

Beyond Electric Dreams

A Misfile fanfiction by ShadowDragon8685

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???

The very air itself was tense. *Race day*. The air was charged with the tension of an imminent contest of skill and speed. Emily stood beside a large wall. She smiled and looked at her hands—her fingernails were painted a bright crimson, and there was a gold band on the ring finger of her left hand.

“You ready?”

Emily smiled, turning her head to look. Ash was resplendent in a red and gold fire-retardant race-suit with a shield-like badge on her right breast—a suit like her own.

“Always.”

They took each other’s hands, fingers lacing. Almost in their own world—despite the loudspeaker booming in both French and English and the other drivers lined up on the wall—they leaned close. Ash’s lips met hers, briefly, but tenderly. Emily looked down at their laced hands.

Ash’s fingernails were also painted—a brilliant, mirror-reflective shade in which she could literally see her own reflection, and there was a matching gold band on her finger. Their hands parted, and they turned back. In the pits, on the other side of the raceway, sat a shining cherry-apple red car. It was waiting for them, the driver’s side door open. The hood in the rear was also open, with two figures leaning over it. The shorter one was in a red and gold suit like their own, the other in a differing suit, much more stained with grease. They stood up and closed the engine’s cover. The tall one was Harry, who gave a thumbs-up; the other was Missi, who crossed her arms and smirked before walking away.

“This is almost like a dream. There are butterflies in my stomach.”

Emily grinned, and Ash gave her hand a squeeze; she nodded, as a fanfare of trumpets blew, and the loudspeaker announced that the race began soon; and ordered drivers to their cars. The whole crowd strode towards the pits; Ash and Emily were the only two racers heading for one car. When they reached the sides, Ash asked, “Heads or tails?”

“Heads.”

Ash flipped a coin and caught it on the back of her hand. “Tails. I drive the first four.”

“Enjoy.”

Emily walked around to the passenger’s side and pulled open the door, getting in. Ash got into the driver’s side, putting a stick of plastic in the ignition harness. The instrument panel lit up, and Emily grinned. Then there was a knock on her window—she rolled it down.

Kate was standing outside. “You might want to see this.”

Kate handed in a small, portable screen, on which a broadcast was being displayed. She, too, was wearing a suit just like the racer’s. The broadcast on the screen she had handed over was in English, being spoken by a man with a British accent.

“We’re all very excited to be here at this, the eighty-eighth race here at 24 Hours of Le Mans. The field looks very competitive today; mostly cars from Mitsubishi, Mazda, and Nissan, who upset the field and took a surprise victory last year with their hydrogen-powered Skyline Z. The field has been dominated in recent years by Mazda’s electrics, but perhaps the most *exciting* entry on today’s field is the red car numbered 27.”

The picture on the screen zoomed in, showing a picture of the long, sleek, low-slung monster that Ash and Emily were sitting in.

“After last year’s spectacular crash, everybody figured it was curtains for Porsche’s reputation and chances of winning; including Porsche. The gasoline-sucking dinosaur’s days seemed over; until they came back for one last charge.”

The picture switched again, showing a picture of Ash, Emily, Harry, Kate, Missi, and Jenny, standing together in front of the car.

“Six racers from a small-town in Massachusetts pooled their money to buy a production Porsche 999 XT Turbo. Designed as a resurrection of the magnificent yet economically failed Carrera GT, the 999 XT Turbo featured a V-14, supercharged engine in the rear. Last year’s entry on the field suffered a fatal crash which was linked to a failure in the engine, which the electricity pundits pointed to as a clear indication that gas engines are dinosaurs, and should be extinct like them.

“Six people from Tempest with a dream of glory set out to prove them wrong. Although Porsche declined to enter their own car this year, these six, calling themselves ‘Team Tempest’, petitioned Porsche to race on their behalf. Porsche agreed, and supplied their latest and greatest motor as well—the prototype Krueger Rotary.

“A behemoth of an internal combustion engine, more powerful and reliable than the previous engine, the numbers on the Krueger are impressive; so impressive that Team Tempest has vowed not only to drive the whole race with two people in the car, but they have loudly boasted that they’ll be taking not only first place in the GT3 class their production Porsche belongs to, but will be taking the overall prize as the first-place winners.

“The debate is fierce; can a gasoline-gulping dinosaur, even one as advanced as the Porsche 999 XT, with the last and most advanced petrochemical engine ever designed, hold up in a field dominated by plug-and-go electrics and high-pressure hydrogen? One thing’s for sure; even if they don’t take the flag, they’re certainly a paragon of sticking to your guns.”

Emily smirked at the announcement, and handed the screen back out. Kate took it with a grin. “Dinosaurs, are we? If we win, they’ll be calling this the ‘day of the dinosaur’.”

Emily grinned back. “Yep...”

She leaned back, settling into the carbon-fiber racing seat; the stretching pulled the sleeve of her suit’s arm back, and she looked down at her watch, curiously, beginning to twist her arm.

Then Ash gasped, letting out a terrible scream of fear.

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, December 23, 2004, 6:21 AM

Emily’s eyes shot open, feeling the bed lurch beside her. Ash had shot straight up, waking up in a cold panic, heaving for breath. “Ash? *Ash*?” She sat up, putting her hand on Ash’s shoulder, getting the tuner’s attention. Ash turned her head, disoriented and confused; Emily hugged her. “Ash, are you okay? What happened?”

Her eyes, wild with panic, slowly focused on Emily. “I... I had a nightmare,” she confessed, shivering.

“Are you okay?” Emily hugged Ash a little more tightly—the tuner shivered again, but relaxed, leaning back slightly into her.

“I... um, yeah. I’m just... Yeah, I’m okay, Em.” She closed her eyes, taking a breath.

Emily brushed the orange hair from Ash’s face, wrapping her legs around Ash’s waist. “You’re upset... Ash?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’ll get over it.”

Emily frowned softly, and leaned up a bit, kissing her love’s cheek, softly. “What happened?”

“I *said* I don’t want to talk about it, Emily. Please, don’t ask me to. It’s too friggin’ creepy.” Her voice was quavering, and it tore at Emily’s heart to see Ash so torn.

Emily reached up; brushing Ash’s cheek, she was surprised to find tears on her face. “Ash?”

Ash pushed herself back to the headboard, leaving Emily in front of her. Emily found herself being pulled against Ash with the terrified strength of the tuner’s arms, crushing her into a desperate hug that hurt. Still, she grit her teeth; she *pushed* into Ash, hugging her just as tightly, instinctively feeling that Ash needed the closeness.

“Ash,” Emily whispered, an eternity of seconds later; the crushing hug loosened, and Ash took a deep, shuddering breath. So did Emily, and she kissed Ash’s cheek, softly, tasting the tears on her lips. “Are you okay?”

“... Don’t leave me, Emily.”

“What?”

“I... it was a stupid dream... never mind.”

“Did you dream that I’d... that I *left* you?”

Ash shook her head. “No... well...” She sighed. “I don’t... Look, it freaked me out, okay?”

“I can see that, Ash.” She laid her head on Ash’s shoulder. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“I really don’t...” The orange-haired tuner let out a heavy sigh, and buried her head in Emily’s shoulder.

“Ash...” Emily began, worriedly, but thought better of it. She bit her lip, and put her head alongside Ash’s. They held one another, closely. Emily could feel Ash’s chest rising under hers. Ash was still breathing hard, her hot breath escaping down Emily’s back. Minutes later, Ash still hadn’t relaxed, and Emily kissed her cheek. “I haven’t seen you this bad since your race with Kate, Ash. You’re *terrified*.” She waited a beat, then realized it might sound insulting. “You’re *never* scared, Ash. You’re the strongest person I know. Please, what’s got you so hurt?”

“I... I lost c-control... It hurt...”

“Of... You dreamed you had a crash?”

“No, I’ve had that dream before. This was...” She bit her lip, hard, closing her eyes; she felt wretched. “Please, I don’t want to say it. I feel too... too sissy...”

“It was sexual, wasn’t it?”

Ash opened her eyes, looking into Emily’s. She nodded. “How did you know?”

“Because I know *you*, Ash. Please... let me help.”

“How?”

In response, Emily hugged Ash again, and kissed her shoulder, softly. “Ash, you are *not* a sissy. But it will only hurt you to bottle up things that hurt you. You have feelings. Even if you’re afraid of showing them to the world, please, show them to me. Let me support you.”

Ash closed her eyes again, and took a shuddering breath. “I... I don’t want you to laugh...”

She was clearly nervous; Emily could feel her stomach knotting. She reached back, putting her hands on Ash’s shoulders, kissing her, hard and hot, albeit briefly. She pulled off, and stared into Ash’s eyes—big and green, the way she loved them.

“Ash, I *love* you. I know we may be young, but I *know* it, more surely than I’ve ever known anything. I care about you. You’re my best friend, my girlfriend, and my lover. Why in the world would I laugh at you when you’re vulnerable?”

“You’ve laughed at me before...”

“That was different. I was laughing at something that was funny, but I’d never find something that made you hurt funny, Ash. Please, trust me.”

Ash nodded, and put her head on Emily’s shoulder. “... I trust you, Em.” She pressed her lips to Emily’s shoulder, softly. “I... I had a nightmare. I dreamt I was...” She bit her lip. “I dreamed that I was over myself... I was on my back, looking up, and I was above me. Only it was, me, you know, *before* the Misfile.”

“You... as a boy? Over you... as a girl?”

“Yeah... I dreamed you were there, but holding onto me—him—and saying what an emotional loser I was. Then he grabbed me, and...” She choked off, but Emily didn’t need her to say more; she clutched Ash, tightly. Ash held back, her fingernails digging at Emily’s back. “It... it *hurt*, so badly... I... I couldn’t...” Her voice quavered.

“Ash, you’re not a sissy for feeling scared from that kind of a dream.” She kissed Ash’s cheek, very softly. “I’d feel the same way... having no control. It’s terrifying, Ash, I understand. *Believe me*, I

understand.” Memories of Ryan’s face swam to her mind, but she forced them away, as Ash sniffled, softly, against her shoulder.

“It... I just felt so... so *helpless*, so powerless... All I could do was squirm. I tried to punch him—me—but it didn’t work...”

Emily nuzzled her friend’s cheek, softly, reaching up and holding her head from behind. “Ash, it was a dream, not real. Dreams, especially nightmares, make you powerless. But I know you’re strong enough to beat up a boy.

“Remember beating the stuffing out of Tom? Remember when you punched Kay Wheeler in the chest? Remember the way you handled that hobo, the one who very much did mean to rape us? And the way you picked up that crowbar and were very, very ready to attack those four when they grabbed us at the arcade?”

Ash nodded, silently, to each of the memories Emily brought up.

“Physical courage has never been your weak suit, Ash.” Emily gently pressed her lips into Ash’s; Ash returned the kiss: slowly, tenderly, long lasting, and warm. They broke away slowly, eyes closed. “You’re still afraid of it, though. Rape... is a terrifying thing, Ash. You’re not weak to be afraid of something terrifying.”

Ash gulped softly. “I... I just...”

“Shhh.” Emily kissed her orange-haired tuner’s forehead, tenderly. “You’re afraid, and I’m guessing it may have something to do with how I tried to put my finger in you, doesn’t it?”

Ash shook her head. “*No!* No... well... No! I liked that. It scared me, sure. It panicked me, but... it’s *you*. I trust you, Em. I’m just...”

“You’re afraid. You’re afraid of losing control. Of being held down, aren’t you?”

Ash nodded, and Emily sighed. Turning around, Emily pressed her back into Ash’s chest, feeling her lover’s breasts against her smooth back. Emily smiled when Ash hugged her as she sat neatly between Ash’s legs. Then Emily placed her hands atop Ash’s, squeezing them gently and lacing her fingers with Ash’s.

“It... can hurt. That’s what you were thinking, but you were afraid to ask, wasn’t it?”

Ash bit her lip. “Um... yeah. How’d you...”

“Know? I know you, Ash. Your mind’s on something, and you want to know the answer,” she softly replied. “You’re afraid; afraid because of that dream. And you’re thinking about... rape, and my first time is the closest thing you know of. You want to ask, but you’re afraid to bring it up.” She squeezed, softly. “Aren’t I right?”

“You’re right, Emily.”

Emily nodded, closed her eyes, and took a shuddering breath. “I don’t want to talk about it, but I will, for you; *with* you, Ash.” Laying her head back on Ash’s shoulder, she continued. “It did hurt. He... wasn’t exactly gentle with me, and he didn’t use anything to make it go in easier. He just... pushed.” She sighed, softly; she could feel Ash’s arms tightening as she triggered Ash’s protective instincts. “So, no. It didn’t feel good. I *loathed* the feeling of him inside me. I hated it...” She took another shuddering breath.

“God, Em... I...”

“Shhh, it’s okay.” Emily squeezed Ash’s hands, and then reached down, pulling the covers back over them, over their shoulders, handing them off to Ash, who wrapped them around them both.

“I mean... in a way, I kind of felt like I knew that something like that *might* be good—skin inside me—but it was too hard, too fast, too soon, and I *didn’t* want him to be doing what he was doing to me. I didn’t want *him*.” She closed her eyes.

“Wait... *skin*?”

Emily smiled, finding an odd sort of retrospective macabre humor in the situation. “I figured that was coming. Yes, Ash, skin. He didn’t use a condom.”

“My god...”

“Yeah, I know. That’s about what I was thinking at the time. He... well, he orgasmed, ejaculated inside me, and got off. I wanted to cry... I don’t honestly know how I held it off until he’d put his clothes back on and left.”

“Emily... I mean, what did you... do?”

“I felt *violated*, Ash; I wasn’t struck *stupid*. I knew Molly had a supply of the day-after pill she kept in her nightstand, so I took a dose, just to be sure.”

Emily closed her eyes, squeezing Ash’s hands, once again. “It stopped hurting after a few minutes... I was only ‘just sore’ by the time I’d finished crying in Molly’s bathroom, splashed my face, and got dressed. The pain itself went away, but the... the hurt inside, in my heart, in my head, in my gut... it didn’t. The feeling of *violation* is worse, much, much worse. It’s an emotional attack, Ash; it’s not an attack you can fight with fists or a crowbar. You can’t attack emotions; you can’t stop them so easily. And all your life, you’ve been told that emotions are stupid, right? That they make you a sissy. But that’s not true, Ash.” She *squeezed* Ash’s hands hard, and Ash squeezed back. “Would you honestly feel differently if, say, you’d had the same dream as a boy, being raped by a boy?”

“Um...”

Ash bit her lip, and Emily waited. “I’m not asking a rhetorical question, Ash.”

“... I’d feel... the same. Horrified, I guess. Angry at the loss of control. Ashamed.”

“Mmmm. Emotions can’t be fought, but that doesn’t mean they’re not real, it doesn’t mean they can’t hurt you. You had a nightmare; it was a bad one. It heaped some extra emotional fucked-uppage on you by making it your old self that was overpowering you. That had to hurt.”

“It did hurt. It felt like... like I was angry with myself. Like I’ve become weaker, somehow. So weak that you’d leave me for a stronger boy-me, and...”

Emily turned around in Ash’s arms, pressing against her: their breasts together, her hips between Ash’s thighs, and her lips on Ash’s throat. “I would *never* leave you, Ash. Not for a boy, not for a girl, and especially not over something so stupid as physical strength. And never for someone who could be so cruel as that.” She leaned up, pressing her cheek to Ash’s.

Ash hugged her, tightly, whispering, “I just... I thought... You were asking about my... penis... last night...”

Emily sighed. “I admit, I was curious, maybe a little titillated.”

“Did you... think about me as a boy?”

Emily shook her head in reply. “I couldn’t. I mean, I knew you were telling the truth; I know, logically, that you were a boy before I met you, but... I still can’t really picture it. When I think of you, Ash Upton, I see you as you are now: soft, tender, but strong; an attractive tomboy.” She smiled softly, kissing Ash’s cheek; Ash sighed, kissing back. “Does that upset you?”

“It’s... it’s more like I’m upset that it *doesn’t* upset me.”

“You feel like you’ve betrayed yourself, falling in love with me, like this; exploring sexuality with me, as a girl. You feel like you’ve betrayed your ‘old self’, don’t you?”

“A bit.”

“You haven’t, Ash. *You* are Ash Upton. The Ash Upton who existed months ago is gone; and he would be gone, even without the Misfile. People are always changing, Ash. The Emily McArthur you met on Misfile day is as gone as the Ash Upton she met. We’ve become more, Ash. We’ve grown, we’ve learned, and we’ve learned to love.” She clasped Ash’s hand, brushing her lips over the tuner’s. “You didn’t ‘betray’ yourself, Ash. You’re just... You’re just yourself. You’re *Ash*, and that will never be truer, no matter what happens.”

Their lips met in mutual kiss, turning, parting. Ash’s other hand clasped hers, and their fingers interlaced, even as their tongues slid out. Shamelessly, Emily enjoyed the taste of her tuner’s tongue, sliding her tongue into Ash’s mouth, as Ash slid her own tongue into her mouth. The kiss parted only after an interminable eternity of taste and pleasure, and Emily giggled at how they’d gotten saliva on one another’s lips. She rubbed her mouth into the blanket, then rubbed it over Ash’s mouth as well.

"I love you, Ash. You make my heart pound; you make me feel like fireworks are going off inside me every time you kiss me. You make me feel like a fool, and I don't care, because I know you trust me, and you care about me."

Ash smiled at the strong, emotional confession, and squeezed Emily's hands again. "So, um..." Ash smiled up at her, and Emily smiled back. "Why were you asking? About..."

Emily shrugged, and smiled. "I wanted to understand you better. I guess I kind of got caught up in the juicy details. I'm just glad I didn't ask the most puerile thing I could've."

"What, you mean how long it was?"

"Yep, that's the one. And no, I don't particularly care. Size isn't as important as being gentle, anyway."

Ash sighed happily, closing her eyes in return. "Really?"

"No, not really. I know it's puerile and stupid and immature, but I'm still thinking it. *Don't* tell me. I don't need to know, and it's immature and silly."

Emily smiled softly, and Ash grinned at her; it warmed Emily's heart, having made Ash smile again. She nestled into Ash's shoulder, closing her eyes, waiting for the inevitable question. It came, though minutes of comfortable silence later.

"Emily, um... would you have..." Ash bit her lip.

"Had sex with you as a boy?" Ash nodded, and Emily kissed her shoulder. "That is a complicated question, Ash. If you mean the person you were before the Misfile? No. If you lost your memories of the Misfile, but somehow I didn't? No, I wouldn't. That wouldn't be the Ash I know, the Ash I love." She leaned up, and kissed Ash's cheek, softly. "But now? With you? I love you, Ash, I know you. I'm willing to have sex with you now, even if it does kind of scare me, still. It would probably be weird, but if you somehow changed back... That wouldn't change the fact I love you." She smirked. "Of course, if we changed back, somehow, that would mean I'd be *older* than you in body as well as mind. Could you handle having a girlfriend a year older than you?"

Ash chuckled softly at that, and sighed, happily. "I *already* have a girlfriend a year older than I am. You just have the body of a girl a year younger." She squeezed Emily.

"Close your eyes, Ash. Just breathe. I want to hear you."

Ash did as Emily asked, lying on the bed with Emily atop her. Emily put her head down atop Ash's breast, with her ear over the side in her cleavage. She listened to the air whoosh softly into Ash's chest, the beating of her heart.

"I'm a *fool* for you, Ash. I'm probably being braver than I should be, but I mean it. I'd let you touch me any way you wanted. I know you're going to have trouble overcoming and exploring, and I'm here for you. If it'll be easier for you to get over this by touching me than yourself, that's fine... Hell, it can't be worse than your *dad* touching me." She grinned at Ash, looking up—and giggled at the expression of mixed horror and disgust on Ash's face.

"Ugh. My dad's such a creep. I'm amazed he hasn't been sued yet."

Emily smirked, but shook her head. "He's actually not so much. He's never been anything but strictly professional with me. Actually, he told me that I'd need to find another doctor. Offered to refer me to some of his friends in the trade, but said he couldn't continue to be my gynecologist."

"Why?"

Emily smiled, and kissed Ash square between the breasts, over her heart. "Same reason he can't be *yours*." She waited a moment to savor the look of abject fear on Ash's face, before continuing. "Too close, now. I'm his daughter's best friend, after all; I've slept under his roof, shared meals with him at his table, and all that—his words, verbatim. Destroys objectivity, gives rise to the potential for seeming improprieties." She chuckled, and sighed, closing her eyes.

"But he's still your mother's?"

"Yeah. All he's done is blackmail her, after all." She snickered softly, and pulled Ash's hand up, kissing it, softly. "Not that it matters. I wouldn't care if she told me never to talk to you again. I care

about you too much. I need your friendship, your support, and your help in my life. And I in yours.” Ash nodded, holding Emily’s head softly against her chest. “I’d defy her if I had to... Hell, it’d be the first damn time in my life.” She kissed Ash’s knuckles, and grinned when Ash pulled the covers up, over her head. “That’s right... Keep me warm, protect me, and comfort me... That’s my Ash; you think about me, even subconsciously.” She closed her eyes, sliding her own arms up, wrapping them under Ash’s shoulder blades, holding tight. “Good night, Ash. Sleep peacefully, this time.”

“I will, Em... and... thank you.”

Emily kissed the inside curve of Ash’s breast and smiled. “Thank you, Ash.”

Emily honestly didn’t know how many minutes passed. Her eyes were closed, but sleep refused to come. Finally, Ash whispered at her, “Are you awake?”

“Yes, Ash. I am.”

“Want to get up early?”

“And do what?”

“I dunno... Hell, we could just get in the cars and drive to drive. We have the helmets, after all, we can still talk.”

“Mmmmm. Maybe we could go to Truro, to the parking lot course, for an early run... Heh, why don’t we do it in the other’s car?”

Ash chuckled. “What, me in the Porsche, you in the Monster XR? That would be *great*. But it’s too light out; too many people. We’d have to wait until like, 3 AM or so.”

“Mmmm. Let’s try it.”

“Do you like it?”

“Racing with you? Of course.”

“The Porsche.”

“*Oh... um, yeah*. I admit it was kinda weird at first, not manually shifting and all, but then I overrode the automatic shifting and used the paddles, and it became kinda like Need for Speed.”

Ash grinned, and she squeezed Emily’s shoulders. “You handle it well. It’s not a car meant for drifting and all, but you did great. Hell, we could probably modify it pretty good. If Harry could change the chipping on the engine, she’ll have plenty of horsepower, and we could do some stuff with the suspension...”

Emily grinned, and took Ash’s hand, squeezing it. “Mmmm... Wanna go get our morning shower?”

“All right.”

Emily sat up, onto her knees, and tugged Ash up with her, hugging Ash’s head into her chest. Ash kissed her, tenderly, over the heart, then slid off, taking Emily off the bed with her, taking her hand.

“Mmmmh. Where’s the light?”

“We don’t need it. The sun will be up soon... And it’s actually kinda nice, taking a long, relaxing, darkened shower.”

Ash laughed softly, and kissed Emily’s forehead in response. “All right.”

Emily led her to the shower, turning on the heat while Ash laid out towels: two thick towels over the radiator to get warmed up, two smaller towels above those for their hair.

Without saying anything they each stepped in, closing the glass-paneled door behind them. Ash stood in front, her head under the showerhead—as per the routine they had developed without any discussion at all, wordlessly in agreement. Emily picked up a bottle of shampoo as Ash knelt down; Ash sighed contentedly as Emily began to lather the shampoo into her hair.

“You like this, don’t you?”

“What do you mean, Em?”

“Me washing your hair. I know what your sighs sound like—that was ‘I’m happy’, not ‘I’m frustrated’. You *enjoy* having my fingers in your hair, don’t you?” She felt Ash’s cheek grow a little hotter.

“Um... yeah, I guess? It feels good...”

“Do you feel silly?”

“A bit... I mean—”

“Ash, you’re not being a sissy, liking this. We’re friends, we’re girlfriends... it’s a mutual trade, an affection. I *enjoy* doing this for you; your hair feels nice to the touch. And I like it when you do the same for me, even if you are a bit ham-handed.”

“Ham-handed?”

“Just a bit. But that’s okay, I don’t mind. Stand up.”

Ash stood, letting Emily lean her head into the spray, gently moving her with two careful hands. Satisfied, eventually, that the shampoo had been washed out, they exchanged places and began anew, Ash washing Emily’s hair. She tried to be gentler, and Emily let out a soft murmur of appreciation.

“Your hair feels good, Em,” Ash whispered in Emily’s ear.

“I’m glad you like it.” Emily reached back behind her; her hand found Ash’s foot, and ran up it, squeezing her ankle.

“What are you doing?” Ash’s voice was amused.

“No idea. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.”

Emily started to gingerly tickle Ash’s foot, which got a chuckle out of her lover.

Out of the blue, a question occurred to Emily, and she took in a breath.

“Ash, what’s important in sex?”

“What’s... What do you mean?”

Emily stood up and turned around—her head in the showerhead’s line of water, she kept her eyes closed, but asked again. “What’s important, in sex, Ash? Is it the penetration? Having a lover physically submit to you? Is it the control? The sounds? The orgasm? Ejaculating? What?”

“Um... heh...” Emily opened her eyes—in the dim light she could nevertheless clearly see Ash’s arm rubbing the back of her own head. “Um, Jeez... I... I mean, I’ve never... Y’know, I don’t know... Why do you ask?”

Emily hugged Ash softly, then turned around, turning Ash with her. With her back to the shower’s rear wall, she smiled. “I just... Trust me?”

“Of course I trust you.”

“Put your hands on me.”

“Um... what do you mean?”

“Just do it.”

“Well... where?”

Emily laughed and took Ash’s hands. Emily stepped back—almost into the wall—and put one of Ash’s hands on her hip, the other on her shoulder. “Step close to me.”

Ash did, and asked, “What are you doing, Emily?”

“I want to try something, okay? Just... I had an idea.”

“What is it?”

Emily kissed Ash, softly. “Push into me.”

“What?”

“Push yourself into me, Ash. Lead with your hips.”

Emily spread her legs slightly, as a confused Ash did as she asked, murmuring, “Okay... um... I trust you, so, okay.”

She gently pushed into Emily’s hips, pushing her body into Emily’s.

“Harder. Make me *feel* you’re there. Push me into the wall.” Emily knew her voice was growing thicker; she licked her lips at the feeling of Ash against her, and pushed Ash’s hips back with her own. She rose up, instinctively, on the balls of her feet, as Ash pushed, driving her back into the wall. It felt *good*, and she grinned, even as Ash looked a bit confused, and possibly awkward.

“What... now?”

“Pull back,” Emily quietly directed, and Ash did. “Now, again. Faster...” Ash’s eyes widened, as Emily’s hands wrapped around her shoulders, pushing into her hips, pressing their pelvises against one another. “Again, Ash...”

“My... God, you’re...” Ash blushed, hotly.

“I’m... um...” Emily smiled. “I think the term is ‘dry-humping’? Of course, we’re both very wet...”

“Em...” Ash slowed down, but Emily pressed her lips to Ash’s, kissing her, softly.

“Don’t feel silly, Ash. Are you okay with this?”

“I feel a bit... stupid, but yeah. It’s not, you know, panicking me.”

“Keep going. Do you like it?”

Ash started to push, harder, and Emily smiled, letting out a quiet moan as Ash tightened her grip on her hip and shoulder.

“That’s right, Ash. You can squeeze me; you can push me. I’m not delicate; I’m not made of porcelain; I won’t break if you handle me.” Her voice was huskier, and Emily knew she was panting softly as Ash drove into her. Ash’s fingernails dug into her skin, and she let out a moan. *“In every way, this is better. She’s even being rougher than he was, now; she’s moving harder and faster, but I love this, and hated that...”*

She moaned Ash’s name, as Ash started to make quiet, laughing sounds with her exhales. “Grab my thigh,” Emily whispered, and pushed her thigh up, wrapping her leg around Ash’s hip; her tuner’s hand fell from her hip to below Emily’s thigh, holding it, pushing up, into Emily’s pelvis.

“Like this?”

“Perfect, Ash... Harder...”

Ash drove into her, and Emily rode up with each thrust of her friend’s hips under her own; though she was too high, and the angle wrong, and she couldn’t feel any of Ash actually touching her vagina, she groaned with the feeling, digging her fingers into Ash’s back in return. She started to laugh quietly with each thrust of her lover’s hips, and her laughter drove Ash’s; they pushed against one another, bodies undulating while they laughed at the absurd intimacy of what they were doing.

“Emily...”

“Yes?”

“I love you,” Ash moaned.

“I love you too, Ash...”

The blue-haired bookworm smiled, even as her lover was slowing, and she pushed back, harder, using her weight to brake Ash’s thrusts, slowing them down. Finally they slid down, slowly, together, into the bottom of the tub, with the water beating down on Ash’s back. Emily giggled, and it brought out the same in Ash, with the two of them holding one another, tightly.

Finally the laughter died, and Ash smiled. “Em? Put one of your arms up, would you?”

“Up?”

“Yeah; on the bottom, but above your head, with your palm open.”

Emily did as asked, and Ash slid her arm up, lacing her fingers with Emily’s.

“You like our arms in this position.”

“I do.”

Emily kissed her, softly, and grinned. “How was that, Ash?”

“It, um... it felt...”

“Great? I hope you thought so, because I loved it.”

Ash opened her mouth, and closed it. She smiled, closing her eyes, and kissed Emily’s cheek. “It was... I can hardly describe it, Emily. It *was* great...”

“You liked holding me. You liked *pushing* me, pushing against me; moving my body with yours.”

“Yeah, I did. And...”

“Did it make you feel in control? In charge?”

Ash shrugged at that. “Maybe... I don’t know. I was following your lead, really, but I really liked the way you moved when I pushed against you; it made me feel good. And, um... you moaned. That made me feel warm and tingly all over.”

“Yeah, it was intimate, it was strong... You know, you were actually stronger and harder against me than he was?”

“I... God, I’m sorry.”

Emily gently put her fingertip over Ash’s lips. “Let me finish, Ash. I *loved* it. Your hands on me, driving against me... It was like giving up control completely, but to someone I trust. Like strapping into the passenger seat of the Monster while you tear off down the Mountain with me. It made my heart pound, but I wasn’t afraid. I knew if I said just one word, you’d stop in a second. But I didn’t have to, because I trusted you. Am I making sense?”

“Yeah. In a weird way, you are.” Ash kissed her cheek, softly, and squeezed their interlaced fingers. “It felt good... pushing against you. It was... I dunno, sexual, even though I didn’t get any, you know, stimulation from it.”

“It was... it very much was.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Um... you know... get anything out of it?”

“I got *everything* out of it. If you’re asking if I orgasmed, no: the angle was wrong, you weren’t pressing against my clitoris. But I still loved it.”

“So, um... did we just...”

“Have sex? I dunno, I guess that depends on your definition, but I’m inclined to say no. But it *was* sexually *intimate*, and strongly so.” Emily raised her other hand, cupping Ash’s head from behind.

“How do you come up with these things?”

“I have *no* idea. It just occurred to me. Ash, would you be comfortable if we did that again, but changing places?”

Ash blinked. “Um...”

“It’s okay if you wouldn’t—”

Ash silenced Emily the same way she silenced Ash—with a fingertip over her lips. “I’d feel really strange, Emily. It’s not something I, you know, was conditioned to do. You’d have to be patient with me, I’d probably do it wrong.”

“That’s okay. *Thrusting* isn’t something I was conditioned to do, either; so you’d have to be patient with me while I learned to do it.” Emily kissed Ash, who slowly kissed back.

“Em? Um... I don’t quite know how to say it, but... I think I’d be fine with that. I *trust* you completely. I guess I trust you enough to have me be the... No, that’s a stupid thing to say. I trust you enough to let you take control of me.”

Emily grinned. “You were gonna say ‘have you be the girl’, weren’t you?” Ash nodded, and Emily smiled back, pecking her cheek. “‘Taking control’ is a much better way to say it.”

Ash closed her eyes, and smiled. “You want to?”

“Not now. I feel so... elated. Satisfied. I mean, I’m aroused; I know I could masturbate, or... Um, I guess there isn’t actually a word for what we just did. Dry-humping involves grinding on your partner’s thighs or something.”

Ash chuckled softly. “Fake-sex? Soul-humping?”

Emily giggled at her friend’s attempts at naming, and silenced her with a kiss. “Whatever it is, in a way, I know I *could* get up and do the same for you, or rub myself off. But I... just want to lay here, I feel so...”

“Mmmm, I know. It feels so good...”

Emily’s eyes went wide, and she giggled. “Jeez, of course. I don’t know how, but I think we’ve triggered the afterglow without actually having sex.”

“Afterglow... You mean, the way you feel after good sex?”

“I think so...”

Ash laughed softly, and kissed Emily, squeezing her hand. “Then let’s just enjoy it, then...”

She laid her head on Emily’s breast, and slid her free forearm under Emily’s head; Emily squeezed Ash’s hand and wrapped her other arm around her friend’s back, closing her eyes. They enjoyed the sensations around them: the sound and the heat of the shower, the sound of breathing in unison. Ash’s heartbeat against Emily’s stomach, in time with her own heart’s beats, rapid but not harsh, felt like they could carry her away.

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 7:58 AM

Ash and Emily walked out of their bedroom, refreshed, dressed, and hungry. Ash’s mother wasn’t in the kitchen, though; rather, she was sprawled barefoot on the couch, talking on her headset telephone, to her secretary. She held up a finger for a moment’s pause, while telling her secretary she’d call her back, then pressed a button on the headset.

“Ah, good morning. I’m going to be busy as hell, today. I’ve got my measurer coming at about ten to take your measurements; the dresses are going to be tailored today, with any luck. It’s cutting it a bit close, but manageable.

“I’m so busy, I’m afraid I haven’t had time to cook breakfast.” She offered a sheepish smile.

“That’s no problem. I can make omelets if you’d like.”

Marie shook her head at the suggestion. “Actually, I’ve got a different idea. Emily, dear, could you go and get breakfast for us? There’s a fifty on the table by the door, go ahead and take it. Get whatever, from wherever, I’m not picky.”

Emily blinked, and shrugged. “Uh, sure, I guess.” She picked up the bill, looking at it and then back to Ash’s mother. “Why me?”

“I’d ask Ash to go, but I’m about to call the insurance company, and I’d like her to stay with me in case I get anything wrong. She knows more about cars than I do.”

“Okay. I’ll find someplace. Fast food, or do you want me to get take-out?”

“Whatever you feel like.”

Emily nodded, and went back into the bedroom she and Ash shared; while Ash blinked curiously, her mother dialed her secretary back. She was still on the phone when Emily left, but hung up a minute or two after, while Ash was in the kitchen getting a bottle of water.

“Ash? Could you come here?”

Ash blinked; the tone was more hesitant than her mother’s usually was—more in line with the first time she’d met her, at the diner. She blinked again, bit her lip, and walked out. “Is there something wrong, mom?”

“No, nothing’s wrong, Ash. It’s just... how do I put this delicately...” She was wringing her hands, and Ash had the sudden feeling of an impending conversation she really didn’t want to have.

“Is everything all right, mom?” she asked, a bit nervously herself, sitting in the recliner.

“Yes, yes, everything’s all right. It’s... um, how do I put this?”

“Put *what*?” Ash furrowed her brow, as a feeling of sinking manifested in her gut.

“Look, Ash, I’ve always... you know, wanted to respect your privacy, and all. But some things a mother notices. I just wanted to ask if, you know... everything was okay, if there was, um, anything you two needed?” Although she didn’t blush, Ash could tell that her mother was certainly unprepared for and awkwardly handling the conversation.

That didn’t make it any less awkward on Ash—she blushed furiously. “*Mom!* That’s... Gah! What are you talking about?”

Her mother shook her head; long brown hair swaying around her. “Look, Ash... I’m... I don’t care who you love, okay? I’m not crazy or anything. I know you and Emily are girlfriends, okay?”

Ash felt a pounding in her head, and she put a hand over her eyes. “We... Look, we’re friends...”

“I know that, Ash, I can see it every time the two of you talk to one another, but please. I’ve been a woman for all my life, and a mother for the last five years. Don’t give me a ‘just friends’ line, okay?”

“Who told you,” Ash asked, trying to keep the rising anger out of her voice. “Was it Jenny?” A bloom of dark red anger towards the blonde started to grow in her head.

“Jenny knows? I had no idea... No, I just accidentally walked in on you and Emily the first night after you got me back from the hospital. I saw the two of you pretty close to naked, and in a... well, a rather *intimate* embrace, you know? I inferred from there, and I woke up early this morning, so I’m pretty sure I heard the two of you doing more than just cleaning in the shower...”

