

i. Emily

Nothing exciting ever happens in Thebes Park, California. That's what makes it such a nice place to live, I think. Some people have lived here their entire lives, maybe going no further than ten or twenty miles away for a nice dinner at the Adams Bistro or a trip to the Camarillo retail outlets. They get jobs in the booming service sector. They raise kids, send them off to college, spend their weekends visiting the Town Center, and then retire to Silver Estates on the hillside if they're lucky. It's not a bad way to live if your paycheck holds steady.

But I never wanted that kind of a life. When I couldn't find work in Hollywood, I came back home and brought back a little flair to the theater scene in Thebes Park. My Friday and Saturday nights were devoted to whatever performances I could stage at the Cultural Arts Center. I played both Hamlet and Romeo, as well as the likes of Stanley Kowalski and Marius Pontmercy. The reviews weren't much, but the ticket sales was decent. At least I could eat and do what I love.

Speaking of food and love, I was compelled to walk out of my house on a cold autumn morning to the local Starbucks. Wrapped in a leather jacket and black jeans, I trundled a few blocks south to where the morning traffic was thinning out.

My eyes drifted over a line of sedans and vans zipping along the main road toward Thebes Park's business sector. With my hands stuck inside my pockets, I felt some dim satisfaction at my current state. Everyone else was rushing to work or from one errand to the next. With no performances lined up that weekend, I had all the time in the world.

I sat at the Starbucks for the better part of an hour, sipping coffee and scrolling over the news on my phone. I was prepared for a mindless reverie until lunch.

What I got instead was a tap on my shoulder. When I glanced up from my armchair, I saw a huge smile and perfect white teeth.

"Jordan! Hey there!" Emily Parcher leaned over me, offering a tiny wave.

"Hey yourself," I replied. As I waved to the chair beside me, I added, "Out for a coffee break?"

"Late breakfast, actually." Emily sank into the chair, smoothing out the skirt of her green dress. My next-door neighbor was my contrast when it came to fashion. She chose to stand out with bright clothing and white jackets, while I preferred to blend in

with blacks and grays. The same could be said about our personalities, too, and in exactly those terms.

I set down my phone, watching the screensaver flicker on. “Another late night, then?”

“Mmph, totally.” Emily paused to finish chewing on the muffin she’d been carrying. She wiped at her mouth and added, “DeSoto wants six new sketches by the weekend. I’ve been pulling all-nighters just to keep up with my other clients.”

“Poor thing.”

“Well, a girl’s gotta eat.” Emily lifted her muffin and snickered. “Case in point.”

“True!” I chuckled and took another sip of coffee. My neighbor grinned and continued to ramble on about her day job.

I might have led a life in the theater, but Emily Parcher was one of the classiest people I knew. She never had a bad hair day or wore anything that clashed. Her every step was an exercise in poise, and she always had a kind word for any occasion. But you could have seen her refined taste in the way she drew. Emily was a born artist, a virtuosa with a pencil or a pen. She did everything from portraits to landscapes. The small-time publishers in Thebes Park couldn’t get enough of her. Emily had enough commissions to afford the nicest house on the block where I lived, though I suspected that she came from a family with money, too.

As neighbors went, she was a treat. Emily could always be counted for a bottle of wine or a towel when you ran short. At neighborhood barbecues, she never failed to delight with her potato salad, and she always volunteered to clean up.

Sure, I’d given some thought to courting her a few times. But I never got the nerve. It wasn’t low self-esteem. I just felt like I’d be ruining an otherwise good friendship. And I never got the sign from Emily that she ever thought of me as anything more than a neighbor.

When we hit a lull in the conversation, Emily looked around the Starbucks. I noticed that she twitched her legs in. Even her hands fluttered in her lap. Like she was trying to stay calm.

Trying, but failing.

“Sorry if I’ve been monopolizing your time,” said Emily. She brushed some hair back over her ear. “I hope I’m not keeping you from anything.”

“Not at all.” I gestured to the phone on the table. “I’m just killing time.”

“No shows this week?”

“It’s the dry part of the season. And yet...” I put my hand to my breast. “I get by. Somehow.”

Emily grinned. “You love the limelight, don’t you?”

“Against my better judgment, yes. I feel more alive onstage.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s like me with a pencil.”

“Bingo.”

Emily shook her head wistfully. “I wish I could feel that good around people. I’m too much of an introvert.”

“You’re plenty social at the local get-togethers, you know.”

“Well, that’s not what my parents say.”

“Oh.” I grimaced. Parental judgment was the worst. As a second-generation Korean-American, I knew it all too well. “Sorry to hear that.”

Looking up at me, Emily nodded. “Thanks for that.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“It’s... complicated.”

“I’ve got nothing but time if you want to chat.”

As a new line of people began to enter the coffee shop, Emily glanced down at her hands. They still fluttered, but not as much as before. When she met my gaze again, she looked so serious.

She said, “Let’s take a walk.”

Heading back to our neighborhood, we felt a little warmer as the day wore on. I kept my hands out and loose at my side as Emily explained her predicament.

“So, the thing is, my parents are strict. Like, super old-fashioned.” Emily’s face turned red as she spoke, and I guessed it wasn’t because of the changing weather. “They didn’t like it when I moved out here to work and live on my own. They’d rather I go back home and marry one of the nice boys that they met at the country club.”

I grinned when I heard the venom in her tone. “Dudes in polo shirts and khakis?”

“Dudes with no class and an overdeveloped ego,” Emily insisted, but at least she smiled a little. “Yeah, I’ve been fending off their proposals for years.”

“You don’t strike me as the housewife type.”

To my surprise, Emily blushed at that. “I’m not against the idea. I mean, if I met the right person, maybe?” She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’d rather just do my job out here.”

“Then you should.”

“But that’s the problem.” Emily turned to me as we came to a stop at the next intersection. An empty school bus passed by the street where we turned toward home. “My parents will cut me off if I don’t meet their standards. That means I lose the house, Jordan.”

“Wait a second.” I frowned, examining her nice—and pricey—dress and jacket. “paying your mortgage?”

“Well, yeah. Most of it.” Emily tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m good for clients, but I could never afford a place on my own.”

“Em, that’s terrible.”

“And so’s my family. My father’s convinced himself that I need to have another woman as a housemate in order to stay ‘proper.’ Because, you know, unmarried woman living away from her parents only has one thing on her mind.”

“Premarital sex. Oh, the horror.” I threw a melodramatic hand to my forehead. “The scandal.”

“You got it.”

“So, you’re looking to rent out a room. Any takers?”

“None. And I don’t have any friends from work who aren’t already married.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. I’m the odd one out.”

I shook my head. “God bless quaint little Thebes Park.”

“Tell me about it.”

We crossed the intersection and turned the corner onto our block. Our houses stood side-by-side, both done up in similar shades of white and beige. My front lawn was small and easy to keep up, but Emily’s house stood out with its garden full of roses and tulips. You could tell from a glance who put the most effort into their dwellings. Emily even kept her car in the garage to keep it from getting too dirty, whereas I was content to let my Toyota Camry gather a little dust before I usually decided to take it in for a wash.

It had been this way on our street for the better part of three years.

As we passed in front of my house, I reached out and put my hand on Emily’s shoulder. She looked at me with a dismal frown.

“Listen,” I said, “I don’t know what I can really do to help, but just know that I here to help if you ever need anything.”

That got a light smile out of her. “Thanks, Jordan. You’re a real sweetheart.”

I chuckled. “Nah. I just play one onstage.”

Hours later, as I finished my latest Netflix binge session—as inspiration for future roles, or so I told myself—I heard a knock at my door. Putting the TV on pause, I got off the couch and ambled over to answer it.

Emily stood on my doorstep. She looked tired. Tired, and anxious.

I stepped aside and waved her in. “What’s the matter?”

“I...” Emily stopped herself. She hesitated on the threshold, taking a glance at her shoes. Those lovely pair of Kurt Geigers. “I’m sorry. I had the stupidest idea. I can’t believe I even came over to ask you.”

“Never hurts to ask. What is it?”

Emily wavered, but she didn’t leave. “So, remember earlier? I told you about my folks, and you said you wanted to help?”

“Sure I do.”

“Well, remember how I said I needed a, uh, female roommate to convince my parents?”

I glanced askew at her. A nervous flutter rose up in my stomach. “Yeah?”

Emily looked up at me with a coquettish smile. “Think you might be interested in the role?”

2. Bombshell

“You can’t be serious.”

“I wouldn’t be here if I weren’t.”

We sat in my living room, at opposite ends of the couch. I’d turned the TV off, which gave me a nice reflective surface to occasionally peer at. Seeing my face through a dark mirror, I had plenty of opportunities to wonder how I’d ended up in this state.

Meanwhile, Emily gave me the most pathetic expressions imaginable. Her hands never stopped fluttering in her lap either. She looked worse than ever.

“Jordan, I know that it’s a crazy idea, but I’m at my wits’ end here. Mom and Dad will be paying me a visit later this month, and if they carry on like they’ve been doing, then my chances of staying here are as good as gone.” Emily tried for a smile. “And, well, I know that you’re quite the talented actor.”

“Flattery isn’t gonna save you this time. I won’t do it.”

“Please?”

“Em, I said no.”

“But you said you’d help me any way you could.”

“When?”

“Like, four hours ago!”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t...”

Now Emily flashed a glare at me. She scooted over on the couch, her hands curling into fists. “You weren’t serious, were you? You just thought you’d say something to make me feel better, is that it?”

Her words cut deeper than I expected. Her face, usually so quick to smile, was contorted into a mask of pain that made me feel worse ten times worse. I’d made this moment happen. Even as she breathed fire at me, I could only sit there, motionless. My own teasing laughter echoed in my head, along with the words,

And I knew then that I hadn’t been fair to Emily. Not in the way I thought I’d been.

Just another neighbor. Keep your problems on your side of the fence, I might as well have said.

Blowing out a sigh, I dropped my hands into my lap and looked at my carpet. I still couldn't meet her piercing stare.

"Em, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. And you're right, I should've been more considerate of your feelings. Okay?"

A tiny smile came back to her face, even as she dabbed away tears. "Okay."

Silence fell between us, and I took a moment to think it over.

Eventually, after a of self-criticism that doesn't bear repeating, I said, "All right."

Emily glanced over at me. "You'll do it?"

I nodded. "You were right about something else, you know. I am that good an actor." Allowing myself a cheeky grin, I added, "And this might be a chance to stretch those muscles like never before."

Despite what I thought, I wasn't prepared when Emily tackle-hugged me from across the couch. I gave her an awkward pat on the back as she sniffled into my T-shirt.

"You won't regret this, I promise!" she blubbered. Looking up with a smiling, tear-stricken face, Emily was a mess. A gorgeous mess, I thought to myself, but tragic nonetheless. "And listen, it's only for a month and a half. My family, they're... well, they'll be checking in and out. So I'll give you advance notice when they come over. We'll have to buy you some new clothes and hair extensions and—"

"Emily, slow down." I put my hand to her cheek. "Breathe."

She stopped and took a few shallow breaths. Just doing that was enough to ease the hitch in her voice. I sat up with her and gave her a handkerchief to wipe her eyes.

"Mm. Thanks." Emily looked up at me. "I can't believe you're helping me. I was so scared, Jordan. I thought they'd get their way for sure."

"Well, we can't let that happen." I patted her hand. "Tell you what. Go home and think it over tonight. We'll meet for lunch tomorrow and discuss it in full, okay?"

“You’re really okay with this?”

“Honey, it’s fine. As weirded out as I was before, this is not my first time in drag.”

“Oh. Theater people are like that, huh?”

“You should’ve our Halloween parties in college...”

By the time I had finished dinner and got ready for bed, my anxiety about Emily’s plan had only gotten worse. I turned off the lights in my house and double-checked the locks on each door. With slow, weighted steps, I made my way down the hall to my bedroom.

Closing my door behind me, I kept the lights on and went over to my closet. Sure enough, inside was my wardrobe of black and gray sweaters and jackets, along with a handful of flowing shirts that I’d worn to improv classes. Nothing but sleek, form-fitting clothes, tailored for men in most cases. Yet it occurred to me that my style had a touch of the feminine to it. I was, after all, a young man in love with the world of drama. I would’ve fit in better with the glittery crowds in WeHo than with the mainstream tastes of Hollywood.

But it wasn’t the thought of wearing women’s clothing that bothered me. I looked down at the bottom of my closet.

Sitting on the floor was a large plastic package. Emblazoned on the front was the brand name Certainty, and below that were the words “Size M,” along with hip measurements. My skin crawled a little when I reached in and pulled out an adult diaper from the package. The light rustling it made was deafening to my ears.

Despite what my mother claimed— , she’d always insist—I did not, in fact, have any control over my bladder at night. For as long as I could remember, I had worn either a diaper or a Pull-Up to bed. Most mornings, I woke up wet, and not even a series of visits to different urologists could tell me why. Just born lucky, I suppose. Of course, this had made it hard to date girls back then, since I could never bring one home and risk utter humiliation.

That was the reason I took to the theatre in high school: to build up my confidence when I talked to people my age. To pretend that I was someone who wet the bed.

I dropped my pants and my shorts before lying down on the bed. With the diaper unfolded, I slid under my butt and pulled the front on tight. A brief thought of Emily getting ready for bed at the same time got me a little excited, but I tucked myself into the diaper in spite of my sudden arousal. Then it was only a matter of taping it on snugly, like I'd been doing for the better part of twenty years.

As I hit the lights and crawled into bed, I realized that I'd have to figure out how to manage my incontinence around Emily. It was one thing when we lived apart, but now we'd be under the same roof for about a month. What would she think? And worse, what would her super-critical parents think?

I grumbled and yanked the quilt over my head. That'd be tomorrow's problem, I decided.

The next day, Emily showed up at my door with a paper lunch bag hanging on one arm and a giant shopping bag on the other. Her grin was terrible, as was the feeling rising in my stomach.

"Hope you like Italian sandwiches!" she exclaimed.

Hearing that, of course, did mitigate my bad feeling. Nothing that a little meatball with marinara couldn't solve.

As we sat down at my table and ate, Emily rattled off one detail after another. She'd spent the whole night working out her plan, from where I'd sleep if I had to stay over to what my backstory would be when questioned.

"So, here's the real lucky thing," Emily was saying. "We don't even need to change your name, Jordan. Just your wardrobe and a little bit of makeup. Of course, the hardest part is gonna be convincing Mom and Dad that you're, um, of the right pedigree. You know, real ladylike?"

I raised my voice an octave and said, "Like I just came out of the spa, dear?"

Emily clapped her hands. "Oh my God, that's perfect! You're a natural."

"Hey, you I could act."

"And I meant it. You sure can." I didn't miss the little sparkle in her eye when she said that. Suddenly, that flutter in my stomach was back for a whole other reason.

As soon as lunch was over, I cleared the table. When I returned to the living room, Emily was rummaging through her shopping bag. She laid out a wide selection of women's clothes on the couch. I hung back, marveling at all the purchases. Nylon stockings, women's jeans, black and gray blouses, and long, pleated skirts, just to name a few. She'd even gone to the trouble of buying a set of hair extensions, along with a full-size black wig. It was, to my surprise, a perfect match to my natural color.

The weight of what I was doing for Emily hit me hard. I steeled myself, reminding myself that, no, this was just another performance. Another role. I could slip in and out just like I did at the community theatre. Wouldn't even be a problem, right?

When Emily turned to me, she clasped her hands together. "I tried to match your style as best I could. Turns out half of these were on sale, which is awesome." She blushed. "Um, only thing is, I might have overestimated your size."

I spread out my arms. "Need to take my measurements?"

She blinked. "You'd let me do that?"

"Em, I've been fitted for costumes for half my life. Measure away."

Her grin back, as did the flutter inside me. Emily reached into her purse and took out a long strip of measuring tape, like the kind tailors used on their customers. I held out my arms and spread my legs as she went to work. All the while, I was grateful that I'd closed the blinds looking into my living room. Last thing I needed was some neighbor, like that gossipmonger Janice McCain, to look in and spoil the whole affair.

After a few minutes, Emily stepped back. The measuring tape hung limp in her fingers, and her expression turned sour. "Hmm, this could be a problem."

"What is it?"

"I think all the tops I bought will fit you since, you know..." She gestured to her chest. "You don't have cleavage. But the pants and skirts might be a size too big. I'm worried they'll fall right off you."

"I'm sure we can find a fix for that."

Emily glanced down. When she did, she put a hand to her mouth and giggled. "Oh, geez. I didn't even consider ."

“Consider what... oh.” I followed her gaze down. Only then did I realize that I had quite the erection poking through the front of my jeans. I sighed and rubbed at my neck. But Emily giggled and backed away, patting at the air between us.

“Don’t worry, I know it just happens.” When she finished laughing, Emily’s smile faltered. She took another long look at the clothes laid out on the couch. “Damn, though. I don’t know if anything I bought is gonna cover that either. They make women’s clothing so light, you know?”

I smiled. “Like I said, we’ll think of something.”

Emily seemed a little relieved to hear it. She crumpled up the measuring tape into a wad and tossed it onto the couch. “Well, I can’t think of it now. Mind if I use your bathroom? I’ve been running around all morning.”

“Sure thing.” I pointed down the hallway. “Second door on the right, just inside my bedroom. Can’t miss it “

“Thanks, you’re a lifesaver!” Her words flew out in a breathless gasp as Emily trotted out of the room.

I laughed and shook my head. When I looked over the clothes she’d bought, I was impressed. Emily did have a good eye for fashion. She’d matched my taste in clothes and my preferred colors pretty well on her own. As horrible as her parents sounded, I had to give them credit for raising her right on that front.

On my way back to the kitchen, I heard the bathroom door swing open. Then I heard Emily call out, “Shoot!”

“Need something?” I called out.

“Uh, no! Thanks!” She bit out a curse, then added, “I dropped an earring, and I don’t know where it rolled off to. Your carpet matches it too well.”

I chuckled and headed down the hall. “Don’t move. I’ll help you look—”

“No, wait, I think I found it! It rolled under your closet door.”

My blood ran cold. I turned my casual walk into a sprint, praying to every god that I wouldn’t be too late. “Uh, hey, Em? I’d rather you let me handle it for you...”

My voice trailed off as soon as I came skidding around the corner.

Emily knelt on the floor of my bedroom, with the closet door thrown wide open. She had the missing earring in one hand, but her eyes were fixed on the open package of diapers sitting in my closet.

I smacked my head loud enough to startle her. Emily spun around and looked up. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I-I didn’t mean to—”

“No, it’s fine. Really.” Despite the fact that my heart was thundering in my chest, I made an effort to stay calm. I offered Emily a hand and helped her to her feet. “Listen, Emily, if I’m helping you keep a secret, you, uh, might as well know about mine...”

3. The New Girl

Emily frowned at me. “Did you really think I’d make fun of you?”

Rubbing at the back of my neck, I couldn’t meet her eyes. I kept glancing toward the open, almost accusing case of diapers on my floor. “Well, not exactly. I just have this fear, you know, that when someone finds out, they’ll freak out and leave.”

“But, like, did that ever happen to you?”

I blinked. “Well, now that you mention it, no. But then, I never did let anyone get that close to me before.”

Emily tilted her head to look me over. “Wow. So I’m the first girl to know?” She favored me with a tiny smile. “Not gonna lie. That makes me feel a little special.”

“It’s nothing to worry about, Em. Just something I live with, all right?”

“Okay,” she replied. “Well, your secret’s safe with me.”

“Thank you—”

I stiffened at first when she reached over and pulled me into a hug. But as Emily tucked her chin against my shoulder, I felt a wave of relief wash through me and I put my arms around her waist. Hugs between friends were not new to me; some of my more enthusiastic male friends in the theatre business were quick to hand them out, regardless of gender. But here, I could smell the light perfume and shampoo that Emily used. That fresh, flowery scent added to the warm glow rising in my heart.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this happy.

