

The RA

Chapter Eleven: Rounds

I carried Tori out of the lounge some hours later. She could walk, but she didn't want to. Even in a room full of fingering, moaning, cocksucking Hotties, Tori's fixation had been distinct. Ellie looked concerned at her roommate's ragged state, doggedly sucking a cock exhausted from hours of labor. She tried to snatch it away from Casey at one point, but after the gentlest of rebukes she shifted to pleading for another turn.

She stayed in my room, as did Casey. I didn't mean for this to become any sort of permanent state of affairs, but for the night, it was the path of least resistance. In the week or so since Casey's tantrum at my absence, there had been no further signs of distress. I'd been weening her, or trying to. She liked having sex with me – and me with her – so it was hard to say if it was working, but I thought it was. I hoped. Considering how much of those she'd guzzled down yesterday, Tori would have a ways to go before she recovered.

"I don't want to get dressed," she protested in the morning. "Didn't I agree that we could be naked again? If not, I do now. I don't want anything between you and me, not again."

"Follow me," I instructed her softly. I led her – yes, naked – down the hall to her room. In the middle of knocking, she told me Ellie would be in class, so in we went. As it turned out, Ellie was sleeping off last night's festivities. Not quite naked, but only a pair skimpy, pale blue panties that fit loosely, hid little. She stirred slightly, blushed when she realized it.

"So you guys are all made up now?"

Tori smiled. "Yes. He forgave it all."

"And made a few concessions to some of the excellent points you all raised," I added. "We're going to be more sensitive to needs, more inclusive in our programming."

"Oh. Um, so does that mean... I can have a choker now?" Ellie released her hold on the sheets she'd been using to conceal herself.

She was asking Tori, but Tori deferred to me. "If you want. Nobody needs to wear anything they don't want any more."

Tori brightened. "So I can stay naked?"

I stroked her hair, thick and frizzy and downy soft, then spoke softly into her ear. "Why don't you find your sexiest underwear, and put that on for me? Something I'll want to tear right back off of you."

Tori kissed my hand, kissed each finger on it, kissed me. "OK."

As Tori started combing her closet for an ideal candidate, Ellie was watching the two of us. "Man. So you guys really made up, huh."

“Yeah. I just wish we’d done it sooner. Sucked, seeing everybody all at each other’s throats like that.”

“Did you guys just make up for the sex, or...?”

“Can you blame me?” But I made sure to laugh the idea off. “No, no no no. I can’t speak for Tori, but I’ve been ready to patch things up for a while now.”

Ellie studied Tori’s ass, bent over as she rummaged through her panties. “So, are you going to just go back to having sex with whoever you want...?”

I shook my head. “I never did. I never could. If somebody wants to, and I want to, then great. That’s it.”

“But you said you’re not allowed to sleep with residents. I heard you say it. You said it like a million times.” She looked at the wall, the one bordering 303, Ramona’s room. “Does she really not care?”

“I’m not allowed to *date* residents.” Ugh, what bullshit. I felt bad lying, but after what I’d had to do to Tori—

No. What I’d *chosen* to do to Tori. No lying to myself.

At any rate, the new standard was clearly doing and saying what kept everybody happy and healthy and sleeping soundly at night. Ellie would cope better with that story than telling her anything resembling the truth.

“But you said... *She* said...”

“I know. Ramona ran it up the chain, and we found out we were wrong. Hard to admit sometimes. Right, Tori?”

I don’t think she heard me until I said her name, but she immediately agreed. “Right. Yes. I agree. Is this OK?”

I inspected the bra and panties she’d chosen. “Try it on. Let me see.” To Ellie, I continued, “Plus I was dating somebody, or trying to, for a while there, so it was kind of complicated for me. But that’s all done and over now, so from here on out, we’re all good.”

The petite girl scooted forward, her legs dangling down from her bunk. She might be the tiniest little thing on the floor. Dawn or Georgia might give her competition. Lexi would have, if not for her recent, erm, weight gain.

Oh, Lexi.

“Oh. Man, lucky you, huh? Set up with all these girls, and, you know, lots of us single. Available. Interested. Not that I’m saying I am or anything, you know, but I mean, some of—”

“Would you like me to go down on you?” I patted her knee.

Ellie’s eyes widened, and for some reason that was the moment she decided she needed her glasses, snatching them from a little shelf above her bunk. “Would I...?!”

Tori halted in the middle of adjusting the little ribbons on her bra. Her expression was pure, undying envy.

“Sorry, maybe I misread things. It’s just you’re right there, perfect height. Perfect lots of things.” I aimed my smile at her disproportionately large breasts. She was a cutie’s cutie, all right. “Apologies if I was wrong. I didn’t mean offense.”

“No, you didn’t...! I’m not...!” Her legs spread slowly. “I mean, if you want to...”

“I would love to.” I casually ordered Tori to continue dressing, then helped Ellie squirm out of her panties.

“C-can I have a choker? I’ll go down on you, too, if that’s what we’re supposed to do. I don’t care. I, um, wouldn’t super mind anyway.”

Damn, but that cum punch had kicked in fast. “There’s no supposed to about it, Ellie. Not any more. Personally, I don’t think there ever was.”

“Can I?” Tori asked. She was crawling around to the front of me, inserting herself in the low space beneath her roommate’s bed, alongside her own.

I looked down. “Hmm. Not sure I like red. Try again, and then we’ll see.”

She nodded, hustling on hands and knees back to her closet. I stepped up and slid my tongue between Ellie’s sopping wet labia, and welcomed her back into the fold.

I took a page out of Ellie’s playbook and granted myself a day off from life as a student. I wasn’t missing anything crucial, it looked like, and I had people in my classes who’d pass along anything not on the syllabus.

Today, I was going to work on completing what I’d started the night before. No doubt word of what had transpired at Tori’s late-night emergency floor meeting had spread. (The Hotties had redubbed it “the after-party” as we cleaned up and tried to figure out whose discarded underwear was whose.) Half the girls hadn’t been in attendance, though, and while a lazy RA might decide that a girl who’d come to his meeting and enjoyed a front row seat to seeing Tori suck the floor back together was herself mollified, I was not lazy.

I made myself a checklist, deciding who seemed to be doing all right, and who I ought to be touching base with. With that in hand, I made my rounds.

Room 300 received first knock. Amy. After all the turmoil the brokers had expressed to me, I made sure not to even glance towards the peephole. If they wanted to ignore me, they had the right. I wasn’t sure why Amy had even fallen onto that side of things, but it was worth asking.

Even without being able to see her, though, my residence life attuned ears filled me in. Two thuds a split second apart – feet hitting the floor. A barely audible grunt – stretching. A moment of silence – checking her phone for the time. “The fuck is it now...?”

Just now getting Tori's invite to last night's meeting? Very possible. It hadn't been quiet, and the noise it made had been distinctive, but Amy's was the furthest room from the lounge. We'd have needed a cannon down there to rouse her if she'd been asleep. Cannons would violate all sorts of protocol.

Footsteps, a click of the lock popping, that awful creak her door made every time it opened. You could hear it way down in my room. Then there was Amy, wearing a simple black tank top and some flannel pajama pants. Even in that, with her hair disheveled and sans makeup, she looked incredible. She belonged.

"Um... yeah?" she said, squinting into the fluorescent lights of the hall from her dark room.

"I'm sorry, Amy. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Yep. Well." She yawned, stretched for the ceiling. Her nipples hardened as I watch. Yep, the effect was back, all right.

"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." I grimaced sympathetically. "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." She smiled, though perhaps sardonically. Hard to say. "You can come in, if you want. Sorry the place is a mess."

"I've seen worse," I answered, accepting her offer. She shut the door and sat down on the edge of her bed, the two twins pushed together to make a queen same as mine, and gestured to her desk chair. "Thanks. I won't be long. So, Tori and I have talked, and agreed to bury the hatchet. However, just because we made up doesn't mean everybody who shared her criticisms has, too. I wanted to see if you were OK, if *we* were OK."

"You and Tori...?" Her credulity was thick. "Sorry, just... watch your back. The way you kept thumbing your nose at her, she's out for blood."

Me, thumbing *my* nose...?! Hmmph. "I appreciate the heads up. But I'm not here to force another conversation about floor politics. I'm just here for you, Amy. I wondered if you'd be willing to talk to me about what I can do to make you feel more comfortable in our community. And speak freely – they issued me an extra thick skin when I took the job."

