

# Harmony Dreams

A Misfile fanfiction by ShadowDragon8685

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On The Highway, December 29, 2004, 4:51 PM

It was the sum of all of her fears. Those three words. Three words that caught her chest in a tight grip, three words that had her reacting in shock, braking hard as she heard them. A horn blasted behind her, Emily in the Porsche 996 slipped to the side, accelerating hard to avoid the collision that Ash nearly caused.

*What's a Misfile?* The words caught her completely off-guard, absolutely bringing her brain to a crash state. Fortunately, instinct took over and she floored the gas in time to (barely) avoid the front bumper of the 18-wheeler behind her, the Carrera GT's massive acceleration curve powering it ahead.

Those three words. Words that could spell her doom if the wrong person heard them. Words that could destroy her world. Erase her, literally, from existence. Words that would rob her of her friendship, her relationship with her mother.

"Where the **hell** did you hear that word?!"

Ash stared over at Jenny, who looked back at her in shock. "A-A few days ago. Emily muttered something about it when she woke up from a nightmare; she said something about dreaming you were a boy..."

"Oh, *hell*." Ash swore, groaning. "It's... Look, it's nothing. Don't mention it again, please?"

"It doesn't sound like nothing, Ash. Please—"

"Drop it, please!"

Jenny's lip trembled. "N-No, I won't. Something's bothering you, and her, about it."

It must have taken an act of tremendous courage for her to say that to Ash, but that was small comfort to the upset tuner. "Jenny..."

"No! It's not nothing. Whatever it was, it made her upset, and now it's gotten you, too. What's wrong? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"*This is a switch.*" Ash sighed. "Everything's wrong, Jenny. I'm in more trouble than you can believe if you mention that word to *anyone*."

"Tell me."

"I... I can't. You don't need to know, and you wouldn't believe me."

"What, is this some kind of The Matrix shit?"

"(*Hmmm... that's one way of putting it.*) It's... complicated."

"Just because I'm blonde and don't get A's doesn't mean I'm stupid, Ash."

"I never said that! Look, it's complicated, it'll sound crazy, and I've no way to prove it to you if I told you, even if I wanted to. (*I don't believe I'm having this conversation. Better here with her, than at home with dad or Vashiel, but I still don't want to be having it.*)"

Jenny looked thoroughly unconvinced, staring at Ash with worried eyes. Ash had been about to say something, but the naked concern on her friend's face gave her pause. She bit her lip. How was she going to explain this without explaining anything? She sighed.

"Jenny, let me ask you something. If you're in the middle of the woods, and you do something to a tree, say, spray-paint something on it. And then something happens to the tree, like... I dunno, it burns down. And you're the only one who knew about the spray-painting, and nobody else would believe you about the spray-painting... did it happen?"

"What? That's... That's stupid, of course it did."

"But how are you going to prove it? Burned *completely*, absolutely gone."

"I... um, I'll—"

“And then you go to find the can you used, only the can is gone. And the receipt is gone, too. You call your credit card company, but they have no record of the charge. You call the bank, they have no record of the amount ever being deducted from your account—it’s still there.”

“Um...”

“And now you’re trying, and trying, and trying, to prove that you spray-painted this tree, but you can’t, because when you go back, the tree is ash. Even if you get a CSI team to come through and look for particles of paint, they can’t find anything!”

“What are you saying, Ash?”

“I’m saying I can’t tell you what I’m saying, and you wouldn’t believe me if I told you, and even if I did prove it to you, you wouldn’t like it, and wouldn’t want to know it. And I’m afraid you wouldn’t want to know *me*, either.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to know you? You’re... well, quite possibly the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You wouldn’t bow down to me, and when I tried to hurt you, you shrugged it off and kept going. You shrugged me off so hard I fell down, so you stopped and picked me back up, too...”

Ash let out a heavy sigh. “Trust me, Jenny. It’s... it’s better you don’t know, for all of our sakes.”

“Ash, something is *hurting* you. I don’t like it; I want to help.”

“When did you become Ms. Sensitivity?”

“I’ve always been sensitive, Ash. You can’t stick an emotional knife in someone and *twist* it without knowing where’s the right place to stick it. Something’s hurting you. Right here.” She reached over, pressing her hand over Ash’s heart. “And it’s got you torn up, and I can’t figure out what it is, but I want to help. You got so... so *upset* when I said that word. Something is definitely there, and it’s definitely eating at you.”

“... Maybe it is. But I still don’t need... Well, maybe that’s wrong, but I still don’t *want* you to know. Trust me, it would only make things worse.”

“Ash... it’s... it’s not drugs, is it? I knew someone who went down that way...”

“W-*What*?! You’ve been with me for the last what, week, more or less on a live-with basis. When have I had time to do anything like that, even if I wanted to, which I *don’t*!”

“I don’t know... I’m just... I’m trying to understand, Ash.”

Ash sighed; annoyed—at herself, because a part of her wanted to explain it, to confide in Jenny. “I... can’t, Jenny. I can’t explain it. You won’t believe me, it’ll make me seem like I’m absolutely insane, and if you do believe me, it’ll hurt.”

“Ash...” Jenny sighed. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay...”

Ash followed the red Porsche ahead of her as Jenny fiddled with the radio, then she bit her lip. “Ash... I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I was listening, at the door. Christmas morning.” Ash blinked, inwardly cursing herself. “It’s just... I wanted to know what you were doing... I thought you might, might maybe be about to, you know... And I guess I was kinda hoping to hear it, but instead you talked about some weird stuff that doesn’t make sense.”

“Oh, I—”

“Are... are you a transsexual?”

Ash groaned inwardly; that was the *last* question she wanted to hear—or answer. Worse, she knew the answer Jenny was looking for might freak Jenny out almost as much as the solid, honest truth.

“Ash, I...”

“I am not,” Ash answered. “I...”

“She said something about you being raised... and about you being a boy?”

Ash got a sinking feeling in her gut. “Jenny... (*Crap, crap, crap. If I tell her the truth, she won't take it well. She's using me as her female role model. Sonuvabitch, how'd I get roped into this?*) Jenny, I swear to you, my birth certificate, as written by the delivery room doctor's hand, says ‘female’.”

“I... believe you, Ash.”

“Thank you, Jenny.” Ash reached over, stroking Jenny's cheek, tenderly, with the back of her fingers, and the fashionista smiled softly at the touch, closing her eyes.

“Ash? I promise, I won't eavesdrop again.”

“I'd... appreciate that, Jenny.”

“I'm sorry. It was stupid, I just... well... the two of you are so *beautiful*, so incredible, so perfect together, so tender... I guess... I just wanted to hear you making love. I won't do it again.”

Ash continued to stroke Jenny's cheek as she didn't need to shift at the moment, even as she blushed red, and Jenny's eyes remained closed.

Upton Residence, 6:59 PM

All was, for once, well. Emily asked about the sudden freeway creativity, Ash said she'd explain later, and all was accepted. The trio were on the pulled-out couch-bed; they had watched some random movie and were now playing Underground 2. Ash was on the edge of the bed, lying on her stomach with her head laid out on a pillow, her arms emerging from under the pillow. Jenny was lying at an angle on her back, with her head tilted down over the edge of the couch staring at the TV, and Emily was sitting against the back of the couch at a right angle to Ash, having discarded her sweaty clothes as soon as they got home and taken a quick shower, and was now wearing a bra, a pair of Ash's shorts, and the light cotton sheet from their bed kind of like a robe. By tacit agreement, their feet had met under the long covers over Emily's legs; all three were quite obviously enjoying the contact without saying a word about it, softly stroking and caressing.

“How the hell,” Ash asked, as she pushed one of the AI drivers out of her way coming off the starting line, “can you lay like that and control your car and *not* get sick?”

“I dunno. I just can.” Jenny giggled softly, grinning. “Going down, Ash.” She pushed on her nitrous hard, attempting to slide up behind Ash and spin the tuner's virtual ride out.

She failed when Ash lit her own nitrous long enough to get in front of Jenny's car and let Jenny slam into her from behind, providing a large boost of velocity. “Not quite, Jenny.”

“*How did we wind up like this,*” Emily thought to herself, yet she still smiled. “*We're literally flirting with disaster here, yet... it feels good.*”

The playful barbs Ash and Jenny were exchanging were punctuated with a twitch, a caress, or a playful swat. Ash soared through the race, though Jenny was hot on her heels—and succeeded in spinning Ash out on the last turn before the finish line, claiming the victory. She clasped one of Ash's feet between hers, giggling.

Ash knew it was Jenny, due to the smooth metal texture of her toe-ring, and grinned. “Well played, you devious...”

“Bitch?” Jenny giggled and nodded as Ash tossed her controller to Emily and slid her hand unhesitatingly up Jenny's shirt, tickling at her stomach, which elicited a giggle from Jenny.

“Mmm... How about another movie?” Emily asked.

“Like what?”

“Well... my pick this time, okay?”

“All right. Hang on.” Ash closed out of the multiplayer mode and shut off her PS2, while Emily slid off the bed, clutching the blanket around her like a robe. “I still don't believe you did that,” Ash said.

“Why? Your mom gets home late. Besides, it's not like you both haven't seen me naked. And this way, I don't have to wash extraneous clothes.”

“Liar.” Jenny giggled up at her. “You just like the feeling of that blanket.”

Emily rolled her eyes. "I'll go put something on if you want."

"I do."

"You... you *do*?"

"Then I get the blanket." She snickered, then shrieked playfully as Emily hurled the pillow in her hand at the blonde's head.

Emily set the TV back to the digital cable and looked through the On Demand. "Mmmmh. We watched one of your picks last time, Ash, so..." She grinned at Ash as her face fell. "I think it's time we made you suffer through a romantic comedy."

"I stand corrected. *You're* the evil one, Em."

"Yep!" Emily giggled as both Ash and Jenny sat upright. She selected one she'd never seen before, and sat back on the bed.

Ash crawled between her and the blonde, and Emily spread the blanket enough for all of them. "I'll sit through it, but don't blame me if I doze off, okay?"

"Okay."

"You know," Jenny said, "if you two want to watch a 'best of both worlds' movie... I saw *Bound* in the listing."

"What is it?" Ash asked.

"Trust me when I say 'right up our alley'. It's got stuff we'll all like. Just, uh... it's the kind of thing we ought to save to watch at like, 2 A.M."

"Like?" Emily wondered.

Jenny giggled. "*Trust* me, I've seen it before."

"Heh... all right, Jenny." Ash reached out, stroking the blonde's cheek, and leaned to her left onto Emily's shoulder. Jenny leaned on Ash as they watched.

The movie was... well, crushingly boring was an uncharitable way to put it; Ash felt she could solve the movie's 'problems' in five minutes by walking into the screen, smacking all the characters and setting them down for a five-minute heart-to-heart. On the other hand, cuddling into Emily was good. Her head on Emily's shoulder, Emily wrapped her arm around Ash's shoulders, to where Jenny had access to it. Jenny's arms were around Ash's body, and Ash's arms were around Emily's. Ash had taken Emily's other hand, and they squeezed one another gently.

"*Wow. This feels...*" It hit Emily all of a sudden, and she smiled. "*This is just like the old times with Molly and Jen and Katie.*" Emily perked up, looking to her right. Unlike her old friends though, Ash and Jenny were instantly sensitive to changes in her mood or behavior; both of them looked from the TV screen to her face.

"Em?" "Emily?" They asked, nearly simultaneously, and Emily smiled broadly.

"I missed this." Emily trembled softly, taking Ash and Jenny by the hand, tugging them both close and hugging them tightly.

"Missed... what?" Jenny asked.

"A... long time ago, I had three friends: Molly, Jen, and Katie. They pretty much ditched me during our... their senior year because I was getting to be too..." She gulped, trembling with emotion and worry—that was a close call, but it seemed to slip Jenny by. "Too... too young to hang with them anymore. Now they're all off in c-college, and I'm..." She sighed. "I'm here with you two... and the both of you are going to be graduating this June, too, aren't you?"

Jenny smiled and kissed one of her cheeks while Ash kissed the other.

"Don't worry, Em. You *know* I'm not going to leave you, no matter what."

"And me... it's not like I'm going to have much chance at getting into a good school, anyway, and I'd be better off just modeling everything under the sun than getting into a bad one, I'd think."

"Tsk! Don't say that, Jenny."

"W-Why not?"

Emily scowled at her. "College is important. You *need* to get a degree."

Jenny closed her eyes in response, placing her head on Emily's shoulder. "I... I'm not really good at academic stuff. I'm horrible at math, and... well, I don't read very well. Complicated words give me a *really* hard time"

"That *settles* it, then."

Jenny's head perked up. "Hmmm?"

"I'm just going to have to tutor you."

Jenny winced. "Oh, Jeez. Are you kidding me? I've looked into those books you packed along with you, those things might as well be written in Russian."

Emily started to giggle. "Good friends are worth their weight in gold, so I'll just *have* to make sure you can both get into a good school with me. Besides, if we can still manage to hit all the gigs your mom has, we could just rent an apartment instead of doing the dorms thing."

Ash let out a groan, and nuzzled Emily's shoulder. "There's no point in arguing with you, is there?"

"Less point than arguing with me about me buying you swim-wear, Ash."

"Heh... I still have that suit, you know."

"I know. We'll *have* to open up the pool at my mom's when summer gets here."

"Did I miss something?"

"Just a bit." Emily giggled softly and kissed Jenny's cheek. "So, what d'ya say?"

"It doesn't sound like I have a choice."

"You don't, really, once Em's made up her mind."

"Dead men walking!" Emily let out a jovial and triumphant shout, raising her arms upwards in victory, throwing the blanket off of herself and them... as the door opened.

"Well, this is certainly unusual." Marie giggled quietly as the trio on the pullout bed scrambled to pull the blanket back around Emily. "Brings back memories of my college days." She walked around behind the couch, dropped her bags, and leaned over the back of the couch to stare down at the girls. "But, you know, there *is* a more comfortable bed for that kind of stuff in there?" She pointed at the door to the bedroom Ash and Emily were sharing, eliciting a blush from all three girls.

"It's... it's not like that, mom. Really."

"Ash, hon, you don't have to justify or excuse anything."

"No, really. It's not, Mrs. Upton." Emily blushed. "I'm dressed like this because I got into a hard race today at the track, and I was covered in sweat when I got home, so I took a shower. But I didn't feel like washing more clothes than I had to, so I just wrapped up in the blanket from our bed instead of getting dressed."

"Sure you did. Okay."

"No, really. We have photographic proof... Err, we will when Ash gets to her e-mail," Jenny added.

Marie laughed. "Ash, Emily, Jenny... you don't have to justify yourselves to me." She leaned down, kissing the top of Ash's head as she ruffled the hair on the other two. "Emily, have you tried calling your mother recently?"

"Er... no."

"I think I explained pretty well what was going on. By now, she *should* be back at your aunt's house if your aunt's recovery went well."

"Okay. Thanks, Mrs. Upton."

"You're welcome, dear. Have you three had dinner?" They shook their heads, and Marie smiled.

"Good, because I'm in the mood to cook!" She spun on her heel and walked towards the kitchen, leaving Emily blushing in her wake.

"I suppose I'd better... ah... go get dressed."

"Maybe a good idea," Ash teased back.

"All right then, get off me. You two are heavy!" Emily made a dramatic, teasing show of straining mightily and failing to budge Ash and Jenny, which made Ash snicker and Jenny giggle as they slid away and let the blanket-robed girl return to the bedroom.

Emily sighed softly, shrugging the blanket off and tossing it on the bed, thinking, *"I need to change these covers, too..."* She started to rummage for something spare she could wear. *"Let's see... no... dirty... no... ew."* She realized she'd found the pair of panties she'd been wearing the day she had been arrested, and scowled. *"They took my damn purse, and it figures I'd hit my period while in the holding cell."* Making a face of disgust, she briefly contemplated burning the bloody undergarments, until deciding that she would do the wash herself, tomorrow, and make damn sure to use a liberal helping of bleach in the underwear load.

"Ash!" She called out. "We've got too many clothes here, I need the laundry hamper!" Ash stuck her head back into the room. "There's too damn many clothes to keep using our suitcases as laundry hampers; can you get the hamper we had when we were here over the summer?"

"Ah, yeah. I remember where it is, I'll be right back."

Emily pulled on a tee and a pair of jeans—her last clean pair.

Ash returned with the hamper and set it down. "We running out? Do I need to do the laundry?"

"Ah, no, that's okay. It's my turn."

"Turn?"

"Yeah, remember, we took turns over the summer? You had the last turn?"

"Um... if you insist." Ash shrugged.

Emily smiled, a bit nervously. "I do insist."

"Um..." Ash blinked at her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"You're not normally so... weird over getting the laundry done."

"Well, I am tonight. Is that a problem?"

"..." Ash shrugged, walked over, and put her hands on Emily's shoulders. "You okay?"

"Just... something really embarrassing I'd rather not talk about."

The tuner waited a beat, and then smiled. "All righty." She slid close, hugging Emily, and the blue-haired bookworm sighed happily, pushing back into Ash.

"Did you hear what your mom was cooking?"

"Nah, not yet. She chased me and Jenny out when we tried to spy on her."

"Ah. It'll probably be good, anyway."

"Yep."

Emily raised her head, sniffing at the air once, twice. "Mmm, I think it's chicken, whatever it is."

"Sounds good."

"Smells good, too. Hey, I need to call my mom, okay?"

"All right." Ash slid away, and Jenny's voice called out a challenge from the other room, to which Ash grinned wolfishly. "Oh, it is *so* on, blondie!"

"In your dreams, dye-job!"

Emily giggled as Ash turned and ran back to meet the challenge and the good-natured ribbing. Then she picked up the telephone, took a deep breath, and sighed, dialing the number for her aunt's house.

The phone only rang twice, before her mother answered, "McArthur Residence."

"Mom?"

"Oh, Emily, thank god. Are you okay?"

"Isn't that my line? What's going on?"

"Never mind about that, what *happened*? You're not in trouble, are you? You're not being locked up, my god, please tell me that orange-haired wastrel didn't steal a car with you!"

"W-What?!" Emily blinked, flattened by her mother's gushing, so startled by it that she sat down, straight on the floor. "What are you *talking* about, mom?"

"Emily, the last time I spoke to you was about a week ago, and then two nights ago, I get a call saying you're *under arrest* and I had to tell the state police that I was authorizing Ash's mother to act as your guardian on my behalf! I'd have come myself, but..."

“Oh... *Oh*, oh. Jeez, I’m sorry. I should’ve called you that night. We’re fine, mom. I’m not under arrest; it was a giant, colossal error. I’m not in trouble, we did *not* steal any cars!”

“What was going on?”

“Okay, look. We... We went to a party on Friday, a Christmas Eve Party, and there were a lot of nice cars there, and Ash got into a race with this arrogant German prick and stomped him. The owner of one of these really nice cars let us keep his car until we went back to Tempest, and Jenny—that’s a new friend—and I were in the car alone, and some mall rent-a-cops decided that a couple of teenagers shouldn’t have a car like that and told the cops we stole it, but we didn’t. It’s all cleared up now.”

“You... you went to a party with strange men who own expensive cars? Emily, you’re... Oh my god, are you... You didn’t...”

Emily felt the vein in her forehead sticking up as she realized what her mother was implying.

“**Nothing** like that!” she exploded, suddenly. “It was a party arranged by Ash’s mother’s company and Porsche AG. I got to wear a really nice gown for like ten hours, drape myself over cars, I went dancing with Kay Wheeler, and Ash got into a race. Oh, and I’m getting paid.”

“You... Oh my god, Emily... you’re... you... you...” The disbelief and horror in her mother’s voice was evident, and Emily squeezed her eyes shut. “You prostituted yourself?!”

“**NO!**” Emily held a hand up in a claw. “I said it was **nothing** like that! *Uuuuurgh!* Why aren’t you listening to me, mom? You never listen!”

“But... you said you... went dancing with that boy you had such a crush over.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Mom, he’s gay. There was *nothing* like that. Nothing at all. (*Well, not unless you count Ash fingering me in a half-a-million-dollar race car, but like hell I’m going to tell you that.*)”

“What? But...”

“Mom, look. It’s fine. I’m not a whore; I didn’t have sex with any men! It was just a party, and I got to wear a beautiful dress and dance with Kay Wheeler *and* I got paid for the privilege, and Ash got to drive a really awesome car and kick some arrogant German’s ass. And why am I justifying this to you? I’m not stupid. You *know* that, why are you on my case?”

Her mother sighed. “Look, Emily... I’m worried that these people might be a bad influence on you.”

“What are you talking about, mom? I’ve never been happier.”

“But your grades are suffering...”

“*One* B-minus. From last year. This quarter’s report card, the lowest on it was a *B*, and I’m still far ahead of Ash. She may be a senior, but she’s barely passing pre-calc, and I’m passing Calculus. And what I’m learning here is a *lot* more interesting—and useful—than ‘gems’ about nineteenth-century literature. That class could put someone on amphetamines to sleep.”

“Oh god... You’re not... You’re not doing *drugs*, are you, Emily?”

“*Why me?! WHY?!*” Emily clenched her fist, feeling her fingernails bite into her palm. “Noooo, I’m not... Urgh.” She sighed, loudly. “What’s next? You’ve already called me a druggie and a whore, why not call me stupid and complete the trifecta of awful things to call your daughter? Hmm? What do I have to do to please you that doesn’t involve baking my brain with inane factoids about literature from two hundred years ago, or doing better in mathematics than ninety-nine percent of everyone out there? I’d think you’d be happy to hear from me, but all I get is accusations, so *what am I doing wrong?!*”

Boiling with emotion, Emily didn’t hear her mother’s answer the first time. Or the second.

“Emily?”

“I’m here.”

“I’m sorry.”

It threw a monkey wrench in her internal tirade. “You’re what?”

“Sorry. I’m... Look, Emily, I don’t want you making the same mistakes I made.”

“Look, I’m *sorry* I was born and I ruined your high-ambition life, mother, but *I’m* not the one who got knocked up when I was sixteen! Stop blaming me for what you hate yourself for, and *stop punishing me for it!* I’m my own person, and you have to accept that!” She stormed to her feet. “You

basically built my relationship with Molly like some kind of arranged marriage, you disapprove of everything *normal*. Can't I just be myself and not have to worry that I'm disappointing you somehow? I can't be perfect all the time! I just can't be! I got into some trouble that wasn't my fault, and as soon as the lawyer and the car's owner showed up and said what was what, the cops let me go, but *you're* not letting it go! And I tell you what happened, and you call me a whore and then ask if I'm doing drugs, what am I supposed to think?! Or feel?! Why can't you just let me have my own friends for a change, live a little and have some fun? I didn't do anything dangerous, we didn't do anything illegal! It was just a party, not... not some kind of Roman orgy or something!"

Her mother was silent for several moments after she stopped speaking, during which time Emily realized that tears were streaming down her face. Finally, her mother spoke again, "I... am sorry, Emily. I just... I just want what's best for you."

"Do you?! Or do you want what's best for *you*? You haven't liked Ash for the longest time, and that really hurts, because she's one of the best things that's ever happened to me! Can't you trust me when I tell you I'm okay? When I tell you everything is fine, that it was all a misunderstanding?"

Her mother apologized again, but Emily shook her head; she couldn't believe it. What her mother had said, had insinuated... It just hurt too deep. "Save it," she said. "How's Aunt Natalie doing?"

"... Your aunt is doing well, Emily. There was an infection as a result of the car crash, and they had to operate on it, but they got everything. It was... It was touch and go for awhile, but she's fine, she's home, resting."

"You're going to be with her for awhile, aren't you?"

"Only until the end of this week, we think. She's arranging for a nurse to come and check on her... When are you coming home, Emily?"

"I... I have no idea."

"Remember, you have class on Monday."

"(*Ugh. Right, right.*) Right. Then I guess we'll be home some time before Monday."