When Emily let go, she took my hand between hers and grinned. “Okay, so I just thought of something.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

“Promise you won’t be mad?”

I gave her an exaggerated stern look. “Well, now you’re just guaranteeing that I’ll be mad.”

Emily stuck her tongue out at me. Then she glanced over at my closet, which was still open and displaying my supply of diapers. “All right, so, here’s my idea. You know how we were talking earlier about some of the problems we had with the clothes I bought for you? Like, with the hips and your, uh, little friend down there?”

The way she kept glancing at my closet had me a little on edge again. “Yeah?”

“I had this idea—crazy thought, I know—that maybe you could, like, wear one of your diapers underneath your new clothes?” Emily chewed on her bottom lip. Her eyes scanned my face. “Like, just to make it more convincing?”

“You think your parents are gonna buy that?”

“Well, I mean, have you how our bodies are shaped?” Emily waved a hand down from her face, encompassing her whole torso. “They call it an hourglass figure for a reason, Jordan. And, yeah, I know you don’t have anything upstairs...” She then gestured to her own modest breasts. “But that’s nothing a little padding up there can’t solve either.”

I could see the logic in her conclusions. Even so, I had an anxious gurgle in the back of my throat whenever I looked over at the diapers in my closet. Wearing them to bed, where no one else could see them, was one thing. Wearing them under a set of women’s clothing, all while Emily’s parents were scrutinizing my every move, gave me a bad case of stage fright. The kind I hadn’t felt since my first audition.

And yet, when I looked back at Emily, she was anxious, too. As confused and scared as I was. Somehow, knowing she felt the same about this made me feel a little better.

I said, “Well, I guess it’s worth a shot.” I tried to reassure her with a smile. “You’ve already dragged me this far into your little scheme, Em.”

As she hugged me again, Emily laughed. “Yeah, that’s the spirit!” She pulled back far enough to look me in the eye. “And, hey, since you’re going this far for me, how about I make you a deal?”

“What kind of deal?”

Again, Emily chewed on her lip. “Since you’re gonna need more diapers during the day now, maybe I can go and buy them for you? You won’t have to pay anything for, like, a whole two months, I promise.”

I blinked. “You’d really do that?”

“Sure! That’s what friends are for, silly!”

“Don’t I know it. I have this one friend who asked me to dress up like a girl for her...”

She socked me in the arm, but I laughed it off. Emily did, too. And seeing that carefree smile on her face brought back that warm glow deep inside me.

That night, while Emily cleared the dinner table, I stood in my bedroom. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I contemplated my fate.

“You’re doing this for her,” I told myself. “Now be a man and put on that woman’s clothing.”

Even with my light tone, the words made my heart sink. I didn’t have quite that much confidence in this new role. It was easier to play it cool around Emily. By myself, with a pile of clothes on the bed and a diaper in my hand, it was agonizing.

Still, diapering myself was easy. I slid down my pants and pulled up the new garment between my legs. With a quick rustle, I had it taped on just like I did every night. Just to be safe, though, I left it a little loose. If Emily was right, then I’d need the extra bulk around my hips and thighs. When I examined myself in the mirror again, I sighed and went back to the closet.

Once I taped on a second diaper, I could see a real difference in the way I stood. Just by holding up the long black skirt to my waist, I could tell it’d be a much better fit.

With that settled, I yanked off my shirt, now clad in just a pair of diapers. Per Emily’s instructions, I started with the camisole. Its hem barely brushed up against the waistband of my new thick underwear. Then came the nylon stockings, followed by the long skirt. In keeping with my tastes, Emily had also bought a light gray blouse. I was grateful for the long, flowing sleeves and the ruffled collar. Anything to hide my biceps and my Adam’s apple.

Last came the wig. I made sure to pull as much of the false hair forward. Since I didn’t have earrings—and I refused to let Emily pierce my ears—we had to ensure that the wig covered my head as much as possible. My fingers brushed and smoothed out the bangs across my forehead. Already, I wore a smile, thinking back to the Halloween nights when I joined my college troupe in drag.

At least this wig didn't make my scalp itch like crazy.

Taking a deep breath, I turned around and looked into the mirror.

"Whoa," I said.

A strange young woman looked back at me. She looked taller in her flowing outfit, with good-sized hips and a demure posture. My heart skipped a couple of beats before I realized that I was looking at myself. At my new body, a whole other persona.

To my surprise, I actually liked it a little.

I took one step forward, sashaying with the skirt as I did. I whipped my head back and forth, watching my now-long hair spray across my face in a believably natural way. In my march across the bedroom, I could barely hear the rustling of my two diapers from underneath my skirt. As soon as I made a mental note to wear compression shorts over them, I nearly burst out laughing.

This new Jordan Kim was a lot more comfortable in her new outfit than I'd expected. But that was the truth. When I glanced back in the mirror, I saw her—saw
—grinning without a care in the world. No more signs of the anxious actor offstage. No more of the desperate son trying to please his strict parents.

There was only Jordan, the new girl from next door.

Opening my door, I called out, "Hey, Emily! It's ready!"

I heard a scramble from the living room. Emily called back, "Okay, don't move! I'm coming!"

I nodded, my heart racing. But there was no flutter in my stomach this time. For the first time, I was genuinely excited. Like my neighbor, I wanted this insane scheme to work out, too.

Stepping back, I had just enough time to regain my composure when Emily opened the door. She froze. Her jaw dropped, and I offered a hesitant smile.

"I know, right?" I said, trying to break the ice.

“Oh my God.” Emily put a hand to her mouth. She looked me over in silence. Then she giggled and started to say something. But then she caught herself and laughed again. With a shake of her head, all she could say was, “Oh my God. Look at you!”

My heart pounded as Emily approached. She circled me a few times, checking my hair and the fit of my clothing. When she crouched down, she gave my backside a quick poke with her finger. Emily gasped when she heard the diapers rustling, and she gave me a stunned look.

“It fits you perfectly,” she exclaimed. “How does it feel?”

“It’s nice,” I admitted. “It feels very nice.”

There was no shame in being honest. Maybe I was just getting deeper into the part already. I imagined that the woman known as Jordan wouldn’t be the deceptive type. She was young and kind and open, all to balance out her roommate Emily’s shifts between hyperactive and moody. At least, that was what my inner acting coach saw in the performance.

Meanwhile, Emily stood and took me by the hand. She gave me the biggest grin, and I could swear I saw tears in her eyes. “I can’t believe you’re doing this for me. Thank you, Jordan. Just... thank you. That’s all.”

Just to tease her a little, I lifted my voice an octave and answered, “Of course, sweetie.”

Emily laughed and then she threw herself into my arms. A thousand conflicting emotions ran through me when she did, but I had enough self-control to stand there and hold her. I was sensitive enough to suspect that she might start crying at any moment. And who could blame her? Her parents had put her in the strangest position.

After a long moment, Emily turned to look up at me. Her eyes were a little red, but she was smiling through the pain.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jordan,” she said.

I laughed. “Nice to meet you, too, Emily.”

“Please, if we’re going to be roommates, call me Em.”

“Sure, Em.”

Over the next few days, I spent more time at Emily's place than I ever had over the last three years that we'd been neighbors. For the sake of her charade, we agreed to begin practicing our routine. I would spend my nights at her place, using her guest room, where she would store all my new outfits. Of course, when her parents were due to visit, I would have to spend the night in Emily's room instead.

For the sake of my conflicted feelings, I offered to use a sleeping bag on the floor. Emily agreed, and we never raised the issue again.

The weekend soon rolled around. I sat in my neighbor's kitchen, sipping green tea that I'd brought from home. In front of me was a notepad with all the details about Emily's career and her time spent in Thebes Park over the last few years. I memorized what I could: where she liked to get coffee, when she preferred to eat dinner, which clothing stores were her favorite, and what the names of her coworkers were. Small stuff, but essential to playing the part of her roommate.

I added what I could to the backstory of the new roommate, now going by the name Jordan Baker. Like me, she was a second-generation Korean American. And like me, she'd studied theatre in college. But instead of going into acting, she took to designing costumes and doing makeup for a variety of local and out-of-town theatre groups. The new Jordan had a passion for making others look their best onstage, and she was even talented enough to get calls for the occasional job in Los Angeles. I thought this last detail was a master stroke: a compelling reason for why Emily's roommate wasn't always in town during the day.

If her parents were as overbearing as Emily claimed, I prayed that they'd be too busy looking up this new roommate in LA. That way, I could be my natural male self around Thebes Park, completely anonymous to their eyes.

The only downside to practicing all this was dressing up to play the new roommate Jordan. For the most part, I grew more and more comfortable with the outfits that Emily picked out for me. In her kitchen, I sat wearing a floral print blouse and a pair of jeans with ample space for my thighs. I barely noticed the feel of the clothing I wore.

The diapers were another matter, though.

With women's pants, I could get away with a single diaper, but with a dress or a skirt, I had to double up. And to make matters worse, I had a few near-accidents during the day. Even as much as a few drops leaking out when I wasn't paying attention. My

body was so used to using them at night that just wearing them more often was making me fight for control.

I didn't tell Emily. My fear was that she'd blame herself for something that I knew I could control.

Sitting at her kitchen table, I could feel the weight shift on my bladder, all because of the tea I'd been drinking. I crossed my legs and focused on my notes again. After a moment, I pushed aside the mug of tea. I wasn't that thirsty anyway. Except, all too late, I heard a gentle sloshing of lukewarm tea from inside the cup. My legs twitched, and the pressure on my bladder grew tenfold.

"All right, ," I grumbled. Pushing my chair back, I got up and stormed out of the kitchen. Across the front room and down the hall was a guest bathroom. I grimaced as my bladder went tight, filling up and threatening to spill out into the absorbent padding pressed between my legs.

I had almost made it to the bathroom. My hand was on the doorknob, but to my surprise, it was locked. Too late, I saw the light turned on from under the door, and I heard Emily running the sink inside.

Just my luck.

I knocked. "Em? Are you almost done in there? I, uh, really need to go."

"Just a sec!" she called back. My heart raced when I heard her drop a towel and begin to unlock the bathroom door.

I gasped. As soon as she opened the door, our eyes locked.

To my horror, I looked down at my jeans. The front was bulging, and in the silence, I could hear the telltale hiss as I peed myself. The warmth that spread between my legs was both relieving and horrifying, but I couldn't stop myself. I just kept going and squeezed my eyes shut.

"Dammit," I whispered.

Emily stared. "Jordan, are you okay...?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm not." I waved feebly at my pants. "Can you, um, move, please? I need to clean up."

It took a moment for the words to register. Then Emily's hand shot up to her mouth. "Oh, God! Jordan, I'm so sorry! I-I didn't mean to take so long!"

"It's not your fault." I hung my head in defeat. "Could you move, though?"

"You need to change?"

"Yes!" It came out a little sharper than I intended. "Please," I added in a softer voice.

Emily looked me over. Then she grabbed my hand and pulled me back down the hall.

"Em," I asked, "what do you think you're doing?"

"Fixing what I messed up," she declared. "Just follow me, okay?"

I had every protest lined up on my tongue, but none of them came out. I didn't have the heart to pull away from her tight grip. And with the wet diaper between my legs, I was too humiliated to do anything else.

4. A Good Neighbor

Leading me by the hand like a child, Emily dragged me into her bedroom. It was slightly larger than the guest room and more suited to her tastes. Emily was the sort of girl who kept framed artwork on her wall, along with a mountain of stuffed animals stacked in front of her pillows. I stood motionless by the bed as she moved about, closing the blinds over her windows with quiet efficiency.

When she turned back to me, her smile returned. “Jordan, come on. Let’s get you changed.”

I froze. My mouth had gone dry.

“You don’t have to—” I protested, but she reached for my hands and cut me off.

“I want to. Look, it’s my fault you couldn’t find a bathroom in time. I mean, thank goodness you were wearing a diaper, but I never wanted you to use it like this.” The whole time, Emily looked so apologetic that I felt like I was getting a sneak preview of what was to come with her parents. She lifted her eyes to mine, and her lips trembled. “Please don’t be mad at me?”

I sighed and squeezed her hands. “I’m not, Emily. I mean it. And you really don’t have to...” The words got caught halfway up my throat. “To change me. I can handle it.”

“I you can.” Emily squeezed my hands back, triggering a slight shiver down my spine. “But I’m also your neighbor, and I want to help in any way I can. Please? Just this once?”

Every instinct within me told me to refuse.

So I said, “Okay, but just this one time.”

Emily flashed a relieved smile. “Okay!” Then she glanced up and down at me. “Um, I don’t know where to start though. Do you mind...?”

I laughed. “All right, Em. I’ll walk you through it.”

“Thank you!”

“Okay.” I turned around and sat down on the bed. The wet diaper squished up against my backside, but I didn’t let the discomfort show on my face. “So, go to the closet in my room. You’ll find some wipes next to the diapers there…”

Emily did as instructed. I watched her leave. Then, after taking a deep breath, I kicked off my flats and pulled down my jeans. Doing this in my female persona wasn’t so weird anymore, but I felt more than a little weird doing this in my neighbor’s bedroom. The pile of stuffed bears and kittens staring accusingly at me didn’t help either.

When Emily came back with a diaper and wipes in her hand, she glanced at me in surprise. I blushed and ducked my head. With just my blouse and a wet diaper, I’m sure I was quite the sight. But she soon recovered and dropped her supplies onto the bed. Giving a nervous chuckle, Emily pushed up the sleeves of her sweater.

Her eyes fell onto my soaked diaper. Then she, too, took a deep breath.

“Okay, roomie, lie down for me,” she said.

I obliged, and Emily went to work. She undid the tapes on my diaper in a heartbeat, then paused before pulling back the front. Our noses crinkled at the smell, but Emily did her best to hide her concern with a cheerful grin. She had the diaper off, rolled up, and tossed into a wastebasket within seconds.

When she began to clean me off with the baby wipes, I stared up at the ceiling. She was quite thorough for someone who’d never changed an adult before, let alone an adult man. And despite my self-restraint, I couldn’t will myself to not get excited.

Emily giggled when she saw the little offender below the waist. “Aww, isn’t that cute? Better make sure it’s clean. I’d hate for you to get a rash.”

I shut my eyes. “Not helping, Em.”

“Oh, hush. Your cool roommate’s got this, okay?” Emily giggled again, and she disposed of the used wipes into the same trash bin.

Then she picked up the clean diaper and unfolded it. At a glance from me, Emily soon realized that she had it upside down and corrected herself before sliding it under my butt. Now she had my full attention. Emily’s expression turned serious as she focused on lining up the front of the diaper over my waistline. She applied each tape one at a time, ripping and sticking the Velcro tabs as best she could. They didn’t line up

perfectly, but I was content. I promised myself that I'd make it to the toilet the next time I needed to go.

When she stepped back, Emily's face softened. She crossed her arms and beamed at me. "Well, look at you. That is just precious!"

"It's not nice to tease."

"Who's teasing?" Her tone was almost motherly. "You really look cute this way."

I blushed, and I imagined that the wig falling around my face didn't do me any favors. I couldn't tell whose reaction that was, the new Jordan's or my own.

"Can you, uh, hand me my pants?" I asked.

Emily nodded and grabbed the jeans from the floor. As I got dressed again, she stepped back, giving me a curious look. I met her gaze a moment later, and then it was her turn to blush.

"I'm glad you trust me," she said, her voice softer than usual. "It's been a long time since I had anyone to share secrets with. And I know you're too nice to judge me."

I wanted to rub at the back of my neck, but the wig was in the way. So I settled for smoothing down my long hair. "You're a good person, Em. I've always thought so. And if your parents don't, then that's their problem."

The brilliant smile she wore was the only answer I needed.

has always been my motto around friends. Because of Emily's hospitality, I offered to cook dinner that night. Having swapped out my feminine look for an androgynous hoodie and sweat pants, I bustled around the kitchen, moving pots and pans as I pleased. My neighbor didn't have any of the ingredients for a traditional Korean dish, but I could still fry up enough chicken and vegetables to make some decent burritos for the two of us. In any case, I found the aroma and the sizzling to be very soothing.

I was deep into my cooking experiment when I heard Emily open the front door. She came in a moment later with several plastic bags in hand. Dropping them onto the kitchen table, she sighed and wiped her brow.

“Man,” Emily blurted out. Her tired eyes landed on my face. “You wouldn’t think a town this small would have such traffic on a Thursday night.”

I cast a smile over my shoulder. “Was it crowded at the supermarket?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. If I see one more mom trying to round up her screaming kids in the checkout line, I’m gonna scream.”

I chuckled, but I kept my thoughts to myself. Truth be told, as much as I wasn’t a fan of parents, I got along well with most kids. When you could exaggerate and be funny, working a room full of youngsters wasn’t too bad.

Turning back to the stove, I slid the last batch of meat and veggies into a fresh tortilla. With four quick moves, I had it all folded up into a tight burrito. As I slid the full tray into the oven to bake, I felt Emily creep up behind me.

“Ooh, that smells amazing,” she commented.

“Wait ’til you taste it.”

“I can’t. Wait, that is.” When I turned around, Emily stood with her hands tucked behind her back. Her pose matched her coquettish smile.

“Em?” I scrutinized her face. “What are you up to?”

She turned away, still bashful. “So... I got you something.”

“Oh? You shouldn’t have.”

“Well, actually, I did. You needed it.” Stepping over to the table, Emily pulled out a package from inside one of the grocery bags. I stared, immediately recognizing the all-too-familiar logo of Certainty-brand adult diapers. Emily held out the package with an embarrassed smile. “I saw that you were running low, so I figured, well, why not buy some more?”

“Em...”

“It’s fine, Jordan.”

“You’re doing so much.” I shook my head. “I wouldn’t have asked you to spend money on this.”

“But the one that’s helping me.” Emily’s smile vanished. She glanced down at the pack of diapers. Her fingers trembled against the plastic. “This is a big deal to me, Jordan. What you’re doing... it’s something I can’t imagine any other person agreeing to do, let alone for my sake. You’re a real good friend, and I mean it. So if it means helping you with your, um....” She blushed. “Your, uh, medical needs? Then that’s what I’m here for.”

Now it was my turn to blush and look away. “Glad to help out any way I can.”

“Glad to hear it.” Emily lifted the package. “So, I can put this in your closet, right?”

“Yeah, right where the others are.” I smiled and clapped my hands together. “And, uh, dinner should be ready in about ten minutes?”

Emily grinned. “Best roommate ever!”

“Girl, you know it.”

She trotted out of the kitchen with the pack of diapers, leaving me to prep the salad. Still, something changed in the air when Emily disappeared from view. I couldn’t pretend that we were just neighbors anymore. We acted far too familiar now, and we’d only been at this charade for less than a week. Even looking at myself in the bathroom mirror, dressed up and admiring myself as a woman, was becoming less surreal to me. And the way Emily watched me in my new outfits—maybe it was more than a little friendly, I thought.

I stared down at the oven timer, as it ticked away from the 10-minute mark.

Just like how much time was winding down before her parents were due to arrive.

Suddenly, I didn’t have much of an appetite.

Dinner came and went without much fanfare. I insisted on cleaning the dishes, too, and though Emily pouted at me, I stuck my tongue out and we shared a laugh. With a flip of her hair, she retreated to her bedroom, promising that she would have another thing to show me as soon as I finished up in the kitchen. For some reason, the image of myself, lying on her bed, being diapered and babied against my will, briefly flashed through my head. After an awkward moment, I laughed it off, too.

Wiping my hands with a towel, I made my way across the living room and down the hall to Emily's room. By now, I knew the house like the back of my hand, and with good reason. Any slip-up on my part, and her parents would smell the charade for what it was.

And, I had to admit, Emily's house was nicer than mine. I couldn't help but memorize every little detail and bit of flair she kept around.

When I came into her room, I found Emily sitting on her bed, looking into the vanity mirror over her dresser. Her makeup bag was open, and an assortment of cosmetics lay on top of the dresser: a long row of tiny brushes, glass and plastic bottles, cream-filled containers, and one or two designer items that I couldn't identify right away. When I looked at Emily, she smiled up at me with her hands folded in her lap.

