

# Electric Dreams

A Misfile fanfiction by ShadowDragon8685

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Upton Residence, Cape Cod, December 20, 2004, 9:00 AM

Sleep is a deep, comfortable blanket from which no person wishes to escape, but from which they must inevitably be dragged. Still, it can be pleasant to wake up, too, Ash Upton mused to herself. Emerging from the black blanket of sleep, she became aware of the warmth, first and foremost. The second thing she could feel was the heartbeat—two hearts beating as one, mere inches apart, two chests rising and falling in time.

The third thing she became cognizant of was the sleek, smooth feel of warm, feminine flesh pressed and molded to her own in a snug, warm embrace. She was lying on her back, and her blue-haired bookworm was facedown, half-atop Ash and slightly below her, such that her head was lying on Ash's shoulder. The orange-haired tuner grinned at the warm, welcome sensation, and opened her eyes. She was lying on the edge of the bed, and her eyes stared up through the window at the blue eternity of sky visible out the frost-rimmed window.

She leaned her head down, pressing the still-tingling sensation on her lips against Emily's forehead, gently kissing her; however, the dozing bookworm failed to awaken. Ash smiled, and reached up; searching for Emily's right hand, she found it comfortably atop her own bare breast, and raised her friend's arm gingerly, peering at the time on her watch—09:01. "Mmm..." Ash murmured softly, realizing she was quite hungry; after all, they had skipped dinner last night, and they'd had a *long* day.

Emily's eyes fluttered open with a slow murmur, and Ash looked down. Sleepy, magenta eyes met her own, and she smiled. So did Emily, who yawned softly, and crawled up slightly, moving her head up; Ash lowered her head, and their lips met. Ahh, that tingle returned in full force, and Ash moved up, finding her back arching all on its own, pressing her chest into Emily's.

The blue-haired girl wasted no time in capitalizing on the move. Her hand slid under Ash, holding her comfortably in the small of the back. Ash gasped softly, as Emily grinned at her. "Good morning," Emily murmured.

"Mmmm. It is now..." Her reply got a soft, quiet laugh from Emily, who laid her head back down, kissing softly at Ash's throat.

"When did you get to be slick, hmm?"

Ash shrugged softly in reply, and kissed Emily's forehead. "I dunno. It just... felt right."

Her bookworm laughed again and looked up. With her free hand she laced her fingers into Ash's, pushing Ash's arm back, as she leaned up, staring into Ash's eyes from above. "Well, keep it up."

Ash leaned up, kissing the side of Emily's neck softly, and Emily released a soft sigh of contentment, their fingers squeezing together.

Ash's head flopped back into the pillow, and she looked to her left at their joined hands. Emily's nails were glittering a glossy red, and hers were an almost-mirrored chrome color. Emily's eyes followed her gaze, and she asked, "They're not so bad, are they?"

"I dunno. On the one hand, you like it. On the other, even chrome makes me feel kinda sissy."

Emily laughed warmly at her reply, and kissed Ash's cheek. "Well then, let's get showered, get dressed, and find something to do to get you back to feeling all tough and strong, hmm?"

"Mmmmm," Ash replied, gently leaning over and laying a kiss on Emily's knuckles. "Sounds good, but we need to get breakfast somewhere in there." Her stomach growled dramatically, as if on cue.

"Fair enough," Emily said, laughing.

Emily reared back hard, pulling Ash with her. Ash wound up sitting upright, holding Emily tightly with one arm, while Emily was left kneeling astride Ash's lap. The pair kissed warmly, slowly, and

Ash slid her hand down to the small of Emily's back. Holding one another nearly-identically, they drug the kiss out, until both girlfriends slid away, inhaling deeply.

"Love you, Ash," Emily murmured, as they slid out of bed, walking towards the door to the shower and grabbing a pair of towels.

She replied in kind, "I know, Em. I love you."