"All right, Emily."

Awkward silence followed, and Emily closed her eyes. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, mom. I just... Ugh. I'm sorry. I... I'll talk to you later, mom." She hung up, feeling idiotic, and looked up—Ash was standing inside the door, having shut it, staring at her. "What," she asked, bitterly, but Ash merely walked over and put her arms around Emily from the side. It broke Emily's shell of anger and bitterness, and she turned, pushing Ash straight down into the bed, pushing on top of her, into her, laying her head in Ash's chest. The tuner just held Emily for the longest time, simply stroking her hair and cuddling her close.

Finally, Emily looked up, trembling softly. "Ash, I'm sorry, I..."

"Shh, Em. I heard it, I know why you're angry."

"I'm sorry. I ruined the night, didn't I?"

"Nah. I know why you're all angry and pissed."

"Eh?"

"Yeah. It's happening to me, too, remember?" Ash squeezed her, tightly, and Emily closed her eyes again. "You lost it at your mom, Em. It happens, I guess. I heard what you said to her about what she said to you. Sounds like she took everything all wrong."

"Y-Yeah..." Emily sighed, sobbing quietly, and Ash just held her tightly.

"It's okay, Emily."

"At least you're here for me, Ash." Emily looked up, into Ash's eyes, and Ash smiled warmly, sliding a hand up to the back of the blue-haired bookworm's head, holding her tightly against her.

"I'm *always* here for you, Em. Have I ever not been?"

Choking softly, Emily licked her dried-out lips, whispering, "No, you've never not been, Ash. Thank you." Then she pushed her head into Ash's shoulder again, her eyes closing. Their embrace held for the longest time until Ash's mother called them to announce dinner.



Emily pushed herself up first, smiling softly. "Sorry I lost it, Ash," she murmured, putting her hair back in place.

"Don't worry about it."

"Okay, I won't..." Emily closed her eyes again, and sat up, slowly. "Don't mention this? I'd like not to explain it again."

"Okay, I won't, but you know my mom's probably going to ask."

Emily let out a soft sigh, and nodded. They stood up together, Emily helping to pull Ash out of their bed, and walked to the kitchen, from where the smell of chicken and lemon wafted. Four places were set at the table, each with a chicken breast, broccoli, crisp carrots, and a small pile of leafy greens, most likely lettuce and maybe some spinach.

"*Oh well. Can't win 'em all every day,*" Ash thought of the food.

"Emily? What was that about, are you okay?" Ash's mother asked as Ash and Emily took their places at the table.

Emily looked down with a sigh. "I'd really rather not talk about it."

"... Emily, dear, is everything okay?"

"Yes, everything is..." Emily started to let out an angry outburst again, but caught herself in the middle, and closed her eyes. "No. No, it's not okay, but I *really* don't want to talk about it. Please, can you let it go, Mrs. Upton?"

Marie frowned softly at Emily, staring at her with concern in her green eyes for a few moments, before nodding. "Okay, Emily. If that's what you want."

"Thank you," Emily murmured, as she picked up her fork and knife. Ash looked sidelong at her friend, whose eyes were still downcast.

Dinner was quiet and awkward for a while, but about the time Ash was finishing off her last bite of lemon chicken, Marie looked up again. "Jenny," she began, quietly. "I've been trying to talk with your mother, but she wasn't to be found yesterday. I'm sorry."

Jenny looked down, squirming softly. "Mrs. Upton, I..."

"No, it's okay." Marie leaned forward, smiling softly at the blonde girl. "You... You can stay with me as long as you need to, Jenny, even if she won't let you go home."

"I... Really?" Jenny blinked, twice, staring across the table, at Marie. Then she closed her eyes, smiled and said, "Thank you... I... Thank you, Mrs. Upton."

"You're welcome, dear; please, it's no trouble at all. I'm hardly going to kick someone out in the middle of winter."

Dinner finished quietly, and Marie announced that, unfortunately, she had an early day tomorrow, so she'd have to get to bed, which she did.

"What time is it, anyway?" Ash asked, as her mother walked up the stairs.

Emily double-checked her thick, waterproof digital watch, replying "Ten thirty."

"Okay, it's not too late... I need to call Harry, since they're going to be releasing the Monster tomorrow."

"All right."

Ash walked to the front door and pulled out her cell phone. "*I need to remember to charge this thing,*" she thought, thinking of having forgotten to do so two days ago. Her phone's battery read a nice, solid, half charge, though, so it would be fine for this call.

She found the number for Harry's cell phone in hers, saved it into her address book, and then dialed it. On the fourth ring, the phone was picked up, with a woman's voice answering, "Hello?" It was Kate.

"Kate, it's me. Is Harry around?"

"He's under a car at the moment."

"You're still at the shop?"

"No, he's under *my* car at the moment. What's on your mind?"

"Ah, they're releasing the Monster tomorrow, I wondered—"

"If we'd still come and pick it up? Of course; hang on a moment."

Kate held the phone away from her head, and Ash caught whispers of a conversation: Kate's strong, but somehow tamed tone, and Harry's thick Welsh accent, like the motor of a car. Then Ash heard the unmistakable sound of a board being rolled out from under a car, and Harry's voice on the phone.

"You there, Ash?"

"I'm here, Harry," Ash said, smiling softly to hear her mechanic's voice.

"Ahlright then. Where's the car, and when can we pick et up?"

"Um... it's at the Barnstable County evidence impound, in Cape Cod. I, uh... don't know where that is."

"Noh problem, I'll joost use a map. I'll find et. What time shoold I be there?"

"I... don't know that either, um... say, two in the afternoon?"

"Ahlright, then. Noh problem."

"Thanks, Harry. Goodnight."

"Night, lorve. Oh, an' Kate says goodnight, too. Was 'at really your blue-haired friend that nearly beat her to-day?"

"Yeah, that was Emily."

"A Porsche Carrera GT. How in the hell you landed that, I've noh idea, an' I'm not sure I want toh. She says she'd lorve a rematch, but if I'm cohmin' down in that flatbed, she'll have toh stay an' man the shop."

"Ah, well, that's a shame."

"Aye, it is. I wanted toh see that. Anyway, have a good night, I'll be at the Barnstable Impound at two tomorrow."

"Okay. Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight."

The call ended, and Emily smiled from behind Ash on the couch. "Two o'clock tomorrow, eh?"

"Yep. Then we can send my fallen warrior home."

Ash let out a wry smile, and it cracked Emily up. "On its truck if not with it, huh?"

"What?" Jenny and Ash asked at the same time, as Ash's grin transitioned to confused, and Emily just fell back, giggling and clutching her stomach.

Jenny yawned, softly. "I'm tired as a dog. You two mind waking me up when it's time to watch the movie?"

"Sure," Ash replied.

"I guess that means we stay up, huh? I'm not tired."

"Me either... Drive?"

"I'm driving," Emily replied with a grin.

Ash smiled. "Oh, okay." Emily held out her hand as Ash chuckled the Carrera's keys to her.

### On The Highway, 11:37 PM

"We're almost inland. Should I turn off?"

"Off the highway?" The Carrera GT was rasping along at an easy sixty-five miles an hour, hardly even trying to maintain the speed, as they traveled westbound. "You enjoying it?" Emily nodded, and Ash grinned. "Punch that shit."

Emily grinned back; her revs were starting to get high as her speed crept up. She saw the opening, put on her signal, and slid to the left lane. Clear road ahead, and she could get past the 18-wheeler that had been in front of her for ten minutes. It was trivially easy, but Emily still smiled as the Carrera GT's engine howled, imagining it for the briefest moment as a monster let loose to stretch its legs and pounce after having been kept in strict check. The mammoth engine behind her pushed the car to eighty without hardly trying; her revs were high enough, close to the red.

"*I could just drop it into third and keep going.*" The Carrera GT would certainly take it and keep going without difficulty. The temptation was strong—too strong. Emily had the Porsche in third gear and only realized she needed to slow down when she had overtaken another tractor trailer and looked down to see she was pushing a hundred and five. She pressed down on the brake, brought the car's speed down to something approaching the legal limit, and down-shifted, while Ash laughed at her.

"And now comes the hard part: now that you *can* handle a car at high speeds, *not* pushing it to high speeds on the public roads."

"Heh, yeah." Emily blushed bright red, as she kept it down to the sane speeds.

"You know, Em... You're incredible."

"I am?"

"You are. I was... Well, remember how you all-but jumped me after that race at Truro? I was *really*..." Ash blushed. "Really hot for you, watching that... God, I feel so girly, but it's true, watching you straight-up stare down the Kamikaze like I did and tell her to get in her car... And then you took off like that. That was *intense*."

"Yeah... It was amazing. I honestly didn't think I'd stand a ghost of a chance of winning, let alone have lost by only having a few yards of pavement less than I needed."

"Kinda like me—when I lost to her, I had a few yards too *many*." Ash grinned, and Emily grinned back at her. "Why'd you want it so bad, though?"

"Um... Promise you won't get mad?"

"I promise."

Emily gulped, focusing on the road ahead of her for a few moments, blushing hard red as she realized she'd have to fess up. "*I couldn't* let you race her."

"Er... *what*?" Disbelief, confusion, anger crept into Ash's voice.

"(*She has a right to be mad.*) Please, listen... I... I was protecting you."

"From *what*? Kate *likes* me, remember? She's not gonna run me off the road!"

"No... From yourself."

"But—wah?"

Emily took in a deep breath, and let out a sigh. "Remember that night you beat Aiden? I knew that if you took Kate on, at the speedway, in this car, and *won*... you'd be beating yourself up for winning by equipment advantage instead of skill alone, and it would make you angry and depressed at yourself. But if you took her on with this car, and *lost*, you'd be beating yourself up for losing in a vastly superior car, which would be, well... devastating to your ego. Lose if you win, and lose if you lose. The only way to keep you from losing was not to let you play the game, and the only way to do that was to do it *myself*."

"I..." Ash struggled for words.

"Please... I know it was sneaky and manipulative, but... I just wanted to protect you, to keep you happy."

"... Did you enjoy it?"

"What? Manipulating you? Of course not!"

"No, racing the Kamikaze, in this car."

"Second-best thing I've ever felt in my life."

"What was the first?"

Emily smirked. "Having your finger inside me and your lips on my neck, in this car."

The tables turned, it was *Ash's* turn to blush bright red again. "You were racing to win, right?"

"Hell yes."

"From how long?"

"The moment I realized that black thing in the rear-view was Kate's XKR... No, that's wrong. It was before that. When we were revving up and burning our tires. That's when I knew I wasn't just going to pussyfoot around. That's when I started to *want* it. The win... I wanted it so bad."

“Heh. Would’ve been fuck-awesome, being the first high-schooler to hand Kate a loss, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah it would’ve been...” Emily sighed.

“Hey, you’ve got another year and a half. I’ve only got six more months.”

“Really?”

“Really. After seeing that, I *know* you’re going to be the next King of the Mountain. You might even take it from me while I’m still in high school.”

“I dunno about that, Ash... I’m not nearly that good.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Emily.”

“Sorry. Can’t help it; it’s the hormones.”

“Bullshit. I have the same chemical cocktail in my head as you have in yours. You’re just too modest.” Ash grinned, pinching Emily’s arm, and Emily giggled.

“Okay, okay... So, tell me something.”

“Mmmh?”

“If you were so hot for me, why didn’t you jump me when we got home?”

“Ah... Well, y’know, we’re both enjoying that most *lovely* feature of the feminine biology...”

“That wouldn’t have stopped you from kissing me.”

“Yeah... actually...” Ash sighed. “Jenny kind of fucked-up my world on the ride home. She asked what the Misfile was.”

“Oh... *Fuck*, she said she’d drop it.” Emily scowled.

It wasn’t often Emily cursed, and it got Ash’s attention. “You knew she knew? What’s going on?”

“Okay, okay... That night, that night Joshua smashed up your car... I woke up from a nightmare, remember?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, you weren’t in bed, but she was, and I was panicking, and she was holding me. I was talking with my eyes closed, and the dream was about the Misfile, and it spooked the hell out of me, and I said that word around her...”

“Oh... crap. So, if she heard it once from you, and she got a reaction like that out of me...” Ash sighed. “Fucking great.”

“Yyyyyyep. She ain’t gonna let it go. Maybe... maybe we can try pleading with her? I dunno.”

“Me either. So, um... what was this dream about?”

“...”

“Emily?”

“Ash, promise me you won’t... won’t freak.”

Ash laughed. “You’ve just told me that you *deliberately* stole from me my one potential chance to actually defeat Kamikaze Kate, not out of a desire to do it yourself, but specifically *to* keep me from my victory, *and* that Jenny has just enough information to be absolutely destructive if she ever meets Vashiel, or says enough wrong shit around someone who knows him. What could be worse?”

“The dream... Ash, it was about what would happen if *you* were re-filed, but I *wasn’t*.”

“I... oh. How bad was it?”

“Well... God, I can’t even remember that face anymore...” Emily snorted. “Even when male-you is the specter that haunts my dreams, I can’t picture it... In short, I had... the life my mom wanted me to have. Rich... well, not filthy rich, but I was a biochemical researcher with some big company like Pfizer or Wyeth, and I was married to an M.D. named Joseph Manderly.

“It’s weird that you can remember a detail like that in its own right, but please, continue.”

Emily smirked softly at Ash. “Don’t you remember the details of that sex dream you had of me last summer?”

Ash’s cheeks lightly reddened and she grinned. “Okay, point. Please, continue?”

“Yeah. Well, it was... stifling. The dream started with him wanting to have sex with me, but I... just didn’t want to. I guess I was like, I dunno, thirtyish. I forget the exact number now. I used work as an

excuse to leave, even though I had nothing to do and probably could've just taken the day off, especially as it was supposed to be my anniversary."

"This is a disturbing amount of detail, but keep going. When does it get to me?"

"In a while... Anyway, my life was on the rocks, marriage was... suffocating and disappointing. I remember, particularly, that he'd made me sell a 350Z, in preparation to have children. He bought me a *minivan*, Ash, a *minivan*." Emily blanched with distaste, as did Ash. "And yet he drove something like your dad's car, some kind of really powerful Audi he didn't know how to do anything with. My 240SX was in the yard, and I got it out and took it to work instead, but my boss just handed me a huge bonus and told me to go home, but I didn't. He called me on the road, asking if it was the Ford minivan that was the problem, then offered to replace it with the latest Town & Country..."

"Um, wow... I guess that's..."

"Galling, especially after what I've done in this Carrera GT. The idea that I'm some kind of frail or fragile flower who can't be trusted with a powerful car... Ugh." Emily scowled.

"You *know* flat-out that's bullshit, Emily. Flat *bullshit*. You've raced the Kamikaze and lost by less than a front quarter panel. You've pulled off a perfect sidelong drift in your 240SX, and you've *beaten* me in my own Monster XR. You've driven a stock Porsche 996, and *won* against one of the local talent's best racers, in his race-tuned Toyota Spyder."

"I *know*, Ash. It's just..." Emily sighed. "What man could accept that? What guy could accept a wife who does stereotypically 'guy' things, and does them far better than he can?"

"Harry can," Ash pointed out.

"Okay, yeah..."

"And so can I." Ash put her hand on Emily's on top of the gearshift knob. "Even if I'm not really, y'know, a guy right now..."

"Heh. That's something I never thought I'd hear you say."

Ash shrugged. "Well...I... I guess it was bound to happen. I've been living in this body for so long. It's not like I've, y'know, *forgotten* what it feels like to be a boy, but... it's a lot better with you, too. My whole life is." Ash squeezed Emily's hand.

"My life's a lot better with you, too, Ash." Emily smiled warmly, and turned her hand up, lacing her fingers with Ash's, briefly but expressively. She stroked her fingertip over the back of Ash's hand.

"Yeah... Hey, Emily. This stuff is starting to come off my nails. You... think I should reapply it?"

"Mmmh. What do *you* think about that?"

"Well... On the one hand, it makes me feel really... I dunno, even. I guess if I think about it, I have to ask *why* it should make me feel bad. And that scares me."

Emily giggled, quietly. "Oh, go on. It's not like if we're half-way through putting it on, you get a masculinity-lack crisis and need to take it off, we can't just pull it off with acetone and go watch an anime or action movie to cleanse your palette and get the testosterone pumping."

Ash cracked up and squeezed her friend's hand. "Okay."

"Yeah. You know, I've actually been thinking about it. I looked up gender-identity disorder a while ago. I think you don't actually have it."

"Er..."

"GID, properly—to the best of my knowledge—comes when someone's brain-chemistry is out of alignment with their physical state. But you... your brain chemistry is normal for a teenage girl. It's only your memories which give you any pause."

"Are you saying... I'd be better off if the Misfile were locked down by having my file read 'female' instead?"

"Absolutely not. We *are* our memories; without them, we equal nothing. Your memories, memories of being a boy for seventeen years, and then becoming a girl thanks to a pot-smoking Angel's mistake, memories of having met me as his *other* mistake, memories of having lived in the body you weren't born with... All of it, all of it, absolutely every single one, *makes* you Ash, Ash Upton."

Ash smirked at her, and grinned. “You use my last name when you’re being serious. Why?”

“I dunno, your name slides smoothly off my tongue.”

“Heh. As opposed to yours; your name is so *serious*, so *Highlander*.”

Emily let out a sigh. “My name is *Irish*, not Scottish.”

Ash blinked. “Er... sorry?”

“It’s okay. Just... Yeah, it’s fine. That just irks me.”

Ash smiled at her. “Okay, fair enough. But you’ve pushed us off-topic, haven’t you?”

“Yeah...”

“No more stalling. What was so bad?”

“Okay...” Emily sighed, again, before continuing, “You were a boy. With the Misfile fixed, you didn’t know me. *At all*. And I... I found you. Tried to be your friend again, tried to get you to talk to your mom... but you wouldn’t have any of it; you thought I was some creepy psycho-stalker girl. I ran into you again, on the Mountain, and we had another bit of a fight. And it made me so sad when you just told me to stay away; it upset me. I hallucinated you—you, now—in my car, as I was driving down the mountain, but I was crying by the end, and... Well, there was a wreck, then I was dying... And that’s when I saw me, *me*, now, above me, telling me not to be sad, because it was *her* dream—*my* dream, not thirty-something me’s dream, and that... Okay, I’m babbling.”

“Yeah, but you sound freaked.” Ash put her hand on Emily’s shoulder.

“I...”

“It freaks me, too. The thought of not knowing you... the thought of... of you... being alone, with a me who’s not-me.”

“Is it possible?”

“What?”

“Is it possible that boy-you, without remembering the Misfile, would have been that way?”

Ash was quiet for a few moments, but even before she spoke, Emily knew the answer, which had a cold fist clenching her gut.

“Yes... I think... I think that’s entirely possible. You know me better than anyone knows me, and if you tried to use what you know to get close to me... I’d probably freak worse than I did when Missi tried to get close to me.”

“... Ash, it scares me. The thought of...”

“Not having me.” Ash slid her hand back down, over top of Emily’s, squeezing it, tightly. “It scares the hell out of me, the thought of not having you.”

They held like that, quietly for a few moments, and Ash smiled. “I love you, Emily. And I know you love me, too. That makes it... so much better. I don’t know that I’ll ever feel, well... ‘normal’, but normal can be overrated. You said it yourself—if I’m happy, what does it matter? Well, I think now, the answer is—I don’t know. I was so *sure* then, but now... it’s not so bad-seeming. Especially with that little graphic illustration of how bad it could have been... What was I driving?”

“Huh?”

“What car did I have?”

“Oh, um... Mustang GT. The current generation, I think, the one they just rolled out.”

Ash chuckled. “And, hell. I’ve driven better cars at seventeen, as a result of the Misfile than your dream put me in at the age of what, thirty? Something like that.”

Emily blinked, and giggled happily. “Wow. You’re shining a light through all the silver linings you can find, aren’t you?”

“Well, it beats moping and being miserable, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah... yeah, it does.” Emily smiled, warmly. “This feels good.”

“Yeah, I know. Right here, right now, you and I... this feels—”

Ash was interrupted by the sudden flash of lights and blare of sirens behind them.

“Crap,” she finished.

The traffic on the road pulled over—as did Emily—but then Emily swore as the patrol car slid in behind them. “Oh, for fuck’s sake.” She pulled the car fully off to the shoulder of the road. “Call your mom, Ash.”

“But she’s—”

*“Just do it, now!”*

Ash fished for her cell phone, as Emily fished for her own, looking around. “This is *not* a well-lit area,” she commented; it was the middle of the road in the middle of the night. She checked the time; it was 12:03.

“Mom, we’ve been stopped on the highway. Ah... I dunno. Where are we?”

Emily pulled the GPS unit towards her. “Route six, half-mile west of Quaker Meeting House Road.” Then she saw who was getting out of the car. “... Motherfucker, it’s him!”

“Who?”

“The guy who tased us. Palmer!” Emily bit her lip. “Another five miles and we’d be out of his jurisdiction...” The car was still in gear; her foot was just on the brake. Her hand twitched. She had only to move her foot from the brake to the gas and she’d be in second gear before he even got back into his cruiser. At the speed the Carrera GT could reach, she’d be in the next county before he got backup called.

*“Which is worse: having done nothing wrong and being stopped by Palmer, or being arrested by Plymouth County’s state troopers for having evaded a lawful stop?”*

She was considering it seriously; Ash knew she was. “Emily...”

Emily blinked once. “We can get away from him... I don’t want to be tased again.”

“Em...”

Cursing quietly, Emily took the Carrera out of gear and shut the engine off.

“Mom’s calling Lt. Grayfield. She gave mom her cell number after last time.”

The rap on the window came as a surprise, starting them both. Then the light shone in.

“You have the right to remain silent, Ash. *Use it*. Don’t say a thing you don’t have to.” Emily rolled the window down, but stared straight ahead as the officer crouched down.

“Well, well... License and registration, and keep your hands where I can see them. Both of you.”

Emily pulled her purse off the floor by Ash’s seat. Carefully and quietly, she reached in with two fingers, taking out her driver’s license. Ash took the registration out of the glove box, also slowly. Emily passed them out, and the officer made a big deal of checking them; he even radioed in the license number, the registration, and the plate number, making the dispatcher check them all.

“Well now. You do know, you’re in a *heap* of trouble, don’cha girl?”

“Am I being charged with a crime?”

“Do you know how fast you were going back there?”

“Sixty-five miles an hour.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you were.”

Ash looked like she wanted to say something, but Emily put her hand on Ash’s, squeezing it. “Am I being accused of speeding?”

“Well, now... you know, my radar gun’s faulty. Could’a been wrong, so I had to pace you... I clocked you at sixty-six...”

Emily *squeezed*, because she knew the tensing in Ash’s hand was her preparing to say something.

“Are you going to write me a citation?”

“Mmmmh. You know... it says here, you’re only sixteen years old. Does the word ‘curfew’ mean a thing to you?”

It was very galling—especially since she knew it wasn’t true. “Are we in the jurisdiction of a township which has enacted a curfew?”

It worked—sort of. Palmer lost his temper before Emily did, leaned close to the Carrera’s door, and reached in and grabbed Emily’s cheek. She yelped as he turned her head to face him. “You think

you're so smart, don't you, girl? Think my boss likes you more than she's loyal to her own? You watch yourself, girl. One mistake, and I *will* get you."

"Officer Palmer," Emily guttered out through clenched teeth, "Take your hands off me, or I *will* have you charged with assault."

"Oh really? And what makes you think you'll prove it?"

"You have a dashboard camera."

"Really? That a fact? Seems the patrol car I was moved to has a faulty camera."

*Click.* "Mine's not faulty," Ash said; she had taken a picture of Palmer's hand on Emily's head with her cell phone. "Take your hands off her, now."

"*Ash,*" Emily hissed, terrified.

