and eyes that sparkled so bright they probably glowed in the dark. And she knew it, and what did she do with it? She teased up her hair like an 80’s porn star and taught herself to heel-toe.

Amy wanted to hate her – for Quinn, if nothing else – but suddenly, being alone in a room with her, where Leigh ought to be at her most threatening, she was somehow more relatable.

“Not a lot, but you’re right about me being pretty great in my underwear,” Amy quipped.

Leigh giggled hysterically. “Come on, let’s go get lunch. And no, not in your underwear, superslut. Get dressed, let’s gooo!”

Amy let her have it. She’d been planning to eat soon anyway, so it was either starve until she could feel sure this chick had left the food court or just be rude. Amy picked out an outfit and started changing. If Leigh thought it was weird that Amy undressed right in front of her, she could give a shit. Nudity didn’t bother her, probably to an unhealthy degree. After all, what was one more self-destructive tendency?

She locked her groany door behind her. Leigh made for the stairwell, but Amy hesitated. “What about Angel? It’s been a week and a half and I don’t think I’ve seen you two apart. Aside from... yeah.” Faux pas. Amy winced apologetically. It was true, though. They sat together at floor meetings, did their morning routine together, she’d seen them eating together, going to the gym together... Amy was glad as hell not to have a roommate if there was even a chance of snagging one like that.

Leigh just kept going down the stairs, so Amy followed. “Eh. She’s in class. Between you and me, thank god a little? She’s cool, but she can be a little clingy.”

“A little? It’s like she’s a koala and you’re a eucalyptus tree.”

Leigh barked out a laugh. It echoed up and down the stairwell. “OK, you and me, we’re gonna be friends. Whatever your plans are tonight, text ‘em and fuck ‘em, because you are partying with yours truly. We are officially super awesome college friends for life, girl.” She was being funny about it, but the hope underlying the declaration was real.

Amy still remembered her first day of kindergarten. How scared she was as her mom walked her down to the classroom. Then right before she had to go into the room, her mom reached into her purse and pulled out this huge, incredible block of crayons in her hand.

The 128-count. Fucking legendary.

Her mom had knelt down, looked little Amy in the eye, and told her, “Now just go in there with these. And when it’s time to color, you offer everyone a crayon. Tell them your friends can use your crayons any time.”

Amy had done exactly what her mother said, and she’d made ten friends in a day.

It was a peculiar commonality between the first week of kindergarten and the first week of college – that you could just walk up to someone you didn’t know and claim them as your friend. That had not been Amy’s experience her own freshman year. She’d spent most of it telling guys to fuck off, and telling girls to also fuck off.

Well, screw it. Maybe she could pretend it was kindergarten again, but instead of making friends with crayons, she’d make friends with her underwear. The drawer might not have 128 pairs, but it was reeling them in anyway.

That night, drunk and cackling and barely able to walk in her heels, Amy stumbled out of a house party, the music still pumping loud enough to vibrate her bones all the way down at the sidewalk. She had no reason to remember, but by sheer coincidence it happened to be across the street from the house where she’d run out of air following her flight from Mother Bear’s almost a year earlier.

They packed into the back of their Uber with Leigh and Angel, Charlie wedged in between them. Amy was the littlest, so she was assigned Leigh’s lap. Georgia and Kendall were in the front seat, the former atop the latter. It was blatantly illegal and if there was an accident Amy and Georgia were probably going to be ejected, mangled and/or decapitated, but they looked way too hot for their male driver to complain.

“You guys, this is gonna be the best four years of our lives!” declared Kendall to the cheers of her co-partiers.

“I only have three,” sulked Amy. “It’s not fair. You guys should have been here a year ago.”

“But a year ago they didn’t have the coed floor,” Kendall pointed out. “We probably wouldn’t have even met.”

“Booooo!” jeered Leigh.

“Yeah, boo!” parroted Angel. She laughed (to curry favor), and Leigh laughed along (to favor her).

“I love you guys,” slurred Charlie. “I love our whole floor. Whoever messed up and put us all together deserves, like, a medal. And a kiss,” she giggle-snorted. Charlie had offered to be their DD, but her wholesome vibe was sort of annoying so Amy had

poured some tequila into her until she turned back into a human, then offered to pay for the ride. She'd figure out how to get her car back tomorrow.

"You just wanna kiss our RA," teased Georgia.

"She wants to do more than kiss him," added Kendall.

Charlie's cheeks flushed even more than they had been from the tequila.

"Maaaaaaybe...!"

"Get in line, sluts," preened Leigh. "I got him right where I want him."

"But you're saying there's a line we can stand in to fuck him?" queried Kendall.

"Grooooooss!" Georgia complained. "That said, I'd take any of your sloppy seconds, any day."

"From Spencer," clarified her roommate.

Amy found the whole line of discussion... disturbing. Like, yes, the guy was hot, but so what? There had been at least a couple guys at the party just as attractive. The whole Spencer fetish creeped her the hell out. The girls were still talking about him by the time their driver, wide-eyed and sweaty at the out-pouring of sexy teenage lust, dropped them off in front of Higgins. Amy helped keep Charlie steady as they made their way in. Up ahead, they could see a couple of the other RAs – Amy didn't recognize them, but some of the others did – meeting up just inside the entrance.

Amy knew one of them, sort of. Savannah Grey had been in her biology lab last year. They hadn't really interacted, but the chick was conspicuously hot in a way even Amy balefully envied. Of course, most people didn't know about that fucked up scar on her tummy. She'd seen it once when the girl's shirt got skewed a little out of whack and it had stuck in her head. Even 10's had their 1 spots, as she herself knew all too well.

They waited for the RAs to head off on rounds – "snitchscapades," Leigh dubbed it to the giggles of all – and scurried up to Higgins 3 before they had to explain why they stank of alcohol and could barely walk straight. Charlie was particularly wrecked; they had to hand-deliver her to her roommate, a little ginger chick who was evidently spending her Friday night playing video games. (Destiny, the door tag read, making her the first "Destiny" Amy had met outside of Jumping Jack's.)

"Whoa. Is she OK?"

Charlie laughed and booped her roommate on the nose. "I'm fiiiine," she tittered. "We had sooo much fun, and I can't wait to *BLUHHHHHHHHH*." She vomited, and though she had the courtesy to whirl away from her roommate, it meant she sprayed it all over Amy and Leigh.

"How about that for karma," Amy self-recriminated a few minutes later, raising her voice so Leigh could hear her over the divider between their shower stalls.

"You were the one funneling booze down her throat. For you, sure, karma, but for me this is just shitty luck. Ruined my fucking dress."

Amy finished rinsing the vomit off her top and started wringing it out. Leigh was probably doing the same to her dress, though she might have just set it aside and gone to work on her hair first.

The two quietly washed up for a bit. It was quiet and steamy and weirdly intimate for a public bathroom. After a time, Amy finally asked what she'd been wondering about since she first pondered not hating Leigh.

"Are you doing OK?"

Leigh grunted. "It's no-win. Can't leave the vomit in my hair, but I'm not going to be able to sleep with my dome smelling like crazy of shampoo. I'll be in here rinsing for a freaking hour. Goddamn lightweight."

Amy smiled, then hopped up on the little seat in the changing area and looked over the stall. She was a little too drunk to remember other girls had boundaries about nakedness, but not so drunk she was worried about her balance. Not very worried, anyway. "No. I mean... since the fight."

Leigh adjusted her posture, put her back to Amy. Maybe she was just rinsing, but Amy suspected more hiding. "It's no big. Spencer handled it."

"No I'm serious. I wasn't in here, but I saw the vid same as everybody. That looked... terrifying."

Leigh was quiet for a moment. "It wasn't great, I'll tell you that."

A little drunk, and a little out of her element being in a good mood, Amy wanted to go over there and hug her, but that was a bit much boundary-ignoring even for her. "I, um, know a little about that. Getting beat up and stuff."

Leigh laughed, but Amy took it for what it was. The laugh was to protect herself, not shame Amy. "I can just picture you out there, going all krav maga in the MMA circuit. Do they have a weight division for girls skinnier than my leg?"

"Yeah, well, he wasn't in my weight class," Amy said softly. "But I just mean I know how it can get in your head. Fuck you up."

"I didn't say it got in my head," Leigh said curtly.

"No, I know. I'm just saying, for me. And, um, if we're gonna be super awesome college friends and all—"

"For life," said Leigh, her stupid hot stupid sexy butt bouncing with a little laugh. Amy frowned at it, then went on.

"Then I just wanted to say, if it ever did get in your head, and you wanted to talk to somebody who got it..." She paused, smiling, and Leigh slowly turned around, eyes big and soft and vulnerable in a way that didn't suit her at all. "And you can handle my stupid door screeching your face off... you can talk to me."

Leigh's eyes settled on hers, radiating gratitude. She didn't let it linger, though – it wasn't her way. "You're as bad as Charlie, I swear, freaking sexy Mr. Rogers up in

here. Don't you fucking barf on me, Amy. I swear I'm not losing *two* fights in this shower."

Amy: just so you know I hung out with Leigh tonight. (you remember her, I suspect? tall, smug, can't take a right hook)

*Quinn: you don't have to apologize for who you hang out with
do what you want idc*

*Amy: bullshit you don't care
and I'm not Applegate*

**apologizing*

*I just wanted to tell you she's not broken or anything
that's all*

*Quinn: maybe next time
but good I guess
text me tomorrow A*

Amy: Will do "Q"

OMG WE'RE Q&A WE'RE SO FUCKING COOL

*Quinn: ... wow
get some sleep*

Amy: IYQYQR

She made a hasty edit to her contact while Quinn grappled with Amy's previous message.

Q: dafuq..?

Amy: Say it out loud...

*Q: omg you are such a fucking dork
ILYYQR
srsly.*

Amy huddled in the back seat of her car and felt relieved no one could see her. (To the extent that she could feel anything beyond sheer terror, that is.) Her heart was trying to hammer out of her chest. After a minute, she dared to peer up again.

It was a gorgeous day. A million little sparkles danced across the surface of Bear Lake, though still not quite enough to obscure the reflection of the clouds overhead. The parking lot was right near the beach, and everywhere Amy looked was another Hottie looking hot doing this or that. Playing volleyball in the sand, floating in the shallow

water on an inflatable, sitting at a picnic table talking and laughing. It looked like a great day. Amy had been sitting with Jordyn, Shauna and Emma, the other sophomores. She'd driven here with her friends, but Emma had invited her over.