“Oh...” Ash gulped, and a quiet “uhhhh,” escaped from her as she tried to come up with a plausible lie, but it was a hopeless cause. Then she felt her mother’s arms around her, hugging her from the side, and opened her eyes again. The hug was warm and supportive, like the first time. “Mom, I... I can explain...”

“Try the truth, Ash. I’m not upset at all. You’re my baby; I love you, Ash. I don’t care who you love, or what gender they are.”

Ash opened her mouth, and closed it again, sighing and closing her eyes shortly thereafter. “Mom, I’m... really not comfortable having this conversation.”

“Neither am I, Ash.” Ash opened her eyes to see her mother smiling, sheepishly, next to her. “But you’re still my daughter, and I want to take care of you. Does Edward know?”

“No, dad doesn’t know. *Please* don’t tell him!”

Her mother smiled in return, and nodded. “Okay, I won’t. I’ll leave it up to you. I’m guessing you’re not comfortable being open about it?”

Ash shook her head. “No, mom, I’m not.”

She nodded. “So, that boyfriend of yours; is he just covering for you? Or are you covering for each other?”

Ash blinked; she could probably freely slander Rumisiel right now. Tell her mother all sorts of mean and untrue things about his habits and preferences and she’d likely believe them. It occurred to her, however, that it probably would not do anything: he’d never know about it, and she was as accepting and open-minded as anything. “I’d rather not talk about that, okay?”

“Okay...”

Her mother let go, and Ash sighed, softly, blushing. “Look, mom, this is...”

“Weird? Tell me about it. But I really don’t mind. Like I said, is there anything the two of you, well, *need*?” she asked as she leaned back in the couch.

Ash blushed. “Um... what are you talking about?”

“You know... Toys? Love aids? Anything you can’t easily buy that I can,” she asked with a distinct pinkening of her cheeks.

Ash shook her head. “Oh, Jeez, we are totally *not* having this conversation!” She slapped her cheeks, exasperated and blushing.

“Too weird?” Her mother asked, uncertainly.

Ash nodded, vigorously. “Yeah...”

Marie sighed and squeezed her hands together. “I... Look, Ash, I know I’m hardly the world’s greatest mother. I just... I want you to know I’m here for you, come hell or high water, okay?”

Ash closed her eyes; her mother was *trying*—goodness knows she was trying—to help her. It almost choked her.

“Ash? Are you okay? Did I... offend you?”

“No! It’s just...” She swallowed bitterly, warring emotions: privacy, shame, and love. “I’m not comfortable... talking about this, okay?”

“I know, Ash. But please, trust me? You can talk to me about anything, Ash. You know that, right?”

Ash took a tremulous breath. “Y-Yeah. I know. It’s just...”

“Just what, Ash?”

Ash turned sideways in the seat, curling her legs up under her. “Would you be this... this *nosy*, this supporting, if I was a boy? If I’d brought my girlfriend here for the summer, and now again and all?”

Her mother tilted her head again. “This again? Of *course* I would, Ash! I probably wouldn’t ask if you needed dildos or strap-ons, but I’d definitely want to make sure you knew where to get condoms, what pharmacies around here will hand out the day-after pill if it broke, and everything...”

She closed the distance, and Ash blushed, heavily, closing her eyes. Her mother hugged her, and she leaned in, placing her head on her mother’s shoulder, eyes still closed. She felt her lips tremble; a flurry of conflicting emotions rose within Ash, and a question that—against her better judgment—she wanted to ask.

“Mom,” she tremulously started, waiting for her mother’s reply.

“Yes, Ash?”

“I...” Ash tried to word it. Tried to figure out *why* she wanted to say it. In the end, she licked her lips, and choked through the sentence, “Mom... if... W-What would you say if I said... if I said I didn’t know whether I was supposed to be a girl or a boy?”

“I...” For once, Ash saw her mother struck speechless, if only momentarily. She had a moment of brief, vertigo-like terror when she wondered if she might have said something very wrong. “Ash, does this have something to do with what you asked me, that night at the diner?”

Ash nodded, glumly. “Y-Yeah.” She felt small, and weak, but her mother hugged her all the tighter, then released the hug and settled back on the couch.

“Ash, I’m not sure I understand, but you’re always going to be my baby. I... Are you saying you think you’re supposed to be a boy?”

A mental scream of “*Yes!*” arose in Ash, but at the same time it felt hollow—like the recitation of a pledge that was chanted out of formality more than enthusiasm. Her mouth worked, but no sound came out. “*Am I... am I losing myself?*” She bit her lip, and her mother repeated the question, carefully. Ash’s lips worked again, and finally an answer emerged. “I don’t know.” She sounded tiny and hollow as she said it.

“Ash, come here.” Ash looked up—her mother held a hand out. Ash took the hand, and found herself pulled onto the couch, next to her mother, who hugged her tightly, setting Ash’s head upon her shoulder.

“Ash, I don’t quite understand what you’re saying, and I won’t pretend to. But you’re still my only child. I love you, and I’m here for you, no matter what. Do you understand?” Ash nodded, glumly. “Okay, Ash. Are you saying you’d like to talk to a psychologist or a doctor about this?”

“What? No!” Ash vehemently shook her head. “No, not a chance. I don’t need to talk to a shrink or a surgeon or anything! I just... Feh, this was stupid.”

“Was it the truth? That you’re not sure what you’re supposed to be?”

The voice of prudence screamed at her to lie, but Ash bit her lip. “I... I don’t know. I feel very... very confused, okay?”

Her mother sighed softly. “Ash... I know you’re into a lot of traditionally ‘boy’ things, like doing terrifying things with your car, but... that doesn’t mean you’re automatically not meant to be a girl. There’s a lot of tomboys in the world, and most of them are, I daresay, absolutely fine.”

Ash shook her head. “It’s not... it’s not just because I race cars, okay?”

“Okay, then... is it something you can explain to me?”

“(No, it *isn’t*. Not without telling you something that would make you think I was insane.) No, it’s... I can’t explain it, okay? I just... I don’t know.”

“It’s okay to not know, Ash.” She squeezed Ash, tightly. “Does Emily know?”

“She does. She’s... actually the reason I’ve stayed sane as long as I have.”

Marie laughed softly, and smiled. “I think she suits you, you know. The two of you practically *glow* when you’re together.”

“You... you do?”

Her mother nodded, and pulled her feet up, her legs tight to her chest. “Yes, I do. Emily is a remarkably mature young girl, sweet, friendly, intelligent... I can see why you fell for her, Ash.”

Ash blinked. “You... can?”

“Oh, yes. She reminds me a lot of Edward, actually, when I first met him. She’s not nearly as intense or dominating, though. The two of you are definitely rubbing off on one another. In short, she’s a good match for you, and you for her—a good fit.”

“Ah... Jeez,” Ash smiled softly, blushing. “You... you really...”

“Approve of my baby loving another girl? Why wouldn’t I?”

Ash blinked, and sighed softly, hugging her mother tightly, briefly. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Ash. And I meant it; if you two need anything you can’t readily get your hands on, please just ask me.”

“I don’t know if I could... but I’ll remember it.”

Ash sighed softly, and slid back, sitting on the couch, dangling her feet over the side. “Um, mom... I... What if, say, I had been born a boy? And what if, say... a boy version of me got so choked up over being thought of as emo, that instead of sending that letter, he’d torn it up instead?”

Marie blinked at her, twice, and she reached for her purse, reaching inside. Brushing the letter with her hands, Ash realized. “Ash... that... that would break my heart,” she said, tugging Ash against her with one hand. Ash choked, feeling a swelling rise in her throat, as her mother continued. “I loved you, Ash, I always have. I was always afraid... afraid you hated me. When I got a letter from a scared and confused girl who wanted her flawed, broken mother back in her life, I was so happy, like the first time I held you in my arms. I can’t imagine feeling any differently if you *had* been a boy. The thought that I might not have known you...” She closed her eyes, and Ash choked up, bitter sadness welling up in her throat—not to mention a feeling of foolishness.

Ash realized she was crying, but fought down the urge to react negatively to that, instead burying her head in her mother’s shoulder. “T-Thank you, mom...”

Marie took a deep breath. “Why do you ask, Ash?”

“It’s... It’s just... I dunno, it’s stupid... I... Just hold me?”

Her mother nodded, and held Ash, tightly again, against her shoulder. “As long as you need me to, Ash. I’m always going to be here for you.”

Ash felt choked with the emotion of the moment. A bitter thought occurred to her—that she had never had any of this before the Misfile, primarily because of stupid pride and shyness. She clamped down on the line of thought, and closed her eyes tightly, letting her mother hold her. It did indeed, last a long time.

Something nagged at her, though, and she finally figured out what it was. “Mom?”

“Yes, Ash?”

“I thought you kept the letter laminated in your purse?”

“I do. Ash, have you ever looked in my closet? Do you know how many purses I have?” Marie laughed. “The original is safe in my desk, I keep laminated *copies* in my purses.”

“Oh, whew...” Ash let out a sigh of relief, and offered a smile. She opened her mouth to say something, but was interrupted by the sound of a car in the driveway, and looked towards the door, curiously.

“Em... (*Crap. Crap! I have tears on my face. Ugh...*)” She hurried to try and wipe them away, futilely, as the car shut off, and steps walked up the drive, to the door.

A knock came, and Ash stood up. She walked to the door, thinking that Emily must have been laden with too many things to carry them and open the door at the same time, but there was a man in a business suit at the door, visible through the window. She yanked her cell phone from her pocket, glancing at the time, which was 8:18.

“Mom?”

She looked back; her mother had stood up, walking to the door. Ash unlocked it and stood back, while her mother opened it, asking “Hello?” in the tone of voice that inevitably was accompanied with the unspoken question, “Who are you, what are you doing here, and you had better not be selling me anything at this hour of the day”.

“Ah, hello. Is Mrs. Marie Upton at home?”

“I’m her.”

Ash slunk back, grateful for the fact the person at the door was not Emily. She hurriedly wiped her face with the sleeve of her shirt, desperately trying to compose herself.

“Ma’am, I represent State Farm. I’m here about a policy you recently had paid out on a red Porsche 911?” He rattled off the policy number.

“Yes, that’s right. The car was totaled out and the policy paid in full.”

“Ah, yes, I know. I’m here for a follow-up. Our records don’t seem to show the car as having been placed in any scrap or wrecking yards?”

“It hasn’t been.”

“Are you having trouble arranging for it to be towed? I can give you the name of a scrap yard that will take it off your hands for you.”

Her mother shook her head. “No, thank you, that won’t be necessary. My daughter rebuilt the car in question.”

“Rebuilt it?” the insurance salesman started, looking defensive. “Ma’am, the car has been totaled. It has to go to a junkyard.”

Alarm bells started twiggling in Ash’s head, and she frowned as her mother asked, “It does?”

“I’m afraid so, ma’am. A totaled out car—”

“Is still my mother’s car, which she can do with as she wishes. She’s under no obligation to have it scrapped, and is perfectly free to re-build a wreck.”

The insurance man sneered down his brow at Ash, who had slid up next to her mother, in the doorway, her arms crossed. “State law requires—”

“It requires no such thing. The car is my mother’s property. Her rolling property, in fact.” Ash pointed out the door.

The red Porsche pulled up into the driveway, parking behind the Monster XR, next to the salesman’s car. He turned and looked at it, blinking. “You do realize that the tags on that vehicle are no longer valid—”

“Yes, we do. We have thirty days to have it inspected and validated as street legal again, re-tagged and re-insured. It’s been less than a week.”

The insurance agent frowned, and turned again. He took a business card out of his pocket, handing it to Marie. “My card, ma’am. Please, call me or come into my office some time when we can talk *uninterrupted*.” He turned and huffed off, while Ash stared at him.

“Ash, that was very rude.”

“I know it was. I was trying to get rid of him.” She turned to her mother, as Emily passed the insurance agent, confusedly staring at him and his black, four-door sedan. “I know a snow-job when I hear one.”

“Ash, he’s the insurance adjuster who worked on my car. Maybe I should listen to him?”

Ash shook her head again. “He’s an adjuster, not an agent. He’s spoon-feeding you bullshit. It’s still your car, and you’re under no obligation to have it wrecked. I don’t know why it was totaled out, but that’s the way it was. You don’t have to junk it.”

Her mother frowned, looking unsurely down at the card.

“Something stinks. Why don’t you call a lawyer if you don’t believe me?”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s...” Marie bit her lip.

Ash slid aside as Emily walked in, carrying a pair of large fast-food bags. “Who was that?” she asked, as Ash closed the door behind her.

“It was the claims adjuster who totaled out my car. He said it needs to be put in a junk-yard since it was totaled.”

Ash nodded, taking the bags from Emily. “He’s full of it. I smell a rat.”

“That does sound suspicious. As far as I know, it’s your car and you can do what you want with it.”

Ash’s mother pocketed the card. “Okay. Let’s eat breakfast, and get you two measured...” She puffed out her cheeks, with a heavy huff of air. “Then we’ll take the Porsche down to the insurance company after you two get measured.” She smiled, taking the breakfast Emily retrieved to the kitchen.

Emily, however, hung back. She put a hand on Ash’s back, squeezing slightly; the gesture caused Ash to pause and look back, with a “Hmm?” sound in acknowledgment.

“What’s wrong?” Emily asked.

“Nothing is wrong, Em. It’s...” Emily was frowning; Ash could imagine that a wheedling was coming, so she nodded. “Ask me later, okay?”

“Okay...”

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 9:38 AM

After Marie had slipped upstairs to her bedroom, citing a need to make some calls, Emily and Ash had been left alone downstairs. Flipping through the channels, Emily had decided that a re-run of Law & Order would be good watching. Ash watched it, although she didn’t get as much out of the tense drama as Emily did.

Then Emily came to the point Ash had put off. “Can you tell me what’s wrong, Ash?”

“How come you know this show so well?”

“Avoiding my question?” Emily teased, with a smile. “My mom wanted me to be a doctor or lawyer or something; I like this more than I like ER, so she thinks that means that I’m leaning towards lawyer.”

“Huh... Criminal defense?”

Emily grinned. “I doubt I’ll become a lawyer. But if I *did*, there’s no way in hell I’d do criminal defense.” She turned to the side, lying back, sprawling in Ash’s lap. “Now, can you tell me what was wrong?”

Shaking her head, Ash sighed, and took Emily’s hand; squeezing. “It’s just... my mom scooted you out of the house because she wanted to talk to me... about...” The tuner was blushing. “She asked me if we needed any—gleh—‘toys’.”

It took Emily a moment or two to process what Ash meant, then her eyes went wide, and she made a face of horror. “I wouldn’t want to talk about that with *my* mother. No wonder you’ve been off.” Ash nodded, noncommittally murmuring. Sensing that something was amiss, Emily squeezed her hand tight. “That’s not all, is it?”

“... No, Em, it’s not. It’s... she... something she said... I... Jeez, I told her I didn’t know if I was supposed to be a girl or a boy.”

Emily’s eyebrows rose in concern. “Ash? You’re not... You didn’t tell her about the...”

Ash shook her head. “*No*, no, nothing like that... I just...” She closed her eyes. “If you’d asked me a week, six days ago, I could’ve answered that question inside of a second. Now?” She opened her eyes, looking up through the window at the sky, to which Emily replied by squeezing both of her hands.

Then it hit her, and she started. “Wait, she asked you if *we* needed any toys?!” Panic rose in her voice.

Ash slid her hand to the side of Emily’s face as the bookworm was starting to sit up. “Yeah. She, uh... figured it out. That night after we got back, we took our shirts off under the covers, remember? She, uh... saw us lying together in that hug we woke up in.”

Emily shivered, and Ash grinned softly, squeezing her. “Relax; it’s my mom we’re talking about, not yours.”

“Yeah, but still...” She shivered, and Ash smiled; with another squeeze from the tuner, Emily turned her body into Ash’s, hugging her back. “Mmmmh. Ash?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you... you know, want to take your mom up on her offer?”

Ash, predictably, made a face, which was returned with a grin, before gunshots echoed from the screen. Emily and Ash both swiveled to face the television, on which Detective Greene was slumping against a black car, his partner firing at the fleeing shooter.

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 9:58 AM

“What’d you think?”

“Eh... Not really my speed, but it was a lot better than I thought it was going to be.”

“I love this show, to be honest.”

“So does my dad. He watches every new episode if he can, and makes Rumi watch it with him if he can’t figure out an excuse to be somewhere else when it comes on.”

“Oh, really?” Emily grinned. “I didn’t know that.”

“Probably because you’re watching the new episodes when they air at your home?”

The bookworm grinned, nodding in reply. She leaned up, and Ash leaned in; softly kissing one another, Ash’s eyes closed. Slowly, the kiss began to deepen; then the ringing of a cellular telephone’s alarm broke the contact.

“That’s yours, Ash.” Emily pointed to the bedroom.

With a sigh, Ash stood up and went into their bedroom to answer it. “Hello?”

“Ash,” began Jenny’s voice. “What are you doing?”

“Uh... nothing, really. Watching some TV with Em; waiting for the person who’s going to take the measurements to get here.”

“Ah,” the blonde replied, “I see. Hey, you said you didn’t mind if I came over again today, right?”

“Yeah, of course not. We might have a busy day, though. We’ve got to take the Porsche to the insurance company. There’s been some funny business with that.”

“Like what?”

“Some guy showed up and tried to convince mom that she *had* to have the Porsche junked.”

“Weird.”

“Tell me. Anyway, yeah, you can come here if you really want to.”

“I really want to. The alternative—if you can call it that—is spending the day with my mom. Ugh.”

“What, is the office building closed?”

“Actually, it’s not. But your mom and mine were tapped to play ‘field agents’ in roping this event together, which means they’re basically working with autonomy... Erk...”

Ash heard a raised voice in the background, Jenny’s muttered “Gotta go!”, and the doorbell all at once. Her phone’s line went dead; it said ‘disconnected’ while showing the duration of the call.

Ash winced; that had to be the girl who was going to do their fitting. “*Might as well get this over with.*” She took a deep breath, let it out, and walked out to the living room.

On The Road, 11:11 AM

Facing the music, as it turned out, wasn’t so bad. The same lady who had measured Ash the previous time showed up; she took Ash’s measurements, then Emily’s, chatting with Emily the whole time. Then they’d had to delay, as Jenny hadn’t arrived yet; she pulled in about twenty minutes after the lady who had taken their measurements pulled out.

Arrangements had been quick; Marie insisted they take enough cars to take everyone in as few as two, in the event the insurance company said they had to leave the car, or if a breakdown happened. So

it was that Marie wound up driving in the Jaguar Ash had won for her on Sunday, Emily drove the Porsche, and Jenny had volunteered to ride with Ash, strapped into the passenger seat of the Monster XR. The oldies station her radio had somehow gotten set to was playing 'Smoke on the Water', crooning about a gambling house on fire.

Ash broke the silence. "So, you've been measured and all, already?"

"Yeah. You?" Ash nodded her affirmation, and Jenny smiled. "That's good. So, uh... what're you doing today?"

"I dunno. We're going to straighten out the insurance company's malfunction. I know a little bit about automotive law; a totaled-out car is still the owner's car, and they can do whatever they want with it, including rebuilding it. It's not our fault that the adjuster made an idiot call in totaling it out."

"Huh... so..."

"Yeah. I don't know why that was, but they've already paid out the policy. She was absolutely fully covered, too."

Jenny grinned at that, wolfishly. "Took 'em for a ride, huh?"

"More like they took themselves for a ride and shoved a wad of cash into my mom's arms. Either way, she's not at all obligated to give the money back."

"Ahhh, that's great. But hey, what're we gonna do *after*?"

"Dunno. Later on tonight me and Em were going to down to Truro, to the course the locals use to race, and do a run against one another."

"A race?"

"Yeah, but the catch is we're gonna do it in each other's car; I'll drive the Porsche, and she'll drive my Monster XR. Advantage to her, really, since the Porsche's rear wheel drive, and this is four."

"Why's that?"

"Traction. The course is a series of parking lots and connecting roads on the beach, and they're often filled with sand. I could have used this car when I was down here in the summer, but I was lucky enough to beat a local racer—Brent."

"Brent? Brent *Westcott*? That beady-eyed little creepy *freak*?"

"You've met?"

Jenny smirked at her. "The *creep* went to my school."

"Why do you keep calling him that?"

"*Haven't* you met him? Those beady eyes, that freaky stare, like your clothes are invisible to him... Yeesh, it gives me the creeps just thinking about those eyes."

Ash laughed and opened her mouth, but Jenny cut her off. "Not like your eyes. They're big, expressive, so green... You can't hide a thing in them. They call out to me, like a siren's sweet song." Ash blinked, gulping and blushing; Jenny had her turn to laugh. "You liked that?"

"Uh... yeah. Did you mean it?"

"Heh. I'm good, aren't I?"

Ash had a moment to relax, before Jenny quickly unbuckled, leant over, and kissed her cheek. "But yeah, I did mean it." The blonde girl giggled as she flopped back into her seat, buckling back up as Ash turned a bright, bright red.

"Oi..."

"Mmmm. So, between this race and the insurance company, there's gonna be presumably a whole afternoon, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So... what d'ya wanna do? Go the mall again?"

Ash winced, inwardly and outwardly. "Why do you like it there, anyway?"

"I dunno. But didn't you say that the best way to stand up to bullies was to not let yourself be chased away by them?"

"Yeah, I did, and I'm not disputing that. But why do you like it in the first place?"

“Yeetcha, you really are a tomboy through and through, aren’t you?” Ash nodded, and Jenny smirked at her. “Well, *duh*, you just *do*. Clothes shopping, window shopping, they have all kinds of stuff in there, and the arcade...”

Ash shrugged her shoulders. “I dunno, only one of those seems to make sense to me. I only go shopping when I need something: I go after it, I buy it, and I go home. Maybe, maybe something catches my eye on the way in or out, but I don’t always buy it, y’know?”

“You shop like a boy.” Jenny let out a giggle, and reached into the back of the Monster XR, pulling out one of the two helmets. “Isn’t that right, Emily?”

Emily was driving the Porsche ahead of them, between the Monster and the Jaguar that Marie was driving. She apparently heard, and held up her finger, indicating she needed time. Emily got the chance as they pulled off the freeway, coming to a red light. She put on her helmet, and Ash reluctantly put her own on as well, hearing Emily loud and clearly replying, “Isn’t what right, Jenny?”

“That Ash shops like a boy.”

Ash let out a sigh and shook her head as Emily laughed. “Huh... yeah, she does, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, yeah. Can we get off the subject of how I shop?”

The cars eased back into motion, and Jenny repeated her question, “So, do you wanna go to the mall again?”

“I don’t know... Ash doesn’t like shopping very much. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I was wondering what we were going to do between now and tonight?”

“I dunno. Probably were gonna watch a movie or play some Need for Speed or something. Why? Dying to take us out somewhere?”

“Kinda... C’mon, got anything better to do?”

“*Drill a hole in my head*,” Ash sarcastically thought, but she bit her lip. “Okay, *fine*. Under the condition that we do no clothes shopping *at all*.”

“None at all?” both Emily and Jenny asked at once.

Ash sighed. “Fine. *One* store, but no ‘make Ash try on a thousand outfits’, okay?”

“Well... Deal,” Jenny concluded, and Emily laughed.

“Works for me. Oh, I think I see the insurance offices.”

Emily was right; ahead of them, on the side of the state road, was a fairly large, one-story building with a State Farm sign out front.

State Farm Offices, 11:42 AM

It was an unusual sight, Ash mused, to see three fast, powerful, expensive cars pulling into the parking lot of the insurance agency, which was otherwise occupied by a couple of SUVs, a few more mundane cars and a minivan. Ash shut off the engine in the Monster XR, and got out. Ahead of her, her mother was getting out of the Jaguar XK, and Emily finally shut the Porsche off and opened the door. All three girls had discarded their helmets.

“Well, here we are. Sorry about getting you dragged along in this, Jenny.”

Jenny held up her hands to stop further apology, dismissing the complaints with, “It’s fine, it’s better than what I was going to do, anyway. Let’s get this over with.”

The building didn’t look very much like an office, Ash thought, and she said as much.

“It’s not the corporate offices; this is the insurance office. It pretty handily serves most of the county. It’s not exactly convenient for anyone from any of the cities or townships, but everyone can get here without being too *inconvenienced*. You can reach it by the state roads if you’re close, or take a longer drive down the highway if you’re further away from it, like we were.”

“It looks like a house,” Emily commented.

“It used to be, before they bought it. Now, let’s get this sorted out. Don’t mind the dogs. They’re friendly.”

“Dogs?” Ash blinked as her mother opened the door, walking in. Following behind, Ash immediately conjured an image of being thrust back into the 1980s. The interior décor was primarily wood paneling, with rib-height dividers forming working spaces, brown chairs, and brown carpet. Three dogs: two large, fluffy dogs with angular, arrow-like heads and one small ball of seemingly endless fur were curled up together in the corner to the left as they entered.

Marie went to the agent on the right, who smiled as she came in, “Marie! Is everything okay? I heard your car was wrecked.”

“Yeah, there’s something about that...” She slid into the seat across from her insurance agent’s desk, then she heard a gasp and a laugh behind her. The small dog had leapt into Jenny’s arms, while the bigger, older ones were rubbing against Ash and Emily. “I know you say they’re there for security, but sometimes, Alice, I think you keep them to distract the kids. And the grown-up kids,” she added, as the lighter-colored of the larger dogs slid up next to her, and she idly stroked its coat while her agent nodded.

“They do a good job, don’t they? What can I help you with, Marie?”

“Well... See, that’s the thing. I need to insure two cars.”

“Two cars?” Alice raised an eyebrow.

“Strange story, that. See, after my car got totaled, my daughter went and did something absolutely *crazy* and gambled her car against someone else’s—and won. It’s a Jaguar that used to belong to my boss’s son.” She smiled. “And then my daughter, well... We got the wreck of my car back, and she put it back together, so I need to insure it again.”

Alice blinked. “Um... Your car was totaled out, Marie. It shouldn’t be possible to put it back together... Or practical, at least.”

Marie shrugged with a smile, and pointed out the window; her red Porsche was sitting on the driveway, gleaming in the winter sun. “I know, but there it is, plain as day. I obviously didn’t tow it here with a Jaguar, so... it’s working. I don’t know what to tell you, though. It’s funny, one of your men came around this morning, told me I had to have it put in a junkyard, but my daughter, Ash, was *adamant* that something was funny.”

Her agent blinked repeatedly, and reached down. Pulling a pair of giant eyeglasses from her desk, she put them on (magnifying her eyes to the size of saucers in the process) and blinked again, staring at Marie’s Porsche. “Um... hold on a minute, Marie. Bob?” She called into the manager’s side office. “Bob, could you come out here, please? We’ve, uh... got something strange here.”

Marie turned her head to watch as the manager, wearing a full beard and flannel shirt, came out, walking behind the three cubicle spaces to Alice’s working area. “What’s wrong, Alice?”

Alice briefly explained the situation to him, and he blinked. “That... that *is* unusual. Of course, you’re absolutely in your rights to rebuild a car that was totaled out and put it back on the road if you so wish, but... a totaled car would normally be more trouble than it’s worth to rebuild it. That’s why we total them out instead of paying to repair it. You say your *daughter* fixed it up? Alice, pull the file on that policy.”

Marie nodded, as Alice typed furiously. “Is she one of those three?” Bob pointed to the trio, who were quite buried in the dogs.

“Ash?”

The orange-haired tuner looked up, from under one of the larger dogs. “I’ll, ah, be right there.”

Bob chuckled at the dogs, and barked out a quick, “Heel!” Instantly, the two larger ones jumped from atop Ash and Jenny, running to him and sitting, giving the teenagers the chance to stand up.

Ash looked up—and up, and up—at the insurance boss, with a slight gulp. “Marie says you repaired her car.”

“I did. It wasn’t that bad.”

“It wasn’t?” He took a printout from Alice’s printer, glancing over it. Then he nodded. “Show me what was wrong with it, would you?”

Ash shrugged, and led Bob (and Marie, who got up to follow) back to the Porsche. “The hood was off; it was pulled off the hinges, and the battery was removed. The inside was pretty bad: the molding was all popped off, all the instrumentation had been pulled out, the radio of course, the glove-box was emptied, and the steering wheel had been removed. A lot of wires disconnected under the hood, but nothing big.”

“Nothing big... And it runs?”

“Runs perfectly. We took it to the motorway to test it out. She almost beat that.” She pointed at the Monster XR, and grinned.

Bob raised his eyebrows, and looked back to the report in his hands. “Let’s see... ‘Engine destroyed’, ‘interior gutted’, ‘significant trim damage’...” He shook his head. “It goes on and on, detailing how the car was more or less reduced to scrap and frame on wheels. And you fixed this in how many days?”

“Not long; a day, day and a half? Maybe two if you count the time I spent putting wires back together.”

“And who did it?”

“We did. Myself, Jenny, and Emily, there.” She pointed Jenny and Em out in turn.

“I see. Marie, what was that you said earlier, about one of our men coming to your *home* this morning?”

Marie explained about the insurance man who had come to her house and told her she needed to have the car placed in a junkyard, and the manager frowned again.

“That’s nonsense. There’s no way this car should have been totaled out. And even if it was a twisted wreck of scrap metal, it’s still yours; you don’t *have* to do anything with it.”

“I don’t know what to say, Mr. Jameson. It was totaled out, the check came in the mail yesterday.”

She took it out of her purse, but he held up his hand. “Keep it. The policy was paid in full, and you clearly had no hand in whatever it is that’s gone on here. I’ll instruct Alice to issue you a new policy in full. Now, excuse me... I need to just check the VIN numbers, procedure, you know, then I need to make some calls...”

He turned back to the car, holding the piece of paper up to his face and checking the VIN in several places; eventually satisfied, he walked back into the insurance office, followed by Marie, leaving Ash, Emily, and Jenny standing around outside.

“What was *that* all about?” Jenny asked.

“I dunno. He totaled the car out when he definitely shouldn’t...”

“Didn’t you say he offered to give your mom the name of a junkyard that would take the car off her hands?” Ash nodded, and Emily continued, “I think I’ve got it. He’s in cahoots with the junkyard guy. He has cars totaled out that shouldn’t be totaled. They put a mostly-good car in the junkyard, where they can fix it up, launder it and sell it again. I wouldn’t think he’d try it on a car in such good condition, but it’s a Porsche 996. That might have been too tempting to pass up.”

“Yeah... yeah, that sounds possible. Plausible, even! But because we fixed it up, he’s gonna get caught.” She grinned from ear to ear, and held her hands up—Jenny and Emily gave her a high-five.

“Think we should go back in?”

“I think I saw him take the dogs into the back room, and do you really want to listen to boring insurance information?” Ash stuck her tongue out, and Emily laughed. “I thought so.” She sat on the hood of the Monster XR, leaning back; Ash followed suit, and then a third weight settled in on her other side; the three laid up, their heads on the windshields’ glass, staring at the starkly clear sky.

“Think the storm’s going to come back?”

“I dunno. It looks wintry enough with all the snow piles turned into ice on the sidewalks and stuff from where they plowed.”

“I hope it does.”

“Why’s that, Jenny?”

“More snow days!” She laughed. “Though yeah, I hope it doesn’t happen until after the New Year.”
“Why’s that?”

“Because we’re off till then anyway. Duh?”

Emily rolled her eyes, and chuckled. “You know, some of us *like* school...” Still, the words sounded hollow, she realized; did she really? She liked being smart, but... Was it worth it in and of itself, or was it just a means to an end—getting into Harvard? And did she really want that?

“Em? You okay? You spaced out.”

Ash was snapping her fingers—thanks to her fingerless gloves—in front of Emily’s face, and Emily started.

“Huh? Yeah, I’m fine. Did I doze off?”

“No, but you did kinda zone out.”

Emily blushed. “Ech... never mind.” She lay back with a sigh and smiled. “Hey, that cloud kind of looks like the Nissan logo, doesn’t it?”

Ash and Jenny squinted. Jenny shook her head, but Ash tilted her head hard to the side. “Maybe, if you look *really* hard...” She chuckled, and Jenny laughed.

“Eh, I’m not really looking at the clouds. I did notice that you’re wearing those clothes we bought at the mall, though.”

Ash looked down; she was indeed wearing the white denim jeans with the red flame pattern creeping up to the knees. She nodded, and tugged the Ford badge on the chain out of her jacket’s collar. “Yeah, I am.”

“And I’m wearing this, too.” She held up her Nissan badge. “Though maybe I should’ve gotten the Porsche shield instead?”

“Get both,” Jenny teased.

“Well, we’re going back there, aren’t we?”

“*Oh right,*” Ash thought. As Jenny and Emily started talking ‘clothes’ again, she lay back, staring at the sky. Then again, it wasn’t so bad, she mused, with the two of them relaxed next to her, talking—it may have been a subject over her head, but it was nice. “*I don’t know how we wound up with Jenny of all people as a friend, but I like it.*” She slid her arms around the shoulders of both girls on either side of her, smiling and closing her eyes. For a moment, far from home, under the brilliantly clear winter sky, on the hood of her car with two friends close; things felt good, normal even.

Cape Cod Mall, Hyannis, 1:03 PM

“So, tomorrow’s the Show Day, Ash. You think you got the heel-walking down pat?”

Ash nodded at Emily, as the trio walked into the mall’s doors. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure. Good enough to manage, anyway.”

They had returned to Ash’s mother’s home and come back in one car—the Monster XR. The mall was *packed*, given that it was December the 23rd.

“This is fun, isn’t it? Let’s go!” Emily took the lead, walking briskly forward through the mall. “We’ve gotta buy presents too, you know.”

“Oooh, right.” Ash laughed, and Jenny smiled, as they surged in.

The shopping was frantic, all around them; Emily first insisted on visiting a Barnes & Noble, then a Waldenbooks (it turned out she had valid member cards for both competing book-stores). She took a long time poring over the books available, which gave Ash plenty of time to sneak in a fast purchase; at her prompting, Jenny bought another book which Ash recommended as something Emily would likely appreciate.

The mall tour was a whirlwind. It was far too crowded for a serious repeat of the other day’s clothes-shopping; only a half-hearted run through the clothes shop took place. As Emily and Jenny

were trying on clothes, Ash slipped away to find the neck-chains. She found the very last Porsche badge, bought it for Emily, and grinned as she imagined giving it to her on Saturday morning.

They ran through a couple of video game stores. Ash saw Jenny looking over them and asked if she had any consoles, to which Jenny replied that yes, she had a Playstation 2, like Ash had. Another score, as Ash slipped a purchase of NFSU2 for Jenny while Jenny wasn't looking.

Following those, they saw the wing of the mall they hadn't had the opportunity to see. In an 'Urban Esoterica' type of store, Ash found a boxed set of three black-painted wooden swords. She grinned, saying "Vashiel" when she bought it and Emily looked at her askance.

"Crap. Angels, forgot about them," Emily hissed, looking around; thankfully, Jenny wasn't in sight. Ash smiled, saying "Good place to shop for them, then."

"Right, weird esoterica, right? Like... what is *that*?" Ash took a potted silk plant off the shelf. "Is this what I think it is?" Emily leaned in to check it over, and rolled her eyes, giggling. "Oh god, yes, it is. That's just *twisted*."

Ash grinned like a maniac. "Oh yeah, this is definitely his."

Emily shook her head, and held her hand up to her mouth. "You know he's going to have a moment where his eyes light up, he looks at you like you're his new personal savior, and then he realizes that it's fake..."

Ash's grin got even wider. "He can take it as a reminder to get off his ass and do something productive." She didn't put much heat into it.

Emily put her arms around Ash's shoulders. "You know, you're a lot less... intense, now. I think getting away from it all for a week has done you some good."

Ash's eyes got wider, staring into Emily's. Never mind that they were in a store in a crowded mall far from home; it felt like there was a bubble of soft serenity around them.

It didn't last; it couldn't. But the parting was, for once, a sweet one. Ash and Emily grinned at one another, slipping away and back into the store's guts to find Emily something to give Vashiel and Rumisiel.

In the end, they wound up giving Jenny a vague description of both Rumisiel and Vashiel after coming up mostly blank (save for mean gag-gifts). Jenny provided some tips for wardrobe enhancements for both, and Ash spied a prop-sword that looked like one of those from some of her Playstation RPG games that he liked, which Jenny helpfully purchased using her fake I.D. Still, even with Jenny's help, both of them drew up blank for Vashiel; so they decided upon a pact to slide him fifty dollars each.

Lastly, they came to a large shop on the opposite side of the mall that they hadn't been to last time. It was an attached Auto ModerZ, approximately the size of a warehouse.

"A car shop?" Jenny had asked as Ash started in.