Palmer bared his teeth, but his radio chattered. "Officer Palmer, respond." He took his hand off Emily's face to respond.

"Palmer here. Go ahead."

"Lieutenant Grayfield's ordered you to return to the barracks."

"I've got a motorist stopped,"

"*Now*, Officer. Let the motorist go and return to barracks."

"Affirmative."

Palmer rocked back. "Well, well... Go on now, git." He straightened up and took his nightstick from his belt. Emily bit her lip as he turned around, walking back slowly, spinning the stick on his finger.

Emily could just see it now: he'd say something smart like, "By the way, your tail-light's out," and smash the rear light on the Carrera GT. Her hand flew to the key, starting the car as he was getting even with the engine. She could do it: get the gear-shifter in her hand, pull the car into first gear, floor the gas, and she'd be off.

But Ash's hand got to the shifter first, holding it out of gear. "Don't," she hissed in Emily's ear, cell phone in hand, looking out the tiny window behind them.

Emily bit her lip, her hand on Ash's, waiting for that shattering sound of glass. She stared out the side-view mirror. Palmer looked back, opening his mouth... but he must have seen the phone again, and he just turned around, walking on back to his cruiser. Emily let out a heavy rush of breath as the police car's lights turned off and the cruiser pulled out and away.

Then Emily slumped forward, putting her forehead on the steering wheel and groaning.

Ash put her hand on Emily's shoulder. "Emily? You okay?"

"Yeah... Yeah, I'm fine. God, I thought he was going to smash the tail-light."

"He *was*. That's why I was ready to take a picture of it."

Emily sighed. "God, I..."

"That fucktard... he has it out for you. That's the guy?"

"That's the guy."

"We'll give this picture to Lieutenant Grayfield when we give her the video that Jenny sent to me, too. Can't we get him in deep shit for this?"

"In theory, yes... this is assault and harassment. In practice... I don't know. Maybe we should just let it go."

"No way. You stared down the *Kamikaze*; you're going to let this punk hide behind a little silver badge when he's laying his hands on you?"

Emily closed her eyes. "I just want him to leave me alone."

"Then we'll let Lieutenant Grayfield handle it. Speaking of which, I need to call mom and tell her we're fine. Let's go home."

"O-Okay."



Upton Residence, December 30, 12:45 AM

The light was on in the house when they pulled up into the driveway, and Ash sighed. “What do you want to bet she’s up?”

“No bet. God, do you think she’s going to be mad?”

“I dunno. We really didn’t *need* to go out this late...”

She needn’t have worried. The very first thing Ash’s mother did when they opened the door was throw the two of them into a massive, tight bear hug. “Oh my god, are you two okay?”

“We’re fine... we’re fine...”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Marie let them go, allowing breath to resume its flow into their lungs. “Ash, Emily... what happened?”

Ash detailed how they’d been out for a drive, talking to one another, when they got stopped. She explained how Palmer had gotten out, how he’d kept saying intimidating things and switching his tactic when Emily asked him directly if they were being accused or charged, and how he’d lost his temper and grabbed her. She took out her cell phone, showing the image of Palmer with his gloved hand on Emily’s chin, holding her—it came out quite clearly, Palmer’s face visible in the light of the GPS unit’s face.

“All right, all right... I’ll call Lieutenant Grayfield again tomorrow and tell her about all of this.” Ash’s mother sighed, softly squeezing both girls again. “Please, don’t go out again tonight?”

“We won’t,” Ash said.

“Thank you. Get some sleep, you two.” She gently swatted Ash and Emily’s backs, and turned around, walking up the stairs, with Ash quickly looking away when it hit her that her mother was wearing only a shirt.

“Oi.” Jenny was sitting on the pulled-out couch, under the covers, though her arm over them showed she was at least wearing a tee. “I guess the movie’s off, eh?”

“Well, no... we can just watch it later.”

“All right.” She yawned. “Goodnight, you two.” Jenny lay back, pulling the covers up again.

“Night, Jenny,” Emily said.

“Goodnight, Jenny,” Ash followed up, and the blonde smiled at them as they walked back to their bedroom.

“What a day,” Emily commented when the door shut behind them, pulling her jacket off and tossing it over the coat tree, followed by Ash’s jacket. Emily groaned softly, sat on the bed, and pulled her winter boots off, followed by her socks, then her shirt and pants.

Ash’s hands fell to Emily’s shoulders and massaged them softly, causing Emily to sigh with newfound content.

“Yeah. What do you wanna do tomorrow?”

“I dunno.” Emily sighed. “After all this, I just want to stay home.”

“We have to go meet Harry at the impound and send the Monster home.”

“Right. And... crap, we don’t have enough seats in just the 996 for that.”

“We’ll have to drive the Carrera GT, then. *You’ll* have to drive it.”

“Me? Why me? I seem to get into trouble when I drive it.”

“Exactly. You’ve done nothing *wrong*, you have every right in the world to be driving that car.”

“I dunno, Ash.”

“You going to let yourself be bullied off the road by one asshole with a grudge?”

“I just don’t want any more trouble.”

“If he gives you any more trouble, we’ll document it, and we’ll fry his ass.”

“I dunno, Ash. Never heard of the blue wall of silence, have you?”

“Er... no.”

“It’s the colloquial expression referring to what happens when police officers form ranks to shut out outsiders investigating one of their own for wrongdoing.”

“Oh... that’s... that’s crap.”

“Yeah.” Emily rolled her shoulders into the massage, moaning softly. “That feels good. Don’t stop.”

Ash continued with one hand and undid Emily’s bra with the other. The blue-haired girl smiled as she felt it release its tight grip around her, letting it slide off her body. Ash continued to rub Emily’s shoulders, then worked down her back, eliciting a strong moan of pleasure from her.

“You like that?”

“I *love* it,” she moaned, breathlessly, leaning back into Ash. Ash’s cotton-covered breasts pressed into her back. Ash’s hands, careful but not hesitant, slid around Emily’s breasts, squeezing her softly, pinching her nipples gently between the index and middle finger of each hand. Emily let out a breathless moan, her head falling back onto Ash’s shoulder.

“Do you like this?” Ash asked, softly.

“They’re not...”

“Losing their charm?” Ash’s fingers squeezed again; Emily’s mouth popped open, breathless in pleasure. “No way.”

“Good.” Emily smiled, pushing Ash back to the bed, lying atop her as Ash softly squeezed and massaged her 34B-cups.

“Ash, we need to go home soon, don’t we?”

“Yeah...” Ash sighed, softly. “We do, I guess. It’s been great, but for once, I think I’m looking forward to even seeing Rumisiel and Vashiel. This has been a winter to remember, that’s for sure.”

“For good as much as for bad, I hope?”

“Well, that’s a hard sell...” Ash squeezed again. “Heh. It’s had its crushingly bad moments, I’ll admit, but...” She kissed Emily’s cheek, and the blue-haired bookworm let out a soft murmur of agreement. “Even getting the Monster trashed, bad as that is, can’t match knowing you love me.”

“It’s gotta be close, though.”

“Well, yeah... but you know, I *can* and **will** repair the Monster. I couldn’t replace you in a million years.”

“Mmmh. So... what do we do?”

“About?”

“Well... we send the Monster home tomorrow, and send the Carrera GT home with its owner tomorrow... well, today. Friday is New Year’s Eve. We can pack up, leave early, and be home in time to relax and enjoy it with all our friends and home-family.”

“Mmmmmh... yeah, that sounds like an idea.”

Emily giggled softly. “Now, get your clothes off. I want to fondle *your* breasts for a change.”

Ash laughed as Emily rolled off of her, kicked her panties off, and started to undress her lover.

“Impatient much?”

“Yes.”

Ash laughed as Emily undid her bra, pulling the cotton support away and hugging her from behind, pressing her arms up and into the bottom of Ash’s breasts.

“How do you feel about them, now?”

“Well... I’m not, you know, *thrilled* or anything, but—ahh!”

Emily slid her hands up, squeezing her lover’s larger breasts, getting a gasp and a soft moan from her. “What about now?”

“... Growing on me when you do that.” Ash smirked and pushed back.

Emily grinned as she let her friend push her back to the bed. Raising her legs, she slid her feet into Ash’s pants and panties at the sides, pushing them down Ash’s hips to her knees.

“In a hurry? It’s not like we can do anything.”

“Well... that’s not strictly true. It *is* possible to masturbate while you’re having a period. Without even getting blood on your fingers.”

“It... is?”

“Yeah.” Emily giggled. “But I don’t care if we do or don’t. I just want you to spoon me.”

“Done and done.” Ash giggled back quietly, divesting herself of the rest of her clothes and rolling over, as did Emily. Ash slid up against her lover’s back and pushed her legs forward to meet Emily’s. “Like this?”

“Perfect,” Emily moaned quietly, tugging the covers over them.

“So, um... how do you...”

“The clit, Ash. You can rub it, and the outside of your vagina... and play with the clitoral hood; that can feel good... and the breasts, of course...”

“Mmmh...” Ash slid her arms around Emily, hugging her, tightly. “Em?”

“Mmm?”

“Did you... want to know the details of that dream I’d had?”

“I... sure.”

“It was... We were together; you were on your back, under me... I remember holding your hand with your arm above your head, our fingers laced together.”

“Ahh, is that why you do that every time we’re face to face?”

“Yeah.”

“So... what were we... doing?”

“Mmm... grinding on each other’s thighs. I remember that quite... clearly.”

“Ahh... that sounds like fun. Guaranteed to get blood everywhere if we do it now, though.”

“Yeah...” Ash chuckled softly, and sighed, kissing Emily’s neck. “We have time, though.”

“Right. Not like we need to rush to do everything imaginable now, Ash.”

They let a few moments pass in silence before Emily broke it with a question, asking, “Ash?”

“Mmm?”

“Is... marriage important to you?”

“Marriage? Uh...”

“I’m not asking, believe me... I’m just curious.”

“Well... Hell, I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

“Just, a dream I had a while ago. I remember wedding bands on each of our hands, identical.”

“Oh. Was I a boy then, too?”

“No, actually.” Emily smiled, and turned her head, kissing Ash’s bicep. “Don’t worry about it. I’m not going to turn into one of those creepy girlfriends who pushes to get married as fast as possible.”

“I didn’t worry about it.”

“Good. Hey, strange question... do you want to ask your mom to get us a strap-on?”

“Er...”

“Just... you know, I thought you might want to...”

“Why bother? In like, two weeks, I’ll be able to buy one for us.”

“There is that...” Emily giggled softly, sliding her legs against Ash’s. “Do you want one?”

“Well... I dunno.”

“You’re not worried about some silly thing like feeling too ‘dominating’ of me with one, are you?” Ash bit her lip, and Emily giggled, softly, pushing her neck up, into Ash’s cheek. “I’d like it, Ash. At least... I’m pretty sure I would.”

“Really?”

“Mmm-hmmm... but... would you let me use it on you in return?”

“Um...” Ash tensed up for a few moments. “I’d try. I don’t know if I could manage it, but I’d try to do it, Em.”

“You don’t have to—”

“No, I do. I really do.” Ash kissed the nape of Emily’s neck, softly. “I have to... I have to be yours, Emily, I have to prove that I can be everything for you that you are for me.”

“Ash... just be quiet and hold me. You don’t have a damn thing to prove to me.”

“What if it’s for me?”

“Then I guess I’ll wind up with a strap-on dildo above you sometime, won’t I?” Emily giggled softly; she could tell that Ash was nervous at just the thought, so she rolled half onto her side, kissing Ash’s cheek, gently. “You don’t have to prove anything, Ash. Nothing at all.” She took one of Ash’s hands, lacing their fingers together. “Not a thing, and please don’t forget that I love you just as you are.” Emily tilted her head up; Ash blushed, but tilted her head down. Their lips met, softly, warmly. The kiss held itself for long, intimate moments, Emily’s chest feeling breathless with each second, until they parted, and her tuner shifted. Letting her slide all the way to her back, Ash put her head on Emily’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Emily.”

The blue-haired girl smiled, sliding one hand around Ash’s waist from behind. “Thank you, Ash. Thank you for being here for me.”

#### Upton Residence, 9:25 AM

Sleep is a fragile peace, and by definition, one you cannot enjoy fully and remember enjoying it. Having it destroyed by the person lying against you moving suddenly and letting out a cry of sound, however, is altogether a different classification of having one’s sleep disturbed.

“*Mnyaaaaa!*” Ash’s cry was soul wrenching, familiar, and yet very, very terrifying. It was pleasure, no doubt; Emily had heard that cry before. But this time, as she was inhaling to say something smart, instinct stopped her, recognizing the horror and negativity that laced her lover’s voice.

“Ash,” she quietly asked, propping up on her elbow, staring into Ash’s face. Her lover’s face was white, but slowly going beet-red; her eyes disturbed. “Ash?”

Ash’s eyes latched onto Emily’s. For a brief, terrifying moment, Emily saw horror cross her friend’s eyes at the sight of her, then she seemed to relax, pressing her hand to her chest, as if reassuring herself that she still existed.

“Ash?” The tuner’s breathing was excited, but she looked... scared. “Ash, what’s wrong?”

“I...” Ash blinked. Gulped, visibly, and shivered.

“Was it the same dream as last time?” Emily asked quietly, as she sat up, slowly putting her arms around Ash. To Emily’s horror, Ash actually *flinched* at first, before seeming to check herself. Then she turned, and hugged Emily tightly, pushing her to the bed.

“It... Ugh...”

“Ash, tell me.” Worried now, Emily slid her head under Ash’s, staring into her eyes as the sun filtered in through the drawn shades.

Ash shook her head, trembling. “I... I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Ash, something has you terrified. Please, what’s wrong?”

“I... that dream...”

“It... Ash, what... Did you...”

“It...” Ash shook her head. “Please. You... a-and Jenny... and Missi... and I was... w-wearing one of those French maid outfits... a-and you started to...”

Emily shushed Ash, quietly, holding her head to her shoulder. “Shh. Shhhhh, it’s okay, Ash. Calm down, you’re not in any danger.”

“I-I *know*... but...” Ash trembled again.

“That sound... That was an orgasm, wasn’t it?” Ash bit her lip, and a bit of Emily’s shoulder, and Emily knew. “You had a dream that freaked you. It happens, Ash. Are you okay?”

“I don’t know, Em... I... I feel really bad, because it... I remember it feeling so *good*...”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Ash shook her head. “No. I... I just... I felt so *helpless*, so... so controlled, and I remember feeling like I *liked* it.”

“Does that scare you? The thought that you might be able to enjoy something like that?” Ash nodded, and Emily kissed her cheek. “Ash, dreams can be weird. Remember, I’ve had sex with another girl, *as a boy*, in my dreams. It doesn’t mean anything about who you are, so... It was just a dream that scared you, okay? Please don’t be afraid of me.”

The thought of Ash being afraid of her terrified Emily to her core, but Ash’s arms wrapped around her back, squeezing her, so she squeezed Ash in return. “I-I’m not afraid of you. It just shook me...”

“You’re starting to explore ideas you’ve never thought before, Ash. With me, talking with me, even doing some. It’s bound to make your mind come up with some strange things, but that’s fine. Even if you do wind up into submission, that’s... Well, who’s to say that’s really you? What gets you off and who you are aren’t very related at all.”

“Em? Not helping my self-image here.”

“Right... Look, Ash... you’re you. A dream that freaked you out by taking something you’re just hesitantly starting to approach with an attitude that’s *not* pure rejection... *believe* me, I know how terrifying that can be.” Emily kissed Ash’s cheek again. “But it’s one thing to face a core facet of yourself having revealed itself to not be what you always thought it was; it’s another to take a dream like this out of context. It’s just a single dream, it means nothing.”

“You... really think so?”

“Yeah, I do. Now, if it starts recurring, you *might* be in trouble; but just once? Nah.”

“... What did you mean, core facet of yourself?”

“When I had to confront the idea that I was attracted to a beautiful girl, emotionally, intellectually—yes, intellectually—sexually... the whole gamut. All of it: wanting to be *with* you, to have you, to be had by you. It was even more of a shock when I realized that *other* girls were turning me on that way. With just you, I could rationalize that I was attracted to your personality, and maybe just capable of compromising on your body, but... Ash, forget it. Just hold me, or let me hold you. Let’s just forget it, and comfort one another, okay?”

Ash blinked then grinned. “What do you need comforting from?”

“When I saw horror in your eyes when you saw me... that was the scariest thing I could’ve seen.”

“... I’m sorry.” Ash curled up, rolling to the side, holding Emily against her.

“Don’t be. So, a French maid’s outfit, huh?” Ash groaned softly, and Emily giggled. “You like that kind of thing?”

“Not *on* me!”

“What about on me?”

Ash looked down as Emily looked up into her eyes. Ash blinked a few times and then shook her head. “Uh... No, no, I don’t think so... That would be too, uhm... It would make you too... I dunno, what’s the word...”

“Servile?”

“Yeah. That’s not you, and it’s *not* what I like, either.”

“Okay. Then maybe, Ash... sometimes a costume is just a costume?”

“... Yeah. Maybe.”

Emily nuzzled into Ash’s throat. “So, the three girls you’ve ever had a ‘thing’ with, all presumably over you... You wanna tell me about it?”

“Not really.”

“Where was I, at least?”

“Really don’t want to talk about it.”

Emily giggled softly. “All right, all right. I wasn’t being horrible to you, was I?”

“Well... n-n-no, not really. It’s just... I don’t want things to be like that...”

“Being gang-banged?”

“Yeah. Exactly how I don’t want things to be.”

“Okay, that’s fine...” Emily grinned. “Mmmmh. You know, my dream was pretty nice.”

“What was it?”

“I hardly remember, except I remember it was warm, and dark, and you were holding me.”

“That’s exactly how we went to sleep.”

“Yeah, I know.” Emily giggled quietly. “So, time to get up, mmm?”

“Ugh. Just let me veg out for awhile, okay?”

“Yeah... okay.”

Emily smiled and kissed Ash’s cheek, warmly.

#### Upton Residence, 10:03 AM

Showered and dressed, Emily and Ash walked out of their bedroom. Jenny was nowhere to be found when they emerged, but just as Emily was curiously musing where she was, Ash pointed up the stairs; the sound of the water starting to run made it clear she was using the master shower.

“Ah, all right. So...” Emily shrugged, and smiled, sitting on the pulled-out couch-bed. “What should we do? Make breakfast?”

“Sounds like an idea. Want me to?”

“Nah, let’s do it together.”

The duo were almost finished making breakfast—omelets again—when Jenny craned her head in through the doorway. “Hey! Something smells good,” she remarked with a broad grin.

Ash looked up from the stove, smiling at her. “Glad you think so. C’mon, breakfast’s almost ready!”

“Oh, great. But why don’t we pull out the folding tables and start the movie?”

Ash looked at Emily, who shrugged. “Sounds fine to me,” the bookworm replied.

“All right, you two handle the tables, I’ll get the plates,” Ash said.

Ash walked back out to the main room as Emily finished getting the tables set up at the end of the pulled-out couch-bed. Ash was carrying the three plates, each with an omelet and an apple on it, balanced in her arms.

“That’s a neat trick, Ash,” Emily teased her. “Guess that time you spent as a waitress at the Ale House taught you a few tricks, mmm?”

Ash chuckled and shook her head. “Yeah yeah, sure. Here.” She smoothly deposited the plates as Jenny was navigating the On-Demand menus. “I’ll go get the drinks.” Ash walked back to the kitchen and poured three glasses of orange juice. Noting that the bottle was nearly empty, she frowned and wrote a note on the pad on the fridge door to get more.

“So, what’s this movie about?” Emily asked as Ash set down the drinks and utensils, taking the seat on the right with Emily in the middle and Jenny on the left.

“Okay, it’s a mob film, right? This jackass Caesar is a money launderer for the mob, and he discovers one of his toadies has been stealing from him, to the tune of two million. But that’s just the background, the movie’s about this girl Corky, an ex-con who’s out to start a new life, and Caesar’s gangster-girl, mob-mollie type, you know?”

Ash nodded. “Okay...”

“So, well, it turns out they’re both... well, just watch the movie.”

The movie was starting, introducing Corky’s day out from prison, moving back into town, looking for work.

#### Marie Upton’s Office, Falmouth, 10:43 AM

“Yes, Henri, I know. I told you, I’ve taken care of it. You won’t ever see that dress again.”

Marie was kicked back in her chair, her legs up on her desk, talking on her headset telephone. Henri was ranting paranoid at her. “Yes, Henri, I’m positive you won’t see it again... What? No, I didn’t *burn* it! I just gave it to my daughter, since she liked it so much.” His response was blistering, and she

wincing. “What? You’d be fine if I’d *burnt* it, but now you’re yelling at me about the cost?” She sighed. “Okay, okay, fine, fine. How much do you want for it?”

The question took him aback, and she pressed the issue, “I’ve never seen my daughter so, well, *happy* to be wearing something *nice* as in that outfit. And if you don’t want it, I want it for her, so name the price!” He named a price; it was steep, unreasonably so given that he’d been willing to see it burn, but she wasn’t in the mood to argue. “All right, done... Yes, just like that. No, I’m not going to haggle you down, I just... Okay, fine. A thousand, and not a penny more... Twelve-fifty, final offer. Done? Good, done. I’ll mail you the check today.”

Henri loved to haggle, she recalled, shaking her head with a smirk—she nearly missed the next thing he said. “What? Oh, yes, the new line... You know I don’t do the modeling any more, Henri,” she chuckled, as he made another proposal. “My daughter? Sorry, not going to happen. It’s hard enough convincing Ash to get into a dress; I think she’d rather kill herself than wear less.

“Yes, yes, I know you want to find the ‘perfect’ girl to put this on, but I don’t think my daughter’s the one. She won’t agree, and I don’t think any amount of money would change that.” Thinking back to the check Mr. Almacy had cut for Ash, she was doubly sure, now.

“Although... You know, I can find you a girl,” Marie said, thinking of the blonde-haired girl on her couch—she’d probably move into the room Ash & Emily were using when they left. She had checked; Jenny had already canceled all of her daughter’s outstanding gigs, but Jenny had never had access to Henri in the first place. “Mmm, hold on, hold on, I know just the thing for you. Blonde, blue, five-four, thirty-four C. I’m positive she’ll jump at the chance.”

Henri responded agreeably, so she took down the details and bid him goodbye. She regarded the remains of the blueberry muffin on her desk. Smiling, she finished the muffin (which Henri had interrupted), and wrote out a check to Henri for the agreed-upon \$1,250. It was expensive, but Ash seemed to like it, or at least disdain it *less* than the dress she’d worn over the summer, and her daughter needed something she could wear to a nice event.

“Now, where is that bitch,” she muttered to herself, pressing the button on her phone to open the intercom to her secretary. “Janice, where’s Jenny?”

“Which one?”

“The old one.”

“Hang on a moment... She just went into Mr. Almacy’s office for something. Almacy has a meeting scheduled now, for fifteen minutes.”

“All right, Janice, thank you.” Marie yawned, stretched, and set her phone to dial her house; she wanted to talk to Jenny.

#### Upton Residence, 10:50 AM

All three of the girls had folded their tables away and were lounging on the couch-bed, watching the movie with rapt attention. Emily was blushing to a light degree—after having been seduced by Violet, Corky had been fingering the mob moll on her couch when Caesar came home. The mob money-launderer had originally drawn the correct impression, but when he saw that it was a woman, he (incorrectly) assumed it had been something innocent, blaming it on being, “Fuckin’ *dark* in here!” Corky had made a graceful exit, and Violet had made her own, some time later.

The next scene was Corky and Violet in Corky’s truck, a beat-up old Ford, making out, which was just starting when the phone rang. Ash slid away, hot and mildly aroused from the earlier scene; it had been all-too-easy to draw a great many parallels between the tomboyish butch Corky and herself, and one between the two-faced Violet, with her putting on a helpless veneer for the person she was dependent on and clearly desperate to be free from, and her competent, capable true face, and Emily.