The four of them had gone for a walk on one of the hiking paths. The city didn't maintain them very well. More than once the trail was so obscure it was basically nonexistent; they'd blundered into the Northside High School parking lot completely by accident, but as a townie, it oriented Amy enough that she steered them back toward Spencer and the girls. Kind of wild. Her old apartment with her mom had been in the Northside school district. When she'd been with Ben, she'd thought sometimes about how if her mom hadn't died, she never would have met him. A very different life that would have been.

So it goes, as one of her favorite authors wrote.

When they'd gotten back near the beach, though, she'd seen him. Kaiden Eaton. Kappa Nu's sergeant-at-arms, and a friend of Ben's.

Amy didn't know what a sergeant-at-arms even did at a fraternity. Ben had tried to explain it once, but it was full of all that douchey jargon – “keeper of ritual,” “recorder of legacy.” It reminded her of back when Jonah used to be into D&D, or whatever it had been. (“It's not D&D, Amy, god, D&D is a totally different game!” Fuck, she missed that little asshole. She hoped he was doing all right.)

Regardless, that creep knew Ben. If he saw Amy, he'd tell him right away. Text him, probably. What if he and Skyler had broken up? What if Ben missed her? What if he came here? What if he found out where she lived?! Spencer hadn't been able to restrain Quinn and Quinn got winded carrying in her groceries. Ben would maul the guy if he got in his way, especially if he saw how besotted the Hotties were with Spencer and felt like he had to make it a Man Contest.

Fuck, for all she knew, Spencer and Kaiden were buddies, and Ben was a friend of a friend. Fuck. Fuck!

She peered again. He was still there, chilling on a swing like it lent him a cute wholesome approachable vibe. No doubt the bipedal turd couldn't wait for one of the girls to notice him and say hi so he could introduce himself and use that disgusting “Eaton – as in eatin'...” line he thought was so fucking clever.

As she watched, he stood up and availed himself of an open beach chair next to Spencer. Of course he did. Leering perv attracting leering perv, big shock. The two of them started chatting. They were much too far for her to overhear; Amy's windows were up, and the doors shut and locked, and an old hoodie under the passenger's seat donned and hooded over her ears for maximum incognito. It was a thousand degrees in the car, but she'd take a chance at death via heat stroke rather than brave the alternative.

Suddenly someone pounded on the glass behind her. In an instant she went from heart-clenching dread to full-blown panic attack. She screamed, but then her throat

caught and she couldn't make any sound at all. As if every single thing wasn't already bad enough, the sudden shock made her lose control of her bladder.

Why was it so dark? Was she already dead? She hoped so. It hadn't hurt so bad, nice and gentle like she'd planned.

They started banging. Amy tried to beg them to leave, beg them to go away, beg them not to kill her, or just kill her and get it over with finally, and bit by bit Amy's vision returned. Not Ben. Not Kaiden. Not Spencer. Just Tori. She looked upset. What had Amy done? She must be in huge trouble. Tori would get Spencer would get Kaiden would get Ben would kill her. Oh god. It wasn't rational but neither was Ben. Oh fuck.

Amy switched the lock and launched herself out of the car on the far side from Tori. She took a circuitous route to avoid Kaiden, but soon cover availed itself via some tall reeds. She darted behind them and made straight for the lake, diving in and swimming confidently.

Amy had been on the swim team in high school. Not very good or anything, but it had been good exercise, and some of her friends did it. Ben had stopped it of course – no girlfriend of his was going to strut around for the whole world to see in one of those not-at-all skimpy one-piece swimsuits and hideous swim caps the team wore. Still, she could swim, even in the increasingly heavy wet hoodie.

When it got to be too cumbersome, she thrashed around until it came off and let it sink. It didn't matter. Swim. Kaiden was there. Hold your breath. Stay under. He can't identify you if you don't surface. Swim. Swim. Swim.

Ben can take you off the swim team but he can't stop you from knowing how to swim.

Swim.

Grueling breathless minutes later the panic attack subsided, leaving Amy dizzy and alone somewhere way out in the middle of this branch of the lake. It was so far to shore she could hardly see the rest of the group. Where she was, the water was so murky she couldn't see her tits, much less down to the lakebed. Bear Lake was surprisingly vast, fed by a number of tributaries from every direction in the city and then spreading out into the countryside for miles, where it was fed by more. People had gone missing out here, survivalists who'd thought to brave the wild only to find out the wild was a lot braver than they were.

Was Ol' Ursula down there, paddling along in the depths?

A trio of bubbles popped up only a few feet away. For a moment, Amy, still coming down from the peak of her panic, forgot Ursula was a legend. She closed her eyes, braced herself to be dragged under and torn apart and forgotten.

Aunt Julia. More than anything else in that moment, Amy wished she could apologize to her tía. If she only had one wish, it wouldn't be for a boat. It would be that.

When, after a moment, she didn't die, Amy opened her eyes. No bear. Just a turtle, a cute little painted turtle hardly bigger than her hand. It was simply floating there, a turtley little smile on its face. Paddling water as delicately as she could, Amy slowly found herself smiling back.

A little ladybug that, like Amy, seemed to be having a moment of malcontent with its life on shore, landed on the turtle's shell. The creature's little jaws tried to intercept, but when it failed, it simply submerged itself and disappeared in an instant. The ladybug floated on the surface of the water for a moment, then likewise flew away. Amy squinted after it, but lost it in seconds. After one last glance down for old Ursula, Amy followed suit and made for the shore.

"You scared the fuck out of me!" Tori snapped as she handed Amy a towel. "Mind telling me what the shit's going on with you? Are you on something?"

Amy was – she usually was, to the extent she only noticed it when she wasn't – but that was beside the point. "Sorry. I was..." What? Terrified our RA is in cahoots with the Kappa Nu sergeant-at-arms to hunt me down so my ex-boyfriend can murder me? It sounded insane. It *was* insane. Not a valid psychological term, she knew, but it applied. "It was just a prank. You should have seen your face." She tried a laugh, though her confidence about what laughter sounded like was yet to return since her impromptu aquatic escape attempt.

Tori placed herself in Amy's path. "Bullshit. I saw the look on *your* face. What happened? Are you... No, scratch that. You are definitely not all right. Talk to me."

They were still a long ways away from the group. Amy didn't see Kaiden any more. Didn't see Spencer either until, surprise surprise, Sammi, Casey, Andi and Lex – in descending tit-size order, and reverse how-often-they'd-shown-them-to-him order – threw their heads back in giggle fits, and there he was in the middle of them.

Amy didn't understand these girls. She got horny, too. *Really* horny, of late. Kind of annoyingly so – she kept soaking through her hot pockets so bad she had to take multiple to Jumping Jack's and change mid-shift when they got so wet she was sliming the pole. Probably a side effect of having her first month in ages where she wasn't miserable a hundred percent of the time. Still, they acted like Spencer was the only guy around. Amy could confirm that there were many, many, *many* other guys.

She double, then triple-checked, but no Kaiden. He hadn't seen her, had he? No way he could have recognized her out there in the water. She was OK. It had all been in her head. What a shitty fucking place to be.

"I, um... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to freak you out. In my defense, you scared me first."

"I went to get my shorts out of Ellie's car to keep the sand off my ass, and I saw some weirdo in a goddamn hoodie hiding in the backseat of your car, Amy. I thought

you were some skinny little rapist or something waiting to ambush... you! What the hell were you doing?"

"Look, I apologized. It's none of your business, OK? Now do you mind...?" Tori let Amy push past her. She joined the girls splashing around in the shallows – ready to dive underwater at the first sign of Kaiden's return – and was still there when the group decided it was time to return to campus.

Tori was waiting for her in the passenger's seat. Kendall, Leigh and Angel had ridden over with her; Amy peered around and found them squeezed into Terri's little shitbox car. Oof. That chick was always trying to drag the other Hotties into one of her "collabs," a thinly veiled metaphor for the softcore porn she called a tiktok feed.

"Hi there. I hope you don't mind, but I sent your friends away."

"How? Why?" Amy demanded, sliding into the driver's seat, hoping her wet ass didn't damage the leather. She'd burned a *lot* of calories shaking her ass at randos for this car.

"How is I told them you noticed me bleeding through my shorts and you offered to take me and be discreet. Had to wedgie the hell out of myself to sell it, too, so thanks for that."

"If you drip *sangre menstrual* on my fucking seat I swear to god I'll kill you, Tori."

"You and what army. Or should I say what navy, with that stunt you pulled earlier."

"You have no idea how many dudes I have to hump every month to make this fucking car payment," Amy grumbled as she started the engine. She regretted it immediately. None of the Hotties knew about her job. She'd only told Quinn last week, and Quinn was her best friend. Even then she hadn't told her about how many of the Jumping Jack's regulars were only regulars so they'd be on hand in case the skinny little slut with the fake perky titties was feeling lonely after her shift. Seiji kept a close eye on her, making sure she never went anywhere with someone she didn't want to, and she tipped him handsomely for it.

"Uh, we'll come back to *that* weird-ass thing you just said in a second, but to your second question, why, because you were hiding in your car and when I startled you, you ran like a kid with a squirt gun from a Florida cop."

"Pretty sure that's Floridist."

"Spanglish or no, you are too white to be calling my black ass anything-ist." Tori smiled, though, with plain reluctance. "Sorry. Don't get to do the whole 'my black ass' thing too often."

Amy smiled in kind, but it faded fast. Tori had been trying to do her a solid, scaring a creep out of Amy's car, and she'd instead been subjected to a front-row showing at *El Carnaval de la Loca*. She deserved at least some explanation. "Look, there

was a guy there, I guess he's friends with Spencer or something. I don't know. But this guy's in my ex-boyfriend's fraternity, and he – my ex, I mean – is... I don't think there are words for what he is.”

“Abuser...?” floated Tori, but compassionately.

“OK, so maybe there are words for what he is. But he turned my life into a waking nightmare and I saw Kaiden – the guy – and I freaked out and–”

Tori put a hand on her shoulder. It was firm. It felt surprisingly reassuring. “Now I get it. I'm sorry that you had to go through that. That was some pretty intense shit there.”

Amy didn't really remember it clearly, the order of events and all. She'd been reading about trauma in one of her textbooks, and that was fairly common for a panic attack. Still, she definitely remembered being in the middle of a giant lake – had there really been a turtle? – so she could only imagine how it must have looked to Tori.

“Did you even know it was me before I swam back?”

Tori nodded. “Yeah, after a sec. I recognized your car – this is a nice ride by the way – and when I saw your little red bottoms, I knew it was you, even if it didn't make any sense. And that's not a lesbian thing or anything, just I saw you wearing it earlier and I got I think the same one except mine has to fit all of this up in it.”