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 9:47 AM

Freshly dried and dressed, the pair padded out to the kitchen, looking for breakfast while carrying on a quiet conversation.

"Ash," Emily began, "um, h-how important do you think sex is?"

"I... um, well... I dunno. I mean, it's not that I don't... Ahhh..." A blush crept up her face. "Y'know, not that I don't *want* to..."

"Right. But you get nervous." Ash nodded, and Emily slid in, under her shoulder; instinctively Ash wrapped her arm around Emily's shoulder, while her bookworm wrapped her arm around her own waist. "I get nervous when I think about it, too."

Ash paused in her step, and looked at Emily again. Em brought her hand up, and Ash took it, holding her softly. "You do?"

"You twist my guts into knots, Ash. I love you so much; and yes, you do make me, well..."

"Horny?" Ash ventured a guess, and Emily laughed a bit shyly.

"Ash, nice girls don't use words like that. But, yes. You *arouse* me, Ash." Emily hugged tightly, squeezing the tuner to her body, and Ash blushed quite brightly.

"I..."

"Yeah. You do." Emily leaned up, just a bit, kissing Ash's cheekbone. "I... I guess I thought it would come easily, Ash, once I told you how I felt."

Ash squeezed Emily's hand. "Nothing comes easy, does it? Even so, I'm glad we have each other." She kissed Emily—she aimed for the bookworm's cheek, but Em turned her head, turning it into a soft lip-kiss, which held slowly and loosely.

Parting the kiss, Emily said, "So... I'm asking, how important *is* sex, to you?"

"I... I dunno. I mean, I still dream about you... and me..."

"Sex dreams?"

"Sometimes; sometimes not. Sometimes it's just..."

"Being *close* to you, holding me."

"Yeah... I guess... what I'm saying is that I *want* to... well, y'know, have sex with you, but..."

"You're happy with what we have, and pushing slowly rather than fast?" Emily ventured.

"Right."

The pair walked into the kitchen, and found it empty. "Hmmm. Mom didn't leave us breakfast?"

"It's not like we *can't*, you know, cook for ourselves. Hey, do you remember that time I cooked you breakfast?"

"Errr..." Ash's memory chugged, and Emily smiled at her.

"Think *waaay* back. The day after Misfile day. You let me sleep on your bed..."

"Yeah, I remember. That was nice of you."

"Welllll... Do you want me to cook breakfast again?"

Ash blushed softly at Emily's question. "Sure. I'll help. What do you feel like?"

"Let's see what your mom has."

Ransacking the kitchen, they took stock of the supplies. Ash held up a package of bacon in one hand, and a carton of eggs in the other. "Let's see... omelet and a side of bacon?"

“Sure, that works. Here, give me the bacon.” She took three skillets down, and Ash handed her the package of bacon strips, then looked back in the fridge. Soon enough the sound of sizzling bacon met her ears, as Ash searched for cheese.

“Ah-hah!” She surfaced with a pack of pre-shredded cheddar. “Cheddar work?” Emily nodded at her, and Ash got to work. “Can you crumble some of the bacon? I’ll put it in the omelets.” Emily nodded again and started to pound the crispy bacon flat. Soon enough she delivered the uneven chunks of bacon, which Ash distributed into the egg and covered with cheese.

“I didn’t know you could cook,” Emily commented as Ash folded the egg over.

“Eh, I can’t really, but omelets are kind of hard to screw up.” She grinned as Emily brought a pair of plates over, and slid the egg, bacon, and cheese creations out onto the plates. “Here we go.”

It was a good breakfast, Ash mused, primarily on the strength of Emily’s bacon. Then Ash blinked as she felt Emily’s bare feet touch hers. Not only touch, but crawl up, sliding along them. She blushed, pausing with a bite of omelet almost at her lips.

“Um...” She smiled softly, feeling both shy and affectionate—and maybe a little aroused—as Emily worked her feet slowly up Ash’s, sliding them under the hem of her pants and resting on Ash’s lower shins. “Not that I’m complaining,” Ash said, as she leaned inwards to the table, setting her fork back, “but uh...”