"Yeah. I have an idea..." The trio walked in, and then she turned around, saying, "Split up. No peeking."

Ash found herself stalking the warehouse, looking desperately. Then she found it: the wheels and wheel accessories. She grinned, thinking back to their many times playing Need for Speed Underground 2. "*Oh yes. Oh, oh yes, yes, yes! Hahaahaa! Perfect!*"

Somehow, the trio managed to shop for each other while keeping all gifts for one another separate. The packages were marked and bagged so that no objects within could be seen.

"Mmmmm. Wasn't that fun, Ash?"

Ash rolled her eyes good-naturedly at Emily, but nodded, with a smile. "Yeah... I guess it was. It's different when you're buying stuff for other people. I don't do it very often..."

She smiled, and broke into a grin when Jenny interjected, "Maybe you should, then?"

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway, you two wanna go back in and hit the arcade?"

Emily shrugged, and Jenny shrugged as well. "Nah. Let's hit the road."

Ash started the car, pulling it out of the parking spot (narrowly avoiding the person who took it after them by mere inches), and towards the road.

“What now? You two hungry?”

Emily shrugged, and Jenny nodded. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Marco’s?”

“Nah... I dunno, somewhere else? Hey, let’s see if there’s anywhere good in Truro, and you two can show me that race course?”

“Okay. Sounds good to me. Em?” Emily nodded, and the trio set off.

The radio DJ’s voice came in at the end of a song. “And that was some Jon Bon Jovi, as if you needed me to tell you that. I’ve got some requests here, I’ve got a play list.” The sound of something heavy and book-like being dropped came over. “But you know what? Nah. It’s around this time of year I get all in the mood to reminisce, and with the producers all in *Hawaii* instead of freezin’ their limbs off with the rest of us, and they don’t even pay for somebody else in the studio, I’m gonna take the next few minutes to play one for myself. See, it was around this time of year in a steamy jungle in the closest place to Hell on earth that I can imagine, in the year 1967, when me and two of my friends got into some serious sh... crap. Well, those two friends of mine are layin’ somewhere in Vietnam, since we couldn’t even recover their bodies. This one’s to you guys: Carlos, Rumisiel. You woulda liked this song. Hey, everyone out there who misses someone from their lives, go ahead and ‘Dream On’ with me and Aerosmith.”

As the slow, mournful sounds of Aerosmith filled the car, Ash and Emily paled, their faces white. Ash had bitten her tongue in surprise, and Emily looked as if she’d just swallowed something highly unpleasant.

“Did he just say ‘Rumisiel’?”

“He did.”

“I’m not hearing things?”

“Not unless I’m hearing things.”

“Isn’t that your friend’s name?” Jenny’s interjection startled the two.

“Uh, yeah, it is,” Emily said.

“He can’t be the only one in the world to have a name like that, you know.” Jenny rolled her eyes.

Ash chuckled, nervously. In the rear-view mirror, she caught Emily’s eyes—those eyes that promised she wouldn’t forget, but Emily said, “Er... yeah, I guess... not...”

Truro, 4:11 PM

After lunch at a roadside diner that had a surprising selection of full meals, Ash had driven her two friends to the Truro course. “This is the start of it. It’s not the Old Road, but it’s not bad.”

“Old Road? The... Mountain?” Ash confirmed Jenny’s question with a nod, to which Jenny grinned and said, “You’ll have to show me sometime!”

Ash chuckled, nervously. “Well... yeah, sure, why not, if you’re ever in Tempest.”

“I’ll find a reason,” she replied. “Now... What, you’re gonna drive us through it?”

“Nope. We walk. It’s a good thing it’s not snowing. Snow over sand? That’s a traction nightmare.”

Snow was piled up on the sides of the parking lots, and there were a couple of large iced-over snow bunkers on the track itself, at which Emily chuckled. “Should make things interesting.”

“Interesting. Right. That’s a word for it... Oh, hey, I guess I’d better call Brent and make sure the locals aren’t using the track tonight, eh?”

“Good idea, do that.”

Emily took the lead while Ash flipped out her cell phone, taking up the rear and placing the call.

The phone rang a few times before being answered, “Brent.”

“Brent, it’s Ash. Ash Upton?”

“Yeah, good to hear from you. Did everything work out with that Porsche?”

“Not only did everything work out, it put up a race fight against my Monster down the speedway.”

Brent laughed. “Oh really? How’d you get in there? They don’t let people under twenty five drive, as a rule.”

“I have my ways. Anyway, question for ya—is the Truro course being used tonight?”

“Tonight? Hell no! Have you *seen* the course lately?”

“I’m *on* it.”

Brent laughed again. “Wicked snow bunkers, eh? All my good lanes are blocked; you’d need a cornering beast to bring it home.”

He was right. The bunkers were blocking all the good lanes. There was precious little room to let the Ford Windsor engine in the Monster or the 3.6-liter Porsche flat-six open up.

“Hey, are you thinkin’ of driving it tonight? Cause, you know, Casper was complaining about nobody to drive against. We could come out and play in the snow with you kids.”

Ash rolled her eyes, but grinned. “Hey, Em,” she asked. “You wanna invite Casper and Brent to show up and drive with us?” Emily shrugged back at her, pausing, as Jenny took the opportunity to lean on a snowdrift—and fell in, the thin crust of iced snow giving way to the tune of her cry of surprise.

Emily quickly pulled Jenny out of the snow; after confirming she was okay (and after Ash assured Brent that the sound was nothing important), Emily said, “I was thinking just me and you. But it’s okay with me, either way.”

“Eh... all the same, I think we’ll pass. Just have a private thing ’tween me and Emily, you know?”

“Emily? That blue-haired girl you hang around with?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, yeah, her. Cas thinks she’s cool, even if they didn’t work out. She drives?”

Ash grinned at Emily, remembering that night she’d nearly caused a head-on collision on the Mountain. “Yeah, she’s good, too.”

“Cool. Casper’d love to hear that. Mind if we come watch?”

“Rather you didn’t. Private thing, you know?”

“Awww, all right, all right. You know, I think I’ll call James and see if he wants to do a run on the mountain.”

“He’s in Tempest?”

“Yeah, he is. Didn’t you know?”

“No... I didn’t.”

“Heh, how ’bout that. Love to see you flatten his ass again sometime. Catch ya later, and have fun.”

Brent terminated the call, and Ash was left blinking. “*James is home. He didn’t tell me, didn’t come to talk to me?*” She shook her head. “*Can’t think about this right now. Throw me off my game tonight.*” They finished walking the course, and Ash sat at the end of the access road to the beach. Thankfully it had been plowed, and indeed, the beach was snow-free, as were the areas closest to it, due to the harsh winter wind.

“So, this is where the course ends, at the beach—‘officially’, anyway.”

“But the road in is so small...”

“Right! Whoever gets their car into that road first wins. Well, almost always, anyway,” she said, with a grin, thinking back to her surprise victory over Brent in the summer.

“Right, about that, Ash. Remember, the Porsche’s not yours,” Emily cautioned, to which Ash stuck her tongue out.

“Yeah. Besides, there’s no ramp in place, sand or otherwise.”

“Ramp?”

“Yeah.” Ash stood up. “Let me show you.” She walked her friends back to the sidewalk access to the beach. “Right here—if the wind is blowing out to sea, instead of how it’s normally blowing in from the ocean, the sand piles up against the sidewalk, here. It forms a ramp; you hit the ramp, pop your left

tires up on the sidewalk, and floor it. If you're not too far behind, the car in the lane can't make the turn to the beach without causing a crash, and they back off—you win."

"And if they don't back off?"

"You back off."

"And if neither of you backs off?"

Ash grimaced. "The kind of thing that's only survivable in *Need for Speed*."

"Right, gotcha." Jenny grinned, then shivered. "Speaking of survivability..."

"Yeah. It is kind of cold out here."

"Hey, do you two mind if I stay the night again? My mom's pretty hot under the collar, and I'd rather not go home tonight."

Her tone of voice told Ash that something was unsaid. "Is... something wrong?"

Jenny looked down at the ground, scuffing a foot on the pavement. "I... yeah." She sighed, and turned, walking towards the other end of the course, with Ash and Emily following her.

Jenny didn't speak for a while, and both Ash and Emily gave her time to compose her thoughts. She started, with seemingly no trigger. "My mom and I... had a pretty big fight this morning. Like, nuclear fight. She got flipped out at me over that picture. I told her what happened in the mall, and she flipped out even more at me for hanging with you two. Started... saying some pretty nasty things about both of you." She closed her eyes, walking on simple instinct, one foot after the other; Ash and Emily steered her around obstacles. "She started asking me if I was going crazy, if I wanted to throw it all away for a bull dyke and a bookworm bitch..." Jenny's voice turned bitter. "I yelled back, I told her she'd always pushed me, and I'd always done what she wanted, but it was never enough. I told her I was sick of it, sick of friends that weren't friends. Then she... she accused me of being a dyke." Jenny let out a depressed, slow sigh, stopping. "I just yelled at her, 'What if I am, what do you even care, as long as I make you money?' She really lost it after that. Accused me of being ungrateful, told me to get the hell out. So I did."

"You ran away?"

"Yeah... I... I just did like you said, I got in my car, started the engine, drove to your mom's place, and tried to forget it for a while. It worked," she added, with a soft smile. Ash stared at her, askance, and Jenny sighed. "I'll go back tomorrow, I guess. There's the Event, and no matter how pissed she is, she wouldn't have me miss it. After all, it's almost seven grand for her, plus what the company pays her," Jenny added, getting a deep scowl again. "I just... I don't want to go back tonight, okay?"

"Okay," Ash said. "I'll get mom to agree. Just... you gonna be okay?"

Jenny shrugged. "I dunno. We've had fights before. Pretty big ones, too. You wouldn't believe the one she pitched when I dumped Joshua."

Emily blinked at that. "Wait, your mom pitched a fit at you for *leaving* a boy?"

"Well, yeah? She's a gold-digger extraordinaire, remember? She tried to seduce her dad to get in a dig at her mom." She jerked a thumb at Ash, who blinked.

"Wait, she *what*!?"

Jenny snickered at that. "Imagine that, we could've been sisters."

Ash paled as Jenny continued. "Yeah. She was really glad I hooked up with the big boss's boy. She couldn't marry the boss, of course, but she figures being mother-in-law to his son is close enough to strike some pay dirt, and still leaves her free to find some rich doctor on the side or something."

Emily started to ask something, but Ash cut her off, surprised (and maybe a little terrified), asking "Hold on, hold on, go back to this 'tried to seduce my dad' part!"

Jenny sighed. "Oookay, you know how your mom and dad are separated, but not divorced? Mom figured that out a couple of years ago, and decided to make him our gynecologist. She was going through a real feud with your mom, and thought it would be delightfully fun to turn up at your mom's doorstep one day, serving her with divorce papers and wearing a ring your dad bought her. So she tried to seduce him."

Ash shivered, for once *not* brought on by the cold. “That’s terrifying.”

“Yeah, really. Anyway, he didn’t bite, not even a nibble, and she got tired of driving across the state for the exams.”

“Thank God for that,” Ash sighed.

Emily nodded. “Yeah, really. That would’ve been too freaky.”

“Anyway, um... Mmm.”

“Your mom can be a bitch, Jenny.”

“Tell me about it. She was actually encouraging me to put out a little to Joshua. She actually told me not to go all the way, but not to frustrate him into leaving me.”

Ash and Emily shared a grimace at one another, and Jenny sighed. “My mom... She’s pretty cold. She never managed to hook a rich one when she was my age, and she’s pushing me to be the most desirable I can be, so I can get hooked as some rich kid’s trophy wife and take him for all I can before he divorces me. And of course, anything I can get out of fame and fortune before that—not to mention what she gets out of it. She likes the limelight, likes... Agh, to hell with it.” Jenny let out a deep sigh, and Ash frowned, softly. “I guess I just got... just got fed up. I’m tired of feeling like a pawn, and tired of associating with boys I hate just to milk them. So I blew up at her. I lost it, nuclear-like.”

“Come on,” Ash replied, putting her arms around Jenny’s shoulders. “Let’s just go, eh?”

“Okay.”

Emily added her own arm, to which Jenny responded by sliding her arms behind each Tempest native’s back, hugging tight. Literally arm in arm, the trio returned to the Monster XR, and returned to the highway.

“Schadenfreude,” Emily said, as they got back on the road towards Provincetown.

“Gesundheit,” Jenny replied.

Emily laughed from the back seat. “No, it’s not a sneeze. *Schadenfreude*, it’s German. It means ‘taking delight in the misfortune of others’.”

“Isn’t that just sadism?” Ash inquired.

“Not quite. Sadism is taking delight in outright physical or mental torture, often in the context of being the one causing it. Schadenfreude is the delight in misfortune or pain and misery, but it’s not generally the same as outright sadism.”

“Huh. So, why’d you bring it up?” Jenny looked back to Emily, confused.

“Because that’s what your whole, well, ‘world’ is based on, it looks like. What a mess.”

“Yeah. It is a mess. But what can I do? I’m trapped,” Jenny sighed.

Emily patted her shoulder. “I don’t know...” She squeezed. “But for now, don’t worry about it, since you’re with us, okay?”

“Okay.”

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 5:14 PM

“Ah, mom’s home.” Ash pointed at the Jaguar in the driveway as she drove the Monster XR up the road towards her mother’s house.

“Maybe I shouldn’t ask,” Jenny started.

“No, if you really don’t want to go home, where else are you going to go?”

“I don’t know...”

“Exactly. So, we’ll ask.”

Jenny nodded, and sighed. “Okay... okay.”

They parked the Monster and got out, carrying their bags to the house. Ash opened the door and led the trio in, setting the bags down next to the couch, upon which Marie was sprawled. Talking on her headset, she smiled, holding her hand up for a brief moment as she told her secretary she’d call back.

“Hello! Looks like you three have had a good trip... but why the long faces?”

Ash put her arm around Jenny’s shoulder, as Emily closed the door. “Mom? Uh... Jenny has a favor to ask.”

“Okay... Jenny?” Marie stared into Jenny’s ice-blue eyes, as Jenny looked down at the ground.

“Ah, I...” She sighed. “Mrs. Upton, I... I had a huge fight with my mother this morning.” Marie’s eyebrows rose, and Jenny sighed. “She... she yelled at me to get out, and... and I did. I don’t want to go home... I...”

“Ah... So that’s why she was biting people’s heads off left and right. Maybe you should call her?”

Jenny shook her head, vehemently. “No! I don’t want to *talk* to her...”

Ash squeezed Jenny’s shoulders, and slid forward, sitting on the couch. Marie looked at her, and Ash leaned against her mother, whispering the nature of Jenny’s fight with her mother, and Marie’s face fell, then she closed her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Jenny. I had no idea. Of course you can stay here if you need to.” She smiled, sadly.

Jenny looked up, a bit dumbstruck, and Ash stood up, putting her hand on her shoulder. “See?”

Jenny nodded quietly, and sighed. “I’m sorry, I really am.”

“Nonsense, Jenny.” Marie stood up, smiling. “My daughter trusts you, and you need somewhere to stay. It’s fine... Besides, we’ll need another pair of hands, make everything go faster?”

“Everything?” Ash asked.

“Well, we need to get the tree up—if I can find it—and get everything wrapped...”

“Oh, I know where it is!” Emily spoke up, with a wild smile. “I saw it in the garage when I was looking for tools.”

“Sounds like a day, then.”

Truro, December 24, 2004, 2:44 AM

Three cars sat in the Truro parking lots: Ash’s Monster XR, Marie’s Porsche 996, and Jenny’s Lexus SC (which was not on the starting line).

“Okay, so, Jenny will start the race, right?”

Ash nodded at Emily. “First one to the beach wins, and no jumping the pavement from either of us.”

Emily nodded in return. “Right. I understand.”

They smiled, hugged, and kissed, softly.

“And I’ll follow after you two take off, and meet you on the beach?”

Ash nodded as they parted, and turned, taking the keys Emily pressed into her palm; Emily walked away with the keys she’d been given in return.

“Don’t hold back,” Emily said.

“I won’t.”

Emily opened the door to the Monster XR, settled into the carbon fiber racing seat, and pulled the seatbelt down over herself. She closed the door, and pulled on her racing helmet with one hand, starting the engine with the other; the Monster XR roared satisfactorily in front of her.

“Testing. Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Ash replied.

Jenny replied, “Just fine.”

Emily grinned. “This is nice. I’ve been eager for this since Friday.” She left the car out of gear, and tested the engine, revving it high, almost to the redline, then letting it come back down.

Jenny walked out between the two cars, and chuckled. “Shouldn’t I have some road flares or something?”

“Well, they’d be nice, but we can see you just fine. Good thing your jacket’s white.”

Jenny nodded at the two of them, holding her arms up. “On three. One!” She bent her arms. “Two!” Swinging her arms downwards wildly, she yelled “Three!” and the engines roared.

Ash took the lead handily in the Porsche—her own prior experience on the track and the Porsche's rear-wheel drive lent itself well to rapid acceleration, but its lack of race-tuning and four-wheel drive quickly penalized it. Ash was still ahead going into the second corner, but the Monster's high torque and four-wheel drive grip let Emily keep pace, waiting for the opening she needed.

Sliding around an iced snow-bunker that greatly complicated a turn, the Monster kept its grip where the Porsche lost it. The resulting slide cost Ash time and momentum, which Emily capitalized upon to take the lead.

"Gotcha!" Emily grinned as she slid into the small 'straight' offered by the connecting road.

"Oh, you think it's that easy? Watch out for that turn."

The turn's shallowness was deceptive—it quickly turned into a near-right angle, and Emily was obliged to brake hard, cursing softly, as Ash pulled the 996 around the outside, accelerating away, with the Monster XR roaring in her wake.

"Bet it's strange to hear your own engine behind you, mmm?" Emily teased her lover.

Ash laughed, "Yeah, it is, but I *built* that engine. I know what you're up to before you do." Ash doggedly held her lead through the next road and parking lot, even though in the poor traction and obstacle-like course she couldn't really advance it. "Last turn, Em." She swung the car to the left, aiming to turn around the final light pole. "Good run."

Emily's eyes flew about, looking for an opening. She couldn't just drive on the right side of the pole; there was no room to turn between it and the curb, and she'd sail into the lot. Yet...

"Oh, I'd better not be wrong about this."

Despite the snow piled upon the sides, the corner of the curb had been cleared, seemingly deliberately so; it was a straight, hard angle. If she nicked it with the front tire at the right angle...

"It's not over 'till the fat lady sings, Ash!"

Emily put the pedal down, shifting down a gear; the move was going to cost her speed, no matter how spectacularly performed, so she needed the lower gear for acceleration. The Monster angled in as the Porsche swung wide. She clenched her teeth to keep from biting her lip. Yanking the handbrake to lock up the rear wheels momentarily...

Contact. The car spun hard as Ash's surprised voice let out a shout of alarm (and possibly outrage), but the car came onto the perfect trajectory; Emily let off the brake and floored it.

Emily grinned, drifting to the left slightly. She could more or less see what was going through Ash's mind: outrage that Emily had done that in *her* car, admiration that she'd done it, pride that she'd done it in *her* car, and the question nagging her mind—should she/could she pull off another sidewalk win?

The answer was no; the sidewalk was heaped with snow, but Emily knew better than to ever let Ash think there was the chance. She skirted the left side of the one-car lane, so that even if Ash did manage to somehow jump the Porsche up, she wouldn't be able to get alongside Emily.

The actual victory was almost anticlimactic after the elegant overtake. The Monster coasted straight and easy onto the beach, and Emily slowed the car, parking it and getting out. Ash spun the Porsche around, facing the road she had just come out of, before parking the vehicle. Emily was already out of the Monster, running towards her orange-haired tuner. By the time Ash got out, Emily threw her into a hug, kissing her hard and deliberately on the lips, killing any *thought* of protest from Ash.

"Wow," Ash said in a quiet murmur when Emily let off. "That..."

"Was incredible," Emily finished for her, pressing into her. Her heart was beating at about a thousand miles an hour, buffeted by the sensation of kissing Ash in addition to the strong adrenaline cocktail rushing through her brain, and she laughed. Ash squeezed her in return, and they met for another kiss, hot and heavy; Emily moved first with her tongue, eagerly received by Ash's lips.

Breathlessly they parted again, and Ash grinned. "How did you do that?"

"I nicked the curb with the right front tire. It kicked the car into perfect line for the finish road."

"How'd you know it was gonna work?"

"The curb was cleared. I figured it had to be for a reason."

“Ah, so *that’s* how Brent did it. He pulled that on me, too. But that time, I had the sand ramp and the sidewalk.”

“Yeah. I’m just glad it worked and didn’t fuck up the Monster.”

“She’s tough, but I’ll have a look at her when we get back.” Ash squeezed hard, and Emily giggled.

“You’re not mad?”

“Hell no. I’ve done worse to her. I wouldn’t have let you drive her if I didn’t trust you to do something like that and not hurt her.”

Ash kissed her this time, as they fell under the headlights of a third car—Jenny’s Lexus SC, pulling up to face the Porsche. She got out of the car, pulled her helmet off, and ran to the two helmet-less girls, laughing and throwing a hug around both Emily and Ash. “That was *incredible*. I caught some of it from behind. Who won?”

“Em did,” Ash answered, kissing Emily’s forehead as she did so.

“I’m glad it worked.”

“Me too.”

The embrace held, a long, warm time—lovers and friends—before they slid apart.

“Mmm. Your first win, Em—how’s it feel?”

Emily laughed softly. “I dunno... Great. I feel giddy, excited...” She kissed Ash again, heedlessly.

Jenny chuckled. “Mmmh. Heh...” She blushed softly. “I’m glad the two of you had fun... Uh, hey, like, you want me gone now?” Emily murmured; Ash was caught in the kiss, and couldn’t reply even that much.

Awkwardly, blushing but excitedly, Jenny slunk away with a quick, parting giggle, leaving Ash and Emily in their tight embrace, kissing one another, deeply. She slunk back to her Lexus and pulled away, leaving Ash and Emily alone.

They slid around to the front of the Porsche 996, and then Emily was on her back, Ash over her. Grinning, they started to kiss again, neither one being so much dominant or submissive as both of them grasping, groping, squeezing, kissing, and licking.

Like all hot flames, the passion burnt itself out, but amicably, Emily sighing softly first, then Ash.

“Wow,” she moaned: breathlessly, tingling on the inside, and quite aroused. “First victory high. How’s it feel?”

Emily smiled in reply, closing her eyes. “*Incredible*. Aren’t you upset I beat you?”

“Why would I be? I’m *glad* it was you and not somebody else. Besides, you did it in *my* car, too.”

Laughing, Emily hugged Ash, softly, and closed her eyes. “Mmmh...” The car shifted as Ash slid to Emily’s side, sitting beside her. Ash slid her arm under Emily’s shoulders, and Emily returned the embrace by sliding her arm under Ash’s back.

“Racing with you... that was incredible, Ash. Like...”

“Almost like what I imagine sex would be like,” Ash finished, with a smile. “I’m so happy for you, so proud... so *glad*. And so...”

“Hot for me,” Emily finished, with a smile. Ash nodded, and Emily sighed, closing her eyes. “You don’t usually take losing *this* well,” Emily teased.

“I don’t usually lose to someone I have no problem losing to.”

The pair laughed, and Emily sighed, happily. “What did you think of the Porsche?”

“It was... it was great,” Ash concluded. “Power, acceleration... She doesn’t cook in the corners as well as the Monster can, but she’s got all the horsepower you need, in a relatively light frame. With the right tuning, tires, she could be a legend.”

Emily giggled softly, and smiled, sliding her arm up Ash’s free arm; as she did, that arm went to her opposite side, leaving the two in a warm, side-by-side embrace, gazing into one another’s eyes.

“Ash... I was always—just a bit—afraid that you’d be upset if I ever won. You can be very competitive... I’m glad that was absolutely without foundation.” Emily smiled, and Ash closed her eyes, leaning in, her head gently resting on Em’s shoulder.



"I am, too. I never quite knew—would I be angry? I can't even be angry you took such a risk with my car. The Monster may be my baby, but you're more important than even my car. I can replace the car, if worse comes to worst. I can't replace you."

Emily kissed her lover's forehead, softly. "And what if it were a car you couldn't replace, mmm?" Ash giggled. "Like what?"

"Oh... I dunno, some kind of supercar. You've never told me what your dream car is."

Giggling softly, Ash opened her eyes, briefly, then closed them again, leaning her head on Emily's cheek. "The Ford GT. Not the 1960s GT40, though that wouldn't be *so* bad, but the modern Ford GT." She paused, just a beat, "And yes, I'd still rather lose a Ford GT than you."

"Mmm."

"And you?"

"Hmm?" Emily asked with a mere sound.

Ash clarified, "What's *your* dream car?"

"My dream car? Gosh, I... I dunno... something in that league. Jeez, um... the Porsche Carrera GT, I guess. Of all of them, I like its looks the best, I already know I like Porsche's handling and feel... I mean, the closest thing Nissan has to it is the Skyline GT-R, but that won't really touch a Carrera GT."

"Be an interesting race."

"What would be?"

"You and me. Carrera GT and Ford GT."

"Yeah... I guess that would be, wouldn't it?"

"Yep. Two supercars, rear-engined machines operating at the limits of human technology..."

"And human sanity." Emily laughed; Ash opened her eyes, quizzically. "Not that I wouldn't love it. Especially with you." Ash grinned in response—their heads met, softly kissing, briefly, then pulling away. Ash's eyes closed again.

"You know what else I like?" Emily asked.

"What?"

"You're not even thinking about it right now, but you're letting yourself be comforted. Your eyes are closed, your head is on my shoulder, we're holding one another... and you're not even thinking about it. But now you will be. But I think you're not able to honestly say you don't like it."

Ash paused; she thought about the position she was in: their legs on the hood and front bumper of the Porsche, sitting mostly upright together, her eyes closed... Emily was very soft and very inviting. "No. No, I can't. I do like this."

Their hands slid down, meeting; despite the chill, they held tight.

"Ash? Let's go home. I want to hold you without these jackets in the way."

"I could go for that," the orange-haired tuner replied, kissing Emily's cheek. She fished the keys to the Porsche 996 out of her pocket, and they swapped sets. "I love you, Em... I... I..."

She let herself be shushed. "It's okay, Ash. Words can't describe it, but I *know* what you're trying to say." Their lips met again, once more, slowly, tenderly, meltingly...

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 3:23 AM

Sneaking in the front door was no problem, all things considered; Jenny had left it unlocked for them. The blonde fashion queen herself was either asleep, or determined not to show otherwise—she was curled up under the covers on the pullout bed, arms wrapped around a pillow, eyes closed. Ash had been about to ask, "Are you awake?" but Emily wrapped her hand loosely around Ash's mouth, while taking one of the orange-haired tuner's hands and tugging on it. Getting the message, Ash nodded, following Emily to the room they shared, and closing the door quietly behind them.

Ash found herself embraced from behind as she took her hand from the doorknob, Emily's head laying sideways on the back of her shoulders.

“That was great, Ash.”

Emily’s fingers laced together under Ash’s breasts, squeezing her over the ribs, and Ash slid her hands up, placing them directly over her bookwormish friend’s.

“Yes... yes, it was, Emily.” She squeezed Em’s hands, and Emily responded by squeezing her tighter, then sliding her hands up. She squeezed Ash’s breasts teasingly, an act which brought a blush to Ash’s face, then her hands went up to her throat, caressing.

“Em?”

“Yes?”

“Mm... no, nothing.” Ash slid her hands down, behind herself, wrapping them around Emily’s sides as best as she was able.

Ziiiiip! Emily tugged the zipper on Ash’s bomber jacket down in one smooth move, and then pulled its sides apart. “Arms up,” she whispered; complying, Ash was soon divested of her jacket, which was tossed carelessly over the desk’s chair’s back. Emily’s jacket followed, and Ash turned around. The two met, squeezing hard, Emily laying slow, hot kisses on Ash’s throat and neck. They made Ash tremble with each connection of Emily’s lips, and she let out a soft sound of pleasure.

“You like this, mmm?”

“Mmm... y-yes, I do.”

“Good...” Emily gently pushed Ash backwards, against the bed. Leaning up, she kissed Ash’s lips, while linking her hands in the hem of Ash’s shirt, tugging it upwards. When she came away from the kiss, Ash was shirt-less, and grinning.

“Yes, I very much do,” she murmured, pulling Emily against her for another kiss. With a deft embrace, this time Emily came away with Ash’s bra, not that the tuner minded.

“You’re in rare form tonight,” Ash remarked, her voice heavy with arousal.

“Yes, I am.” She pushed Ash backwards—Ash fell onto the bed willingly, kicking her shoes off and toeing her socks off, as Emily divested herself of her shirt with remarkable speed, followed by her bra.

Then she pounced.

“Em-mmmph!” Ash’s words were cut off at the feeling of Emily’s breasts pressing into her own, squishing, as her blue-haired friend laid a heavy, hot kiss on her. She wrapped her arms back around Emily, and closed her eyes. *“When I’m with you... it doesn’t hurt.”* She soundly squashed the tiny nagging voice complaining about being a girl, to a girl, pushing her tongue up, through Emily’s lips, tasting her friend’s mouth as Emily’s fingernails sank just a little bit into her sides.

Their lips popped as they parted, and Emily grinned down at Ash, heaving for breath; Ash was heaving back against her. “Is this okay, Ash?”

Ash gulped softly; nodded, and whispered, “Yes... it’s okay, Emily.”

The bookworm slid her hands up under Ash’s shoulders to her head; squeezing her ears, she started to suck on Ash’s neck, slowly but surely moving down. Ash trembled at the sensations, but didn’t object as Emily’s lips slid down over her shoulder, up the top of her breast. She bit her lip, trembling softly; Emily had paused, and Ash could feel her love’s breath over her nipple, which was rock-hard by now. Emily looked up—Ash met her eyes, green orbs filled with both trepidation and anticipation. Ash nodded.

Emily licked her lips, and slid her mouth around the hard, pink peak. Ash let out a gasp, her fingers clenching into Emily’s back, but she whispered, “Don’t stop,” as Emily started to suck.

The sensation was electrifying: it tied her guts into knots, made all of her body clench. She let out a quiet, tiny moan, holding Emily’s back tightly as she felt the hard flesh of her nipple being pulled by the pressure into her lover’s mouth, the contact of her teeth, gently nipping. “Nnnnnnh!” Ash strained to keep quiet, and Emily pulled off with a sharp *pop*.

“Ash?” Worry tinged Emily’s voice, and Ash reached down, squeezing her lover’s hand.

“I’m okay, Em... it’s...” She took in a deep breath. “I’m managing. Please... it feels good.”

Emily smiled, and leaned up, kissing Ash’s lips, softly, tenderly. “Would you rather do this to me?”

Ash blushed, and smiled at her, replying, "I'd love to. But I don't want you to stop."

"I won't," Emily promised softly, and leaned back onto her knees. Heaving for breath, she gave Ash a wonderful view of her bare breasts, cradled by the moonlight. Ash reached up, hesitated; Emily smiled, and the orange-haired tuner cupped Emily's breasts, slowly squeezing them, growing bolder and firmer, her lips turning into a grin, as Emily's eyes half-lidded, a soft moan escaping her lips.

"Too hard?"

Emily gripped Ash's hands, squeezing them onto her breasts. "No! Perfect..."

Ash squeezed again, and Emily smiled at her, reaching down her own body. She shimmied her pants and panties off, tossing them away behind her, while Ash kneaded and squeezed her chest. Then she reached down—sliding her hands under the waistband of Ash's white jeans and panties, she slid to the side, and tugged Ash's pants down over her legs, and tossed them away. Then she grinned.

"Em? Can I..."

"Mmm? Can you what?" Emily crawled up Ash's body, slinking low, across her skin, staring with a smile at her friend's trailed-off question.

"Nothing," Ash mumbled, looking away, beet-red.

"Can you what?" she repeated, and kissed Ash, gingerly rolling to her side, her front pressed against the tuner's side. "You're embarrassed to say it? Afraid?" Ash nodded, and Emily sighed softly, grinning. "Ash, don't be afraid." She wrapped her feet around Ash's ankle, and kissed her friend's cheek. "It has to do with me, and I'm getting the feeling you want to ask to look at me?"

Ash nodded again, and Emily grinned, tilting her friend's head and kissing her once more, softly, on the lips.

"I don't mind." Emily rolled onto her back, and spread her legs slightly. She rolled her head to the side, and grinned at how red Ash's face was—she was bashfully hemming. Emily laughed, and took Ash's hand in both of hers, squeezing it tightly. "Go *on*, Ash. You're not going to upset me, and if you do something that hurts, I'll tell you."

Hesitantly, Ash sat up and started running her hands down Emily's body: starting at her shoulders, over her breasts with a quick squeeze, down her stomach, over her hips, and down her thighs.

"Working up the nerve?"

"Something like that." Ash squeezed her foot, quickly and affectionately, and Emily wriggled her toes and wrapped her arm around Ash's waist. "Mmmmh... you know, you're lucky, a bit."

"How so?" her lover asked, as she leaned in, slowly, tentatively placing her hand with the barest of pressure on Emily's mound.

Emily trembled softly, arching her back slightly at the feeling of Ash's palm around her aching sex. "You've got such a big clitoris, it's easy to find. You'll probably get off easily in no time, if someone was sucking on it..." Emily grinned; Ash was blushing fiercely, just the effect she'd been hoping for, as it had no doubt gotten Ash to thinking about just that.

Then Ash's face got morose, and she looked down at her own lap, drawing her hand away and hugging herself around the ribs.

"Ash? Is something wrong?" Emily sat up, concerned now.

Ash closed her eyes. "I..." She sighed. "I feel ashamed..."

"Why? Wait, don't tell me it's because you've got a bigger-than-normal clit?"

"It's huge." Ash turned away.

"Why do you say that?"

"I... I guess I never really got a good grasp of just how big it was compared to normal before. Well... I just got a good look at yours, y'know? Jeez, it's like being in the locker room at fourteen all over again."

"What you..." Emily blinked, and then *she* blushed. "Oh... is..." She hugged Ash around the shoulders. "It correlates, doesn't it?" Ash nodded glumly, and Emily squeezed her tightly. "Talk to me, Ash. Tell me what's on your mind."

"I just..." She sighed, and turned, hugging Emily, placing her head on the bookworm's shoulder. "Okay, you wanted to know, right?"

"I'm guessing it was bigger than normal, from the way you're acting?"

Ash didn't answer for a few seconds. "Eleven and five-eighths inches, two and a half around."

Emily's eyebrows shot up at that confession. "That's..."

"Hard to believe? Or hard to believe that I know so precisely?"

It was Emily's turn to blush again. "Both, I guess. But I always thought guys were... well, that you'd be thrilled to have a penis that was nearly a foot long?"

Ash snorted, softly, but not derisively. "You'd think that; *I* thought that, when I was younger. When I was fourteen I started to really notice it was a lot bigger than my classmates', and that made me, well... I guess I just felt cocky, literally. Like I was destined for a lot of girlfriends and all. I never really tried, I guess, I just assumed girls would somehow know, and flock to me because of it."

"That's unlikely... I mean... I don't want to rub it in, since I can tell this is... well, a sensitive issue..." Emily stroked Ash's back, softly, before continuing, "But a penis that size would... well, hurt. A lot."

"I know. I started to pick up on that, as I got a bit older. I started to realize it made me a freak. You'd think guys would, like, be envious of it, right? I used to get teased and jeered in the locker room. Doubly so because I'd never had sex..."

Ash sighed softly, and Emily leaned her head against Ash's, rubbing cheek to cheek, holding her as they sat together, side-by-side. "You are full of surprises, Ash Upton. That's part of why I'm so head-over-heels for you." She tilted her head down, kissing Ash's shoulder.

"You don't think it's freaky?"

"Mmm. Maybe a little, but it doesn't make *you* a freak. So you had a huge penis, and now you have a huge clitoris. Why should that change the way I feel about you, Ash?"

"I don't know... I just..." Ash miserably laid her face into Emily's shoulder. "I was just afraid, when it came up... I dunno, I guess I thought it would... turn you off of me? Make you not want to touch me?"

Sighing exasperatedly, Emily reached up, took her tuner by the shoulders, and squeezed them. "Ash, it does not *matter* to me. I love you for who you are, not what your body is..." Ash looked into her eyes, and Emily pushed into her, until they were nose to nose. "The bond between us is a lot more than sexually-based, Ash. In fact, I'd go so far as to say most of it has no basis in sex at all. It doesn't matter to me that your clitoris is about three times as big as mine. It doesn't bother me *at all*. If anything, it's a mild turn-on; you do not disgust me."