"So, we've got one more thing to go over," she explained. Emily patted a spot on the quilt beside her. "Come on. I promise I won't bite."

"I can't promise I won't, depending on what you're planning." Even so, I shrugged and sat down beside her.

Emily smiled. Then her eyes darted over to the makeup arrangement. "So... you've done makeup before, right?"

"In theater? Sure, all the time." Heat rose in my cheeks. I kept talking at a casual tone, even as my heart beat a little faster. "A little foundation goes a long way under those hot lights."

"I knew it!" Emily clapped her hands together, now grinning at the cosmetics.

"So, you want me to practice?"

"If you don't mind..."

"I don't. It's just..." I scratched at the back of my neck. For a fleeting moment, I almost missed the gentle weight of the black wig that my neighbor had me wear around the house. "I mean, I can do makeup in general. Just not, you know, the stuff made for ladies like yourself."

"It's not too hard." Emily reached over and grabbed an eyeliner pen. "Want me to show you?"

I hesitated. My eyes flickered to the cosmetics, and then to my nervous face in the mirror.

“Sure,” I finally said. “Why not?”

Seeing Emily’s smile made my heart race for an entirely different reason. Maybe it was the soft lighting from her bedroom lamp, but I couldn’t believe what I saw in her face. This lighthearted expression, with her hair pulled back around her ears, made her seem young and carefree in a way I’d never noticed before. And part of me wanted to give her a reason to smile like that all the time.

Emily got to work. Taking me by the chin, she began with a few deft strokes of the eyeliner pen over my top and bottom lashes. I did my best not to squirm. Having sat in plenty of makeup chairs before a show, I was used to being handled this way. Being handled by Emily, though, was a different matter altogether. But she seemed to know what she was doing. I breathed in and out regularly, letting her sponge a layer of foundation across my face, letting her rub in a hint of blush into my cheeks.

It wasn’t until she grabbed the lip gloss that Emily hesitated. Her eyes darted over to me, and her body language turned apologetic. I shook my head, and I puckered my lips at her.

“You’re positive?” she asked. “Because most guys wouldn’t—”

“Em, come on.” I grinned. “You’ve seen me in a dress. And a . . . What’s a little lipstick compared to them?”

“Okay, okay,” she said with a laugh. I was still grinning as she applied the lip gloss. The way her hand moved relaxed me a little, too. Slow and gentle, and again, that motherly smile and tone was back. Emily even began to hum a little as she finished up.

“There we go!” she proclaimed.

I turned to look into the mirror. Unlike the first time I transformed into my new look, I could still recognize myself in the reflection. It was just me with a lot more makeup on my face. Still, as I turned my head this way and that, I saw something different in the style. My skin looked softer. Smoother, too. Like someone had dipped me in oil. With a few strokes of her hand, Emily had somehow taken a few years off of me.

“Wow.” I gave myself a smile, and then turned it toward Emily. “You really did a good job—”

But when I turned back, Emily inched closer to me.

“No, it’s that looks good,” she said in a soft tone.

Suddenly, we were almost nose-to-nose. Her eyes searched my face, and I blinked in confusion. But I didn’t dare pull back. Not when I could feel her breath against my face, and the warmth of her hand closing over mine.

I almost leaned in.

That long, beautiful, magical moment could’ve happened if not for the fact that her phone buzzed from its spot on the nightstand. Emily and I all but leapt away from each other. I tried to cover my unease with a giggle, and she rolled her eyes before sliding off the bed. But my humor died away as soon as she picked up her phone and read the name on the screen.

“You have timing,” Emily hissed. Tapping the screen, she held the phone to her ear and put on what looked like the biggest, fakest smile ever. “Hey, Mom! So of you to call...!”

My stomach sank at the word . This wasn’t a conversation I wanted to hear, but when I tried to get up, Emily waved me down. She didn’t miss a beat in the rhythm of her conversation.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, everything’s going great, just great. Yeah...” My neighbor paced around her side of the bedroom, her smile fading the whole time. I could relate. Trying to get a word in edgewise with my own mother was next to impossible.

“So, uh, about Daddy’s proposal? Yes, the roommate agreement.” Emily gave me a quick wink and a thumbs-up as she spoke. “Well, I’ve got good news! I found a nice young lady who’s agreed to stay with me for a while. She’s... no, Mom, not from work... no, she’s working in theater...” Emily rolled her eyes at me as her mother’s muffled voice rang out at her. Then she snapped back, “Look, it’s not out of the question for me to have a few friends who are artists, too! She answered my ad, we met for coffee, and it’s all fine now!”

I fought the urge to chuckle. The order was a little off, but Emily had more or less described how she’d roped her into her scheme.

Meanwhile, my neighbor dropped onto the bed beside me. I leaned back and tried to radiate positive thoughts at her as she withered under her mother's phone call. Emily kept glancing at me and trying to smile, but she didn't have the heart for it.

"I know," she said as soon as she got a break. "And I promise it'll be... yes? Yes, of course... yes, Mom, I know that..." Emily winced against another barrage from her mother's chatter. " , I promise I'll have everything arranged. It'll be , Mom." Then she glanced at me and grinned. "What's that? I think I hear my new roommate coming back from work! Oh, and she has groceries, too! I'd love to stay and chat, but she'll need my help! Give my best to Daddy, won't you? Love you, Mom! Okay, bye!"

And with that drama finished, Emily tossed her phone onto the carpet and flipped over onto her stomach. She clutched a white teddy bear to her face and let out a prolonged moan into its belly.

I sighed and reached over to pat her shoulder. "Parents are the worst, aren't they?"

"You're telling , " came her muffled reply. When Emily lifted her head, she cast a miserable glance my way. "At least yours don't visit too often."

"It's a mutual arrangement."

"Lucky you."

"Says the girl who doesn't wear diapers to bed."

"Hey, you never know." Emily's devil-may-care grin was back in action. "I just might try it out."

I blinked. "Um, what?"

"I'm kidding, Jordan." As she sat up, Emily stretched out her arms and legs. "But seriously, as soon as my folks arrive, I wouldn't be surprised if I started pissing my sheets every night, too."

The rouge on my face did nothing to hide the blush forming there. "Yeah, well, I stand by what I said. Parents are the worst."

"Can't live with them, can't get born without them." Emily chuckled and patted my hand. "Thank God for my awesome new roommate."

I ducked my head. "I'm only this cool because of your help."

“Awesome modest. What a winning combo.”

I laughed, but when I saw that Emily wasn't looking much better, I took her hand into my own. Emily's gaze flickered to me, and then over to her sad reflection in the mirror.

“What did your mother have to say?” I pressed, as gently as I could.

“She's confirming their travel plans.” Emily wilted in my grip, the poor little flower.

“They'll... they'll be here next Sunday.”

5. One New Message

Coffee had been my instant remedy all through my years of theatre training. At least, it was during the day. I knew all too well what a few late-night rounds of coffee did to my bladder when I slept. Waking up to a leaking diaper was just the worst. But still, between sunrise and sunset, I had to have my caffeine fix.

It was early in the morning when I walked down to the local coffee shop. Wearing jeans and a simple hoodie was reinvigorating. I didn't have to hide around Emily's house, just in case someone saw me in women's clothing. For a short window of time, I was free to be myself again, sans diapers, sans wig and makeup. And I soon realized how much I'd missed the warmth of sunlight on my face and the fresh autumn air chilling me to the bone.

Standing in line for my drink, though, I looked around at the regulars with a new pair of eyes. The actor in me wondered how these people would react if the female Jordan walked in, or how she might react to them. After all, she only existed inside Emily's house, especially when her parents were due to be there. She didn't actually go to the mall or to her job in Hollywood. Those were just lines from a script.

I frowned. Ahead of me, the barista smiled. I stepped up and ordered my usual.

The girl, however, was new. She picked up a black marker and held it to my cup before asking, "And your name?"

Her eyes flashed up at me. I froze.

For a split second, she looked at me almost the same way that Emily did.

I stumbled over my tongue. "Ahh, Jordan. Thanks."

After she rung me up, I wandered over to the pickup counter to wait. But my mind wandered farther. I kept seeing myself back home with Emily—and I was surprised at how easy it was to think of her place now as —and wanting to just lounge there with her. There'd been something so carefree in the way we'd snuggled up on the couch, binging on Netflix shows and having heart-to-heart chats, just like how real roommates did all the time.

My thoughts swirled around those moments. I could have floated in that headspace forever, were it not for two voices reaching me in quick succession.

"One large coffee for Jordan!"

“Jordan, hello! So good to see you!”

The first voice belonged to the barista who now served my drink. The second, though, was from behind. I grabbed my coffee and spun around to awkwardly smile at my neighbor Janice McCain.

I felt awful for thinking this way, but every time I saw Janice, I used her as inspiration for whenever I had to channel an old person’s voice. She was easily twenty years my senior, and while she looked good for her age, I could always hear those years in her slightly cracked voice. The obvious brown dye in her hair didn’t do her any favors either. But, as I looked her over in the coffee shop, I had to admit she took great care of herself. Not every housewife could look so good in jogging clothes.

“Janice, always a pleasure.” I raised my coffee in a mock salute. “Just get back from your run?”

“Oh my, yes!” Janice replied with a giggle. She grabbed a drink with her name on it from the counter. Some kind of fruity-flavor juice, loaded up with enough fructose that I could almost smell it. “You know, these old bones don’t treat me as well as they used to!”

I smiled. “Well, you’re an inspiration to us all. I can’t remember the last time I even hit the gym.”

That was a lie. I knew exactly how long it had been, but you had to say some things just to make polite conversation.

Janice, meanwhile, had leaned in conspiratorially. “So, have you heard the big news?”

I blinked. “No. Care to fill me in?”

“Oh, honey, I thought you would have seen it yourself.”

“Okay. Still not sure what we’re talking about—”

“About Emily.” Janice tilted her head to the side. “I thought you two were close.”

My stomach lurched, but I stayed on my feet. I kept up my poker face as I said, “We’re close enough, but I’ve been a homebody for a week now. What’s up with Em?”

Janice brightened. She never could resist a juicy bit of gossip. “Well, Maureen Davis told Alice and I over brunch that she saw Emily has a new roommate. And a cute one, too, by the sound of it.”

Now my stomach dropped several inches. If Janice had kept talking, I’m sure it would’ve pierced the earth’s mantle in a matter of seconds. My brain was split between trying to come up with a reasonable reply and straight up panicking over what would happen next for Emily and I. If the neighborhood knew, what might they say? And how would poor Emily handle the extra scrutiny when she already had her parents to consider?

I swallowed. My voice came out in a soft murmur. “Well, good for her. I’m glad to know she’s got a good friend living with her.”

“She is quite a darling,” Janice added in agreement. “Did you know she took such good care of my garden when Ted and I were on vacation last year?”

“I didn’t.” For once, that wasn’t a lie. I never pictured Emily as someone with a green thumb.

Janice rambled on in this fashion for a few more minutes. I played along, taking judicious sips of coffee and going, “Oh, really?” every thirty seconds. Fortunately, my older neighbor didn’t need much to be satisfied. Any warm body with functioning ears would do. After that, we shook hands and she left to continue her jogging routine.

Suddenly, I needed a refill of my coffee. As I got it from the counter, I grabbed the first available armchair and plopped myself down.

It was time to think things through. I needed to lose myself in this new role. That meant giving the world less of Jordan Kim and restricting myself to Emily’s house as Jordan Baker.

Let the neighbors talk. I’d give them all a fine show.

I was on my way back to Emily’s home when my phone buzzed. Stopping at the corner, I checked and saw I had a new email alert. Opening it up on the app, I read while I waited for a line of cars to pull through the intersection.

Then I nearly pissed myself. Of all the times to not be padded!

The email was from Greg, a good friend of mine who taught at the Community College. And what he had was an offer of a lifetime.

Greg had written,

My heart skipped a beat. I was ecstatic terrified. An actual teaching gig? How could I say no to that? I'd loved mentoring the younger actors who came onstage with me at the community theatre. Seeing their enthusiasm made me want to work hard, to show them what a real performance could be. And here was my chance to have a lasting impression on the next big wave of talent.

But the email flew in the face of everything I was setting out to do. I needed to help Emily. I wanted to rescue her from her miserable parents. And I couldn't do that if they ever spotted me walking out of my house in my finest suit.

I hung my head. The email sat in my inbox, unanswered, as I finally crossed the street.

Emily looked at me from across the dining room table. She looked like she was about to cry, and I hated myself for that.

"It's all my fault," she whispered. As I grabbed her hand, she shook her head. "I'm just standing in the way of your career. I'm so stupid."

"Em, don't say that. You're smart and beautiful." I winced as soon as the word slipped out. If I'd been dressed and acting like her female roommate, it would have been less weird. But not so much coming from the guy next door.

"I just don't know how else to handle this," Emily insisted. "My parents are gonna figure it out, and when they know I've lied to them, they're gonna make my life a living hell." She sighed. "Scratch that, they'll make my life even of a living hell. And yours, too, probably."

"They don't know me."

"Doesn't matter. They'll still tear you down."

“No, I mean, they don’t know me, Em.” As I spoke, I felt a little of Hamlet’s stratagems slip into my brain. To find a method to my madness. “That makes me dangerous, even if they don’t know it.”

Now Emily glanced at me. “What are you talking about?”

“Listen. Whatever happens when they get here, I can handle it. If they find any reason at all to criticize you for something, I’ll take the blame instead. I’ll make them how good you really are, Em.” I grinned at her. “Because that’s what roommates do.”

Emily stared at me. Then she sniffled and wiped at her eyes. “You’re nuts, you know that?”

I gave her hand a squeeze. “Of course. That’s why this plan is gonna work.”

For a second, she said nothing. Then Emily reached her other hand out and laid it on top of mine. She gave me a squeeze back and smiled.

“Thanks, Jordan. Let’s get started.”

6. The Arrival

“Emily, dearest, what is this? It looks like it was made in the Midwest. What happened to the nice rug I bought you from Monaco? It had such vibrancy! You can never have enough style in a place like this...”

“So... Jordan, is it? Emily tells me you work in theater. I hope you’re getting a good income out of it. Heh. Hollywood can be so overrated these days. No backbone, I tell you. None at all...”

“And, dear, what about these curtains? Roman ? Heavens, no. I’ll put in a call to Marge, and we’ll get some real window treatments in here...”

“WiFi’s isn’t looking too good either. I’ll have to speak to someone about ...”

I stood in the living room, hands clasped over my skirt, trying to smile my way through the endless barrage. Emily’s parents had proved, in hindsight, to be how I’d pictured them.

George and Virginia Parcher were an older couple with a strong sense of style and modesty. I could see how Emily got her looks and her fashion from her mother; Virginia, however, was still refusing to admit defeat when it came to the color of her hair and the lines in her face, using plenty of dye and cream to mask her age. The perpetual critical frown she wore didn’t help her much either. As for George, I had to stifle a blush every time I looked at him. Not because of his looks, but because of his dress. He literally was a dude in a polo shirt and khaki pants. Exactly the sort of guy that he and his wife were trying to set poor Emily up with all the time. And every time he spoke, I heard the entitlement in his voice. This was a man who was accustomed to talking over others the most in a boardroom meeting, and as I recalled, Emily had mentioned that he had been a banker before he retired.

For my first meeting, I played Jordan as demure and conciliatory. Another shy Korean girl as far as they were concerned. Virginia commented on my hair, and I almost laughed when she asked if the shine was “all natural.” George was more standoffish around me, for which I thanked God. The last thing I needed was another man sizing me up and realizing that something was off.

But none of that prepared me for how they laid into poor Emily. From the moment they walked through the front door, luggage in hand, they were scrutinizing her and the house. I felt each passive-aggressive barb as if it were directed at me. Emily nodded along to each new comment, flinching and wilting under the assault. I wanted to

throw myself in front of her, but I knew I couldn't dare. Still, every time she twisted her finger around a coil of hair and looked down at the floor, my heart sank.

Our first lunch was awkward enough. I served cold chicken sandwiches and glasses of white wine, praying that the vintage would be to their liking. I counted their noncommittal remarks on the food as a minor success; it gave Emily just enough breathing room from their constant criticism. And when they weren't doing that, George was going on and on about the latest round of golf he'd played with "the boys from PNC and Northern Trust," like we were supposed to know or care what any of that meant. Fortunately, I had my smile-and-nod routine down pat.

Hours later, after helping them settle into their guest room, Emily's parents announced that they were going out to the Malibu Bistro for dinner. It was easily the priciest restaurant in Thebes Park, but of course they could afford it.

"Jordan, would you care to join us?" Virginia smiled at me, but her tone sent an icy chill creeping down my spine. "I'm dying to get to know you better, dear. Emily hardly tells us anything anymore."

I spared a sidelong glance at Emily. She was shaking her head furiously, standing out of her mother's eyesight.

"I'd love to, but I can't, I'm afraid," I added in my feminine voice. "I have to take a conference call in half an hour. Costume consulting for a big shoot in Long Beach tomorrow."

"Oh, doesn't that sound exciting? You see, Emily? You could be doing important things, too."

Another glance at Emily's face told me exactly what she was thinking.

Meanwhile, George fiddled with the GPS on his phone. He didn't trust Emily to know the best route to find the restaurant, even though she'd been living here for three years. I could only stand there and watch, helpless to stop Emily from having to escort her parents out the front door and into their rental car. I could only smile and wave as they left the house.

Seconds ticked by. The pressure was rising now. I waited until I heard the car pull out of the driveway before I threw back my head and shouted, in my full natural voice, "Fuck !"

I was pissed, neighbors be damned. Who would do that to their daughter? And around her own roommate? I could see how Emily had been browbeaten into submission all her life, but having to watch it in action, as a fully grown adult, was ridiculous. No income bracket could justify the way Mr. and Mrs. Parcher tried to run their daughter's life for her.

And speaking of things to be damned, my bladder chose that moment to release. I wiped away tears as a trickle of pee soaked into the front of my diapers. I'd been holding it in for the entire afternoon. If I took too long in the bathroom, or if I'd tried to use my diapers discreetly, I'd be a poor reflection on Emily either way. And she needed all the help she could get.

With a sigh, I turned around and stalked my way to the master bedroom for a change. And if the tears were any indication, I'd need to touch up my eyeliner, too.

For better or worse, my evening alone at Emily's house was at least quiet. I made myself a sandwich with the leftovers from lunch, and I holed myself up in Emily's room for the rest of the night. My iPad still had plenty of charge left, so I could keep myself entertained with all the shows and movies still left on my Netflix queue.

Emily, however, didn't return until close to ten at night. I cringed when I heard the front door open and shut. Voices murmured briefly in the hallway outside, and I curled up into a ball around my tablet. But then I listened for the footsteps padding away, and another door being shut. My breath went tight and shallow as I turned down the sound on my iPad. Only when Emily herself opened the bedroom door and came inside did my heart start beating again, and I let out a small sigh.

She didn't look good. Her eyes were laden with bags, and she didn't so much walk as drag herself across the room. I offered a gentle wave, but she ignored me.

"Em?" I asked. "Is there something I can do for—?"

"N-no, not right now." Emily ducked her head. She lingered on the threshold to her bathroom. And when she looked over at me, she sniffled. "Sorry. Just... just give me a minute, okay?"

I nodded. She disappeared into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her hard enough to make the pictures on the wall shake.

With a sigh, I began to undress. Knowing beforehand that her parents were early to bed and early to rise, I resolved to go to bed myself. Taking one last look in the mirror, I smiled at my reflection. The girl who looked back at me was tired, but nowhere as bad as Emily looked. I knew I had to do something to make her smile once—just once—before this night was over. Or else what kind of a neighbor would I be?

The younger me would never have admitted it, but when I saw the pink fleece pajamas that Emily had bought for me a few days ago, I knew they'd look cute on me. For all the gloom and anxiety that her parents had summoned, I couldn't feel half so bad once I put these clothes on.