I braced myself. Today had the potential for a lot of conversations like this. Recriminations, accusations, rehashing of all of Tori's valid and less valid castigations. I didn't know Amy as well as some of the Hotties. Would it be my insensitivity with Lexi? With Casey, and that awful incident in the bathroom? My sexual indiscretions? That I'd–

"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."

I blinked. Blinked again. My eyes fluttered, waiting for the next salvo. She didn't continue.

"Wait, that's it?"

She shrugged. "I mean, that thing you said to Lex, asking some crying girl to flash her boobs, that was kinda fucked up, but 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 tits, maybe don't show your tits so much."

"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. "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? The door? That's really it?"

"You say that like it isn't fricking infuriating. Every time I come and go it's like a gong or something."

I laughed. "Well hold up."

Ramona dispatched Marcus with a can of WD-40; he was up to Higgins 3 and back on his way to the center desk in under five minutes.

"Wow. Thanks," said Amy, swinging her door open and closed, marveling at its silence.

"I'm sorry it took so long. If it acts up again, come find me."

"Will do."

"Are you coming to the party tonight?"

"Wasn't the party *last* night...?"

"That was just the warm-up."

Amy grinned. "Well I guess you got me feeling good and warm then."

301 was up next. Katrina's door was open. Her windows, too, an autumn breeze wafting briskly into the hall. She was sitting on her futon with a blanket wrapped around her waist when I tapped at the door and she looked up from her laptop, pushed her glasses back up her nose. "Spencer! Hi." Her cheeks were already coloring. After last night in the lounge, no surprise.

Unlike Amy, Katrina and I had well-established rapport. I stepped in and closed the door behind me. "Hi to you. Am I interrupting homework?"

"A welcome interruption," the high school salutatorian assured me. "I'm probably overdoing it, but better over than under."

“Absolutely.” I passed along what Ramona had told me about the floor’s mid-term grades. “A lot of that is from good role modeling by floor leadership. I know it’s still early in the year and things could change, but I wanted to let you know I was really proud of you. I’m glad you’re here. I’ve had residents who drag people down before, and it’s so refreshing to have someone who lifts people up.”

The compliment landed. The best deflection the blushing brainiac could muster was, “You know I already gave you head, right? You don’t have to suck up.”

“Bah, a gift like that only means I need to suck up *more*.” On impulse, I crossed the room and settled in beside her. It was chilly by the window, but she radiated heat. “And that has nothing to do with this. That was amazing – *you* were amazing – but you’re a lot more to me, and to this floor, than your lips and tongue.”

She turned crimson, giggling in spite of herself. “I cannot believe a boy just said to me, and I cannot believe it worked.”

“Sorry. I promise, no more complimenting.”

“See to it that you don’t.”

Near to shivering, I lifted part of her blanket and pulled it over my lap. In the process, I found Katrina wasn’t wearing pants. Oops. I pretended not to notice.

“Enjoying the fall air, huh?”

“Pumpkin spice season, baby.” She laughed self-consciously and reached behind her awkwardly, but with obvious practice, and retrieved a cup from the window sill bearing the logo of the coffee shop at Penderdast, helping herself to a sip. “I love the smell of fall. I should probably leave the door shut, I guess.”

“You do you, Katrina. In fact, that’s sort of why I wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh. You wanted to...?”

“Yeah, why?”

“No, I just thought, after last night, maybe you’d come down because you wanted...”

I leaned closer. Then closer. Until I could feel her breath flowing warm and wet between her lips onto mine. They parted invitingly.

I doinked her on the nose and leaned back. She burst into giggles. “I don’t *not* want that, but that wasn’t why I came down. I wanted to talk bigger picture stuff, if that’s OK.”

She rolled her eyes, forcing her bemusement into abeyance. “You are incorrigible, Spencer. Sometimes, I don’t get why we put up with you.”

I shifted to Serious Stuff Mode, though, and her expression quickly matched. “I wanted to thank you, first and foremost, for everything you’ve done these past weeks since break.”

“But—”

“I know, I know, we were in opposing camps. I want you to know, though, when I tried to tell you guys I understood and empathized and all that, that wasn’t bullshit. I know I made mistakes. You and Tori helped pull me back from making worse ones.”

“Worse ones? Spencer, Casey almost *died*.” Dang, she really had joined me in getting serious in a hurry. “Lexi too, maybe, and maybe in an even sadder way. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad we made up, and I’m personally glad you decided to reform rather than resign. Still, you have a lot to make up for.”

I nodded. “I do. I really do. You know, everybody’s been so flirty with me this year, and so...” I didn’t want to say *slutty*, but—

“Kinda slutty?” Katrina supplied.

“Your words, not mine.” Boom, verbal integrity maintained. “I let myself get used to it. By the time break was over, I’d been worn down. I was ready to give in, just do whatever felt good. You helped me see that even if that’s OK to do sometimes, I need to think about what’s best for the community, not just what’s going to be fun for an evening.”

“Like that time you stood there and let me and Tori and Casey go down on you,” she observed dryly.

“Exactly like that, actually. I know it’s not the conventional way diplomacy is achieved, but it worked for us, here, on Higgins 3. Sometimes it’s signing a treaty, sometimes it’s smoking the peace pipe, sometimes, it’s...”

“Smoking a pole?” She chuckled. “No, I get you. This floor is... weird. It’s still hard to wrap my head around it sometimes. No joke, I lie awake sometimes, trying to think if we’re doing something... wrong. Like if I’m bad, or compromising my values, being a part of it. But every time I think I ought to be standing up to it – to you...”

She sighed, lowering her head with a little shake. “I just can’t get around that it *works*. We’re happy, in our weird little sexy commune. I’ve been reading up on the philosophical arguments for and against hedonism as a social order. For the individual, it works great. It sounds so obvious – chase pleasure, avoid pain. Apply that to a society, though, and things get tangled in a hurry. Limited resources that can’t be shared and enjoyed by everyone, demands for labor and productivity and so on. Capitalism offers an avenue for this, or at least claims to, converting labor into transmissible goods we can exchange for hedonistic enterprise, but then the root of it isn’t hedonism any more but rather anti-hedonism, counter-hedonism, wherein the foundations of pleasure are those things that are innately unpleasurable. Ipso facto pleasure comes from displeasure, which...”

Katrina paused, caught my eyes boggling. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get heavy-handed about it.”

“No! It’s fascinating. Don’t stop.”

“The second time in 24 hours you’ve said that to me.” She smirked sweetly. “Anyway, all I mean to say is that we’re somehow resisting that transactional dynamic. We were sharing, each receiving pleasure according to their need. It was... communal hedonism. Maybe that doesn’t sound strange to you – or maybe it just sounds like gibberish – but the more I read about it, the more inspirational I found it.

“Until, right before break there, it started... changing. Instead of *providing* pleasure to us, you started to, for lack of a better word, harvest it *from* us. I don’t think it was conscious or even intentional. It just made me sad, seeing our little societal experiment stop being about *us* and what *we* wanted, and become about *you* and what *you* could get from it. The capitalist model – to the owners go the spoils, to the plebeian masses go the crumbs.”

“I’m sorry I let you down,” I said. I was. Too bad those Hancock bastards weren’t on Katrina’s level, using their technological sex marvel to better the world. “So how do I do better? What do your books say about using hedonism to better society?”

“It’s give or take,” she said. “Simple as that. I don’t mean ‘it’s making compromises,’ a give *and* take. I mean *or*. These girls adore you, Spencer. Even the ones who think this is all kinda messed up, the ones who think you’re too much teddy bear and not enough Teddy Roosevelt.” She hesitated. “Too dorky? Sorry, like I said, I think about this a lot.”

“You are the hottest nerd I’ve ever known. Go on.”

Katrina’s grin was fleeting, though. “But I mean it. Even Tori, even when she was so pissed that she was... Can she get in trouble if I say anything?”

“She did some bad things. Understood. Even then, she...?” I prompted.

“Even then, she still thought you were hot. I think that’s what pissed her off the most. It’s reductivist to say she wanted you out so she could invite you in, if you take my meaning, but between you, me and the pumpkin spice (which you’re welcome to a sip if you want), she definitely told me more than once that she had a thing for you. But that’s what I mean! You’re a very easy person to like, and, um, easy on the eyes. So you could use that, and a lot of us would let you have your way with us.