“Your black ass?”

“That's our phrase.” Tori grinned. “You get your own thing.”

Amy would have been happy to pivot to lighter discussion, or just turn on the radio and not talk at all. Amy didn't really know Tori, but she was beginning to. There was an intensity to her, and intense people stressed her the fuck out. Instead, Tori pursued the other thing Amy had shared.

“Now what's this I hear about you humping dudes for a car?”

With a sigh, Amy gritted her teeth and made her confession. She didn't want to, but she didn't want Tori thinking she was a hooker or a call girl or something. (No, those would be so much more embarrassing than stripper-slut.) Not answering a question like that was how such rumors got started, though, so Amy told her about the stripping. Once she got going, and once Tori responded not with condemnation but with curiosity – polite, if not fascinated – Amy talked and talked.

Tori got a big kick out of the “hot pockets.” Amy told her about how last winter she used to wear them to campus so she could hustle to this Mexican place she liked off campus and have somewhere to keep her burrito hot on her rush to her next class. Tori laughed herself silly imagining tiny little Amy walking around sporting what anyone looking too closely had to assume was the biggest dick at Lakeview.

“Even Spencer isn't packing burrito-sized meat!” she howled.

The name brought Amy back out of it a bit. “You know, I don't get what you all see in that guy, honestly.”

“Seriously? Well, no, I guess... I dunno. He’s easy on the eyes and all. One of us,” she said, tapping the big H on her Higgins Hotties shirt. “But I just like the guy. He’s got good values, respectful of women, diverse cultures. I know it’s whatever, but it works for me. If I’m gonna fantasize about a guy I’m not ever gonna actually get with, I want the fantasy to have a nice date before the big show. Olive Garden, Pepsi, plotting the overthrow of the fascist regime, then back to my place so I can chain him up in my sex dungeon.”

“Whoa.”

“That was a joke, Amy.” Tori snickered. “Mostly. But you know, before we get too far off of it, I... I know it’s not my place, and you can tell me to shut up. But some of what you’re saying, about your job? I know you said you went there because it felt safe, but the way you’re talking about it, back rooms and random dudes... It doesn’t sound all that safe.”

“There’s a bouncer. It’s cool. I saw Seiji roundhouse a watermelon off the bar so hard it freaking exploded.”

“I’m just saying—”

“Hey. Drop it? It’s fine.”

Accepting her invitation to tell her shut up didn’t look like it sat very well with the floor governor, but she took it. She’d meant well, Amy knew. “Hey. Um, so I know it’s a little early, but while we’re out... wanna go to Olive Garden?”

Like that, Tori was all smiles again. “You’re still dripping wet and I’ve got sand in crevices I forgot I had. Blech. I need to sign up at whatever gym you’re going to.”

“It’s called starvation and self-loathing. The dues are brutal and the trainers are incompetent sadists. But seriously, I got a bunch of clothes in the trunk. Work stuff mostly, but I can use it as a towel and slip into a halter top, a sarong, use a hot pocket and get by. Come on. My treat. We’ll tip extra for leaving a sandy bench.”

“You don’t need to treat me.”

Amy flipped open the compartment in the center console, fishing around until she lifted the piece of black cardboard she’d cut from a shoebox lid that she used as a false bottom. There was a huge wad of cash in there, a wad she spent and refreshed regularly but never depleted in case Ben found a way to track her via her assets and she needed to run.

“Holy *shit*. Those... Those aren’t even singles. Jesus.”

“My white ass,” Amy quipped. “Literally. Had a guy last week who slipped me almost two hundred bucks to do body shots off the backs of my thighs. Not my proudest moment, but not even close to my most shameful.”

“I...”

“You’re an unemployed floor governor who risked her life to confront what she thought was a predator hiding in my back seat, and I’m a fucked up stripper who sees a chance to feel good about herself for an hour by doing something nice. Let me?”

Tori extended a hand, and Amy shook it. “Sold.”

Later that night, Amy was getting some reading done for next week when someone knocked at her door. While she’d had a nice dinner (Diet Pepsi and all) the combination of seeing Kaiden with their RA, the panic attack, that long moment of hoping to die in a lake, the memory resurfacing of the horrible way she’d treated Aunt Julia during their last conversation... It had been too much. She donned her emergency socks, which had been tucked between her mattress and bed springs since she’d gotten there.

It was Terri, of all people. “Um, hi...?”

“Your door is *really* loud,” she said, like Amy might have somehow failed to notice. “Can I come in?”

“I’m studying,” she lied.

“I won’t take long.”

Once more, the emergency socks earned their keep as she let the girl into her room. She was still wearing her Hotties shirt from the beach. Amy had changed into hers when she got home. They were kind of annoyingly comfy, and there was no pretending she – they – didn’t look fine as hell in them.

“What’s up?” she asked once her feet were carefully concealed by her sitting position. “And if this is about your streaming thing, no offense, but I’m really not–”

“No, it’s not that. Though the offer remains open if you ever want to just try it out and see. You’d be surprised how fast you get used to sitting around talking about nothing in a cute outfit while dudes fight for your...” She stopped herself. “Well, um, since I was about to say I talked to Tori earlier, I guess, yeah. You wouldn’t be surprised, huh.”

Amy found herself scowling. “She told you?! What the fuck! I can’t believe I–”

“Whoa, whoa, hey,” Terri said, holding up her hands. “She asked me to come talk to you, and she said I should tell you that all she told me you told her... I think that makes sense? But yeah, that you, um, were a... yeah. A stripper.”

“You don’t have to say it like that. I just do what you do on a stage instead of on camera.”

It was Terri’s turn to scowl. “That is so not what I do! I–” She caught her tone. “Sorry. I really didn’t mean it as a judgment. I suppose it is fair to say our professions are, you know, quasi-adjacent. Same neighborhood, at least. Looking hot, making guys happy. Putting a little beauty in the world. Fair.”

“That’s a hell of a euphemism for ‘shaking your tits for cash.’”

“Hey, I only came down here because Tori said, um... Sorry, this is so awkward. She said...”

“Something other than ‘Amy’s a stripper?’ Cool, what other gossip is she starting.”

“All right, so since I’m making a mess of this, let me just cut to the chase. You want to use your body to make tons of money? And you want to do it in a way that’s *actually* safe, not ‘I’m protected by a tiny Asian man who excels at the watermelon arts’ safe? I can help you do that.”

Amy shook her head. “What? I told you, I don’t want to stream. I’m doing just fine where I’m at. And don’t talk shit about Seiji and shit you don’t know about.”

Terri sighed and adopted a tone like she was the worldly one and Amy was some rube she had to educate. “I don’t know if you’re the sort who’s more persuaded by data or anecdotal evidence, but I can whip up a presentation to show you that no, you definitely aren’t ‘safe.’” She ticked off points on her fingers. “Sex work is horrendously under-regulated. They’re preyed upon by their managers, handlers, and sometimes folks like your friend Seiji. Sex workers are massively more likely to be assaulted on the job. They have significantly higher rates of mental health problems. They—”

“I get it. It’s not glamorous. But it also pays great, no paper trail for the tax man, and I’m good at it.”

Terri nodded. “I bet you are. Amy, you’re one of the prettiest women I’ve ever seen. You’re probably even prettier than my roommate, and you’ve seen her, she’s like a hot girl cosplaying an even hotter girl. Or... reverse that? Whatever, she’s hot, you get me. But you could do exactly what you do on stage, the tassles, the jigging, and... I’m told there’s some tool you call a ‘hot pocket?’”

“It’s a g-string with a big pocket inside. My pussy keeps it warm.”

Terri grinned. “That’s awesome. God, I wish you would let me put you on my... Focus. But I’m saying, you could just start an OnlyFans, or a competitor, whatever. You’d have complete control over what content you put out there. No tipping your bouncer, no giving your manager a cut like he’s the one busting his butt at the gym. Yeah, the site gets a cut, but they also create and maintain the digital tools for it, so it’s actually fair. You wouldn’t have to walk to your car hoping there’s not some psycho rapist hiding in the back seat, which if you think that sounds like Hallmark horror movie bullshit, one of the girls said she saw exactly that literally earlier today at the lake.”

Amy managed not to laugh. Apparently Tori hadn’t spilled everything after all. “Really?”

“Yeah, they told Tori, but she said they must have seen her coming because she thought she saw the creep run off into the woods in like a hoodie and fake glasses and mustache kind of thing. Fucking bonkers. And that was at a public park in broad daylight, not 2 AM in a dark parking lot at Hank’s Spank and Yank.”

She let it out this time. “You know, that wouldn’t be a bad name for a club.”
Maybe Jack had a brother.

“Anyway, if you want help setting it up, I’d be happy to. It’s not exactly what I do, but I’ve read up on my industry and I keep my options open. If not, forget I said anything and I hope you’re right. Maybe you found one of the good ones.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the offer.”

Terri gave her a nod and left, once more grumbling about the hinges. A few hours later, once Amy was good and scabbed over and could wear her normal socks, she headed down to 307. The door was open. Seemed like the doors on this floor always were. She’d grown up with Jonah, a kid who’d closed his bedroom door at age 10 and spent every day since rigorously testing whether it really could make you go blind.

Terri was sitting at her computer, likewise looking like she was doing homework. Why did it feel weird to think of this professional boobly broadcaster doing homework?

Terri would probably think the same thing about seeing the titty dancer doing hers.

There was no sign of Terri’s roommate. A shame; Amy was constantly forgetting which of the two ginger shortstacks on the floor was which. A reintroduction would have been helpful.

“Do you have a minute? I was thinking about what you said, and... maybe it’s worth checking out. I can come back later if—”

Terri was hugging her before Amy knew it was coming, bouncing and squealing in excitement. “We are going to make you a friggin’ millionaire, Amy. Or whatever your alias winds up being, I should say. I guess you probably have one at your club already, right?”

Maritza. Her mother’s name. Amy shook her head. “I, um, need a new one, I think.”

“Well sit right in, because you and I are going to figure all this shit out. You got your bank info ready? Because, by the way, you’re going to wanna call them in the morning and let them know that no, it’s no mistake. You’re just that freaking great.”

Amy smiled, and took a seat.

It finally happened.

Amy found out from a text from an unknown number that turned out to be her little cousin Alana, who’d heard from her dad, Amy’s Uncle Martín, who’d been told by Aunt Julia, that Jonah had gotten himself arrested when he’d been caught stealing. He even had a little blurb on the local paper’s recent arrests page, mugshot and all. He hadn’t been caught swiping candy bars from a convenience store or stuffing a couple

t-shirts down his pants at Walmart. No, the fucking idiot got caught on his school's security camera wheeling out a whole cart of laptops and tablets.