Ash picked up the telephone up. “Upton residence. Mom, hey!”

Emily muted the TV as Ash’s mother asked, “Hey, honey, everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine, mom.”

“Good. Can I speak with Jenny?”

“Sure.” She looked up—Violet had gotten Corky’s jacket off and was fondling her through her gray bra. “Jenny, my mom wants to talk to you.” She held the phone out, and Jenny took it, sliding to the kitchen as Ash sat next to Emily.

Ash pulled the covers back up into her lap, sliding close to Emily, who smiled at Ash’s return; Ash looked back and Emily murmured, “What?”

“Nothing,” Ash smiled, as they watched the muted television screen. Violet had asked something of Corky, and the scene cut away upwards to a bedroom: bare wooden floor with strewn clothes (two pairs of women’s clothes) and only a mattress and box springs without frame. Ash leaned forward, as did Emily. They were both straining to see; the characters were on the bed together, Corky on her back, Violet on her side and against Corky’s side (much in the way Ash and Emily often slept together, but Violet was propped up on her elbow). They were hungrily devouring one another’s lips, but from the angle they were at the figures were backlit. The camera started to move around them, both teenagers straining for a glimpse as the camera swung around to reveal Corky’s left leg arched, her foot tugging the covers from the corner of the mattress, moving it back and forth.

Emily’s hand clamped onto Ash’s thigh, and Ash did likewise to Emily a second later. Then Ash moved her hand in, up to Emily’s inner thigh, stroking her through the fabric of her pants, then squeezing—which Emily returned—when they saw Violet’s right hand between Corky’s thighs. It occurred to Ash that although the actress probably *wasn’t* actually fingering her co-star, she very well *could* have been, with the angle she was using and the athletic motion of her hand. Emily’s hand slid in; it tingled, and Ash trembled as Emily’s fingertips probed her inner thigh, though no further.

The camera brought the actresses’ impressive breasts into view, heaving as Corky started to orgasm. Their faces were last, and Corky was clearly biting Violet’s middle finger in a rictus of orgasm as Violet cradled her head.

The camera cut away again, revealing the two of them lying together on the bed, under the covers this time, as dawn’s light broke. Ash was beet-red and very aroused, and she knew Emily was too. She looked over, and Emily licked her lips, blinking a few times.

“You okay?” Ash asked.

“Y-Yeah...”

“That was...”

“I really do like girls, don’t I,” Emily whispered quietly.

“You’re a hell of an actress if you don’t. God, I’m so hot.”

“Me too,” Emily whispered back.

Then Jenny walked back in. “Aw, did I miss it? The good part?” She plopped on the couch on the other side of Emily, giving a knowing smile to her two friends. “Why don’t we rewind it and watch it again?”

“You can rewind an on-demand movie?” Emily asked.

Jenny nodded, grinning. Neither Ash nor Emily had *any* objection to watching it again.

Marie Upton’s Office, 11:11 AM

“She agreed!” Marie squealed happily at Henri.

Henri was glad to hear that, and told her to have her people call his people to arrange a schedule. Marie set Janice to the task, and smiled to herself, checking her email.

She didn’t have long, however, for soon Janice’s intercom connection buzzed her again. “Marie? Jenny’s out of that meeting with the Big Boss.”

“Snag her and tell her I need to talk to her.”



Marie stood up from the chair she was sitting in and set her headset down. The door opened, and her surly co-worker entered. She didn't bother to put on a sweet face, which told Marie that: (a) she was pissed, (b) she blamed Marie, and (c) something made her absolutely certain she was safe from reprisal by Marie.

Marie put on her sweetest face. "How did your meeting with Mr. Almacy go, Jenny?"

Jenny seethed. "You didn't *tell me* the boss's son had attacked my daughter? Or that she'd taken a settlement from him without telling me?!"

"No, Jenny. I didn't see it was really relevant. The boss asked us to meet him, and we did. He apologized for his son's behavior, which both Ash and Jenny accepted, and wouldn't let us leave without making whole the damage his son had done. He pressed Jenny to name a figure, and she did."

"Are you *out* of your mind, Marie?! We could sue the boss! Have his ass and his company's! This could've netted hundreds of thousands; *millions*, even! And she took twenty-five *grand*!?"

Marie sighed, heavily. "Look, Jenny, not everyone is a back-stabbing gold-digger. She just wants to see Joshua thrown behind bars for attacking her. And frankly, I can't believe you, Jenny."

"Believe what?"

Marie leaned over her desk. "What you said to Jenny, to your own *daughter*. What you *did* to her, reporting her credit cards stolen to get her in trouble. I had to call a lawyer to the state police barracks to get her out, and call a car's legal owner all the way from Manhattan to straighten things out!"

"Stolen? I didn't report her cards as stolen; *I* merely had them canceled." Jenny shrugged off the accusation. "And when I heard from the officers that she'd been accused of stealing a car, I presumed that no-good daughter of yours had persuaded her to steal *my* Lexus."

Marie rolled her eyes, but other than the visual exasperation, she let the slight slide. "Jenny, she's your own daughter. How long are you going to keep this up?"

"Keep *what* up, Marie? No lesbian is any daughter of mine. She's ruined her image, ruined her chances of marrying well, and ruined her life."

"*No, she's torpedoed your plans to enrich yourself*," Marie thought. "Fine."

"Fine?"

"Fine. If you want to be the kind of heartless gold-digging bitch who tries to seduce other women's estranged husbands just to spite them, that's fine. I don't care. But if *you* aren't going to be a real mother to Jenny, then I'll take her in."

"I already said I don't care where she goes or what she does."

"Then give me her things."

"Her what?"

"Her things: her clothes, her possessions. And the car; I'll buy it, Jenny. You already have a car; you don't need two. I'll pay off the lease on it in one go."

"No."

"Uh, what? Why not?!"

"As far as I'm concerned, she ran away. She's old enough to take care of herself."

"But... Jenny, she's your daughter!"

"She is *not* my daughter. If *you* want her so bad, keep her. She's ruined her whole life with this little stunt."

"What stunt? What are you *talking* about, Jenny?!"

"She got weak. She stumbled, and it's over. The other girls are moving up. She's finished."

"She is not finished."

"Fine. Like I said, I don't care, Marie. If you want to make my dyke daughter your personal mission, go ahead. I have girls who need work that know what's what in this business. Excuse me." Jenny ignored Marie's sound of protestation behind her and walked out the door.

Upton Residence, 12:23 PM

“So, now the mob’s in disarray, chasing a dead man to find the money, and Violet and Corky made off with the cash,” Ash summarized the ending with a chuckle, as Corky and Violet drove off in a brand-new Ford F-450 and the credits rolled.

“Good movie?” Jenny asked.

Ash and Emily both confirmed, “Good movie.”

Emily giggled quietly. “I think we found a movie that tickles all of us.”

Ash nodded, and yawned, stretching out. “So, now... Mmmh, we need to find the evidence impound, retrieve my car, and put it on a flatbed.”

“Right, that’ll be around two P.M., so we need to find where the impound is.”

“The Carrera GT’s GPS Navigation system can probably find it for us.”

“Oooh, good point,” Ash said.

Jenny grinned. “Then I get to drive the 911!”

“Right. Oh! Ash, we need to call Lieutenant Grayfield and give her that video.”

“Oh, right.”

“We can drop it off on the way, then. Didn’t your mom give you the number?”

“I... don’t think so.”

“It’ll be in her Rolodex files, I’ll go look it up, Ash,” Emily said as she slipped out of the bed.

“All right.”

“So, what’d you think of the movie?” Jenny had slid close to Ash, turning to the side and lying back, putting her shoulders in Ash’s lap, head comfortably resting on Ash’s stomach. It was simplicity itself, the quiet intimacy and maybe even subservience of the gesture.

Ash slid her hand down, cupping Jenny’s chin, then rubbing the underside of her head softly, as she thought. “It was fantastic, really. It wasn’t mushy like most ch-err, romantic comedies,” she said, catching herself from saying ‘chick flicks’, “but it had strong... Well, I dunno, I didn’t mind watching the stuff where they were talking. It had action and suspense, and it looked like the bad guy was going to win for a while. The sex was...”

“Intense,” Jenny murmured.

Ash nodded, squeezing Jenny’s chin, softly. “If I had any complaints, it’s that there wasn’t a car chase sequence.”

“Yeah, but this was the W Brother’s first movie.”

“The W Brothers?”

“Wachowski? The guys who made The Matrix?”

“Ooooh, right.”

“Yeah, it was a low-budget one. Given that...”

“Pretty brilliant, I’d say, then,” Ash confirmed.

Jenny smiled up at Ash, took Ash’s other hand in hers, and laced their fingers together.

That was the position they were still in when Emily came back down the stairs, and she smiled at the sight of it. “*I’d be murderously jealous if that were Missi Fuller... but all I want to do is put my head on Jenny’s chest,*” she mused as she walked around the couch, crawled on from the other side, and did just that, lying back along Jenny (who wrapped her other arm around Emily’s stomach without a word).

Emily held up a piece of Post-it paper with a number. “This is Lieutenant Grayfield’s cell phone number. You call her, Ash.”

Ash took the note with her free hand, unlaced her other hand from Jenny (who wrapped it around Emily), and pulled out her cell phone.

It rang three times, then was answered with the officer’s clipped voice, “Grayfield.”

“Lieutenant Grayfield, this is Ash Upton. You, ah, wanted that video file that Jenny took and sent before her phone was smashed?”

"Yes, I did. Do you have it?"

"It finally came through on my phone. Should I bring the phone in?"

"Yes, do that."

"Okay... Um, you're not going to impound my phone, are you?"

"I'm afraid so. You'll get a receipt for it, and you can have it back when we call you."

Ash flinched; though she'd only had it for a week, she loathed the idea of not having it now. "Okay. We can do that now. Are you, uh..."

"I'm at the Barnstable County State Police Barracks. Is that a problem?"

"Um, no. No, we can do that. We'll be there shortly," Ash said before hanging up. "Damn, we're gonna need to make some calls."

"No, it's... actually, don't worry about it, I know just the thing," Emily murmured. "I'll take Jenny in the Carrera GT; I've driven this route before, and I know how to use the GPS system. Jenny can transfer your address book stuff to my phone, so we can still call your mom and such, and you follow us in the 996. When we get to the barracks, we give Lieutenant Grayfield your phone and all."

"Right, okay," Ash nodded. "Then we switch cars, 'cause I want another go."

"Heh, all right." Emily grinned at her. "Then we go to the evidence impound, meet Harry, put the Monster on his truck, and then..."

"Dunno. Oh, we'd better call Nathan and tell him he can have his car back."

"Right. After that... speed-way for one last hurrah?"

"Nah."

"Mall," Jenny suggested.

Ash and Emily looked at one another. Ash didn't look terribly happy, but Emily smiled, and Ash sighed. "All right, all right."

"Just like that? No conditions?"

"Do you *want* me to attach some conditions? I can think of a few."

"Nooo, that's quite all right," Emily grinned.

Ash thought for a moment that she saw a bit of Kate in Emily's expression.

### On The Highway Heading North, 12:35 PM

The great thing about business lunches is that the client will take you out somewhere to eat, they'll *pay* for it, and it's not even slacking off (in theory). Marie grinned to herself as the sleek black Jaguar (regarding which she still couldn't help but be proud of the fact that her daughter had *taken* it for her from the arrogant Joshua, even if she couldn't let Ash know about her feelings on the matter) roared up the freeway. She thought it might have been a slight downgrade from the Porsche, but you can't touch the price, and she liked the sound of the eight cylinders ahead of her, not to mention the all-time four-wheel drive since the weather men were predicting that the weather might get worse; they'd been blessed with two weeks of calm after that unrelenting storm.

And the music... she'd been radio-surfing, and had found a classic metal station, so she was roaring down the road to the hard sounds of Mötley Crüe singing, "Too young, too young, too young to fall in luuurve!"

*"Brings back memories..."*

Memories, specifically, of the mid 1980s. All her friends had been green with jealousy at her having scored a med-school student with a fast car. She thought back to those days, and shook her head, heavily.

*"Edward, why did you have to turn into such a bastard? You were so charming and cool when I met you. Why did everything change when I said 'I do'? Bah.*

*"Oh well. I'm not going to let it get me down. And I haven't; for fifteen years, I haven't. My only regret is that I walked out of my daughter's life as well as yours."*

She grinned widely as the song changed from the depressing Crüe song to Quiet Riot's loud and brash, "Cum on feel the noize! Girls *rock* your boyssss! We'll get wild, wild, wild!" Marie found herself singing along, "Wild, wild, wild!!!"

She almost missed the sound of her cell phone ringing. Cursing that she'd have to miss the song, she turned the radio off and answered, "Hello!"

Jenny was on the other end. "Mrs. Upton? We called Lieutenant Grayfield. She's having us hand over Ash's phone, but she says they'll probably have it for a few weeks."

"Oh, I see. Well, I expected this would happen." She sighed. "What's on your plan for the day, girls? Got anything at, say, six?"

"Um... we were going to give the phone to the Lieutenant, and then go to the evidence impound and have Ash's car put on a truck for home."

"Do you need money for the tow truck?"

"Um... no, no, Emily says we're fine."

"Okay. What's after that?"

"Well, we were thinking of the mall, actually."

"Oh, okay, the mall? That sounds good. You know, I'll meet you there around, say, six, six-thirty?"

"Um, sure."

"We need to go to the cell phone store in the mall. I need to get Ash a new phone, and get one for you, too."

"For—for me?"

"Mmm-hmm! And I want to talk to you in person, too, so... It fits nicely, okay?"

"Okay then." Jenny conferred quickly with whoever was driving the car she was in. "All right. Six thirty, we'll be at the food court by the Chick-fil-A."

"No problem; actually, it's right next to the cell phone store, so that's perfect."

"Okay then. We'll see you there, Mrs. Upton."

"All right, Jenny. Bye."

"Bye."

Marie hung up the phone and smiled to herself. "*Who would have thought I'd wind up taking in Jenny's spoiled princess? Who would have thought she'd be such a self-centered egocentric bitch as to kick her out?*" Marie's smile turned into a sad, depressed sigh, and she drove on, not even bothering to turn her music back on.

Outside The Massachusetts State Police Barracks, South Yarmouth, 1:03 PM

Two Porsches growled up into the front visitor parking lot out front of the low, yellow-painted brick building. Emily clenched the steering wheel tightly; looking to her right, she could see Jenny was just as unhappy to be back here after their many hours of unjust incarceration. Ash got out of the 996 behind them, walking forward to the Carrera GT, and Emily rolled down the window. Ash could clearly see the upset on their faces.

"Jenny, go get in the 996 and keep the engine on. Can I have the phone I need to hand over?"

Jenny passed it over, after checking that it was the right phone. "I used your phone to send the video to Emily's phone *and* Mrs. Upton's. We can't view them on these phones, since they're not powerful enough, but there's barely enough room to hold the data. They should be able to recover it on their systems."

Ash nodded, and Emily looked up at her. "Ash, don't give that phone to *anyone* but Lieutenant Grayfield herself. The last thing we need is for the blue wall of silence to 'silence' your phone like Palmer silenced Jenny's."

Ash nodded, putting the phone in the pocket of her brown bomber jacket, and leaned in, kissing Emily's cheek softly. "Just stay out here. I'll handle this, okay?"

“All right, Ash.” Emily leaned up, kissing her girlfriend’s cheek in return before Ash walked into the barracks.

A uniformed officer was sitting behind the desk, enclosed with what Ash was certain was bulletproof glass. “Can I help you?” he said, his voice coming out through the grille set in the glass.

“I’m here to see Lieutenant Grayfield.”

“What is this in reference to?”

“She asked me to bring her something, and I have it.”

“Okay. I can give it to her.” The officer indicated the slot through which something could be passed under the glass.

Ash shook her head. “She was very insistent I hand it to her directly. It’s personal.”

The officer behind the desk looked like he about to argue, but shrugged. “All right, miss. I’ll page her, have a seat.” He waved at a number of worn vinyl-upholstered chairs in an awful shade of puke-green. Ash sat in one without complaint—hardly worse than her school chairs, after all—and waited.

And waited. And waited...

Eventually it occurred to Ash that the officer at the desk hadn’t actually paged Grayfield. Ash stood up and asked, “Excuse me, is the Lieutenant coming?”

“Oh, right. I apologize, miss,” he said, giving Ash the most insincere apology she had ever heard. He finally paged Grayfield, and Ash again sat to wait.

Grayfield did show up in short order this time, walking over to Ash.

“Lieutenant Grayfield,” Ash said, rising and reaching into her pocket for the cell phone.

“Thank you for bringing this, Ash,” Grayfield said, taking the phone from Ash. “I’ll take this to the computer lab myself. The video is on here, right?” Ash nodded, and Grayfield nodded in response.

“Good. Oh, and you didn’t hear this from me, but someone’s leaning on the county prosecutor to rake Almay over the coals. The prosecutor’s not willing to consider a plea bargain at this time. Looks like you’re really going to get your date in court.”

“When will that be?”

“I can’t say. You’ll probably get some subpoenas in the mail.”

“Um... they do know I live in Tempest, right?”

“I’m sure they do, but I can make sure it’s known if you want to give me your proper address.” She took out her tape recorder and spoke, “Grayfield, Lieutenant A, with Upton, Ash, confirming mailing address of Upton, Ash.”

So Ash provided her full name and address, as well as Emily’s. “Oh, and I think Jenny’s moved in with my mom. Her mom’s kicked her out, you see.”

“Okay. Can you give us that?” Ash nodded, and provided Jenny’s full name and her mother’s Provincetown address.

“Record off,” Grayfield said and shut off her recorder. “I’ll make sure the county prosecutor gets this. You’ll probably get something in the mail sometime in January.”

“Okay. Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“It’s my job, Ash. Have a good day.”

“And you, Lieutenant,” Ash murmured, walking back out.

Emily got in the passenger’s seat as Ash left the barracks. Ash slid into the driver’s seat and checked the time—1:25. She winced. “Not gonna get there before Harry.”

“I punched in the route already. We’ll be late, but not by much if you go *now*.”

Ash put the car in gear and pulled out to the side of the road; once certain Jenny was ready to follow them, she pulled out and got onto the road.

“Okay. So, what’s the plan?”

“Well, we can call Nathan from the impound lot while Harry’s putting the Monster up on the truck and tell him he can have the Carrera back. Then we go to the mall; your mom’s meeting us at six thirty by the cell phone store.”

“Really? Why?”

“First, she wants to replace your phone, and second, to get one for Jenny.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yep.” Emily giggled quietly as they drove. “Wow, I guess that kinda *does* make you two sorta-sisters, doesn’t it?”

“Yeesh.” Ash shook her head.

Emily giggled. “What’s wrong, you two get along fine, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but... eh, if she’s my sister...”

“Well, she’s not your sister unless your mom actually *adopts* her. And anyway, it wouldn’t be like you were blood.” Emily winked.

Ash shook her head, laughing. “You’re bad.”

“No, I’m just me. Pointing out the logical flaws in your thinking.”

“Suuure.”

Emily stuck her tongue out at Ash, with a happy expression on her face, her eyes closed.

#### Barnstable County Evidence Impound, 2:13 PM

When the rasping Carrera GT pulled up the road towards the evidence impound, Ash could already see the big flatbed truck with ‘Aries’ written on the rear window and the side door panels. She smiled as she pulled into a parking space, Jenny parking the 996 beside her.

“That’s a sight for sore eyes, isn’t it, Ash?” Emily grinned at her.

Ash couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yeah... but I’m kind of afraid to see the damage to the Monster.”

“We have to look some time, don’t we?”

“Yeah. I suppose so.” Ash opened the driver’s door, and slid out of the Carrera GT, followed by Emily. Jenny likewise got out of the 996, and started to walk towards the guardhouse.

As they approached, the door on the Aries tow-truck opened, and Harry climbed out, dropping to the ground and shutting the door behind him. “Helloo Ash! And Emily, pet.” He waved at them, then blinked when he saw Jenny. “Got a new friend, pet? Gonna introduce us?”

Ash chuckled, softly. “Jenny, this is Harry. Harry, this is Jenny.”

“Pleasure to meet you, pet,” Harry said to her. “How have you been, Ash?”

“Been better, Harry. Been worse, too.”

“Awn, same ol’ story, eh? At least you’ve got your paws on that, right?” He pointed at the Carrera.

Ash laughed. “Yeah, I did. Even if Emily *did* steal my chance to beat Kate.”

“Don’t worry pet, you’ll get another crack at her. Anyway, let’s go an’ see where they’ve put my lil’ beastie, an’ see what kinda damage that tool did to her.”

The guard at the gate took a look at Ash’s driver’s license, verifying she was the owner of record of the Monster XR, and jerked his thumb to the back. “It’s in the back, under a tarp. Left you plenty of room to get the truck in, since she can’t move on her own.”

“It can’t move on its own?”

“Well, orders we have say not to move it without a truck. Whether it can move on its own or not, I don’t know.”

He opened the gate, and Ash, Harry, Emily, and Jenny proceeded in. There was clearly a car under a blue tarp, and Ash and Harry pulled the stakes up and the tarp off.

Harry swore. It’s not often he swore, but he uttered, “Bluddy hell, this is a focking mess!”

Ash trembled at the sight of her stricken car, letting out a soft gasp of emotion, then a sob. For once, she couldn’t even blame it on being a girl; Ash was certain that she would have sobbed even if she were still a boy. Fighting not to cry outright, Ash began to survey the damage.

In the light of day, the damage to the Monster XR was phenomenal. The only things that seemed *not* to be damaged were the tires. Every single panel was beaten in, banged in, and even punctured. The

mirrors had been shattered off (they were sitting in the passenger's seat) and the spoiler had been smashed away (it, too, was in the front seat, in two pieces). The windows were of course smashed, as were the headlights and taillights. The bumpers had been beaten in as well.

"Holy hell," Jenny murmured.

Emily simply shook her head in disgust. "I hope that bastard enjoys his soap on a rope time. I just wish he'd done something to me that I could press charges for, too."

"Yeah..." Harry shook his head. "Let the twat rot in prison. Sorry, Ash," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "I'll tow her back to Tempest, but this is gonna be a nasty piece of work. You have to more or less buy another Merkur for the body panels and all. That's not gonna be cheap, and neither will the fixin' part."

"I understand, Harry. As it happens... I've already got another Merkur."

"You're kiddin' me..."

"Buying a junked Merkur for the body panels is something I was already planning on doing, Harry. But when it comes down to it, I need the better car operational."

"Yeah, I see where you are goin' with this."

"Strip the body and glass, the doors and the spoiler, from the XR4Ti, and put them on the Monster. Leave the skeleton of the XR4Ti in my garage until we can repair it to snuff."

"Ahlright, if you say so pet. Are you sure about this?"

"I'm sure," Ash answered, while regarding the battered body of the Monster. "What do I owe you?"

"God, I cannot even begin. I'd need to take her back to the shop and figure out exactly what all's been done to it."

"You can just start when you get home. I'm good for the money, you know that."

"Yes, I do. Pet, this could run you thousands, though."

"It's not going to run over fifty thousand, is it?"

"Fifty thousand?!" Surprise was evident in Harry's voice. "I could build you a *new* Monster for that! Hell, you could buy a brand new Mustang GT for that!"

"Yeah, I know. The father of the guy who did this told me to tell him what it would cost to repair it. I didn't know, so he asked how much it would cost to replace the whole car, lock, stock and barrel. Then he just... cut me a check for fifty grand." Red was evident in Ash's cheeks.

"Well, if you have to get your car smashed in, I guess it helps to have it beaten up by the son of a man with deep pockets, hey?" Harry said, laughing. "Ahlright, I'll get to work when I get 'er 'ome. You want me to get the car from your dad's house and start replacing panels as soon as I get 'er in?"