“Or, you use that, and give of yourself. Like, do you remember beach day?”

“Heh. I doubt I’ll ever forget beach day.”

“Be that Spencer. The Spencer who lets us flirt and flaunt and tease and, sometimes, ask a little more of you.”

“That euphemism is doing some heavy, *heavy* lifting there, Katrina.”

She shrugged. “OK, so, fuck us, if we ask and if you want. Let us be wild and crazy and, yes, a little slutty. Let the community drive the hedonism where we want to go, instead of you driving us where you’d like us to be.”

We talked for a while about that. Mostly she talked, and I listened, which with all she had to say was for the best. Before long it was cold enough that Katrina decided to

close the windows. She wriggled out from under her blankets, her seamless pink panties right there in my face as she grunted with the effort needed to close the building's wonky old windows. I could have pulled them down and fucked her right there, her cheeks smushed against the glass while I plowed her genius pussy from behind.

Instead, I listened, and I thought about what she wanted, and remembered that my job was to lead through service.

So when she held the pose and asked me if I would rip her panties off and give her a nice thorough fuck while she admired the foliage and sipped her pumpkin spice latte, I told her I would be only too happy to give her what she desired.

I skipped the rest of the doors on the east side. Kendall and Georgia, Tori and Ellie, Andi and Jean – I either knew where they stood or had talked with them recently enough. Next it was down the far side of the hall, starting with Jordyn in 309. (Terri and Toni's door preceded theirs, but theirs was another room where I felt like I knew the score.)

There was a paintbrush sitting on the dry erase board mounted on Jordyn's door, one of those little brushes she did her art with. It was a familiar sign, meaning she was out painting, meaning she was probably in the lounge. I studied her board for a moment. She liked to draw on it, these elaborate displays of swirls and careful smudges that were so elaborate it sometimes took me a moment to recognize what was being represented. Sometimes it was nothing.

Today, it was solid lines, straight and clear. The joint H's of the Higgins Hotties logo from our floor shirts. I was never sure how much of what she did was creativity for its own sake or a reaction to something in her orbit, but this one was pretty clear. We were reunited, and she was proud to say it.

I made for the lounge, and was pleased to see she was there. The decorations from the Halloween Eve party were still up, including the tissue paper over the lights. There was Jordyn saturated in an otherworldly orange glow, her wild mane swirling this way and that as she came at her easel from different angles, making a stroke or two and then coming at it from another. It was early yet, too little there for me to understand the larger project, but it was fascinating to watch.

She humored my interest by continuing unabated, or perhaps simply didn't notice I was sitting there watching her. Hard to believe someone could be painting in a smock and a thong without feeling self-conscious about it, but Jordyn was a person who lived deep in the forest of her heart. I don't think I understood her, but it was pleasing to contemplate.

I'd always harbored a fascination with creative processes and creative people, despite my own general lack of such talents. Being able to see a project unfold made it feel possible, the inverse of the way looking at a completed work made it look so unattainable. The canvas in the background was solid black, the paint already dry it seemed. Jordyn had begun with lines of white, radiating generally but never directly upward. Blue, then, around the white, encasing it, extending it upward and outward.

Then people. Not distinct, only shapes that were distinctly feminine. They surrounded it, dancing, arms raised to the sky, faces fixed on the center. There was nothing firmly formed about them but they gave the impression of nudity. At least that's what I saw in it, maybe because it was what I wanted to see. Some were embracing one another, and there was an odd sensuality to it despite the lack of obvious person parts. The way they blended together, I had no sense of number except that it was many, many together.

Emma came in at one point, and the way her eyes were already aimed at the corner Jordyn used, the one by the windows for better lighting, it was plain that was why she'd come. She had a book with her, and settled into one of the other couches and read, Jordyn and her easel fixed in her peripheral. We said nothing, barely saw one another.

Our artist in residence had returned to the central component, the white flame, and delved into oranges and reds. Soon it was exploding outwards at random, around the women, between them, through them. Then she returned to the women, each of them surrounded by the colors of the fire, basking in the incandescent radiance, the painting transforming from women dancing around a fire to a fire born of these otherworldly women, until it was unclear which was born of which.

Then, suddenly, Jordyn stepped back, dropping her brush and palette on the plastic sheet she worked on. Her breath was heavy suddenly, like she'd been holding it. Emma spontaneously began to applaud, and I joined right in. Jordyn turned, looked surprised to see us even though we'd been there watching her for hours. Heedless of the paint coating her fingers, she reached into her mop of hair and plucked out two earbuds.

"That's incredible," I said immediately.

Emma moved closer, studying the canvas. "Is that us?"

Jordyn shrugged. "Probably? I, um, don't know. One of my art teacher in high school – my dad, actually – he always said an artist creates art, she doesn't describe it." She snorted. "Never stopped him, though, but I guess he had fifty minutes to fill."

"Your dad was your art teacher? How did I not know that?"

Jordyn shrugged. "Like woman, I am mystery."

"I love it," Emma said. "You are so, so talented."

Jordyn was studying the painting herself. "Yeah, this turned out pretty good. Wasn't sure what I was gonna do when I started, but just sort got what was in here out there."

We talked art together for a while, at least to the extent that Emma and I had the vocabulary for it, and Jordyn the patience to talk about something that didn't really need or want words. I asked Jordyn if we could talk privately, and Emma excused herself, leaving us the lounge.

"I know you were upset about the shirts," I said. She was sitting across from me on the couch. The paint on her hands and arms was dry enough now that even my protective instincts could quiet themselves. As for Jordyn, if she felt self-conscious at being mostly naked across from me, nobody would have known it.

Her eyes blazed at the mention of the destroyed floor shirts, though. "Tori had no right, Spencer. No fucking right. That was *my* work, *our* bodies, *our* home."

I nodded. "You know, when I first told Ramona about them, I thought she was going to ban them, too. The university has rules about how it lets itself be represented. Only reason we got to have them at all is because it didn't actually say Higgins on it."

"Yeah, I remember you said. Woulda fought that old bitch for 'em too. Probably would've been easier. You don't gotta pull punches when you're fighting the man. When it's your neighbor, though, you gotta keep the foundation stable. Tori forgot that. Glad you reminded her."

"The chokers," I said, gesturing to the one clasped around her slender throat. There was a little paint smudge on it, her fingerprints visible. "Was that your idea?"

"It was a lot of ideas together. I'm not, what, 'political' or whatever. But when they start coming for the artists, you gotta stand up, right? Heard Casey next door, talking with Terri and Toni. She wanted to do that Hotties thing, the HO-TT-EZ, on another shirt just like the old one. I'm like, you don't run the same showcase twice, so I ran over and we talked, and they already had these slut-ass things, and I knew that'd get Tori way more than more fucking midriff. That's how you get at the censors. Offer to meet 'em halfway, they just take a step back. So you gotta innovate, do something wilder, bolder, cooler, sexier, something they'll understand even less and hate even more, until they have nothing left but to go full fascist. That's all they got, in the end. Should all be exposed for the fuckers they really are."

It was hard to imagine a woke, passionate leftist like Tori as a fascist. Her objections were to the female body as a display for male gratification, not to women's sexuality intrinsically. Or maybe Jordyn understood something I hadn't. Either way, I was grateful.

"Can we put that on the new ones?" I pointed to her painting.

"We're doing new ones?"

"I think the age of the choker is coming to a close. Keep wearing it if you want, of course," I amended quickly, "but as a symbol of resistance, I think you've won the war."

She snickered. “Yeah, there’s no waving of the white flag like getting on your knees and sucking the enemy commander’s dick while his soldiers jack it to ya. But the painting, actually, I was meaning it to be a tattoo design, actually. For me.”

I grinned. “Yeah?”

“Gonna piss Dad off bigtime. He always said tattoos were too permanent, that art should be flexible, mobile, evolving. Blah blah blah. But I’ve been feeling it. Like, since I got here, you know? Like there’s something new inside me that isn’t going anywhere, like it can’t go unless I let ‘em take it.”

She suddenly shook herself. “Fuck, listen to me. I want a tattoo is all, same as anybody. Anyway, that’s for me. Just need to find somebody around here who can do it justice.”

“You know, you might want to talk to Ramona. She’s a bit of an enthusiast, actually.”

“What, she got herself a lil’ tramp stamp or something?”