Alana said apparently he'd hid out after school, waited for the building to empty, then gone right out the front door with it. She had to hand it to him, he'd had a buyer ready. Sold them off right there in the parking lot, he said. The little genius never learned the guy's real identity, so now there was no returning the goods or finding the guy who'd made the real money off of it. Thousands of dollars of shit, and he'd gotten \$500 – right up until he was hauled out of first period the next morning and handed over to the cops, who found it in his wallet, less a few bucks for a pack of condoms and a slurpee.

Amy's cursory research suggested that he was probably looking at upwards of 2 years if – when – he was convicted. Eighteen. Eight-fucking-teen.

She was sobbing so hard, and as stoned as she'd been in months, that she didn't hear the knocking. When they kept at it, she dismissed it as irrelevant. She didn't miss the groan of that door, though. Still, she was weeping into her pillow so hard the posts were knocking into the wall as she shook the bed.

"Oh god. Oh my god. Amy? Amy, are you OK? What happened? Oh crap. Um, somebody—" There was nobody else in the room, of course. "Oh god. Um. It's OK. Shh, it's OK."

Someone was sitting next to her suddenly, rubbing her back and murmuring the same pointless shit. Amy didn't care. She didn't care that she was naked, either. She'd been masturbating when she'd gotten the text. She did that a lot these days, it seemed, just feeling good about things for a change. Plus it was cheap and easy content, and she didn't fake that shit for her vids. (Not often, anyway.)

Then she twisted, put her back to whoever it was, trying to curl up into a little ball, and after a moment, they saw her feet.

"Oh *shit*. Oh fucking *shit*. Amy. Oh my god. Amy. Oh no. Oh god. I'm getting Spencer. Stay right there, and I'll—"

Amy whirled upright. Katrina, Quinn's first and best roommate. "No! No. No, I'm fine. It's just my brother. He..." That was as much as she could manage, word-wise, but she made sure Amy understood that she didn't want the RA.

Quinn had insisted Spencer didn't seem to actually know Kaiden that she could tell; she was still friends with him on social media from her brief stay here. (She'd begun to acknowledge that her fixation on him was a bit silly. It had lingered for as many weeks now as their hookup on night one had lasted in minutes. Pretty devout for a handjob and butt-fingering, Amy thought.) In any case, it let her friend snoop, and there didn't seem to be any link. Amy surreptitiously asked Sammi who that guy was she'd seen him talking to at the beach, and she'd made it sound like the guy was bothering him, like they'd chased Kaiden off. Maybe that was how it had been.

Still, she didn't trust him. He was just too... Ben. That idiot smile he wore all the time for no reason, like he just *needed* these girls to trust him, that he was one of the good ones – nay, the *best*. Word had it he'd tricked his way into Andi's panties. It probably hadn't been hard. Some said he'd given Kyu-Ri a spanking. That chick's English was worse than her Uncle Martín's, though, so who knew what to make of her ditzy Korenglish giggle-babble when she'd been asked. Most people figured he'd fucked Casey – except Casey, who claimed she was only messing and she had a boyfriend whom she loved back home – and pretty much everybody seemed to hope they were next.

Pretty much. Amy kept hoping one of these chicks would make her life easy and turn her gay, but so far no such luck. She was stuck here single and sexed up, and the only guy in the building was a Ben.

And now her little brother was going to prison. It was going to chew him up and spit him out as another miserable broken piece of shit. Like her.

Katrina folded her hands in her lap. She plainly wanted to be reassuring, but wasn't coping well with the panorama of fluids, blood and sweat and tears and cum. To be fair, Amy wasn't coping well either. “OK. I won't get him. But, um, can I get Tori? I'm sorry, I just... you look dreadful and I'm freaking out and I'm sorry but I don't know how to handle this stuff, and... I'll get Tori.”

“No. You're fine. It's fine. I don't need anybody. I'm fine.” Katrina looked aghast. Amy took her at her word that she did not know how to handle this stuff. In fact, “I don't know how to handle this stuff, either.” A disgusting laugh-snot-cry followed – adding snot to the fluid list – but it was better than just crying, she supposed.

“I'm sorry. I just heard you, and at first I thought maybe you were watching a sad movie, or like one of those Sarah McLachlan style commercials came on. Remember those, when we were kids? Those were so manipulative, my parents said it was hard to root for the ASPCA for a while. I guess I used to see them and throw tantrums and go ‘Mommy, Mommy, we have to save the puppies, save the puppies, Mommy’ and drive them sort of crazy. It was actually one of my Christmas presents when I was... 5, I think? They let me push some of the buttons when they made a donation. And I'm talking way too much and saying nothing and I'm sorry and I'll shut up.”

It was all enough to get another laugh-snot-cry that was balanced more toward laughing. “It's OK. I'm just having a night.”

Amy's eyes flitted between the sobbing girl, her bleeding feet, and the blood-stained knife now staining the bed. Fuck. Amy was usually really careful – kind of insanely careful, really. It had felt really important that Aunt Julia never find out about it, so she had a whole routine, her special towel, plastic wrap as a just-in-case tarp mechanism, her emergency socks. If Aunt Julia had found out, she'd have demanded to know why, and then demanded to get involved and help, and then found out about everything with Ben, and then get in his face about it, and...

She'd thought that scenario would end with a double funeral, and then Jonah being put in foster care or sent to live with family back in Puerto Rico. Not impossible, she granted, but with the benefit of hindsight it probably would have ended things sooner and without all that drama she'd put herself and Skyler through. Maybe even put Ben in jail where he belonged.

Where Jonah was headed now.

It was a long time before she was able to talk again. Katrina out-performed her self-assessment, comforting and soothing and subtly helping her get dressed. She started by running across the hall to her room for bandages because of course Madame Salutatorian had her own first aid kit, sensible-ass nerd-ass sexy-ass chick that she was.

She didn't know Katrina beyond the half-serious jeers people lobbed at her, which she absorbed and ignored admirably. Amy's sense was that they had next to nothing in common. She was there, though, and Amy could hardly tell up from down and she was so depressed she figured she might get on with it tonight and maybe she'd try fucking a girl before she did and Katrina was one who was always staring at Spencer like she'd fuck him if he even looked at her so you knew she was just so horny she'd say yes and—

"It's my little brother," she said.

It was a give and take. Katrina wasn't wrong that emotional support wasn't her forte. (Not that Amy faulted her. It was better than Amy would have been able to do if she'd found Katrina having a meltdown in her room.) Amy would start venting, and Katrina would try to distract her from them.

"He's going to prison. My baby brother. In prison."

"I think I stopped the worst of the bleeding."

"If they charge him with grand larceny, Jonah could get a decade. More even, since the stupid *cabron* did it at a school."

"Why don't I put that knife somewhere... else."

"It's going to ruin his life."

"Let's get you dressed. You'll feel better dressed."

"I got fake tits to make myself feel like the whore piece of shit I am and my aunt who's been a second mother to me loved me too much to watch me flush my life down the toilet on drugs and stripping to stand for it so I said the meanest shit I could think of to make her throw me out so I could hit the flusher faster and now I can't even call her and tell her I'm sorry and go home and hug her because I'm no better than the guy who almost broke my ribs because I laughed for a second when he tried this stupid awkward sex position and he fell off the bed, but at least he never deliberately set out to hurt his family so much they'd never talk to him again."

"Um, I really like that little sign thingy. Did you make that?"

Amy had fished that dumb wall hanging out of her box and had been holding onto it tight. It was the last thing of hers that her tía had touched when Amy stormed out. She let Katrina's non sequitur slide. Amy had been ranting and raving like a schizophrenic for hours, so she was due a subject change.

"Yeah. You can have it."

"I couldn't."

"Take it or I'm gonna throw the fucking thing in the trash."

Katrina nodded, set it in her lap committedly, and put herself back in listen mode. Amy was done venting though. She'd already said way too much. "No, I'm done. I'm sorry. You can go do your thing. I'll be fine. Thanks, Katrina."

Katrina didn't move. "Why didn't you want me to get Spencer?"

"What? I didn't... What?"

"When I first came in. I said I was going to get Spencer and you panicked."

"No I didn't."

"You did. I saw you did. Did he do something?"

Amy shook her head. "Do something? To Jonah?" She was so dizzy. How many of those stupid pills did she take? There weren't many left.

"To you. If he did something to you, you have to tell me. Do you hear me? You have to tell me."

Amy didn't know why she had to tell this girl anything, but she sounded very confident about it. "Something like what? What are you talking about?"

Katrina took a moment. Her eyes flickered like she was... computing, or something. Or maybe Amy was hallucinating. When she spoke, it was like she was presenting some kind of solution to a story problem. "You panicked when I suggested we invite Spencer. The self-harm on your feet, which explains why you do your morning routine in your underwear and socks so nobody will look and if they do there's nothing to see. The scarring that says it's been going on for a while. A tipped over bottle of oxycontin on your desk. Your panic attack a couple weeks ago on beach day that Tori told me not to tell you she told me about. And no, she didn't say what caused it so don't get mad at her. But she asked me to try to keep an eye and ear out for you since we're neighbors."

"Look at fuckin' Benoit Blanc over here," Amy said, forcing a laugh. *Deflection*, they called that in her psych classes. "How did you even see all that from the bed?"

"20/10 vision." Katrina did not laugh.

"Then what the fuck are your glasses for?"

"I get too much screen time and they have blue light protection."

"Oh."

Katrina got back to her point. "Anyway, add to all that your family situation, and... Amy, what I've seen in here tonight doesn't worry me. It fucking terrifies me.

You've obviously been through some things. If one of those things was being victimized by our RA, you need to tell me. I promise that I won't do anything about it without your say-so, but you *have* to tell me."

"He hasn't done shit. Yet," she added. "Don't worry, your precious golden boy isn't going anywhere."

Katrina studied her closely, like if Amy wiggled this finger or that, it might reveal she was lying. Amy made eye contact and delivered a scornful "see, nothing wrong" face.

"OK." She nodded slowly. "OK. You're high right now?"

Amy forced another laugh. It didn't put Katrina off any more than the last one. "Why, gonna snitch? 'Cause I was gonna share. Got me a fresh bottle of oxy for the evening, but looks like you're getting cut out."

"Come with me." Katrina stood up, held out a hand, the little wall hanging clutched in the other.