Ash's lips twitched into a soft smile. "Really?"

"Really." Emily slid her legs out, around Ash's waist, and pulled herself into Ash's lap. "And even if you became a boy again, as long as you were the Ash Upton I know... Well, it would take me some time to get used to it. But I wouldn't stop loving you, and I would still be just as willing to have sex with you."

"But..."

"Even if it *did* hurt. Ash, do you understand?" Her hands grasped Ash's head by the cheeks, and Emily stared into Ash's eyes—Ash's eyes showed the optimism and careful hope in her heart.

"I... I understand," she murmured, and Emily held her head still, leaning in; joining their lips, they kissed passionately.

Unrelenting, Emily pushed, and pushed. Soon Ash was flat on her back, underneath Emily, the blue-haired budding tuner sliding out, stretching, lying atop Ash. They parted, and Emily sighed happily with the feeling, laying her head on Ash's shoulder. "Do you still want to touch me, explore me?"

"Kinda, but... that bit of panic broke the mood up a bit, didn't it?"

"Yeah." Emily nipped her girlfriend's earlobe, slurping it between her lips for a brief suck. "I'm not in a hurry. I can wait until you're ready."

Ash wrapped her arms around Emily's back, and squeezed her with one hand comfortably in the hollow, the other above her spine, between her shoulder blades. "Em?"

"Mmmm?"

"You really... don't think it looks freaky?"

"No. I mean, it's not usual, but... You're a girl who was a boy until nine months ago, and I'm an eighteen-year-old that everyone in the world but you thinks is sixteen. We know of no less than three angels on a first-name basis, one of whom is hostile enough towards us that we can honestly say she's a nemesis, and we've participated in the banishment of two supernatural threats."

"When you put it that way..."

"You having a clitoris three times larger than mine hardly registers." Emily giggled, quietly, and kissed Ash's cheek, at the base, almost inside the hair behind her head, eliciting a sigh of pleasure.

"Em?"

"Mmm?"

"Love you," Ash murmured, rolling to the side, taking Emily with her.

The blue-haired bookworm squeezed her in return, lightly scratching Ash's back. "I know."

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 11:01 AM

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound of a fist banging on the door drew Ash out of a dreamless sleep. Disoriented, she groaned, "Whozzere!?" She vaguely became aware of a heavy, comfortable, hot object atop her, which shifted—Emily. Ash forced her eyes open; Emily's eyes were squeezed shut, and she yawned, heavily. Ash slid her head to the side of Emily's, peering through her friend's blue hair. "Who iz it?" she called out, louder and more clearly this time.

"It's me!" Her mother's voice. "Wake up! The girl gets here in a half an hour!"

"*Girl? Shit! The party.*" She muscled her way up, shifting Emily from atop her into her arms—the sudden movement had her blue-haired friend waking up, blearing.

"What is it?" she mumbled.

"We have to get ready." Ash shook her, gingerly. "The party?"

"Party? Oh!" Emily rolled out of Ash's grip, making a beeline for the shower. Ash recalled the bathroom door not having been closed when they went to sleep, as Emily pulled it open, letting the sound of the running shower out.

"Jenny's using your shower," her mother called in, entirely unhelpfully late, as Ash, Jenny, and Emily let out a simultaneous yelp of surprise, followed by the door slamming.

"Sorry!" The blonde from inside sounded *highly* embarrassed. "I'll be out in a minute!" she promised, as Ash looked at Emily; Ash was blushing extremely heavily, though Emily seemed little effected. The two retreated to their bed, sitting and pulling the covers around their shoulder. The shower shut off in short order. "Sorry," Jenny called out. "When I woke up, your mom was in her shower and you were asleep, so she told me to use yours."

"Don't worry about it, Jenny," Emily answered for them. "You're clear." She closed her eyes—Ash did likewise, and waited until the sound of the door to the living room opening and closing had hit their ears. The two all but leapt into the shower, Emily pushing Ash in front and hurrying into her hair as Ash scrubbed. Even still, there was time for Ash to think.

"Hey, how come you weren't blushing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well... okay, maybe I'm just different, you know, being... But I'd think you'd blush harder than that if you walked in on someone in the shower."

Emily laughed softly, behind her, and tugged gently on Ash's orange mane. "Maybe because I've already seen her naked?"

“Oh... *What?*” Ash’s eyes flew open (and she immediately regretted it, squeezing them tight at the stinging pain of the shampoo that was on her brow). “You what?”

Emily let out an exasperated sigh. “I’ve seen her naked before; so what?”

“Um...” Ash felt a dirty, terrifying, burning sensation spread through her body—she tried to crush it as best as she could. “Um... you mind explaining that to me?” She stood up, turned around, wiped the shampoo from her face, carefully opened her eyes, and stared into Emily’s magenta eyes.

“Yes, I do, ’cause I promised I wouldn’t.” Emily put her shampoo-slicked hands on Ash’s shoulders, staring her straight in the eye. “Oh my god... don’t... don’t tell me you think...”

Ash closed her eyes. “No, I... urgh, maybe a bit...” She looked down, feeling all the more the idiot as she said it.

“Just shut that down right now.” She squeezed Ash against her, tightly. “Can you *really* say you don’t trust me?”

“Of course I can’t say I don’t trust you.” Ash wrapped her arms around Emily, placing her forehead on the blue-haired girl’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. That was really stupid of me, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was.” Emily pinched her, in the small of her back—Ash arched, letting out an “eeeh!” as the sensation shot up her spine. Emily giggled. “Look, we...” She mumbled off.

Ash slid a hand up to the side of her cheek, stroking it. “It’s okay.” She stared into Emily’s eyes, her own soft. “Did you like it?” Her green eyes turned mischievous, and *then* Emily blushed, giggling and looking away.

“I don’t believe we’re having this conversation.” She squeezed Ash, even tighter.

“Did you?”

“What if I did?”

“I’d say... lucky?”

Emily snickered and started to giggle out of control; defused, the source of tension turned into a melting point, her body limply sliding into Ash’s letting her tuner support her. “I still had my doubts, you know,” she murmured.

“About?”

“Whether I was really... well, attracted to *girls*, or just to you.”

“What was the verdict?”

“Tempted. She’s pretty hot. I guess. After that night, I kind of... stopped fighting the idea and just let it run its course.”

“So...?” Ash asked, and Emily shrugged; she didn’t need to hear the question.

“I have no idea. But ever since that kiss on Saturday morning, I’ve been in a whirlwind and I like it. I can’t just say... Maybe I don’t *want* to say. I guess I’ve been fighting for labels like ‘normal’ and ‘smart’ for so long that I didn’t know what it was to just forget them and act on my feelings.”

Ash slid her hand up Emily’s back at the same time Emily did the same to her. They met, lips parting... and pulled away just as fast, gagging on the taste of the soap on Ash’s lips.

“Eugh!” Ash turned around, opening her mouth and gulping a mouthful of the water from the showerhead, swishing it around and spitting it in the general direction of the drain. The sound of a giggle came from behind her, and Emily embraced her hard from behind, pressing into her back.

“Mmmmh... warm,” she murmured, rubbing against Ash.

“Warm?”

“Yeah. And not just from the shower.” Emily’s slick hands slid up, slowly; Ash reached back, her hands sliding over Emily’s hips, as Emily softly cupped her breasts, squeezing them tenderly. “It makes me feel warm in the middle, to be so close to you. You make me feel safe and warm.” She giggled, quietly. “And you don’t have to do anything ridiculously macho to do it, either.”

“What do you mean?”

Emily smiled warmly, almost enigmatically. “It’s hard to put it into words, Ash. But what you’ve been doing since Friday? You’re on the right track.”

She leaned into Ash's chest, head on her shoulder, as Ash slid them around, snagged the shampoo bottle, and starting to carefully wash Emily's hair.

"I think it's 'cause we were best friends long before anything else," Emily continued. "You trust me. You don't feel a need to constantly assert your position as dominant of me, either to me, or to others."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... remember in Marco's, the other day, when Jenny's bitch-crowd were in with their boys-of-the-week?"

"Yeah. Oh, you mean the way the boys were hanging their arms around the girls and all?"

"Yeah. Maybe they were trying to be affectionate, but it just came off to me as marking their territory." She snickered softly.

"But... I've put my arms around you."

"Yes, you do; but when you touch me, you're focused on me, not on other people. I'm not a trophy with legs to you, to be shown off and never at more than arm's length. You don't slap my ass to show the 'guys' what a stud you are. If you slap my ass at all, it's because you're feeling affection for me."

"You..." Ash slid her hand down Emily's back, hovering over her rear. "Heh... I always thought about it, you know? But it... always seemed just..."

"Exactly. You think of me first as someone with whom you have a deep connection, and second as someone you get aroused for." Emily grinned, and put her head on Ash's shoulder. "And that's why I love you. Even when you're leading, you're my best friend, my partner. You don't try to be my boss or my owner."

Emily waited a beat, and grinned. "You can slap my ass. It's okay." Ash bit her lip, raising her hand. She hesitated, and Emily giggled, quietly. "I'm really not going to mind... but why don't you?"

"Umm..." Ash thought about it; on the one hand, she wanted to; she knew there was a voice inside her, urging her to take a good swat at Emily's rear. On the other hand, she really didn't want to offend her friend...

Paralyzed by indecision, Ash arched as she felt Emily's hand take a firm chunk of her own rear and *squeeze*, followed by a giggle from the bookworm. "Too slow, Ash."

The tease made her grin, and the tuner squeezed Emily, tightly. "I think I get it. You're afraid of 'disrespecting' me, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Did you want to?"

"Mmm... not as much as I wanted to do this." Ash slid her hand down, returning the favor, and getting a similar arching from Emily in return, but the motion didn't stop. Ash let Emily push her against the back, returning the wide, happy grin on Emily's face.

"Is this... okay, Ash?"

Ash closed her eyes. "Yes. No. I don't know. Both." She sighed, happily, and slid her hands around Emily, squeezing her back at her shoulder blades.

Emily gave her a soft push, sliding her hips against Ash's. Ash gasped softly at the sensation, electrifying, but scary at the same time. "Ash?" Emily's voice filled with worry.

"I..." Ash trembled, letting out a tremulous breath, sliding her hands around Emily. "I just..."

"You want me to stop?"

The tuner shivered softly. "It was good... but scary, too?" She closed her eyes—imagining another time, another place, Emily over her, on her back. "I... Shh, go on..."

"Ash..."

"I need to know." Ash whispered softly into Emily's ear, and the blue-haired girl nodded to her. Then Emily pushed in against her friend.

It was good, Ash couldn't deny. A part of her wanted to be disgusted that she liked it so much, but the sensations were electrifying. With her eyes closed, she urged Emily on with her hands, letting her friend pick up speed and force.

She was blushing, she knew that much. Then her mind drifted to the previously unthinkable—would she let Emily do that with a toy? The thought of something penetrating her, under Emily’s control... Terror and interest flooded Ash in equal measure, and she let out a strangled, quiet sound. It was enough; in a flash, Emily slid back, giving Ash room to slide to her jelly-like knees, breathing heavily.

“Ash? Ash?” Worry in her voice, Emily put her hand on Ash’s head.

Ash leaned into her. “I’m okay,” she murmured, her lips against the soft flesh of Emily’s torso, her head between the bookworm’s breasts. “I’m okay... I just...”

“Too intense?”

“Yeah... I...” Ash gulped for air, softly, as it slowly sank in what she was doing—on her knees, in front of Emily, she was hugging her tightly, resting her forehead between Emily’s breasts, clutching her friend for comfort. The nagging voice that usually berated her for ‘girly’ things was very faint indeed, however—and was silenced completely when Emily wrapped her arms behind Ash’s head. “Thank you,” she murmured quietly.

“Whenever you need it.”

Ash smiled softly, kissed Emily’s sternum, and braced her leg; with a heave, she picked Emily up (who yelped in surprise) and leaned against the back wall, while Emily giggled at her, then squirmed, sliding down to her feet, and leaned into Ash, heavily. “Mmmm. Ash—”

The sound of knocking interrupted them. “Ash, Emily! The dresses are here!”

Ash sighed, heavily, and looked into Emily’s eyes. “We’re doomed.”

“Doomed together, at least.” Emily grinned at her. “Besides, I want to see you in this.” She kissed Ash’s cheek, softly.

“I know... I... *Oh!* We didn’t open the pictures from last summer, did we?”

Emily’s expression went through several shades of “oh, d’oh!” and she groaned. “Forgot about those.”

Ash laughed. “We can bust ’em out when we’re drying off.”

Emily wound up “ooohing” over the pictures of Ash in the black and white dress she’d worn in the summer, as they toweled off. “Wow. You were gorgeous,” she murmured, a little breathlessly, holding up the five-inch-wide glossy print.

Ash blushed softly, shaking her head. “I was terrified.”

“Yeah, but...” Emily turned to face her. “You were really beautiful in that outfit.” She put her hand on Ash’s bicep. “Don’t be offended.”

“I... I don’t know how to take that.” Ash closed her eyes, but reached up, clasping Emily’s hand to her arm. “Thanks, I guess. You really like that?”

“Does it surprise you so much?”

“I guess not.” Ash smiled softly, encouragingly.

“Just don’t strip out of whatever you wind up wearing tonight the *moment* we get home, okay?” She grinned for emphasis, and Ash nodded.

“May as well face the music.”

“What’s it sound like?”

“Mmm... with me alone, it was the theme from *Jaws*, so with you, Jenny, and me being done up at once... The Imperial March from *Star Wars*, most likely.”

Emily giggled at Ash’s description, and started to hum the tune; Ash joined in, swinging her hands with her fingers out as if conducting, and they broke down giggling.

Then Emily gasped for breath, and (trying not to split her face from the grin) asked, “You sure it’s not ‘Duel of the Fates’, since it’s a terrible trio of two heroines and a lone villain?”

Ash snickered, and fell backwards on the bed, laughing. “But who’s who?”

“I’m definitely Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

“Aww, damn. That means I’m gonna get stabbed with a lightsaber, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll avenge you.” Emily leaned down, kissed Ash’s forehead, and then hugged her.

“Yeah, well... you’d better.” Ash stuck her tongue out at Emily, only to widen her eyes in surprise when Emily parted her lips and slid them down over her tongue, kissing her hotly.

They parted, and Ash’s lips felt like they were on *fire* (not to mention her tongue), and she grinned wildly. She opened her mouth to speak, when the door was banged upon. “Ash! Emily! You two are taking forever, it’s twelve!”

Both of them blushed, and hurried to get dressed and out the door—ironically only to be mostly stripped and subjected to an intense battery of scrubbing, painting (Ash had steadfastly refused to have her nails painted any color but the mirror-chrome her mother had surprised her with), washing, and blow-drying that Emily likened to being put between the turbocharger and the intercooler. And that was just for starters; it was going to be a long day even *before* the party.

“I am *not* being left helpless in someone else’s car, this time,” Ash declared, as her mother walked in with the trio of dresses (somehow she’d gotten Jenny’s delivered) on hangers, still under wraps. “I’m driving myself.”

Her mother laughed, softly. “How’re you going to drive in heels?”

“That outfit has a purse, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll put my sneakers in it.”

Her mother blinked, and then shook her head, grinning, as the three girls’ hair was ruthlessly done (for the fifth time, it felt like). “You can’t drive that car of yours. I know how much you love it, but it would be out of place.”

“I can drive the Porsche, then.”

Her mother shook her head. “Trust me when I say you’ll change your tune once you see what your date’s ride is. Anyway...”

“Hey, who have I got?” Jenny interjected.

“Um... let’s see here...” She fished a piece of paper out of her pocket, the dresses forgotten.

“Emily’s got Kay. I figured you’d appreciate that.” Emily smiled, and Marie continued, “Anyway, he’s good with handling the new girls. Jenny, Ash... Hm.” She shook her head. “To be honest, most of the boys passed up tonight’s event. They don’t get paid as much, generally, you see. We had to reach pretty far down the corporate tentacles to find you dates. Ash, you’ve got a boy we normally have modeling winter wear, his name’s Adam. Jenny, um...” She paled. “Joshua Almay? That can’t be right!”

“Joshua? As in, my ex-boyfriend, Joshua?”

“That’s what it says. I’ll call and confirm that—it’s got to be a mistake.”

Jenny rolled her eyes, and sighed, turning her head—to the indignation of the foppish man working on her hair—to face Emily. “Well, congratulations. You’ve got the best date, and I’ve got my pissant-brained ex-boyfriend.”

“Well, I’ll trade, if you want?”

“Or you could trade with *me*,” Ash said, with a grin. “He’ll take one look at me and storm out in a huff and I’ll be a happy lone wolf.”

Her mother rolled her eyes and shook her head with a chuckle. “All right, fine, I won’t object. He is a spoiled brat. Just don’t blame me if he doesn’t just take off. Anyway, here are your dresses.” She pulled the cover off the first one, and Ash’s jaw almost hit the floor.

“My god. It looks like you robbed the wardrobe department of The Matrix.”

Giggling softly at her daughter’s comment, Marie held the dress up high. The centerpiece of it was a blazing red bodice, utterly strapless with a black underpinning corset and ‘laced’ across the middle with thick straps of what appeared to be fake crocodile leather (in brilliant, glossy red) and shining buckles. Hanging from above it was a short-sleeved vest-jacket in the same material that would cover up to her mid-biceps but definitely not fit around her breasts. Below the bodice was—to Ash’s amazement and relief—a pair of pants, glossy red, with long strips taken out of the sides and held together by a loose weave of red straps, with a pair of thick, (presumably) decorative belts in the red croc-skin pattern

hanging from the sides, and an impractical number of buckles on them. Backing the pants was what looked like most of a normal dress, but without any front at all—it was done in the thick croc skin, and had many, many of the thick belts crossing the front over the thighs. The whole thing was red, with strips of black at the edges, and in a bag below them was a pair of knee-high, red, one-inch-platform-heeled boots, with an absurd number of buckles and straps in lieu of shoelaces.

“You like it? Henri went kind of nuts about a month ago, and cranked this thing out inside of a week, then demanded we find a girl to showcase his masterpiece. The problem is...”

“The problem,” Jenny finished, “is that it’s the kind of thing that only a bull tomboy could or would wear and pull it off. They actually wanted *me* to wear it.” She smirked at the thought. “I mean, it would fit me—we’ve got the same bust and all, but... No!”

Marie snickered at Jenny’s vehement objection. “But then I saw it, and I envisioned you in it, baby, and...”

“And... you got it for me...”

“Because: (a), I didn’t think you’d want another frilly thing like last time if you could help it; and (b), you have the perfect build, hair, and attitude to wear this thing.”

“Wow... just, um... wow.” Ash blinked, staring at it. It... defied mental categorization, but it was certainly unique. “I’m going to get a lot of attention in that.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m kinda jealous.” Jenny said with a grin.

The girl (Kay’s boyfriend’s sister, actually) behind Ash clucked. “Going to have to do something with your hair to match that.”

Marie hung the dress on a wall hanger, and picked up the second. “And Emily’s...” She took the cover off, and Emily’s eyes lit up. It was almost sublimely simple: a strapless, backless dress with diamonds cut out above the cleavage and the midriff, attached to a collar choker. It came with unattached sleeves, and had a long tube-skirt at the bottom, and blue satin heels in a bag at the bottom. The whole thing was the same blue as her hair, trimmed in white along the edges and borders of everything.

“Wow,” Emily breathlessly murmured, staring at the dress, then her face turned into a grin.

“Well, it’s definitely you,” Ash commented.

Jenny added, “It totally is.”

“Mm-hmmm. Absolutely beautiful, Emily; can’t wait to see you in it,” Ash finished.

Emily blushed softly, and giggled at Ash’s comment.

Marie hung the blue dress up and revealed the last one. “And thirdly...”

She pulled the cover off of the third dress—all three goggled. It was a sweeping, billowing pleated gown, in solid, shimmering opalescent white—floor-length, trailing a mountain of fabric behind, and slit in the front all the way to the hip, guaranteed to reveal more or less all of her legs when she took a step. Jenny’s eyes were alight, and Ash could only stare in awe, imagining the thing on her new somehow-friend.

“It’s...” Emily started.

“Magnificent,” Jenny finished.

Marie nodded. “Yeah. I remember this now, but I never figured out where it went. This was designed a few months ago to be a silver bullet—put this on a girl built enough to wear it, and you’re more or less going to steal the show. I thought I’d lost track of it—I was actually going to call Ash and ask her to wear it, but I’d lost it. I guess your mother squirreled it away somehow.”

“Me? Wear *that*?” Ash blushed heavily.

Jenny leaned forward, grinning at her. “You could wear it well, if we did something to the color of your hair—maybe bleach it white, maybe make you a blonde. You’d totally kill the show in it.”

Emily giggled at the sight of her friend’s eyes flicking back and forth between the red faux-crocodile skin outfit she’d been assigned, and the silver bullet gown. “I agree. You’d look good in it, but you’d probably rather be caught dead than wearing it.”

Ash nodded, glumly, adding, “And no way in hell I’m letting you bleach my hair!”

“Don’t sweat it. In that buckle-and-belt-fetish outfit, you’re going to be hard to beat anyway,” Jenny said, grinning.

Ash shook her head. “It’s, uh... not a competition?”

“No, but still... You’re definitely going to get the attention in that thing. It’s... so *unique*.”

“Unique is one way to put it,” Ash muttered; still, the red outfit was growing on her, having seen the alternative.

Marie hung the third dress up, and nodded. “*I know*. It’s so *unlike* Henri’s work, I don’t know what got into him.” She shrugged. “Still, he made it, he *demande*d we find a girl to put it on. I’m glad you volunteered, Ash. You’re the only one who could pull it off who’ll touch the thing.”

“It won’t be so bad, Ash,” Emily said. “Besides, you hate girly-girly stuff anyway, right? That thing looks tough, like that leather bomber you bought.”

Marie shook her head and sighed. “My daughter, always the tomboy... Oh!” She darted back into the other room, and brought in an armful of purses—three, to be exact, each one matching the dress it was assigned to. “I forgot these.”

Ash stuck her tongue out, but sighed. “I guess there’s no escaping it, is there?”

“Nope. You can just put it down in the coat-room when we get there, though.” Marie put them on the desk—the red, croc-pattern one bumped. “Oh, there’s something inside.”

Reaching into the purse, she pulled out a pair of... Well, calling them ‘sunglasses’ would be an insult. The things were very bright and near transparent, but tinted a sharp red to match the dress. They were solid material, no hinge. She handed them to Ash. “Try them.”

Ash experimentally put the red wraparounds on—they fit more or less perfectly, tinting the world a light red. “Wow.” She turned to look at Emily.

“They look good!” Emily giggled and gave Ash a thumbs-up, and Jenny nodded behind her.

“Mmm. Okay.” Ash smiled.

Outside The Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 6:42 PM

Ka-snap!

Marie’s camera flashed repeatedly as the trio emerged from her house, taking snap after snap of them in stride.

Ash assumed the lead, walking rather easily, all things considered, in the outfit she was wearing; although it looked tight, the belts holding the rear of the ‘skirt’ together were quite loose, giving her enough range of motion that she felt she could easily run (or heel-toe downshift) when combined with the much more comfortable boots. Looking at her shoulders, draped in the fake croc-leather, she had to admit she looked ‘tough’ enough that she could ignore the fact that she was wearing what amounted to a corset, thanks to the vest-jacket. Her hair had been slicked back and mostly tamed with a thin brass clip, though her bangs had been allowed to hang dramatically forward, as they always did.

“You look great, Ash!” her mother called out, as she continued to snap away.

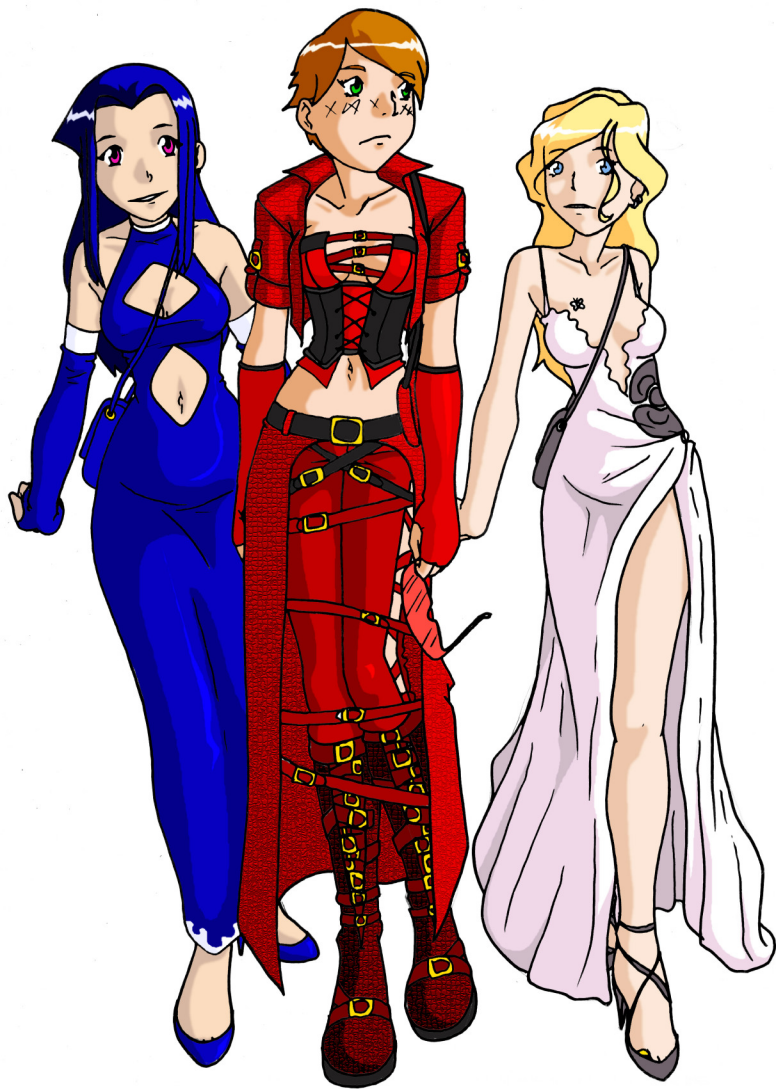
Emily was right behind Ash, sliding to her right. The bookworm’s hair was naturally long, straight, and silky, but with the treatment the hairdresser had given her, it practically glowed, waving behind her as she walked. Unlike Ash, she carried the purse on her arm easily and gently. Beside her was Jenny, sweeping down the sidewalk in the eye-seizing white gown, her hair done (as Emily’s) in a long, yellow wave down over her back.

“Hey, aren’t these ‘dates’ supposed to be here?” Emily asked.

“Yeah,” Marie said, “they should be—ah! I hear Kay’s car.”

The little red Miata was purring as it came up the road, and Emily swayed slightly—to Ash’s lascivious grin. “You’re looking forward to this, aren’t you?”

Emily rolled her eyes good-naturedly and punched Ash’s faux-croc-covered upper arm. “Yes, I am.”



“Don’t forget, he’s—”

“I *know*. I know.” She smirked. “Doesn’t mean I can’t still enjoy going on a date with the guy who was the center of *all* my adolescent fantasies. Call it closure, if you want.”

Ash chuckled. “Alright, fine, fi—. . . What the hell is *that*?” Her tuner’s ears caught the sound long before the car it belonged to was visible. Not at all the throaty growl of the Monster XR, not the banshee scream of the Carrera GT they’d seen the other day, nor the roaring sound of the Hemicuda that she’d passed close to at Marco’s. This was high-pitched, but throaty, like the howl of a thousand wolves.

“That *has* to be Adam.” Marie smiled. “You’re gonna love this, Ash.” Another car rounded the corner, up the street—the sound of it accelerating was exhilaration and terrifying—it was a sleek-slung, low-to-the-ground monster, white with two blue stripes. Ash’s jaw dropped, as did Emily’s.

“My god. That’s a Dodge Viper,” Emily murmured as the car roared up the street. Ash expected the beast to dodge around Kay’s Miata, but it rather civilly braked when it caught up, following the little convertible into the driveway.

Ash goggled; Daimler-Chrysler may not have been her company of choice, but *still*, seeing and being in the presence of a true Supercar was awe-inspiring, the rumble of its ten cylinder engine shaking her guts. The driver gunned the engine briefly, and shut it off, as Kay got out of his Miata.

“I get to ride in *that*?” Jenny snickered. “You missed your chance, Ash.” She grinned at the tuner.

“Enjoy it!”

“Ho-oly wow,” Kay commented as he approached the trio with Marie hovering behind them. “You girls are incredible!” He laughed softly, coming to a stop in front of Ash, and looking side-to-side at Emily and Jenny flanking her. “So you’re the brave volunteer who got Henri’s masterpiece? You carry it well.”

Ash rolled her eyes, and shook her head. “I had *no* idea what I was getting into, I assure you.”

“It flatters you, Ash.” Kay made an elegant half-bow, which had Ash’s eyes rolling again. “Jenny,” he said, quietly, as he walked to stand before Emily. “Marie told me that she was sending me with someone special that I’d met before. I had no idea she was thinking of you.” He gave another bow, and offered his hand. “Shall we?”

Emily laughed at the attention and took his hand, as the driver of the Viper clambered out of the machine. Unlike Kay, who was dressed in a pale yellow shirt and brown slacks, the man in the Viper was in a full dinner jacket and black-tie suit.

“Hello, all,” he called out, as Jenny and Kay walked back towards the Miata—Kay waved to him, as did Emily, and he waved back. He was all but wearing a top hat and carrying a cane, with a mop of ‘creatively disheveled’ brown hair on his head. He arrowed in straight for Ash and smiled. “And you must be Ash. A little bird told me you were hardcore into cars, so I brought my baby.”

Ash rolled her eyes sarcastically. “First off, save it. The Viper’s a nice machine, but I don’t need to be talked down to. Second off, I’m not your date for tonight.”

Jenny stepped forward, as Marie shrugged behind the teenagers. “That will be me.” Jenny smiled.

Ash nodded, crossing her arms. “The date she had assigned was her prick of an ex-boyfriend, so I volunteered to trade. You don’t mind, I trust?”

Adam let out a laugh and smiled. “Oh good, so you’re *not* just a pretty face.” He nodded. “I don’t mind. Though, where *is* the other one?”

Ash shrugged. “I have no idea. He might be planning to stand her up, which is *fine* by me. I’ll catch up if he doesn’t show.”

“You know the way there?”

“Know it? I’ve raced the track there.”

“Really? You did? In what?”

Ash pointed to the Monster XR.

Jenny confirmed the story with a grin. “She’s really fast.”

“Okay, fair enough. Anyway, the event’s in like, an hour, so we’d better get a move on.” He walked back to the Viper, opening the door for Jenny—Ash and Marie had to help her get her whole dress into the tiny passenger seat, and get buckled in.

“See you there, Ash.”

“Only if I don’t pass you on the freeway.” Ash grinned, and closed the door, as Jenny’s date walked around to the other side, getting in. Ash walked away from the car as the engine jumped to life, and the powerful car pulled back out of the drive, speeding away. Ash turned back to her mother, as the wind blew across them from the ocean, and sighed. “Well, that’s that. If he’s not here by the hour, I’m going on my own.”

“Ash, it’s a couple’s event.”

“Maybe, but I’m not forfeiting my pay because your boss’s prick of a son never showed. I’m already in the hock.”

“In the hock? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I am, but I owe you for the money I spent that night before we fixed the Porsche, and I spent some more on Christmas gifts yesterday. So, even if it is a couple’s event, if Joshua doesn’t show, I’m going on my own, and if anyone has any complaints, I’ll direct them to him. Besides, I’d be happier on my own.”

“You would, wouldn’t you, baby?” Marie reached forward, taking Ash by the shoulders, and then hugged her softly.

Ash hugged back, and closed her eyes. “Yeah, I would.”

“You really don’t like this kind of thing, I know... but why?”

“Why? Well, I wanted the money, for one. For another, I knew Emily would jump at a chance like this... I wanted to make her happy, you know?”

Her mother nodded, and patted the back of Ash’s head. “You’re brave, doing what you don’t like for your girlfriend like that.” Ash blushed softly at her mother’s frank description, but didn’t let it show since her head was still buried in Marie’s shoulder. “Why did you volunteer to trade with Jenny, though?”

“I figured he arranged it to get her so he could make trouble for her. It’ll throw him off to get me, especially in this. And if he tries to make trouble for *me*, I will make him sorry he was ever born.”

Her mother sighed, exasperatedly, but didn’t comment on it, stroking her daughter’s hair. “Ash, this is going to sound stupid, and not that I’m complaining, but... why are you and Jenny so close all of a sudden?”

Ash blinked, released the hug, and looked into her mother’s eyes. “Um...”

“I mean—I’m not complaining—but I would’ve thought you two would hate each other.”

Ash shrugged. “We did, on Sunday. But since then... I came to her rescue in that brawl in the bathroom. Since then, she’s just been... I dunno, she’s acting way different. I think she felt defeated, but I didn’t do any of the things she would’ve done to someone else, and she didn’t know what to make of it, so she latched onto me.”

“Oh. I thought it was because she was coming onto you.” Marie smiled.

Ash let out a “Gwack!” sound. “Where’d you get *that* idea?!”

“Well, there was that picture making the rounds of her about to hug Clarita, and she’s always looking at you more gooey-eyed than I’ve ever seen her gaze longingly after a boy...”

Ash screwed her eyelids shut. “Ugh. Mom, I do *not* want to have this conversation, okay? Jenny and me and Emily... It’s weird, but she’s not doing evil stuff anymore, and she likes us. And I guess, after we killed her old, evil bitch-self with kindness, she’s kind of a blank slate, but somewhat likable. And she kinda latched on; what was I going to do, kick her to the curb and stomp on her?”

Marie laughed softly. “Oh my, this is too rich. Jenny’s daughter has a *crush* on my baby?”

Ash rolled her eyes. “Mom, please, d—”

“Not a word, I swear. This is just too funny. Is she really likable?”

“Yeah. We kind of had to shut down her hostility factory and just about destroy her ego, but she’s trying, I can tell.”

“Okay. I believe you. And I guess, the way she was last night... I could tell she was really distraught. Her mother can be demanding.”

“You have no idea. Her mother’s a pure stone cold bitch. Did you know she tried to seduce dad?”

“Edward?” Marie blinked, a bit startled. “I had no idea she even knew him!”

“Neither did I, until last night. Jenny told Em and me the story—she found out you were still married, and who dad was. Then she joined his practice, dragging Jenny across the state for exams and such, tried to seduce him.”

Marie scowled. “I bet he jumped right on her. No good—”

Ash held her hands up. “Whoa, *whoa*! He never bit. Not even a nibble. Dad may be kind of... sleazy, but he’s not stupid, I guess.”

“Really?” Marie blinked, and shrugged. “Huh... How about that.” She sighed, and walked to the side of the Porsche, leaning on it, soon joined by Ash.

Ash took her cell phone out of her purse—it read 6:59. “He’s not coming. Good, this makes tonight infinitely easier.” She fished out her keys from the purse, approaching the Monster XR.

“Whoa, Ash. You can’t drive *that* thing!”

“Why not?”

“It’s... ugh, do you have any idea how ridiculous you’d look?”

“It’s my car. I know it inside and out; I’ve handled every part on it. Why shouldn’t I drive it?”

Her mother sighed, smiling sadly. “You... are *such* a tomboy. If you have to drive yourself, at least drive the Porsche?”

Ash chuckled, and sighed. “Mmmh. I don’t... well, okay.” She walked back to the sleek red 996, as Marie took the keys out. However, they were interrupted by the sound of a car purring up the road, and turning into the driveway. It was a black Mercedes-Benz—a CLK 500, Ash thought. “Oh, god damn it, I could’ve been out of here already,” Ash grouched.

“He might still tell you to go to hell and drive out of here. You’re not exactly his favorite person in the whole wide world ever since you took his Jaguar and gave it to me.” She grinned softly, patting her daughter’s shoulder.

Ash cracked into a grin. “Good point.” She sighed. “Now, all I need is a band playing that song from The Matrix.”

“Which one?”

“Oh, any of them, they’re all good.”

The Mercedes came to a halt entirely too close to the Monster XR for Ash’s comfort, and she scowled in its direction as the preppy, cocky boy who she’d utterly destroyed in the parking garage on Sunday got out. “*Oh yeah, he’s looking for trouble. You want trouble, Joshua Clayton Almacy Jr.? You found it.*” Ash narrowed her eyes; she wasn’t going to let the boy who had accused her of forging his signature shove her around. Her boots crunched satisfactorily on the gravel as he looked around.