Ash thought about it for a moment, then she nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, okay."

"I'll get to it, then. Oh, and Kate sends her love to all of you."

"Send mine back, Harry," Ash said while Emily voiced similar sentiments. "Need help getting it onto the truck?"

"Nah, that's fine. Be off with you; I can take care of my own creation."

Ash turned away from the Monster XR, closing her eyes to brush the tears out of them. She walked back towards the gates, Emily and Jenny following her.

They returned to the Porsches, and Emily took out her cell phone. "Now, we need to call Nathan, right?"

"Right."

Emily flipped through her address book. "Okay, I got it out of your phone." She handed the phone to Ash.

The phone was picked up on the fourth ring, "Hello, this is Nathan. Who's this, I don't recognize the number."

"It's Ash—Ash Upton?"

"Oh, Ash, great timing. Is this your cell phone?"

"Emily's, actually. The cops took mine for evidence."

“Oh, that’s a shame. Hey, great timing, though. Do you need the Carrera GT? I kinda need it for tonight.”

“Um, need it?” She looked at Jenny and Emily. There were three of them, and two cars with two seats each between them. “Um, we’re actually having another automotion crisis at the moment. Jenny’s bitch of a mom came and stole her car back.”

“What? Aw, Jeez, that’s a real bummer...”

“Hey, your mom will be meeting us at the mall,” Emily pointed out.

“Actually, there might be a way. My mom will be meeting us at the Cape Cod Mall ’round six. If you can let us drive to the mall and get it from there—”

“That’s no problem. You heading to the mall right now?”

“Yeah, we are.”

“Okay, meetcha there.” The phone sounded as if the other handset was being held away from the person speaking. “Yo, Jim-bo! Fire up the ’cuda, we gotta go down ’the mall!”

Ash chuckled softly. “Staying with Jimmy?”

“You bet. Why pay for an impersonal hotel when you get a friend’s couch to crash on? And when was the last time a hotel’s concierge invited you to a party, then?”

“Never?”

“Exactly! And sure, a hotel will call a car for you if your pockets are deep enough, but they generally don’t have Hemicudas.”

Ash laughed. “Fair ’nuff. Okay... There’s an arcade in the mall, behind the food court. Meet out front?”

“Out front? Try inside.”

“All right, see you there.” She hung up and laughed. “We’re gonna meet ’em inside the arcade.”

“All right. Driver’s seat!” Emily called.

Ash smirked. “Oh, all right.” She handed the Carrera’s keys over.

Then Jenny called “Shotgun!”

“Damn, I’m too slow today.”

Jenny tossed Ash the keys to her mother’s 996 and walked to the Carrera GT’s side as Ash walked to the driver’s seat of the 996.

### Cape Cod Mall, Hyannis, 3:15 PM

The Carrera GT and 996 rolled into the parking lot of the packed mall together, driving back to the far reaches where they could find two parking spots together. By sheer chance, they got a spot right under a parking pole sign, *and* directly next to what was unmistakably Jimmy’s ’Cuda.

“Looks like they’re here already,” Ash commented as she got out of the 996.

Jenny let out a sigh. “I don’t want to give it baaaaaack,” she whined, to which both Ash and Emily laughed.

“Yeah, but it was never ours in the first place. So we ought to be glad we had and lost, than never to have had at all.”

“Plus, I nearly beat Kate the Kamikaze in it. That was awesome,” Emily added.

Ash grinned at her. “Yeah, yeah it was.”

Jenny yawned, smiled, and looked at the mall. “C’mon. Let’s go *shopping*,” she said, with a vengeance.

“Just don’t try to use your cards this time, okay?”

“Okay.”

“We ought to give the keys to this back, though,” Ash said, fishing the keys for the Carrera GT out of Emily’s pocket.

Emily laughed and sighed sadly, staring at it. “Oh well. It was a good run.”



“Yeah, yeah it was.”

The trio turned, walking up to the mall, while Emily repeated the parking number they’d parked at to memorize it, until Ash reminded her that they had managed to park directly next to Jimmy’s Barracuda—and it was unlikely that they’d be able to miss what were probably the two fastest and most distinctive vehicles in the parking lot parked together.

“So, you think we should go back to the same store, maybe find the stuff we had to ditch last time?” Jenny asked, as they passed through the glass-enclosed foyer.

Emily shrugged; she looked at Ash, and then inexplicably grinned. “Oh, I’d love to. But we’d better cut her loose to do something else, I don’t think she could handle that.”

“Handle *what*?”

“Come with us and find out,” Jenny said with a lascivious leer that made Ash instantly wary.

But she could hardly back out now. “I have the distinct feeling I’m doomed, but we may as well get on with it, then.”

“Dead man walking!” Emily cheerfully called out, leaving Ash to hang her head as they walked through the mall.

The food court was packed, of course, so they picked their way through it.

“Mmmmh. Think your mom will treat us to dinner here?”

“I dunno, maybe. Of course, it might be more like lunch if this winds up being a late-ass night.”

“Heh. Dinner at 11, that would be messed up.”

“Eh, it’s not so bad, if you plan to stay up into the A of M, which we frequently do,” Ash replied, with a shrug. “Anyway, let’s see. They said in the arcade, so… think they’re playing Need for Speed?”

“Probably.”

Picking their way to the back of the Arcade, they found that the NFS units were in use, but not by either Nathan or Jimmy. “They’re almost certainly in here somewhere,” Ash mused, as they turned around and fanned out.

It was Emily who caught sight of the objects of their search, catching Ash’s attention with a wave. Ash walked over, presuming that Jenny would catch up to them, which predictably she did by peering around the other side of the row of consoles and moving towards them as Ash and Emily closed in.

Nathan and Jimmy were side-by-side at a shooting game, loud gunshots issuing forth from the machine’s speakers as they both furiously aimed, fired, aimed, fired, aimed, fired, and the occasional sound of the death of a monster of some stripe or another issued from the machine. Jimmy was wearing an all-black outfit, including a black dinner jacket and a bowler hat, with a white shirt and tie visible through his unbuttoned coat, while Nathan was wearing black slacks and likewise black shoes, but with a gray dress shirt, no tie, and no coat.

“I don’t get it. *How* can you possibly be better at this than me, man,” Nathan grouched as they continued to furiously fire at the screen, their plastic pistols making sharp chink-chink sounds and a plastic slide cycling on top of them each time. “How is it possible? You’ve never held a real gun in your life. I go to the range at least once a month and I’m licensed to carry a concealed firearm in five States. How can you *possibly* be doing better than me?!”

Jimmy let out a loud laugh at him, jovially shoving Nathan with his shoulder. “I’m just good, man. You mess with the best,” and the sound of a monster’s scream issued from the machine, ‘GAME OVER’ appearing over Nathan’s side; he let out a sigh of disgust, holstered the plastic pistol, and finished with Jimmy, “You die like the rest.”

“I get it, I get it.” Nathan rolled his eyes, reached up to the top of the game cabinet, pulling down a dinner jacket like the one Jimmy was wearing. “And what galls me the most,” Nathan griped at his friend—Ash held her hand out to stop Emily from moving forward, grinning at the lamentation unfolding before her—“Is that you didn’t even take your damn jacket off.” Jimmy continued to do well, as Nathan took a brown hat—a pinch-fronted fedora—down from the top of the cabinet as well, pulling it onto his head and down over his brow.

Ash snickered softly. "A fedora? Really, a fedora? Nice hat, Indiana," she ribbed him as the three approached.

The car's owner turned to face her, laughing. "What, you don't like my hat?"

"Nooo, it's fine, if you're going to a movie marathon, Dr. Jones."

"Okay, okay." Nathan pulled the hat off his head. "Had fun with my car, I hear, Blues."

"Yeah. Yeah, I did," Emily answered, while Ash grinned, dropping the keys in the hat. "Speaking of Blues," Emily said, "Are you two dressing as the Blues Brothers?"

"Very nearly, Blues," Jimmy answered, not even looking up until he, too, attained a Game Over, and holstered the pistol. "Except he's got this damn brown thing and not a proper hat."

"Everybody's hating on my hat today. What's wrong with my hat?" Nathan grouched, as he took the keys and pocketed them.

"Because we're going to a New Year's party, and you're wearing a hat that looks like the one my *granddad* wore in all the pictures I have of him."

"A New Year's party?" Ash asked, looking up. "But it's the thirtieth, not the thirty first."

Nathan and Jimmy both grinned at her, "Yeah. That's the idea."

Ash laughed. "Don't get drunk and wrap that car around a tree."

"Hah! No chance of that, King; this boy don't touch a drop, ever."

"I told you that already, didn't I?"

"Yeah, I think you did. But still... a two-day party?"

"Three day. It's not the end of the New Year till it's January second, King," Jimmy clarified.

"All right, all right. Well, thanks for the car, anyway."

"You're welcome. You *flattened* Rainer Herrbruck in my baby, and your girlfriend nearly handed *Kate* a defeat. That's worth the loan-out."

Ash chuckled at that, grinning. "It was great, you should've been there."

"I wanted to be, believe me. Oh well, the video of the race is good enough."

"Video?"

"Yeah, I've got some copies here, too," Jimmy cut in again. He picked up a bag from one of the mall's stores, took out three disks in thin, slimline containers, and handed one to each girl.

Ash grinned at the disk. "Awesome."

"Awesome? But, I lost..."

"Yeah, but you lost to Kate. You lost for the lack of only four yards. I raced Kate in my 'Cuda in August, and she flattened me. Not even *close*. Even in a Carrera GT, it's no small feat to 'just lose' to the Kamikaze."

"Yeah, fair enough... I guess she's moving up. Her Jaguar was accelerating a lot harder than it did the last time I raced her. I don't think the Monster can compete anymore."

"Sure it can. What kind of engine you got in there, Ford five-liter?" Ash nodded. "Nice, nice engine, there. Can do a crazy number of mods to make it more powerful on the cheap. I heard Kate upgraded basically her whole drivetrain, and upgraded the super on her Jag even more. You might want to think about supercharging Dr. Harrystein's monster if you need more power out of it."

"Or nitrous," Nathan interjected, to which Ash scowled at him. "What, don't like NOS?"

"Nitrous is for cowards."

"Or people who appreciate the tactical advantage a sudden burst of horsepower can provide."

"Nitrous makes you lose control."

"Sure, but it can be just the thing when you hit a straight and need to *go*, or you had a bad corner and need to get back up to speed in a hurry."

Ash crossed her arms, smirking. "Then why don't you have nitrous on the Carrera GT?"

"Are you kidding me? That's a six hundred horsepower Porsche. It's stock, and it already accelerates faster than the Space Shuttle. I have used NOS in the past. It has its advantages, but you shouldn't rely on it to win."

Jimmy laughed at him. “Not to mention it risks blowing your engine if you don’t take a lot of care to make sure the engine can handle it. Better to get more control out of your machine with a more regulated boost, like a supercharger, if you haven’t got the engine to handle natural acceleration.”

Ash rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay. Anyway, you have the keys back. Thanks for the loan.”

“No problem. Maybe I’ll let you borrow it again sometime.”

Jimmy checked his cell phone, and shook his head. “Hey, man, we gotta burn asphalt if we’re gonna get there on time.”

“What? Crap. Sorry, King, Blues, Jenny—we gotta jet.” They turned to leave, then Nathan turned around and whipped the fedora off of his head. “And since it’s apparently too dorky for me, put it to some good use with that ‘supreme tomboy’ thing, King.” He tossed the fedora to Ash, who caught it. Then Nathan turned to dash and catch Jimmy, leaving Ash blinking and holding a hat and a DVD in a CD case.

“Huh,” Ash said, shrugging, looking at the hat. “Now I’ve got a hat.” She blinked. “Where am I going to put it?”

“Your head is traditional,” Emily quipped at her, and Jenny giggled, taking a compact out of her purse, opening it as Ash put the hat on.

Ash twisted her head left and right, staring at the sight of the brown hat on her head. “Frig, I look like Indiana Jones, don’t I?”

“Kinda,” Jenny replied, and giggled. “It’s a fashion massacre, but it kind of looks okay, I guess. Just don’t wear it anywhere serious. All right, well... shopping time,” Jenny added with a ferocious grin at Emily, who nodded. Ash got a sinking feeling, as her two friends turned and led her from the arcade.

#### Cape Cod Mall, 4:11 PM

“It’s bad enough,” Ash grouched, “That I *somehow* let you two talk me into trying this, against all my better judgment, common sense, and *sanity*. But how—by the power of Grayskull—is it that *every single time* I go into a fitting room there’s a poster of my *mom* in there?”

“Really? Again? That’s *freaky*!” Emily laughed, sticking her head in.

Ash didn’t bother to freak out; Emily had seen her naked, after all, and as she had yet to get to trying on one of the ridiculously impractical and spicy lingerie things Emily had suggested (and Jenny had vociferously encouraged her to try), she didn’t mind as much, simply covering her breasts with an arm.

The poster was posted high on the wall behind her. This one showed Marie modeling a light purple, lacy-fronted bra, the (somewhat faded) caption reading, ‘Signature Collection – by Henri Leroux’ and declaring ‘In five luxurious new colors’.

“That’s not the worst, believe it or not, Ash,” Jenny said.

“What’s the worst, then?”

“Going into one of these places to try on something, and having a poster of *yourself* above you. And it’s even worse when someone sees a picture of you and asks why you don’t look as golden as you did in the picture.” Jenny pushed in through the other side of the curtain and looked up. “Yeah. So, it could be worse, you know.”

“Oh, so I just get compared to my supermodel mother instead of myself?”

“Well... no, I guess you do have the same eyes, don’t you?” Jenny grinned. “I still doubt anyone would get the connection, though.”

“Okay, okay, out, you two. Out!” Ash fought down self-consciousness enough to bare her breasts by taking her arm away, pushed both of her friends out, and pulled the curtain firmly shut on both ends. Ash turned back to the ‘outfit’ Emily had gotten to her and sighed.

“*Why in the world did I agree to even consider this?*” she asked herself as she sat down.

The response took shape, swirling out from her right shoulder in the form of her shoulder devil—and wearing the outfit that Emily had picked out for her. “*Because, inside of you, somewhere,*

*there's an uninhibited wild woman waiting to come out? It's in your blood, after all,*" the miniature figure said, pointing up at the poster.

*"Bullshit,"* another mental voice retorted, swimming out from the other side—her shoulder angel, in its traditional robe. *"It's because you want to make Emily happy so much you'll think about doing something you'd never think about doing before. But if you don't want to do it, if it makes you feel too emasculated, why do it?"*

*"Ignore this drag,"* her shoulder devil said, jerking her arm towards the angel. *"It made you feel great when Emily told you she liked it when you looked good—and when that hot blonde thing with the tits said it, too. You want to show off what your mother literally gave you. Go on, if you can. Shake what momma gave us, and don't feel bad about it, 'cause it's for your girlfriend."*

"Shut up, both of you, I'm trying to work up the nerve," Ash growled.

From outside the curtain, Emily's voice, hurt, came, "We weren't talking *that* loud!"

*"(Shit! Emily and Jenny!)"* S-*Sorry,*" Ash hurried to clarify, "I w-wasn't talking to you two!"

"Not us?" Jenny asked. "Then who?"

"Um... n-nobody; just doubts in my own head. Really, n-not you two!"

"Ooookay, this is one of the weirder things you've done, Ash... but, okay. Let's just move away for a bit, Jenny."

Ash picked up the bra and sighed. It wasn't see-through, like the ones Emily had been picking out, or tiny, like one of the ones Jenny had found. She still didn't want to try it on, let alone the panties.

*"Am I losing myself? Maybe I'm finding myself... Is this what it's come to? Giving in?"* Ash pictured herself, in a sundress with a basket of flowers and with a rainbow arcing behind her. She shivered. *"But this isn't... y'know, sugar-sweet girly stuff... This is... it's spicy, like..."* Remembering the time she had put on a ridiculously over-the-top 'girly' act to get Colin to hustle about getting her the spark plugs, she shivered again, and pictured herself in a tiny casino-girl one-piece outfit, wearing high heels and fishnet stockings, being leered at by a horde of men.

*"I can't... but... Emily's not like that."* She tried to picture Emily, wearing something that she had picked out today, in a similar situation—and couldn't. Everything Emily wore in public had been... Well, *normal*; attractive, yes, but normal. Not the kind of stuff she'd been buying here... *"But she does buy it. And it doesn't seem to be an entirely new thing, either."*

It was not easy, reconciling her image of Emily with her buying the kind of—for lack of a better word—slut-wear that she had seen Emily thinking of trying on, not to mention the red lingerie outfit at Albany. But, she had seen it with her own eyes. And long talks with Emily about the nature of her private masturbation and how most 'innocence' was just an act had revealed a side of Emily that Ash found, frankly, blazingly hot, if surprising.

*"Maybe girls just... Maybe you can wear something like this and not be a total hoe-bag? I..."* Ash looked down at the outfit in question. This time she pictured it under her normal clothes, jacket, jeans, and a T-shirt, during a race, which she won, and being revealed when Emily pulled her out of her clothes later.

*"I don't know if I can do this... but I'm going to try. If only because I think it might be a turn-on for Emily."* Ash took a deep breath and let it out. She looked up at the poster. *"Did you ever feel stupid, or silly, trying on something like this?"* She shook her head; her mother was cut from the same mental cloth as Jenny, who took to showing off like a car to road. *"Would I be different, if I was born your baby girl, instead of your son?"* It occurred to her that her mother had called her 'my tomboy', implying that girl-Ash had still been given to tomboyish clothes. *"But she did have all those spicy things in my closet. Greh. I feel like I've inherited a used and modified car and no instructions or documentation. I feel like... Well, frankly, like I've inherited someone else's life. But now it's my life. And I have to decide..."*

She looked down at the bra in her hand. *"What have I got to lose? Dignity? Nobody will see this except Emily and maybe Jenny. I don't even have to take it home, I could probably leave it here in*



*Cape Cod, and it'd just get swept up into Jenny's stuff. Dad will never see it; absolutely not Rumisiel or Vashiell... just Emily. And me... You like showing off for her, in your car, or in something 'tomboy awesome'... Why not in something that'll make her hot for me?"*

Ash sighed, heavily, regretfully. *"This would almost be easier if I could just fall back on a knee-jerk 'no' answer. This self-reflective stuff is for the birds. I don't want to face this stuff! But I have to. If I'm going to abandon the attempt to be re-filed... That means I've accepted living my life in a girl's body... no, as a girl. Am I... am I losing myself?"*

She shook her head as Emily's words came back to her. *"No. I am Ash Upton. I am who I am, who I make myself. I felt... as if something had been stolen from me when Rumisiel dropped my file in the wrong folder, and maybe it was. But I can't keep harping over it; what's done is done, this is my life now. The only choice will result in me never remembering any of this—and if that happens, am I me anymore? Or do I just black out, and some guy wakes up the next day remembering my life without the Misfile... without Emily, without any friends except James... That's suicide, only there's someone else to take my place seamlessly, and nobody else notices... isn't it? I can't do that... So where does that leave me?"*

She looked down at the bra in her hand. *"It leaves me in a lingerie store in Cape Cod, staring at an evocative bra in my hand and thinking to myself instead of either putting the damn thing on or just putting it back. Fuck it; gotta do something."*

Ash took another deep breath, then she wrapped the garment around herself, clasping the metal hooks under her breasts. She turned it around, slid through the shoulder straps, and worried the bra into position, letting it push up and support her breasts. Then she turned to face the mirror.

*"I did it."* The mint-green bra, not see-through, but with a lacy rim and exposing all of her cleavage was fitting snugly upon her person. *"I don't believe I did this..."* She shook her head. *"In for a penny; I might as well go the Full Monty."* She tugged her jeans down and off, then doffed her own panties. Closing her eyes, she stepped into the matching pair of panties, pulling them up right. They fit, but they were extremely uncomfortable, cut entirely wrong in the front and rear. *"Ech."* Ash looked down, pulling them off, and realized she'd put them on backwards.

*"Gah. D'oh!"* She sighed, and reversed them, pulling them up the correct way this time, and working them until they fit, snug. Ash crossed her arms under her breasts, pushing them up even further, staring at herself in the full-length mirror.

*"I think this is even turning me on, kinda, and I thought I was over that."* It wasn't much, but the outfit was *hot*. Picturing it on, say, Jenny... Ash shivered, shaking her head. *"This is exactly the kind of thing I can see on Jenny. I shouldn't be doing this... should I? Why am I doing it... why aren't I? Ugh... this is that self-doubt coming up. This is simple: Do I want to buy something for vanity because it will look good on me, or not? I've done it before..."* She had only to look down at the white jeans with the flame pattern crawling up to the knees, and grin.

*"Is this really so different? I bought that because I like looking good, but not being ogled for showing off skin. But I... wouldn't mind Emily ogling me. So why is this wrong?"*

Ash sighed, and slipped out of the bra, then pulled the panties off. *"Okay. I can just do this. Or I can just toss it back. It's not outwardly girly, nobody but the people I want to show this to can possibly see it..."*

Ash nodded to herself, and reached down, pulling on her clothes. She pulled the curtain away, and found Emily standing there.

"Oh! Are you done?"

"Yeah," Ash said, her voice hitching slightly before she smoothed it back out. "Yes, I'm done."

"You okay?" Emily peered at her.

Jenny leaned into view from the stall next to her. "Does it really take you an ordeal requiring ten minutes to try on one set of mildly-spicy lingerie?"

"Yes, Jenny. It really does," Ash replied glibly, and walked out with the tiny set in her hands.

“So...”

“I’ll buy them,” Ash murmured quietly to Emily, when she asked. “I don’t... I don’t know if I’ll ever wear them again, but I’ll buy them.”

“Ash, you don’t have to do this.”

“No... but I want to. I can’t be intimidated by *underwear*, after all.”

Emily’s face twisted up into a grin, and she pulled Ash close, kissing her quickly, brushing her warm tongue against Ash’s lips. “Okay.” Unsaid, but obvious to Ash in her eyes was, ‘*I’m proud of you*’, and Ash nodded in reply.

Cape Cod Mall, 6:19 PM

Ash, Emily, and Jenny exited the clothing store, each of them carrying large bags in both hands. Admittedly, only one bag in Ash’s hand was hers, the other had stuff from both Emily and Jenny in it. Fortunately, perhaps, they’d only wheedled her into buying one new pair of shoes (which were a thoroughly practical pair of black sneakers), though she hadn’t managed to get out of buying clothes.

“Do we have enough, you two think?”

Jenny and Emily looked at one another.

Ash sighed. “Forget I *asked*! Yeesh, let’s just go to the food court where we’re supposed to meet my mom, okay?”

“All right. I’m hungry, anyway,” Jenny remarked.

Ash chuckled. “Me too.”

They found Marie at the Chick-fil-A. She waved and smiled as soon as she saw them, walking towards them as the trio approached her. “There you are! Had a good run, I see?”

“Yeah, we really did,” Emily replied.

Ash just let out a sigh and a weak grin, to which her mother laughed, ruffling her hair. “All right, all right.”

Marie then looked at Jenny, and her face fell to a sad smile. She hugged the blonde girl, tightly, murmuring, “I’m sorry, Jenny.”

“Er... s-sorry for what, Mrs. Upton?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Marie clarified, and sighed. “For now, let’s get you those phones.”

They walked into the cell phone store, where a couple of geek-types wearing good shirts were waiting, one talking to another customer. The one at the back smiled at Marie. “Back for more, Ms. Marie?” he laughed.

Marie shook her head. “Afraid so.” She walked up to the desk. “My daughter’s phone was confiscated by the police as evidence, and I don’t want to wait for it to be returned, I’d rather just replace it. And Jenny here needs a new phone, and to be added to my plan.”