"Field trip time? Where we going? Oh, let's do the zoo!" Amy knew she was being a cunt, but it was better than being the weepy sad sack she'd been all evening. God. Jonah. Aunt Julia. Fuck.

No, keep shitting on the salutatorian. Safer.

Katrina dragged Amy along in her wake, but only across the hall to her own room. She sealed them in. "Oh, we gonna finally do this?" snickered Amy, flopping into the bed and half-heartedly striking a sexy pose. It felt too familiar. Strange place, someone she barely knew. Her pussy was already lubing up even though she was very sure she didn't want it. Whatever. Not wanting it was part of it sometimes.

"You're staying in here tonight."

"Oh am I? Fine, cuff me."

Katrina wasn't amused. "The label on your pill bottle said it had 30 pills and I counted 18 sitting out. You just told me it was a fresh bottle, and whether or not you were being literal I'm not going to risk treating it as a joke. 12 oxycontin pills means you're at risk of an overdose. Your pupils are so wide I'm surprised you can even see. You're a victim of trauma with self-harm. Now you're speaking semi-coherently, and you can still walk around, so for now, I won't force you to go to the hospital. I'm not leaving you alone in your room with that knife and those pills, though. If I have to cuff you to the bed, I will, but don't expect a kiss goodnight. Unfortunately, you're not my type."

"Somebody's a homophobe."

"I've lived on Higgins 3 long enough to admit I'd let a girl go down on me. But you're just a fucking basketcase."

Katrina allowed her smile to surface for a moment. Amy found herself laughing for real this time.

"Remote's on the... yep, you found it. Turn on whatever you want, there's Klondike bars in the freezer and kombucha in the fridge, help yourself."

The next morning, when Amy was sober, she accepted that the price of guzzling down two bottles of that kombucha shit to atone for the three Klondike bars was accepting Katrina's edict that she go to the health center and set up an appointment to see a therapist.

It had been over-zealous; they didn't really do walk-ins. By sheer dumb luck, they were able to get her in as early as that afternoon; Katrina cut class to walk her down there once again. Amy took a little offense at not being trusted to go on her own recognizance, but it felt weirdly good to have somebody set aside time to worry about her. Like Terri had. And Tori, the pushy fucking blabbermouth. And Quinn, who'd responded to Amy's 2 AM pitch-black selfie captioned *guess where I am...* with *did someone bury you alive or something...? wtf?* and then met her for lunch and hugged her and distracted her forming an almost unnervingly detailed plan to prison break Jonah. Amy would seduce the guards as a distraction, then Quinn would do most of the knifing.

How had moving to this stupid floor been the best decision she'd ever barely made?

So she saw a therapist. They didn't click. Amy simply couldn't feel safe alone in a room with the man. She'd been alone with men all the time at Jumping Jack's, but she knew exactly what those men wanted from her. When she knew all a guy wanted from her was sex, it wasn't scary. They weren't hiding anything, nothing behind those smiles but plain honest lust, nothing behind compliments and gentlemanly behavior but an earnest desire to rip her clothes off, slam her up against a wall, and fuck the shit out of her.

Katrina threw away her pills, deleted Lukas's contact from Amy's phone, and made her go back and request a woman counselor. She didn't like this one either, but part of it – Katrina said – was Amy's own refusal to let people help her, which was a bellwether of people who'd had their power taken away from them. A natural reaction when circumstances tried to make someone strong feel like someone weak.

There was a long weekend in there somewhere spent sweating and screaming and shaking and vomiting and shitting molten lava and finally accepting she needed to go to the hospital. Quinn checked in on her constantly, even violated her sanction against ever setting foot near Higgins Hall to drop off flowers for her at the center desk. Her fellow Hotties did the rest. It was pure hell.

She was functional again by Monday, and as weeks passed, she remembered her body, and how much she loved it. What it could do. Not just walking up to a pole and jiggling around, but it was strong. Fit. She had endurance and more power than a girl her size was meant to. A little spring in her step returned. She did a back-flip one day in the courtyard, for no reason, and stuck the landing. Amy hadn't done that since before Ben. It felt like she'd conjured fire out of thin air. She felt alive again.

Meanwhile, Katrina made her go back for another appointment, and it was... better. Not just rehashing her shitty life story, but actually getting advice. It would take more time to arrive at a thorough diagnosis, though Amy was told up front that because of her history of substance abuse, they couldn't prescribe her anything. The implication – basically calling her a drug addict – pissed Amy off and she cussed the lady out, stormed out. She'd only made it to the health center lobby when she received a text from the woman: "You're worth fighting for; don't give up on you. It took time to hurt you, and it will take time to help you. See you in two weeks, I hope."

Amy sat with that for a long while, heard nothing in her classes that afternoon. Just read it over and over. *See you in two weeks. Thanks*, she finally wrote back.

That night was another floor program. Amy usually went to them. It was something to do, and after reading about exposure therapy for class, she kept hoping that if she just spent time around him, in a safe place surrounded by the other Hotties, she'd make her peace with the guy's intrusion into her little paradise. Everybody was really excited about it. Massage night. Like they were going to dogpile on the guy and massage him until they all came on his face or something. Amy chuckled, reading all the posts in discord's #spencerthoughts about their little mini-fantasies for the night.

When she saw Katrina's door open across the hall, Amy hurried over and took her hand. The girl looked surprised, but pleased. "Hey, you."

"You want to be my partner for tonight, Miss Valedictorian?"

"I'd like nothing more. And like I keep saying, I was salutatorian, not valedictorian. Missed it by .02, stupid B+ in stupid AP calculus."

Amy tugged her in the direction of the lounge. "You're valedictorian in my book."

"Aww. Do you still have your knife, because that pickup line was so cheesy I think I might need to fend you off."

God, Amy was horny. Could she really...? Katrina was so...

Nah. Nah, that was crazy.

Maybe just once.

An hour of rubbing each other down in their underwear made her feel a lot less crazy about it. It was the horniest fucking display Amy had ever seen; if she could have charged admission for it they could have put Jack out of business.

(Not that she would. He'd been pretty cool when he found out she'd been handing out business cards at work for her site, and even pledged to it himself on her last day. He'd taken her into his office, and while she'd been afraid he was going to lash out at her, instead he just wanted her to watch him click the sub button. "Come back any time, Maritza." Not the worst guy, all things considered.)

Massage night got so fucked up by the end that Amy wondered if she'd found some more oxy and taken it without remembering, but no. It was just... nuts. She watched as one by one, her floormates descended on their RA and put their mouths and

tongues on his back, his shoulders. Some of them ditched their bras, or their panties, or even their whole-ass dignity while they watched. Casey had two fingers and a thumb at work the moment he granted permission for the whole salivatory affair; others joined in.

It was... hot.

For a moment, she thought she actually got it. A sisterhood of beautiful harem slaves, dressed per his command in next to nothing, drooling over their beloved sultan. If she weren't so goddamn horny, Amy would have run from the room screaming. Instead, she shook her head when it came her turn, only to be physically pushed by Casey. Faced with bowing out and demands for an explanation at how anyone could pass up the opportunity to lick some dude's back, or having a panic attack the longer she stood there psyching herself out, Amy hastily bent down and dragged her tongue over his shoulders. She gave Jacqui, underneath the beast receiving a tit massage, a little wave, and went back to shaking her head over the spectacle and trying not to touch herself. And failing, but less than most. She hadn't been fucked in days.

The party broke up. She and Katrina made their way back down to their rooms at the far end of the hall. "Do you want to, um, keep going?" she heard Lex ask Kyu-Ri.

Kyu-Ri grinned and let Lex draw her into their room. Jo, with the door shut in her face, turned back and knocked on her partner Addison's door. Nobody answered, but then Danielle came over and took hold of Jo's wrist, dragging the black-haired beauty into her room.

"Some people, huh," laughed Amy casually. "Getting all worked up over a little massage."

"And some licking," said Amy, laughing also, also casually.

Amy couldn't remember the next morning if Katrina had pulled her into her room or if Amy had instigated. What she did remember was everything else. Sober sex was *intense*. Not that it had started out as sex. They started by pretending they were still just massaging, like Lex and that horny exchange student had when they'd headed in to make out. Amy massaged first. When she got to the bottom of Katrina's back, she didn't ask, just tugged Katrina's boxers down and went lower.

She stopped shy of actually massaging her ass. Katrina was straight-laced, not some fucked up skank like her.

When Katrina's tongue joined her hands on Amy's own tight little derriere, she tensed in surprise.

"Is this OK?"

"No, it's good. You're good." Amy shuddered with pleasure as Katrina's teeth grazed her bare bottom.

Amy's body threatened to melt her bones into goo and ooze off the bed as the woman kneaded her ass. Bit by bit, she became more brazen. Less massaging, more groping. Those questing fingers drew closer and closer to her crevices.

“Do you remember Quinn? My roommate at move-in?”

Amy laughed to herself. “I think we all remember Quinn.” She didn’t know where this was going, so she didn’t bother elaborating that they were supposed to go out clubbing tomorrow night.

“So you remember how she said she and Spencer...? She told me she, um, put her finger...”

“Up his ass? Yeah, I heard.” She’d more than once watched the little piglet gross her out smelling the thing in memoriam, too.

“Yeah.” Katrina kneaded deeper.

OH.

Amy craned her neck to look back at her. “You can do any fucking thing you want to me,” she whispered.

It was a line she’d used with lots of guys, most of them pussies who took it to mean they could go “crazy” and fuck her doggy style, or some such vanilla bullshit. Really, though, the offer was to make everything feel safe. For Amy, blanket permission meant that nothing was a violation. It made all of the guys she’d let use her the superior of the man who’d never once asked.

Katrina’s finger slid right the fuck in, and it did it the moment Amy consented. It was electric. Her spine tried to curl the back of her head around into her fucking toes. Her neighbor’s free hand gripped a handful of Amy’s hair, and jerked her ear to soft, moist lips.

“Don’t you fucking dare come until I tell you to,” Katrina hissed.

Amy’s eyes widened. “Have you done this before...?”

Katrina giggled. “Nope, but it’s fun, right?”

Amy nodded. Carefully. It was a tight grip. “Don’t stop.”

The finger went deeper. “Don’t stop...?”

Mistress? Or please? Amy went with please. From what Katrina did to her next, it seemed to have been the right answer.

She met Quinn at her place the next evening. “My life blew up and I’m going to ruin your night,” she announced at the door.

“Right, you texted that this morning,” said her friend, pulling her in for a hug, then escorting Amy to her little closet.

“But first, I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“I should have believed you when you told me his cum hit the ceiling. Your ex-roomie is a fucking *freak*.”