“My god, you actually live in a dump like this, Ms. Upton?” He sneered as Ash approached, then his face fell when he saw who she was. “Where’s Jenny?” he demanded, only barely restraining the third word that Ash could see almost falling off his lips.

“She didn’t want to go with you, so I offered to trade. Got a problem with that? Leave.”

He looked as if he were about to do just that, then put on a perfectly plastic smile. “Why ever would I have a problem with that?” He walked to the Benz, and opened a rear door. The engine was still running, so Ash slid around the front, while he watched, dumbfounded. “What are you doing?”

Ash pulled open the driver’s door, and got in; the skirt, she realized, gave her plenty of freedom to sit behind the wheel, though it would be a pain to buckle up around it.

“I’ve *seen* your driving. I don’t trust you to drive a go-kart, let alone maintain the speed we’re going to need to make it to the speedway in time.”

Joshua scowled, peeking into the car through the rear door. "Like hell I'm letting some car-dyke drive my new car," he hissed, quietly. "Get out."

"Sure. And I'll get in that Porsche 911 over there, floor it, and your 'date' will not only arrive in a better car than you have, but about twenty minutes before you do. How will that look?"

"It won't look like nothing but some cheap tramp in a car and a dress that're both too good for her drifting up alone, 'cause I won't show if you do that. Get out and get in the back."

"I'm not riding in the back, and I don't trust you to drive me. *You* get in the back, and I'll have us there in time." Ash scowled back at him, but her mother knocked on the window.

"Ash, please..."

Ash met her mother's eyes, vivid green and vivid green. Ash scowled, but the only expression on her mother's face was pleading, not demanding. She sighed, and got out of the car, as Joshua smirked. She did, however, pull open the passenger side door. "I'm not riding in the back."

Ash got in, and the boss's son looked about to object, but Marie leveled a look at him.

"Just go already."

"Fine," he replied, stepping forward from the rear. He opened her door again, held it, and shut it again, then walked around to the driver's seat. He got in, and put the car in reverse gear, swinging it around out of the driveway entirely too fast—Ash held onto the dash, nervously—she noted he wasn't wearing his seat belt, while she was.

"Oh-ho, scared now, bitch? I thought you were the hard-as-nails racer-dyke?"

Ash's eyes flashed with fury as he stomped the engine, the CLK's rather pathetic engine nevertheless accelerating hard. "I'm not afraid of anything when I'm in control. You don't know how to drive this thing."

"Hmmp. I could'a beat you in my Jag."

"No, idiot, you couldn't have. You don't know the first thing about performance driving. You didn't even have a manual transmission. Do you even know what a gear is?"

"I don't need to, my car handles that for me. I have more important things to do, like pointing the car where it needs to go and pushing the pedal to the metal."

Ash rolled her eyes. "Aren't you going to buckle in?"

"Why the hell should I," he snarked in response, as Ash caught sight of her mother, in the black Jaguar, pull out of the driveway.

"Gee, I don't know, I figured you would want to protect that *mush* you use to keep your ears from falling in."

"Hmmp. Only bad drivers rely on seat belts to protect them." He looked up, into the mirror at the Jaguar. "Bitch has *no right* to be driving my car."

Ash clenched her fist. "*What* did you just call my mother?" She glared at him, and he smirked at her.

"A bitch. She is; what're you gonna about it?"

Ash felt her chrome-colored fingernails digging into her palm. Then she turned her face and looked ahead at the road.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. You bitches are all the same."

"I can't punch him; if I do, he'll black out and we'll wreck and get me killed. I can't punch him; if I do, he'll black out and we'll wreck and get me killed. I can't punch him; if I do, he'll black out and we'll wreck and get me killed..."

On The Highway, Driving To The Cape Cod Speedway, 7:39 PM

"So, Emily, how'd you get into this biz?"

"Biz?" Emily looked left at Kay, curiously.

"Yeah. The whole modeling-and-parties thing and all. Not that you're not beautiful, especially in that magnificent dress by Henri, but the handlers don't usually pick up girls with your figure."

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Emily asked, a sudden flash of heat going into her voice.

“I mean that they usually pick girls on the basis of bust and hip size, rather than how nice or beautiful or intelligent they are.” He held a hand up. “Please, I don’t mean to offend you, you really are beautiful. I’m just wondering how you got the chance to prove it.”

“Oh.” Emily sighed, leaning back into the passenger seat of Kay’s Miata, as Adam and his Viper blew past them again—the powerful sports-car had been showing off, more or less orbiting the Miata, and Emily had wished more than a few times she’d had her racing helmet and Jenny had had hers.

“Ash and I came out east to visit her mom last Saturday, since the utilities where we live were getting all fucked up due to the storm.”

“Yeah, I remember; you called me looking for Marie.”

“Well, she mentioned that she’d keep us on her short list of girls to call, since she knew Ash liked the large paychecks, so she can work on her cars. Then she mentioned this, and, well...” She grinned. “I wanted to wear a beautiful dress, and I didn’t get to see Ash in the one she wore last time, so...”

“Ahhh.” Kay nodded, and smiled. “She’s your girlfriend, then?”

“Er... I didn’t say that!”

“Hey, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to deduce, between the way you got all flustered about what I said in the summer, and how close the two of you are... Sorry, I won’t mention it again.”

Emily sighed. “Is it that obvious?”

“Hello, gaydar? I could see Ash coming a mile away. You were putting up a good confusion last summer, but...”

Emily sighed. “Okay, it was really scary, all right? And then I kissed her in the night, and we kind of had a fight and all, but last Friday...”

“Something wrong?”

“Well... I’ve been jealous of another girl all year when the little tramp got near Ash. Sometimes I’ve treated her like dirt, all because I was so afraid of telling her how I felt. It’s not an easy thing to think about.”

“Ahhh. So, you told her Friday...”

“Not as such. She and Rumisiel were forced to stay at my house since her house’s heat went out. I couldn’t let either of them stay in my mom’s bed, so I gave him my sleeping bag, and we slept in the same bed. I had a nightmare—a very *vivid* nightmare—where I thought she died. I woke up crying her name, then I kissed her in the heat of the moment.”

“And the cat was out of the bag?”

“Yeah... And I liked it. A lot. We’ve been... adjusting, I guess. Coming to the Cape helped a lot, since we got away from all the troubles.”

“Mmmm-hmm. Provincetown’s one of the places I feel really comfortable, especially Marie’s home. She’s an incredible lady.”

“Yeah... Ash’s mom makes me feel so at ease, you know? It’s not like my mom. She’d probably have a coronary heart attack if she knew, but Ash’s mom picked up on it and didn’t have a problem.”

“Marie’s a beautiful woman, inside and out. She really makes you feel happy to be who you are.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

Emily sighed, and closed her eyes, letting the smooth ride and good company lull her. “Yeah, it’s... mmmh. Sometimes I’m terrified. She’s... well, Ash puts on a brave shell, and she can be *retardedly* brave when confronted with physical violence. I don’t think she’s afraid of anything that walks on two legs, except, well, me.”

“You?”

“She’s... really shy about some things, and very excitable. I know she wants me, and I want her, but we have a real hard time, you know?”

“Mmmmh. Yeah, I do. It was like that for me, too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You buy into the ‘Idea of Kay’ too much. It’s one thing to be confident and easy in front of the cameras, it’s quite another to do it in the dark, with someone you love.”

“How’d you get through it?”

“Time. Time and being careful.”

“Yeah. I think that’s what we’re doing, too.”

“Well, you’re smart, and she’s devoted. You’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

Emily smiled, and nodded. “Thanks.”

“So, you really did crush over me?”

“Yeah. I guess I feel like an idiot for it. When Ash told me, I about cried.”

“Told you?”

“I was giving her a hard time about it when she said the trophy-date she had was a gay guy, cause, well, that’s what I do.”

“Bash gays?”

“What? *No!* Give Ash a hard time.” She opened her eyes, to find that Kay was grinning; he’d baited her into that, and laughed.

“I figured. I’m playing with you.”

“Then she said your name, and... what was it I said?” Emily looked up, at the inside roof, thinking.

“Oh yeah, it was, ‘I feel like a pillar of my early adolescence was just ripped out from under me...’ She snorted, softly. “Hell, I still had that old poster of you over my bed until we got home from that summer.”

“Oh Jeez, you’re gonna make me feel all awkward and all.”

“Sorry... So, have you done anything to this car yet?”

“Umm, ‘done’ anything?”

“I guess not. You know, this thing would rock if you put a turbocharger in it, stiffened up the shocks, make it a real car with a manual gearshift, put some good tires on... You could dominate in the corners, might even out-corner Ash’s Monster.”

Kay groaned. “Car lingo again, you’re making my head swim. I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, well, a turbocharger is like a jet engine; it spins from the exhaust, and drives a turbobfan which compresses air and injects it into the engine. The more air, the more horsepower, and the more pressure in the exhaust, which feeds the cycle. They’re really good for getting more power...”

On The Highway, Driving To The Cape Cod Speedway, 7:39 PM

“Yeah, do it again!” Jenny laughed as the man at the wheel of the incredible (and incredibly loud) car slid smoothly to the left lane of traffic, pressing the accelerator—the Viper howled, the speedometer shooting up through the roof as he passed the Miata that her friend and Kay were in, sliding around to lead again.

“Heh, you’re liking the wheels?”

“Yeah, I am,” Jenny said. “This is a Dodge Viper, right? Don’t these cost like, a hundred thousand?”

“Near to that, yeah. How’d you know?”

“Emily mentioned it to me while we were talking.”

“Heh. You three are good friends, then?”

Jenny nodded, leaning back into the body-hugging, foam-like seat, grinning. “Yeah, we are.”

“That’s nice. Most of the girls I have to deal with—when I have to deal with models your age—are image-obsessed twits. You seem to actually know what you’re talking about, though.”

Jenny shook her head, with a grin. Burying the urge to get irate, she replied, “Well, Emily knows what she’s talking about. I’m just good at remembering what she says. They’re both way, *way* better at talking ‘car’ than I am.”

"Are they? She said she drove the track. She drives such an old car, though. A Merkur, right?"

"Yeah, it is, but she's put like, a super-mega engine in that thing. She raced my ex-boyfriend in a Jaguar and totally cleaned his clock, and she won against her friend in that Porsche in the driveway."

"So... you're all serious about racing cars, then?"

"Well, they are... I'd like to, but I really don't know as much as I can sound like I know."

"Well, that's no problem. Get them to teach you."

"I'd like that, I would. They're just east visiting, though. I think they're going home soon."

"Where's home?"

"Tempest. It's on the far side of the state."

"So what? That's nothing. I drove hundreds of miles to do this gig."

"In this?"

"Yeah, I did. This is my baby."

"Heh. It's such an incredible car," Jenny said, stroking the dash. "I just have a Lexus SC, but Ash hates on it because it's a convertible."

"She doesn't like convertibles?"

"No, she doesn't. I'd like to get another car, something she'd like, like a Mustang GT."

"Mustang fan, eh?"

"Well, I wasn't before, but she likes Ford. And I admit, its looks grew on me after she and Emily and I played Need for Speed for a while. I think I could really love one if I got it."

The driver chuckled. "Well, that's true. The Mustang... It's not a bad car, all told; too heavy for its horses, in my opinion, but that can be solved by just about gutting it and boosting the horses. But go with what you like, you know?"

"I really want to do something that would make her happy. I trust her, she's..." Jenny sighed, softly. "She and Emily are the only people who stand by me, even when everything's falling apart. I don't even know if I can do tonight. I think I've lost my edge. They've been dragging me along, running interference for me, standing between me and all the enemies I've made."

"What do you mean, 'do' tonight? You nervous? Don't wanna go?"

Jenny shook her head. "It's..." She sighed. "Okay, until like, last Sunday, I was *exactly* what you meant by 'fashion-obsessed twit.' I did anything and everything to be the prima donna, the showstopper, the prettiest, the most magnificent. I made a lot of enemies, including Ash, I guess, when she showed up last summer. Then she shut me down, Sunday. She totally took me down, made me a fool, made me break up with the asshole... And then she pulled me back up again."

"Really?" Adam looked sidelong at her.

"Yeah. She and her friend... They were being *nice* to me, and I was doing everything I could to make them miserable for it. Then some piranhas caught me in the bathroom, attacked me, like I've done to them in the past. Ash jumped out and rescued me, like some kind of white knight or something. She took a real beating for me."

Adam shrugged. "Not many people would do that for someone who pissed them off."

"I know..."

"Sounds like she's worth more than twice her weight in platinum. Hold onto her."

"I wish," Jenny said. "It's like my life's gone to complete shit, but when she's there, it's like the eye of the storm. I don't know what I'm going to do when she goes home, to be honest. My mother and I had a huge fight; I haven't gone home in two days. I've been sleeping on her mother's couch."

"Rough."

"Yeah, I know..." Jenny sighed, heavily, putting her head in her hands. "Hell, I don't know why I'm telling *you*, but..."

"Eh, sometimes it helps to have a stranger to unload on."

"I guess... Thanks."

"No problem."

On The Highway, Driving To The Cape Cod Speedway, 7:49 PM

She could *feel* the vein in her forehead pulsing. The urge to kill rising. Yet, Ash was forced to restrain herself.

"If I kill him, the car will crash and I'll die, too..."

"What's wrong, not loud enough?!"

The CD player was playing some kind of thrash metal at the maximum volume, but the man in the driver's seat spun the dial up, anyway. Ash grit her teeth.

"What's wrong? Not fast enough?"

He was already driving at about eighty, the CLK's engine straining to make more speed, and control being sacrificed. He'd weaved close to other cars a few times, and once cut off a semi-trailer which had unleashed its air horn at him. He also had the system set on full A/C—in a full suit, he was 'okay', but Ash was shivering in the thin dress and faux leather ensemble.

"I will not ask him to turn it down. I will not cave." Ash was close to snapping—she knew she'd made a mistake in getting into the car, but had only herself to blame. *"I should've insisted on driving myself."*

"Awww, looks like we're almost there! Such a shame! The ride has been *most* enjoyable, hasn't it, my dear?!"

She twitched. *"I'm gonna kill him. Just as soon as the car stops, I'm going to kill him."*

He took the off-ramp from the highway at about twenty miles an hour faster than it should've been taken, leaving Ash's breath caught in her throat as her door skimmed entirely too close to the barrier.

"Dead man. He's a dead man."

Ash could only sit, trying *not* to leave gouges in the dashboard, as the CLK sailed off the ramp, meeting the road and slamming the brakes on to not hit traffic in front.

"This asshole doesn't even know how to drive."

Finally, the ride came to an end—after several more hair-raising moments and near-collisions—the Mercedes-Benz pulling into the speedway's parking lot and parking between the Miata and the Viper. Emily, Kay, Jenny, and that guy with the Viper—Adam, she recalled his name—were waiting around outside, talking. He shut the radio off before they pulled up.

"Thank god. My head is killing me."

She yanked the door's handle before the car was even off, but it didn't open. She tried again, verified the door was unlocked, but it wouldn't open. "What the *hell*," she growled.

Joshua put on a perfect plastic smile. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I didn't want you injuring yourself. Allow me to get the door." He stood up, and shut the driver's side door.

"Son of a bitch engaged the child lock? Arrrgh!" Ash snapped. She seized the steering wheel as she undid the seat belt, and pulled herself over the console, sliding out the driver's side door.

To the tune of his put-on perturbed, "My dear, whatever is the matter?" and in full view of the observers, she slammed the door shut and stormed around the hood, clearly intent on wreaking violence.

"Whoa, *whoa!*" She growled as she felt arms wrap around her, and her 'date' backpedaled.

"Lemme go! He deserves it, believe me!"

She struggled, Kay squeezed tighter. "Chill out, Ash! What's got into you?"

Teasing the dragon's maw, Joshua approached her close, somehow putting on a perfectly civil and confused tone. "My dear, whatever is the matter? Was my music too loud, my driving too spirited for your delicate senses?"

The world turned red.

The next thing Ash knew, she was being physically pulled from atop Joshua by Adam, Jenny, and Emily, while Kay was picking himself up from the hood of his car and rubbing his head. *Joshua*, at least, was squealing in terror, which was *oh* so satisfying, and holding his hands up to ward her off as she was pulled back to the sidewalk, and deposited on her feet.

“Ash! What the hell’s gotten into you?” Emily’s voice, from the side; the sharp sound of her voice shook Ash back to her senses, and she took a heaving breath.

“That son-of-a-bitch deserved it. I’ve spent the last *hour* trapped in his damn car while he blasted my ears out and drove like Kate never did.”

Joshua struggled to his feet, scrambling backwards; at least she’d punched the arrogance out of him, since his eyes were now full of fear. He turned and ran, stumbling off the van before pelting behind the line of cars, and Adam let her go.

“Jesus, Ash, you don’t punch like a boy, you punch like Mike Tyson.” Kay Wheeler winced, stood up, and rubbed his stomach. “I’m gonna be bruised all *week*.”

It actually made Ash blush slightly; she must have laid into Kay—her friend—to get to Joshua. “Oh, shit... I’m sorry, I—”

“Save it. You snapped, it happens. What did that loser *do* to you?”

Ash sighed, and then shivered. “Can we go somewhere warm? The last *hour*, he’s had the A/C on full, been playing some ridiculous thrash metal as loud as the car’s systems would handle it, and he’s been driving like he was out to kill us both. And berating me for ‘stealing his car and his girl’.”

“Oi. Here.” Adam flicked a key fob out of his pocket, and the Viper on the other side of the CLK roared to life. “Get in, her heater will warm up in no time.” Ash unsteadily walked to the Viper’s passenger door and got in—the car was already warm, and the monstrous V10 engine quickly got the heater core blowing gloriously hot air across her goose-bumped skin, for which Ash was magnificently grateful. Then the car shifted—she looked to the other door as Emily slid in, closing it behind her.

“Ash, are you okay?”

The question made her feel ashamed, and she sighed, looking down. “Yeah, I am. I feel like an ass, I shouldn’t have lost it like that.”

Emily laid a hand on Ash’s forearm, below the vest-jacket’s sleeve. “Ash, don’t.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t beat yourself up. Temperature extremes, noise, inducing reasonable fear of danger or death—those are classic hallmarks of torture.”

“... Torture?” Ash blinked, a bit dumbfounded.

“Yes, Ash. God, why did we let you go alone?”

“What were you gonna do? He shook mom about ten minutes in, and she’s driving a Jaguar.”

“Well... Adam knows how to drive this thing, he could’ve kept up.”

“And done what, exactly? Called the cops? I thought about it, but I didn’t want to ruin your night.”

“... Oh, *Ash*.” Emily frowned, leaning over the console and hugging her tightly. “You’re doing this all for me, aren’t you? You shouldn’t...”

“Save it, Em. I’m so far in the hole that if I don’t get paid for tonight, I’d have to put the Monster in the hock to dig out. Besides, I kind of wanted to do this.”

“You did?”

“Yeah—for you. I know you wanted to see me in a dress and all...”

Emily squeezed her, and Ash sighed, closing her eyes—her chin resting on Emily’s shoulder blade, her friend’s shoulder in her throat, they hugged long and tight.

“Ash, you shouldn’t have gone with Joshua.”

“I’m glad I did, actually. If not me, he’d have been tormenting Jenny, and probably worse, since she’s the one who actually dumped him.”

Emily pulled away, stared into Ash’s eyes, and rolled her own. “You are *stupidly*, retardedly noble at times, Ash.” She exasperatedly sunk her face into Ash’s faux-leather covered shoulder. “You walloped Kay a good one.”

“I did... I don’t even remember. The last thing I remember was he was taunting me, Kay was holding me, and then I’m being pulled off him... Oh shit, I didn’t punch him in the junk, did I?” She was suddenly mortified at the idea that, in a moment of rage, she would resort to that.

Emily snickered. "No, but you *did* ram your elbow into his solar plexus. And I expect that Joshua will be nursing a choice shiner before the night's out. Was it worth it?"

Ash considered. "After what he put me through? Yes, yes it was. At least he showed his true colors when he was squealing like a pig."

"Just hope his father doesn't kick you out."

"What's he gonna do, say to daddy that he got his shit whipped by a teenage girl?"

Emily rolled her eyes, snickering. "Oookay. You stay here and get warm. You're still shivering."

She slid out of the Viper, and walked back to the boys and Jenny. Emily talked to them, then Kay and Adam nodded. They both walked away, leaving Jenny blinking, and Emily walked back to sit in the Viper, and Jenny knelt down at the passenger side window.

Ash rolled the window down. "Where are they going?"

"They 'said' they were going to the bathroom. I'm pretty sure they're going to go and track down Joshua and make it abundantly clear that he's to tell anyone who asks that he got into a fistfight with Kay, or else stumbled into a van's mirror or something."

Ash bristled. "I don't need anyone to cover up for me."

"Come on, Ash. Kay's your friend, when he goes out of his way to help you, be glad for it? Besides, would you be so upset about a friend covering for you getting into a fight, say, ten months ago?"

The sharp demarcation left Jenny with a "what?" look on her face, but Ash got the message.

"Yeah... you're right, sorry." Ash sighed. "I just don't like it."

"Of course you don't. But really, you're not a sissy for having friends who'll stick out for you." Emily leaned onto Ash's shoulder. "Wouldn't *you* do the same if I got into a rumble with some bitch?"

"... In a heartbeat," Ash was forced to conclude, at which Jenny and Emily giggled softly.

"So, how's it feel to be sitting behind the wheel of a Supercar?" Ash asked.

Emily blinked. She settled back down, and it dawned on her. The engine was running, although the keys weren't in the ignition, and she put her hand on the wheel and the gearshift, with a grin.

"Yeah. I could like this."

Ash grinned, as a purring sound she knew quite well rumbled up to the left side of the Viper, a black Jaguar. Her mother got out of the car, looking around; but with the heavily tinted windows in the Viper, she couldn't see them. She started towards the show room.

"She must think we're already inside," Emily commented.

"Yeah. Let's wait a bit."

"Shy?"

"Maybe. Maybe I'm getting my nerves back. Maybe I'm still frozen from the ride here."

Ash sighed, and closed her eyes, while Jenny and Emily talked softly, letting a few minutes pass.

"I guess we might as well go. But I swear, if that bastard so much as shows his face around me..."

Ash slapped a fist into her palm.

Emily frowned. "Look... maybe you should talk to your mother about this?"

"What? Go snitch on him?"

"No, ask her about what to do. It *is* supposedly a couples event, after all."

"Oh yeah... right." Ash sighed, heavily. "Some Christmas Eve this is turning out to be."

"Hey, don't worry. If he gives you any more shit, I'll mention it to Kay. He'll beat him up *for* you, and you won't get any heat." Ash turned a fast, angry eye to Emily, who broke into laughter. "Gotcha!"

Ash blanched, scrunching her head up. "You're mean."

"Just a bit." Emily leaned into her, placing her head on Ash's shoulder. "What say we go in and wait for the boys to find us?"

"Yeah, um, about that. What are we supposed to *do*, anyway? Sell up the Porsches? Just look good for the cameras?"

"Mostly that one," Jenny said, from her right. "Though, you might well go and do something else." She grinned. "Go for it. We'll be right behind you."

Jenny slid behind, and Ash and Emily opened the doors, standing up out of the rumbling Viper. They shut the doors in sync, and Ash looked to Emily and Jenny. "Let's go."

"We're going to look a sight when we hit the floor."

Ash nodded. "May as well get it over with. Let's find my mom, then."

Even though she hated to admit it, Ash readily imagined that the three of them *would* be an amazing sight as they strode up the wide concrete sidewalk between the parking lot, towards the door of the show room, full of lights and glitz.

"Just a shame I'm part of the scenery, again. Oh well." She tugged her vest-jacket's sides forward, feeling a lot more comfortable with her shoulders covered by the faux crocodile skin, the long belt-restrained skirt behind her legs fluttering, the belts tightening around her thighs with each long stride. Emily was simply *elegant* at her right hand side, and she smiled at the sight—whereas Jenny, on her left, was an absolute show-stopper with her supermodel-powered gown, the long splits indeed revealing all of her legs as she moved forward to keep up with Ash. *"Well... I guess it's their night, so I'll make the most of it..."*

The Party, 8:19 PM

"Oh, they have a real, live band!" Emily pointed—at the far end of the show room, occupying one of the slowly rotating pads, was a large band, with a lot of horns and drums and a few strings, playing something upbeat but muted.

"Yeah. We're lucky there's no real celebrities showing up," Jenny commented.

Ash smirked at her. "In that? You'd probably blow them away anyway."

Jenny giggled. "Thanks for saying so."

"Hey, isn't that Beethoven's Fifth?"

Emily looked surprised Ash asked. "Yes, it is. It's interesting—they're using the drums in place of the deeper horns; that takes some guts. You've heard it?"

"I'm not completely out of touch," she replied, with a grin. "So, where should we go?"

Jenny shrugged. "Well, we could always float over to the snacks table. Or push through the crowd and get close to some of the cars."

"Cars," Ash and Emily said at once, and Jenny snickered.

"All right, let's go. Now, the trick to doing what you want to do, ladies, is to strut around like you *own* the place. If you look like you're supposed to be doing what you're doing, or you have a right to be doing what you're doing, people won't question it, since they're afraid of being wrong and getting egg on their faces—or worse, getting punished for impudence. Observe."

She pointed ahead, at a car—a white Porsche on a pad, with a saleswoman in a business suit standing by, talking to people with cameras. "Look, she's giving the sales pitch to some press members. What's that car called?"

"It's a 911—a 997, actually. Turbo." Ash pointed at the sign. "It's gotta be one of the higher-ends at the show, if not *the* highest end."

"All right, then. Observe and learn, my friends." Jenny walked straight over to the car, the gown sweeping around her. She was right—the saleswoman gave her an odd look, but didn't complain, as she started to strike a variety of poses around the car. She tugged on the handle and almost got in—the camera flashed. She stood beside the window, leaning on the side—the camera flashed. Incongruously, she popped the hood to the engine compartment and leaned in, as if she were messing about in the engine compartment—the camera flashed. She rolled around to the front, laying back on the hood in much the way she, Ash, and Emily had laid on the hood of the Monster XR at the insurance agency, one leg long and low, the other propped up on the bumper, revealing more or less all of her leg through the slit of her gown—and the camera flashed.

"Wow, she is something, isn't she?" Ash said.

“Yeah, she is. Jenny has a love affair with the lenses.”

Ash turned—Kay Wheeler had come up behind them, as had the brown-haired man in the fine suit. Joshua Almacny was nowhere to be seen.

“We took care of that punk,” the Viper’s owner began. “If he bugs you again, give one of us the message.”

Ash rolled her eyes. “I don’t need you guys to fight my fights.”

“No.” Kay put his hand on her shoulder. “You really *don’t*, but Mr. Almacny can’t afford to blacklist *me*, and he doesn’t have the authority to blacklist Adam. You, on the other hand, might never get a gig again if you deliver unto that twerp the beating he so *richly* deserves.”

“Wow. He must be bad to make *you* think he needs a whipping.”

“He does, believe me. Jenny’s the girl who put up with him for the longest, but even she dumped him in the end. If I’d have known you were going to have to drive with him, I’d have suggested you drive in with your mother instead. He can’t keep his hands to himself.”

Ash snorted. “I’d have killed him if he tried anything, believe me.”

Kay snickered. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“She looks like she’s having fun.” Emily pointed up at Jenny, who was sitting atop the engine’s hood, her elbow on top of the Porsche’s roof, leaning across it.

Ash chuckled. “That’s not a plastic smile, is it?” Kay shook his head, and Ash let out a smile of her own. “I do believe the car bug’s bitten her.”

“She sounded like it had on the drive here. You couldn’t shut her up—she grilled me about my Viper and other cars the whole time. I’d better go help her get down without flashing the cameras.”

Ash snickered, softly. “Wardrobe malfunction?”

“Yeah. We don’t want one of those.”

Adam walked towards the Porsche with Jenny, who had since braced her heels on the wing, and was arching above it, her blonde hair falling over the windshield.

“I just thought of the perfect -gate name for *this* one, but I think I’ll keep it to myself,” Ash said.

“Yeaaaaah.” Emily grinned. “Hey, I’m gonna go and check out the snacks with Kay. Have fun, go find a car... never mind. I found one for you.” She took Ash’s shoulders, rotating her.

Ash’s jaw dropped. It was a glossy, bright red Carrera GT, with a number of blue velvet ropes around it forming a broken circle. Ash blinked, and Emily pushed her shoulders. “Come on, *go* for it. You know you wanna.”

“I do... I really do.” Ash grinned. “I’d love to sit in that thing.”

“*Two* supercars in one night? Go for it, Ash.” Emily pinched her arm, and then took Kay’s hand. “Shall we?”

“Of course.” Kay and Emily walked away, hand in hand, and Ash steeled herself.

“*Just look like you belong.*”

She took a step forward, but was grabbed from behind—soft arms wrapping her up in a strong hug. “Ash!” Marie said. Ash smiled as she was squeezed from behind, and turned around.

“Mom, there you are.” She smiled, as her mother let go, putting her hands on Ash’s shoulders.

“I heard some girl in a wild dress was all but dry-humping a car over here, so I figured it was you. I guess not.”

“It was Jenny,” Ash said, with a grin. “The bug’s bitten her.”

“Bug?”

“The car bug... ah, never mind.”

“Okay. Hey, where’s Joshua?”

Ash’s mood fell, immediately. “I don’t know, and I frankly don’t care as long as I don’t see him.”

“Ash, honey, it’s a couples event...”

“I don’t care. After what he did on the ride here, if I see him, I’ll hurt him.”

Marie’s face fell to serious and aghast, simultaneously. “Ash, honey, what’d he do?”

“He cranked the air to full, blew my ears out with thrash metal, and drove like he was trying to kill us both, all the while yelling at me about stealing his car and his girl. He also locked the child lock on my door so I couldn’t get out, and tried to shame me in front of my friends.”

“Ash...” Her mother’s face was serious and angry, and Ash held her hand up.

“Save it. I’ll deal, just as long as he doesn’t show his face around me again. But I swear, if he shows up and starts that ‘my dearest’ bullshit again, I’ll...”

Her mother squeezed her hands, tightly—they were balled into fists. “Ash, I... I’m sorry, I had no idea, I...”

“Save it, mom. If not me, he’d have gotten his hooks into Jenny.”

“Ash, I... I’m going to go and talk to Mr. Almacy.”

Ash shook her head, vehemently. “Don’t. Please, I’m not a snitch; I don’t need my mom to go running to his daddy. I can handle it.”

“All right. Why don’t you go and find Kay and Emily?”

“No way. She’s been crushing over him since she was twelve. I think she needs tonight to work it out of her system, and she’s wanted to have a night like this. I’m not going to ruin it by tagging along.” She paused a beat. “And this is Jenny’s thing, not mine. This should be her show anyway; she’s worked for it for years, not me. She and that silver bullet deserve this. I’ll just... I’ll find something to do.”

Marie smiled, softly, and hugged her. “Well, there’s some high-powered people from Porsche here. The head guy’s got kinda-reddish hair and a bit of a beard, his name’s Rainer Herrbruck. You could go and impress him, I bet.”

Ash snickered. “Thanks, but... I’ll figure it out, okay?”

“Okay. If you need something, or if you need to know something, or especially if Joshua bothers you again, *come find me*, okay?”

“Will do. Going to go and schmooze up the other marketing types?”

“Yeah. Jenny’s in rare form tonight—she’s schmoozing more than I’ve ever seen from her, laying it on real thick. I think she’s gunning for a promotion.”

“Jenny? Oh, the first.”

Her mother nodded, and let her go. “Try to have fun, Ash. You’re *gorgeous* in that outfit, and you look dangerous. You’ll go well with any of the red cars.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Her mother laughed, and then pulled out a comb to straighten her hair. “There you go.”

Sighing, Ash put up with it.

The Party, 8:49 PM

“You were really loving on that car, weren’t you?”

Jenny nodded at the question. She swept across the glitzed-up show room, the long pearly gown sweeping around her, setting her apart and clearly above of most of the girls in the low-fabric attire they had—not that hers was, generally, any *less* revealing, but she stood out like a beacon in the silver bullet.

“I could tell. There’s a lot of girls draping themselves over cars here, but you were the only one who looked like you respected the car as more than an accessory.”

Jenny snickered. “Wait ’till Emily or Ash get a hold of one of them.” She pointed across the floor—in the long, blue dress, Emily swept along at Kay Wheeler’s side, towards the buffet line.

“She looks like she’s entranced.”

“Yeah, yeah she does. C’mon.” Jenny started to lead, with Adam following and chuckling at her.

“Where?”

“The snacks table. I’m starving.”

“Heh, all right.”

The two of them walked towards the long table full of snacks, arrowing towards Emily.

“So *here* you are!”

Jenny scowled. *Clarita*. She spun, the gown whirling about her body as she did.

“Who do you think you are, Victoria Beckham?”

Jenny sneered; Clarita was standing in front of her, towing a rather helpless-looking buff man in a bright red dinner jacket and suit. She was wearing very little, though what there was of it was an eye-searing shade of orange trimmed in red—a lattice, tied together with additional latticework over her breasts, formed a halter of sorts—not that she needed much in the way of support. It was attached to a choker collar, and below it was a mid-calf length skirt—if a skirt could be said to be made of latticework. Whoever had designed it was either a genius or insane, or possibly both. Her heels were not overly large, but they did have the distinction of coming with (for a change) more latticework that went up her shins, like the sandals Jenny vaguely recalled seeing in a history book when she’d been flipping through it at random instead of paying attention.

“Better a Spice Girl than a call girl, Clarita.” The put down came easily, although she felt a wellspring of guilt within her.

Clarita’s eyes flashed with anger. “What’s your problem?”

“You, interrupting my night. What’s yours?”

“You, polluting *my* space and photographs like you’re the queen of the show. Putting on something like that, strutting, *sweeping* around like a queen or something.” Jenny felt her temper flare; she was about to retaliate (somehow), when Adam stepped between them.

“Whoa, there, ladies. Is there a problem here?”

Clarita looked up at him and smiled. “No problem.” She put on a plastic mask of pleasantness.

“We’re just teasing each other.” She took his hand. “I’m Clarita. And you are?”

“Adam,” he said, curtly, taking his hand back. “Nice to meet you,” he said, and turned back to Jenny. She turned around with him, and started to walk towards the buffet.

The Party, 9:13 PM

Emily and Kay drifted through the party, showing up at cars and having their pictures taken—they’d had a few taken in the white Porsche 997 Turbo, as well as a red 997, and a concept prototype of a car Porsche was designing, the Cayman S.

“So, do you dance?” Kay asked.

“Dance?”

“Yeah, dance.”

“Um... I... can,” she said, guardedly. “Why?”

“With a live band like that, *someone’s* going to pay them off to play something you can dance to sooner or later.”

Emily almost felt a swoon come over her. “Are you... asking me to dance?”

“I am, when the music starts.”

Emily blushed and giggled softly. “I’d love to. I’m not very good, though.”

“That’s fine, as long as you have fun.”

“Okay.” Emily smiled, and snagged another deviled egg from the snack tray as they went by, eating it in two bites.

Kay chuckled. “Most girls won’t touch those things.”

“I’ve never had one before, they’re really good. I need to learn how to make them. I should try Ash on these; I bet she’d love ’em.”

“Yeah, these are pretty good. I don’t know who hired the caterers this time, but they need to be hired or promoted, one. Usually the food’s god-awful stuff made to look good, but these are like my mother used to make them, with paprika on top and everything.”

He took one for himself, and Emily stretched after finishing hers, then groaned. “Mmmh. It’s been a *long* time, believe me, since I’ve worn heels this long. Can we go find a nice car to sit in and let me rest my legs?”

“Of course. How about that?”

He pointed, and Emily made a face. “*Ew!* That’s a Cayenne. I am *not* sitting in an SUV.”

“It’s got more legroom?”

Emily shook her head. “Like hell, fat chance. I am not getting into that abomination against automotion.”

Kay tilted his head. “You really are a ‘car’ person, aren’t you?”

Emily blushed, lightly. “Is it showing?”

“Only like a neon light. And with the way you talked my ear off...” He tugged on his ear, as if to reassure himself it was still in place.

Emily giggled. “Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s okay. You have a way of explaining things that makes them almost make sense. I just don’t ‘get’ the whole obsession thing, but you made sense.”

“Sorry, I’ll stop.”

“No, no, it’s fine. So, you don’t like the big one with legroom? How about that black thing there?”

He pointed, and Emily nodded. “It’s a 997, sure.” She led him to the car, getting into the driver’s seat, letting Kay open the passenger door and get in.

“You know, you do that naturally.”

“Do what?”

“Get behind the wheel. Most of the girls I have to deal with would just get into the passenger seat and let me sit in the driver’s seat.” He shrugged. “It’s kind of silly, I think, but I like the way you just take the wheel, like you were born to do it.” He closed his door, though the windows were down.