“Okay, I can do that. Same model as the last ones?”

Marie nodded, and the man spun into a flurry about services and charges and so forth. It was all over inside of ten minutes, but Ash was very lost by the end. Jenny, however, seemed to understand everything being said, and indeed, had walked over to a huge wall of accessories for the cell phone, and brought back a bright, metallic hot-pink cover for hers.

“Why *that* color,” Ash asked, when the four had exited the cell phone store with their new phones having been activated (the man had said they should be operating within five minutes).

“It’s distinguishable and noticeable. And I like it,” Jenny grinned.

Ash rolled her eyes good-naturedly. Hers was the default, glossy gray, as was Emily’s.

“Why not that color, Ash?” her mother asked.

Ash had no good answer, so she simply shrugged. “No idea... Anyway, we were going to get lunch, right? And one of us will need to ride back with you.”

“Er... ride back with me?”

"Yeah. Nathan needed his car back tonight, so we gave it to him. We only have your 996 now, and three of us."

"Oh... Oh, that's a problem; I'm not going home. I have to go back to the office for a while."

"Oh..." Ash and Emily and Jenny looked at one another. "Well... damn, that's not good."

"I can call a cab for you," her mother offered.

Jenny shook her head. "Don't worry about it. I can just go with you to the office and back for a while. It's not like I don't know my way around or anything," she said with a grin.

"Actually, that might be a good idea, Jenny. I have some papers I'll need you to sign on my desk. Do you mind?"

"No, not really," Jenny replied. "Guess we'll catch up to you two later tonight, then?"

"Yeah, sounds about right. See you, then." Emily waved to the two, and walked off; Ash hugged her mother and Jenny briefly, before following Emily, with Jenny waving at them.

They had made it all the way back to the 996 before it hit Ash that they had left without eating.

"Uh, Emily, why did we just *ditch* my mom and Jenny?"

"Because it just occurred to me that this is going to be the last night we have up here, and I want to do something *wild* before we have to go back to Tempest," Emily replied, as she opened the forward-mounted trunk on the 996 and started loading her bags.

"Something... wild, huh?"

"Yeah. New Year's Eve at my house typically consists of studying while maybe watching the ball drop in Times' Square. Then I get two days of weekend, followed by back to normal. And you know what? I've been there before. Literally. If this is going to be like 2002, it's just going to be a minor interval in a long and soul-crushing stint, and worse. Because after 2003 is when my mom started to *really* crack down on me; if you think you've seen bad yet, you haven't."

"Ah... Jeez, I didn't—"

"So," Emily continued, cutting her off, "I want to live it up now, before I have to go back." She grinned at Ash, who nodded.

"Okay. So, what do you want to do that's so urgent it can't wait for a Chick-fil-A sandwich?"

"Um... I don't know," she admitted.

Ash laughed. "Okay, what would you have done with Molly then?" she asked as she walked around the 996, getting into the passenger's side, while Emily slid into the driver's seat.

"Jeez... oh-three? Molly, Jen, and Katie tore out of Tempest; they went to Manhattan and watched the ball drop."

"We could make it there," Ash pointed out, "We've got a whole day to drive."

Emily nodded, but sighed. "I know, but... I don't think I really want to go to Times Square. Katie passed out at some party and got... Well, Molly stopped it before she got raped, but she was molested, for sure."

"Okay," Ash said, puffing out her cheeks, then sighing. "So, what do you want to do? I don't think you want to try crashing that party Jimmy was talking about."

"Mmmh... nah," Emily considered it briefly, then shook her head. "Maybe I'm just being stupid," Emily muttered darkly.

Ash reached over, stroking her cheek. "Don't *talk* like that." Emily looked at her. "You're exactly right. If the crackdown is Saturday, then we have the rest of Thursday and all of Friday to live it up. You know, I bet Jenny knows of some party or something we can crash."

"We wouldn't be able to all get there, though, even if we weren't *personae non grata* around here."

"Oh yeah..." Ash sighed softly.

Emily quietly said, "I'm sorry, Ash."

"Don't be. You're entirely right, Em." She leaned over, kissing her bookworm friend's cheek, softly, perking Emily up. "Especially since report cards come out soon, right? Your mom's gonna flip you didn't get straight-As, isn't she?"



“Well... she *might* not, after your dad owned her last summer, but...”

“Well then, we have two days to ourselves. Let’s find something to do, then.”

“Okay. Let’s take this stuff home, then, and figure it out from there.”

Cape Cod Mall, 6:33 PM

Jenny waved at Ash and Emily’s retreating figures, calling out, “Bye!” as they walked off. They were out of sight before it hit them.

Marie asked, “Did we just get ditched?”

Jenny blinked, and then laughed, shaking her head. “I think we did, Mrs. Upton.”

“Just call me Marie, Jenny.” Mrs. Upton ruffled Jenny’s hair, and sighed. “Well, I guess we ought to get those—oh!” She let out a soft yelp and took her cell phone out of her pocket. “Hello? Yes, I’m coming back... Need me now?” She rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine. I’ll be back soon.” Marie hung up the phone. “Everything’s an emergency in this business, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is. We have to go?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“No problem.”

Marie led Jenny to her car, the black Jaguar which Jenny was so familiar with from its time as the car of her ex-boyfriend. She slid into the passenger seat, settling in and buckling up—something she had never done, she noted, before she had met Ash. Marie likewise got in, secured herself, and started the growling Jaguar engine.

“So, what did you say ‘I’m sorry’ about, Mrs... Marie?”

“Oh.” Marie started the car in motion, with a sigh. “Jenny, I talked with your mother today. She... I’m sorry, Jenny, I hardly know how to say it.”

“Let me guess, she’s being an absolute bitch and refusing to even let me clean out my things?” Marie hung her head, and Jenny sighed, settling back into the seat. “That doesn’t surprise me. She’s a bitch. Her whole motto in life has been ‘take what you can, give nothing back’.”

“Didn’t you get that from *Pirates of the Caribbean*?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s what it’s always been, even before it was codified by Johnny Depp... So, no, it doesn’t surprise me, at all, anymore. I was only ever her pawn, I think. She might even have had me just to try and get married, you know... I can’t say for sure, but I wouldn’t put it past her.”

Marie made a face of distaste, and Jenny shook her head. “Don’t say you’re sorry, please.”

“Okay... I... won’t, then.” Marie let out a sigh. “I wanted to get your car back. I offered to pay off her payments on it.”

Jenny snorted, and shook her head. “She’s been letting the payments on my car slide, so she can keep up with her own.”

“But... why?”

“One-upsmanship. She makes all the money she makes, and she takes ninety percent of what I made, and she’s still floundering because every time one of the neighbors does something, she has to do it one better. She didn’t even want to get me a car, until Annette’s parents got her a Cadillac. So she had to one-up them so I’d still be the ‘better’ of us, which meant either a BMW or a Lexus, and she went with getting me a car identical to her own.”

Marie shook her head in disgust. “That’s... that’s awful. And she’s been letting the payments on yours slide...”

“Mmm-hmmm. Why?”

“That’s... that’s just interesting,” Marie murmured. “But don’t worry about it.”

“Um, okay...”

Upton Residence, 7:30 PM

"I don't really look old enough to sneak us into a club, do I," Emily asked, as she and Ash carried their bags into the house.

Ash shrugged. "I dunno. That's more Jenny's thing than mine..."

"Well... You know, we might manage it if we look like we're loaded."

"Eh?"

"Put you in the Red Arrow again, your mom hasn't sent back the Blue Diamond yet, we roll up in the Porsche, we'll look older and more loaded than we really are."

Ash snickered. "Well, it sounds like a somewhat workable plan, but for two major flaws. One: We're not really loaded, two: there's no way in Heaven or Hell that you're getting me into that dress again."

Emily giggled. "But we *are* loaded, remember? We've got the money we haven't already spent from our paychecks from the Party, and you've got the *fifty damn grand* that Mr. Almacyn wrote you."

"Oh, yeah... but first, that's to get the Monster fixed. Second, I'm not getting back in that dress."

Emily grinned at Ash, as they dumped their bags in their bedroom, and looped her arms around Ash's neck, pulling up close to her. "Yes, you will. Maybe not soon, but you will before this school year's out; you'll do it and you'll like it."

Ash stared back into her eyes, incredulous. "You're in the predictions business now?"

"Well, unless you plan to skip your senior Prom, you'll need something to go in, and they still have that stupid rule against cross-dressing, so you won't be able to go in a tux."

Ash shook her head, but hugged Emily close anyway, kissing her cheek. "I dunno... I mean, I *really* don't want to go with Rumisiel, and I'm not going to let any other boys ask me, either."

Emily grinned ferociously, and slid her hand down, squeezing Ash's rear. "Who said anything about taking a boy at all?"

Ash's eyes grew wide. "Holy..."

"Well, it's either not go, take me, or take Missi," Emily said, with a grin. "You won't get in alone, after all."

Ash blinked, and then she started laughing. "Did you just ask me to the Prom with you?"

"Well... I guess I did." Emily grinned, and bunched her arms up, pushing Ash backwards onto the bed; she fell in with a laugh, and Emily jumped onto her, staring down into her eyes. Ash laughed again, and reached up, hugging her loosely.

"You didn't freak," Emily murmured, dropping her head to kiss Ash, slowly, warmly.

Ash's eyes closed. Her hands slid under the back of Emily's shirt, splaying her fingers out on Emily's smooth back, arching up into the kiss. When it broke, Ash grinned. "I don't feel afraid of you, or with you... Emily, you just make me feel safe. When I'm, well, being aggressive, I sometimes get afraid I'll be too forward, or too strong. You're helping me overcome that, but... When you're aggressive, for once, it just feels... Okay to let you take control."

Emily giggled quietly, and slid her legs between Ash's, sliding out, pressing her long body along her lover's. "Ash, I trust you. Go ahead and take 'control' if you want. I'm not going to freak."

Ash blushed softly, nervousness clear on her face, and slid her hands up to Emily's shoulders. She squeezed softly and closed her eyes.

"You're having a hard time doing it, because you're afraid of hurting me physically, aren't you?"

Ash opened her eyes, and found them mere inches from Emily's own, with Emily kissing her lips, softly.

"We've been over this, Ash... But it's really kind of endearing, that you're so afraid of hurting me." She leaned in, and gripped Ash's shoulders, squeezing them. "I am not a fragile, delicate flower, Ash. Sex can be rough. It's by nature very physical. But you're not attacking me by making love to me, Ash. You understand that, right?"

Ash nodded, kissing Emily's earlobe. "Yeah, I do."

"Then don't be afraid of squeezing me, or pushing me roughly. Don't be afraid of hurting me."

"Mmmh... I'll try not to be, Em." Ash sat up, pulling Emily into her lap.

The blue-haired bookworm shifted, wrapping her legs around Ash's waist. "Ash, let me put it this way—what do you *want* to do? In your dreams, or daydreams, or fantasies, how do you and I make love? What do you do to me?"

Ash's eyes closed, and she bit her lip for a moment. "I... I can squeeze you, push at you, pull you... Bite you, maybe, be..."

"Forceful?" Ash nodded, and Emily leaned in, biting her lover's lower lip, kissing her hungrily. Ash slid back, and Emily pushed in, reaching up between them, wrapping her hands around Ash's breasts; she squeezed strongly and a moan of pleasure came through, emerging from Ash's lips.

Emily pulled off suddenly, grinning. "Like that?"

Ash was blushing; Emily could feel her heart racing through her chest. Ash nodded, "Y-Yeah, just like that."

Emily grinned, sitting up, on her knees, straddling Ash's waist. She pulled her headband off, tossing it to the side, and then doffed her shirt in the same way, leaving her in only her bra above the waist.

"Then do it."

Ash blinked, reaching up, hesitantly, and Emily shook her head. "Don't hesitate, Ash. I'm not going to be offended now, just touch me. Just... do what you *want* to."

Ash did. She reached up, pushing her hands up, under Emily's bra, pushing the fabric of it up, to the top of her breasts, and clasped Emily's bare breasts in her hands, squeezing them strongly. Her friend arched into her grasp, letting out a cry, her eyes closed.

Terrified, Ash let go. She realized it was the wrong move when Emily lowered her head again, growling, "Don't stop!" She took Ash's hands, pulling them back to her breasts.

Ash laughed, squeezing and kneading slightly, grinning wildly at the sight of her friend's fleshy breasts squishing and moving under her fingers. She began to say, "Can I—"

"Don't ask, just do it," Emily growled out.

"Okay," Ash murmured, flushing. She arched herself, lifting her hips; she could feel the now-familiar feeling of arousal tingling through her pelvis, worming through her whole body. She sat up, licked her lips, then wrapped them around Emily's nipple, sucking on it. Not slowly or gently as before; this time, she let wild abandon creep into her actions, and Emily let out a groan of pleasure as Ash sucked hard on her friend's pink nipples, switching from one to the other and back again.

Ash reached behind Emily's back, unclasping her bra as Emily's hands clawed down Ash's back, pulling up her shirt. They parted long enough to discard each other's clothes, and then Emily pushed her breasts back against Ash's face, clasping her head into her cleavage with one hand, fumbling for her lover's bra with the other, unclasping it eventually and pulling it off her.

Ash stared up at Emily's eyes; Emily stared back. Their wild motions had put Emily's hair into gorgeous disarray, and the expression of unmasked lust on her face was *very* inviting. "You're pushy tonight," Ash commented.

Emily grinned. "Hormones. Sometimes they make you bitchy, but sometimes they just make you *horny*," she murmured, running her fingernails over Ash's breasts, then squeezing them just as hard. Ash cried out as pain blossomed; but she found no objection to the feeling, instead pushing her larger breasts into her smaller lover's hands. "And it looks like you're feeling the same way," Emily whispered as she leaned in.

"Yes, I am," Ash growled back, laughing. "You turn me on, what can I say?" She reached up, sliding her hand into Emily's hair, tugging her in. Heedless now, Emily's boldness making her feel just as bold, she kissed her lover greedily as Emily's fingernails dug into her breasts, then slid down, dragging five lines of fire down each, over her nipples, and down her stomach. Ash cried out into the kiss, as their tongues furiously worked against one another, hot, slick, filling her senses with Emily: the taste of her tongue, worming against Ash's own, thrusting into her mouth; the feeling of her breasts

pressed into her own, the lingering lines of pain down her chest, tingling through her body and urging her onwards; the smell of her excited lover, heavy in Ash's nostrils; the beautiful sight of her bright magenta eyes staring back into Ash's, fixed on her, giving her all and intending to take Ash's all in return; and the moan she made as Ash responded by dragging her own fingernails down Emily's back.

Ash rolled, pushing Emily down to the bed this time.

"See, you didn't hesitate this time," Emily murmured, her voice heavy with lust, as Ash dropped to her throat, kissing, then sucking on the hollow, leaving a groan in Emily's chest. "God, I want you, Ash," Emily confessed.

Ash looked up, grinning. "Mmmf... Damn, I'm still bleeding, I think. What about you?"

"I might be stopped," Emily murmured. "But still..."

"This is incredible," Ash replied, shifting her legs; her hips resting over one of Emily's thighs, and she pushed forward, pushing her denim-clad pelvis into Emily's; Emily growled sensually at the sensation, and drew her fingernails down Ash's back, as their breasts pressed into one another.

"We could always just continue in the shower," Emily breathed in her ear.

"Do you want to?"

"Will you freak about being bloody when we're done?"

"I dunno..."

Emily let out a groan, and bit her lover's shoulder, eliciting a gasp from Ash, though it wasn't nearly strong enough to break skin. "I need a shower anyway—a cold one, if nothing else." Ash laughed, and Emily grinned up at her. "So, we might as well try taking advantage of the situation; we have your mother's house all to ourselves for *hours*. And I'm tired of being *quiet*; I want to be loud."

Ash pulled Emily's head slightly up, kissing her again, her kiss full of hunger for Emily, and Emily's reply full of hunger for her. She laughed, "L-Let's try, then," as she pushed her shoes off with her feet.

Emily heaved her body, pushing Ash off of her. With a laugh, Ash rolled to her back, curling her legs to remove her jeans, and Emily did likewise, after first kicking off her shoes. Ash then wrapped an arm around Emily's back, while Emily grinned at her, tugging her down by her orange hair. "I love the hell out of you, Ash," she murmured, and Ash laughed, kissing her again, on the nape of the neck, then sinking her teeth in slightly.

They lurched towards the bathroom, greedily grasping and squeezing and kissing at one another almost every step of the way, as they tried to discard their remaining clothes: socks together, and their panties. Emily tugged her tampon out, barely flinching at the pain of her hasty yank, tossing it in the trash, while Ash opened the door to the shower.

Ash started to look down, but Emily caught her head with her hand, keeping it up. "Don't look, just touch," she warned her lover. Ash nodded, tugging Emily by the wrists into the shower, ultimately with Emily pushing Ash against the sidewall of it. They reached out together, twisting the knobs; it was a lucky stroke that they each liked their showers in the same temperature band.

Both emitted a yelp when the blast of cold water hit them, and Emily pressed into Ash for the warmth of her body, which was rapidly prickling up with goose bumps, while Ash reached behind her, pulling the glass door closed. Emily pressed into her, in the heat of the moment taking control; Ash groaned as she felt Emily's thigh slide between her own, their legs interlacing.

"Y-You want to do this?"

"Do you?"

Ash moaned softly, considering for a moment, as she squeezed Emily against her. "I did last time. It's your turn, if you want to. But I thought you said you were never expected to be the one thrusting?"

Emily bared her teeth, and kissed Ash's neck again. Ash tilted her head to offer Emily better access, and Emily pushed up and in. Ash felt the heat of Emily's mound, her open slit, pressing into her thigh, and gasped loudly as she felt Emily pressing her smooth thigh into her own vagina, letting out a tremulous groan of pleasure at the contact.

"I'm a fast learner," Emily replied. "But I think you'd rather have an encore, wouldn't you?"

Ash laughed, even as the intense pleasure spread from that tiny point that was her clit, like fire burning through her sex and suffusing outwards through her body. She gripped Emily by the hips, turning the two of them around. "Y-Yes, I would."

"Then take me, Ash. I'm yours, and you can have your fill," Emily groaned.

Ash thrust up, once, strongly; abandoning fear for lust, letting the pleasure and the taste wash away trepidation. She forced Emily up against the wall, her lover standing on the balls of one of her feet, pushing her other thigh into Ash's mound. Emily braced that leg on the metal frame of the shower's door, as she responded fully, arching into Ash, her hands clenched around Ash's shoulders.

A groan erupted from Emily's throat, and she squeezed down on Ash's shoulders. It felt *good* to be loud for once, and Ash cried out with her. Emily started to gyrate her hips on Ash's pressing thigh, and let out a moan of pleasure, matched by Ash's. "Mmmm! Ash... Don't stop!"

"I won't," Ash growled, even as she was slowing down. "It's j-just hard to stay upright."

"Then fuck me on the floor," Emily replied.

Ash did, suddenly turning. She laid Emily down, quickly; the blue-haired bookwormish tuner caught herself with a bone-jarring landing, but couldn't care less. Ash slid smoothly down atop her, and Emily cried out with the feeling as Ash slid up against her, the hot water beating down on Ash's back, flooding down onto her own sides.

Her lover slid forward, bracing slightly on her knees. Emily responded with a groan, raising her right leg alongside Ash's hip, the left flat. And Ash dug in with her toes, *thrusting* into her. Emily trembled and moaned, because the angle let Ash grind her own sex against Emily's. The blue-haired tuner let out a cry (as did Ash) as their vaginae met one another. Like lightning, the sexual thrill raced through her, and Emily let out a groan of pleasure, wrapping her right hand around Ash's waist, placing it in the small of her back, as Ash took her left, squeezing it and lacing their fingers together.

Emily's eyes rolled up as Ash hit upon the idea. Emily quivered with the sensation as Ash's large, swollen clitoris met her own, and cried out, tremulously, as her lover started to push into her with even more strength. She reached up, whispering to Ash, "Fuck, I love you... an-and I love *this*. I do-don't care if you have a penis or not... y-you're still the best lover I've ever imagined."

Ash laughed back at her, as she slid to the side, leveraging her thigh *hard* into Emily's pelvis, getting a groan from her for it. "I-I'm just glad you like it at all."

"I love it," Emily admittedly, splaying her fingers and gently digging her fingernails into Ash's back, as she resumed grinding against her. "I r-really do... Oh! Yes, like that... More, harder..."

"L-Love to," Ash moaned out in reply. Obliging, she pushed and slid with all of her might, braced on two legs and one arm, while Emily cried out. It was musical, eliciting the sounds of pleasure from the bookwormish tuner. "A-Am I doing it right?"

"Mmmmh! Y-Yes... Y-You can put your finger i-in me if you want," Emily moaned out, staring into her eyes; Ash stared back. She didn't hesitate, sliding her hand down, between their bodies. She felt between them, and Emily groaned. "Left... Right there... Go on, I'm already *very* wet."

Ash pushed in, groaning, her body quivering as she once again felt Emily's insides around her middle finger. Emily groaned in return, as Ash ground her mound onto Emily's, and slid her finger in to the second knuckle.

"It feels so... so..."

"Incredible," Emily groaned, reaching behind Ash, squeezing her rear, then down to her thighs. Emily gasped as Ash's finger slid into her all the way, and squeezed Ash harder, groaning. "P-Pull up with your finger, Ash. Y-You're right over my g-spo-ooooooooot!" Ash did as directed, and Emily's back arched, her eyes closing, hand squeezing Ash's thigh, hard. "Faster," Emily hissed and Ash sped up, both with her thighs and her hand. Emily withdrew her hand, squeezing her own breast harshly, arched like a bow being pulled, crying out again, louder, a wordless cry of pleasure as orgasm wracked her body, quivering and shivering.

“W-Was that an orgasm?” Ash asked.

Emily nodded, groaning out, “Yesss! Nnnngh, yes!” She collapsed to the floor of the shower as Ash stared at her eyes; Emily stared back, groaning as the exertion of it all caught up with her, and she moaned, pulling Ash into her. “Grind on my thigh, Ash,” she murmured, pushing her thigh up between Ash’s legs. Ash didn’t need to be told twice, and Emily wrapped her outside leg around Ash’s thighs as her lover ground against her.

It was intense, and incredible, dragging her sex along Emily’s smooth thigh, the (comparatively) broad pearl of her clit being pressed into her lover’s yielding flesh, and the smooth sensation of it gliding across her labia. Emily pushed against her, and Ash soon joined her lover in orgasm, erupting like a bolt of fire through her body, starting at that tiny, incredible nub, and rocking through her body, leaving her thoroughly exhausted, lying atop her lover, the two of them panting for breath for long, long moments. Then Emily raised her hand, tugging Ash’s head to hers, kissing her again, long and languidly, sated. Ash joined her, filled with the wonderful feeling of afterglow, sliding her tongue into Emily’s mouth, caressing her tongue.

It took even longer for their kiss to part, and Emily let out another groan, this time closing her eyes. “Ash... that... thank you.”

“F-For what?”

“For making that the most incredible, wonderful thing I’ve ever felt. For enjoying me the way I was meant to be enjoyed.” Emily moaned, and started to stroke Ash with everything she had: both hands, one on her back, the other on her chest, her thighs wrapped around one of Ash’s, and her feet, stroking her lover’s.

Ash stroked her back and grinned happily. “It...”

“Was wonderful, wasn’t it?”

Ash nodded and blushed, softly. “I wasn’t too rough, was I?”

“Noo,” Emily breathlessly moaned. “You were perfect. Not too hard, but you didn’t treat me like I was fragile.”

“Love you, Emily,” Ash murmured, kissing her lover’s lips.

Emily smiled back. “I know...”

#### Marie’s Workplace, 7:37 PM

“You know, it occurs to me my mom’s going to *flip* when she hears the news. I can’t believe you actually got Henri Leroux to sign me!”