She spent fall break in that closet. Amy had nowhere else to go. She could have afforded a hotel, but as Quinn, and Katrina, and Tori, and Charlie, and her therapist each individually pointed out, her mental health was in no state to endure a week and a half of isolation and boredom. Seeing everybody else going home to their families while she couldn't put her at major risk in the first place. It had only been weeks that she'd been clean and there had already been some days when she'd nearly relapsed. She would have without her friends.

She did try to reach out. It almost triggered another panic attack, but her brain settled for mere crushing anxiety instead. Amy texted Aunt Julia, *I heard about Jonah*. That was it. She had so much more she wanted to say. Her therapist had been a big help with thinking it over and prioritizing, assessing which of her misbehaviors weren't her fault and which might merit apologies and restitution. When the time came to press send, though, she'd been unable to open with the apology she wanted to open with.

You heard, did you? Glad to know his big sister won't forget him while he's in prison the way she did the last six months, huh?

That was as far as it went. No less than she deserved, but a lot less than she'd prayed for. She jogged from Quinn's place out to Bear Lake, the words echoing in her brain. Amy rented a paddleboat and took it out to the middle of the lake. Held her knife at the ready. Looked for Ursula, or her turtle friend. Neither of them showed up.

Still mulling it over, Amy called the number her therapist gave her and talked for half an hour with some woman somewhere. The reception was awful way out there in the middle of the lake, but the woman talked her down. Aunt Julia was angry because she'd learned to expect better from Amy, not because she'd given up on her. That was what the woman said, and she made Amy say it until she believed it. Just because it was true didn't make it easy to swallow, but it *was* true.

Before paddling back to the boathouse, Amy tossed the knife into the water and spit after the bubbles it tossed up as it drowned. Worst \$30 she ever spent.

Her friends returned from their time at home. Amy had been surprised by how much she'd missed them. She told them. She hugged them. And here she'd thought Charlie was going to be the clingy one.

Speaking of clinging, she and Katrina hadn't spoken of their fling after massage night. It was sort of a relief. It had been so exciting, but Amy wasn't sure she was really looking to go "gay for the stay," as Aunt Julia had jokingly warned Ben she might once upon a time. Much as she wished she could reject the whole male sex just to spite him, she liked cock. Or at least it's what she was used to. She thought she did, though. It was hard to think of one attached to a guy she wasn't afraid of or apathetic toward. Her therapist had told her that for a victim of so much sexual violence, that one might take some time, to be patient and find a good dildo in the meantime.

Amy decided she'd let Katrina fuck her again, if she wanted to. She liked Katrina. She knew how fucked up that sounded, but it was what it was. Apparently sex with people you actually cared about made it way, way better, cock or no cock. Who knows.

It was a relief to find out the housing department people were finally beginning to take the Spencer situation seriously. When she returned to Higgins from Quinn's, the head Higgins lady, Mrs. Tinsley – “Ramona,” she asked to be called, like she was one of the gang – had moved in right next to Katrina where the Two of the Three had vacated back in August. It was a relief to know someone was actually keeping an eye on him at last.

The whole week of midterms following his depredations at massage night, Spencer had been bouncing around instigating these creepy conversations with everybody. He'd invited himself to lunch with Amy and some of the girls right before break, started this weird dialogue about some kind of hypno-fuck app, point your phone at somebody and they'll beg you to sleep with them. Turn a person into a sex object, consequence free. Pretty misogynistic shit, basically “mind controlling” someone into sex. The metaphor wasn't exactly thinly veiled, either. *“Hey, girls, I know I've played the part of knight-in-shining-armor well enough you all want to fuck me, so no big deal if I just start doing it, right?”*

Amy played along the best she could to avoid pissing him off. The other girls were clearly ready to get fucked. They hadn't been with a Ben, though. They didn't know what they were signing up for.

After break it felt like ousting him was finally going to become a possibility. She knew most of the Hotties worshiped the guy, but absence had not made their hearts grow fonder. A little perspective had done a lot for them, it turned out. Tori had gone on the warpath on discord, making her case and trying to get people to align against him. The governor had grumbled about him privately at times, but Amy was relieved to see her very sensible friend coming back to her senses about the guy. Katrina had her concerns too, though she was less adamant about them. Katrina's massage partner/ass-playmate was quick to remind her how ready she'd been to believe that her precious Spencer had molested her. His reaction to hearing about Lex freaking out about her boob job... Jesus. (Happy with her own surgical results, Amy had been happy to provide a referral, but she was so relieved she hadn't gone all out like Lex had on her own.)

Amy wasn't political and organized like Tori, but she wasn't shy about sharing her worries. There was no getting around it – Spencer sought out vulnerable girls and seduced them one by one. Quinn, wide-eyed and innocent on her first day, whatever she claimed about having instigated it. Andi, the sheltered farmgirl, heart still bleeding from a break-up. Kyu-Ri, the stranger in a strange land. Jacqui, who could lose her scholarship if he wrote her up, pinned to the lounge floor, stripped and groped and

sucked on in front of an audience. Casey, the only girl on the floor who might have done more drugs than Amy, and with that inferno of a libido, missing her boyfriend and craving a man's touch. Terri and Toni, desperate for a gimmick to boost the profile of their stream.

Shit, when the pills had still been clouding her judgment, Amy had had some weak moments where she'd contemplated asking him to do a shoot with her for her site. She didn't think the panic attack from letting him touch her would be very sexy, though.

Her harangues had sold Katrina, and together, they pushed hard. Tori was relentless. She set her attraction to the guy, intense though it was, to the side, and made an earnest bid to ally the floor against him.

Day by day, it drew closer and closer to failure. Tori pleaded with Amy to share her story with the girls. Tell them how unsafe he made her feel. She couldn't. Too many people knew too much as it was, and Kappa Nu was only a four-minute walk from Higgins Hall. Tori claimed she understood, but Amy could see that it pissed her off. Hurt her, really, more than angered. So, as the "chokers" began to overwhelm their ranks, Amy sucked it up, and one night she crossed the hall and knocked on the door to 303.

Ramona answered. Amy had seen her around, and she usually dressed very crisp and professional. Seeing her hanging out in her jeans and a flannel felt weird, like seeing a teacher at the movies or something. "Amy?"

"Hi. Um, can we talk?"

"Of course. Is this something quick, or...?"

"Not quick."

Ramona nodded. "I thought not. Is here OK, or would you be more comfortable if we went down to my office?"

"Here is OK, I guess." She hoped.

Ramona invited her in, setting the room's two desk chairs across from each other and taking one, offering the other. The room was weirdly unfurnished. It looked like move-in day, except one of the beds was made, plain white sheets with a simple fuzzy blue blanket. A clear plastic box set with drawers, probably the same ones she'd bought from Target for Quinn to stick on her shelves to hold her clothes and stuff, held Ramona's food and sundries. That was it.

"So what's up?"

"I, um, wanted to talk to you about the situation with Spencer."

Ramona looked like she'd expected this. She licked her lips unconsciously. She must be nervous about the whole thing. "Go on."

"I don't feel safe with him in our community," Amy said plainly. "I'd like to see him replaced – fired, ideally – and have a woman put in charge."

Ramona nodded. Amy had a sense that this was a woman who had a great deal of practice at patient, empathetic nodding. Lord knows everybody had lost their minds about the ant infestation from when they'd been closed for break. The woman probably needed it. "I'll say up front that I can't in good conscience terminate someone's employment over a feeling. That said, I'd like to hear more about why you feel that way."

"Because I'm a woman, on a woman's floor, and he's a man, and he's slept with half a dozen of us? No offense, but you have to know about some of this at least, right?"

"I've heard rumors. Apart from the young woman who assaulted one of your floormates, nobody has come to me with any specific accusations of impropriety. At least, none in which a resident is the driving force behind the impropriety in the first place. I can't fire someone for *being* sexually harassed either."

The woman's accent was soothing, lovely even, but her message could go straight to hell. Amy had tensed at the allusion to Quinn, but she had to admit that yeah, the girls could be... aggressive. She'd been there while he knelt down and let them slobber all over him. When they staked out his room and touched themselves while he was having a date. These girls were undeniably *un poco loco* when it came to Spencer.

Ramona went on. "And while it's a sensitive situation, it's not entirely against department policy for an RA to engage in sexual relations with residents of his building, so if such incidents have occurred, those likewise aren't likely cause for dismissal."

"They're not? Because I heard him say the exact opposite, like fifty times."

More nodding. "Spencer was under a misapprehension. Obviously there would be a lot less drama if things were otherwise, but this is a residence hall, not an apartment complex. A certain amount of drama comes with the terrain."

"Did you know he's showering – routinely, like every freaking day – with Casey, the girl who ODeD last week?"

"I know who Casey is. I... heard that rumor also."

Amy folded her arms. "And you think it's fine that your employee is daily fucking the living shit out of–"

"Let's keep things polite here, OK? He's having consensual sex with a woman. If we ousted him for that, we'd be ousting half the floor. While we're acknowledging rumors."

She couldn't have heard about her and Katrina, could she? "It's wrong. It's gross, and it's... I don't feel fucking safe! How much more complex does it need to be!"

"And I respect that, but I'm still having trouble fully understanding why. We're all entitled to our opinions about sex, but I'm sure a sophomore on the dean's list doesn't need me to explain why we can't base employment policy around such opinions. Did Spencer do something inappropriate to *you*, Amy?"

"Well, no. Not technically. Wait no – he whipped his thing out in the lounge! Right in front of everybody!"

“Wasn’t that Casey who did that? I did consider whether she should be disciplined when I read his incident report, but she’s been through a lot lately and I didn’t want to be insensitive to that.”

That had been Casey, hadn’t it. Fuck. “Well, fine, I guess, but he’s said some weird stuff.”

More goddamn nodding. “Oh? What did he say to you to make you feel unsafe? Did he threaten you? Harass you?”

“I mean, not like that. He’s just... He held this floor meeting and passed these weird rules—”

“My understanding was that Tori was the guiding spirit behind those...?”

“—and he was asking around, like, for permission to have sex with more of us.”

“He asked you to have sex with him?”

“No! No, I mean, it was this ‘hypothetical,’ like ‘if I used some magic love-spell app on my phone, would you be cool with it’ or something. It’s been a few weeks, I don’t remember it exactly, but it was obvious what he meant.”

“I don’t understand. You’re upset that he’s having mature conversations or that he’s seeking consent?”

Was this woman being obtuse on fucking purpose, or what?! Amy growled in frustration. “I was raped, OK! There, are you happy?! Now can we do something about this or what?!”