“Born to do it?”

“Sit at the driver’s seat. And the way you talk, and get all opinionated about cars. You have a *focus*, and it’s not being a camera-hog. Could you drive this thing?”

Emily looked down—the controls were more or less identical to the 996 that Ash’s mother had been letting her drive, and she grinned, feeling extraordinarily bold due to the praise. “I could take this thing out onto that track out there and lay rubber around the corners.”

“Yes, right before you crashed it into a wall.” The comment was followed by a derisive snort from outside the window—a man with slightly red hair and a beard was standing in a very nice suit, scowling down at her.

Emily flushed, and she saw Kay’s brow furrow to her right. “I could. I placed, you know, fifth in the overall straight-stock cars, in a 996 this week.”

The man snorted. “I find that *highly* unlikely.” He was urbane, but his accent was still slightly Germanic. “Little girls like you have no business behind the wheel of a fine, performance machine like this. You have no skill, no ability, no *right*. Get out.”

“Ex-excuse me?!” Emily bristled, angrily, full of offended pride. “You want to take that attitude out to the track and find out?”

“As if I would even *think* of giving you the keys to one of my precious vehicles. *Get out*, or I’ll have you taken out.”

Emily bared her teeth, but Kay put a hand on her forearm. “It’s not worth it, Emily. Let’s go find somewhere else to sit.”

She nodded to him, and opened her door, getting out, and shutting it. “If you’re the kind of person who works for Porsche, I should be glad I bought a Nissan.”

“Nissan? *Pfah!* Just like a little girl to own a car that whines like one. Go enjoy your little car, little girl.” He turned and walked off, leaving Emily with her fists clenched.

“He has no right to talk to you like that, Emily.”

“You’re damn right he doesn’t. If you’re going to say stuff like that, you shouldn’t get away with not putting your accelerator pedal where your mouth is.” Kay laughed, softly. “What’s so funny?” she demanded, and whirled to see him.

“You. You’re standing there, *shaking* with rage, not because of the blatant sexism, but because he insulted your pride and wouldn’t give you the chance to force-feed him his words on the track.”

“I could.”

“I believe you.” Kay smiled, and sighed. “I really do. C’mon, let’s go complain to someone in the venue. Even if he is with Porsche, he can’t just talk that way to the guests and get away with it.”

“Someone with the venue... I see Jimmy over by the buffet, killing the deviled eggs.”

“Jimmy?”

“He’s the Race Boss here. His boss doesn’t like him, but I bet he can ruin that prick’s reputation by spreading it around that he’s afraid to race a ‘little girl’.”

“See, now *that’s* the kind of attack I’ve gotten used to. I guess you’re flexible, then.”

“At least it’s not the kind of attack *Ash* would’ve retaliated with.”

Kay chuckled. “Yeah. She’s a great girl, but she’s more hotheaded than most of the boys I know. It’s actually endearing, after all the nonsense I have to put up with.”

“Yeah... *yeah*, it is. She has a real white-knight complex. Do you know, four punks cornered us in the back warehouse off an arcade the other day, and she grabbed a crowbar and about laid into them to protect us?”

“Us? That was *you*?” He blinked. “Wow. Yeah, there was a rumor that Clarita, Rachelle, and two boys got stared down by three girls, and one of the boys got the shit kicked out of him.”

“It was me, Ash, and Jenny. And he didn’t get beat—Ash was about to, but Jenny put him down with her taser.”

“Aren’t those illegal?”

“Are you gonna snitch?”

“Not a chance.”

“Good. Anyway, c’mon, let’s go find Jimmy, I want you to get eye-witness proof that I placed.”

“All right.”

The Party, 9:21 PM

Ash sighed, walking towards the Carrera GT. She had made some rounds of the 911 series vehicles in attendance, and even (begrudgingly) posed on the Cayenne’s side when a photographer offered her two hundred on the spot, because he needed a picture to beef up the ‘toughness’ image of the Cayenne. But now... she was *hungry*. That monster machine kept calling her, though she’d never seen a girl in or on it. Like being lured by a Siren, she walked determinedly towards it. Sliding around the ropes, a photographer flashed the car. She tried the handle and it opened. She slid in, smoothly, letting the soft leather racing seat hug her body. She shut the door, and the sound from outside, the band, and the people were almost immediately drowned out.

“*Whoa.*” The car’s interior was... not as luxurious as she expected. It was built for performance, with luxury as an extra. Still, there was a Bose sound system and a GPS computer in it—though the front of the passenger’s compartment was metal, and there were no floor-mats. The corner of a slip of paper stuck out from the glove box, and she opened it. Inside were a number of audio CDs, some soundtracks, some burn discs, papers that looked like insurance registration, and a crumpled McDonald’s breakfast bagel wrapper.

“*Heh. Someone took the company car for a joyride,*” she thought, imagining the person at the McDonald’s window who must have been absolutely flabbergasted to be handing a sandwich out to a Porsche, let alone a Carrera GT, and she shut the glove box. Then she put one hand on the wheel, the other on the wooden-knobbed shifter.

The door opened, behind her head. “This car’s invite-only.” The voice was annoyed-sounding. “People who don’t ride aren’t invite—” She turned to face the speaker—and blinked. Recognition dawned on his face. “My apologies. You have every right to be in this car.”

The black-haired man shut the door behind her, and walked around the car, climbing into the passenger seat. “You’re the one from the highway. The one with the Merkur XR4Ti.”

Ash stared at him. “You’re the one. This is your Carrera.”

“That’s right.”

“It’s not an XR4Ti. I own one, but that one’s a Frankenstein’s monster. It’s the body of an XR4Ti, with the four-wheel drive system from an XR4X4.”

“And a five-liter Ford Windsor engine, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ash grinned. “You’re not. How can you tell?”

“Engine’s too deep for the stock. Sounds more like a Mustang GT than a Merkur.”

“Heh... Ford person, too?”

He shook his head. “Hell no. I’m a Porsche fan internationally, or a Daimler-Chrysler fan domestically. But Ford makes a few things I could drive, like the Mustang, or the GT.”

Ash chuckled, and leaned back in the seat. “Fair enough. How come you talk like a real person, and not the honey-coated garbage they spew at these events?”

“Because I am a real person.”

“Really? You don’t work for Porsche?”

“Nope. This car is mine, free and clear. They couldn’t arrange for a company car to be here, because there was an accident on I-95, so I volunteered to present mine, since I was in the area.”

“Wow. This...”

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” He stroked the dashboard. “So, no offense... how does a girl go from driving a dingy Frankenstein’s Merkur to wearing a dress like she’s about to kick Agent Smith’s ass at a big Christmas Eve party?”

Ash laughed, loud and earnestly, at his description of the outfit she was wearing. “My mom works with the fashion company. She likes seeing me do these things, even though I’d rather be out there on the track than in here.”

“Your mom, eh? Is she the nice brunette, or the mean blonde?”

Ash blanched. “The nice brunette. The mean one’s my friend Jenny’s mother, and she’s a real piece of work.”

“Yeah, I could tell. She heard this was my personally-owned car and suddenly she couldn’t go out of her way fast enough to get me a drink.” He blanched. “As-if. I don’t drink alcohol on the best of days, and there’s no way in hell I’m going to touch any right before I strap myself into a six-hundred horsepower lady like this.”

“Lady?”

“Yeah. You’re a racer, and from the sound of it, a tuner, too. Don’t your cars have personalities, talk to you?”

Ash winced. “Oh god, don’t tell me you’re another ‘car whisperer.’ I really can’t take another.”

“Car whisperer?” The man laughed. “Where’d you get that voodoo hoodoo from? But still, it doesn’t hurt to ascribe a personality to something you invest yourself into, to listen for the cues...”

“Cues?”

“Yeah. You know what instinct is, right?”

“It’s automatic reflexes...”

“Sort-of. A reflex is like how your knee bends when a doctor hits it with a hammer, or how you throw your hands up to ward off a punch. Instinct is what happens when your subconscious recognizes patterns and symbols you can’t consciously pick up on. It’s why you get ‘gut’ feelings, like when you’re in the woods and you realize something’s wrong, and it takes you a minute to realize the birds have all shut up. When you act on them, you’re often correct.”

“O-kay... What’s that have to do with the car whisperer stuff, though?”

“Well, I call her Lady.” He stroked the dashboard. “When I feel like she’s trying to tell me something, she is. It’s in the subtle change in the vibration of the engine, the feeling of the tires on the asphalt. It means that something is up, and I need to pay attention.”

“Oh... oh, yeah. I know the feeling you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, that’s the stuff. It doesn’t hurt to anthropomorphize your car. Your Monster, what would you characterize it as?”

“Um... I dunno. I know a guy, his name’s Aiden. He calls it a Monster, says it growls.”

“Ahhh. A beast, then, like a Mercedes-McLaren SLR.”

“You own two supercars?”

“No, but I’ve driven one. The Carrera GT is a refined and grown-up tomboy. Under all the shiny surface and sophistication, there’s a wild woman waiting to be let loose, to open her throttle up and lay rubber. You can’t fear it, because if you’re afraid of it, she’ll either buck you, or fail on you. You have to respect it, but master it. Not like the SLR.”

Ash snorted. “Sounds like woo-woo crap, but I’ll humor you. Go on.”

“Well, the McLaren SLR is like a fire-breathing dragon. It doesn’t care if you respect it; it *demand*s your fear. You have to kind of baby it. If you don’t have fear of that car, it’ll run away from you and end you in a huge fireball. But if it senses your fear, you should be all right, because it won’t usually flip and kill you if you’re appropriately fearful.”

“That really sounds like woo-woo crap.”

“It *is*, basically, but it’s a useful anthropomorphization of the cars. The Carrera GT is touchy, and this one has a nasty case of oversteer. You have to stay in control all the time, and you can get it up to its full performance. But it doesn’t drive like the SLR. That thing doesn’t oversteer as much, but it’s much touchier to my mind. Mastering that beast is almost impossible; you kind of have to baby it. You can’t really take it to its full potential, or it’ll kill you, but less than its full potential is still more than enough to win most of the time.”

Ash nodded. “Ahhh... I... guess I see.”

“Yeah. So, go on, what would you characterize yours as?”

“The Monster XR? Jeez... I dunno, I’d have to think about it.”

“Go ahead and think about it, then.” He smiled. “Feel free to hang around my car. You’re a racer, you’re worthy.” He took the keys out. “Go ahead and spin up my tunes if you want, too. Or turn on the heat—it’s cold in here. Just don’t start the engine, or you’ll kill everyone’s ears.”

Ash grinned, widely, looking for the ignition on the left side. She put the key in, turning the key to the right twice—putting the car into ‘on’, but not sparking the engine. “So, what’ve you done to this?”

“Done to her? Not that much, really. I’ve got twenty-one inch nonstandard rims, and Yokohamas on her. Tweaked the suspension to give me more oversteer, upgraded the brakes to six-caliper Brembos, and I had the headlights replaced with one-off Xenon 10ks... I haven’t done anything to the engine or exhaust. I guess yours is pretty much all tuned?”

“Yeah. About the only thing it doesn’t have is a turbo.”

“Engine like that? You’d be better off with a supercharger. Still, a turbo would do you fine, too.”

Ash nodded. “Yeah, that’s true. Hey, I saw you in Marco’s the other day, as I was leaving. You were driving something else, a green muscle car.”

The Carrera’s owner nodded. “Yeah. After I foolishly allowed myself to be baited into a race by a teenage girl in an overpowered car, I had to ditch the fuzz and get my baby under cover until they lost interest, and change the windows for good measure. But I had to meet some friends there, too, so I called Jimmy and he let me use his Hemicuda.”

“Jimmy? The race boss here?”

“Yeah, that’s him. You know him?”

She grinned. “Yeah. We met him when my mom was planning this gig with his boss.”

“Oh... *Oh!* Small world, you must be one of those girls who came here and placed. Let me guess, you’re the one he calls King?”

“Not to brag (much), but yeah. My friend Emily was driving the Porsche.”

“Sweet. He talked my ear off about that the other day, how the King of the Mountain showed up with Doctor Harrystein’s Monster. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I didn’t have the heart to interrupt the guy.”

Ash grinned. “Yeah. Doctor Harrystein is actually Harry, the mechanic where I come from. The Monster XR was his project car, but the engine he put in it failed spectacularly—as in, block cracked spectacular—and he didn’t have the time to put in a new one, since his repair shop was taking off...”

The Party, 9:53 PM

“Hey-Hey, Blues!” The heavyset race-boss with the neck beard certainly cut a distinctive figure in an eye-searingly orange and white zoot suit, complete with wide-brimmed hat.

Emily couldn’t help but giggle softly. “My god, Jimmy, what are you wearing?”

“Whaaaat?” He smirked. “Hey, a little bird tweedled in my ear that he’d paid the band off to put on a performance of ‘Hey, Pachuco’. You just can’t dance to that song properly without a zoot suit.”

“Dance? In that?”

“Well, yeah. You’re gonna make an ass out of yourself and have a good time at a party, you might as well go for the gold, right? Just a shame there’s no lampshades anywhere.” He grinned. “What’s up? I haven’t seen The King yet. Did she bail?”

“I... don’t know.” Emily shrugged. “Last I saw her, she was over by the Carrera GT.”

“The Carrera? Oh, wow, I hope she doesn’t touch it. Nate gets pissed if someone he thinks is unworthy touches his baby. Then again, he might think she’s worthy; I saw how she drives, like the demented daughter of Evel Knievel and Mario Andretti.”

“You two are making me *very* confused,” Kay interjected. “Who’s the King?”

“Ash. He’s talking about Ash.”

“Er... wouldn’t she be the Queen?”

Emily winced. “Don’t call her that. It pisses her off.”

“Yeah, it’s a title of achievement—King o’ the Mountain.”

“More car stuff?”

“More car stuff,” Emily confirmed.

“Hooo. Excuse me,” Kay murmured as he turned, walking to the buffet table and getting a drink. Emily frowned at him, but he smiled, holding up the glass, explaining. “It’s cream soda, not champagne.”

“Oh, okay,” Emily replied, turned back to Jimmy.

“But yeah, I haven’t seen her yet. Oh, I did see your other friend, though, the one who looked like she was wearing a pearl like some kind of Euro-trash starlet.”

“Jenny? How was she doing?”

“I dunno, really. I haven’t been to many digs like this, so I can’t really say, but she looked like she was doing a good job of hiding an almighty case of the pissed-off.”

“Wonder what got her upset?”

“Nooo idea. Hey, what do you think of the rides here?”

“The Porsches? I love ’em, but for the red-headed man.”

“Red-head?” Jimmy rolled his eyes. “Rainer. You know, I’m of a mind to take that prick outside, mano a mano.”

“Really? What’s he done?”

“He’s an asshole, that’s what. There was this cute girl who got into one of the Turbos, lookin’ around an’ all, started asking questions about what everything was. Her date answered some of it, and I

came over, started filling in the rest, then this Teutonic twat shows up and starts lambasting her, saying maybe she'd find one of the 'milder' vehicles like the Boxster or the Cayenne to her taste." He snorted.

"He did the same to us, too. Said some really nasty things about Emily."

"*Did* he?"

Emily nodded. "Then he wouldn't even take his words out to the track."

"Really? That prick." He scowled. "I'm gonna go scare up Fitz outta his office. Even if he does belong to one of the co-sponsors, he can't just talk to guests that way. Especially not placing champions." Then he grinned. "Actually, I have an idea. We have a speaker system set up for the band, but there's a microphone. I could go and scare up Nate and the King and announce our pleasure to have placing champions in attendance tonight."

"Oh, no, please. Ash would hate that."

"She would? What's the point in being King if you don't get to brag?"

"It's not the bragging, she just hates what they've made her wear tonight. She'd really hate the attention."

"All right, all right, yeah. Well, I'm still gonna go and have words with Fitz. Oh, hey, isn't that your other friend?" He pointed across the showroom.

Jenny was with Adam, looking as if they were having a pleasant conversation with two other people. Except that one of them was Clarita, and Emily winced.

"Yeah, it is. Oi, that's..." She turned back, but Jimmy was already gone. "Huh... for such a big guy, he moves quietly." She turned back to Kay, who shrugged, drinking a glassful of cream soda.

"So, what's this King of the Mountain stuff?"

"Well, there's a mountain where we come from, near Tempest, that's great for racing. The road's off the beaten path, nobody ever goes up there except the ones that want to race on it, so it's more or less our private racetrack. The racers from the school we go to race there, and the top-dog racer is crowned 'King of the Mountain'..."

The Party, 10:00 PM

"Are you ladies quite done?" Jenny and Clarita had been passing thinly veiled barbs, insults, and threats back and forth at one another for nigh-on ten minutes now.

"*What would Ash do? Just walk away? Okay.*" Jenny nodded. "Yeah, I'm through. This one's not worth my time, anyway." Brushing off Clarita's indignant squawk of "I'm not done with you" with a shrug of "I'm done with you," she turned and walked away with Adam, towards the band.

"So, you never did explain the whole deal with that guy that Ash beat the hell out of."

"Which one?"

"The one she didn't like."

Jenny sighed. "Joshua Clayton Almacy Junior," she said, pointing out Senior, who was slow dancing with his wife in front of the bandstand. "That's his dad; he owns the company."

Adam nodded. "I gathered that, since it's his signature on my check."

"You got paid already?"

"Yeah. Being in-demand means you can demand payment up-front. Anyway, what's the deal with that boy of his?"

"Right. Well, he *was* my boyfriend, until Sunday last..." She sighed. "There was a minor party going on at the company building, and Ash's mom's car had been wrecked the Friday before—the red Porsche that me and Emily and Ash put back together during the week. Anyway, they brought Ash's mom in Ash's car, but they had to stick around in case she needed to be driven somewhere, so she let them set up a Playstation in the break room." Jenny sighed. "They were... trying to be *nice* to me. They were playing Need for Speed Underground 2."

"Yeah, I've seen it."

“Well, they offered to let me play. I didn’t know what game they were getting at, so I started off with a put-down, and told them my boyfriend had a super-hot car that was faster than anything.”

She took a deep breath. “Ash took it personally. She challenged me to prove it, and, well... I went to Joshua, and I honey-talked him into doing the race. He didn’t have his own car, but he did have his dad’s Jaguar S-Type, which he figured was going to be more than fast enough to beat Ash. We went to the parking garage, and Ash... Well, she was trying to get him to back down, since she knew he was a punk. She upped the stakes to a wager, but he started pulling out hundred-dollar bills, which she couldn’t match. So she escalated again to the cars—the winner got the loser’s car.”

“Pink Slips, huh?”

“Yeah. You race?”

“A little. I’d never take a Pink Slip challenge, though.”

Jenny grinned. “Yeah. So, anyway, she pretty smoothly wounded his pride, and he signed on the deal. God, I was such a stupid bitch... Ash toyed with him for most of it, then she blew right past him and left us eating dust. Theeene the boss showed up, and busted us all. He hauled us into his office first, and Joshua made up some bull about her having forged his signature, and I backed him. His old man didn’t buy it, and not only did he yell at Joshua the worst, but he made him honor his agreement—he made his son give Ash his own Jaguar, the XKR her mother’s driving now.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, double-ouch. He blamed me, and I blamed him for being stupid and signing for it, and I told him she was toying with him when he said he could’ve won if he’d been driving his own car. He drove off, and I was pissed... Emily and Ash then offered to take me to lunch.” She sighed. “I was mad at them, so angry, but I figured if I declined, I’d be playing into their plan, so I said yes... And, well, things kind of went from there, and now Joshua thinks I’m in love with Ash, and blames her for stealing both his car and his girl.”

“Are you?” Jenny asked, and turned her head up to look at Adam’s—he grinned back at her.

“She loves someone else.”

“That’s *not* a no.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. She’s in love with someone else, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Ahh, okay, okay.” Adam smiled, and walked to the other side of Jenny as the pair walked through the room, smiling when a camera showed up in front of them, and then he plucked a piece of celery stuffed with cheese from the tray.

“Excuse me.” Jenny said, softly, slipping off towards the restroom; Adam followed, at a distance, and waited in the general vicinity of the door.

The Party, 10:09 PM

“Emily!”

Emily turned around—it was Ash’s mother, grinning at her, standing next to Jimmy.

“Hey, Blues,” he waved. “I had a word with Fitz; he said he was gonna rein Rainer in.”

“That’s good. Hi, Mrs. Upton.”

“Hello, Marie,” Kay said. “How are things going?”

“Good. Jimmy here was kind enough to ask me to dance; he says the band’s going to start a dance number any time now.”

Emily grinned, and looked up at Kay—he smiled back, and then asked, “Do you know what kind?”

“Swing,” Jimmy answered. “Liveliest thing my friend found out the band could do.”

“Swing?”

Kay nodded at Emily. “It’s not too hard, just fast. It’s easy to improvise, though.”

Kay smiled and offered Emily his hand; Emily took it, and followed him towards the cleared area around the band; Marie and Jimmy turned to follow, but Jenny (the first’s) voice cut in.

“Marie, we need to talk.”

“What is it?”

“Urgent.”

Marie let out an exasperated sigh. “Can’t it wait?”

“No.”

As Kay led Emily away, she saw Marie making an apology to Jimmy, who seemed to take it in good stride.

The drums started to kick up as they arrived at the dance area in front of the band. Then a voice boomed out from the speakers—a man in a black dinner jacket with black hair that Emily thought was somehow vaguely familiar was standing with the band’s singer.

“It’s Christmas Eve two-thousand *and four*, ladies and gentlemen. Year’s almost over, and for whatever reason, we’re all here, tonight, instead of home, safe and sound. I guess that says something about what kind of people we all are—*party* people!” The horns kicked in. “I see some of us have been in the dancing mood all night, but with any luck my friends over here can play some Royal Crown Revue and move *everybody*’s feet tonight. That said: Hey, Pachuco! Hey!”

The opening line was sang by the man with the band, the whole band, and Jimmy, who had snuck up near them, and the black-haired man danced away, as Jimmy started to tear up the floor.

“Hey, look,” Emily murmured, pointing out the senior Joshua Almacry and his wife, who were looking at one another with a grin, and then started to tear the floor up, and the singer took up the rest of the song’s lyrics.

“Cool. I haven’t seen them enjoy themselves at an event this much in years. Shall we dance?”

Emily turned back, taking Kay’s hand—he nodded his head to the rhythm. Emily followed his nodding. “I’m with you,” she murmured, and he swung her around, starting them into the frantic, happy dance that more and more people were taking up.

The Bathroom At The Party, 10:14 PM

The bathroom in the venue wasn’t so much like the bathrooms in a public building as in a small office. The interior was dark, faux wood paneling above the mid-level of the room, and brown carpet-like wall below the middle. It was not entirely unpleasant, Jenny thought, introspective and quiet, though she’d never admit to liking the décor. There was a large bay-mirror and bank of sinks, which she stood at, having washed her hands twice already, staring at her reflection in the mirror.

“Clarita...” She sighed. “*I know I don’t deserve it, but can’t you just leave me alone for one night? I’m probably finished after tonight, anyway. I don’t think I’d have the guts to show up without Ash and Em.*” She heard music outside, and smiled. “*Mmmh. Kay’s probably dancing with Emily. Maybe I can get a dance out of Adam.*” She turned around, only to be interrupted by the door opening, admitting the last person she wanted to see.

“Clarita.”

“Jenny.” Clarita smirked, and turned around. The door was equipped with a lock, and she locked it, then turned back to Jenny, who was blinking and stepping back.

“What are you *doing*?”

Their eyes met. Neither spoke for a moment, staring. Jenny felt like she should be going for a pistol at her hip before Clarita went for one at her own.

Finally Clarita broke the silence. “I don’t believe you.” She took a step forward. “I don’t *fucking* believe you. What’s your angle? What’re you getting at?”

“What are *you* talking about?” Jenny demanded back, furrowing her brow. “What’s not to believe?”

“I don’t believe you deleted it.” She took another step forward, her fists clenched. “I don’t believe you, all of a sudden, going soft. Going off with that auto-dyke and the bookworm bitch.”

Another step, and Jenny clenched her own fists. “Don’t talk about my friends like that!”

“Hah! Friends?! You, Jenny, friends? I don’t buy it. I don’t believe you. What’s your angle, bitch?”

Jenny shook. Then she set her purse on the counter, and took out her cell phone. “Have a look for yourself. I deleted *all* of it. Everything.”

Clarita fiddled with the cell phone for a while, then set it back on the counter. “Why? What the *hell* is your angle?”

“Is it so hard to believe I don’t have one? That I just want to stop the fighting?”

“*You* started it!” Clarita’s eyes flared with anger, and Jenny looked down.

“Yes... yes I did. I’m sorry.”

“*Sorry?!?*”

“Yes, I’m *sorry*, okay?! I’m sorry for everything! I’m sorry I got your locker combination, I’m sorry I stole your Playboy, and I’m sorry I grabbed you in the showers and m-molested you, okay?”

“You... you’re *sorry?!?*” Clarita sounded enraged and incredulous, and Jenny hung her head.

“Yes, I am, it...” She sighed, and slumped on the counter. “You threatened me, Clarita. You threatened the image my mother was making me build. How the hell am I going to compete with that? Full figures were going out; tomboy-slim was getting in. It’s the same thing I’ve done all my life, and you know what?” She looked up, meeting Clarita’s eyes. “I realized just how pathetic it all was, after Ash showed me up...” She sighed, feeling incredibly guilty and pathetic. “I’m sorry, Clarita.”

“You? *Threatened* by me?!” Clarita looked outraged. “Do you... Argh! When I was twelve, I saw you, in all the school plays and pageants, in magazines, and I told my mother I wanted to be just like you! And I finally got my break, and you *attack* me and take blackmail movies of me?”

Jenny hung her head, shamefully. “Clarita... I... I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say. It was wrong of me.” She looked into the mirror. “I had no idea you even existed until that party last January. Then you walked onto the scene full of bright eyes and stole all the show. My mother yelled at me so much about being upstaged by a flat-chested twit...” She closed her eyes. “I shouldn’t have done what I did, though... I... I’m sorry.”

She knew, actually knew, it was coming, but she didn’t put a hand up to ward off the punch. Surprisingly, it hit her in the stomach instead of the face. Jenny staggered backwards, groaning and holding her guts. The second came, but this time, something sparked inside of her, sparking her into action. She jumped to the side, letting the punch sail by her, and grabbed Clarita’s arm, spinning and throwing the smaller girl against the wall. She wasn’t nearly as strong as Ash, and probably not even as strong as Emily, but Clarita was thinner and weaker than she was, so she could still manhandle the younger girl.

She pushed Clarita against the wall, staring into her eyes, holding her arms—the squirming girl bared her teeth. “I deserved that. But I’m not going to be a punching bag. I’m sorry for everything I did, but I won’t let you beat me up.”

“Let go.”

Jenny did, and Clarita lowered her hands. Then she pulled them up, pulling Jenny’s top—it was strong enough that, had she tried to rip it, it would’ve been futile, but she yanked it down instead. Jenny gasped, and Clarita’s hands found her full breasts, squeezing.

Fingernails digging into her flesh, Jenny arched, letting out a cry. She trembled at the feeling; it hurt, yet... “My turn. You like that, don’t you, bitch?”

“Y-Yes, I do.” Jenny all but whispered it, tremulously gasping, but the pressure stopped almost immediately.

“W-What?”

“I said I liked it!” Jenny trembled, and forced her eyes open, staring into Clarita’s. “Why do you think I gave you such a hard time? Why do you think I felt so threatened by you?”

“I...”

“We’re two sides of the same coin, aren’t we? B-But... I’m tired of it. I’m tired of the fighting, of the blackmail, of the hatred. I don’t care what my mother says; it’s not worth it to get ahead. To be the

one in all the magazines that thousands of boys use for wank material. (*Wank material? Where'd that come from? Ash, probably.*) So... I'm done. Do what you have to do." Jenny sighed, feeling lower and more vulnerable than ever.

Clarita squeezed again, then shot her hands up; she grabbed Jenny by the head, and the blonde fashion queen's eyes shot open as she felt the hateful, angry, but passionate kiss press into her. Jenny responded, arching her back, and squeezing Clarita against her.

The kiss parted after a few seconds; Clarita's eyes were a mix of ambivalent contradictory emotions, though Jenny felt no less confused. She yanked her abbreviated corset back into place as Clarita pelted around her, darting to the door. Clarita unlocked it and fled without another word, leaving Jenny staring after her, and sighing.

She started to walk out. But as she passed the door to the stall that she hadn't used, she noticed it was now slightly ajar. Feeling a surge of bravery no doubt brought on by her association with Ash, Jenny rammed it with her shoulder, and was rewarded by the door slamming into something thick and meaty on the other side, a cry of pain and surprise, and a cell phone hitting the tiled floor and sliding out to her heeled foot. She picked it up; on it was a video of the whole encounter, including Clarita and her kissing with her breasts bared. It was on the 'send multimedia' screen, with a number of addresses listed, many of which Jenny recognized (including her mother's), but had yet to be sent.

"Fool me once, Rachelle, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." She snapped the flip-up cell phone in half, its screen going black, and tossed it in the toilet in the stall she had used. The industrial-sized hopper had no trouble flushing the phone straight down. The raven-hair came out of her stall, fury on her face, clearly meaning to attack.

"*To hell with this,*" Jenny thought, scowling evilly. She intercepted the raven-haired girl, unconsciously reacting the way Ash would have. She slid to the side of the lefty's incoming punch, and shot her hand up, wrapping it around Rachelle's throat, squeezing the string-of-pearls choker around her neck into her. With the taller girl gasping for breath, Jenny pushed the advantage, shoving her against the wall.

"And *you*," she railed, staring into Rachelle's eyes. "Call me whatever you want, but don't you *dare* call yourself her friend if you were going to do that! You don't know what a friend is, do you?"

Rachelle bared her teeth, growling, "Dyke, let go of me."

"So what if I am? So what if *she* is? Does that make her not your friend? You're as pathetic as I am, you know that?" Disgustedly, Jenny let go, shoving the black-haired, taller girl into the wall again. "Fucking forget it. Maybe you'll re-think it, maybe you won't. Just remember what you did to Clarita when your next 'best friend' gets blackmail or ruination material on *you*."

She turned to stalk away. She expected an attack from behind, but it never came, as she slipped out of the bathroom, confused, full of adrenaline, and jittery.

The Party, 10:25 PM

"*This is not going too bad, actually.*" Ash had to admit. With free license to hang around the Carrera GT as she wished, she'd taken full advantage of what was, essentially, a monopoly of its owner's time and his car. Numerous photographers had shot the car while they were in it, during most of which she'd put her hand on the wheel and the shifter, while they'd talked at length about cars and racing. They had a mutual track-nemesis, even—Kate the Kamikaze.

On the subject of Kate, he'd had to say, "She's going to come back and take the top spot again, I know it. I'm good, but she's incredible. I only beat her time using the Carrera GT, and that was one of my best performances, ever, and it took me like twenty attempts spread over a few weeks."

"Huh. So, why'd you do it?"

"I'm trying to provoke her. I want to race against her, even though I probably don't have a snowball's chance."

Ash had thought that was just insane, and she blinked. “*Provoke* Kate?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you just challenge her?”

“Ego. It’s one thing if I drive up to Greylock and challenge her, it’s another if I start to make enough of a name for myself that she challenges me.”

Ash shook her head. “That is *nuts*.”

“I know. But you’ve raced against her, right?”

“Yeah. I almost won.”

“If you’d had this, do you think you would have?”

“I honestly don’t know. Maybe, but that was an exceptional circumstance.”

“Yeah, exactly. Kamikaze Kate is more than a person; she’s a *phenomenon*, a reputation. Looking at the stats, you’d think there’s no way a Porsche Carrera GT could *lose* to a Jaguar XK-R, but I’m honestly not optimistic about my chances.”

“Why are you out to do it, then?”

He grinned at her. “Tell me something, King. If you got the invitation to take your Monster to Daytona and run a few laps against Andretti and Gordon and Earnhardt, would you?”

“I dunno. That’d be pretty one-sided.”

“Yeah, it would, even in this car. I’d still do it, though. Winning may be important, but not as important as having tried your best, against *the* best. And being challenged by the Demon of Greylock on her own mountain? I don’t know if I can win. But I want to meet her, to find out.”

Ash chuckled. “That’s kind of nuts. But I know her, I guess I can ask her to.”

He shook his head. “No, that’s... You *know* her?” He turned to face Ash. “As in, on a basis deeper than ‘you’re going down, punk’?”

Ash grinned. Though she hated to admit she had done something so girly, in the context of bragging about being close to Kate, she could take it. “Know her, hell. She asked me to be maid-of-honor at her wedding!”

“Holy wow. *Wedding*?!”

“Yeah. I know; it’s not something you’d expect. Harry—Dr. Harrystein—proposed to her a few months ago.”

“Does that make your car her Monster-in-law?”

Ash broke into a snickering fit, leaning forward onto the Carrera’s wheel. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

The owner of the red Carrera GT chuckled, leaning back in the passenger seat. “Wow. You know, I was hoping she was going to show up tonight.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

“Jimmy. He sent her two tickets; thought the old first-place champion would like to meet the new first-place champion before she busted him back to second. She didn’t show, though.”

“Wow... that’s... kind of a shame, actually.”

“Why?”

“I dunno... I guess I’d love to have seen her again.”

“Yeah, but, you know her, right? Can’t you just drive up to her house and knock on the door and say, ‘Hey, what’s up?’”

“I guess there’s that.”

“I wonder what could’ve made her miss this?”

Ash shrugged. “I dunno. Probably wanted to spend Christmas with Harry.”

“Ahh, true... Oh.” The soft ringing of a cell phone had Ash reaching into the purse she’d dropped on the floor, but the man who owned the Carrera GT had taken one—identical to Ash’s—out of his pocket, flipping it open. “Ahh, right. Excuse me, King, time to go pay off the band and rock the joint.” He opened his door and slipped out, and only about thirty seconds after did Ash realize she had neither asked his name, nor given her own.

She got out of the car, striking a pose with the door open, leaning on the side of the roof—yes, there was a camera to snap her picture. She turned to put her back to the hood of the Carrera, leaning back over the top of it—another camera flashed, as she looked out, over the dance floor.

“*Mmmh. I wonder where Emily and Kay are, or Jenny and Adam, or mom...*” The music had started—it wasn’t really to her taste, but she could see the feeling to it. She got back into the Carrera and looked through the CDs. She put one in; with the doors closed and windows up, the sound from the Bose system in the car drowned out the band with dark, low power strains. Then Ozzy began to sing; she grinned, thinking back to the arcade last Friday, in Albany. “*We need to go back there.*”

She started to bob her head to the music, eyes closed, letting the music pass over for a while. When the door opened, and the car shifted, her eyes opened, expecting to see the Carrera GT’s owner, but her face immediately fell to a scowl.

“Good evening, my dear. Did you miss me?”

Ash bared her teeth. “What the *fuck* are you doing back here, asshole?”

He had closed the door, and was smirking at her. “Such harsh *language*, my dear.” He turned his face to fully face her—he was, in fact, sporting a choice black eye over his right eye, which was swollen. “Should you really be in that seat? You might accidentally turn something on, you know.”

Ash twitched—her face literally twitched, and she clenched her fists. “You have two seconds to get out before I start hurting you, asshole.”

“I’d like to see you try, my dear.” Ash lunged—her right hand a fist, the left out, but he was prepared. Her fist solidly connected with his face, but he grabbed her wrists, baring his teeth.

“Nobody’s looking this way, bitch, and you’re going to pay for that,” Joshua growled.

Ash pulled, trying to free a hand. “Just wait and see, asshole. I’m gonna punch your *other* light out!”

The two struggled back and forth. Ash was definitely not about to give in, but Joshua had superior stamina. Although she managed to yank a hand free and clock him one again, he took the opportunity to deliver a vicious backhand to the side of her head. It *hurt*, and boiled up a sickening feeling of vulnerability inside Ash. She grit her teeth, pulled her hand free again, and delivered another blow to his already-bruised eye.

His head reeled back, and he snarled, hauling back to throw a punch of his own. He didn’t get the chance—Ash grabbed his hand, digging her nails into the top of his fist, as the door on the passenger’s side opened. The voice of the car’s owner, thick and angry, growled, “Car’s invite-only, punk,” as he reached in, wrapping his hand around Joshua’s throat, clearly squeezing it. “Let go of her, or I’ll pop you like a zit.”