“From what I’ve heard, just about everything that’s not covered by clothes is covered by ink. Not really appropriate for me to ask for a tour, but she might show some of it to you.”

If Jordyn’s eyebrow raised any higher it would have merged with her hair. “Ramona, like, the boss lady down the hall Ramona? ‘Booby shirts are bad for business’ Ramona...?”

“Just talk to her. Worst thing that could happen is you don’t like her recommendation.”

“Hmm. Fair enough. Thanks, man.”

“My pleasure. And think about what we’ll do for the next shirts – or whatever we decide to go with. Could do the classic sweatpants with something written on the butt like the DAT ladies.”

“Don’t wanna look anything like those fucking bougie ass bitches.”

“All the more reason to start thinking about it. I’ll talk to Tori – maybe we can even arrange to see to it your work is sponsored, this time. Least we could do.”

“Tori? Spending our money on something like that? You must’ve made her come her whole damn soul out if you think she’s gonna agree to that.”

Jordyn gave me a once over, intimately, then stood up and walked back to her painting, studying it from a new angle. I’d seen her work before; this was part of the touchup process, and it could go on for hours. But god, that ass.

“Thanks again, Jordyn. And, um, can I ask you something personal?”

She smiled at me over her shoulder. This woman who could work all day ignoring her observers sure knew when a man’s eyes were on her butt. “Pretty much got to now, right?”

“How come you never, you know, made a pass at me or anything? The way you fought for me at that meeting, and the way you look at me sometimes... Not going anywhere with it, but so many of the girls are so up front about it, and you... I just wondered.”

Jordyn’s smile spread. She knelt down, dragged her finger through a splotch of red paint still wet on her palette, and approached me. Uh, oh. I checked my outfit to make sure it wasn’t anything I’d be too sad to see ruined. I suppose an arrogant question like that deserved—

Her finger swiped at my cheek, then at the other. Then she planted it on the back of my head and pulled our lips together. She didn’t seem to want to let go, not any time soon. That she was rubbing paint into my hair fazed me not at all. This girl could *kiss*.

When she pulled back, my mouth followed her instinctively, but she halted my pursuit with her knuckles firmly on my chest, careful to keep the point off of me. (Aw!) “You’re not my type, Spencer.”

I blinked. “Oh. Oh gosh. Are you... Are you a lesbian? I had no—”

Jordyn threw her head back and roared with laughter. “That’s what I mean, man. There’s girls who wanna fuck you, and girls who wanna fuck girls. Boy like you, you gotta suck him off in the restaurant parking lot to show him you’re grateful for a shot, you know? You are, way, way too goddamn pretty.”

Before my next stop, I stopped by to check on Tori. Ellie said she’d headed down to my room; I found her in there rubbing yesterday’s underwear on her face and masturbating on all fours in my bed.

So, not great.

We had a talk about respecting boundaries and then I fingered her to a few – or a dozen – or a few dozen – orgasms. It was hard to tell, the way she sort of flopped over and spasmed the whole time. It only took a few minutes before she made a noise so loud I warned her I’d stop if she couldn’t control herself, but she kept on making it.

“You told me you were going to work on planning tonight’s party. How’s progress?”

She frowned, soft brown eyes downcast. “I, um, haven’t...”

“Get on that, Tori. Ask for help if you need it. Katrina’s around.”

She shook her head. “I just... I need you so bad...”

I nodded patiently, patting her shoulder. “I tell you what. Do a good job, show everybody a good time, and you can stay in here with me tonight. We’ll have fun. How does that sound?”

Her eyes widened like I'd told her she'd won the lottery, and she was out the door before I could get another word in.

Back to my meet-ups. Next up was Jordyn's neighbors in 311, Charlie and Destiny. The pint-sized redhead answered the door in a pair of headphones with pink kitty ears on them. It was pretty adorable.

She adjusted the headset so sit just behind her ear canals, so she could hear me and it. "Spencer, hey! Charlie's in class."

"That's cool. This was really an either or both kind of stop. Do you have a minute?"

She glanced anxiously behind her. On the monitor at her desk, a video game was playing out. Little animated dudes swarming and fighting. Or something. It wasn't a game I recognized, though that wasn't saying much. "Um, yeah. Sure. Just..." She cupped a hand over the arm bearing the headset's microphone and spoke softly. "Sorry you guys, my RA just showed up. I'll brb, OK?"

Their replies were just barely audible. "What? Tell her to go fuck herself!" "We're in the middle of a match!" "This is ranked!" All male, unless I misheard. Not surprising.

"I can come back later – it's not urgent at all!" I said, taking a step back.

"No, it's fine. We're totally boned this match anyway. Come on in. You're sure you didn't want Charlie?"

"I definitely want Charlie, but I think that's only because I'm a man and I'm alive," I joked, accepting her invite. Their room was full of rows of icicle Christmas lights, blinking softly in gentle blue rainfall patterns.

"Guess you'll have to settle for me," she said, but with humor. Destiny wasn't a woman who didn't recognize her own sex appeal. I wasn't sure whether leggy blondes or busty redheads would go out of style first, but my suspicion was that the world might well end first.

I told her much the same spiel I'd said to Amy. Coming around to check in with the brokers to make amends, apologies, and adjustments, and so on. Every so often I heard one of her teammates shouting something, something desperate sounding, so I tried to keep it brief.

"Is Finger ever coming back or what? We're getting our asses handed to us out here!" yelled one guy.

Destiny winced and fiddled with a setting, and the banter quieted. It didn't silence, but that was fine. I pretended not to hear them raging at her inactivity.

"Finger...?" I asked.

She looked a bit embarrassed. "I was a big *Game of Thrones* fan when I was little. So when I made my first gamer tag, I was big into Littlefinger, but that was taken, so I went with Mittlefinger and some numbers. It was really funny to a nine-year-old." She grimaced.

I knew Destiny well enough to know she took her gaming pretty seriously, so I was surprised I hadn't seen that user name on the discord with Charlie. Not that I remembered. If I had, I'm sure I would have assumed it was Leigh or Sammi or Danielle. "Pretty cute. Anyway, I didn't want to disrupt anything, but if you had anything you wanted to say, complain about, slap me around for, whatever, I wanted to make sure you got your chance. I'm just here to..."

As I spoke, however, her expression was shifting, looking more and more confused. "Why would you think I'm mad at you?" she asked, frowning.

"Um... You know. Because you were on Tori's side, with the... You know."

Destiny shook her head. "Tori's side? I wasn't on Tori's side. Did she tell you I was?"

Uh, what? "But, um, you don't have a, um..." I pointed to her neck.

"A choker? No, I do!" She hopped to her feet and opened one of the drawers in her desk. Sure enough, there it was. It was in a plastic baggie. Was that how Terri and Toni packaged them or something?

"But, then... Sorry, did you just not like wearing it or something?"

"Did Charlie not tell you? I just assumed you guys talked all the time."

"Tell me what?"

"Is Finger getting fingered by this bitch or what?! Come on already!" shouted a man, just audible through her headset.

"I think it's a dude, actually," said another dude.

Destiny was talking over them, though. "That we weren't taking sides...? We were talking about the whole choker/broker thing – everybody was, but I mean the two of us in bed one night. Not in bed together! We're not like that. The massage night was just..." Her cheeks were turning as red as her hair.

"Oh."

I must have looked hurt by her pronouncement. Maybe I was. I hadn't seen Charlie in a choker either, but in her case I'd figured it was to cover for the covert help she'd given me with the discord server. Destiny replied in a rush, "No, not because we don't like you! Not that I *like you* like you—"

"Did she just say 'like you like you?'"

"I told you she was twelve."

"—not like Charlie does. I mean, Charlie's like completely in love with you so I would never..." Destiny's eyes shot wide. "Oh my god, do NOT tell her I told you that. Unless she already told you?"

"You're fine, Destiny. But... then why...?" I pointed to the choker.

"We thought that was what you wanted! Everybody was mad at each other and fighting and all those mean pranks. We wanted you to stay here, but we thought what

you'd want was for people to stop taking sides and just get along, talk it out. Oh my gosh, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, I swear. Don't be—"

I threw my arms around her and tackled her backwards on the bed. A second later, I was tearing up, and a second after that I was thinking of golden retrievers and football games and anything else to make sure I didn't accidentally have another Tori or Casey situation.