As I was still struggling to fit them over my diaper, the bathroom door opened. Emily came out. Rubbing at her eyes, she yawned and looked me over. Her eyes lit up for a second.

“Hey, beautiful,” she offered in a soft, almost-okay voice.

“Hey, yourself,” I added, one octave higher than usual.

Emily snorted and began to pull back the covers on her side of the bed. My heart skipped a beat, but I tried to play it cool. What would be wrong with two roommates sharing a bed? Of course, we didn't have the same genitals, but so what? I knew that nothing would happen between us tonight. Not like how my subconscious kept picturing it.

As I finished getting dressed, Emily shucked off her jeans and blouse in favor of her own pajamas. I couldn't help but notice that hers were a nice shade of baby blue. And yet, here I was, born male and wearing . . . Oh, if only my Gender Studies teacher could see me now.

But I couldn't stay amused for long. As soon as I sat down on the bed, I felt a slight squish between my legs. I glanced down at the bulge of my diaper.

My . . . diaper, in fact.

Blood running cold, I gave it a prod and groaned when I felt how warm and soaked it was. I had changed myself earlier, but at least that had been me using the diaper on purpose. I hadn't felt the slightest trickle here. Had Emily distracted me? I couldn't tell. And the thought of losing my bladder control outside of sleep scared me. It wasn't the sort of thing an actor wanted to present onstage, to have critics and audiences guessing at the bulge and crinkle beneath my outfits, ruining my big dramatic moment with a schoolkid's giggle from the cheap seats—

“Hey, Jordan?”

Emily’s voice brought me back at once. I looked over at her, biting down on my lip.

“Yeah?” I crossed my legs, but that only made my diaper squish loud enough for us both to hear. Emily drew back in surprise.

“Oh!” She clasped her hands together. “Did... did you have an accident?”

I blushed and nodded.

“Oh, sweetie.” Emily gestured behind herself. “God, if you were holding it because I was in the bathroom, I’m sorry, I—”

“Em, it wasn’t your fault. Honest.”

“Are you sure?”

“I swear, I didn’t even . I just... went.” The more I explained it, the hotter my face got. I had to avert my eyes and trace the patterns on Emily’s quilt instead. That was so much simpler. “I don’t know why it happened. Don’t blame yourself, okay?”

Emily approached my side of the bed. She wrapped her arms around me and whispered into my ear, “Okay. You know I’m here for you, right?”

“Yeah.” I closed my eyes and hugged her back. “Thanks, Em.”

“Anytime.” She stood and looked me over again. This time, her eyes lingered on the bulge around my waist. “My parents should be asleep by now. Can I at least help you get changed?”

I shifted in my seat, which made my diaper crinkle louder than usual. “That’s not really... I mean, you don’t need to...”

“Jordan,” Emily bit out. Her tone had sharpened and her eyes went hard. “Please, for the love of God, let me help. I’d... I’d appreciate it if I could do at least thing right for someone else tonight. Please?”

She didn’t need to tell me twice. I heard the strain in her voice, and I imagined what kind of a night out with her folks she must have had. This was old pain talking, not my neighbor.

I obliged her, and I laid myself down on the bed without a word. Emily smiled her gratitude at me and proceeded to grab her changing supplies from the closet. We'd taken the precaution of keeping them in a small trunk that she locked with a key from her nightstand. I thought she was being paranoid, but Emily had reminded me that her mother, older though she might be, still had a proclivity for snooping through her things.

With a diaper and wipes in hand, Emily got to work. She yanked down my pajama bottoms and untaped my diaper with a series of short, almost irritated gestures. Or maybe that was how I reading into it; the frown she wore had nothing gentle about it. I stared up at the ceiling. One less pair of eyes to judge her, I supposed. In any case, it felt good to have her wiping me down and sprinkling baby powder to cover up the fresh smell of pee. Almost like when I first put on my female disguise. A diaper change by myself was nothing new, but with someone else doing it for me, I could forget myself for a time.

A minute later, Emily had me in a clean diaper once again. She stuck each tape, fitting it as tightly as I would have done it. I wriggled a little to get comfortable, and then pulled my pajama bottoms back up.

"You did a good job," I offered. When I looked up, I was ready to see if she was still upset.

But instead, Emily smiled at me. An honest-to-God smile. She laughed and shook her head. "It's nothing. Just something roommates do, right?"

"Right," I answered. "And now roommate is telling you to get your butt to bed, missy."

She raised an eyebrow at me—a gesture I wished I could do naturally. "Don't you take that tone with me, little girl. I just changed your diaper, after all."

We stared at each other for a long moment. Then we broke into giggles, and Emily patted my arm before walking back over to her side of the bed. I moved to lock the door and turn out the lights. Behind me, I heard my neighbor slip under the covers and snuggle deep into her sheets.

My eyes fell heavy as soon as I got into bed myself. I almost forgot that I was still wearing my wig or a set of women's pajamas. Only the sudden swell of a certain organ between my legs reminded me that I was still male—and that I was climbing into bed with the girl next door, too. I hissed a mental warning at the little guy below the belt.

Now was the time for those antics. We weren't in college anymore, and Emily was in no mood for games. She needed a safe, non-judgmental friend more than anything right then.

"G'night," Emily whispered, her voice half-muffled by her pillow.

"Nighty night," I replied.

Try as I might, I drifted on the verge of sleep for a long time. Emily's body heat was so close in the darkness, even though I kept tugging further away to give her space. I couldn't talk down the erection underneath my pajamas, though it wasn't noticeable through the diaper bulge. A glance over my shoulder at the clock on the nightstand told me it was still close to midnight. Which, for me, was still early.

I sighed, and shifted around to face my pillow. But doing so brought me face-to-face with Emily.

"Um," I said.

Emily's smile was apparent, even in the darkness of her room. "I forgot to tell you something."

"What's that?"

"Thanks."

"Okay. What for?"

"For... well, everything. You did so good today."

"You think so?"

Emily's giggle warmed my heart. "So far, yeah. Mom and Dad don't hate you."

Now I had to laugh. "Well, that's a start."

"You have idea."

I didn't, but the fatigue in her voice told me plenty. My heart ached to hear it. I wanted to go back in time, either to comfort Emily in her childhood or to slap some sense into her folks. And if I were going to do that, I might as well try and do the same

with parents. Jordan Kim's Anti-Trauma Tour, a limited production coming soon to a theater near you.

"Hey." My hand snaked its way over the covers and onto Emily's shoulder. "You're doing great yourself. I can see how strong you're being. For both of us. I'm proud of you for that."

When Emily sniffled, I resisted the urge to cry. I wouldn't break down, not when she needed me to be strong for her.

"God," she whispered, "why couldn't be my mother?"

"I'm too young for the part." I grinned. "How about I be your big sister instead?"

Another giggle broke the darkness. Then Emily's arms slid around my waist, and her head fell against my chest. I held her as she snuggled into me, amazed that she somehow ignored the erection poking through my diaper. Yet not even a minute had passed before I heard her snoring, her body gone completely limp against mine.

I smiled and stroked her hair. After a moment, I could finally sleep, too.

7. Diplomatic Ties

It was still dark when I woke up next to Emily. She was half-buried in her pillow, half-dug into my shoulder. She was still cute in the morning gloom, even though her mouth was parted and she was snoring. I gently pushed her off as I got up.

In the bathroom, I changed out of my wet diaper, hopped in the shower, and took extra care when shaving. After reapplying my makeup—I swear I was getting faster at it these days—I took a long look in the mirror. With my wig off, I saw a dolled-up young man, wearing nothing but a towel. This wasn't the real me. But then again, the makeup didn't bother me whenever I was with Emily. I could be the Jordan, the girly roommate Jordan. Not the stressed-out actor, but the sympathetic friend.

Was there really a difference between them anymore?

My stomach gurgled, and I knew I needed breakfast before I could answer such questions.

And then, I had a brilliant idea.

Butter sizzled on the frying pan as I poured in the yolk, with just a dash of cream to give it body. Grabbing a fork, I started whipping up the eggs, letting the whisking rhythm lull me through my half-awake state. I felt so very maternal in the kitchen, wearing one of Emily's bathrobes and cooking, just like I'd done for her for the better part of a few weeks. I hummed a tune under my breath as I worked. One of those K-pop tunes that my cousin Lily was always sharing with me on Twitter, by some artist whose name I could never remember.

I was still in the act of serving up breakfast when I heard the shuffle of feet in the hallway outside the kitchen. Spinning around, I flashed a smile at George and Virginia. They both had bleary-eyed confusion written across their faces.

Virginia, at least, was quick to recover. She forced a smile and clapped her hands together. "Oh, well, now isn't a nice surprise? I would've thought you've be out for work, dear."

"Oh, don't worry, I will be." I didn't miss a beat as I slid one fresh helping of eggs and a side of bacon onto the plate. "But I figured the least I could do would be to make you two feel right at home. Since I can't be here all the time like Emily."

“How very thoughtful,” Virginia remarked. I listened for the barb in her words, but I didn’t quite hear it. Maybe she was too unused to my presence to be sarcastic.

Meanwhile, George had taken a seat at the table. He looked impressed when he examined the food I set down in front of him. After grabbing a fork and a napkin, he took a bite and chewed his eggs thoughtfully. Then he swallowed, and to my delight, his eyes fell shut.

“Now ,” he said, “is good. Your mother teach you to cook like that?”

“A little,” I admitted, offering a slight curtsy. “Some of it I learned from her, and some I learned from being on my own. Before I met Emily, that is.”

“You know, Emily’s been quiet about how the two of you met.” Virginia busied herself with the coffee maker, but she raised her voice enough for me to hear. “Did you always live here?”

“Not always...” I coughed. The tricky part of this role was to be as truthful as possible, even when spinning lies left and right. Borrowing from my own biography couldn’t hurt much. “I grew up here, but I spent college and a few years after graduation in L.A. But my salary couldn’t match the prices down there, so I moved back here.”

“Finding roommates must be tough,” George remarked.

I shrugged. “At first, but I got pickier about the people I lived with. And I can’t begin to tell you how much I adore your daughter. She’s the best housemate I’ve had yet.”

“Really?” George chuckled. “Well, don’t tell her that. She’ll get a swelled head.”

I smiled, but I didn’t drop the acid from my tone. “I can assure you, Mr. Parcher, there’s nothing wrong with her head. Not that I’ve seen, anyway.”

That shut him up, though I hid the rest of my smile by turning back to the stove. As much as I wanted to be polite and not offend Emily’s parents, their sensibilities sometimes left me with little choice. And for all I knew, maybe what they needed was a little crack in their worldview, a little shakeup to make them see that the world didn’t have to fit their standards all the same. And, by extension, neither did their daughter.

But a small part of me did regret saying how much I her. They didn’t seem to suspect my true gender—yet—but that kind of talk could be suspicious all on its own.

I could only imagine how they'd feel about a female roommate eyeing up Emily with scandalous intentions.

Yet even that thought made me want to toss a Pride flag in their faces, just to see their reactions.

I didn't have to stall for much longer. Emily herself came into the kitchen, inching her way in with some trepidation. She glanced at me, and then over at her parents. "Morning...?"

"Hello, sweetheart," Virginia greeted. She pulled out a chair for her daughter. "Your roommate's been nice enough to cook up this wonderful breakfast. I can't imagine how she must spoil you."

"Not the time," Emily answered. She took her chair and cast a knowing look at me. "Only for... special occasions."

"Like our dear guests," I added with a wink.

"Yeah. Something like that..."

We ate the rest of our breakfast in a less-than-comfortable silence. Every so often, I'd look up and catch Emily smiling at me. It was the first real smile I'd seen her show around her parents. Not a hint of strain to be found.

Another small victory. I had to take whatever I could get here.

As I'd promised Emily's parents, I stayed out of the house for the rest of the day. Sneaking out to borrow Emily's car—thanks to her defense of "It's a mutual arrangement, _____"—I put on a pair of Jackie O sunglasses and let my hair cover the rest of my face. Even though the street was quiet and inactive, I couldn't spare a single precaution. After all, my neighbor Maureen Davis had caught a glimpse of my new look at some point, and no one was a worse gossip than Janice McCain.

I drove off for a few miles, my eyes constantly darting to the rear view mirror. But no one was chasing me. No one was popping up in the backseat, ready to accuse me and spoil the whole game. That was just my nerves talking.

I thought to myself in Jordan's voice. The female Jordan, not the real me. Even though I was dressed as her—or was it as myself? I was deep into the part, after all.

Tired and confused, I switched on the radio to a station with enough Top 40 hits to take my head off this whole affair. My eyes fell back onto the road as I took side streets all the way to the edge of Thebes Park.

There was one secluded spot I could find for the day. Up on a hill that overlooked the small town, accessible by a winding road that was its own highway, I was able to park on a ledge that some developer had paved over with asphalt. The lot was empty at this time of day. There had been plans to build a mall up here, but they never came through, even though the lot had been set up. However, if you were a teenager or a college-age kid looking for someone private to be with your special someone, this was as good a make-out zone as any.

I parked and turned the car off. For a long moment, I stared at my reflection in the visor mirror over the driver's seat. I still saw a woman looking back, but I felt like a worn-out old gentleman. Even being around George and Virginia Pacher for a few minutes at a time was exhausting. My heart went out to sweet, gentle Emily, who'd been crushed underfoot by them all her life. No wonder she was so bubbly and lively when I met her; she'd been out of their house for a year.

A small voice in the back of my head wondered how she'd react around _____ once they left.

"Happy thoughts now," I murmured to myself, switching the radio back on. "We'll deal with that when we can."

As the melodies of some Kelly Clarkson clone washed over me, I gazed out over Thebes Park. It actually looked bigger from the hillside. And yet it couldn't compare to LA, where I still longed to be.

I shifted in my seat, feeling the bulk of my diaper under my jeans. At least in Thebes Park, I was under _____ scrutiny for what was between my legs than I would be in the big city.

Time passed. I listened to the radio, answered emails on my laptop, and occasionally watched a video or two. I knew I could be back at the house in the early afternoon, having made excuses about the "short job" in Hollywood that I'd been called out to handle. And with the supreme breakfast I'd offered them, how could George or

Virginia think poorly of me? But that meant I had to stay away for a certain amount of time, which meant fewer opportunities to shield Emily from them.

I blinked at that thought. Wow. When did I become her knight in shining armor?

Then I took a peek at my reflection in the visor mirror again. I thought,

A faint buzz grabbed my attention. I yanked my phone out of my pocket, thankful that I'd thought to wear slim men's jeans instead of the pocket-less women's pants. They looked about the same on me either way.

Three new messages from Emily flashed across my screen.

I grinned and typed back my reply, getting into a whole chat with her.

We chatted in that style for a bit. I don't know how she was able to do it so discreetly. Maybe her folks weren't paying that much attention to her—for a change.

As the sun rose higher, and Emily's texts dropped off around lunchtime, I began to consider my next moves. I could hide out at this hilltop for a long while, but I hadn't brought food. Finding a bathroom wouldn't be a problem since I was diapered, but I didn't have spare ones in my bag, so I'd have to change when I got home. And if I were going to do that, I'd have to move fast to avoid crossing paths with Emily's oh-so-considerate family.

My diaper rustled when I grabbed my seatbelt. I muttered a short prayer, readjusted my wig, and began the long drive back home.

My heart pounded in my chest as I pulled into the driveway. I didn't even put on my sunglasses as I bolted for the front door, using Emily's keys to get inside and then lock the door behind me.

Minutes later, I had slipped down the hall and into the master bedroom. Vaulting into the closet, I grabbed a clean diaper to replace my now-soggy one and did a pirouette right into the bathroom. My hand slammed the door shut, and I slumped against it, breathing hard.

My eyes found my haggard reflection in the mirror. Unladylike sweat had ruined my makeup. Worse still, my wig was askew to the left. Obviously a fake from this angle. I cursed and kicked my foot against the door. But that negative thinking wouldn't get me out of a sagging diaper any faster. My fingers twisted open my jeans, dropping them to my ankles as I un-taped the diaper and disposed of it in a second. I even made a mental note to spray a little Febreze once I was done. Poor Emily didn't need to come home to a bathroom reeking of urine.

"Come on," I whispered, yanking up the new garment between my legs. I'd put one on while standing only a few times, and every time, I found it too awkward. This time was no different.

I was still wrestling with the diaper's tapes when I heard a door slam outside. My heart froze. I hastily finished taping up and struggled to get my jeans back on. With only moments to spare, I got to the sink and turned on the faucet. Right on cue, someone knocked at the door.

"Occupied!" I called out in a falsetto.

"Sorry!" Emily answered. "Uh, no rush..."

I sighed and switched off the sink. My hands were clean enough. Leaning back against the door, I added in a softer voice, "Are... are you alone?"

"It's just me, I swear. Mom's in the other bathroom."

Pulling open the door, I looked over at Emily. She looked as tired as I felt, but her eyes still went wide when she saw my face. She reached for my wig, resetting it with a mere tug of her hand.

“Thanks,” I grumbled. “Oh, and, uh... sorry about the smell. I had to change very fast in there.”

Emily shook her head. “Don’t even worry about it. I’ll handle it.”

“That’s not—”

“Roommates, remember? We share our bathroom, right?”

“Right. Uh, thank you.”

“And thank for answering my texts earlier.”

“Was it that bad?”

“I almost got into a fight with Dad.”

“About what?”

“Community theater, if you can believe it.”

I scoffed and pressed a hand to my breast. “And you didn’t think to include ? What gives, Em?”

Emily giggled. She crossed her arms and said, “Hey, if you wanted to spend time with my folks badly, I wished you’d have told me. I could be sunning on a beach right now.”

“Hmm, point taken.”

As I stepped out of the bathroom, Emily pushed past me. I cast a guilty look over my shoulder, but she didn’t react to the strong pee smell filling the room. She hummed as she grabbed the can of Febreze from under the sink and started spraying it around. A sigh of relief escaped my lips, and I headed over to the closet. In my haste, I’d left the trunk open and my diapers clear enough for anyone to see. The trunk was closed and locked up again, and as I shut the closet door, I had to shake my head and laugh at my predicament.

Playing the lovely friend Jordan couldn’t even compare to Hamlet or Marius. For all the weight and sorrow of those parts, having to perform as a preppy, polite Korean girl day and night was beginning to tax my creative abilities.

I fell to my knees and dropped my head on Emily's side of the bed.

One more day. I knew I could make it.

8. Homecoming

Tuesday morning, 11:48 a.m. Only a few more minutes to go.

Having built up their expectations about me the day before, I treated Mr. and Mrs. Parcher to another fine breakfast and a boisterous little speech about how grateful I was for their daughter's kindness. All to explain how I "spoiled" her, as they put it. And they accepted my words, being sufficiently flattered into thinking what a good job I'd done with Emily. Sure, Emily had told me they might forget all this within a few days, but at least she could send them off on a better note than she had before.

I stood on the threshold of the front door—trying to stay out of my neighbors' view—and watched Emily help her parents load their luggage into the car. I waved and smiled, ready to offer any parting words, any last little dig at their point of view. But thank heavens, they were subdued this morning. George, in particular, wouldn't keep eye contact with me.

Emily kissed them both goodbye. She retreated to the door, and we watched the car pull out of the driveway. Neither of us said a word nor moved a muscle. We kept a perfect vigil as the Parchers' sedan drove up the block and back to the highway.

As soon as I closed the door behind me, Emily dropped to her knees. I ran to her side, but I didn't need to worry.

She was shivering with barely held-in laughter.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Oh my God. Oh my God, we did it! It's over! Oh, thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You were flawless," I said, and wrapped my arms around her shoulders.

"Me? Christ, Jordan. None of this would've happened without you."

"I know, sure—"

"You saved me from an arranged marriage. I'm eternally in your debt."

"Awesome. Then how you buy me dinner for once?"

"Jordan." Her voice went soft, and my heart skipped a beat. With tender eyes, Emily searched my face. She laid her hand against the curve of my jaw. "I mean it. You... you

saved my life. You really are..." She shook her head, trying to think up the right word. "...Special."