Eyes bugging out (even the one which was swollen almost shut), Joshua let go, and Ash took the opportunity to ram her knuckles into his face (again) before he was hauled bodily from the car, spun and thrown. Ash watched him hit the marble show-room floor face-first, and seethed at the indignation of being *rescued* by some guy she didn’t really know—or, well, being rescued by a man at all. Joshua scrambled to his feet, the crowd watching. (Un)fortunately, Joshua wasn’t streaming blood from anywhere. Balling his fists up, he screeched, “Do you know who my father is?”

The Carrera’s owner faced him down—Ash couldn’t see his face, but she got out of the car, walking around to see. “Yes. I do. Joshua Clayton Almacny Senior, as a matter of fact.”

“He’ll ruin you!”

“How? You gonna get your senior citizen old man to come and beat my ass for you, punk?”

“You... you’ll...”

“What? Not get paid? Newsflash, kid, I’m here to show my car off, I’m not being paid a dime. I’m losing money on this gig. I’m also here at Porsche’s request, with their top-of-the-line model, so I don’t think that even if he was in the mood to have me thrown out, they’d let him. Not that I think he would, since I saw you *hitting a teenage girl in his employ*. Last I heard, not even bastards could get away with letting their sons beat up the help, and unlike you, Almacny Senior’s not a bastard.”

“I... I’ll have you arrested!”

“Please, do. I’d *love* to see the police called. I’ll testify that I saw you striking the young lady who’s stalking up behind me, and I’d love to see your ass cuffed to a bench next to me while we sort it out.”

“G... Grah!” Joshua’s hands formed claws, and the car’s owner crossed his arms.

“Please. Strike me, in front of fifty people, half of whom are news media with cameras. Make my day, punk, I’ll take you for all you got.” Indeed, the photogs were all aiming their cameras, juicily waiting for a shot. Joshua looked around, paled, flipped Ash and the car’s owner both off, and stalked away, shoving his way between a rather stunned journalist and some fashionista’s date.

“**Asshole!**” Ash railed at him, and he turned around.

“Eh?”

“I didn’t need your help!”

“Whoa, easy, King.” He held his hands up, but she glared at him, fists clenched.

“I didn’t need you getting involved.”

“Easy, easy. Hey, step back into my office if you want to chew me out. Unless you want anything you say going down in the morning’s news.”

Ash glared at the cameras, and forced her face to soften. Turning back around, she walked to the driver’s side door, got in, and shut it altogether harder than she had to. The car’s owner got in, and once the door was shut, she hissed at him, “Why the *hell* did you do that?”

“Call me old-fashioned, but I see a man raise his hand to a young lady, it makes me want to bestow unto him bodily harm.”

“I could’ve taken him.”

“Yeah, I saw, judging by that choice jab you gave him as I was hauling him out. You responsible for that shiner he was sporting, too?”

“Yeah, I was. What about it?” she huffed.

“Good work. That schmuck deserves it and then some.”

“Why’re you taking my side, anyway?”

“Call it a double-standard, but when I see a girl and a boy fighting, I just assume that he’s the party ultimately at fault for the battle.” She glared at him, and he shrugged. “Hey, if it’s any consolation, I didn’t want the two of you fighting in my car. The last thing I need is someone ripping my rear-view mirror out, smashing my radio, blasting the horn in a confined space, or causing some other mayhem to my baby. So, what *did* he do to piss you off?”

Ash scowled. “None of your goddamned business,” she venomously spat.

“Fair enough. Hey, he’s not supposed to be your ‘date’, is he? All the other girls you age have some windbag or pretty-boy hanging off their arms.”

“I said I’d hurt him if he came near me again.”

“And it looks like you carried through on that promise. Good job; you okay?”

“What?”

“He got you one good in there. Are you okay?”

Ash reached up to feel her face—it was sore, and she winced. “I’ve had worse.”

“I believe you. Want me to go dig up an ice pack for you?”

“Why’re you so helpful all of a sudden?”

He shrugged. “Have I ever been *unhelpful*? You’ve got a chip on your shoulder the size of Michigan, and I can respect that. You’re an angry young lady, and that’s better than the vacuousness I’ve seen from most of the twits around here, but you could really learn to more graciously accept help when it’s freely offered, ’cause it ain’t offered that much these days.”

Ash crossed her arms, scowling at him, and he put his hands up. “Easy, easy, King. No offense meant... I’m not gonna talk my way out of you being pissed at me, am I?”

“No, you’re not.”

“All right, fine, fair. I’m gonna go get you that ice-pack and see if I can scare up that punk’s dad to prevent him from spinning an entirely one-sided story of things. If he comes back, there’s a taser of

abominably high power under the seat you're sitting in. Go ahead and make him sorry he was ever born if he tries to start shit again."

Ash blinked, reaching down—her fingers felt the grip of a something, she imagined akin to Jenny's, and he hissed, "Don't take it out!" She drew her hand back, confused and annoyed. "King, don't ever draw a weapon until the very moment you've decided you have to use it. Don't ever point it at anything you're not willing to unload it at, and don't put your finger into the trigger guard until you're *going* to fire—firing's not optional at that point."

"It's just a taser," she said.

"Doesn't matter. It could be a taser, a knife, a tire iron, a can of pepper spray, a knuckle-duster, a pistol, or a rifle; the rules are the same. Well, mostly the same, though you have to modify them a bit for something that's muscle-powered. If you pull a weapon before you've decided it's necessary to protect yourself or others, that makes you a show-offing punk, like that one you beat the tar out of."

Ash snorted. "What are you, Mr. NRA?"

"Nope. Can't stand the NRA's agenda, but it's all about responsibility, you follow? Have you ever had to grab something, even fists, to defend yourself or someone you cared about, or some random stranger you felt needed defending?"

"Well... yes, I have. More times recently than I care to think about."

"Right. So, if you go around swinging a crowbar, or acting like you're about to whip the tar out of someone, aren't you an ass for doing that? It's looking for trouble, and if you look for trouble, you'll find it."

"Okay, yeah... I get you, can you leave now?"

The owner chuckled. "All right, fine. Take some time and cool down."

He slid out of the door, shut it behind him, and walked off through the crowd. Ash watched him depart, scowling at the unwanted interference in her fight, but sighed. Her face *was* starting to sting where Joshua had hit her, and he probably would've gotten her a lot worse if the owner of the Carrera GT hadn't intervened. Still...

"I don't want anybody's help. Especially not some man's that thinks I'm some weak little girl..." She smacked her fist into her palm.

The Party, 10:53 PM

"Emily? Emily, there you are!" Jenny called out, Adam in tow, clacking towards her blue-haired friend. Emily was standing by the snacks table, wrapping up a conversation with someone, who walked off. "Where's Kay?" Jenny asked, curiously.

"Bathroom," Emily replied, and grinned. "You missed it—wow." She sounded breathlessly happy. Jenny blinked. "Missed what?"

"The dancing, the music." She grinned, widely.

Jenny shook her head. "Uh... *you* missed it. There was a fight."

"A fight?" Emily's heart sank, imagining Ash's involvement if she'd run into Joshua again.

"Yeah. I couldn't get many details, but it sounded like Joshua got into that car that Ash has been sitting in, and they got into a fight. The word is that he hit her, then this guy came out of nowhere and totally whooped him."

Emily winced. "Oh gods. Ash can't be happy about that."

Jenny shrugged. "Yeah, let's go find her."

Adam pointed, "Hey, isn't that him?" Jenny and Emily both followed his pointing arm to the opposite side where the drinks table was. Joshua was standing at it gulping down glass after glass.

"That doesn't bode well," Emily sighed, heavily. "What should we do?"

Joshua was more or less gulping the champagne down, one glass after another, and Adam shook his head. "Oh, this can't be good. Mad, bruised, and boozed is a bad combination. Let's get out of here."

“Yeah,” Emily said. “Maybe we should find his father or something?”

“I dunno, but if he sees us, he’s gonna start shit,” Jenny added.

The trio turned to walk away, leaving Joshua behind them, but the din of the crowd changed. A girl nearby turned, yelling, “Hey, fight!”

Emily groaned. “Oh god, Ash.”

Emily broke into a run, followed by Jenny and Adam moving as fast as Jenny could move in the overblown gown. When they reached the area, there was definitely a disturbance in progress around the powerful red Porsche—the man with the slightly red hair was huffing and puffing, standing close to Ash and shouting down at her, while Ash was shouting back up at him.

“Who do you think you are, little girl, to talk to me?! You are nothing. Do you even know what a gearshift is? Do you know what the third pedal does?”

“I know better than you do, asshole! Anytime, any place, any car, you have no right to tell me I don’t know what I’m doing!”

“You are *nothing*, little girl! Little girls like you are not *worthy* of even *sitting* in a performance machine like this! Get your presence away from it!”

“*Make* me! Go ahead, make me!”

Emily gasped—they *both* looked ready to throw a punch. Adam took off at a dead run towards the car, which a number of the party-goers were gathering around, but another man—the same one who had started the band’s song, Emily noted as she dashed for the car—jumped between them, holding his hands out, shouting “Whoa, whoa, *whoa* there! Both of you! Calm the hell down!”

The shouting died momentarily, although the crowd was dinning among themselves.

“He has *no right* to say what he said!”

The car’s owner turned his head to Ash. “What did he say?”

“He came up to the car, banged on the window, and told me to get out because I had no right to be in the car!”

The Carrera’s owner turned his head, leveling a gaze. “Rainer, did you say that?”

“Look at that little girl, she cannot be old enough to *drink* in this country! She might not be able to *vote*. What right does a spoiled brat have to sit in a machine like the Carrera GT?”

“She has *every* right, since it’s *my* car and I told her she could.”

“She is a little girl, she cannot drive such a machine! She has no right to disgrace its presence.”

Ash looked ready to lose it, yelling, “Why don’t you prove it, asshole?! You and me, out there, right now! Pick whatever car you want!”

Rainer sneered, “As *if* I would hand a little girl the keys to one of my machines!”

“Why you—” The car’s owner turned his head to her, holding up his hand.

“Hold on there, King. You see, the thing is... Rainer’s a cock. A complete and total one, and a chicken to boot.” He turned back to Rainer. “You talk a big game, *herr* Herrbruck, but when it comes down to it, you’ve got nothing to back it with.”

“As *if* I were afraid of defeat on the motorway to a little girl! I simply will not hand her the keys to one of my performance machines so she can wreck it!”

Ash snorted. “I thought so. You’re a coward.”

“Yes, he is. And he’s not weaseling out of this one.” The Carrera’s owner took the key fob out of his pocket, and loudly announced, “She drives *my* car!” Ash’s eyes goggled as he handed her the keys. “Hey, Jim-bo! Open the doors to the track!” Herrbruck almost choked. “Since she’s never driven the Carrera GT before, I do presume you won’t object if I give her a few drives ’round the course to familiarize herself with it?”

Recovering, the Porsche representative snorted, “Trying to teach her to drive a manual car in the course of a few laps won’t save her, or your car, Nathan. You are a fool, and I will not replace your vehicle when she wrecks it.”

“Let me worry about that.” He turned to Ash. “Get in.”

The large glass doors to the track, the ones that could admit cars, were sliding out of the way, as the crowd murmured loudly. Ash stared at the fob in her hand. Then she grinned, clenching her hand around the fob and getting into the Carrera.

“*Stop this at once!*” The call rang out, and Emily winced, recognizing Mr. Almac’s voice. The elder Almac stood between the car and the doors to the outside, holding his hands out. “You *can’t* be serious about letting a teenage girl race a Porsche!”

Emily started walking towards Mr. Almac, as the car’s owner—Nathan, Rainer had called him—asked, “Why not? I’m quite confident in her ability to handle herself.”

“I won’t allow it!”

“On what grounds, Mr. Almac?” The car’s owner crossed his arms. “You are not the guardian of the King there. You’re not a Porsche representative to complain about the potential for damage to a Porsche show car—indeed, Rainer *is* the senior Porsche representative here.

“For heaven’s sake, she’s only seventeen, be reasonable!”

“I am being reasonable. I am quite confident in her ability to handle that car, and at her age, her physical reflexes are about the highest they’ll ever be. Besides, think of the publicity you’ll get from tonight.” Nathan grinned as he continued. “One of your employees, a showgirl, driving Porsche’s highest-end model off the showroom floor and directly into a race, flattening an arrogant cocksucker with a misogyny problem? Or would that be the publicity where your son *assaulted* the *employee* in question? Or maybe the publicity wherein your son physically threatened me after I pulled him off the girl in question?”

“He—he *what?!?*” Almac goggled.

“Go ahead and ask him. He should be fairly blue at this point, since I had to bounce his face off the floor to get him out of my car. Now, which kind of publicity do you want associated with your company tomorrow? The publicity wherein I sue you for an employee threatening me with bodily harm, or the publicity wherein one of your employees drives my car to victory?”

“That, son, constitutes blackmail.”

“Yes, but of a quite, quite legal variety, I assure you.”

While Mr. Almac and the car’s owner were ‘debating’ the finer points of not having his company sued in exchange for not interfering, Ash rolled down the Carrera’s windows as her mother and friends had gathered around.

“Ash, I don’t like this...” Marie said.

Ash was already strapped in, and sighed. “What am I going to do? Say no? I’d never be able to race again. I’d never be able to live with myself after I issued that challenge and backed down.”

“Oh, Ash...”

Her mother looked nervous, but Emily looked furious, skidding to the side of the driver’s window. “Damn your pride, Ash Upton!” Ash blinked, and Emily leaned in, grabbing her by the faux crocodile leather vest. “I challenged him first,” she said with a grin, leaning into the car, hugging Ash. Leaning close, she brushed her lips over Ash’s, and Ash pushed gently into a kiss, though she hoped it looked like a hug from a friend to anyone who might have been watching. Emily pulled away, grinning. “Win for me, Ash. Flatten that sexist bastard for me.”

Ash grinned at her blue-haired lover. “He’s road kill.”

“Pardon me, ma’am, sir.” The Carrera’s owner excused himself around Jenny and Adam at the passenger’s door, and got into the car. Emily quickly pulled herself out of the car, and Mr. Almac was nowhere to be seen.

“Ash... be careful,” her mother said.

“I’m always careful, mom. I want to *win*, but not bad enough to *die*. Or wreck a car.”

Marie sighed, and reached in, patting her daughter’s shoulder. “Always a tomboy. Try not to drive it sideways too much.”

“The doors are open. Start her up,” the owner of the car said.

Ash turned the key to ignite the engine, and the ten-cylinder engine sitting behind her head shrieked to life as the owner buckled up.

“Take her out.”

“Enjoy your *driving lessons*, little girl!” Rainer called from the side.

Ash flipped him off with her left hand, putting the car in gear with her right. Ash let off the brake, and let the car idle forward. Smoothly rolling off the rotating pad, she corrected with the wheel as the car’s back end was rotated slightly out of alignment, and drove out to the track.

“Yeah! Whip his ass, King!” Jimmy was standing outside the doors, threw switches on a set of circuit breakers, and lit the track up.

“Fitz split just after I saw Jimmy talk to him,” the car owner said. “I think he figured that he either had to rein in Rainer, or excuse himself and avoid pissing off one of the guys signing his paycheck. He might’ve given you some trouble, but he left Jimmy in charge, so...”

“Why are you doing this?” Ash asked.

“Well, that’s simple. See, Rainer’s an asshole, and I want to see him get force-fed his own words.”

“But still...”

“Well, I’ve seen you drive on the highway, for one, and I listened to a solid hour of Jimmy breathlessly extolling how exciting the match between you and your friend—the one he called Blues; was that the one you were lockin’ lips with when I got in?”

Ash blushed, heavily. “Oh fuck, was it obvious?”

“Not unless you were stooping down to get into the car. Chill out.”

“Oi...”

“So, yeah, I want to see Rainer eat his own words. He’s an arrogant bastard.”

“What does he do, anyway? I didn’t, like, just challenge a test driver to a race, did I?”

“Not hardly. Rainer’s a VIP of the Cayenne project.” The reaction on Ash’s face made the car’s owner grin. “Yeah, I know; I’d love to see that thing fucking scrapped. It’s an embarrassment to my Carrera GT that they try and associate that garbage truck with it. When I need an SUV’s carriage capacity, I drive a beat-up old Dodge Durango. Line up on the starting line.” He held up a radio handset. “Jimmy gave me this. It’s like the ones in the helmets they have here, in that it has a separate receiver and transmitter, so you can talk and hear at the same time, and it’s hands-free.”

Ash lined the car up with the starting line, and turned on the lights—the powerful Xenon High-Intensity Discharge lamps lit up the night track ahead in a blindly bright shade of blue, and Nathan grinned. “Whups, I left the highs on.”

“King, Nate, can you hear me?”

“Five by five, Jimmy.”

“Your friend from before has volunteered to man the flags again.” Ash looked up—Jenny was at the top of the tower, holding the flag. “Take as long as you need to get used to the car—the photogs are watching, and even that should make them happy.”

Nathan rolled his window up—Ash did likewise, after a second. She held onto the brake.

“Get ready,” Jimmy called out.

Jenny waved the flag as hard as she could, and Ash pushed the gas. She didn’t near-floor it, like she might have with the Monster, but the Carrera GT responded, engine pitch getting higher as the car rocketed forward. She blinked, and when she looked down, the electroluminescent gauge was already at sixty.

“She’s like flying low, ain’t she? Now, remember, I’ve tuned this girl for a really nasty case of oversteer.”

Ash grinned as she approached the first turns. “It feels like a jet engine! Sounds like one, too.”

“Yep. She’s just great, ain’t she?”

Ash slowed down, braking, and cut the wheel—the car did oversteer, and she compensated, leaving the car traveling to the right for a few moments before it came back in line. “Whoa-oo-oo!”

“Carefully, carefully, you’ll get the hang of it.”

Ash took the corners at about fifty—the Carrera GT slid more than she was used to, driving the Monster, but it wasn’t so bad she couldn’t adjust.

“Now, Rainer’s definitely going to take the 997 Turbo.”

Ash came out of the first corners, testing the car’s acceleration and performance flat-out on the straights, shifting down and letting the engine behind her shriek.

“He doesn’t think you have anything, yet. He’s probably planning on accelerating ahead off the starting line, staying in first place the whole race.”

“Accelerating ahead?”

“The 997 Turbo can actually out-accelerate the Carrera GT, but he’s probably not going to push it to its hardest. When it comes down to it, Rainer’s a pussy.”

“How do you know?”

“I keep challenging him to a race, and he keeps refusing.”

Ash snickered. “So he’s only brave enough to bring it against a ‘little girl’, eh?”

“Yep. That’s why I’m hoping you flatten him for me. Even if you don’t, you’ll still impress people, since he’s talking like you’re going to be a lap back when he finishes. But see, the thing about Rainer... he’s not a racer.”

“He’s not?”

Nathan shook his head negative. “He’s got a lot of experience on the autobahn, but when it comes down to it, he’s not a racer. He owns an old 911 for his personal vehicle, and he drives the new ones around their test tracks, but he’s never raced. He doesn’t *want* it the way we do. He doesn’t have the fire you need to race. And he can’t drive worth a shit.”

Ash smirked, and Nathan nodded at her. “I know, I know, but don’t underestimate him. Once he realizes he’s got a fight on his hands, he’s going to get mad, and there’s nothing more unpredictable than a mad layman. Take the lead hard, and keep it.

Ash blew past the crowd gathered on the bleachers next to the show-room for her second lap, the engine screaming like a banshee, and Jimmy’s voice came over, “Clocked you doing a hundred, easily. Don’t baby her, King, I want this Teutonic twat eating his own words for dinner.”

“One helping of crow, coming up!” Ash boasted.

“What’ll she max out at?”

“210, but that’s salt-flat speed. You can get her up into the one-nineties if you have enough normal flat road, though. On this track, I’ve gotten her up to one-sixty. Rainer’s probably not going to get near that much. Don’t be afraid to waste my rubber or brakes to win, either. I got plenty of the ready to replace ’em.”

“Right.”

“And hey, you wanna psych him out? Do some doughnuts before you pull up to the starting line. Those are always crowd pleasers.”

Ash grinned. “Well, it’s your rubber.”

“Damn straight, King. Hey, I’m Nathan, by the way.”

“Ash, in case you didn’t hear Emily say it.”

“I did, but I felt like a proper introduction. Slalom it off the outside to the inside to the outside in the turns.”

Ash slid to the outside lane, cutting her wheels hard. She drifted with her back tires almost off the course and onto the grass, definitely in the red and white painted caution zone. Sliding into the switchback’s inside lane and facing the outside lane, the wider turns let her preserve more of her speed, and she came out of the switchbacks on the end of the course at seventy, then hit the accelerator, shifting down and pushing hard onto the straight.

“This thing is twitchy.”

“Yeah, it is, it’s the way I like it. Can you handle it?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. You’ve got the touch. The best I’ve managed those corners coming out is seventy-five.”

“Really?”

“Really. And I was practicing this track for weeks.”

Ash took a couple more practice runs, until she nodded. “Now. I’m ready now.”

“Okay then. Jimmy?”

“I heard you! Slow it down and bring it into the pits for a gas-up. Herrbruck’s getting the 911 Turbo, by the by.”

“I figured he would. She’s gonna do it, Jimmy. Was he even watching?”

“Nah, he was sitting in the Turbo, talking out his ass about how this would be a smooth ride.”

Nathan snickered, and nodded at Ash. “Bet you ten bucks that idiot’s going to start in comfort mode instead of performance mode.”

“No bet.”

“Wise call.”

Ash pulled the Carrera GT into the pits, the same pit she’d parked the Monster in, and shut the engine off. Jimmy climbed down from the tower, running over, and Ash watched as the white 997 Turbo slid like a line of sleekness out of the car lot, turning neatly and settling on the starting line.

“Ready to whimper, little girl?”

“*You’re* the only one who’s going to be whimpering when this is over, jackass.”

“You should respect your betters, little insect.”

“I do. You’re merely older.”

“Bold words! I shall enjoy feeding them to you.”

Nathan rolled his eyes. “So, you’re bold enough to pick on a little girl, but you won’t take on *me* on the track? You *are* a jackass, Rainer, and I’m going to enjoy sending the film of your humiliating defeat back to Deutschland. I don’t think Porsche will appreciate its employees talking shit and then not having the guts to back it up, or the skill to back it up when someone else forces the issue.”

“Pfah. You overestimate your influence at my company.”

“Maybe I do. But they’re still going to have some nice hard questions to ask *you*.”

Nathan smirked, and switched the radio off. “He’s an ass, all right.”

“Influence?”

“Not nearly as much as I’d like, to be honest, but I know enough of the right people to get them to let me represent the Carrera GT line at this event, anyways.”

“Aren’t you risking that?”

“Maybe, but what are they going to do, make me give my car back? Like I said, it’s going to be worth it to watch Rainer Herrbruck get the whoopin’ he so richly deserves. Looks like Jimmy’s done gassing her up, so, give him hell, King. Win or lose, you’re going to shake this up... But do try to win, will ya?”

“I wouldn’t get behind the wheel if I wasn’t trying.”

Ash switched the radio back on and clipped it to the dashboard-mounted GPS system. Nathan climbed out and walked quickly into the bleachers.

“Do try to keep up, little girl. It would embarrass that car if you can’t manage that much.”

“That’s *my* line, Rainer. You called down the thunder, now it’s time to reap the whirlwind!”

She realized, when she heard her voice booming out of the loudspeakers, that Jimmy must have patched the channel to the PA system. She looked—Jimmy was giving her a thumbs-up from the tower, and Jenny and Emily were both waiting in the tower, as were a number of photographers, crouching behind the tower’s reinforced concrete struts, taking pictures.

Ash grinned, wolfishly; she imagined that the look on her face might begin to compare to the sheer badassery that Kate carried with her. She gunned the engine, but didn’t take it straight to the starting line. She cut wheel hard, deliberately spinning the car—rubber squealed and laid on the track. She held

the doughnut long enough to make it quite clear it was intentional before cutting her wheels the other way, sliding the back end into line and gliding smoothly up to the start. She put the car out of gear and gunned the engine—it howled, the tachometer drifting up to the redline, then sliding back down.

“One lap. Begin on three!” Jimmy’s voice boomed out. “One!” Jenny raised the flag.

Ash gunned the engine again. She looked to her right—the crowd was watching, some of them were waving, some looked as if they were yelling.

“Two!”

Ash put the car back in gear. Her heart started to beat faster, but this was *her* element. She was *not* losing to Rainer.

“Three!”

Ash pushed the pedal almost to the metal, the massive engine behind her shrieking like a thousand banshees. To her left, Rainer Herrbruck’s 997 Turbo took off like a rocket, even as Ash pushed the pedal all the way down once she got the grip to not spin the tires out. Even so, she was angry to see Herrbruck pulling ahead of her.

“Should’ve taken that bet, King.” Nathan’s voice came into her car. “Looks like those doughnuts scared him into setting his transmission to performance mode. And no, they can’t hear me.”

Ash grinned. “*This is far from over, Rainer!*”

The 997 failed to pull decisively ahead enough to block her, as its acceleration band tapered off and the Carrera GT’s kept going wide. She slid smoothly around the chicane in the straight, towards the outside lane, to the sound of Rainer’s laugh. “The outside lane is longer, girl. Are you completely helpless? Would you like to stop now?”

“Oh, be quiet,” Ash groused dismissively. She applied the brake to go into the turn, but not nearly as much as Rainer did—she put the rear end out in another oversteering slalom to the outside of the switchback in the course. Then she winced.

Rainer, having been hugging the inside lane going into the turn, swung wildly to the inside lane of the next turn—the inside lane she had drifted into, leaving him right in front of her, going about thirty miles an hour slower from his hard braking.

“Idiot!” she yelled, turning the wheel hard to avoid the collision, then turning it back the other way, ignoring whatever cry of response or derisiveness he gave. The tires on the Carrera GT squealed, leaving an unbroken trail of wavy rubber as the oversteering car careened wildly into the next turn, more or less in the place it was supposed to be.

Again, she wound up behind Rainer, who was pushing the 997 Turbo harder than he had last time. This time she was ready, however—having adjusted her line, she passed Rainer to the right as he again slid to the outside.

“I. Don’t. *Think!* So!” Ash vowed, shifting down a gear and stomping it. Rather akin to her second race with Tom after the Misfile, she wound up facing Rainer as the Carrera GT squealed around the turn, steering with one hand and sparing the other to flip Rainer the bird. He looked quite terrified to see the Carrera GT’s front at his side, then she leveled off, accelerating again. He tried to accelerate to stop her, but she’d conserved enough velocity that she slid ahead of him on the short, and held the lead into the next turn.

“Agh! Nein! Verrucht schlampe!” Ash didn’t know what the excited, angry and (perhaps) nervous cry meant, but she imagined it couldn’t have been very polite. Still, it made her happy—Rainer was getting excited, which meant he had lost control of the situation; the impetus swung to Ash.

The Carrera GT swung around the next switchback having reversed Rainer’s lead on her, and tore off down the straightaway towards the other end of the long track. She was in the lead, her heart pumping, adrenaline surging through her body at the feel of driving a vehicle far, *far* more powerful than even her Monster XR. She looked to be free and clear, the banshee scream from the Carrera GT’s engine drowning out all other sound—except the high-pitched howl from the 911 Turbo behind her. It was getting louder. She glanced in the rear-view mirror; the lights from the 997 were getting closer.

“He’s gaining on me?” she said aloud, incredulously.

Rainer laughed. “Luck! It was all luck and no skill!”

“Stop babying her, Ash. Don’t worry about wasting brakes when you get to the turns, *floor it!*”

Ash did, flooring the Carrera GT’s accelerator, but the damage to her lead was done—he was falling behind, but not very quickly. She shifted to fourth gear as the tachometer went red, not even bothering to look at the speedometer.

“This isn’t over, Rainer. Not by a *long* shot!” Ash skirted elegantly around the chicanes, sliding through them without losing speed. Unfortunately, they didn’t deter Rainer much, either. She approached the other corner, glancing down at her speedometer—her heart almost skipped a beat when she saw she was doing one hundred and fifty miles an hour!

“*This is fucking awesome,*” she thought. She shifted down a gear and braked, the Carrera squealing as she sent it around the next turn. Rainer proved he was not unable to learn a lesson entirely—he followed her driving lines, but didn’t drift or slide. She gained in the turns leading out to the last stretch, and as soon as she was parallel to the straightaway, floored the pedal.

“Too little, too late, Rainer!” His response in German was undoubtedly even less pleasant than his previous outburst in his native language, as Ash pushed the Carrera GT up into fifth gear, roaring down the straight, sliding around the chicane. She flew over the starting line, had a bare second to watch Jenny throwing the checkered flag, and stomped on the brakes, camera flashes erupting all around her.

She locked the wheels and threw the steering wheel, the sound of screaming tires screeching along the ground, and Rainer flew past her as the Carrera GT slid sideways, to the front of the bleachers, where the crowd seemed to be going wild.

Jimmy yelled, “And the winner by ten seconds, The King!” The zoot-suited race-boss was throwing the horns up high from the tower, which Ash saw as she pushed on the gas, spinning the car in screeching doughnuts in front of the bleachers.

Ash climbed out of the Carrera GT, feeling the waves of heat coming from the vehicle in stark contrast to the frigid winter air. She laughed, exhilaration surging through her body, lightheaded and giddy with the victory high. Ash raised her fists to the sky, shouting, “Yesss!” She vaguely recalled seeing a gaggle of people rushing the track, and the flash of numerous cameras snapping pictures at her and at the car. But her eyes focused on one person in a particularly sublime blue dress.

Emily launched herself into Ash’s arms, laughing giddily; Ash caught her lover, spinning around with Emily in her arms. It was incredible; it was intense. She was about to heedlessly kiss Emily when she felt the impact from her side—her mother hit them both, hugging tightly and kissing her temple. Then Jenny hit them from the other side, hugging her just as tightly and laughing ecstatically.

“I feel dizzy,” Ash said, in a giggling punch-drunk voice, and she felt Emily sliding her arm over her shoulders, and Marie taking the other.

Ash could hear Jimmy’s triumphant shout of, “Hail to the King, baby!” from the tower behind her (and all the amplifiers around the track). Kay Wheeler, Nathan, and Adam were in front of her, clapping and moving aside as Emily and her mother all but carried her, Jenny following behind. The band had apparently carried their horns outside, and they struck up a rendition of ‘Hail to the Chief’ as she was led back inside, segueing into ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ behind her.

The Party, 11:40

“I’m fine, really!” Ash laughed, having been sat in a glossy-metal and cushion chair, even though her mother was still doting over her, dabbing at her forehead with a paper towel. Emily snickered at how the affectionate attention was embarrassing her friend.

“Ash, didn’t I ask you to not go sideways too much?”

“I didn’t. Just enough to win.” Ash smiled back, and her mother rolled her eyes, with a chuckle.

Emily snickered. “And what was with those doughnuts at the end? I’ve never seen you do that.”

Ash grinned back at her. "I wouldn't waste my brakes and rubber to show off."

"Oh, so it's okay to gratuitously waste *my* brakes and rubber to show off?" Ash paled for an instant, then Nathan (who had brought the car back into the showroom) laughed behind her, as she turned to face him. "Just kidding. It *is* okay to gratuitously waste my brakes and rubber to show off."

Ash snickered, then laughed, holding her stomach. "You're as bad as Kate!"

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You didn't pay them off to play that, did you?"

"I paid them off to play the winner's national anthem. They must have thrown in 'Hail to the Chief' for free."

"Where's Rainer?"

"Hell if I know. He drove to the rear exit, opened the gates, and blew out in a huff. If there's any karmic justice, he'll get ticketed for speeding."

Ash snickered softly. "I don't think I'm *that* lucky."

"You make your own luck, you know. Specifically, he's driving an un-tagged, un-registered, un-inspected vehicle on the public roads, so I took the liberty of anonymously tipping off the fuzz."

Nathan pulled out his cell phone, and Ash started laughing, as Nathan glibly said, "Getting chased down while speeding would be just the icing on the cake."

"That's *evil*," Emily commented, while trying to hide a smile with her hand.

"Yeah, it is. Did I say you were as bad as Kate? I think you might be just a little bit worse."

"Stop, you're gonna make me blush. Anyway, that was some great driving out there. You have the gift, that's for sure."

"Yeah..." Ash sighed. "Mmmh. Now if only I didn't have to deal with Joshua, this would probably be my favorite night ever."

"Joshua? Your erstwhile date? I'm guessing he drove you here?"

Ash scowled at the memory of that harrowing experience in the passenger's seat. "Yeah."

Then she blinked, as the key fob to the Carrera GT fell into her lap again. "I guess that means you'll need a ride home, then. Take mine."

Ash goggled at the key fob, and Nathan smirked. "Don't worry, Jimmy's got his 'Cuda in the back; we're probably going to go and roll up to some club and party like it's nineteen seventy four anyway. Just don't drive like that on the public roads."

Marie snorted at him, "I don't think you were *alive* in nineteen seventy four."

"No, but nothing says I can't be nostalgic for days before my own."

"Ash..." her mother began.

"I don't drive like that on the roads, mom. But, uh..."

Nathan grinned. "Don't worry, she's got a GPS locator. I'll roll up and get her some time in the A of M. Probably won't even hear me."

"Heh, sweet... Jeez, thanks."

"Hey, you *earned* it. I've wanted to see the cocky grin get wiped off Rainer's face for a while now."

"Hah! That's awesome..."

"Shotgun!" Emily called out.

"Sure, but, uh, where's Kay? Won't he object?"

"I doubt it. You know, I haven't seen him since we came in. Maybe Adam knows. I'll go find him and Jenny."

"I'll go with," Ash said, and rose, following Emily.

They did, indeed, find Kay Wheeler with Adam and Jenny, talking to one another animatedly. Ash waved as they pulled close. "Hey!"

"That was *incredible*!" Jenny laughed at her, running up and hugging Ash again, grinning widely.

"Yeah, yeah it really was, Ash," Kay said.

"You saw it?"

"I emerged from the bathroom and the only people in the whole place were Mr. Almacny and his son by the drinks table, and some guy getting into a white car. Then I heard the sound outside; it was like a jet engine, and so I went out to see."

"Heh. Did you like it?"

"My heart was in my throat when I saw you going sideways."

Ash rolled her eyes. "Everybody says that, what's the big deal? It's just drifting."

"I explained it to him. He still doesn't get it." Adam elbowed Kay in the side.

"I *get* it; it just makes me *more* scared."

"You really aren't a car person, are you?" Ash said.

"Nope. Just makes my head spin."

"Lightweight." Adam snickered at him. "Hey, speaking of that punk, where *is* he?"

"Good question," Ash asked. "Hopefully we don't have to see him again, but where is he?"

"Last I saw, his dad was taking him out to a taxi," Kay said.

Ash sighed in relief, and grinned. "Oh, *good*. I think we can finally enjoy this night, then."

"What's left of it; isn't this party due to end in a few minutes?" Jenny asked.

Emily pulled her digital watch out of her purse, looking at the display (twice, of course). "It is, actually. Oh, speaking of which, Kay, that guy who owns that car Ash drove is letting her drive it home. Do you mind if I drive with her?"

"That would be just fine, beautiful Emily." Kay smiled, eliciting a gentle blush from her. "I wanted to go somewhere anyway, and I can be early this time."

"Oh, good. And thanks for dancing with me."

"It was my pleasure."

The End Of The Party, December 25, 2004, 12:01 AM

"And a merry Christmas to all! And to all: good night, drive safe, get home to your loved ones in one piece!" Jimmy, being the duly-appointed representative of the venue (and seeing as how Mr. Almacny was too busy profusely apologizing to Marie for his son's behavior, and explaining that he would fully understand if she and her daughter elected to press charges upon his son for his actions; and with Rainer having left in a phenomenal display of poor sportsmanship), finished off the night with the band, which was performing an instrumental rendition of 'Silent Night'.

"Look, Mr. Almacny, sir," Ash said, after enduring the third round of understanding from Mr. Almacny, "I understand that you understand. I just don't care enough to level charges at your son for a fistfight we got into. As far as I'm concerned, if I don't see him again, it's settled."

"I fully understand, young lady. I assure you, this is the first and *last* time I will allow my son to represent my company at these events. Marie," he said, turning back to Ash's mother.

Ash took the opportunity to slip away. Emily slid up next to her and—with a grin—pushed her friend gently. "How are you doing?"

"Great... You?"

"Dreamy," she replied. "Shall we?"

Ash nodded, and pointed to the Carrera GT—as the crowd started to thin, she could spot the owner standing next to it. "Shall we?"

"I'd say 'I'll drive', but I can't in these damn heels."

"Well, we can go home, get changed, and take you for another ride before he comes and gets it?"

"I won't mind," Nathan said from next to the car, "as long as you think she can handle it."

"I'd trust her."