Emily giggled softly, and started to flex her toes against Ash’s leg. “I dunno. I’m feeling flirtatious, I guess.”

Ash grinned softly, and slid her legs back, then forward—their feet flattened up to one another, and Ash curled her toes around Emily’s, with a grin which was answered in kind. Orange-haired tuner and blue-haired bookworm leaned forward, reaching out, over the table...

“Gah!” Ash exclaimed, as the inside of her elbow pushed her glass of orange juice, tipping it—right down the front of her shirt. She and Emily each went for the napkin holder, but Ash felt stiff paper under her fingers, even as the cold O.J. soaked her down to the skin.

“What the hell?” Ash picked up the paper; it was actually an envelope, and it felt thick. The front had ‘Ash’ on it in her mother’s writing. Forgetting the orange juice for a moment, she opened the letter, while Emily stared at her. “It’s a note.” It read, in her mother’s writing, “Ash, I’m going in to work early. It’s seven, and I’m going to take the Jaguar and have it insured and plated first. A tow company will be dropping off what’s left of my car sometime. See that it gets put in the garage, would you? The insurance company called; their inspector dropped by it at the impound and they decided it would be cheaper to total it out than to pay for new parts to fix it, so if you want anything left on it, it’s yours. There’s spending money in the envelope, and if you look in the top-right drawer of my desk, there’s a surprise for you.”

Emily had taken the envelope and pulled out the rest of the contents. She goggled, as five hundred dollars lay on the table. Ash likewise goggled. “Uh, wow...” Then it hit her that she was sitting in orange juice, and she made a face—which prompted Emily to giggle.

“Go get showered and changed, Ash.”

Ash blushed, and ran up the stairs, getting showered again in a hurry. She heard the phone ring, but didn’t run to get it, since she was still washing off the sticky feeling of the orange juice. Once dressed and out of the bedroom, she asked, “What was that about?”

“It was your mother, calling to see if you got your present, yet.” She was holding a smallish gift-wrapped box in Christmas colors with ‘To Ash, from Mom’ on a tag.

Ash took it; it was somewhat light. She sat down on the couch to open it. The box was that for an LG cell phone. “Oh, she got you a cell phone? Cool!” Ash opened it, but didn’t have to break the seals; her mother had opened it already. The phone inside was charged, and Ash flipped it open.

“Oh, that’s one of those with a camera, isn’t it? Nice!”

“I guess.”

“Don’t like it?”

“I dunno. I mean, it’s good and all, but I’ve never needed one until now.”

“Well, go ahead, have a look. See if she fiddled with the address book.”

Ash did, and found that, yes, her mother was already entered several times: her office telephone, her home telephone, and her own cell phone.

“Oh well. It was nice of her, anyway.”

“It’ll be useful,” Emily said. Ash leaned in to kiss her—and the house phone rang.

“Hm. Wonder who that is…” Ash stood up and walked over to the telephone, answering it. “Upton residence.” The deep voice on the other side was her father, and she put it on the speaker.

“Ash? Okay, so you’re still up there. You planning on staying the holidays with your mother?”

“I dunno.”

“Well, that’s fine if you want to, Ash.”

“I… It is?”

“I’ve had you for the last sixteen, remember? It’s fine. Is Emily still with you?”

“Yes, I’m here, Doctor Upton. Is my mom looking for me?”

“No, I was just wondering. However, some girl named Jenny is looking for *you*, Ash. She called on your room line. You weren’t here, so I answered it.”

“It’s no problem, dad. I’ll call her back. When did she call?”

“Just now.” Ash looked around for a clock, then remembered and checked the display on her cell phone—it read 10:37.

“All right, dad. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie. Talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay.” Ash hung up the phone, and walked over to her coat, searching it for the number Jenny had given her last night.