I sniffed and looked away. After a moment, I said, "Shucks, Em. I mean... thank you. I'm happy I could help. And, you know, it's been a very unusual acting experience for me."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"I did."

"I swear, I won't ask you to do it again—"

"But I'd be happy to—"

We froze and stared at each other. Our answers came out in unison, and I didn't have the first damn clue where to go from there. Apparently, neither did Emily. I blushed and hid my face in the long locks of my wig.

Emily sighed and leaned against my shoulder. I nudged her head with my cheek. Then I helped her to her feet, and we made our way over to the bedroom. I was looking forward to being back in men's clothing, and I was glad that I could be seen with Emily in public again.

Where we would go from there would be anyone's guess.

Chinese food in Thebes Park wasn't too bad on its own. But in the spirit of celebration, the feast of dim sum and egg rolls that Emily and I enjoyed that night was marvelous. True to her word, she paid for the meal, but I had to contribute a bottle of white wine.

I just didn't expect that we'd go through it so .

Emily was red-faced and grinning through her third glass. She danced to the tune of the movie we were watching—I forget which one, some Wes Anderson romp. I sat on the couch, enjoying my wine and her company. Through the haze of our partying, I'd thought ahead and slipped into the bathroom to put on a diaper. Not that I was the type to get piss-your-pants drunk, but a little protection wouldn't hurt. I tried to hold it anyway, but between the heavy dumplings and the wine, I couldn't keep my eyes open all the way.

“ Emily’s voice rose high and warbled as she danced to the Bowie song that was currently playing on TV. “

“Hot tramp, I love you so,” I murmured. That lyric, like so many others from the era, was embedded in my skull. But, I reflected, it felt appropriate for the evening.

Part of me was still adjusting to the lack of a wig on my scalp. And while I’d gotten used to being diapered before bed, I didn’t have any of the women’s outfits that Emily had bought me. Even my face felt lighter without a layer of makeup, though I didn’t miss the fear of trying to keep it neat every waking moment. The absence of George and Virginia Parcher was a huge relief; you could feel the air getting brighter and cleaner now that they were gone.

But if that were true, why the hell was I still so down?

Emily didn’t notice. She was lost in her own happy world, where everything was sunshine and kittens on fluffy clouds. I could watch her twirl around the den for hours, but I had to get back to my place at some point.

I frowned into my wineglass. Something was wrong with me. A few weeks ago, the thought of being at my house would have been a huge comfort. Now it felt like a prison sentence. But that wasn’t fair. I’d built up the place to be exactly what I wanted. It wasn’t the kitschy, second-rate house that my parents would have liked, but that was the point. It was . . . And no one else’s.

, I thought. I sighed and took another drink.

Meanwhile, the song had finished, and the movie continued. I wasn’t even watching anymore. My thoughts had gone heavy and dark. I couldn’t tell if I needed more liquor or less. At least I wouldn’t have a red wine headache the next morning.

But before I could get up with my glass, Emily flopped onto the couch beside me. I tried to escape her grip, but she caught me in a snugly vise with her arms, pulling me back and resting her head on my shoulder. I rolled my eyes and fell back with her. Why would I bother getting up? No one could refuse a cute face like hers. Not even when she talked her neighbor into wearing women’s clothing and diapers around her parents.

Of course, who else me would be crazy enough to do that?

“Jordan?” Emily’s voice came out as a soft, half-slurred tone. I looked at her and smiled. She smiled back. “You’re... you’re quiet tonight, aren’t ya?”

“What gave me away?”

She giggled. “You’re funny, too. I like that ’bout ya.”

“Thanks, Em.”

“Em...”

“Yes, that’s your name.”

“No, I mean, it’s weird...”

“What?”

She shrugged and sat up a little more. I still couldn’t escape her death grip of a hug.

“It’s the weirdest thing,” said Emily. “I know lots of people. Like, lots of friends, and... no one but calls me Em.”

“Oh, I’m sorry—”

“No, it’s fine. Really.”

“I guess it’s just a habit. You never seemed to mind.”

“I don’t mind.” Emily smiled, sending a shiver down my spine. “I don’t mind at all.”

That shiver kept traveling. It prompted another twinge below my belt—and then another. And another. But it wasn’t the fun kind of twinge that so many romance novels talk about. It was the twinge of being about to pee myself in front of Emily. Something I’d only done once before. I wasn’t too keen on repeating that experience.

As I tried to sit up, Emily frowned. “Jordan?”

“S-sorry, I have to go.”

“No, wait. Can’t you stay just a little bit longer—?”

“No, I mean, to the bathroom.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “. Never mind.”

With that, I dashed off the couch and raced down the hall to the guest bathroom. I made it inside, yanked off my pants, twisted out of my diaper, and relieved myself in the toilet with a sigh. I could have stood there forever, but as I took care of business, I had to pause and wonder at what I’d just heard my neighbor say.

I blinked. Was she serious?

When I’d finished and flushed, I mulled the idea over as I washed my hands. The cool water kept me grounded enough to think. There was Emily on the couch, her eyes gentle and pleading like so many times before. Begging me to help her. Asking me to be her savior. Trying to form a connection. I could see it all so clearly now. She was still the same person as before, still bright, cheerful Emily Parcher. The cute girl next door.

But when I thought of her as now, my heart did a samba dance.

I looked up at the mirror, judging my reflection. If I squinted hard enough, I could still see traces of Jordan the female roommate looking back at me. A few feminine curves in my face, especially I tilted my head and smiled a certain way.

Did Emily see this, too? Had being her fake roommate changed things between us?

All her words came flooding back to me in an instant. Every syllable infused with affection. And the way she smiled, the way she laughed and looked at me when she said those words—they took my breath away every time. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had looked at me the way Emily had then.

I couldn’t imagine what I’d do without her looking at me that way.

Having hid out in the bathroom long enough, I went back to the den. Emily was sprawled out on the couch. The movie had ended, and she was flipping through channels. When she noticed me returning, she perked up and scrambled to give me some room.

“All better now?” Emily asked.

I sat down and nodded. “Yeah, I’m good. Thanks.”

“No problem.” Compared to how she was before, Emily didn’t slump into my side or get grabby. She seemed embarrassed. Her eyes kept darting over the carpet, and her hands twisted together in her lap. Watching her made me feel embarrassed, too.

With a sigh, I leaned forward and glanced at her. “So, Em, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Well, it’s about us.”

Her body seized up. Emily’s eyes flashed over me. “Y-yeah?”

I rubbed at the back of my neck. Without the wig, it felt ridiculously bare. “I, uh, don’t know how to put this.”

“Oh. Well, take your time.”

“Okay...” I let the silence build a little longer, just to organize my thoughts. “So, I gotta say, it’s been more fun than I would have expected being your roommate. I didn’t even mind doing it around your parents—not I want to what they did or said. Because , Em.”

She giggled, and I continued.

“I just wonder where things are between us now. Like, if you said a month ago that I’d be dressing up in girly clothes for you, or that I’d let you change my diaper, I wouldn’t have believed you. I almost can’t believe I did all that stuff. But it’s real. It happened, and... well, I guess I’m okay with the fact that it happened.”

“Jordan...”

“Emily, I’m glad to be your friend.” I turned to her. “I just wanted you to know—”

The words died on my tongue when I saw how close she was.

And my heart damn near stopped when she leaned in and kissed me.

I kissed her back. When our eyes opened again, Emily chewed on her bottom lip. I saw the worry rising in her eyes, could sense the panic bubbling up anew, and if I weren’t careful, the same would happen to me, too.

So I reached for her face and pulled her back for another kiss.

Somewhere in the tangle, we fell against each other. I moaned into Emily’s mouth as she rang her fingers through my hair. I gasped, savoring the weight of her body on top of mine. Her small, perky breasts bounced against my chest, and I couldn’t stop myself from getting hard through my jeans. It even made my diaper rustle, which made Emily giggle. She planted a trail of kisses down the side of my face, and I shuddered at the thrill that washed over me.

My hand snarled itself through her hair, and Emily laughed again. She leaned up and planted a kiss on my lips, and then another on the tip of my nose. I kissed her on the cheek and pulled her head onto my shoulder, desperate to catch my breath.

“Emily... I, uh...” I shook my head and gasped. “Oh, God, that... that was...”

“I know...” Emily was breathless, too. She grabbed my other hand and intertwined our fingers. “I couldn’t.... oh, I couldn’t help myself...”

“You really don’t want me to leave, do you?”

“Not on your life. Roommate.”

“Am I just your roommate now?”

She paused and moved her head to look askew at me. Her eyes scanned my face, and for a moment, I felt self-conscious without my makeup and outfits.

“You’re special to me,” Emily whispered, dropping her head onto my shoulder again. “I don’t care if you’re a guy or a girl, Jordan. I just want this.” She lifted our hands up and smiled. “Just this, all the time. If you don’t mind?”

“Not at all.” I leaned in and kissed the back of her hand. “Guy or girl, Em. I’m yours.”

9. Mapping It Out

Waking up to a rainy morning was fine; waking up next to Emily was better. I lay beside her in the quiet twilight of the bedroom, watching her chest rise and fall in a slow, even motion. The constant patter of raindrops against the windows kept me lulled into a state of half-slumber. I couldn't be bothered to get up and leave. Not even to change my diaper. Not even to follow my routine and put on the wig and makeup that Emily always kept handy for me.

Her parents were gone—finally! Why bother with any of that now?

And yet, my eyes drifted over to the nightstand. My black wig sat curled up like a sleeping cat. The lipgloss and eyeliner were just within reach.

I glanced back at Emily. At the girl I'd kissed numerous times the night before. My lips trembled at the memory, and I stared up at the ceiling in disbelief.

I didn't know which Jordan I was anymore. There was a Jordan that Emily had molded from an anxious young man into a fine young woman—and into the girl whom she'd fallen in love with. Jordan Kim, after all, was nothing more than Emily's neighbor. He knew his limits around her. But Jordan Baker was different. Nothing was off-limits with her. She was the cool roommate, the sweet but sensual friend who could woo even the most hardhearted parents. Going deep into a role was nothing new for me; I'd get depressed after a few weeks of playing Hamlet and other tragic characters, like a bad dream I couldn't shake off. But the last few days with Emily had been different. I couldn't help but go back to playing the other Jordan.

Sighing, I reached down and tapped at the wet padding between my legs. At least that other Jordan and I had thing in common.

When I turned over, finally deciding I might as well stop stalling, I felt a weight across my chest. I looked down at Emily's arm crossing my shirt, and my eyes darted over to her face. Her eyes were open and staring right back at me.

"Hey," she whispered.

"Um... hi."

"What's your hurry?"

I turned over to fully face. "I was, uh, gonna get changed."

Emily's hand crawled down my belly, from one fingertip to the next, inch by inch. She came to a stop around my diaper's waistband, her fingers teasing the edge. Her eyes locked onto my face again, and I blushed.

"You sure it can't wait?" she asked.

I bit on my bottom lip. "Em..."

"Come on. Stay a little longer. I don't have to work until noon today."

"But my house... the neighbors..."

"Forget them."

"Emily—"

"I'm , aren't I?"

"Yeah?"

"So let's have some fun for once."

Her hand slid itself over the bulging front of my diaper. I groaned, and Emily leaned over to plant a kiss on the side of my neck.

I thought.

She dropped her head onto my shoulder. I slid my arms around her waist, mere seconds before she grabbed hold of me through the front of my diaper. My breath went shallow as she started to massage the front, teasing me. I buried my face in her hair. Emily giggled and began to rub me harder—and harder still. In my mind's eye, I wasn't myself anymore. I was the other Jordan again. Longhaired, grinning, passionate Jordan. Sensual, generous, loving Jordan!

It wasn't until we were both rocking against each other in the bed, our hips flexing, our breathing hard, that I finally groaned out, "Ohh, honey... oh, God, I'm almost there..."

"Come on, girl," Emily insisted, equally breathless. "Give it to me..."

"I'm gonna—"

And then I did. All at once, an eye-opening release right into my diaper, with Emily's hand still locked in place over it. I gasped and sweated, falling limp against my partner as she stroked the side of my face. She planted a trail of kisses down my neck and over my chest. I moaned into her hair one last time before collapsing against my pillow.

In the gloom, Emily's smile shone out. "Wow..."

"I know..."

"Best. Roommate. Ever."

"Right... right back at ya..."

"And, hey, you didn't mess up my sheets." Emily's giggle sent a shiver through my neck. "Thank God for your diapers."

I was almost tempted to add "Thank God your parents aren't here," but I clamped down on that urge. The last thing we needed was something to kill this beautiful moment. Nothing would do that faster than bringing up Mr. and Mrs. Parcher of Doom-and-Gloom, Orange County.

Instead, I lay back and cuddled against Emily. We held onto each other and listened to the rain for as long as we could.

It was mid-afternoon when I came across an unusual sight in the living room. Emily lay across her couch, facedown and peering into her tablet. A heavy sketchpad lay within arm's reach, with dozens of pencils scattered on top. She stared into the screen as a delicate finger traced designs into one of her art programs. It wasn't the fact that she was attending to her day job that took me by surprise. It was the change in her demeanor. For the last few weeks, I'd seen Emily switch between one of two moods: bouncy smiles and anxious frowns. It had almost been enough to remind me of one of my exes, a girl who had been diagnosed as bipolar. But at least I knew Emily wouldn't try to steal my keys or accuse me of cheating on her Facebook page.

But here was yet another side of Emily: quiet and attentive. She didn't seem all that aware of the world around herself. I watched one of her feet tap itself against a couch cushion in regular time, beating out a rhythm I couldn't hear. If not for how important her work was to her, I would've risked remarking on how cute she looked.

Leaning on the doorway, I tried to sort things out between us in my mind. I couldn't help but grin when I thought about the intimate moments we'd shared the night before and early that morning. Emily's carefree laugh, her warmth against my chest, the scent of her hair—it was addicting. I couldn't get enough of her. Couldn't get enough of .

But where did that leave us now? Would it be fair of me to just sneak back next door and go on like before? And what if her parents arranged a surprise visit? I knew that last worry was anxiety talking, but even so, I couldn't take that risk. I knew what they were like now.

Racked with indecision, I retreated to the bedroom. I stared at my reflection in Emily's mirror. Tired, sad, confused Jordan Kim stared back. I couldn't even see the guy I was in public, the one who dazzled neighbors and audiences alike with , as one reviewer put it. I tried a smile. When that didn't work, I rubbed my hands across my face and went for a stern glare. That only made me look away in revulsion. I went from one expression to the next. The Nervous Frown. The Sneer of Contempt. The Face of a Man About to Throw Up, and so on...

After a moment, I noticed that my hand kept slipping away to the back of my neck. I scratched at it, but felt nothing odd. It wasn't itching or anything—

And then it hit me.

It itching. It was too bare to cause that familiar itch, the one I got from wearing a wig.

And here I was, sitting in Emily's bedroom, feeling like a stranger. Because, as far as we both were concerned, Jordan Kim a stranger there.

Jordan Baker, her classy roommate, on the other hand...

Now I could grin at my reflection.

I didn't waste a moment. After closing the door, I went to dig through Emily's closet. There I found everything I'd need: a clean white blouse, a long cerulean skirt, some hosiery that would fit, a padded bra, and a clean diaper. All I'd need was five to ten minutes to myself.

While I got changed, I kept sneaking glances at myself in the mirror. A half-finished woman looked back at me. And when I was diapered and wearing at least a blouse and bra, I saw more of the girl I wanted to be. I didn't even need the wig or makeup to feel

complete. But this wasn't me coming out as trans. Not exactly. I didn't want to be a woman the time. It was more like I only wanted to be a woman around one special person.

Around the most important person in the whole world to me.

With a few finishing touches, I took a chance to smile at the lady in the mirror. Just like the first time I'd dressed up, I was back in that happy-go-lucky mode. Here was Jordan without worries or responsibilities. Here was Jordan lost in another role: a command performance for an audience of one.

Barely had I finished applying my makeup when I heard Emily knock on the door. "Jordan?"

"Yeah, Em?"

"Can I come in?"

"Um..." I looked over at the bed, where my men's clothing and a package of diapers lay in the open. "Y-yeah. Just gimme a sec."

"Kay."

As I moved to clean up, my pulse raced. For once, though, it wasn't the dread of being caught. I knew her parents were long gone—though, knowing my luck, they could've shown up in the driveway at that exact moment. No, this was better. This was the adrenaline thrill right before the curtain went up. This was the beautiful pause when you walked out on stage, waiting that solitary beat before you delivered your first line. This was the amazing pause between the last line of the show and the part where the audience started clapping and cheering.

Screw Greg's acting class. I couldn't find better material than the show I gave in my best friend's house night after night.

"Jordan?" Emily's voice reached me from across the door. "Hey, everything okay in there?"

To answer her question, I reached over and opened the door. "I don't know. You tell me."

Her hands flew to her mouth. "Oh! Um, hi!"

I grinned. “Hello to you, too!”

“You... you know you don’t have to do this for now, right?”

“I know. I to do this, Em.”

“Really?”

“Really.” I took her by the hand and led her into the bedroom. “I... I don’t always know how to explain it, but... I this. Not every day, and not every waking moment, but for now, this is nice. I...” Now I had to duck my head. “I like the way you look at me when I’m like this.”

Emily’s eyes misted over. “You really are beautiful, Jordan. Even if I did make you this way.”

“You should be proud of what you’ve created.” I cupped her chin with my other hand and met her eyes. My smile and my voice softened. “I know I am, Emily.”

She chewed on her bottom lip for a second. Then she said, “Can I add a condition?”

“Sure thing.”

“If you’re going to keep dressing up, then I only want you to do it for me when we’re alone.”

“Deal.”

“Really?”

“You keep using that word—”

“Shut up!” Emily laughed and gave me a playful tap on the cheek. “You’re terrible, you know that?”

I leaned over and planted a kiss on her forehead. “I sure do, Em. I sure do.”

Emily looked me up and down. When I did a little twirl, she nodded and clapped her hands together. I ended with a curtsy, and Emily snorted. Not a proper thing for a lady to do, but it sounded cute to my ears.

We shared a laugh, and I headed over to the living room. Emily joined me on the couch and snuggled into me with a sigh. Her head fit so neatly against my shoulder. Like it belonged there. Which, of course, it did.

“Hey,” she said after a moment of silence.

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been trying to work something out. Ever since Mom and Dad left.”

“Oh. Okay?”

Emily’s finger twisted itself around a lock of her hair. She glanced at my face, then over at the carpet, and then back at my face. I shifted on the couch and let her sit up a little.

“I think I realized something that’s been missing from my life. When you tally everything up, I’ve got a nice job, a good set of friends, a cool house, and one really neighbor...” I blushed, but she went on. “But that’s not all I want. Those are things I have. They’re not the things that make me feel complete. Like how being an actor is what you love to do, right?”

I smiled. “Sure. It’s what I’m good at. Like you and your drawing.”

“Yeah, but I could draw anywhere. That’s just for some of the bills.” Emily chewed on her bottom lip and searched my face. “But it didn’t hit me until this morning.”

“Oh.” I could feel my cheeks turning red, not that I could’ve stopped myself. “Yeah...”

“You had fun, right?”

“I... I did.”

“I did, too. But what I realized was that I like taking charge the way I did with you. And not just like that, you know?” Now Emily did sit up, never once taking her eyes off me. “Ever since you started living with me, Jordan, I’ve been so happy doing all these things for you. Buying you clothes. Helping you put on makeup. Even changing your diaper. It’s made me feel complete as a person. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.” I paused to gather my thoughts. It wasn’t easy looking into such a cute face. “You’re saying that you like being a... a caregiver. Is that it?”

“Kinda, yeah. Not, like, twenty-four hours a day or anything.”

“No, I got ya. You like being the provider.” I grinned. “Well, from one actor to another, I think it’s a role that suits you.”