"All right. Just be careful, and don't speed on the public roads." He opened the passenger side door, which he was leaning against. "I'll go open the doors to the track; you can get out through one of the car gates."

“Gotcha.”

Ash opened the driver’s door, sliding into it. *Thump. Thump.* Her heart was beating at the prospect of firing up the Carrera GT again, this time taking Emily for a ride. Ash was grinning like a loon, and stared ahead as the doors started to pull open. She inserted the keys into the ignition, and pulled her seatbelt on.

“Totally cool,” Emily said, grinning; it seemed to just hit her that she was inside of the car she had named the ‘car of her dreams’, and she stroked the dashboard.

Ash turned the key, and the engine turned over, lurching into activity, idling strong. Ash pushed in the clutch pedal, put the car in gear, and let off the pedal. She felt the car ‘thunk’ as it pushed into gear, wanting and demanding to go.

She let it, easing off the brake, letting the whining engine idle forward. Emily laughed at her, and rolled her window down—just before they got to the outside, she motioned for Ash to apply the brakes, and asked, “Do you mind if she takes me for a lap of the track?”

The owner of the car snickered. “Victory lap, eh? Sure, go ahead. Just don’t wreck it now.”

“I won’t,” Ash called over Emily, and let the car idle out, onto the track. She pushed the accelerator in, the car’s engine whining as she accelerated, pushing it up into second gear.

Emily laughed at her, rolling the window up, turning the heat on, and holding onto the dashboard, staring at her friend as they went down the nearside straight, then into the curves. Ash didn’t push it too hard, maintaining an easy fifty into the switchbacks.

“Hit it when we get out of here!”

“You like this?”

“Fuck yeah!”

Ash straightened out of the switchbacks onto the straight, and *floored* it. Emily laughed as the car took off. “Yeah, faster, *yeah!*” Ash shifted down again, and yet again, the Carrera GT easily reaching fourth gear with a quarter of the straight left to go. “Awwwh, it has to end,” Emily pouted, as Ash let off the speed—she had hit 135, easily—and applied the brakes gently, slowing down for the switchbacks, but Emily grinned madly at her. “I get the feeling, in the back of my mind, I should feel insecure about being so aroused by that.”

“A-Ah?” Ash blushed, and Emily giggled, as Ash slowed down to 40, easily navigating the switchbacks. She let the car idle forward.

“Surprised?”

“A bit.”

“I’m not. Why are you?”

“You’re just... I dunno, you’re always so serious and you act so mature all the time...”

Emily snickered softly, and nodded. “That doesn’t mean I don’t still, you know, *want* the things that other girls tend to want...”

“A girl who used to be a boy?”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” Emily placed her hand on Ash’s right, squeezing it gently. “It excites the hell out of me when you do *stupid* things for me, like driving at a hundred and thirty five miles an hour, or picking a race with Rainer Herrbruck...”

“Hey, I would’ve done that anyway.”

“Maybe, but you still did it with me in mind, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Maybe, I guess, I’m just embarrassed to admit I liked it. I feel like I should be above silly things like that, but...”

“You’re not?”

“No. You have a real white knight complex, you know that?”

“I do.”

“Yeah, you do. It’s sweet.”

Ash smiled softly, her cheeks slightly reddening, and she applied the brakes, putting the Carrera GT out of gear. They unbuckled, and then leaned over the console, Emily's hand on Ash's cheek, pulling her into the kiss. Ash closed her eyes, tingling with the sensation. Emily broke the kiss, then slid down—she kissed the hollow of Ash's throat, and worked her way down, causing Ash to blush and moan when she started to kiss the tops of her breasts.

"There could be people watching," she breathlessly murmured.

"At this distance? They'll have to rely on their imagination." She gently tugged Ash's corset-top down, causing Ash to blush heavily.

"Em..."

"Too forward?"

"... No, I like it." Ash pulled Emily's head in, and Emily laughed, nuzzling her friend's rock-hard nipple, then kissing them each, slowly, playfully, eliciting a soft whimper of pleasure out of Ash with each kiss. Then she pulled back, and adjusted Ash's top back to where it was, leaving Ash falling back into the seat, groaning, "Emily McArthur, I think you're a... Damn, that metaphor shut down."

Emily giggled at her, "What, a huge clit-tease?" Emily giggled softly, and Ash grinned, breaking into a laugh with her.

"Not the word I was *going* to use, but yeah... Mmmmmph, I like it." She reached up—Emily's hand met hers, and they squeezed, together, as Emily buckled back in. They looked to one another, eyes meeting—bright green and vibrant magenta.

"I love you so very much," Ash murmured.

"I know." Emily squeezed her friend's hand. "Go."

"Where?"

"Anywhere." Emily turned on the GPS navigation system in the car, bringing up a map of the area and the orientation of the Carrera GT. "Take me somewhere we can be alone, Ash. Take me somewhere I can kiss you."

"I can do that."

She put the Carrera GT in gear, and drove towards the rear gate of the track, with a grin on her face and Emily's hand on her shoulder. They exited onto the road, and Ash piloted the car out through the gaggle of vehicles leaving—the Carrera GT's distinctive engine definitely getting them a lot of looks.

"Show off."

"Well... yeah?"

"I know." Emily giggled. "I guess I just have to live with the fact that you're going to do bravado things." She squeezed Ash's shoulder, teasingly. "Woe is me!"

Ash laughed back, as she got a red light—the four-lane traffic ground to a halt, and Ash put the car out of gear, revving the engine—Emily laughed. "I think you scared the hell out of Granny." She grinned, nodding her head at the four-seat, brand-new family car—a large, chunky Chrysler 300C. There was a young man at the wheel, and an elderly woman next to him. The man adjusted his own shifter, and revved the engine—it was not quiet. "Hemi," Emily murmured, pointing at the badge. "Ash, you're not... Ash!"

Ash was revving the engine to the redline, and let it drift back down. "Ash, he said no speeding!" Ash put the car back in gear once the engine drifted back down in the revs. The light shifted, and the Hemi howled—the Carrera GT howled too, but Ash let off when she hit the posted speed limit of 45, while the man in the 300C sped ahead of her, passing her and getting into her lane. Emily groaned, rolling her eyes and laughing, "Ash! That was very mean of you!"

"Really?"

"Yes, really! It was infantile and... and puerile... and dangerous..." The 300C had slowed down ahead, once he realized Ash wasn't chasing him. "And, I love you." Emily squeezed her shoulder.

"Please, don't do that again."

"I won't. Promise."

“Good. Hey, where are the CDs?”

“Glove box.”

Emily opened the glove box, taking out the heavy rock CD and putting it back in its case. She snickered at the sandwich wrapper, and looked through the CDs, grinning when she found a CD-R labeled ‘Happy Riding’. She put it in, and the Bose sound system broke into a fast, light rock that seemed to mirror the sound of the engine.

“‘Ey! Ho! Let’s go!” an Australian voice started to sing out, and Emily grinned as Ash turned onto the freeway, accelerating almost instantly to 60. The music came quickly, as Ash watched the road, driving northeast, back towards Truro and Provincetown.

Eventually, they turned off of Route 6, heading east, and Emily tilted her head, blinking. “What’s out here?”

“I dunno, but the GPS map looks like a winner.”

Emily grinned, as Ash drove them out along a side road. Emily leaned back in her seat, squeezing Ash’s hand, her heart fluttering softly; they drove past a parking lot, and to a paved cul-de-sac with a graveled road going down after it.

“Isn’t this private property?”

“I don’t think so—I see a few houses down the road, but I *don’t* see a ‘no trespass’ sign posted.”

Emily looked around; she didn’t, either, and nodded to Ash, grinning. Ash let the Carrera GT idle forward, down the gravel lane—a few yards, when Ash put the brakes on. A pair of concrete posts in the middle of the gravel lane blocked their progress, illuminated starkly in the powerful, bluish light of the Carrera GT’s custom Xenon HID headlamps.

“Whoops,” Ash said, softly. “I didn’t see that on the map.”

Emily snickered at that, and sighed. “It’s fine. This is pretty remote, and I see a cool lighthouse up ahead, anyway.”

Ash put the car out of gear, and grinned at Emily; Emily grinned back as she unbuckled.

“This is beautiful, Ash.” She leaned over the console, took Ash’s cheek in her hand, and stared into her lover’s eyes. “I hope you won’t take it the wrong way, but so are you...”

“*So are you...*” The words echoed in Ash’s head, and she trembled softly as she unbuckled her seatbelt. Em leaned in, kissing her, and Ash moaned, trembling as she reached up, wrapping her arms around Emily’s back, holding her as her friend kissed her. “*She thinks I’m... beautiful?*” In a way, Ash knew she would have been upset about that, a week or more ago. Indeed, from anyone else, she still would have been; but she felt a wave of gratitude for the praise, emotional gratification welling up within her. “*This is so girly,*” she thought, swooning as Emily deepened the kiss, “*but right here, right now... she likes it, so I don’t care.*”

Ash slid her hands up Emily’s sides, tracing her bare back, her curves. She squeezed Emily’s waist as she felt Emily’s tongue testing her lips; she responded with her own, eyes closed. Emily wrapped her hands around Ash’s neck as Ash felt her up. Ash slid her hands up, more, pressing them around Emily’s breasts, eliciting a moan from deep inside her, and vibrating Ash’s tongue. She felt Emily pull off, and the blue-haired bookworm groaned.

“You took that better than I thought you were going to...”

Ash was blushing, heavily, staring up at her lover’s magenta eyes. “I... I feel so girly saying it, but I liked what you said.”

Emily hugged her friend tight, forehead-to-forehead. “Your brain’s wired to enjoy flattery, Ash. But is it really so bad?”

“No... Not when you say it, Emily. You like it when I’m girly, don’t you?”

“I like you when you’re *you*, Ash.” Emily murmured, as she reached behind herself. She undid the fastener at the back of the choker collar holding the front of her dress up, and let it fall off her torso, revealing her bare breasts to Ash. “Go ahead, Ash, you don’t have to ask.” Ash’s hands again cupped her friend’s breasts, squeezing softly, eliciting a soft murmuring from Emily. “When you’re not

thinking ‘I shouldn’t like this, it’s too girly’, or ‘I should do this to be manly’, is when you’re best, Ash. When you *do*, and *feel*, without letting expectations color your emotions.”

Ash experimentally ran her thumbs over Emily’s nipples, eliciting a moan from her. “You like that?” Ash’s voice was a sincere question, and Emily’s eyes half-rolled up into her head.

“Oh, yes, I love it, Ash. I love it when you touch me.”

“You do?”

Emily laughed softly, and leaned in, kissing Ash’s lips, hotly. “We’ve been over this, Ash.”

“I know... I just...”

“All your life, girls were ‘the big mystery’, Ash. Even moreso after you got an inside track. You’re afraid you’re going to do something ‘wrong’, make me upset at you, but you’re worrying too much.”

Emily kissed Ash, hotly, pushing Ash’s head into the leather seat behind her. “You can’t *upset* me by being my girlfriend, Ash. If you do something that hurts, I will tell you, you trust me, right?”

“Of course.”

“And if I tell you, I trust you’ll stop doing it.”

“Of course!”

“Then why worry? Ash, you can only make a *mistake*, you can’t make me hate you. Didn’t you make mistakes when you were learning to drive? I know I did.”

“Well... yeah, I did.”

Emily tugged Ash’s corset top down again, and placed her hands around Ash’s breasts, eliciting a moan from Ash. “I love you, Ash; I’m a damn fool for you.” Emily kissed her cheek. “And you’re the same way, aren’t you?”

Ash squeezed Emily, tightly—pressing their breasts together, Emily pulled her hands out, letting the soft mounds of flesh on their chests flatten together, pressing their hard nipples into one another. “I am,” Ash said, her toes curled inside her boots, tightly, and she shut the engine off.

Emily snickered softly, and Ash felt her lips on her neck. “You’re going to make a mistake, sooner or later, Ash. Probably something you saw in a porno or something, and it’s going to hurt, and I’m going to yelp or something. Do *not* run away from me; just let go and ask what you did wrong.”

“Em...”

“Mmm?”

“You’re so forgiving...”

“Ash, I’ve been your tutor in living as a girl for the past nine months. I still am. Why wouldn’t that extend to being your tutor in love, too?”

“... No reason, I’m just being stupid.”

“Shh.” Ash squeezed her girlfriend again, and Emily leaned up, nipping Ash’s earlobe, softly. “Do you want to touch me, Ash?”

“I... you mean...”

Emily nodded, and took her girlfriend’s hand, sliding it up her stomach, down, to the hem of the skirt hugging her waist. Ash grinned, blushing furiously and Emily grinned back at her. “So... did you like seeing it?”

“What?”

“My freckle.”

Ash snickered, and kissed Emily’s cheek, nodding. “Yes, yes I did.”

“Ash, you make me feel giddy and nervous, you know that?” She kissed Ash’s freckled face, and Ash blushed even heavier.

“You don’t act like it.”

“*One* of us has to be bold.”

Grinning, Ash slid her hand around, down. She squeezed Emily’s rear, and Em moaned hotly, murmuring, “Yesssss,” in her ear.

“You like that, don’t you?”

"Don't you like it when I do it to you?"

"Yeah, but... I always felt sissy for liking it."

"I don't, Ash. I *love* it when you handle me like that... And, honestly, I love handling you, too."

"You do?"

"It feels good to be aggressive, too."

Ash squeezed again, and slid her thumb through the hem of Emily's thong. "Yeah... It does."

"Touch me, Ash."

Ash did as commanded, sliding her hand around the front. Tentatively, she slid her hand down, cupping Emily's mound in the palm of her hand. Smooth and hairless like her own, she groaned at the feeling, as did Emily, putting her head forward, on Ash's shoulder. Ash trembled at the heat, the soft, quivering sensation; she blushed softly when she realized that Emily's clitoris was pressing hard into her palm. Gently, she pushed in, and her eyes opened wide when a soft wetness spread across the base of her fingers. "Oh, wow," she murmured, quietly.

Emily groaned in Ash's ear. "Go on, Ash..."

"It's... okay." Ash took a deep breath, and curled her middle finger in. "Um..."

"Too far up. Slide it back down a bit..."

Ash looked into Emily's face; Emily was blushing just as hotly as she was, but was grinning. Her eyes closed, and Ash trembled at the feeling of quivering flesh around her fingertip.

"There, Ash. My vagina's right above your finger. Slow," she cautioned, and Ash bit her lower lip, hesitating. "Any time," Emily murmured, kissing Ash's cheek, and Ash closed her eyes, focusing on the feeling of Emily's wet, soft flesh around her finger.

"It should say something about us," Ash noted briefly, "that I will have put my finger in your body before in my own."

Emily kissed her cheek, and bit her ear, softly. "Love is seldom perfect like it is in the movies, Ash. But I love you all the same."

Softly, Ash pushed. She quivered, almost as much as Emily did, as she felt Emily's vagina parting, wet but not terribly slick, around her finger. Emily let out a strangled cry, and Ash froze. "Em?"

"It's fine," she groaned. "It's just... mmmh... how do I explain it..."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah..." Emily nodded, rubbing her cheek on Ash's. "Ash, it's always going to feel a little like a violation when someone who's not you puts something into you." She kissed Ash's cheek, hard. "But that doesn't mean it's bad, Ash. Not for you. Not with you."

"... Does it hurt?"

"Not at all... mmmf." Emily moaned. "I wish you could feel how good I feel right now. Then you'd know for sure I'm loving this."

"I trust you, Em." Ash kissed her lover's cheek, and pushed Emily forward. She licked her lips, and then wrapped them around one of Emily's nipples. The feeling of the hard, hot flesh in her mouth and the soft, wet flesh around her finger was driving her mad. She sucked, hard, and Emily let out another groan, jerking her hips—Ash felt Emily's body slide forward, onto her finger, up to the middle knuckle of her middle finger. She got tighter the farther in, and Ash moaned, as did Emily.

"God, we're..."

Emily moaned, hotly. "I know... Do you like it?"

"It's... like nothing I've ever felt before."

"Good?"

"*Incredible*," Ash breathlessly extolled, leaning up, kissing Emily's throat.

"Mmmmf... Ash..."

"I know, Emily." Ash kissed her throat again, and Emily breathlessly placed her head on the top of Ash's, her own merely an inch from the roof of the car.

"Somehow... I knew we'd wind up doing this in a car."

Ash snickered, “You did?”

“I’ve known it, deep in me, for a long time, since I realized I was attracted to you...”

“I bet you didn’t anticipate it would be a half-a-million dollar Porsche, though.”

“I definitely did *not*. Mmmh...”

“Are you... comfortable?”

“Are you kidding me? I’m on my knees on a car seat, leaning across the console with my pelvis resting on the shifter.” Emily groaned, and leaned her head down, kissing Ash’s breasts, then licking her nipples. “But I don’t care. Go on, Ash. I know what you want to do.”

Ash nodded, and slid her finger out, a bit, then pushed in. Emily moaned herself breathless, as Ash hilted her long middle finger in her friend’s wet, quivering vagina, trembling at the sensation.

“Is it... good?”

Emily moaned, hotly. “Most of the feeling’s at the lips,” she admitted, “But... Oooh, I can feel your palm pressing into my clit, and if you hook your finger up right there, you’ll—aaaah!” Emily arched her back dramatically as Ash did—she bonked her head into the roof of the car, in fact, and Ash stared, widely, freezing.

“Em!?”

“It’s fine! Fine!” Emily reached up with one hand, rubbing her head. “It’s just my g-spot, Ash... Mmmgh!” She kissed Ash’s cheek, biting it, softly, and Ash felt distinctly that her palm was getting wetter.

“It took me by surprise, is all... It was a lot stronger than I thought it would be.”

“Really?”

“I’ve never... Mmmh, your fingers are longer, and your angle’s better. I can’t reach it.”

“What should I do?”

Emily bit her friend’s earlobe again, and moaned, “Do you want to drag this out, or do you want to make me orgasm?”

“Mmmh... W-Which do you want?”

“I hope you won’t be mad, but... orgasm. Dragging this out is going to make my back hurt like a mother, and I’d rather do that in bed, anyway.”

Ash lowered her head to Emily’s shoulder, kissing her cheek. Her heart must have been *pounding*. “That sounds better to me, too... W-What should I do?”

“O-Okay... just grind your palm into me, where it is, and squeeze up on that—waagh!”

The sound of knocking on the car interrupted, and Emily banged her head on the roof, then back down, clonking foreheads with Ash. A light shone in the window, and a voice began, “Is everything oka-*whoa!* Shit, sorry!” The light removed itself, and outside the car, over the sound of the blower, could be heard the sound of footsteps retreating down the path.

Ash felt as if her cheeks might spontaneously ignite into a new star, and Emily looked about the same way: chagrined, pained, yet giddy.

“Mmmngh, ouch...” Emily winced, and reached down, sliding her hand into her dress, gently extracting Ash’s fingers from her. Ash felt her finger pull out with a tight squeeze on it, as if Emily’s body didn’t want to let go.

“Fuck, Em, I am *so* sorry...”

“Don’t be. Nnngh...” Emily waited until Ash’s hand was out of her dress, and she tugged Ash’s top back into position, then her own, snapping it behind her neck and sitting back down in the passenger seat, with a wince.

“You okay?” Ash asked.

“Yeah. Scraped myself with your fingernail when I jerked like that. It hurts a bit.”

“Sorry.”

“No more sore than any of the times I’ve done myself.” Emily reached over, with her hand, squeezing Ash’s forearm. “Sorry, Ash.”

“For what?”

“This was your first time...”

“No it wasn’t.”

“Well, yeah, but I meant the first time that *you* remember.”

“No, I mean, we didn’t finish, so it wasn’t my first.”

Ash closed her eyes, and laughed, softly. Emily joined her, and the two filled the car with loud, giddy, happy laughter, nearly a minute long. When they’d calmed down, Ash gulped for breath, and grinned at Emily, who grinned back.

“Ash... are you still in the mood?”

“Damn right I am.”

“Take me home. Take me to bed, Ash.” She squeezed Ash’s hand, then looked at it. “Whoa... you’re really wet... I didn’t realize I was that wet for you.”

“You didn’t?”

Emily shook her head. “Usually, I have to use hand lotion... I haven’t spontaneously gotten that wet in a *long* time.”

Ash grinned, and raised her hand, staring. She experimentally licked it: lightly sweet, yet somehow salty, like an apple. She blushed, and Emily giggled at her.

“Like it?”

“... Yeah, I do.”

“Good. That bodes well for the future.”

Ash was glad it wasn’t possible for her to blush any hotter, as she drew the inference she was sure Emily wanted her to draw.

Emily reached into her purse, taking out a packet of tissues, but Ash was busily licking her hand off already; looking back, Emily broke into a giggle, and Ash grinned. “I always wanted to try that.”

“Like in the pornos, huh?”

“Yeah...”

“Good?”

“Mmmhmm.” Emily threw a tissue into Ash’s face, and Ash grinned, wiping her hand dry. Then she started the car, putting it back in gear, and looked over at Emily. “I am so hot for you right now.”

“Likewise.”

Emily squeezed her hand, and Ash smiled. “Um... you want to try...”

“In you, when we get home?”

“Yeah...”

“If you want to try it.”

“I do.”

“Then so do I.”

Ash put the car in motion, carefully reversing back into the parking lot, spinning the Carrera around once back on pavement, and letting it idle towards the road.

“Wow, my heart’s beating so fast...” Ash said.

“Mine too. Like racing against you in the Porsche, or the Monster.”

“Mmmhmm. God, it feels so...”

“Good.”

“Yes, yes it does.”

Emily squeezed her hand, tightly. “I love the hell out of you, Ash.”

“I know.”

“So,” Emily asked, as Ash turned the Carrera GT back onto the road, “was it good?”

“Putting my finger into you?” A nod was her answer, and Ash licked her lips. “The best thing I’ve ever felt. It’s so tight, it’s hard to imagine a...”

“A penis fitting?”

Ash blushed. “Yeah.”

“They *do* stretch, you know.”

“Mmm...”

Emily leaned across the console as well as she was able, putting her elbow on Ash’s shoulder. “You make me feel so warm, even when I feel stupid and giddy.”

Ash grinned. “Likewise. I’m so scared and, even, kinda mortified, but...”

Emily nodded, and the two rode in comfortable, charged silence. Emily looked at her watch when they pulled into Provincetown—it read 12:50. They pulled onto the road to Marie’s house, and Emily’s jaw hit the floor, feeling the mood shatter as if struck with a sledgehammer.

There were emergency vehicles all around the house and in the drive and on the lawn, even. Marie’s Jaguar was being hooked up to a tow-truck, the rear window smashed in.

“What the *hell!*” Ash demanded, angrily. She pulled up behind the Viper that was parked behind Marie’s car, and her heart skipped a beat at the sight that she saw in the driveway.

The Monster XR was being hoisted onto a flatbed tow-truck; the windows were all smashed out, the paneling was beaten to hell, glass strewn everywhere.

“Ah-aaah,” Ash gasped, an incredulous look in her eyes, her mouth open, dumbfounded, staring.

“Ash?”

Ash blinked, several times; her lip quivered, her expression going slowly from ‘somebody shot my dog’ to ‘wait until I get my *hands* on the somebody who shot my dog!’

“Ash?”

“What the *holy fuck* happened!?”

“Ash!”

Ash turned to face Emily, her lover’s eyes full of fire—Emily wasn’t afraid of Ash; she was furious, too. They said at the same time, “*Joshua*.” They opened the doors, got out, and slammed the Carrera GT shut.

Approaching The Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 12:35 AM

“I thought Mr. Almacny was going to be apologizing to Mrs. Upton for the rest of the year.”

Adam snickered softly at Jenny’s joke, as his powerful Viper purred slowly behind Marie’s Jaguar XKR. “I know, I know. Still, I would have, in his shoes. His own son, while acting as an employee of his company, assaulted and tormented her daughter, who was *also* acting as an employee of his company. If Ash or Marie were the vindictive or litigious sort, they could have him by the short and curlies and he knows it.”

Jenny snickered softly, and sighed. “Mmmmm. All in all, this was not a bad night... Hey, I don’t see that red race-car they left in.” She grinned at Adam. “Hope they’re having fun somewhere.”

“I bet they are,” Adam replied, as he parked the Viper—doing so, his headlamp’s light fell across Ash’s car, and Jenny gasped. The *bang* rang out, without the sound of the engine in the car’s interior.

A figure in dark clothes was leaning over the Monster XR, armed with some kind of long, metal implement. The windows of the Monster were shattered out, and the panels having been beaten to hell. He raised the implement, smashing again, taking one of the headlamps. Then, walking to the other side of the car, smashing the hood in on the way, he smashed the other headlamp. Jenny opened her door, as did Adam, stepping out—Adam threw his coat back onto the seat, shouting, “You! On the ground!”

The figure turned—in the stark light of the Viper’s headlamps, it was revealed to be none other than Joshua Almacny. His eyes focused on Jenny, and then he shouted, “**Whore! Bitch!**” He laid another bang into Ash’s car. “Where’s your biker-dyke girlfriend *now*?!”

He charged. Jenny reached into her purse, fumbling with the zipper, as Joshua raised the implement—a tire iron. Jenny’s zipper stuck, and she tugged at it, fully unable to run in the massive gown. She tried to dive away, but Adam intercepted anyway—the Viper’s owner flew across the hood

of his car, tackling Joshua straight to the ground. The tire iron flew out of his hand, and shattering glass was punctuated by a scream of surprise—it had flown through the rear window of Marie's XKR. She was on her cell phone, frantically explaining that the sound was her car window shattering, and that the person was attacking them.

Adam's head swam as he took a punch in the temple, rolling off of Joshua. The boy was up, and jumped on him, but Adam returned the favor, and with his shoe in Joshua's gut, launched Joshua back, the drunken berserker falling heavily across the hood of the Viper with a hard '*clank!*' to his head.

"What the hell is your *problem?*" Adam growled, launching himself at Joshua, trying to hold him down, but Joshua rolled aside. The two went down, hard, Joshua on top of Adam. The Viper's owner saw stars as his head met the door of his car with a tremendous bang. Disoriented, he threw his hands up. He managed to clock Joshua in the jaw, once, and got a knee in his stomach as the younger man tried to struggle up to start whaling on his face.

He didn't get the chance. Adam clobbered him one in the temple, then another in his already-swollen eye, sending the drunken rich kid sprawling. Adam clawed his way to his feet, heaving for breath, his ears ringing.

"Raaaaagh!" The shout came from behind him, and Adam whirled, to defend himself—but the cry of rage turned into a shriek of pain.

Joshua hit his knees, shivering and shrieking and writhing. Jenny was standing behind him, holding her taser gun strongly with both hands as Joshua jerked and shrieked in pain. She held the taze a lot longer than, strictly, one ought to, and then released it, Joshua gibbering out some kind of threat, his body twitching.

"Oh, shut it." Adam threw a hard right hook straight into Joshua's head, and the teenager sprawled out like a light, as the first sirens were audible from the road behind. "Perfect," Adam lamented. "Just like the fuzz to show up after the hard work's all done."

"Adam, *Jenny!* Are you okay?!" Marie had gotten out of the Jaguar, and ran towards them. She threw a hug around Jenny, squeezing her tightly, eliciting a gawk from the teenager.

"I'm... Fine, Mrs. Upton."

The police hit Marie's little house like an invasion after that—the first patrol car on scene rolled straight up onto her lawn, followed by the second and third, lights and sirens blasting, lighting up the night lawn with, ironically, very Christmas-like colors.

The police cruisers parked, and cops surged out of them, yelling for everyone to stand still. They did, and an officer approached each of them, two of them picking up the dazed and confused Joshua. One asked Marie, "Did you place the 911 call?"

She replied affirmatively, "I did."

"What happened here, ma'am?"

Marie sighed. "We were coming home from a party. My daughter aggravated this young man by besting him in a car race last week, and his girlfriend left him. They got into an altercation at the party, then he got drunk and was put in a cab by his father. Then we drove up, and found him here, at my home, smashing my daughter's car."

"Is this young lady your daughter?"

Marie shook her head. "No, this is Jenny."

"I'm the one who dumped him," she clarified.

"Okay... And you?"

"Ouh... My name's Adam," the date said, rubbing the back of his head.

"Are you okay, Adam?"

"He got in a few good hits," the brown-haired winter-wear model said, wincing and rubbing the back of his head. "And he hit my head into my door."

"I see. Son, go ahead and sit down, if you need to. And you... Er, you'll need to hand that over, young lady."

Jenny blanched, as the officer held out his hand for her taser. She slowly handed it over, and he shook his head. “This is police issue. You’re not allowed to have this; where’d you get it?”

“My mother got it for me from a cop.”

“Did she? Oh, this is going to be a long night straightening this out. Let’s get to the salient point—what *happened* here?”

Marie explained how Joshua had seen them drive up, as he was busy smashing Ash’s car (the officer took a moment to call for a flatbed unit to impound the car as evidence), and how he had charged at Jenny with the tire iron. Adam explained how he had tackled Joshua, and the tire iron went flying, through the window of Marie’s Jaguar, and asked if he could go and lie down on the couch, which the officer had no problem with; Jenny helped him inside. The officer took another moment to call for a truck to tow the Jaguar as evidence, with a sigh, and explained that, given that Joshua had sustained multiple blows to the head over the course of the evening, he was handcuffed and put in the back of a cruiser, pending an ambulance’s arrival. The trucks arrived, and began to load the Monster onto the back of a flatbed, while the Jaguar was hooked up to a normal tow truck.

“Well,” the officer said, “this is a fine mess. It seems fairly clear that the young man in the back of my car is largely at fault, however...” He sighed, and looked up—several officers were cordoning off Marie’s driveway as a crime scene, and laying a tarp over it. “Just procedure. We’ll come out again in the morning, pick up the glass, take some pictures and all, but you still might want to move that other car,” he pointed at Marie’s Porsche 996, “out of the drive, over the lawn.”

“Okay, I... Oh wait, Emily has the keys.” Marie sighed.

“Emily?”

“My daughter’s best friend. They left the party together, driving a car someone else loaned them, since her erstwhile date is the one who attacked her.”

“She went on a date with someone who hated her?”

“It was a show-party thing, she was working for my company, showing off a new dress...”

“A *very* long night,” the officer said with a sigh, and turned to look at the sound like a small jet engine vrrring up the road.

“Oh, that’s the car,” Marie added, pointing. “Here she comes, now.” The red Carrera GT parked behind Adam’s Viper, and Marie winced. “Oh god... She’s not going to take this well.”

“Take what well?”

“That car he wrecked, it’s her racer. She’s poured her heart and soul into that car.”

Ash and Emily had emerged from the Carrera GT, slammed the doors shut, and the officer shook his head. “Since they’re not witnesses to this event—given that they’ve just arrived—we’ll save off interviewing them until later about the earlier events, and whether or not you intend to press charges about those assaults, as well. Until then—”

Joshua’s voice rang out across the lawn, from the rear of an open patrol car, drunkenly laughing. “Not so tough now, are you, dyker-bitch?! Not so tough without your precious piss-poor car!”

“Aw, shit,” the officer said, turning and running.

Ash had sailed across the hood of the Carrera GT, shouting, “You *son of a bitch!*” and was charging at the patrol car.

Marie’s shout of “Ash! Don’t!” went unheeded, but Ash was taken down from an unlikely direction—Emily got her hands around Ash’s waist, and held onto her. The officer who had been interviewing Marie ran to the patrol car, and shut the door on a laughing and taunting Joshua Almay.

“Ash! Ash...” Marie ran up next to her daughter, who was literally quaking, and put a hand on her cheek. “Ash, are you okay?”

“I... I...” Ash balled her right hand into a fist, and slammed it into her left palm. “Rrrgh! That...”

Marie put her hand on Ash’s shoulder. “I know, baby. Please, just go inside?”

“... Okay,” Ash said, and Emily took her hand, tenderly, staring towards the door. The sound of a heavy gearshift operating caught their ears, and Ash turned, just in time to see the flatbed truck with the

Monster XR on it lurch into action, the heavy, jarring motion causing a clank as the Cosworth spoiler, which had been hanging by one of its three attachment points, fell off, landing on the bed of the truck.

Sniff... Ash realized with a start that she had been the one who sniffled. “*Oh god, no... please, no...*” Emily took her inside.

“Are you okay?” The question came from the couch—Adam was sprawled out upon it, an icepack under his head, and Jenny had already changed into her normal clothes.

She winced when she saw Ash. “Damn... Ash, I’m sorry. If I didn’t break up with him...”

“Save it, Jenny... just... save it.” Ash slipped away from Emily, and slunk off to her bedroom, past the un-lit tree and the pile of wrapped gifts underneath it, Emily following with a helpless sigh, to get changed.

Emily didn’t really know what to say. What *do* you say when your best friend’s pride and joy has just been maliciously destroyed? And in truth, she was furious, too. She liked the Monster; her first victory over Ash had been in that car. Some of her and Ash’s best times had happened in the Monster XR... She let out a strangled cry first, and hugged Ash from behind, tightly—Ash was staring out the window, silently.

“Ash...” Emily simply felt Ash’s hands clutch her own by way of reply, and she looked over Ash’s shoulder, wincing. A Jaguar S-Type had replaced where the XKR had been parked, and Mr. Almacy was on the lawn, talking to a clearly irate Marie. Ash pulled open the window, to hear what they were saying.

An ambulance pulled up to the side of the street, as Mr. Almacy began speaking, “Marie... I am *extremely* angry with my son; I cannot *begin* to imagine the damages he has inflicted upon you and your family. I... I am at a loss, Marie, I really am, I don’t know what I can possibly offer to make whole the wrongs he has inflicted upon your family, I—”

“*Save it, Joshua.*” Marie was *furious*; Emily had never heard her best friend’s mother’s voice so angry—it sounded much like Ash’s often did. “Your son has *harassed* and ***assaulted*** my daughter! And then he came here, to my *home*, broke into and entered my garage, took my tire iron and *smashed my daughter’s* car, the car she’s all but literally built with her own two hands, to pieces, as well as damaging my car and Adam’s, and he assaulted Adam, while attempting to assault Jenny with a tire iron! And all of it on Christmas, too. I cannot *begin* to imagine the emotional trauma my daughter and her friends must be feeling right now, so with all due respect, Mr. Almacy, take yourself and your son and *get the fuck off my property!*”

The officer began to speak, starting, “Sir—” but Mr. Almacy cut him off.

“I understand, I understand, Marie. I’m leaving.” He turned to the officer. “Keep him. I don’t care where you take him; he’s earned this and more. I refuse to take custody of him.” Then Mr. Almacy walked back to the parked Jaguar S-Type, while Joshua was being transferred to the ambulance.

Ash closed the window, letting out another sigh, then a tremble. Emily nodded against her friend’s head, and pulled Ash back to the bed. Mechanically, she undressed Ash, and slid her friend under the covers, then did the same with herself, cradling Ash’s head against her shoulder. Ash simply stared; even when Jenny slipped into the room, asking if there was anything she could do, and Emily spoke with her briefly; even when Jenny slid onto the other side of the bed, patting Ash’s forehead and hugging her.

“Ash... I love you.” Emily whispered, tenderly kissing Ash’s temple. “Remember that. Please, remember that.”

“I’m here for you,” Jenny whispered on the other side of her, kissing Ash’s temple, softly—their hands met under the covers, Jenny’s and Emily’s, each on top of Ash’s hand, and Jenny sighed. Emily nodded at her, and Jenny closed her eyes, her head tucked into Ash’s neck, while Emily kissed her lover’s temple again.

“You that have toiled during youth to set your son upon higher ground and to enable him to begin where you left off, do not expect that son to be what you were: diligent, modest, active, simple in his tastes, fertile in resources...

“Poverty educated you; wealth will educate him.”

Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 1825

Notes:

The Porsche 911 series has strange terminology. It may seem that, at times, the model series are used interchangeably—this is intentional. It is proper to refer to a Porsche 997 Turbo as a 911, a 911 Turbo, a 997, or a 997 Turbo. It is also proper to refer to a Porsche 996 (such as Marie owns) as a 996 or a 911, but it would be improper to refer to it as a Turbo (the Turbo being a performance upgrade of the 911-series cars) or as a 997 (different beast generation).

Emily is not misspeaking. When she told Ash about having had a poster of Kay Wheeler over her bed, she had (to her frame of reference) removed it two years ago. But we know she mostly sleeps on her side, and background stuff in your bedroom can easily slip your notice. She later realized that she had taken it down after her 16th birthday the first time; thus, it was still on her ceiling when she got back from Cape Cod. Emily then took it down and stored it.

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http://www.imeem.com/people/GCgawn//music/cQIslZoe/need_for_speed_carbon_nfs_carbon_composed_music/

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