Marie laughed softly. “Well, I hear his lines are exclusive to me, so he’s got to pick *someone* I recommend for the line...”

Jenny shook her head, grinning. “My mom was *always* trying to get something of his to put on me.”

“Yeah, I *know*.” Marie grinned at the blonde girl, and ruffled her hair.

Then Jenny hugged her quickly, leaving Marie staring down at the top of her blonde hair. “Thank you for taking me in, Mrs.—Marie.”

“You’re welcome, Jenny,” Marie replied, hugging the girl back, and letting go as the elevator opened onto the floor with her office. The maze had been demolished since there wasn’t a big party or event being prepared for, and that left the floor mostly open—a few tables had been erected with various long-lived snacks and such. Both Marie and Jenny snagged a blueberry muffin from the table as they walked by. Jenny grinned when she realized Marie liked the same kind of muffins as she did—even if her mother was always screeching at her to eat bran.

“What are *you* doing here, dyke?”

Both Marie and Jenny halted in mid-stride and turned around. Rachelle was staring them down. Marie opened her mouth to say something, but Jenny held up a hand. She leaned on the table and laughed. “I *work* here, what about you?”

The raven-haired girl snorted at her. "You don't know it yet, but you're through."

"Oh, really? Then how come I'm on my way to sign on with Henri, mmmh?" She smirked at the flash of sudden jealousy in Rachelle's eyes. "Besides, boys love girls who can turn on the 'lesbian', or so I'm told. Reports of my 'throughness' are greatly exaggerated."

"You whore," Rachelle spit.

"No, that's what I *was*."

"Hey, Rachelle, baby, you up here?" Joshua Almacny asked as he walked out of the elevator.

"And it looks like that's what you *are*, bitch."

Fire flared in Joshua's eyes as he saw Jenny and Marie. "Yo, what the *hell* is this bitch doing here?"

Marie narrowed her eyes as Joshua stalked towards them. "Don't the conditions of your bail require you to stay *away* from the *both* of us, Joshua Clayton Almacny Junior?"

"Yo, hey. I *work* here, remember?"

"That's no excuse," Marie retorted.

"Have fun, Rachelle," Jenny sneered. "Enjoy getting *whined* at by a whining bitch who wants sex and isn't smooth enough to butter up a slice of bread. Have fun knowing your boy's ride is a low-end Mercedes because he's such a bad driver he can't beat a tomboy tuner with a Mustang engine in a beat up old chassis, and too stupid to realize she's setting him up for the fall."

Temper flared in Joshua's eyes. He started towards Jenny, raising his hand before Rachelle grabbed him by the forearm. "You idiot, she's *goading* you! If you hit her then you go back to jail until this all blows over!"

Joshua spun, his fist backhanding Rachelle; the raven-haired girl let out a squawk of pain as she fell to the ground and Marie gasped.

"Don't you *ever* talk like that to me, *slut*! I'll have your ass fired," he spat at Rachelle, and turned around, stalking back to the elevator.

Jenny was over at Rachelle's side only a split second before Marie, kneeling down. "Oh my god, are you okay?" Joshua's hard backhand had split open her skin over the top of her cheek, and blood was oozing from it.

Defiantly Rachelle bared her teeth at Jenny. "I don't need *your* help, whore!" She grabbed the table, pulling herself up, shaking off Jenny and Marie's attempts to help, and ignoring Marie when she said she should go and see Mr. Almacny, stalking towards the stairs.

Jenny sighed, heavily, slumping her shoulders, as the other girl stormed away. "Damn it... that was my fault."

"What? No it wasn't, Jenny!"

"I *was* goading him, wasn't I? I wasn't even thinking about it..." Jenny sighed.

Marie put her arms around Jenny's shoulders from behind, hugging her softly. "Jenny, ultimately, nobody is responsible for anyone's behavior but their own. You didn't force him to do that. He did it himself, and I *am* going to tell Mr. Almacny."

Jenny sighed. "It won't do any good. She'll deny it, say she fell on the stairs or something."

Marie's face fell, and she sighed. "If I see him again, I *am* going to call Grayfield about him violating the terms of his bail."

"That might work," Jenny sighed, and shrugged. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for what he did. Come on," Marie let go, and led Jenny back to her office. She flicked the lights on, and walked to her chair, while Jenny sat in the chair ahead of the desk. "Let's see... Here we go." Marie pulled out some papers from her lower-right hand drawer, handing them to Jenny. "Have a look through those."

Jenny looked through the documents, grinning. They were the same ones she'd signed many times before, agreeing to model a certain line, but this time it was *Henri's* stuff. She quickly signed them all, and grinned wildly at Marie, who put them in her fax machine, punching in some numbers and running it through.

"There we go. Looks like your next shoot is January 4th, Tuesday."

Jenny nodded. "Ah, okay. When?"

"Um, six."

"Okay, yeah. I can make it from school to the studio in... Oh, crap."

It hit them both at the same time, and Jenny winced, as did Marie. "Yeah, crap. We need to talk to your school. Hell, they probably won't let you transfer without your mother's permission."

Jenny groaned and sighed. "I'll be eighteen in two *weeks*. Jeez, this is gonna be a problem, isn't it?"

"It could be... Damn."

Jenny sighed. "I guess I'll just have to wait until I'm eighteen, but what about signing this. Is it going to be a problem?"

"It could be, if your mother wants to make trouble. Well, I suppose we could just talk a judge into declaring you legally emancipated, since you'll be eighteen in two weeks..."

"I don't want to be trouble. Why do I wind up being trouble, even when I'm trying to be nice?"

Marie shook her head. "Jenny, you're *not* being trouble. Relax. I'm sure this isn't going to be a problem."

"Okay..." Jenny nodded.

Upton Residence, 7:59 PM

"Ash?"

"Mmm?"

"C'mere."

Emily tilted Ash's head towards her, kissing her lover on the lips. The two were lying atop the bed in their room, nude but for a towel wrapping Emily's hair up. Ash kissed back, softly, and smiled as they parted.

"Thank you," Emily murmured.

Ash grinned at her. "Thank *you*, Em." She hugged the blue-haired tuner, placing one arm over her and squeezing them together. Emily smiled, closed her eyes, and put her head on Ash's shoulder.

"I almost wish this night wouldn't end, Em."

"I know what you mean." Emily rolled over, lying on her back, and Ash rolled likewise, sliding her arm under Emily's head, while Emily took her other hand, pulling it across her body and squeezing it.

Their eyes met again, and Emily smiled broadly, eliciting a similar smile from Ash. Emily curled herself into the orange-haired tuner, closing her eyes, and Ash curled her arm up around Emily's back, wrapping the other under her, hugging her tightly. Emily yawned softly, and closed her eyes.

"Tired?"

"A bit."

"Can you grab the pillow?"

Emily did so, murmuring, "Lift your head," when she brought it close, sliding it under Ash's head.

"So, tomorrow... Back to Tempest in the morning?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Right. And then back to normal..." Ash sighed, softly. "*Angels*. Dad. Your psycho mom. Mind-busting math..."

"You know, I can help you get through your math classes, Ash."

"I..." Ash sighed. "I know, I guess, I just don't like asking you for help." Emily's eyes opened, a cool expression of annoyance on her face, and Ash shook her head. "No, *no*, it's not like that, it's just... I don't want to annoy the hell out of you with my stupidity."

"Oh, is that all?" Emily rolled her eyes, and grinned. "Don't worry about it. I'll get you through this, if you're going to college with me."

"College..."



“Mmm-hmmm. My mom’ll probably disown me as hard as Jenny’s did if I say no.”

“I dunno...” Ash looked away, up at the ceiling. “Do you even think I could hack it?”

“You could, I know you can, if you try. I... I just, honestly don’t know if I even *want* to go. Am I just living my mother’s dream *for* her?”

“What about your dreams?”

Emily closed her eyes, thinking. “Um...” She thought back to that dream: married to an M.D., brilliant pharmaceutical researcher working for a high-brand pharma-corp... Or the dream that had come before that—standing on the line at the Circuit de la Sarthe with Ash. She grinned at that one and giggled.

“Something on your mind?”

“Oh, just remembering an old dream.”

“A good one for a change?”

“Yeah. I had it that night you had a nightmare.”

“The one with you and Missi?”

“No, the one before that.”

“Oh, *oh*... Yeah, that... So, this good dream of yours.”

“Have you ever heard of 24 Hours of Le Mans?”

“Uhh, of course? Why?”

Emily snickered softly. “I dreamed that you and I were going to compete in 24 Hours of Le Mans as a team together.”

“Oh... Oh, cool!”

“I also dreamed we were *married*, at the time, but...”

“Really?”

Emily turned her head; Ash was blushing, and Emily laughed, kissing her cheek. “It was just a dream.”

“Yeah... I s’pose so.” Ash closed her eyes, nuzzling into Emily’s shoulder. “So, was it a good car? A Ford GT?”

“Actually, it was a Porsche.”

“Oh... I could drive that.”

Emily giggled softly again. “You already have; I think it was like, one of my patented futurism-cars, a later re-make of the Carrera GT.”

“Oooh. Neat.” Ash grinned, and kissed Emily’s cheek, softly. “So... I’m guessing you’re not terribly interested in being a doctor or a lawyer?”

“Not really. I guess I just want to be free. Free of my mom’s expectations. Free to just... find out what it is I really want.”

“Mmmh. I hear you, Em,” Ash murmured in the blue-haired girl’s ear, and softly kissed her earlobe. “Is that why you like coming to Cape Cod?”

“Yeah. It’s easy to just *unwind* here, without my mom, with your mom around... You’re really lucky to have such an awesome mom, you know?”

“Yeah... I guess I am,” Ash replied, with a sigh. “And I’d never have known her if not for...”

“The Misfile.”

“Ugh. I don’t want to feel like I have *anything* to thank Rumisiel for, but... I guess I do.”

“Well, you could go less hard on him?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t go hard on him at all... I... I don’t think I *want* to go back, Emily. Not at all.”

“Why not?” Emily didn’t sound surprised as she kissed Ash’s ear.

“Mmmh. Don’t you already know?”

“Well, I have my ideas...”

“What do you think it is?”

“You don’t want to die.”

“Huh?”

“It’s the same reason I don’t want to be re-filed. If I go back, it puts me in Molly’s bug, when she was in that crash. I’m a dead girl, literally, but even if not, I would be dead. I wouldn’t remember any of this: I wouldn’t remember *you*, I wouldn’t remember Rumisiel or Vashiel, I wouldn’t remember grappling with the question of my own sexuality, or the feeling of manually shifting a car, or sitting behind the wheel of a Porsche Carrera GT, burning my rear wheels next to the Kamikaze, or having totally owned my mother in an argument, or the thrill of hearing the turbo in my 240SX spool up for the first time, or the squealing joy of having done a slide right, or the feeling of having your finger inside me for the first time...”

“So, who would I be? There’d still be an Emily McArthur, assuming she survived the crash in Molly’s VW, but she wouldn’t be me. And that would mean that *I* would be gone, dead, ka-put. Like if you get gunned down, but get cloned. There’s still someone walking around with your name, and your memories, but *you* are gone, fundamentally, and someone else has your name.”

Ash blinked. Then she grinned, kissing Emily’s cheek warmly. “Yeah! You really *do* know what I’m thinking, don’t you?”

“Sorta,” Emily replied, with a giggle. “It’s...” She smiled, and closed her eyes, placing her head again upon Ash’s shoulder. “I love you. I love you so very much, but more... we’re close.” She squeezed Ash’s hand. “It’s almost like I *can* tell what you’re thinking, when you’re thinking it... I like the feeling.”

“And so do I.” Ash grinned, softly. “I... I wonder if I can do the same.”

“I don’t think it’ll stand up to a ‘test’ like, ‘think of the most unlikely thing you can’. I don’t think I’m like, reading your mind or anything,” Emily replied, with a smile.

“Okay, fair enough... Do you think I can hack it?”

“Hmm?”

“College, Emily. Do you think I could hack it?”

“I haven’t known you *not* to be able to do something you actually put your mind to, Ash.”

“Yeah, but... Ugh, math really *burns* my head.”

Emily snickered quietly in response, kissing Ash’s cheek. “I’m trying to help...”

“I know you are, Em...”

“Anyway, I’ll have an extra year to get you up to snuff.”

“An extra year? Oh, right.”

“Yeah. *You’re* graduating in June, I’m not.”

“Right... I’m sorry,”

“Don’t be. I was pissed off, but... The last ten months have taught me that not everything worth knowing can be read in a book, Ash.” Emily grinned, and kissed Ash’s lips, softly. “Like this...”

“Heh. You’ll get it, I *know* you will.”

“Into school?”

Ash nodded. “Pretty much a foregone conclusion at this juncture.”

“But... is that what I really want?”

“I dunno. *Is* it? Educated at some prestigious university, hired by some ridiculously rich company to help make them even more rich? Nine-to-five or whatever for the next thirty years?” Emily shivered, and Ash chuckled. “Yeah, me neither.”

“So, what do *you* want?”

Ash shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. But I want to be close to you doing it.”

Emily giggled quietly, and kissed Ash’s cheek again, closing her eyes. “Love you, Ash.”

“I know, Emily. I know.”

Marie Upton's Office, 8:39 PM

"Okay. Yes, I understand... Good, we're in agreement, then. Thank you, and good-night!" Marie cheerfully told the person on the other end of the line, then hung up, with an exasperated sigh. She glanced at the time in the corner of her computer screen, and shook her head. "Eight forty. Ugh." By now, almost everyone was gone, and she would have been, too, if not for a sudden influx of late contacts by her various and sundry suppliers and buyers.

"Just *wearing* the underwear was a lot easier than this," she grouched good-naturedly to her empty office, and began the shutdown sequence on her computer. "Oh well." She stood, walked to the door connecting her office to the break room, and opened it. The TV and lights were on, but the only sign of Jenny was her coat thrown over the back of the couch. Marie walked around said couch, to find Jenny either asleep, close to it, or doing a good facsimile thereof, 'staring' up at the TV with closed eyes, her head on her arm. Marie smiled, prodding the sleeping girl's arm.

Jenny awoke with a start, looking up, then relaxing. "Oh, s-sorry."

"No problem, Jenny. To tell the truth, I probably would have done the same. Anyway, I'm done with these dingbats who think their business is such an emergency it can't wait until the New Year. That's it! I'm off, don't have to come back in until Monday."

Jenny laughed softly, and dragged herself to her feet, taking her coat from the back of the couch. They walked out of the break room, shutting the lights off on the way out, and Jenny yawned, as she put her jacket on. "S-s-s-soo-ooooo, have you got any plans for dinner?"

Chuckling at the blonde's protracted yawn, Marie shook her head. "Haven't thought of any, yet. It's too late to hit a store and get something I can cook, and I think I'm out of things I can easily make into dinner, so we might wind up going out."

"Fine by me. Wonder where Ash and Emily would like to go?"

"Why don't you ask them when we get home, then?" "Okay."

"Okay," Jenny replied, as the two walked into the elevator.

Marie pushed the button, setting the lift in motion to the floor where she had parked the Jag. "You know, Jenny, it occurs to me that your birthday is the same as Ash's, the 11th, right?" Jenny nodded in confirmation, and Marie smiled. "Well, we'll have to work something out, won't we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's the Tuesday after next. See, I was thinking, if you wanted, and depending on when her party will be... Well, they'll probably hold it that weekend or so. Probably Saturday. See, you could go to Tempest to visit Ash during her party, stay the night, then bring Ash and Emily back here on Sunday for *your* party, mm?"

Jenny chuckled at that, and smiled. "That would be nice, though I suspect I wouldn't have many people who'd want to come to my party, anyway."

"Quality, not quantity, right?"

Jenny giggled quietly. "Sure you don't just want an excuse to steal Ash and Emily away from Tempest for another day?"

"Well, that may be a nice fringe bennie," Marie replied, giggling quietly and twirling some of her long hair around her finger.

"Mmm, that would be nice," Jenny admitted, as the doors to the elevator opened, letting them exit to the parking garage, where Jenny strode forth—

And nearly ran straight into her mother, who was walking out of the door to the stairs opposite the elevator. "*Oh... Oh no,*" Marie thought, as Jenny's eyes met Jenny's, and she could see the explosive potential brewing.

It was the first time she'd seen her mother since that night she'd been disowned. Despite all the reasons she had to loathe her senior, Jenny felt a sinking sensation in her heart that she was sure she would have called a 'weakness' a month ago. She wanted... to make peace, maybe reconcile. She lifted her hand, plaintively, beginning to speak, "Mom?" Her voice quavered a bit, as she made her plaintive





out-reach, somehow desperate for her mother's affection. But her outreach was wasted; her frizzy-haired elder had turned away as she was raising her hand, walking coldly towards the door to the parking garage. Jenny blinked a few times, watching her leave, her vision becoming blurry—tears were forming in her eyes. Her lips trembled, parted, taking in a breath, though she couldn't think of anything to say.

The display of heartlessness was not lost on Marie, either. The suddenness of Jenny's plaintive gesture made Marie certain it was genuine, as was the utter icy apathy with which Jenny had simply walked away. Marie could see the shock and betrayal, the emptiness from the profile of Jenny's face, and couldn't help wondering, "*Did Ash feel that way when I walked out on her?*"

Marie blinked, realizing that tears were forming in her own eyes as well, and she spun Jenny around, hugging the younger, shorter girl tightly to her, placing Jenny's head on her shoulder. The young fashionista didn't sob, but she did clutch Marie in return, and the brown-haired woman raised her hand to the back of Jenny's head, stroking her hair, softly, quietly.

Upton Residence, 9:44 PM

"Ash?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you think we ought to get dressed?"

"That's probably a good idea, since they'll probably be back soon." Ash let out a soft moan, opening her eyes. The lights were still on, giving her a beautifully illuminated view of Emily's shoulder and hair. Her lover was atop her, lying slightly to one side, with her head on Ash's shoulder. Ash's arms wrapped around her, the fingers of her left hand laced with those of Emily's right. "Do you want to get up, Em?"

"Not really," the blue-haired bookworm replied, languidly stretching her body, raising their arms up, back, above their heads, stroking Ash's feet with her own. "How do you feel?"

"Great..."

"Sore?"

"Like hell," Ash replied, with a soft chuckle. "But I still feel great."

"Me too... Mmm, Ash? Give me a massage?" Emily smiled, and rolled over, off of Ash, and lying facedown on the bed.

Ash didn't reply verbally; she didn't *need* to. She rolled over as well, yawning as she got to her knees and leaned over Emily's back. She put her hands on Emily's shoulders, and started to rub, kneading large handfuls of her friend's flesh in her palms.

"Mmmh, lower, Ash."

Happy to oblige, Ash followed Emily's instructions, letting the blue-haired tuner guide her, rubbing down, across the back of her ribs, to the small of her back, and back up, helping Emily to work out the kinks in her muscles she'd gotten from all the arching and squirming and other activity on the hard tile floor of the shower.

"Ash, tell me something. How does it make you feel?"

"This, you mean?"

"Yeah. Being *lovers* like this," Emily murmured.

Ash slid down, lying lightly along Emily's back, supporting herself with her arms at Emily's sides. "It feels... It feels good, Emily. It feels... I dunno, just..."

"Somehow, indescribably *right*?"

"Yeah." The orange-haired tuner grinned, cupping the sides of Emily's breasts and gently kissing her shoulder, eliciting a soft sigh of pleasure from her blue-haired companion.

"Exactly like that, Ash... exactly." Emily pushed up slightly, taking Ash's weight onto her back. It was comforting, and she rolled over under her lover. When it was done, Ash's head was between her

breasts, and she smiled, squeezing Ash into her. “How does this feel?” she whispered softly while cupping Ash’s head into her cleavage.

“Like... like a guilty pleasure,” Ash murmured back. “Like I feel like I *should* feel like a sissy for loving this so much... But I just...”

“Don’t?” Ash nodded, and Emily smiled. “You want to feel safe and warm, and I can give that to you. You can do the same thing, too,” she said, with a soft giggle.

“Mmmh. That’s even weirder, but in a good way. It’s not something I...”

“Ever expected to do, cradling a lover underneath you?”

“No, it wasn’t... it’s... mmmh, I guess I like this. I like being able to make you feel safe, and I like feeling safe with you.”

“Mmmh... I could just fall asleep now...”

“Me too... What time is it?”

Emily double-checked her watch. “Five of ten.”

“Mmmh. Wonder how late they’re gonna be?”

“Dunno.”

Ash yawned, muffling it in Emily’s breasts, and Emily smiled at her friend, hugging her tightly.

“Your friendship has... been the best thing that ever happened to me, Ash.”

“...And yours to me, Emily.” Ash smiled softly, looking up into her lover’s eyes; green meeting magenta, they slowly clasped their hands together, squeezing softly, gazing into one another’s eyes.

Ash didn’t ask; she didn’t need to. She saw it in Emily’s eyes. Ash braced her legs and knees and pulled up, tugging herself to her knees. Emily sat up, with her legs between Ash’s, staring into her eyes, before leaning forward, placing her head on one of Ash’s breasts.

“I didn’t want to admit it, for so long,” Emily murmured. “I kissed you in your sleep, hoping I’d find it disgusting, but... it just... it was a kiss. It felt good. I grabbed your breasts, I thought it would be weird, and it was... but... weird because it made me tingle, weird because I enjoyed it. I so wanted to ignore the fact that all day, my hands felt a bit, well... jelly-like, from that grope, or that I wanted to do it again, wanted to fondle you... I’m sorry, Ash. I was so neurotic, I... I held us back, didn’t I?”

“No, Emily, you didn’t.” Ash laughed softly at her, tilting her blue-haired friend’s head up. “Where we’ve been has led us here, right?” She smiled, and Emily smiled back, leaning up to kiss her, softly. “So, do you still want to grope me?”

“Oh, yes I do.” Emily grinned back. “Turn around.”

Ash laughed, and did just that, reversing herself on Emily’s lap, and leaning back into the smaller girl. Emily reached around Ash’s body, squeezing her breasts with impunity, squeezing Ash’s nipples between her fingers. Ash’s jaw dropped, moaning, satisfied. “You know, I... I loved it, that day, too. I wanted more...”

“I’ll squeeze your tits any time you want, Ash,” Emily murmured, biting gently into the taller girl’s shoulder, getting a sigh of pleasure for her troubles from Ash’s lips.

That was how they were when the door opened. Jenny walked in, the muffled radio from the other room’s volume jumping as soon as the door opened, the blonde already talking, “Hey, where do you... *oh*,” she said, with a wide grin, as Ash and Emily turned to face her. “I’ll tell your mom you’ll be a bit,” Jenny continued, grinning madly and blushing as she backed out of the door, leaving Ash and Emily both blushing hotly.

Ash let out a nervous chuckle, while Emily giggled quite quickly, shaking her head. “I guess we didn’t even hear them come in.”

“Guess not. We probably should get dressed...”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

They got dressed then, with only a bare minimum of fuss and kissing one another, and soon walked towards the door, Emily leading. She turned however, instead of opening the door, and Ash pushed her against the door—exactly what she had hoped Ash would do.



“Did I scare you, earlier?” Emily asked quietly, smiling up at Ash.

Ash shrugged. “Yeah... but not so bad. Besides...” She raised her hand, kissing Emily as she stroked the blue-haired bookworm’s hair, brushing it behind her ears. “You’re supposed to push me, right?”

“Yeah, but... I don’t want to be *pushy*, Ash.”

“You’re not. I’ll tell you if I’m getting freaked, okay?”

“Okay.” Emily grinned, kissing Ash in response, slow and soft, then turned the doorknob with her hand, blindly fumbling for it behind her before finding it. “Let’s go.”