Emily smiled, but not for long. Her face fell a little. “I’m a bit worried, though.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s the kind of role that my parents would’ve pushed me into, don’t you think?”

“I... God, no! Em, where did you even get that—?”

“Sorry!” She clasped her hands together in a pleading gesture. “I didn’t mean to bring them up!”

“Hey, it’s all right. This is a safe space.” I winked and took her hand to my lips. “Cool roommate, remember?”

Emily giggled. “Right. The best.”

“So that’s fine. I don’t mind hanging out and letting you being a caretaker. But I need to have some time to myself, you know. Time for work and the occasional night back at my house. Just to placate the neighbors, you know?”

“Oh, of course!” Emily grinned and fell into me with a hug. “Jordan, you rock! I’m glad you get me.”

“Me, too, kiddo.”

When she pulled away, Emily’s grin shrank to a smile. She leaned in and pecked me on the lips. I responded with another peck. I felt ready to lunge forward and add another dose of nightly passion, but she stopped me with a finger to my lips.

“Before we go further tonight,” she said, “I’ve got a favor to ask.”

10. Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

We sat together in the bedroom, almost but not quite touching. I wore the pink-and-purple pajamas that she had bought me, and Emily wore a silky white nightgown for the occasion. With the lights off and the door closed, I wanted to do so many things with Emily.

, my subconscious added.

I couldn't act on those instincts just yet. I was too busy staring at the unfolded diaper in my hands.

"You're sure about this?" I asked, possibly for the two-hundred-and-twelfth time.

"Oh, my God, Jordan." Emily flicked a finger at the back of my neck. "For the last time, . I trust you. I like you. I want to get to know this side of you."

"But it's not a 'side,' Em. It's my..." I struggled to find the right words. You'd think that'd be easy for an actor. "My condition. I have to live with it. But you don't."

Emily's smile shone bright and clear in the darkness. "You're right, but you're also wrong, you know?"

"Uh... no?"

"I want to see things from your perspective." She laid her hand over mine, making the diaper crinkle and my heart race fifty miles an hour. "I know you think being a bedwetter isn't fun and games, and I get that. I really do. But if we're going to make this relationship work, then I want you to know that I'm here for you. That I accept you. And if I'm going to be a better caretaker, then I need to see how this works from the other side first."

I didn't think it was possible for Emily to look more beautiful to my eyes, but here she was. A few simple words that added so much charm and light to her face. I was sure I was about to die of shock at any moment.

"O-okay," I finally said. Taking her wrist with one hand, and holding up the diaper in the other, I turned toward her and tried to smile. "Then, you know the drill?"

Emily nodded. Without a word, she fell back onto the bed and reached down for her underwear. I couldn't resist watching her slide off her panties. In that moment, I was

thirteen years old again and trying to peek on the girls changing in PE. When those panties hit the floor, I swallowed and moved to stand over my new girlfriend.

. Just thinking it made me feel light and happy all over again. I ducked my head and hid my smile, letting the diaper take all my attention.

To her credit, Emily was quiet and patient throughout the whole ordeal. She stared up at me as I slid the diaper underneath her, and her cheeks turned a little red (or so I thought) when I pulled the diaper into place. I couldn't decide if I was more of a Mommy or Daddy figure as I taped the garment up, but I could tell that she was getting into a baby girl role all by herself. Still, as cute as she was, I didn't want to baby my new love interest. Treat her the way I'd like to be treated, I decided.

When it was done, I gave Emily a pat on the butt. She giggled and shifted around. "Wow, this feels so weird!"

"You get used to it," I replied. "Just give it a few years."

Emily giggled again and sat up. She squirmed in place, grinning as the diaper rustled underneath her. "Yeah, okay. I guess I can see it." Her smile, however, dropped. Her eyes fixed on my face with a more serious expression. "Um, so..."

"Yeah?"

"I guess, if we're serious about this...?"

"Say what's on your mind, Em."

"Well, I should... this, right? Like how you use it?"

"Er..." I rubbed at the back of my neck. At least this time I was wearing the wig. It added a layer of security that I so desperately needed right then. "Right. Well, yeah, I mean... look, it's entirely up to you. Whatever makes you comfortable."

"No, I mean I to try it." Emily's face contorted into a silent plea. "I just don't know how."

"Oh." Then, I blinked. " , I see."

"Right? It's, like, all my muscles don't wanna let go."

I had to pause and think about it. Thanks to enuresis, wetting my diaper required no effort at all on my part. No matter what my mother had insisted, I had no control over my bladder at night. If it came down between soaked bedsheets or a soaked undergarment, I'd choose the latter. Even the few accidents I'd had during the day were out of necessity—and both, I realized, because of how I'd tried to accommodate Emily. Now she was looking to do the same for me, to realize that little burst of humiliation, to know how I felt and to see how she could make me feel When that thought struck me, I couldn't help but smile in gratitude for how life had turned out.

And I couldn't let my "roomie" down either.

Taking her hand, I sat down on the bed beside Emily. Pulling her into my lap, I brushed at her hair. Her eyes drifted shut, and I leaned over to whisper into her ear. "It's okay, sweetheart. Just breathe in... and out. Breathe in, and out."

When she kept her eyes shut and did as she was told, I placed my hand on the small of her back.

"Now just picture those muscles down there letting go," I added. "Let it go, let it all go..."

Emily let out a tiny squeal. Her eyes flew open a second later, and I immediately glanced down. Her legs shifted, but not enough to hide the growing wet patch on the back of her diaper. I didn't mind even when Emily dug her fingers into my arms. The higher her squeal became, the tighter she gripped onto me. Like any good friend, I ignored the pain and focused on what she needed. I held her until she'd finished. Then I patted her on the back.

"There we go," I whispered. "Not so bad, is it?"

"It's . . ." Emily pressed a hand against the front of her diaper. When it squished at her touch, she let out a tiny cry and laughed. Collapsing against me, we fell back onto the bed. "Oh, God! That's hot! Oh, geez, I can feel it moving!"

I laughed, too. I couldn't help but laugh. Who would've guessed I'd be doing this with my next-door neighbor? And in drag, no less? Speaking of which, as I smoothed back some of the false hair from my face, I felt motherly holding Emily to my chest. That sensation only grew stronger as I reached down to pat her warm, wet diaper. She giggled when I gave her padded butt a good squeeze.

“Ooh, someone’s frisky.” Emily’s eyes flashed toward my face again. “Is this what turns you on?”

“What, being wet?” I chuckled. “Listen, sometimes when I need a little... self-pleasure, I don’t mind if there’s a bit of pee to work past. It’s not taking away any of your charm right now.”

Emily didn’t respond at first. She blushed and ducked her head against my chest. For a moment, I thought I’d offended her. I had an apology on the tip of my tongue when she looked back up and smiled coyly.

“I can’t believe I never met anyone as sweet as you,” said Emily. She leaned up and kissed me on the lips.

I kissed her back. Within a minute, her eyes fluttered half-shut. I decided to show some initiative and carried her over to her side of the bed. After double-checking that my own diaper was still dry, I pulled away the sheets and got into bed myself. Emily sighed and snuggled against me. I brushed at her hair with one hand and patted her diaper with the other.

I couldn’t have asked for a better end to a day than this.

Everything was a groggy mess inside my head the next morning. As I roused myself out of bed, I paused to look at Emily. She looked so innocent when she slept, and the fact that she was wearing a diaper—for me—only made me love her more. If I had been like the guy in some rom-com, I would have leaned over and stolen a kiss before she woke up. Instead, in the real world, I glanced down at my pajama bottoms and shifted in place. Sure enough, I had a wet diaper of my own to worry about.

Changing it only took a few seconds of my time in the bathroom, followed by a nice hot shower. As I dried myself off, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. For just this morning, I decided to take a break from my female persona. It’d been enough to make Emily happy yesterday, and I knew I’d be doing it more often in the future. But today, I had the urge to get out of the house and do something Emily. As a couple.

When I got dressed and came back into the bedroom, Emily yawning and stretching in bed. She flipped over and smiled up at me.

“Morning!” she said. Then her face turned a bit red. “Um, can I, er, ask a favor?”

I smiled. “You want me to help you get changed?”

“It’s not a problem for you, is it?”

“Not at all, Em.” I walked over, bent down, and kissed the tip of her nose. “Not at all.”

Emily giggled and pushed away the covers. She slid down her bottoms as I went to her dresser, but before I could open the drawer, she called out to me. I looked back at her and frowned.

Then Emily shook her head and pointed to the closet. “It’s okay, Jordan. Just get me a new one.”

I blinked. “I... oh! I didn’t realize you wanted to—”

“Of course I do! Like I told you last night, I want to get to know this side to you.”

“Even during the day?”

Emily nodded. “It’s... a little scary. But not so scary because I know you’ll be doing it with me.”

Suddenly, my plans for us going out together got a lot more complicated. But seeing her in bed, with her pants off and her wet diaper out in the open, made her realize that she was someone I cared about, no matter the season. Emily didn’t seem embarrassed around me. The curious look on her face was nothing compared to the look of disgust I’d imagined with so many other girls if they ever found out about my diapers. She didn’t even blush when I went over to the closet and grabbed a clean diaper and some wipes from the trunk in the back. It was a total role reversal of what we’d been doing while her parents were in town. I couldn’t help but laugh a little at how much things had changed so then, and how quickly.

Emily laid her head back on her pillow as I began to untape her diaper. When I pulled it open, her eyes darted down at her privates, and this time, she did blush.

“Um, I can’t tell,” she whispered. “Is... there a rash or anything?”

“Nope.” I rolled up the old diaper and tossed it onto the floor. “You’re fine down there.”

This wasn't my first time seeing a girl naked, but this wasn't a circumstance I was used to either. I had to smile as I took a baby wipe and began to clean Emily between her legs. She squealed and kicked her feet, but tried to keep still as I finished up. She was much calmer when I grabbed the diaper and put it on her. Compared to the previous night, I was a lot less anxious. Diapering her wasn't a big deal, and that was strange all by itself.

When she had the new diaper taped up nice and snug, Emily sat up and looked down. She wiggled her butt a few times before grinning at me. "Nice job!"

"Thanks. I try."

"It really is comfy. I feel like I'm wearing a security blanket."

I reached down and gave her diapered butt a little pat. Emily giggled again, and I helped her to her feet. As she went to get dressed herself, I sat on the bed and pondered my next move. We had a whole day to ourselves.

"Hey," I finally said.

"Yeah?" Emily was in the middle of yanking a sweater on over her head. "What's on your mind?"

"You want to try something daring today?" I rubbed at the back of my neck. "I, um, had this crazy thought, and I know how much you love those." When Emily grinned at that line, I had to smile, too. "So, if you're up for it, how about we catch a matinee? And then maybe lunch?"

"I love it!" Emily buttoned up her jeans and clapped her hands. "Wanna go see that new Ryan Reynolds movie?"

I laughed. "You read my mind! And then, let's do the Fiesta Familia Grill for lunch?"

Emily nodded eagerly as she stepped into her shoes. Now dressed, she looked perfectly natural. I couldn't even tell that she had a diaper on under her jeans, but I figured I'd spot the waistband if she ever bent over. Getting up, I tugged at the waistline of my blue jeans, just in case my own diaper was peeking through.

When I looked back, Emily stood right in front of me. She leaned forward and kissed me once on the lips. A little peck that sent my heart a-flutter.

“I can’t imagine how I was this happy before now,” Emily whispered. “Thank you, Jordan.”

“Don’t mention it, Emily.” I draped my arm around her shoulders. “Shall we?”

Never had I felt more subversive than that entire morning out with Emily. Everything we did, from holding hands in the parking lot to trying to muffle the crinkle of our diapers, was some secret activity, some covert mission that only made us laugh and exchange teasing looks. The rest of the world more or less faded away for us. Even the Ryan Reynolds movie, as good as it was, didn’t hold my attention for very long. I couldn’t help glancing over at Emily in the dark theater, only to find her looking back at me. She bit her lip, and I could tell when she was about to relieve herself in her diaper again. It was fortunate that we’d packed several spare diapers into her large purse. I had no problem wetting myself during the movie.

Locating the family restroom to change in, however, was a little more difficult. We had to stand outside as a mom wrangled her two small children in and out, with plenty of chatter and stern warnings between them. But once they left, Emily turned to me and smiled.

“You’re sure about this?” she asked.

I nodded and waved her inside. As soon as I closed the door behind me, Emily hopped up onto the changing area and began to remove her jeans.

Cleaning her up wasn’t a problem. At least _____ was small enough to fit on the tiled changing table. When she offered to do the same for me, Emily had me stand up, so she could change my diaper from that awkward position instead. I could tell how flustered she was when she tried to wipe me up, and even more so when she kept missing and readjusting the tapes on my new garment.

“Geez, this is a lot harder without a bed,” she remarked. “How do you do it?”

“Usually with my back to the wall.” I blushed and added, “And then I re-tape the diaper when I’m actually lying down.”

“Great, _____ you tell me.”

“It’s okay. You’re doing fine.”

Truth be told, she really was. Ever since she'd started wearing a diaper herself, Emily was a lot more attentive to my needs in that respect. She was more thorough about cleaning me with wipes, and when she finally got the diaper in place, she had it nice and secure. When I moved, I could almost forget that I was wearing it and not regular old underwear.

As I pulled my pants back on, Emily went to wash her hands in the sink. Then she cast a smile over her shoulder at me. "Still hungry for Fiesta Familia?"

" !" I answered, trying for a booming Spanish soccer broadcaster's voice.
"

Emily laughed and shook her head. "Drama queen."

"Said the drama princess."

"I love you, too."

Lunch at the grill was as good as it always was. Nothing like cold beer and tacos to follow up the cheesy goodness of a rom-com matinee. Our mood, however, turned a little sour when Emily's phone buzzed. She took it out of her purse, digging through a layer of diapers and baby wipes, but when she glanced at the screen, her entire face scrunched up in revulsion. Before she even said a word, I knew what—or who—had upset her so much.

"Seriously?" Emily asked. A rhetorical question, I knew. I watched her drop the phone onto the table of our booth. With both hands, she rubbed at her temples and sighed. "And today was getting to be so much "

"Trouble from home?" I asked.

"It's Mom. She texted me to ask if I'd come up and see them next week."

"Oh." My stomach dropped right away. I could feel nausea stirring in my chest. I didn't want to even think about Emily's parents, but here they were to rain on our parade once again. And what new loving horrors did they have to inflict on her this time?

Emily frowned up at me. "Oh, and get this. Mom says she just happened to run into an old classmate of mine at the country club the other day. Calvin Winchester,

that snooty little prep boy who got honors at Harvard.” Her tone shifted from low and miserable to dripping with acid. “Oh, isn’t he wonderful! Oh, wouldn’t he be a match for the family name?”

Now I felt like I really going to throw up. “They wouldn’t.”

“They might, Jordan.”

“But I...” I failed for words, a rarity in my line of work. “But they wouldn’t now, would they? I-I mean... after all we did together! The whole roommate bit! That was our delay, wasn’t it?”

Emily shook her head. “It’s my fault. I didn’t think things through. I knew it’d only delay them, but that’s my folks for you. They know I’ve got a female roommate and that’s fine—for . But it’s not forever. Not with them.” She shook her head again, and her lips twisted as if she were about to spit. “Christ, what is it with them?”

I had no answer for her. I wish I did. I could quote a dozen lines from plays like and other family dramas, but none of them seem to fit the occasion. At that moment, I felt like such a charlatan.

Who was I, really? An actor, sure, but what else? I wasn’t Emily’s roommate; I was her neighbor playacting as her female friend. I wasn’t Emily’s boyfriend; I was her secret lover, the one her neighbors and family couldn’t know about. Just like her, I couldn’t be who I wanted to be in public. What I’d hoped to be a nice day’s outing with my new girlfriend had turned into a farce in the final act, a sad melodrama mere moments before the curtain fell.

I had to do something about it. I just didn’t know what.

ii. Neighborhood Watch

With our would-be day out suddenly tarnished, neither Emily nor I wanted to keep things going. We beat a hasty retreat to the old neighborhood. And since I was out and about in men's clothes, identified as Jordan Kim, I decided to stop in and check out my neglected house.

Nothing there surprised me. The mail had piled up while I was away, and it was more ads and junk than anything else. I saw a thin layer of dust along the bookshelves and tables that needed cleaning off. And worse still, an equally thin mask of grime had formed around my bathroom sink drain. Apart from those traits, the house looked exactly as I'd left it. But the more I wandered through its halls, the more like a stranger I felt. I saw everything through the Jordan's eyes. The drapes my mother had picked out—a rare concession for me. Acting books and screenplays left in a pile on a desk. A handwritten grocery list of ingredients that I'd never gotten around to buying, but when I looked a little closer at it, I saw that Emily had gotten them all for me when we lived together.

By the time I came back to my kitchen, I found Emily waiting for me there. She perched on a stool, a cheap piece of furniture I'd gotten with a set from IKEA. Her eyes wandered over to me and her face twisted up into a scowl.

“Boy, Mom sure knows how to pick 'em, huh?” Emily waved her phone at me. “If you've got any old phone numbers, can I borrow one? I might need to throw them off the scent.”

“I would if I could.” With a shrug, I headed to the counter and checked the empty fruit bowl. At least I'd been smart enough to dump all that I moved next door. “Any chance that they're going to make another visit down here?”

“Please, God, no.”

“It could happen, Em. Just saying.”

“And that's what scares me the most.” Emily chewed on her bottom lip. “Are you comfortable with playing my roommate again?”

I turned to her, my face twisted into disbelief. “Seriously, do you even have to ask?”

“Well, I mean, it worked out the time...”

“And it'll be fine the next.”

“Until they get suspicious. You know they will!”

“Then they will, and...” I shrugged. “I don’t know. We’ll answer that when we cross that bridge.”

Emily nodded, though she didn’t look convinced. It crushed me to see the worry written across her face. It was that fateful day at the coffee shop all over again. After all the work and joy we’d accrued in this ongoing farce, building back her self-esteem piece by piece, and then one little text message had wiped out our progress in a heartbeat.

Oh, the things I wanted to shout at her parents. But I couldn’t do that. Not yet, at least.

I leaned against the counter. “In the meantime, are you busy with work at all?”

“No. Why?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but this place is a bit of a mess.” I gestured around the kitchen and over to the living room. “If you’re free, I could use a hand tidying up.”

Emily smiled. “Sure. It’d be nice to take my mind off this whole other mess in my life.”

“That’s the spirit!”

Early the next morning, I needed to clear my head. Emily stayed asleep on the couch, curled under her blanket, looking quite adorable. If I didn’t get outside, I’d be hanging around her the entire day, and I’d more of a creep than a boyfriend if I did that. Once I was out the door, I knew I’d made the right call. The air was fresh, the streets were full of cars pulling out of driveways, folks going off to work, and I couldn’t miss the smell of dew on the grass. My eyes closed, and I let go of all the misery and tension from the day before.

Then I began to jog.

I let the morning go at its own pace. My legs carried me up one street and down another. Before long, I was out of breath and reeking with sweat. I found my way

down the next block and across the street, right in time to see a line of people out the front door of the neighborhood coffee shop.

And as I jogged over to take my spot in line, I recognized a certain shade of brunette hair dye two spots in front of me. I raised my voice and called out, "Morning, Janice!"

"Jordan!" My neighbor moved out of line and walked over to me with a grin. "How you? I hardly see you around anymore!"

"I've been studying," I replied. "Lot of acting gigs to consider. Lot of scripts to read, you know?"

It was technically the truth, from a certain point of view.

"Oh, good for you! I always knew you'd get more work! I'm sure you're having a better run with work than I am with my grandchildren!" Janice leaned in conspiratorially. "You know, my youngest Margaret is expecting another, but between you and me, I think she's ready to divorce that good-for-nothing Paul. I've always wondered she waited so long! Don't you think so?"