All this time watching my residents organize themselves into factions, bickering over whether or not I was fit to remain, it had been tearing me apart. As flattering as it was seeing them rally to me, and of course their exciting methods of declaring their support, I'd sat back and watched them light into each other and felt helpless to stop it. I'd been as guilty as anybody, letting them engage in their hijinks to gain their badges of membership.

Meanwhile here were Destiny and Charlie, staying above the fray, keeping the lines of communication open, encouraging cooler heads to emerge and prevail. Showing tolerance and patience and love for everybody. I suppose I ought to have assumed as much of Charlie, but here was quiet little Destiny, detached in her little online world, that I hadn't thought to give credit for the same.

She had a hand down my pants, suddenly.

"Is... is this OK...?" she asked, smiling nervously.

"OK? Destiny..." I kissed her while moving my hand over hers. God, she was already so wet. The part of me that loved foreplay was continuously put out that the Hotties walked around ready to be fucked at a moment's notice, putting so many of my skills and talents to waste.

The part of me that loved fucking gorgeous redheads with big perky tits, though, was conspicuously devoid of complaints.

After a minute of frantic groping, we pulled back to get our respective pants off. It was an urgent affair, the way only spontaneous hookups like this could feel. If we slowed down, we'd remember I was her RA, she had a roommate who could be back any minute, she had a match to finish, that I'd been fooling around with her floormates all day. Neither of us wanted to remember any of that.

"Are we going to have sex...?" she asked meekly.

"If you want. Would you rather—"

"No! No, that. Sex. I want that. Just... don't tell Charlie? She wants you so bad. We'll have to be quick!"

The goons on her squad interrupted again. "Wait, shit – are they fucking?!"

"When I told you to take some D, I meant defense!"

"Dude, no way. Can you hear...? Is she...?"

"You don't get your cut of the loot if you're just going to be a little ho, Finger!"

Destiny gritted her teeth. “Would you guys shut up?! I’m trying to have a goddamn *moment* over here!”

Their banter gave me a moment to reconsider, though, and as much as I hadn’t wanted to, I was glad I did. I whispered into Destiny’s ear, covering the microphone with my hand. “I’m not going to make you keep secrets from your friend, hon. Why don’t the three of us sit down sometime and talk, and see... Well, we’ll see what we see. But trust me, I’m not a good enough lay to lose a friend over.”

“But...”

“That said... you want to give these idiots something to cry over?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Well yeah, baby. Let’s give them the Mittlefinger.”

“*OH MY FUCKING GOD!*” Destiny moaned a few moments later. “Your cock is splitting my little pussy in *HALF!*”

“Tasty little slut like you, I can’t believe you’re this fucking *tight.*”

Destiny’s jaw dropped in mock offense. Our pants were back on, but she was on my lap, and her humping wasn’t subtle. One of her headphones was turned sideways so we could both hear, and her mic was hovering right between the scant distance between our mouths.

“Dude. Dude! What a—”

“SHHHHH!”

Destiny switched the mic off momentarily. “Oh my god, you have no idea. I joined this guild like a month ago, and these dicks have been just... ugh.” She turned it back on, following with a lewd cry. “Oh *god*, nobody’s *ever* made me *come* like *this!*”

“Guess you’ve been spending too much time around these beta pussies,” I grunted with all the machismo I’d learned in my years in high school sports.

Off again. “Oh man. Oh *man* I fucking *hate* guys like that!” she giggled hysterically. “But it’s perfect. I took a risk and used my actual face for the guild discord, and these casuals have given me so much shit for faking it. I didn’t even want to join voice chat, but it was the only way to convince them I was a girl. Dicks.” On. “Harder! Harder! Oh fuck, *harder!*”

“No way. No fucking way.”

“She moans like a ten, dude.”

“She moans like a deuce and a half, I’m telling you!”

I rolled my eyes, both for real and in character, and spoke right into the mic. “She barely fits around my dick, she’s so small, you casuals.” I didn’t know what the term meant, but Destiny had said it with a lot of contempt.

“I *told* you that was her real portrait! I fucking told you!”

“What color’s her hair?” asked one.

“As cherry red as your mom’s baboon ass, bitch,” I said, making myself breathe hard. Destiny shook with silent laughter.

“I *told* you!”

“What about her eyes?”

“Grey,” I answered. Was there some blue? I should see my optometrist next time I got home.

“Don’t stop! Don’t stop!” whimpered Destiny, switching off to let herself laugh.

We were both moaning out our fake orgasms when the door opened and Charlie walked in, as if she couldn’t hear what we were doing. “Hey guys, what’s going on?”

Mic off. “I think we’re faking sex to make the dorks in her guild jealous, if I understand correctly...?”

Destiny nodded. “And how. Didn’t you hear us?”

“Well sure, but I know what he sounds like when he’s coming for real,” Charlie answered as if it were perfectly obvious. “I can give you the room, if you guys wanna for realsies.”

Apparently Destiny had gone hot mic in time for the gamers to hear Charlie, too. “Wait, there’s another one now?”

“She sounds hot, too!”

Destiny nodded to her roommate. “Or hey, do you wanna just share him? It’s been so long since I’ve had a threesome with a smoking hot babe like you.”

Charlie giggled merrily, and sat down beside Destiny on my lap, their breasts squashed together so they’d both fit. “Oh god, that’s the biggest cock I’ve ever seen, or my name isn’t Scarlotte Andersen!”

We did not have a threesome that afternoon, but by the time our show was over, her party agreed that Mittlefinger was entitled to a double share of loot.

The sun was setting when I knocked on 315. Sammi answered, scowling when she saw who it was. “What do *you* want.”

Jacqui was out, it looked like. Her team worked her to the bone, it felt like. “Just to talk. Is this an OK time?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You always have a choice.”

“Well, then...”

The door shut.

Ah, well. They can’t all be winners.

I skipped past Emma and Nikki, and then likewise Allison, Addison and Maddison. I felt like we'd talked as much as we needed to recently. Time to head back toward the east wing where I'd started this morning. I knocked at 318. I heard a voice mumble something, and a moment later the door opened and there was Dana, dressed in a cute little dress that was more summer than fall. Danielle was lying on her bed swiping away on her phone.

"Spencer! Hey, what's up?"

Again, the speech. I didn't like sounding rehearsed, but there wasn't any avoiding it. Without a word, Danielle got up and walked past me, then doubled back, grabbed her jacket off her bedpost, and out again.

"I guess she's said what she needs to say," I observed with an awkward chuckle.

Only then did I notice Dana wasn't merely holding her phone, but had apparently been in the mist of using it. She raised it to her cheek.

"Yeah, mom, I gotta go."

"No, it's nothing. Somebody at the door."

"It's my RA. Spencer."

"No, Danielle left."

"Mom, I think I'm freaking safe in a room with him for crying out loud."

"Yes, he's fully dressed."

"Of course I'm dressed, too! God, Mother!"

"I will."

"I said I *will*."

"I *know*."

"He'd be gone already if you'd just let me hang up and talk to him!"

"OK."

"OK."

"OK."

"Mother!"

"OK, I love you too. I'll call back when we're done."

At last she hung up the phone with an apologetic look. I stood there like I hadn't been able to hear the myriad insinuations and precautions. "If I'm interrupting something, I can—"

"No, you're fine. She's just paranoid is all. Worried I'll get raped and murdered or something."

"I'm the one who's here to *prevent* that from happening," I grumbled.

Dana shrugged. "I tell my mom everything. So, um, she sorta knows, you know, how you're..."

"Ah. Did you, ah, tell her about last night?"

“Oh god no! I mean, there’s limits. I’m not sure I believe it myself. That was *insane*. This floor is so freaking crazy, I swear.”

I nodded. “You’re not wrong.”

“But I like it. I mean, it’s... fun? Like, there’s always something going on. And everybody’s so nice. I mean, not recently, but I guess after last night...”

I smiled. “On behalf of everybody... you’re welcome.” She humored me with a mild laugh. “But yeah, I think things are going to be getting back to normal. That said, I wanted to say I really appreciated that email you sent. I haven’t had the chance to follow up until now. Your mom, she and I had a talk, too.”

“Which one? The one where she was a gross giant hypocrite skank, or the one where she chewed out my RA even though I begged her not to?”

“Yeah, I have to say, it was a bit of mixed messaging, there. The chewing out, I get. I didn’t exactly behave like a gentleman at times, there.”

“Might be more accurate to say you aren’t much of a gentleman.” Dana playfully nudged me with an elbow.