The woman’s serene expression sure melted away after that. “Oh. Oh my god. By Spencer?” She looked horrified. Like she might vomit.

“No, not by Spencer, he wouldn’t—” Amy caught herself. What had she been about to say? “Some guy.”

The woman leaned forward. “At Lakeview? Recently? I’m sorry, I want to understand.” She sounded a hell of a lot more serious now.

“No. I mean, yes, sometimes, but like—”

“There were multiple incidents?!” The woman put a hand to her mouth in distress.

“It was my boyfriend! Ex-boyfriend. Do you know what it’s like to be trapped in a cage with a hungry fucking animal? Because I do. Whether the cage is a car, or a frat house, or your own fucking living room... You don’t know what it’s like knowing that at any moment, a man could snap his fingers and break you. Again. To feel like every time you hear someone knock on a door, it could be him, finally finding you again. To never know if a guy’s smiling because he’s a person, or because he’s playing you, trying to make you feel like he’s a nice guy but really he’s a wolf, huffing and puffing and blowing your whole mother fucking world down! To feel afraid *all the fucking time!*”

Amy realized she was on her feet, and that she’d been shouting. Ramona looked like she’d been punched in the face. Then she stood up, and right as Amy’s knees gave

out, she caught her, and helped her back into her chair, and held her, and swept her hair back, and let her cry and cry until she realized she'd told a total stranger her whole life story. Again.

Why did she keep doing that?

Except she knew the answer. Because these people kept... caring. Somehow.

It was late by the time they were done talking. She hadn't held anything back, and every time she'd come close to it, Ramona asked another question, expressed more empathy, brought her back to where she'd side-tracked. Was she going to be kicked out? She'd just told the head dorm person that she'd been doing drugs and filming porn right there in her room. Ramona promised that there were bigger concerns, though, that she was glad she was accepting help, and kept her talking.

"So can we fire him?" she asked at last. That was one point the woman hadn't circled back to.

Ramona looked... devastated. It was so much more real than that kind façade she'd worn at first. "Amy, I'm going to level with you. There are factors at play here that are larger than you know. The Higgins 3 staffing situation is... complicated. Extremely. I can't say more than that, but... What I'm trying to say is that whatever my personal feelings, I can't fire Spencer, whether I want to or not."

"But—"

"But what I can do, and what I'm going to do, is put in a transfer for you. You've been through so much, and you're still going through so much, and I'm in awe of how well you're managing in spite of it. Truly. But you don't feel safe, and you have too many things making you feel that way to keep you in a place that triggers you just by being here."

Amy shook her head. "No. No, my friends are here. I love it here. I mean, aside from that. From him. You can't. I won't go."

Ramona looked at her. Through her. Her head cocked side to one side, then the other, then back. Finally, she spoke. "You've been through a lot. Lost a lot. I won't be the one to take anything more from you. That said, my opinion, which you may ignore if you like, is that I think you should move. It doesn't have to be across campus. We have spaces on other floors here in Higgins. There's an open single on Higgins 4, in fact."

Amy had heard rumors that RA was even worse than hers, but she wasn't about to ask for another firing.

Ramona continued. "Think about it. Your feelings are valid, and real, and important. You don't have to decide tonight, or this week. In case you wake up sweating over it in the middle of the night a month from now and decide you need to be somewhere you feel protected and safe, I'm going to give you my number, and I want you to call me and keep calling until I wake up and take care of you. OK?"

It wasn't the answer Amy wanted, and she still didn't understand why he couldn't be fired. It wasn't the worst answer, though. "OK."

The walls closed in, and the battle was lost. Amy felt bad that she couldn't keep supporting Tori the way she wanted to, but there was no point rattling her saber once the woman said he was unfireable. She tried to tell Tori, but the woman wouldn't have it. If she couldn't force him out by legitimate means, she said darkly, she'd make him hate living here so much he'd leave on his own. Which of course rallied those choker sluts, like Katrina had said it would before she too somberly withdrew from the cause.

This, said Tori bitterly, was why people didn't vote.

A week or so later, Amy was surprised when she was picking up a package at the center desk and was greeted by Ramona, who darted out of her office with a purpose. There was that pencil skirt and silk blouse look. A proper boss bitch look. It wasn't for her, but Amy liked it as a style.

She asked Amy to come into her office. Amy was on her way from rather than to class, so she headed in. "Um, am I in trouble or something?"

"Trouble? Heavens no. Have a seat."

Amy sat.

"Since we spoke last week, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

"Um, thanks? You're pretty dreamy, too. Love the accent." Amy winced after the joke was out, but still chuckled a little.

Ramona smiled. "Don't worry my dear, I know my worth. But you know what I mean. I can't erase what happened, but I thought maybe I could try to help to ease your burden a little going forward."

"Thanks, but seriously, you don't have to go out of your way for me. I'm doing better, really." Never mind that someone had slammed their door last night and she'd had another panic attack in her room. Nothing as dramatic as some of the big ones, but the little ones were more than awful enough.

"Sure. But, um... Well, I'll just come out with it. There are rules – laws, actually – about college officials like myself and what we can and can't share with parents or guardians. Broadly speaking, the can't outweighs the can about a hundred to one. The hippies fought for their emancipation from mom and pop, and now their kids want back in. It's a mess."

"Well, good news, my mom is dead and my dad is AWOL, so."

"I called your Aunt Julia."

Amy blinked. "You what? Didn't someone *just* say something about a hundred to one...?"

"I... was circumspect. I called her to inform her that I had information about her niece. Which, um, is technically true, and technically doesn't actually share any information. She told me the two of you weren't on speaking terms. I said that was too

bad, and with a little of the old school gypsy trickery, I got her talking a little. A very little. But, without quite risking my career, I gave her an inkling about what an asset you've been to your community, but that I'm worried that you're struggling."

"You... what? Asset? What?"

Ramona nodded. "I've had ample opportunity to speak with your floormates. Including Spencer. Not to stir anything up, but just full disclosure. People had a lot of good things to say about you. They really like you, it turns out. Sort of the cool fun big sister of the floor. He told me you've been tutoring some of them with your friend Katrina—"

"He knows about that?"

"That, as a townie, you've helped show people around, make them feel at home. I checked, and saw you're excelling academically, you're a regular at floor events, and all that while you're grappling with everything you have on your plate. Which, again, is awesome, truly." She said "awesome" in that old school "inspiring awe" kind of way. The chick had a hot way of talking, for sure.

"So... what did my aunt say?" she asked.

"She mostly listened. But I did my best, without crossing too many lines, to impress how glad we are to have you, and how proud I am of you for powering through some things. She seemed... surprised? I don't know. You didn't tell me what she knows and doesn't, and neither did she, and nor would I ask. Anyway, I just wanted to suggest that you give her another try. I don't pretend to be a miracle worker, but... who knows." Ramona shrugged. "For what it's worth. I hope I didn't overstep."

"No. No, you..." Amy sniffled. Goddamn waterworks. "That's awesome. Thank you. I'm, um, sorry I yelled at you the other night."

"I'm glad you did. It's not always easy, managing Spencer and all you 'Hotties,' but I try to keep things from getting messier than they're bound to be. By the way, have you thought about what I said about the transfer?"

"Still thinking," Amy told her.

She was still thinking about it several days and several phone calls later when, once more, there was a knock at her door. Her friends should know better than to knock. They'd all seen each other naked and/or jilling themselves off by then, so why be shy. She stretched, walked over and peered out the peephole.

Spencer.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Had Ramona told him what she'd said? Kaiden? No, they weren't friends. Quinn was sure. So here for Amy for himself. To collect her finally. Taken all her practiced smiles and phoned in don't-rock-the-boat flirtations she'd mastered practicing on Ben to mean she was his. Oh no. Oh god. Fuck.

Amy gritted her teeth. She thought about what her therapist had said about what Ramona had said. It had pissed her off, but... maybe she was right. Amy opened the door and deliberately yawned.

“Spencer? Um... yeah?” She tried to look tired. Maybe he’d feel bad, go away. Fuck. Fuck fuck. Don’t kill me. Fuck. Don’t panic. Don’t die. Don’t die panicked.

“I’m sorry, Amy. I didn’t mean to wake you.” He smiled that Benny smile of his. A mean kid smiling as he adjusted his magnifying glass over the anthill.

“Yep. Well.”

“I just wanted to touch base. It feels like we haven’t talked in a while, and I wanted to make sure you’re doing OK, that’s all. If I’d known I’d be getting you out of bed to ask you, I’d have tried later in the day.”

“Yeah, I guess getting us *into* bed is more your thing, huh.” Amy issued a sardonic smile. Inwardly, she was trying to keep her knees rigid enough to stay standing. If she weighed any more or leaned on it any harder, the pressure she was putting on the doorknob might break it off.

Again, she thought on that advice. What she’d studied. Leigh, pouting that he’d told her no, time and again. Charlie with her big wise heart and her unshakeable adoration. Level-headed, insightful Katrina, unable to completely write him off. Quinn, who had always insisted she’d been the instigator, the driver, and the closer of their hookup, no matter how much Amy had refused to believe her. All that she’d seen and heard and read about these girls throwing themselves at the guy.

He’s not Ben, she told herself. As her therapist had told her when Amy had failed to find any way to describe Spencer’s words or actions that put them in the same category. *He’s not Ben. You’re safe. This is your home. You’re safe. You’re safe. If he tries to kill you Katrina and Tori are right there in screaming distance and would take a bat to his head for you if needs be. And needs been’t. You’re safe.*

All that flashed through her mind. Somehow, her voice remained steady as she said, “You can come in, if you want. Sorry the place is a mess.”

She let him in. He played that sensitive nice-guy role of his to the T, talking about how he’d patched things up with Tori. Fat fucking chance; Amy had had to listen to a massive rant about how she was going to wreck his little pre-Halloween olive branch party collaboration. Hence why she’d skipped it last night. He talked, and in return she said words, roleplayed an Amy who wasn’t on the cusp of pissing herself in terror.

The last time she’d had a guy alone in her home with her, she’d called him Benny instead of Ben and for that crime he’d raped her body, broken her mind, and torn her life and her soul to shreds. She hadn’t known a single day’s peace since.

He’s not Ben. You’re safe. This is your home. You have friends. You have family. You have people who love you. You’re safe. He’s not Ben. Don’t run. This is your home.

Imagining him as one of the guys at Jack's helped. She imagined Seiji, waiting in the corner to roundhouse Spencer's head with that melon-exploding force of his. *You're safe. You're safe.*

He'd been sitting, but as he finished his spiel and Amy didn't immediately answer, he quickly crossed the room and closed the door. They were alone. Trapped. Fox and bear. *Fight. Run. Leave. Fuck. FUCK!*

No.