I smiled and nodded. Janice had three daughters, all fully grown, with the youngest fresh out of college and married to her high school sweetheart. I'd never heard good things about the marriage of Margaret and Paul Danvers. They also seemed to have more kids every time I heard about them. Truth be told, I knew that Janice couldn't resist being a gossip about her own family. It wasn't one of her best qualities, though I supposed that, given the degree of affection she showed to Margaret, she wasn't all that bad a person.

Meanwhile, the line got shorter and we drew closer to the barista at the counter. With only one person ahead of us, I felt ridiculously comfortable. Everything was quiet and ordinary today. All right then. One day to figure things out, to put our lives back together. Emily would be fine. I would stand by her through whatever nonsense her parents threw our way.

"Oh, Jordan, did you ever get a visit from that Mr. Winchell?"

I blinked and turned to Janice. Her question took another second to fully register in my head. Then I blinked again and said, "Uhh, no. Sorry, who's that?"

"Ohhh, you are missing !" Janice leaned in again, and as she did, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. "The other day, I was tending to my garden, and this gentleman in a suit came walking right up to me. So I said hi, and he said hi, and he

said he was with this private investigation service. I said, ‘Oooh, isn’t that fascinating work?’ He said it was, and then he—and this is tantalizing—he asked me about any new people who’d moved into the neighborhood recently. Like any single, young women in particular.”

My jaw dropped, probably low enough to whatever my stomach had been, which had turned into a queasy ball that hit the floor and kept on falling.

“Oh?” I asked. “So... so, you think this, uh, Winchell guy was checking up on Emily’s new roommate?”

Janice flashed back a teasing grin. “I’m sure I couldn’t say. But, you know, Alice tell me over cocktails the other night that she hasn’t seen the new girl in over a week! Can you believe it? It’s like she doesn’t exist anymore! So strange!” She sighed. “But then, poor, sweet Emily. She did always attract the weird ones, bless her heart.”

It took all the decency instilled by my Korean mother not to sock her in the face for that remark. Not that she would’ve understood why. I forced a grin and said, “Well, she’s an artist, Janice. It comes with the territory.”

“It sure does!” Janice laughed and turned around just as the barista waved her ahead.

I took a bottle of water to go and raced back home. Sweat and tears be damned, I to make it back on time.

I took shortcuts through side streets and away from the main road. Every familiar path now looked treacherous. I imagined eyes peering at me through open windows. I pictured men in black hats driving past me in nondescript cars, taking notes and snapshots. Somewhere in my mind’s eye, a giant manila folder was being pulled from an office drawer with the name _____ on it. Some faceless detective was flipping through the papers contained within, and paper-clipped to each one was a blurry photo of me in drag.

My neighborhood was rated as one of the safest in Thebes Park, and the town itself was one of the safest in the state. But right then, I didn’t feel safe at all. My own neighbors had sold me out. A goddamn tidal wave of innuendo was about to crash through my house—and through Emily’s, too.

Heart pounding and feet throbbing, I managed to veer back onto my street. Somewhere along the way, I’d dropped the water bottle, or maybe I’d chucked it in

the trash. I couldn't quite remember which it was. With years of actor's training to call upon, I stopped behind a small hedge in Maureen Davis's yard to catch my breath. I used everything I had in my toolkit—visualization, breathing from the diaphragm, the Alexander Technique—to regain my composure. When I reappeared from behind the hedge, I wasn't frantic anymore. I took a calm, collected stride back to my front door, in full view of any nosy neighbors.

When I opened the front door, I took a deep breath.

I told myself.

I stepped into the house, and within minutes, I was in the living room. Emily had left her blanket folded up on the couch. My eyes scanned the room and the hall beyond it. A second later, I noted that my bedroom door was ajar, and someone had turned the lights on inside. Yellow haze poured out into the hallway, setting a rather ominous atmosphere.

I plunged ahead and went to open the door. "Em? Are you in here?"

"Jordan..."

Her voice set me on edge. I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, and I opened the door all the way.

She sat on my bed, her legs folded underneath her. She had taken one of my big sweaters from the closet and wrapped herself in it like a little kid. The sleeves comically hung loose over her hands, but I could still see that she held her phone in one palm. When I saw the bags under her eyes and heard her snuffle, my heart cracked right away.

"Hey," I whispered. I was at her side in an instant. My arms slid around her shoulders, and I cradled her head against my chest. Emily sniffled again, and she turned her face into my bicep. I stroked her hair, whispering some random, soothing nonsense into her ear. To this day, I still don't know what I said to her, but it seemed to calm her down. Maybe it was just hearing my voice that helped.

With another snuffle, Emily wiped at her nose and looked up at me. "S-sorry..."

"It's okay. Just tell me what's wrong." I smiled. "I'm here to talk."

"Yeah..." Emily blinked back tears. She closed her eyes and tilted her head away.

"Yeah, okay. It's... it's over, Jordan."

“What do you mean?”

“The... the gig. The charade. It’s all over now.”

“Em—”

“My parents fucking !” Emily waved her phone at me. Now the tears fell, and the sob strangled her every word. “They know that Jordan doesn’t exist! They know that went missing the whole time she was around! It’s all there! No Jordan Baker in Thebes Park! No records, no witnesses! It’s... it’s all fake, and they know it now!”

Her face twisted up into a scowl, and she pressed her hands to her cheeks to soak up more tears. I sat there, speechless and stunned. I couldn’t even hold her close and comfort her like before.

I couldn’t do anything now. I’d done enough, hadn’t I?

12. We Have a Reservation

One after another, the text messages came and went that evening. Emily's parents blew up their daughter's phone within ten minutes, all while I sat beside her on my bed, cradling her in my chest.

The only exchange that mattered, though, was the final one.

When the texts finally stopped, Emily hung her head and sniffled. I brushed a finger against her cheek, and I cringed when I felt tears running down it.

"Tell me it's going to be all right," Emily whispered. "I-I don't care if it's not true. Just... I don't know. Lie to me. Just tell me it's going to be—"

"Shh." I held her close. With one hand cradling the back of her head, I reached down and took the phone away from her. Emily didn't resist. She melted into my arms, and I mentally let out a stream of curse words at her parents. I hated them, and I made no bones about it. I hated how they could so easily turn my sweetheart's confident spirit into a crumbling facade. Say what you might about my folks—and I could say plenty—but I knew that their criticisms came from a place of love.

The more I learned about Emily's family, the less sympathetic I could feel toward them. Had all their smiles and all their courtesy from before been one big act? I'd made them breakfast, showered praise on their daughter, and made every allowance for their visit. And all I got back was a cloud of suspicion to tear away the peace in my life.

a small, petty voice spat out in my head.

I couldn't deny it. I sighed into Emily's shoulder and pondered our next move.

"Two days," Emily whimpered into my chest. Her fingers tightened. Her breath came quicker now. Small, hitching coughs into my t-shirt, matching my heartbeat. "I... I can't... we can't be... not like before... Jordan, I... I'm so sorry..."

Now was the one ready to cry. But for both our sakes, I held it together. It was a reversal of my usual method, having to pull back my emotions rather than channel them into a performance.

“Listen,” I said, stroking her hair. “Listen. It’s not over. Not yet. I don’t know what they’re going to say. I don’t know what they’ll do. We’ll find out soon enough, I guess.” My voice hardened. “We’ll find out Emily. I promise you that much.”

“To-together?” Emily looked up at me, her whole face wet and slick. “Jordan, you can’t—”

“Oh, can’t I?” I shook my head, smiling sadly. “Em, what kind of boyfriend would I be if I ran from this? Hell, what kind of would I be if I didn’t own up to it? If I wasn’t scared to dress up like a girl for you, to playact with your parents for you, to wear diapers and expose every part of myself for ...” I grinned. “Well, I mean, hell. Do you think your folks being mad is gonna scare me that much ?”

The more I talked, the easier it became to believe my own words. Certainly, seeing Emily’s tragic expression made it easier. I wanted to channel the Jordan into my voice, into my face, into every gesture. Let Emily see my love like that. Let her parents chew on that open affection of someone they treated with such contempt.

I let out a long breath, and half of my anguish went with it. Closing my eyes, I tried to put aside all the anger, all the sorrow.

“Hey,” I said. “We’ve got two days. Your folks will come and deliver their doom, and you’re right, it feels like the end of the world.” I didn’t even flinch when Emily whimpered again. Instead, I hugged her closer. “But hey, we’re gonna focus on that right now. Right now, we’re gonna do what makes happy. Forget your folks. Forget the neighbors. Let’s just be Emily and Jordan again, okay?”

“O-okay...” Emily sniffled and wiped at her nose. “Thank you...”

I bent down and kissed the top of her head. Emily chuckled, and I almost leapt for joy.

“Come on, baby girl,” I whispered. As I stood, I pulled her up alongside me, letting her melt into my side like the scared child she was. “Come on now. There’s a Netflix marathon waiting for us in the living room. I’ll make you some tea and give you all the blankets you need. Would you like that?”

“Mm-hmm.” Emily’s eyes rose just long enough to blink back fresh tears. “A-and maybe you could look over some sketches later? I-I’ve got to get them ready for publishing tomorrow.”

“I’d be happy to, Em. Whatever you need.”

That night was an endless vista of ice cream spoonfuls, cups of tea, and a blanket fort on the couch, all set to the sweet serenade of a binge on Netflix. Emily left a near-permanent crease in my side, having more or less fused to my body. Not that I could blame her. I didn’t let it show, but I needed to know she was going to be there for me, too. A month before, I wouldn’t have dreamed up any of this. But late into the night, I wondered how I could have ever gone without this. Every little rise and fall of her chest into mine was enough to keep my spirits high, even while staring into the abyss.

Emily fell asleep on the couch. She curled up underneath the blankets, fatigued from crying and a sugar overload—one that I was at fault for encouraging. Like any good roommate, I tried to find the best way to carry her from the couch to the bedroom.

I managed to wrap up her into a blanket in the same way I’d make a burrito. Emily snored against my shoulder as I carried her down the hall. With one toe, I gingerly nudged my door open. Then it was a short dash inside and a gentle deposit of my precious cargo onto the bed.

“Gngh... Jordan?” Emily’s voice came out from behind the fleecy edge of her blanket. I saw a pair of hazy eyes peer at me, blinking slowly. “That you...?”

“Shh.” I reached over to stroke her hair. “Not a word. It’s time for bed.”

“Mmkay. Th’nks...”

I chuckled and brushed at her cheek. “Don’t mention it. Now, then, missy. Let’s get you changed.”

“Don’t need a...”

“What’s that? Sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

Emily blinked again, a little more furiously. A hand shot up from under the blanket to rub at her face. She sniffled and looked right at me.

“I was _____,” she insisted, “that I don’t need a diaper this time.”

I swallowed. “Well, uh, sure you don’t. That’s your call.”

Emily stared at me for a second longer. Then she extended her hand out from the blanket roll I’d made. With a single outstretched finger, she flicked me right on the tip of my nose. I flinched.

“Ow! The hell, Em?”

“Idiot,” she replied sweetly. “You’re supposed to _____ me on this.” With a wink, she added, “I’m really asking you to make me wear a diaper. You know, take charge like you’ve been doing all night. It means a lot to me, okay?”

Still rubbing at my nose, I put on a fake look of outrage. “Well, sure I do! But geez, Em! I can’t always take a hint like that. A little more talk, a little less physical violence, okay?”

“Aww, did I hurt the poor widdle baby’s feelings?”

“Says the girl about to be wearing a diaper!”

Emily giggled. She squirmed around on top of the bed, a fleecy little caterpillar ready to break out her cocoon. I sighed and leaned over to plant a kiss on her forehead. Then I stood and went over to the closet. My original, long-neglected package of diapers was waiting for me there.

When I came back with a handful of changing supplies, Emily had already tossed off the blanket. She stretched and yawned, arching her back like a feline. I stood and waited while she removed her clothes. No, not even _____ fazed me anymore. Of all the things we’d experienced that day, the sight of my nude neighbor didn’t bother me, or excite me, in the slightest. I felt ready for just another quiet evening in bed with her.

Emily kept quiet, too. She didn’t offer a single word as I sprinkled on the powder and put a fresh diaper on her. She stared up at the ceiling. Not a single clue as to what she was thinking, though I had plenty of guesses.

When it was over, she smiled up at me. “Okay, your turn!”

I laughed and rolled onto the bed beside her. “How can I say no to that face?”

Truth be told, I was just grateful to see a little joy in her eyes again. I knew she was putting on a show for me. Maybe for herself, too. I didn't take my eyes off Emily as she proceeded to change my diaper. Every so often, I caught glimpses of the sad, lonely girl I'd seen earlier, but she kept her focus on adjusting the new garment between my legs and sticking on every tape perfectly.

"My little one's ready for beddy-bye!" she sang. Her eyes fell half-shut, and then she tumbled on top of me. I grabbed her right before she hit and guided her onto the bed beside me. How sweet we must've looked. A couple of dorky kids in t-shirts and adult undergarments.

I hit the lights, and Emily hit the sack. We lay together, our fingers locked under the covers as the room turned quiet once more.

"Hey, Jordan," Emily whispered. She turned toward me. "You asleep yet?"

"It's only been a few minutes, Em."

"Okay, good." Her eyes sparkled in the darkness. "I just... I want you to know something."

"Go ahead."

I watched her chew on her bottom lip. Not a good sign.

"I just... I wanted to say..." Emily fumbled for words, chuckling as she did. "Ahh, it's funny, I mean. But, like, on any night, you know... maybe I'm crazy, but I think I would have asked to get a little more... physical with you."

The room fell silent again. Everything except for my own rapidfire heartbeat.

"Uhh... oh-okay..." I swallowed. "I see."

"Not that I don't find you attractive," Emily added, her eyes widening. "I do! I really, really do. It's just tonight, with all this stupid shit going on... I'm just not in the mood. And that ."

"Yeah, it does," I admitted. Then I tried for a smile. "And let me tell you, you're missing out on all the joys of sex with diapers."

Emily giggled again. I laughed and slid my arm underneath her shoulders. With a single tug, I brought her up against my chest. Her head slid against my shoulder, and I sighed when I felt her breath, warm and soft, tickling the side of my neck.

“Someday,” I promised her. “Someday, we’ll get there. But let’s just sleep for now, okay?”

“Okay. I love you, Jordan.”

“Love you, too, princess.” And with one last kiss to the forehead, we tried to find some rest.

Thursday night, 7:25 p.m.

We sat in the parking lot of the Adams Bistro. I kept my hands on the steering wheel, staring out at all the finely dressed folks coming in and out of the restaurant. We’d dressed well, too. We’d come dressed as ourselves. No wig, no fancy makeup, and certainly no diapers. Just Jordan Kim and Emily Parcher, in the flesh.

I didn’t need to look over at Emily to know what she was thinking. I could hear her turning in her seat, trying to spot a pair of familiar faces passing by. Her hand gripped mine. I gripped hers back. It was all we could do to stay sane.

“Okay,” Emily whispered. “Just... okay. Deep breaths. Big, deep breaths...”

“I’m fine, Em.”

“I was talking to myself.” She paused. “Oh, I’m talking to myself. Em, you’ve lost it.”

“Hey, Em. Knock knock. It’s me, the guy sitting next to you. You’ll be fine.”

“You keep saying that like it’s true—”

“It be true.”

“How? How could you possibly know that?” Her hand tightened around mine. I didn’t flinch. Her eyes darted at me. That didn’t scare me either. “Please tell me you’re not still acting for my benefit, because I don’t think I could bear that.”

I swallowed. “You’re right. I’m not acting. In fact, I’d go so far as to say I’m so deep in shock that I will turn into a puddle on the ground if I’m not careful.” I shrugged. “But, hey. That’s life on the stage for you. You put aside the nonsense and remember your lines and find your mark. And that’s what I’m gonna do tonight.” When she didn’t respond right away, I squeezed her hand a little tighter. “It’s what I’m gonna do, Em.”

“Only a few minutes left.” Emily sounded harsh, but her smile told me otherwise. “We could just take off right now. Hit the Pacific Coast Highway. Drive somewhere else and start over.”

Now I had to turn and look at her. “Seriously, Em?”

“Come on. It’s not the idea I’ve had.”

“True. Remember that time you made me dress in drag?”

“Oh, please. Remember that time you said I was a girl?”

We laughed, and I lifted her hand to kiss it. I let out a few deep breaths, waiting for the butterflies in my stomach to settle. The car and the parking lot around us came back into focus. Street lamps cast a phosphorescent glare over the nearby bistro, where the gilded front doors swung open and shut continuously. The Thebes Park dinner crowd hadn’t stopped since we’d arrived.

No point in putting it off any longer.

Emily and I got out of the car. We walked together toward the restaurant, our fingers locking together as we made our way inside.

13. Like There's No Tomorrow

Honestly, it was the silence that was the worst of it.

We sat around a table in the middle of the restaurant, surrounded by other families enjoying their wine with fresh-baked salmon and roasted chicken. Emily gripped onto my hand as she faced down the death glare from her parents. George and Virginia Parcher sat across from us, their drinks and dinner untouched. George didn't offer a word as we sat down. He didn't seem willing to even acknowledge that we were there anymore. Virginia, meanwhile, was less willing to keep quiet. She offered a sniff of disapproval when her eyes finally settled onto me.

"It's disgusting, what you did," she declared. "It's worse than fraud. It's perverted! It's hideous! I can't even to describe how awful you've been!"

Shouting matches in public were, sadly, nothing new to an actor. I didn't mind the eyes and ears that turned our way once she spoke. And I'd even memorized my lines for the occasion. Nothing that Virginia had hurled my way was a surprise. I'd expected to get about this much abuse.

"I know," I finally said. "I'd like to apologize. I can't offer any excuse for what I did."

"Jordan, don't," Emily started to say. Her mother, however, cut her off with another glare.

A waiter came and went, refilling half-empty glasses of water and, unusually, not bothering to ask how we liked our dinner so far. He must have read the temperature of our little party.

"I always thought that you were wasting your time here," Virginia continued, "but I'd never imagine that you were being so outrageous, Emily. I mean, dear . Living with an unmarried man? Dressing him up as your roommate? Have you no shame?" Her eyes snapped toward me, her stare as black as coal. "Do of you? Or are your father and I the only sensible people left on this earth? We must be, because they'd never let us back into the country club if they knew about this. About the you've done! Your whole neighborhood was talking about all those horrible things—"

"Mother, please!" Emily's voice came out in a harsh whisper. "Keep your voice down!"

"Oh, so you're concerned about your propriety? Well, there's a surprise!"

“Mother, you’re being petulant and you know it. I really sorry I deceived you, but it... it wasn’t as if I had any choice!”

“No choice? Emily Louise, you had right to—”

“No, Mother. No, I didn’t.” Emily’s eyes flashed up to her parents, and this time, she was the one glaring daggers in their direction. “If I had to choose between my independence as an and being married off to the likes of Calvin Winchester, then guess what? I’m gonna damn well choose the former. Even if I have to convince my next-door neighbor to dress up like a girl to sell it, because ’s how much I hate this whole thing.”

I couldn’t have been prouder of Emily when she said that. True to our agreement, though, I said nothing in her defense. It was the hardest thing in the world to sit there and keep silent, but I did my best to radiate strength at her. And I saw that confidence that her parents kept trying to shatter rebuild itself piece by piece, right before my eyes.

Virginia, however, didn’t like the confidence one bit. She glowered in her next salvo. “Calvin Winchester is a fine young man. He’s good-looking, he comes from a respectable family, and he’s set at his father’s company to make more than enough money for the both of you. You’d be out of your mind to turn him down.”

“Well, guess what, Mother? I am.” Emily blinked. “Turning him down, I mean. Not that I’m out of my mind.”

“Hmph. So you say.” Her gaze snapped over to me again. “And you’re going to defend her on this? Honestly, if you were really her friend, you’d tell her to stop being so silly.”

“Don’t drag him into this!” Emily protested. “I asked him to be here.”

“Why? So you could humiliate us further?”

“Mother, . Your voice. You’re the one who’s being embarrassing—”

“Emily, that’s enough.”