That stung, oddly. Considering she’d watched me more or less compel a three-woman blowjob last night while the floor looked on with envy, I supposed she had a point. It was a character flaw I’d have to own if I was going to proceed like this.

“I guess not. Still, I have to say, very different from her first impression.”

Dana rolled her eyes, then nimbly vaulted up into the top bunk. “Oy, do not remind me. I am still so embarrassed about that. I don’t know what came over her. People flirt with my mom all the time, guys say gross stuff. ‘Duh, duh, I totally wanna bang yer mom, Dana.’ Dash, every guy I went to high school with.”

“Oh man, I bet.” I winced. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound like I agree with them or anything!”

“It’s fine. I get it. She’s a milf.” She shuddered. “I know that’s a nasty word, but it’s better than when people think she’s my big sister. Now *that* is creepy.”

“And she’s your stepmom, right? I think I remember her saying that during the chewing out. You two just look so much alike, I assumed...”

Dana nodded. “Yep. I mean, I don’t even remember my bio mom, so she’s basically just mom. She busts out the ‘step’ once in a while. She thinks it saves explanation of why she looks so young to have a son and daughter in college. I guess my dad has a type, huh.”

I smiled at that. “And for my part, don’t worry about your mom. She didn’t come down on me for anything I didn’t deserve. As for August, I’ve been harassed worse.”

Dana rested her cheek on her folded arms, glasses scrunching slightly to one side. “I have no idea what came over her. She was probably just tired. Our groomer was really late with Whiffle – that’s our doodle – so instead of leaving at noon, stopping in a hotel,

and finishing the trip to Lakeview in the morning, we just napped hard that evening and drove through the night.

“I had my first marching band meeting for orientation right super early, so my mom just came up here and crashed on the bare mattress while I was doing that. She’s always been kinda *MREEEER* if she doesn’t get her beauty sleep. Must not have napped enough, because by the time I got out and we could start moving in, she hit on you like you were the freaking poolboy.”

“So... Yeah. Yeah! Oh my god!” I laughed so hard I had to use my knees to stay up. Even now that I’d learned a few things about the Spencer effect, I’d wondered how Dana’s mom had been hit so hard by it that she’d been after me in seconds. There was the answer. Dana was looking at me like I was crazy, though.

“Sorry. Just... that was a funny thing is all. Wow. But yeah, sounds like you two are really close, though. That’s good. Easier to forgive little stuff like that when there’s all that love.”

Dana’s head bobbed a bit, considering. “Yeah, I guess. She’s kinda... smothery, though, if that’s a word. She doesn’t mean to be. She’s just really involved, you know? I think she’s just having a hard time adjusting. When I was in high school, checking in all the time made sense. Some kids were out being bad, and doing bad things, and girls need to be extra careful, because...” She smiled at me appreciatively. “You know why. You’re one of the good ones, no matter what she thinks.”

“I try.”

Her rant went on. “But now that I’m here, she still wants me to call every night, to let her know if I’m going out, if I have any tests, how did I do on the tests, if the band is traveling somewhere I have to let her know where we’re staying and...” She sighed. “I like that she cares so much, but sometimes I feel like it wouldn’t be so bad if she cared a little less. And that’s to say nothing about she is with boys. Nobody wants to date the girl who has to be interviewed by her mom first.”

“I very much doubt there is a shortage of boys who wouldn’t gladly be willing to jump through hoops for a date with you, Dana.”

“Eh. I don’t have time to date anyway, but do you know what I mean?”

I propped my elbows on the edge of her bunk bed and leaned in. “Hey. I know you didn’t ask for my advice, but since everybody thinks RA stands for resident advisor—”

“It doesn’t...?”

“Resident assistant. Anyway, here’s the thing about parents. You’re an adult now. You’re out on your own, and you’re only going to get more out and more on your own. If you want to create some space, protect your privacy and your autonomy, do it. Have that hard talk, tell your mom how you feel. Then tell her you love her.”

“You sound like Danielle. But... you know, less... not nice.”

“I’m not done. Because you can also just... let her have this. I know people my age and older who still talk to their mom every day. If you think the good outweighs the bleh, there’s nothing wrong with having a tight relationship with your mom, either. Do what’s good for you, draw lines where you need them. Just don’t let a nagging roommate or some guy whose name you won’t remember this time next year tell you how your relationship with your mom is supposed to be.”

Dana smiled. What a smile. “I’m really glad you decided to stay.” She scooched just an inch closer, but we were close enough that inches counted. “Like, really glad.”

I leaned my head sideways, our eyes aligned vertically but congruently with one another’s. “Me, too. Although... I wouldn’t be too sad if you let your mom know I’m not all bad. My boss has been really riding me lately.”

Everybody is permitted the occasional inside joke with themselves, I told myself.

“I will. I told her I’d call her back. She’s probably sitting there scowling at the phone, wondering why we’re taking so long.”

“Want me to...?” I jerked a thumb at the door.

“No, you can stay. I mean, we don’t get to hang out much, so...”

Dana and I talked, briefly, mostly just me checking that she was doing OK, not getting overwhelmed by school and band and Hottie drama. She said she’d think about what I said, said she was looking forward to the party. I thanked her one more time for her kind words at a time when I’d really needed them, and made to excuse myself.

“Um, are you really not gonna kiss me...?” she asked, cheeks flushing. “I’m sorry, it’s just, your vibe, and you were so close, and I know how you like to, you know, with the other girls, and...”

I paused. “Did you want me to?”

“I mean, kind of...?” She looked like she might die to have to say it.

“Call your mom back, OK?”

Her smile faded, her embarrassment spiked. “Yeah, you’re right. I probably should. Sorry, that was... I don’t know what that was.”

She pulled her phone out, hit a button. I could hear it ringing, though it only took one before her mom answered. “Took him long enough. What did he want?”

I was walking to the door. “Just to talk, Mom. He wanted to make sure I’m doing OK. I told you he’s a nice guy.”

“They always seem like nice guys until they get what they want from you, honey.”

My hand hit the knob. “He doesn’t want anything from me.” Dana sounded somewhat bitter. “Of the three of us, you’re the only one who said she wanted something from anybody.”

I pressed the lock, in case Danielle circled back. “Oh, will you just let go of that already! I was only teasing the boy. I thought it wouldn’t hurt to make a good

impression for you on your first day. It's not like I was seriously inviting him to... do anything."

Dana's eyes widened as I turned back. She sat up, legs dangling from her bunk. She was a tiny thing, her hair just barely missing the popcorn ceiling. "I know you weren't, but how was *he* supposed to know that?"

I reached the bed, and with gentle pressure on her knees, spread her legs outwards. "A boy like that, I'm sure he gets hit on all the time. I'm sure he's long since forgotten it. It would be nice if you would do the same."

I tapped my chin, pantomiming consideration. I shook my head. No, I had not forgotten it. Dana tried to give me a stern look, but she was a hairs breadth away from peels of giggles. To help her keep them under control, I lifted up her dress, baring her thighs and exposing a pair of crimson red panties. They fit her little body tight as a glove, outlining her pussy lips clearly.

"Just because girls at Lakeview hit on him doesn't mean it's OK for their moms to join in!" Her eyes were locked on me, though. Nothing in her resisted my touch. Everything in her signaled permission.

I kissed the inside of her knee. Her eyes slid closed.

"Well you just make sure there's one less Lakeview girl giving him any more attention, all right? It sounds like he's got more attention than sense, and that hall manager of yours isn't doing a darn thing about it."

I kissed an inch higher up her leg. Another inch, another kiss. On and up the flautist's smooth, tanned thighs.

"Well I think he does... does a good job," said Dana, her voice trembling.

"That's why I worry, sweetheart. You're such a pretty girl, and you're of an age, and boys like him see girls like you and see only one thing. Believe me, I know. It wasn't so long ago that I was just like you."

Right as my mouth neared her panties, I turned my attention to the other leg, starting over. Dana beamed at me radiantly, loving the tease. "You weren't 'just like me,' Mother, and it wasn't that short ago, either."

Be nice to your mother, I mouthed, or else I will.

Dana's body shook with barely suppressed laughter. *You're so bad!* she mouthed back.

"Dana! I don't know what's gotten into you. What did he say to you, really? Because we were having a nice conversation, then that RA of yours shows up, and suddenly you're bent out of shape with me. I don't know what—

This time, I didn't tease. I put my lips right over the center of her panties, and planted a kiss.