### Pulling Out Of The Upton Driveway, 9:59 PM

Jenny had made the request to go to Marco’s, which was open past midnight. She had also made a plaintive request to go with Ash, leaving Ash in the driver’s seat of the Porsche 996, with Jenny in the passenger’s seat, looking decidedly morose.

“What’s wrong,” Ash asked, as she pulled out, following the Jaguar in front of her.

“I... we saw my mother today, Ash.”

“Your mom? Oh.”

“She wouldn’t even *look* at me,” Jenny said, suddenly, sounding quite weak and pathetic. Ash got the feeling she was seeing Jenny at her most vulnerable, an unsettling sight and sound.

“Oh... Jeez, oh Jeez, Jenny.”

The blonde continued, her eyes watery, breath coming difficult to her, “Even after what she did when she came here... I... God, this is what I deserve after all I’ve done, isn’t it? I just... I just... I wanted her to hold me, to say she still loved me... I guess she doesn’t, though.”

“I... oh, Jeez, Jenny.” Ash reached over, taking Jenny’s hand, putting her own over it and curling her fingers between Jenny’s, into the blonde’s palm, as a soft, gentle piano-based song started to play on the radio.

“Was that wrong of me?”

“What?”

“Just... just wanting her to be like she was, years ago... to...” The fashionista’s voice choked, and she closed her eyes, a well of self-loathing rising up in her, making her throat tight. “To tell me I was still her daughter and she loved me?”

“*Oh, holy...*” Ash let out a sigh of exasperation, as Jenny’s fingers clenched around her own, needing an anchor. “No, Jenny. That... that’s not wrong at all.”

Jenny’s throat worked, and she gulped for air. “I just... I just...”

“You wanted your mom back in your life,” Ash said. “And it hurt, and it hurt more than anything, but you were so afraid... And then she rejected you, Jenny. I’m so sorry.”

“You...”

“I’ve... kinda been there, Jenny.” Ash closed her eyes, briefly, at a red light, though not nearly as long as she wanted, as she thought back, drawing on five-year-old memories and extrapolations of what the Misfile’s changes must have been. “My mom... she left my dad when I was three. I can’t... really remember her from before then. I found out about her when I was thirteen. We got lingerie catalogs, and dad said, ‘Hey Ash, wanna see what your *mom* looks like? She’s the woman in the bra and garters on page 16!’” Ash let out a soft shiver at the memory of how freakish that had been, having masturbated to that very picture not two hours previous to the revelation.

“So, wh-what happened?”

“I... I didn’t know what to think. She surely must have known where I was, right? I... I wanted to talk to her, to have her back, but I... I didn’t know what was going on. I was lost, confused, and... scared. I wrote a letter to her, and I... I took it to the post-office box,” Ash continued, airing her very real frustrations and emotions from that time.

“What if she didn’t write me back? What if she didn’t want to know me, or care about me, or anything? What if... what if I was being a sissy? It all went through my head, all the time... I... I tore it up. (*Aw crap, I went too far!*)” Ash bit her lip as soon as she said it. “*Craaaaap, need a fix.*”

“You tore it up?”

“Yeah,” Ash said, with a sigh, grateful she’d picked up enough smoothness to at least stall for time. “I threw it in the trash, but... I didn’t want to be a sissy-girl, a pansy, you know? I walked away, but... I came back, like, an hour later. (*I really thought about doing that, didn’t I?*) I pieced it together, and wrote a new one. And I sent it, and... and she wrote back to me.”

“Wow... that’s... You came close to never knowing her, didn’t you?”

“Closer than you can *possibly* imagine, Jenny,” Ash answered, entirely truthfully.

“But you did get her, didn’t you?”

“Well... yeah,” Ash said, suddenly feeling like a heel.

“I’m... I’m kind of envious, but... Well, when my mom turned cold shoulder on me... Ash, your mom grabbed me. Spun me into her and held me.”

Ash smiled, slightly and wryly, at that.

“She just... didn’t say a thing, she just held me... Jeez, I... I don’t...”

“Stay with her, Jenny.”

“What?”

“She’s always wanted a girlier daughter than me, anyway.”

“You... you’re not...”

“Angry? I’m angry at your mother for what she did to you, now and all the times before; furious, in fact. I hope I don’t see her again, or I might be winding up in prison for beating the hell out of her.” Ash slid her hand from Jenny’s, reaching up and stroking her cheek with the back of her fingers. “But I’m not mad at you. If anything, I’m glad. Emily and I are... going home, tomorrow. I... hell, I didn’t know you at the start of this month except as the bitch daughter of my mom’s bitch coworker. A fortnight ago, all I knew you as was a stone-cold bitch, ice-queen gold-digger. Now I hate the thought of not having you around.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, I do. I’d bet dollars to donuts that Em feels the same way, too. It’s weird, because you’re like, everything I thought stereotypical—and stereotypically despicable—in a girl, but I hate the idea of you not being around, and of not being here to have your back... So yeah, I’d be really glad if you stay with my mom. We can stay in touch easily, what with these cell phones my mom bought us.”

“... Thank you, Ash. Being around you, and Emily, and your mom these past few days and weeks...” Jenny took Ash’s hand in both of hers, kissing it, softly, then holding it tightly to her chest. Ash smiled softly, even at the feeling of the back of her hand sinking into Jenny’s ample, soft breasts through the fabric of her shirt and bra.

“Jenny, my mom... She’s a great person, magnificent in fact. She tries her hardest to be a mom to me, even though she lives a whole state away. Stay with her... I don’t know if she can replace your mom, but I know she’ll do her damndest. Have you liked living with her the last week?”

“Y-Yeah... she’s... she makes me feel... safe. Safe, warm, and...” Jenny sniffled. “I just realized, my mom hasn’t made me feel any of that in like... I dunno, a decade. She’s been pushing me so hard, for so long, teaching me to take whatever I could, to play people for my own gain. She hasn’t just...”

“Shh. You don’t have to say anymore, Jenny.”

“Thank you, Ash.”

“You’re welcome, Jenny.”

As they drove, the radio bleated out the distinctive twin-twin guitar chords, and a singer began, “This ain’t a song for the broken-hearted!” Jenny blinked as the song started in, looking up as they drove down the freeway. Jenny grinned widely at the line, “A heart is like an open highway, like Frankie said I did it my way!”



“Yeah,” Jenny said. “You’re right, and, thank you. I’m not... I’m not going to let her get me down like this, to destroy all that feels good and right about life.”

“That’s the spirit, Jenny.”

Jenny squeezed Ash’s hand tightly, momentarily, and released it.

They drove on silently through the night for many more minutes, when Jenny looked back up at Ash. “Ash, I want to know. What’s a Misfile? Why does it trouble you?”

“Erk...”

“I’m *not* dropping it, Ash. You’ve done so much for me: you’ve torn me down when I was being a brat, and you picked me back up; you literally held me when I was feeling awful; you’ve actually told me you liked the idea of me staying with your mom when mine threw me out; you’ve shown me things I never could have seen before, about myself, about the world; you’ve shown me passions I never thought I could have, and hope that they might be fulfilled... You’re like a best friend and a sister in one, and I have this ridiculously huge crush on you, *and* on your girlfriend. And I *know* something’s bothering you.”

“What... what do you mean?”

“Look, I just do. I can’t pin it down, or figure it out, but you’re... Well, I think helping me is maybe helping you, but there’s something there, and I want to help you.”

“Jenny, I—”

“Don’t want to talk about it. I know, but I’m not letting go of you. Not now. You’re too important.”

Ash groaned, audibly.

“Come on, Ash. You can tell me *anything*, you know that, right?”

“(Rrrgh. *Fine!*) Fine. You want to know the truth?”

“Yes!” Jenny said, exasperation in her voice. “I want to help you.”

“Okay, Jenny, fine. You want to know the truth? You want to know what a Misfile is?” A bit of a manic glee grew within Ash’s heart. “In March of this year, Emily was seventeen years old, nearly eighteen; she was about to graduate with a massive report card, and had already been accepted into Harvard. Then one day, poof! She’s fifteen going on sixteen. Just like that, the only person who remembers two years of her life having happened at all is *her*.

“And me?” Ash laughed. “I went to bed a teenaged boy, and woke up with breasts as big as yours. I was turned from a boy into a girl overnight, and the whole world only ever remembered me as a girl.

“And all of it because of one, jackass, pot-headed Angel—yes, an angel, what with wings and a halo, I’ve seen them both myself. His name is Rumisiel, and he’s the ‘cover’ boyfriend of mine, only he’s covering for more than you think. You see, that idiot was, for some asinine reason, given some measure of control over the Celestial Filing Cabinets. He lit up while he was at work, and his bosses stormed in. He managed to put the last two files on his desk—mine and Emily’s—away. He shoved my file into the girl cabinet, but because the header line in my file still says ‘boy’, I remember being a boy, even though nobody else in the world remembers me that way, and all evidence of me having lived a life I never lived is there. He also left out the last two pages of Emily’s file, the record of her life. But her header line reads age eighteen, not age sixteen, so she remembers those two years, even if as far as the world is concerned, they never happened. *That* is a Misfile.”

Jenny stared at Ash as if in utter shock as Ash took a deep breath to recover from her manic unload. Then Jenny’s eyebrows furrowed. “Ash! That’s not funny! I’m trying to help you here, and you feed me some kind of fantasy crap about Angels?!”

“You can’t *handle* the truth,” Ash responded, sarcastically and bitter, before she got very soft and quiet. “And I’m so very, very sorry about that, Jenny. I *know* you want to help me. And believe me, I... I actually want your help. But believe me, the truth is precisely, *exactly* as unbelievable as that story. And worse is that I have no way to prove it to you, even if I wanted to tell you. So... please, Jenny. Don’t make me tell you the same thing over again, okay? Please, if you want to help, you can help me most by not mentioning it again.”

“Can’t she help you?”

“Who? My... my mom?”

“Yes, your mom.”

“... No, she can’t. Jenny, please—”

“Not going to say a word to her, Ash. I swear.”

“Thank you, Jenny.”

Marco’s Parking Lot, 10:51 PM

“Okay, so, why did you want to come here, anyway,” Ash asked, as they got out of the car. “What with the high chance of running into at least one unpleasant encounter?”

“Really... I just had the feeling you two were leaving tomorrow, so I did this so I could get the chance for a long drive with you so we could have that talk.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Jenny grinned. “Anyway... thanks.”

“No problem, Jenny.”

Ash and Jenny turned, looking for their companions, as they had been forced by parking limitations to park on opposite sides of the lot, when Ash’s new cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

It was Nathan on the other end. “Ash, I’m sorry I didn’t think of this earlier, at the mall. You said your blonde friend got her car basically stolen, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“It’s not the coolest or fastest thing in the world. In fact, it’s pretty much the opposite of a hot chick-car, unless you happen to be redneck-country, but I’ll let her borrow my Durango for as long as she needs. Is she around?”

“Uh, yeah, next to me, in fact. Hang on.” Ash looked over at Jenny, holding the flip-top cell phone up beside her head. “It’s Nathan. He says if you want it, he’ll let you borrow that SUV of his for as long as you need.”

“Really? Gimme.” She held out her hand, and Ash put the cell phone in Jenny’s hand.

Ash spied her mother and Emily waving at her from near the door to Marco’s, so she started walking quicker to catch up to them; Jenny followed, though not nearly as fast.

“Something up?” Emily asked Ash as she arrived ahead of Jenny.

Ash nodded and explained the situation. “How did he get my number, though?”

Marie chuckled. “That’s not hard. I set your new phone up to have the same number as the deactivated unit.”

“Oh, okay.”

Jenny caught them up, returning Ash’s phone. “Here you go.”

“So, what’s going on?”

“He said he and Jimmy will drop it off for me like on the second or so.”

“All righty. That’s pretty awesome,” Ash said.

“Yeah, I know. I don’t know how I deserve it, but... Well, let’s just go get dinner, mmh?”

The maître d’ hardly bothered to give them much of a disdainful look this time, as he had the quartet seated. They ordered, and were soon talking. Small talk gave way to serious conversation when Marie said, “Hold up. We have some serious things we need to talk about.”

“What is it, mom?”

“Well, first off, there’s the small question of how you two are getting back home.”

It hit Ash like ten tons of bricks and she groaned.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re taking my car.”

“W-What?”

“My Porsche? You two seem to love it. Take it, and keep it as long as you want to. I trust the two of you, and it makes you happy.” Ash blinked, and blushed lightly, while Marie grinned at her. “And secondly... is birthdays. Both you and Jenny are eighteen on the eleventh.”

“Oh... right.”

“I don’t know what Edward’s planning to do, but if you want to ask him to do it your way...”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Get your birthday party scheduled for the fifteenth. Jenny can go to Tempest to attend your party, stay the night. The next day—”

“We come back here for Jenny’s birthday party, and then we go home on Sunday.”

“Right!” Marie grinned at her daughter, and then her eyes lit up. “Heads up.”

Ash turned her head, and grinned as the waitress approached with the platter of their dinner. Ash grinned, sliding to the side to make more room for the waitress, who began to set their plates down.

### Back On The Road, December 31, 12:37 AM

“You okay?”

“Mmm? Yeah... I’m just kind of depressed.”

“Again? Your mom got you down again?”

“No, you do,” Jenny smirked.

Ash looked back at her, blinking. “What?”

“You’re going to be leaving in less than twelve hours, right?”

“Well... yeah, probably. You—”

“I already know I’m gonna miss you,” Jenny replied, with a soft grin. “You and Emily. You two have helped me *soo much* the past week... I...”

“Shhh. It’s fine.” Ash reached over, taking Jenny’s hand, caressing it tenderly, and Jenny looked up, with a smile.

“Can I...” Jenny bit her lip, feeling silly.

Ash asked, “What?”

“Well... I was... It’s stupid, but... can I sleep with you two?”

“Ah...”

“You two make me feel so good, so warm, so *safe*.”

Ash blinked again, and bit her lip. “If Emily’s okay with it... This isn’t a transparent ploy to get me to grope you in my sleep, is it?”

“Well, I won’t say it didn’t enter my mind...” Jenny giggled softly.

Ash rolled her eyes. “Was it really that good?”

“You have no idea, after all the guys I’ve let fondle me, all the hard, impersonal, greedy touches, how good it was to just have someone *sensitive* touching my tits.”

Ash snorted, and shook her head. “That’s kind of crazy. But okay, if you say so. You know... Why won’t your mom let you get your stuff?”

“Well, she technically owns it.”

“The car, sure, but the rest?”

“No, all of it. She’s not the kind to give unless she’s getting something out of it. But even so, I’d guess she’s waiting for me to get desperate enough to crawl back to her.”

“That’s—”

“That’s my mother,” Jenny said, with a brief scowl, and then a weary, resigned sigh. “It figures she took it, just after you two got it looking so... *unique*. Perfect.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, I do. *You* may be content to have your Monster look like a beat up old 1980s junker, but I thought it really looked... mmmh, great.”

“You really get off on looking good, don’t you?”

“My favorite song is ‘Barbie Girl’, figure it out.” Jenny grinned at Ash, who chuckled. “And thanks to you, I realize just how unique and bold a car can be, both under the hood and over it. I... I really liked what we did to my car. What *you* and Emily did for my car...”

“I thought it looked good, too. Spinners... I’d never put them on my own, but they weren’t bad... So, really, ‘Barbie Girl’?”

Jenny nodded. “What can I say? I am shallow, I love looking good, and driving something that looks good.”

“So, you must be *thrilled* at the idea of driving that old SUV around.”

“Oh yeah, absolutely thrilled, let me tell you,” Jenny said, with a sardonic grin. “Still, it’s got four wheels and eight cylinders, which will get me to and from school, anyway.”

“School... Man, how’s that gonna work?”

“Fuck if I know, honestly. Your mom’s still puzzling that one over.”

“Okay...”

Their conversation trailed off again, with Jenny looking away, out the window of the Porsche at the side of the highway.

“Ash? You don’t feel like I’m...”

“Stealing my mother? No way, Jenny. It’s... it’s fine, really. Like I said, I’m glad. You’re more the kind of daughter she’s always wanted than I am, and you can actually be here all the time.”

“Mmmh... thank you, Ash.”

“You’re welcome. Does what I think really mean so much to you?”

“It means the *world* to me.”

#### Upton Residence, 1:08 AM

Marie had hardly gone in the door when she wished the girls a good night and went straight for the stairs, leaving Ash, Emily, and Jenny walking into the house and locking up. They did so, and shut off the lights, leaving them illuminated only by the light from the tree.

“So, was this impromptu vacation worth it, Ash?”

“Yeah...” Ash looked at Jenny, and smiled back at Emily. “Yeah, it was, if only because we made a new friend.” She wrapped her arms lightly around Jenny’s shoulders, and the blonde girl blushed softly, as Emily came up to her other side, hugging her as well.

“And the really super cars weren’t bad, either, were they?”

“That too,” Ash said. “You know, we’re not going to all be together again for at least two weeks, right?”

“Yeah...” Emily grinned. “So, see, I was thinking...”

“You, too?” Jenny looked up, asking Emily, and the blue-haired girl nodded, squeezing her smaller blonde friend’s body.

“Yeah. What do you say, Ash?”

In response, Ash just blushed, shifting awkwardly before reaching down, taking Jenny’s hand and pulling her towards the door into the bedroom she and Emily shared.

“I don’t deserve this... I don’t deserve you two in any way,” Jenny said quietly.

Emily kicked the door shut behind them. “Shush. Yes, you do. Simply because you are our friend...”

“But I make things so... complicated, don’t I?”

“Yes, you do,” Emily said with a grin, as she reached down, pulling her shirt up, dropping it in the hamper. Ash’s shirt followed, while Jenny awkwardly slid her own off.

Then Jenny gasped when Emily moved behind her, unlatching her bra. “E-Emily?”

Ash was looking at Emily’s eyes too, the look in her eyes confused. “Em?”

“You’re really confusing for us, you know, Jenny?” the blue-haired girl said, as she pushed the blushing blonde back to the bed, gently pushing her down with a finger to the shoulder. “The last girl who got a crush on Ash, I got so very, *very* jealous over. You? I guess it’s really weird, because we all kind of think each other’s attractive. But... tonight, since it is the last time we’re going to see you for awhile...”

Jenny’s eyes were wide, and Ash sat next to her. “Emily, you’re not thinking—”

“No, I’m not,” the blue-haired bookworm clarified, with a light blush of her own, as she tossed her own bra behind her, landing atop Jenny’s; Ash’s joined them a moment later. “But tell me... Would you regret if it we didn’t take the chance now?”

“The chance?”

“To hold her. To squeeze you,” she said, shifting from addressing Ash to addressing Jenny, “between us, the same way we sleep when together, holding you tight. Would you want that?”

The blonde on the bed blushed heavily, but raised her legs, tugging off her shoes and discarding her socks. “I... I’d like that... A-Ash?”

The orange-haired tuner looked down at her new blonde friend, Jenny’s breasts rising and falling, illuminated by the moonlight. She bit her lip, and nodded. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

It didn’t take the trio long after that to disrobe, and they were even quicker together under the covers. Jenny became sandwiched between Ash and Emily, with the blue-haired tuner spooned tightly to Jenny’s back. Emily’s lower arm was under both Jenny and Ash’s heads, the upper over the blonde, resting gently against the underside of Jenny’s breasts, firmly squeezing her soft body to Emily’s own. Ash and Jenny were staring at one another, Ash’s lower arm holding Jenny’s, while her upper arm rested over both Jenny and Emily. Necessarily, they were tightly close, blushing softly.

“You okay, Ash?” Jenny asked quietly.

Ash shrugged. “I dunno. I... I want to hold you, you’re a friend, you’re important to us... It’s just... I’m kind of attracted to the idea of a menage a... Menage a twas?”

“Ménage à trois, Ash,” Emily corrected with a soft giggle.

“You are?” asked Jenny.

“Yes, I am... it’s... I’ve thought about it, of course I have.”

“What do you think?” asked Emily.

“It feels like a bad idea, but one... that’s so... indescribably desirable, too.” Ash leaned forward into Jenny, kissing her cheek softly as she gently stroked Emily’s side with her hand, and both of her friend’s feet with her own.

“I’m sorry, Ash. I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable...” The blonde closed her eyes, guilt welling within her. “This is me being selfish, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not,” Emily assured her from behind, kissing Jenny’s cheek from behind. “We both wanted this, to hold you tight the last night we were going to be here. Do you think it’s a bad idea?”

“I... I don’t want to come between the two of you.”

Emily grinned, pushing Jenny’s hair out of the way, whispering across her ear. “The only way you’re between us is literally. Close your eyes and just enjoy it, okay?”

“Okay...”

Jenny closed her eyes, as did Ash. Jenny breathed out, softly, letting the proximity, the two very supple, soft, curvy bodies pressing into her lull her to sleep. The last thing she remembered was the feeling of Emily’s hand deliberately moving up between Ash’s lower breast and her own, cupping and squeezing her enhanced mound tenderly, as she felt the two of them shift enough to kiss over her head.

Notes:

Due to the Misfile, Ms. McArthur's unplanned pregnancy was moved to when she was *eighteen*, not sixteen. Emily saying sixteen in the heat of the moment is a result of her having a fight with her mother and falling back on old knowledge. (The moving of Ms. McArthur's unplanned pregnancy to her senior year is Word of God, from the horse's mouth.)

There may be some confusion as to the naming of the car Jimmy drives. Jimmy drives a 1970 Plymouth Barracuda with Chrysler's legendary 426 Hemi engine in it. Barracudas are often abbreviated as 'Cuda, and with the Hemi engine in it, the Hemi is often prefixed to the abbreviation of 'cuda, thus, 'Hemicuda'. It is perfectly acceptable to call it a 'Cuda', a 'Barracuda', or a 'Hemicuda', in much the same way Marie's 2004 Porsche 996 can be called a 996 or a 911.

Nathan may or may not be talking out of his ass when he says the Porsche Carrera GT accelerates faster than the Space Shuttle. It's hyperbole; please don't bombard me with the stats for how fast the Space Shuttle accelerates. (For the record, the Carrera GT out-accelerates the Shuttle for the first nine seconds, past which the Shuttle wins by just enough to have beaten the Carrera GT over the Quarter Mile.)

There is no plot hole in Nathan having walked out without asking where the car was parked. Remember, it has a GPS locator beacon in it, and Nathan's BlackBerry is linked to the function. He was planning to go back with Jimmy to the Barracuda and have Jimmy drop him at the Carrera, following the GPS beacon. However, the Carrera GT is parked next to the 'Cuda, so it's a moot point.

Thanks to:

Avenged Sevenfold, for the philosophy ripped straight from their lyrics.

Bon Jovi, for "Thank You for Loving Me" and "It's My Life".

Aqua, for "Barbie Girl" and "Butterfly".

Google Earth, for being an invaluable research tool.

The Need for Speed Underground 2 Soundtrack.

The Need for Speed Carbon Soundtrack.

The Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas Soundtrack.

ThePirateBay.org for enabling me to listen to the above-mentioned soundtracks.

The Need for Speed Carbon composed music, which may be found at

[http://www.imeem.com/people/GCgawn//music/cQIslZoe/need\\_for\\_speed\\_carbon\\_nfs\\_carbon\\_composed\\_music/](http://www.imeem.com/people/GCgawn//music/cQIslZoe/need_for_speed_carbon_nfs_carbon_composed_music/)

Griffon8, Cheshire Cat, Rhiannon, CyberRanger, Saradraco, Shannon, Scotts13, Owncksd, Harri,

Kyeudo, and random55 for being beta-readers.

Bails5607, FracturedSoul, Gavin, HalcyonSpirit, Hoopla, Jamjamnorman, jbenant, MythicalXeon,

RallyNinja, Samantha, Shandi, and Splat for additional beta-reading.

Griffon8 for editing – he really could do it professionally.

Chris Hazleton (Peacecraft) for being a good sport about letting me play in his playground.

You, for reading this long story.