All eyes shifted to George, who had finally spoken. He remained seated, completely still except for a subtle twitch of his mouth. In the corner of my eye, I saw Emily shrink back, her body language already conceding defeat.

A scared little girl when Daddy spoke up.

“You watch your tone, little lady,” George continued. “You’ve abused our trust and our money long enough. You need to straighten yourself out.” Emily opened her mouth, but he didn’t give her a moment’s pause. “It’s come down to this. Either you come back home and accept Calvin’s proposal, or you’re cut off. For good.”

“Cut off?” I didn’t recognize the tiny voice that came out of Emily’s mouth. “Daddy...”

“Emily, that’s final. Do you understand?”

I didn’t say a word. To his credit, George didn’t look at me. I wasn’t even part of the equation in his mind. This was a long time coming between him and his daughter.

Looking over at Emily, I saw tears in her eyes. It took every ounce of willpower not to offer her a handkerchief or stroke her hair. I did neither of those things. My role required perfect stillness. Whatever Emily did then, I couldn’t interfere. Really, that was the whole point of this meeting. To prove that she was her own person. That her life was hers.

Emily closed her eyes and drew a deep breath.

“Mom? Dad?” She lifted her chin. Her eyes opened and she looked at her parents. “I think we’re done here.”

“Think about what you’re doing,” George hissed. “We’ll cut you off, Emily. Say goodbye to that house. All those car payments. All those free tickets. All .”

“I won’t miss it.”

“Emily!”

“Sorry, Dad, not this time.” Emily pushed herself away from the table. She stood, as did I. “Let’s go, Jordan.”

I nodded. “Right behind you, Em.” I turned back to her parents and nodded. “Good night.”

Emily led the way out of the bistro, even with half the restaurant’s patrons watching us go, even with the shocked silence of her parents trailing behind us. As soon as we

cleared the doors, I reached for her hand and held on tight. She smiled through her tears and squeezed my hand back.

Neither of us said a word on the drive back to my house. Lights flashed across the windshield, guiding through us half-empty streets in the dead of night. I barely noticed the familiar contours of the neighborhood as we pulled into my driveway. I got out first and went to open the door on Emily's side. She didn't speak, even as we reached for each other's hands and walked all the way inside. I barely even noticed how cold it was.

She jumped me the moment I closed the door behind me. One second, she was perfectly still, and the next, she was throwing herself at me, her arms around my waist and her lips pressed against mine. I stumbled back a few steps, but caught myself against the door. I kissed Emily back. I kissed her back .

We moaned and sighed against each other for a long time. I didn't bother turning on the lights. Making out in the dark, empty living room was fine by me.

"Jordan..." Emily moaned into my ear as she pulled herself away. "Jordan, I... God, I-I love you. You were so good, you were amazing..."

"Me?" I brushed my lips against Emily's forehead. "Honey, if anyone was amazing tonight, it was . Only ." My hand traced a line across her cheek. "I've never been prouder to know you than I am right now."

"Christ, though. My house. I'm... I'm gonna have to give it up now."

"I know. We'll figure something out."

"We will? Jordan, I couldn't ask you to—"

"You never have to ask," I said, maybe a touch more delirious than I realized. "I-I don't care either, Em. Maybe it's the adrenaline talking, but screw it. Stay with me. I don't know how we'll manage it, but we will. Because, after this? I don't want to deal with those awful parents of yours ever again. This was..." I rubbed at my eyes. "Geez, this was the best thing they could've done for you. For of us."

Emily nodded. "I think you're right."

My heart skipped a beat. "Is... is that a yes?"

“Are you kidding? Of course it is!” Emily leaned in to steal another kiss. “Mmph. God, yes. Let’s do this, Jordan. Let’s do this and never look back!”

My heart sang when I heard those words. I enfolded Emily into my arms and carried her off to the bedroom.

For this night, for at least this moment, we could forget the rest of the world and just be happy.

The next morning, before Emily could wake up, I got changed and headed out early. It was a cool, foggy morning, with no glare in the overcast sky. With the weather and my mood in perfect sync, it seemed like as good a time as any for a little walk.

I wandered up and down familiar streets, looking at them with new eyes. I’d driven these streets as both a man and a woman. I’d been two different Jordans, and my neighbors knew about both of them. So which one was I to them? Or was I not even someone worth knowing anymore? The question nagged me all the way through a small park and along the main boulevard. I wore my sweater’s hood up and tried to ignore every older, white couple I passed by. Their faces reminded me too much of George and Virginia’s disapproving stare, even if they were just nice folks out for a stroll.

After some backtracking, I decided what I needed was a little bit of C and C to go with my R and R. C and C, of course, meaning . Fortunately, I’d wandered back enough that my usual coffee joint was only half a block away. I dropped my hood and let out another sigh. I didn’t feel great as I pushed open the front door to the shop, but at least I’d have something to take the edge off.

“Jordan!”

My blood ran cold at the sound of her voice. I almost backed out of the shop, but Janice McCain came up to me with a sweet smile. Same as she ever was, then.

“H-heh, Janice,” I murmured. “How’s it going?”

“Jordan, come on now.” Janice surprised me by putting a hand on my shoulder. She guided me out the doorway and back to the open sidewalk. “Don’t worry about lil’ old me. What about ?”

“Me?”

“It’s okay, hon. I... I know everything.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “Christ, Janice, for once, could you be such a gossip hound?”

Janice drew back. Her eyes dropped to the pavement, and my heart did, too. I shuffled my feet around and stuck my hands in my pockets.

“I’m sorry. I’m... I’m sorry to snap at you like that.” My eyes refused to part from my sneakers. “You didn’t deserve that.”

“No, it’s... it’s fine. Really, Jordan.” Her sympathetic tone caught me off-guard. I looked up and saw Janice smiling at me like a kindly old grandmother. Which, as it took me a second to recall, she already was. “I’m sorry to spring this on you. I can’t begin to imagine how you must feel.”

“How I feel,” I replied, “is fucked up.”

Janice nodded. “I guess you would.” Then she brightened. “But I must say, Maureen Davis told me she saw you and Emily at the Adams Bistro last night. She told me the whole story.”

“Oh, God. She saw all that?”

“Yes! And I must say, we’re all so proud of you!”

“Well, it was only a matter of... wait, what?” I blinked. “What? Proud?”

Janice nodded again. “Dear, you have idea how long we’ve been worrying over poor Emily Parcher. She’s such a sweet thing, but she’s unsteady. And we couldn’t imagine a better fit for her than someone like . Someone with a good head on his shoulders.” Her teeth flashed in a grin. “Oh, and you should’ve heard the way Maureen talked about how you stood up to her parents. Honestly, the of some people! How Emily turned out as well as she did, I’ll never know!”

“Yeah...” My head was spinning. Without even thinking, I grabbed the pole of a nearby parking zone sign by the curb. It was a grimy, decades-old pole, but at least it kept me from falling over onto the street.

“Oh, but don’t worry, dear.” Janice patted my shoulder again. “We don’t think any less of you for your little, er, dress-up with Emily. Whatever makes you two happy is none of our business.”

“I’m sure...” If my sudden insecurity were to get any worse, I felt I’d regret not wearing a diaper. The tightness in my bladder contrasted with the constant spinning in my head and stomach.

“And, you know, if you need any help, you come talk to us.”

“Help? Help with what?”

“Well, I mean, I’m sure Emily’s parents meant what they said, didn’t they? They’re cutting her off?”

“It sure looks that way.”

“Then, you know, if you two need anything like new appliances or help with moving boxes, just let us know.” Janice winked. “The neighborhood is here to help!”

I was at a loss for words. Everything I thought I’d known about Janice McCain and her little clique had fallen apart. The fact that she spoke so casually about my private life still irked me a little, but I could forgive it for how generous she was revealing herself, and her friends, to be.

“I... well...” I shrugged. “I guess...” Then I smiled. “‘Thank you’ is what I’m trying to say.”

“Don’t mention it, kiddo.” Janice pulled me in for a hug. “Now, as our dear Emily’s savior, can I at least buy you a cup of coffee?”

“Janice, I think I’ll let you this one time...”

When I came back, Emily was sitting at my kitchen table, fully dressed and clutching a mug full of hot tea. I noted the half-eaten piece of toast on a plate by her elbow. It matched the expression she wore: vacant and thoughtful, like she’d forgotten she was hungry halfway through.

“Em?” I leaned over, hands planted on the tabletop. “Hey, Earth to Em?”

“Hmm?” Emily blinked. When she noticed me standing over her, she blushed. “Oh! Hey.”

“Good morning to you, too.”

“Excuse for not being so chipper. I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“I can tell.” I pulled out a chair across the table and sat down. When I flashed her plate a questioning gaze, Emily sighed and pulled it closer to herself. She took another bite of toast, but nothing in her face said that she relished it at all.

“So,” I added, “I just had a bizarre encounter.”

“What do you mean?”

I proceeded to tell Emily the whole story about running into Janice. Her face went through several emotions over the course of the tale. Silent horror. Wide-eyed amazement. By the end of it, I noticed that she’d set down her tea, which had lost its steam over several minutes. Her hands gripped each other on top of the table, wringing her fingers out before she could speak.

“That’s... geez, that’s not what I expected.” Emily blinked. “You’re we’re talking about the same Janice?”

“I know, right?”

“Well, that sweet of her. I can’t deny that.”

“But what about you, Em?”

“What about me?”

“I mean, what do you want to do next?”

Emily was silent for almost a full minute. When she raised her eyes from the table to my face, her lips curved into a tiny smile.

“I thought that was obvious after last night,” she answered.

My heart did a backward somersault in joy. “Emily...”

“Shh.” Her finger reached across the table to press against my lips. Emily was halfway out of her chair. Then she stood the rest of the way and circled over to me.

I made room for her as she plopped onto my lap and slid her arms around me. Emily’s head dropped onto my shoulder, and I cradled her to my chest, pulling up her legs like a little girl. She let out a happy sigh, and I responded with a lingering kiss to her forehead. With each passing second, whatever else we’d done or said the night before was forgotten. All that old pain, all that long-suffering dread.

All cleansed at last.

14. That's A Wrap, Folks

Three dozen eyes tracked me around the room. I didn't move. I didn't speak. All I could do was stand there, in total silence, and wait.

At the head of the classroom, Greg finished his introduction and turned to me with a smile.

"They're all yours, J-Man," he said.

I flashed him a grin. "Much obliged, Greg."

Greg sat down near the front of the class, and I took his spot at the podium. It felt surreal being on this end of the education system, even though I was used to having an audience. And that feeling didn't get better when I realized that most of these college kids were only eight or seven years younger than me. There weren't all that many years between us.

Ah, well. After my previous month, this was nothing.

"Morning, guys and girls," I said. Clapping my hands together, I looked around. "So, who here has ever seen community theater...?"

Dust floated through a shaft of sunlight in the window. It swirled around, caught up in a sudden gust from my feather duster. A few quick swipes removed another layer from my den's shelves and added to the mixture in the air around Emily's head. She glared up at me from underneath the TV table. Well, more like she pouted, which was still pretty adorable.

"Ugh," she exclaimed, "I am taking the longest shower after this."

"You want some company?" I teased.

"Keep dreaming, girlie."

"Hey, you girls shower together all the time, right?"

"Ha! Only in your wildest porn collection."

“Like yours is any cleaner?” I brandished my feathery tool at her. “Apparently, you’ve got a thing for guys in women’s clothing—”

She jumped up from her crouch. I dodged the snap of her dusting cloth from her left, and then the playful slap from the right. Emily giggled through her fury, and I couldn’t help but laugh, too.

It had been a memorable two weeks. In that time, the only contact we got from Mr. and Mrs. Parcher was through their attorney, which suited Emily just fine. Several signed pieces of paper later, all of her ties were finally cut. No more guilt trips. No more surprise calls. No more private detectives. Emily was a _____ and she was free to give up the house that she could no longer afford on her own. She was also free to have a few late-night crying sessions. I took it upon myself supply all the requisite cuddles and tissues so she could sleep. But once the house went up for sale, she began to pack up all her things. I offered my help with that, so long as she could help me prepare _____ place for a new housemate.

What amazed me the most, though, was how little we saw of the “other” Jordan. I still occasionally put on my wig and a cute skirt, but Jordan Baker only came out once the sun went down and all the dishes were put away. Emily, to her credit, treated me about the same in both personae, so my alter ego wasn’t needed as much to help with the transition into a real couple.

But when she _____ come out, the sex was pretty mind-blowing.

Back in the present, I took up a box marked “Fragile.” I gave it a cautious shake, heard glassware tinkling around inside, and gently set it back down on the floor. Emily watched me with her arms crossed and a teasing smile.

“Look,” she said, “if it’s marked with a ‘G,’ that’s from my grandmother, so don’t break it.”

“Okay. How about the stuff marked ‘M’ or ‘D’?”

“All stuff from Mom and Dad.” Emily shrugged. “Break as much of it as you want.”

“Don’t mind if I do!” I threw back my head and let out a wild cackle. Then, without missing a beat, I spun around, sweeping my leg up for a devastating kick that would destroy a small shopping bag. Of course, I froze my leg in the air a few inches above the bag and glanced over my shoulder at Emily.

She shook her head and smiled. “You’re such a dork.”

“I know you are, but what am I?”

“My new idiot landlord, apparently.”

I withdrew my leg and frowned. “Hey, now. That’s not fair. I’m letting you stay here rent-free.”

“Uh, remind me how that works again?”

“Ok, maybe not for free. You’re paying me back in groceries, an extra hand with keeping the place clean, and, you know, the general pleasure of your company.”

Emily went quiet for a moment. I could see how much those kinds of compliments affected her. And every time I saw that, I let loose a mental flurry of insults against the nonsense that George and Virginia had put into her head growing up. How could such a talented artist have so little concern for herself?

“You really mean it, don’t you?” she finally said.

I smiled and walked over. Putting my arms around her, I whispered, “You know it’s true.”

Emily sighed into my shoulder. “It’s okay if I keep asking you that a hundred times over, right?”

“Sure. And I’ll answer the same every time.”

She sighed again, and her fingers dug into my shoulders. I closed my eyes, and we took a much-needed break in our chores. Around us, the dust swirled through a shaft of sunlight and settled across us without protest.

“...Now, the really cool thing is, no matter what, you’re never really alone on stage. It might say in the script, ‘And here is where Prince Hamlet delivers his soliloquoy,’ but that’s not true. He’s got characters like Ophelia and Claudius spying on him. He’s not supposed to know this, of course, so he he’s just thinking out loud. And more importantly, you’ve got an audience watching you. Intruding on a private moment like the filthy voyeurs they are.”

I paused and soaked in the class’s laughter. Then, with a chuckle, I stepped back.

“Well, that about wraps up my lecture.” I glanced around the room. “Any questions?”

Several hands shot up. I called on a black girl in a yellow sweater.

“Is it really hard to get theater?” she asked. “Like, you know, are you giving up your life to be on the stage? Or is it something you can manage with other projects or jobs?”

“Good question!” I answered. I thanked her with a quick nod, then swept my gaze over the room. “So, if you’re a sad little geek like me, then, , the theater will devour every waking second you have.” I paused for another round of laughs. “No, but seriously, you’re already figuring out as college students how to find the right work-life balance. Trust me, it took me a few years to get it right, too...”

Not even a day after we finished moving her in, Emily became the center of the neighborhood’s attention once again. Maureen, Janice, and Alice organized a small get-together at my place. An “impromptu housewarming party,” as Maureen put it. Complete with angel food cake and white wine. Even though I’d been living there for years without the same treatment, I didn’t complain. I mean, how could I when I saw the giant grin on Emily’s face the entire night?

I had to admit, for all her gossipmongering, Maureen was an excellent hostess. She whipped up the cake herself, and her neighbor Alice—whom I now suspected of being more than just her neighbor, given the way they smiled at each other when they spoke—had brought the wine from a friend with a vineyard. Janice, meanwhile, spent the entire evening bending poor Emily’s ear about her grandchildren and about parenting, and then apologizing every time she brought up the subject of parents, and then awkwardly complimenting Emily’s dress for the fortieth time.

Now, that last part made me laugh. Emily had originally picked out that floral print dress for .

That was the other surprise of the housewarming party. None of the three older ladies made a single comment or query about my crossdressing. I couldn’t decide if they were too embarrassed to ask or if they were actually being respectful. And then, I decided I didn’t care either way.

The little smile and thumbs-up that Emily gave me from across the room was all I needed to see.

“...And that’s all you need to know about the AEA.” I shrugged. “To be honest, though, you could look up all this and more on your phones in, like, two seconds. But thank you for your question... Josh, was it? Yeah, thank you, Josh. It’s good to get informed early on.”

I scanned the room for more eager faces. As I did, my eyes caught something on the periphery. I half-turned and noticed a familiar face smiling at me through the window of the door.

“Sorry,” I said to Greg. “I think I need to cut this short if that’s cool.”

“Hey, no problem.” Greg turned and raised his voice for the entire room. “We had a great time as it was. Right, guys?”

A chorus of ’s and a round of applause came back to us. I laughed and shook Greg’s hand. Then I offered waves and smiles back to the room as I headed out.

In the hallway of the community college building, Emily stood next to a small bench across the way. She wore a green dress underneath a white cotton jacket. For some reason, as our eyes met, I got the strangest feeling of déjà vu. Like we’d met under the same circumstances not too long ago. But I shook my head and took a step toward her.

Emily fell into my arms with a giggle. “How’d it go?”

“They’re sharp,” I replied, pausing for a kiss on her cheek. “The next generation’s in good hands.”

“Awesome. I’m so glad we got to do this.”

“Me, too. Wanna celebrate?”

Emily looked up at me, teasing her bottom lip through her teeth. For the briefest moment, I felt like I’d said something troubling.

“Um, sure,” she said. “I was, uh, gonna suggest the Adams Bistro, but... well, that’s not exactly a place I want to visit anytime soon.”

I nodded. "Sure, sure. Consider it crossed off the list of suggestions."

"But, you know, there's that little Asian market on the way home. How about I treat instead to a plate of spaghetti and a bottle of Merlot?"

I chuckled, looping my arm around her shoulder. "As served by a cute girl like you? Count me in."

"Don't forget. This cute girl can pin you down anytime she likes."

I grinned at her enthusiasm. Then, as I looked her over, I got a terrible impulse in mind. Without no warning, I slipped my hand down from her shoulder to the small of her back. Very gently, I teased a finger across her waistline, where I felt—and heard—a distinct crinkling.

"Oh!" Emily's face turned bright red. She glanced around the empty hallway. Then her eyes found me again in a vicious glare. "Really? You want to check me out?"

"Relax, Em." I grinned as we made our way back to the front doors. "It's not so bad. Besides, if you need changing, I'd rather find a bathroom now than have you sit in it for too long."

"Hmph. You're such a brat."

"And you're cute when you're mad. It's only fair."

Emily opened her mouth to respond, but she stopped herself. I noticed a sudden, sinister glint in her eye. I didn't resist when she slipped her hand down my side and gave the back of my jeans a not-so-gentle swat. I had to flinch when I heard the diaper underneath rustle in response.

"For a Daddy," Emily teased, "you sure do you enjoy being diapered, too."

Now it was my turn to blush. "You know, it's not so bad when you're trying to build your confidence. I forgot I was even wearing it halfway through the lecture today."

"That's good!" Emily's grin was merciless. "Practice for later tonight."

"Oh, don't worry. I think cute little Jordan will make an appearance."

She laughed, and I slid my arm tight around her waist. Emily leaned into me, utterly carefree, and we pressed on through the doors, out into the quad, and back to my car. Overhead, birds were chirping, and a soft orange shine from the early evening sun touched everything we saw. I couldn't believe how good it felt to be out on a fine autumn day, in boring old Thebes Park of all places. If you'd told me last summer that I'd be happy to be there, I'd have laughed in your face and called you crazy.

Well, I'd still laugh in your face now, but that's only because I'm crazy, too. It helps considering the company I keep.

THE END