"Mmmm...!" Dana moaned.

"Dana? What was that? Were you...? Was that...?" A pause. "Is he...?!"

“What? No mom, I banged my elbow on the bed post again. Nngh, that hurt.” I extended my tongue, went right for where I hoped to find her clit. Dana gasped, her thighs clamping down reflexively. “Oh *god*, oh god oh god, oh *wow* that really... really...” She let out a slow, ecstatic sigh. “Ow...”

“Oh, sweetie. You know, I bet they make some kind of, I don’t know, bed post cover or something. To pad it, so this doesn’t keep happening. Here, I’ll check Amazon. You poor thing.”

Dana didn’t seem like she wanted to release me, so I reached up under her dress and filled my hands with her ass, squeezing hard as I licked her through her thin, silky panties. “It’s... Yeah. Thank you. Oh god. Thank you. That’s so... Thank yooou...!” she whined.

“It sounds like you really dinged it this time. You’re sure you’re OK? Maybe you should tell the conductor you need a day off. You could probably get a brace at the health center or CVS or something, if you need to sell it. Just put it on the card, I don’t care.”

Dana squirmed in response to my efforts to pull down her underwear, assisting me in peeling it off. Hot damn, shaved bare. I didn’t have any particular objections to pubic hair styling one way or the other, but I’ll admit that being ambushed by a flat patch of skin like Dana’s always provided a moment of inexplicable awe. Only a moment, but what a nice moment.

“Thank you. You’re... You’re so good to me. I’m... I’ll... oh god...”

“Dana? Are you OK? It’s not broken, is it?”

I probed her moist pink nubbin, swirling my tongue around it in slow circles. She was shaking, gripping my head with both hands, holding her phone between her cheek and shoulder. “I... I... I’m OK. I’m OK. I’m... I’m so OK.”

Her mom evidently mistook her ragged breaths for an attempt bravery in the face of serious elbow ouchies. “Oh, my poor baby. I wish I was there. I just hate not being able to take care of you. It’s the worst thing about you being gone, not being able to hug you when you’re hurting.”

Dana was panting now, on the edge. I wrapped my lips around her clit and darted my tongue in and out, pushing her over the cliff and swirling like a soft, warm tornado of drawn out orgasm. Dana fell back, thrashing.

“I LOVE YOU, MOM!”

I made sure she had her fill before I stepped back. Say what you want about bunk beds, they made for damn convenient cunnilingus positioning. I was a little sad the Spencer effect seemed to make my girls come so easily. It was going to make me rusty. I headed for the door, nodding in acknowledgment of the incomprehensible silent words of gratitude Dana was throwing after me.

“No, sorry.”

“I dropped the phone on the floor, that’s why.”

“You were being so nice, I wanted to make sure you knew I appreciated it.”

“I know you know I love you.”

“I know you love me, too.”

“No, I know.”

“I know.”

Giggle. “I know.”

“I love you, Mom.”

I halted in the doorway. “Tell her I love her, too,” I whispered, and darted out just before Dana’s pillow crashed through where my face had been.

Only a handful of rooms left. Down my side of the hallway, there was Shauna, an avowed choker girl, one of the first. No problem there. Leigh and Angel I’d keep my eye on, make sure Angel’s act of liberation didn’t cause resentment from queen bee Leigh, but I’d not heard any cause for concern as yet. Casey, Dawn and Kyu-Ri were all happy as peas in a pod with the return to Higgins normal.

That meant there was only one room left.

As Dana chatted on with her mom in the next room over, I approached 316 and issued a soft knock. Right there on the other side of 1 & ¾” of door was, last I’d been permitted in the room, the Tits Out/Timeout schedule they’d worked out during the roommate agreement meeting. Was it still up? Would I ever get a foot in the door to find out?

The door opened, but only a crack. It stopped with the precision and suddenness that said it was being kept from opening further by something firm. There’s Jo’s darkly beautiful face, or at least a thin strip of it, glaring at me. “No, you can’t see them.”

The door slammed shut.

I shook my head. “I need to talk to you. Both of you.”

“Go away.”

“Lex?” I called out. “You in there? Can we talk, please?”

“She’s not in here, and you’re not getting in either. Go. AWAY!”

Hmm. Lexi’s absence changed things. There, I was walking on eggshells. Jo, on the other hand, was pissed at me on her roommate’s behalf. Justifiably – so very justifiably – but she wasn’t the victim. Which meant...

“I’m Ennery the Eighth, I am! Ennery the Eighth I am, I am. I got married to the widow next door! She’s been married seven TIMES before, and eeevery one was an Ennery (Ennery)! She wouldn’t have a Willy or a Sam – NO SAM! I’m her eighth old man, I’m Enneryyyy, Ennery the Eighth I am!”

“What in the fuck are you—”

“*Second verse, same as the first! I’m Ennery the Eighth, I am...*”

I lost count of the repetitions in the sixties. At least I thought it was the sixties. Hard to count that many verses, especially in a song with a number repeated over and over. Emma and Nikki exited their room across the hall, gave me looks that were a nice blend of pitying, encouraging, and deeply annoyed. Dana politely closed her door on the third refrain. At one point Casey passed by on her way to the bathroom, and even she gave me an irritated look. She barely even looked at my crotch. I took it as a good sign of her recovery.

At last I heard footsteps thundering toward the door. I sang right up until it flew open, an enraged Jo looking like she might murder me where I sat. “*WOULD YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP?!*” she shrieked.

“Two minutes. That’s it.”

Her nostrils flared. I was surprised plumes of fire weren’t shooting out of them. “FINE! Two minutes. Starting now!” She snapped her fingers, and I scurried behind her into the room.

The Tits Out/Timeout schedule was down, I noticed as she closed the door behind us.

“My *god* that is the most annoying fucking thing anyone has ever done to me! That’s FBI smoking out terrorists from their caves level shit!”

I nodded. “Yep. It’s from this old movie, *Ghost*. My dad loves it. Patrick Swayze’s character uses it to get Whoopie Goldberg to talk to him. And to make his dead wife go out with him.”

She folded her arms angrily. “I don’t know who any of those people are, and I don’t care. You have ninety seconds left.”

“He made me watch it when I was a kid. They had it on a VHS tape, but the VCR was kind of dying so they wanted to watch as many of their old tapes as they could before it broke down, kind of a sendoff for the technological era. One of those things you hate at the time that later you remember fondly, you know? Like camping or something.”

“I hate camping.”

“I guess I don’t remember it *so* fondly. There’s this scene near the end where the ghost guy gets his revenge on the guy who killed him, and there’s these dark evil shadow monster things that rise up out of the ground, moaning and howling, and they drag his spirit down to hell and then just disappear. Gave me *such* bad nightmares. It took me a long time before I understood that’s not something that happens when people die. I was at my great grandpa’s—”

“Is this ever going to have a point?”

“–funeral and I started freaking out that they might come for him, and my mom had to take me outside and explain it to me. Really embarrassing stuff. Not my fault, I know, just a dumb kid who didn’t know better, but still.”

“Is this some bullshit metaphor about forgiving yourself for what you did? Like you didn’t mean to be horrible, so it’s OK? Because it’s *NOT* OK!”

I shook my head. “No, no, sorry. I know it wasn’t OK. Aside from wanting you to open the door and talk to me, I mostly brought it up because of that ghost thing. I haven’t thought about it in forever, but the past couple weeks, I’ve had dreams about it. Nightmares, kind of. Like I fucked up, and I’d ruined someone, and they were coming for me to give me my just desserts or whatever.”

“Hopefully they are.”

“But that’s between me and Lexi,” I said. Firmly. “Right now, I wanted to talk to you, about you.”

“I think you might have another twenty, thirty seconds. Have at it.”

“Are you all right?” I asked softly.

She stared like she was expecting more. “Am I all right? The fuck does that even mean?”

“Just that. Are you doing OK, how are you holding up, how’s your life. That.”

She frowned, but that was an upgrade. “What do you care? Want me to smile and giggle and lick your balls like these other bitches? Well guess again, asshole, I’m not–”

I held up a hand. “Not, are you mad at me. I know you are. But.. look, Jo, you’ve been carrying around a lot of anger. That eats at you. If we’re all three of us staying here – and I can’t decide for you, but I’ve decided for me – then I’d hate to think you’re going to spend all years seething.”