Amy took three deep breaths, like she'd practiced. Three more. Spencer sat back down and watched her for an answer. He was quiet. Patient. He didn't touch her. Didn't approach her. Gave no sign that he would. Kept his distance, in fact. He wasn't going to hurt her. He wasn't Ben. She was safe. She was *safe*.

And suddenly...

She was. Spencer might have no business being here, but... he wasn't Ben. He was just another guy, like the ones in her classes and the ones at Jumping Jack's and the ones subbing to her site. Like her brother. Fucking up left, right and center, but not because he was a monster. He was just a big dumb slut who sucked at responding to the on-going competition of three dozen sex-starved women who all wanted to jump his bones.

He leaned in expectantly when she didn't respond to his question about her welfare. It brought him six inches closer, but somehow, Amy didn't die.

"You said you put in a work order for those squeaky-ass hinges. Like, back in move-in week. But they're still loud as fuck." She pointed.

The simplicity of her response took him aback. "Oh. All right. I'll see what I can do. So... what else?"

Amy shrugged. "That about covers my gripes." Holy shit, was *he* nervous being in here with *her*? The guy looked like he'd been expecting her to punt his balls into his throat but instead got a poke in the tummy.

"Wait, that's it?"

She shrugged. Just a guy. Just another horny guy, helpless in the face of a bunch of horny girls. Jumping Jack's was a microcosm of the world, somehow. She did take the opportunity to chastise him for how he'd treated Lex, although, as she'd conceded to Quinn, "That chick was *always* busting those damn things out anyway. I know people got pissed, but like, whatever. Don't want guys to ask to see your boobies, maybe don't show your boobies so much." Didn't make it right, but it made it have a reason. She'd sorta forgotten the world could do that.

He waited for her to say more, to chew him out. He was like those guys her age at the club, terrified to be talking to a pretty girl. It was almost funny. "But... what about, you know, the sex, and whatnot?"

“You mean, do I hate living down the hall from a super hot guy who can’t keep it in his pants? Oh, woe is me.” Amy laughed as her flirtatious side emerged out of nowhere, crawling out of the grave. He looked like he was the one on the verge of the panic attack instead of her. “Just don’t get why you haven’t come knocking before now is all. I’m way prettier than most of these chicks. Just hate that goddamn door.”

“That’s it? Just the door? That’s really it?”

Maybe someday she would say more. For today, she’d looked death in the eye and told it to fuck off. She’d taken back her home. Sure, progress was never linear, and maybe the next time he came knocking she’d lose it. Today, though, she’d fought back, and she’d won.

“You say that like it isn’t fricking infuriating. Every time I come and go it’s like a gong goes off. Drives me *insane*.” They were just talking. Like he was another Hottie. Which, she supposed, he was. The guy was obnoxiously attractive. There was just something about him. Maybe she should fuck him and get it over with? Get to wear that hot little choker Terri and Toni had given her after they’d collabed on that photo shoot for their respective sites the other day, finally. That shit was so hot she sorta hoped somebody leaked it to Katrina.

Spencer laughed. “Well hold up.”

That guy from the center desk responded to Spencer’s call in minutes. All it took was a little WD-40 and the hinges swung open and closed as quietly as anyone else’s. And look at her, with two men in her dorm room at the same time! Such a stupid thing to feel badass over, but nevertheless.

“Are you coming to the party tonight?” he asked on his way out.

“Wasn’t the party *last* night...?”

“That was just the warm-up.”

Amy considered. She had plans this evening, but she’d probably be back in time. “Well I guess you got me feeling good and warm then, bud.” She clapped him on the shoulder on his way out the now-silent door and thrilled at the way he flinched.

“HAPPY HALLOWEEN!”

“Hey you guys.” Jonah’s head cocked to one side. “What the fuck are you wearing?”

She grinned at her brother’s face on her Aunt Julia’s phone. He looked like shit, but nothing to be gained by pointing it out. “Princess Leia, dumbass. From Star Wars...?”

“I know what Star Wars is, but... *Tienes cojones*, Amy.”

Aunt Julia gave her niece a sidelong glance. “Don’t encourage her, *sobrina*. She looks like another *puta universitaria*.”

“I look hot is what I look.” She’d bought the costume for the Kappa Nu Halloween party last year. She’d thought it would go over well, showcasing her obvious hotness, but Ben had thrown a fit. Then thrown a punch. She’d wound up skipping the party to ice her jaw. Later she’d find out that was where Ben first cheated on her with Skyler.

Well, fuck it. She’d bought the thing, and she was going to wear it. Admittedly, it didn’t fit as well as it had thanks to the boob job, but that only made it look better. She didn’t know what Lex’s problem was. Tits were hot. Revel.

“I wish I could screenshot this shit. I could trade it to the guys in here for a proper vape, you know?”

“You did *not* just say you could sell sexy pics of your sister for one of those fucking cancer gizmos!” griped Aunt Julia.

Amy laughed, even blushed a bit. The subject of her newest source of income was yet to be broached. She was pacing herself. In the meantime, she made a mental note to see if she could score a pic or two at the Higgins 3 party tonight and print them off for him. She had no doubt the girls wouldn’t disappoint.

The three of them talked for a half hour. That was all the more time they gave him. It was so good to hear his voice though, to see his face, even if only on a screen. He was alive, and he was fighting. His lawyer thought he had a shot at a decent plea deal that might have him back home before Easter. The food was pretty bad, he said, and it was pretty boring. And lonely, though he didn’t quite say that.

“I love you, Jonah. We’ll talk again soon, OK? I’ll visit, as long as you think you can keep the fellas off of me.”

“Yeah, well, don’t wear *that* shit or I won’t be able to do nothing for you,” he said, grinning. “I love you too, Amy. And you, Tía. Thanks for calling. Sucks a little less.”

They both started crying the moment the screen went dark, but they had each other to hold. It made her cry harder, but for once in her stupid life crying didn’t feel so bad.

“Come on, we better get down to the street if we’re gonna give out all that candy, *sobrina*,” her aunt said, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue and offering a wad to Amy.

Amy eyed the bucket of candy bars and peanut butter cups and stroked her chin. “Or,” she said, “we could stay up here and turn on a murder doc and get fat on it ourselves.”

Her aunt laughed, then hugged her again. “Sold. Turn on the Netflix, *chica*. They got a ton of new shit for Halloween. There’s this one about this guy, *le dio de comer su esposa a su schnauzer!*”

“*Por supuesto que es el marido!*” Amy started it, but they finished it together.

Amy made it to the party just after it ended. So much for Jonah's spicy photo. Ah well, not like the girls wouldn't give her a hundred more opportunities.

She passed Tori and Spencer in the stairwell, the two lugging a mountain of trash with them. "Oh. Am I too late?"

"Alas, yes. Did you have a good time? You look great, by the way."

Duh. "Thanks. And yeah, I did. Best day I've had in a long time."

Spencer smiled. "Same."

Tori made a very un-Tori whining noise, and Spencer nodded. "I'm coming, I'm coming. But yeah, Katrina's still finishing up in the lounge, but I think everybody else called it a night. There's still some snacks and stuff, if you're hungry. Help yourself."

Amy left them to it. Tori and Spencer, working together again. Strange, but Amy had long since given up on the notion that the world was supposed to make sense. Up in the lounge she found Katrina wiping down counters. They complimented one another's costumes, and Amy pitched in. She wasn't one to clean up other people's messes, but Katrina would have done it for her. Besides, her ass looked fine as fuck in a metal bikini and loin cloth, and maybe it wouldn't be so bad if Katrina noticed. She was in a good mood, and good mood sex was fucking *good*.

They were in the midst of shoving the furniture back into place when Amy noticed something and stopped, nearly tripping Katrina with the sudden lack of help on the other end of the sofa. "Fuck, sorry! Are you OK?"

"Yeah, just... yeah. These things are heavy."

"Sorry," Amy repeated. Then she pointed. "You put it up!"

Katrina followed her finger. "Oh! Yeah. I felt weird hanging it in my room, sort of. I don't know why, but... yeah. I'd sort of forgotten about it, but I stumbled on it while I was unloading party decorations and thought it was too awesome not to hang up, so I put it in here. I hope that's OK."

Amy was still staring at the wall hanging though. It was in pretty good shape, considering how many times it had been moved and removed. The ladybug was as cute as it ever had been. "I, um, actually made that on my first date with Ben."

"Oh. OH! Oh gosh, I'm sorry, I'll--"

"No! No, leave it. I like it."

"Me too." Katrina smiled in relief. "So, slave Leia, huh? Very progressive of you. You missed Shauna – I think she was trying to pull off the same, just with..." She held out her hands in front of her chests and made honking motions in reference to the girl's crazy gigantic boobs.

"It is progressive, actually. You know, my mom was a huge Star Wars fan. I remember she had me sit down with her and watch all the movies. Well, all the movies then. Tons more now. She was such a nerd about it, it was awesome. I was super into it

as a little kid, and I guess I hung onto some of that after she died. Anyway yeah, I saw this interview with Carrie Fisher. She played—”

“I know who Carrie Fisher is. I’m American, Amy.”

Amy laughed. “Right. But she was talking about how this guy came up to her after *Return of the Jedi* and got in her face and demanded to know what he was supposed to tell his little girl when she saw her dressed like this in the movie, how to explain what a powerful woman like her was doing in an outfit like this.”

“Carrie Fisher grew up famous and starred in one of the most successful movie trilogies of all time,” Katrina pointed out.

“So?” Amy tried not to sound annoyed.

“So, I highly doubt random dudes were walking up to her and demanding anything. It sounds apocryphal.”

“*Anyway,*” Amy went on, “he asks what to say to his daughter, and she just looks at him and goes, ‘Tell him someone captured me and forced me to wear it, and I didn’t like it, so I killed him. Then I took it off, backstage.’”

Katrina chuckled. “All right, your anecdote is sufficiently cool. Criticism rescinded, and you’re once again worthy of your sign.”

Amy smiled at it, then walked over and tapped one corner a millimeter upwards. Nice and level. In fact... She fished her phone out of the hot pocket she was wearing under the plastic-metal bikini bottoms and snapped a selfie of her standing in front of it, and sent it to Aunt Julia.

Her aunt responded immediately. *Damn right, sobrina. Pelea como una chica!*

Amy smiled proudly up at her sign. *Fight like a girl.* With her friend’s help, Amy picked up her end of the couch and got back to work.