“Right, we’re supposed to move on, open wide, spin the wheel and see which hole we give you like Tori and Katrina, right? Well maybe they forgot, but I can’t. Err, won’t.” She looked down at her toes angrily.

Hmm. “I don’t know a diplomatic way to ask this, but I guess since you hate me already it can’t make things much worse, so here goes. I thought you and Lex didn’t really get along. My sense was that you guys had made peace, but didn’t hang out. I always saw her around with Casey and Sammi and them, and you with Shauna and Amy and your group.”

“So?”

“So, I guess I’m just sort of surprised you’re so concerned about her is all. I remember you complaining to me about wanting to change rooms because she was bugging you so much.”

“And I remember you calling her flat and ugly. What’s your point?”

“I did *not* call her ugly.” Some defense that was. “I’m not after recriminations here. But her other friends have said what they wanted to say to me, chewed me out,

called me names, all that. Sammi still isn't talking to me. But the rest forgave me. I guess I'm having a hard time understanding why you're taking this so much harder than her own closest friends."

Jo's jaw clenched. Trembled. "I don't want to talk about it."

So there was something there after all. "Please, Jo. Talk to me."

"Your time's up. Go."

"I can see you're hurting. I'm not leaving you like this. No way."

"I said, *go*." She stamped a foot, pointed at the door.

"Please, Jo. Whatever it is eating at you, let it out. We'll figure it out."

"There's no figuring it out, asshole!" she roared. It was so sudden, so intense, I actually stumbled back. "She was *this close* to killing herself because of those things! Did you know that? She was texting one of her friends from high school, and I saw it." Jo gestured illustratively, a line from her bunk up top to where Lex would be sleeping beneath her. "She was really thinking about it."

I nodded. "That's awful. I'm so sorry."

"Pfff...! 'I'm so sorry!' I saw Casey, you know? Lying there with her head busted open. And all I could think was how that could've been Lex! Every time I've come home since then, I've wondered if I'm going to open the door and find her like that, like if that's going to be one of those things that gets inside you and poisons my soul and I'll be like my fucking grandpa in the nursing home muttering out these creepy as fuck fucking 'Nam flashbacks, except for me won't be Charlie, but my own fucking roommate!"

"Jo, it's not your fault. If she hurt herself, or god forbid..." I shook my head.

"There's nothing *you* could do to fix the damage *I* did."

Her fists were clenched in rage, though her eyes were brimming over with tears. "I'm talking about the damage *I* did, you stupid dick! All you did was 'hey baby can I see your fancy new tits?' like a fucking idiot moron dickhead!"

Harshly put, but no time to push back. "Then what do you—"

"I'm the fucking reason she got those things in the fucking first place!"

I froze. "What...? Jo, what do you..."

"It's my fucking fault! I was giving her shit, dunking on the flat girl. She had her stupid crush on you, like half the straight girls on the floor, and I could've just let her sit there pining and moping over it. But no. 'Maybe he's bi, you know? Into little boys with overdeveloped pecs.' 'Tits out? I'm not sure those things can legally be called tits. More like big pimples than any tits I ever saw.' *Yawn, stretch*, oh man these things are so annoying, you know? Oh right, why would you know.' I was such a fucking *cunt* to her!"

Oh shit. I crept closer as Jo slumped down onto Lex's bunk and started to bawl. "I did the same shit to these girls in high school. I don't even know why, it was just like, ha ha, I'm prettier than you, like, like... Like I couldn't love my body unless everybody else hated theirs, or... I don't know. Just over break, I bumped into Laura Malone and some

of her friends at Taco Bell with my friends, and like she just said hi, like ‘hey, high school’s over, let’s be adults now’ or whatever, and I... I forget what I said exactly, but I remember my friends laughed so hard, and she just... she just, like her face just *died*, like she’d never get out from under me, and...”

I sat down beside her and wrapped a gentle arm around her shoulders, and that was the end of her holding it together enough to get words out. That small, tender act sent her into a place beyond verbalization. Her arms flew around me, and occasionally she lashed out and punched me. It didn’t hurt. (Much.) It wouldn’t matter if it did.

“I almost killed her!” she managed. Then again, over, and over, and over. She was sobbing too hard for me to say anything back. For now, she just needed to let it out. For the second time that day, I cursed the Hancock Institute and the Spencer effect that at a moment like this, I had to force myself not to cry with her. I held her, and sniffled down any traces, and let her bare her awful secret.

“How many Lexi’s have I hurt?” she murmured into my shoulder some time later. She shook softly, but seemed to be running low on tears. “How many girls look in the mirror and hate themselves because of me?”

I shook my head. “Some, probably.”

Her head shot up, glaring venomously. “Aren’t you supposed to be comforting me or something? God, you are a sucky fucking RA!”

“Sometimes, yeah. I know you haven’t forgotten, but I hurt her, too, Jo. We both fucked up. I knew she’s attracted to me. No girl finds that many excuses to cross paths with a guy with their boobs peeking out unless they’re looking for some attention. So maybe you made her think that was the only way to get it, but I was the one who treated her like a body with toys pinned on it instead of a person, with her heart pinned on her sleeve.”

“So you’re saying we’re both pieces of shit.”

“No.” I shook my head, put my hands on her slender shoulders. “I’m saying, we both did something shitty, and to the same person. We can’t unsay the stuff we said. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Me too. I think she’s having an even harder time dealing with me now that I’m feeling so guilty toward her than she was when I was just being a bitch.”

“I can imagine. But let me tell you something.” Jo scared up some tissues and cleaned herself up while I told her about Spencer the bully. It felt awful, reliving some of the shitty things I’d said and done, though there was a small comfort in sharing them with someone else who could appreciate the feeling of regret that came attached to them.

“Man, you’re like Andrew from *The Breakfast Club*, Spencer.”

I smiled. “So you *have* seen an 80’s movie. Nice.”

“I thought that was 70’s.”

I considered. “Maybe you’re right. It’s old, is my point. But that’s a good call, too. Because just like the jock in *The Breakfast Club*, I couldn’t undo what I did, and hating myself for it didn’t make anything any better.”

“So what do we do, just... shrug it off? Trust me, I can’t forget what I did. Those things are way too big.”

I shook my head. “What did make a difference was opening up to the other kids in detention. You know? I could look for ways to show kindness. Compassion. Empathy. Interest in other people and their lives and their problems and their feelings.”

“And sometimes you tell girls on the brink of suicide to flash you their tits.”

“I’m not perfect,” I said, a bit gruffly.

“I’ll say.”

“But once I realized I should feel bad, it’s the only thing I’ve found that let me feel good about myself again. It’s why I get so hyped up over this stupid job. I mean, I know I’m a glorified babysitter slash narc.”

“Who’s glorifying you, exactly...?”

I flicked her shoulder. “But every now and then I get to actually help somebody. Sometimes just to let them vent, or get a work order done. Once in a while, I get to do something bigger.”

“You mean Tori’s big round ass.”

“Would you quit making jokes?” We were both smiling, a little, though. “So keep being nice to Lex. It sounds like she needs it. And when you’re feeling shitty about it – whether it’s her or somebody else – take a moment to do something nice. Doodle something on someone’s dry erase board. Invite somebody unpopular to lunch, let ‘em hang with the cool kids. Compliment someone. Whatever. I promise you, it helps.”

Jo sniffled, blew her nose and tossed the tissue down on the floor with the pile of others. “Or I could just find a floor full of lonely hot guys and fuck my way down the hall, eh?”

“That helps, too.” I rolled my eyes, though. “But I’m serious. You think I’m being cheesy, but try it and watch what happens. Apologizing is good, too, by the way. You could find that girl from Taco Bell on facebook, I bet.”

Jo studied the floor for a moment, but nodded slowly. “I bet I could.”

I squeezed her shoulder and at last let go. “I’ll get out of your hair, I suppose. If you’re going to be OK? I can stay if you’d rather.”

She shook her head. “No. You’re OK.”

“OK? I’m frickin’ great.”

“Do I need to remind you what you said to her...?”

“All right, all right. But I’m doing great *today*.”

Jo gave me a grudging smile, then stood and helped me to my feet, guiding me to the door. Before I could open it, though, she hugged me hard against the door.

“I’m sorry I was so mean to you,” she mumbled into my chest.
“I’m sorry I gave you reason to be,” I whispered into her hair.