Emily chuckled softly. “This should be interesting. Think she’s going back to type?”

“I don’t know. She seemed really off-kilter last night, but…” She dialed, and the phone rang for a few moments, before it was answered.

“Hello?” It was Jenny’s voice, sounding somewhat surly.

“Ah—Jenny?”

The voice on the other end lightened immediately. “Ash! Um, hi…”

Awkwardness struck, and Ash kind of shifted, walking to the door and looking out its window.

“You were trying to call me?”

“Um, yeah. Your dad, I think, answered?”

“Yeah, that was my dad. Um, what’s up?”

“Uh, nothing. It’s *crushingly* boring out here right now. Um… What are you doing?”

“Not much of anything. Why?”

“I, um… I was wondering if I could join you.”

Ash looked over at Emily (who seemed to be amused by Ash’s awkward conversation), and shrugged at her. Emily shrugged back, and it hit Ash like a blinding flash of the obvious that her cell phone wasn’t a speakerphone. “Hang on a second, can you?” She turned to Emily, holding a hand over the bottom of the phone, saying, “She wants to join us.”

“I don’t mind, I guess.”

“Okay.” Ash took her hand off from the microphone of her new cell. “Um, yeah, I don’t mind. Um… where should we meet?”

“I don’t know. Wherever is fine.”

“I don’t know the area that well, you could come here if you wanted, or we could—”

“No, that’s fine. My mom has your mom’s address in her files; is that where you are?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’ll be there. And, thanks.”

The line went dead, and Emily smiled at her, asking, “What was that all about?”

“I honestly don’t know. She just asked if she could join us. Guess we’ll find out when she gets here.

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 11:52 AM

By noon, the pair had settled in on the couch, watching a movie on DVD. Ash was lying on her side on the couch, with Emily snuggled up in front of her. The tuner was playing with her new cell phone, while Emily’s head was lying on her upper arm and her eyes watching the movie. It may have been a romantic comedy, but Ash didn’t mind; Emily had, after all, spent more or less all day yesterday playing *Need for Speed* with her (and at the end of the night, Jenny), so it was only fair to watch something she wanted to watch. And at least a few points had been funny enough to make her laugh.

The movie started to reach its conclusion, getting Emily’s head raised in interest when they heard the sound of a car pull into the driveway. Too light to be the truck bringing the rest of her mother’s Porsche, it had to be Jenny, and Ash said as much.

“Sounds about right,” Emily said, sliding out of the embrace and off the couch, turning off the movie and standing up. The sound of the engine died, and a car door opened and shut. “It’s her,” Emily said from the door, undoing the lock. She opened the door as Ash stood up, and waved the girl outside in. Jenny walked up the drive quickly, and into the house.

Ash thought to herself, *“Mom would probably laugh if she could see this.”* Jenny was wearing a pale pink shirt under a hot pink jacket, with blue jeans and tall, vivid red boots. Her hair was of course curled around the back of her head.

It struck Ash, as she opened her mouth to say hello, *“What do you say to someone you don’t like, but want to try and maybe like, because she’s so pitiful that you really want to try and help her?”* She wound up saying, “Hello,” as the blonde shook her hair.

“Hello,” Jenny replied, and said the same to Emily as she moved away from the door for the latter to close again. “It’s *cold* out there.”

“Is it?” Ash asked, moving to the window. She noticed that Jenny had parked her car, a red Lexus SC convertible, behind the Monster XR. “I haven’t even gone outside today.”

Jenny was awkwardly standing about equidistant between Ash and Emily. She hummed softly, and Emily asked, “Did they close the schools here today?”

“No, they didn’t, but it’s the day before break—nobody shows up.”

“Well, we’re not doing much,” Ash admitted. “What did you think we were doing?”

Jenny looked at her with ice-blue eyes and shrugged. “I don’t know. I tried calling everyone I knew, but... nobody wanted anything to do with me.”

“Why not?”

“Was it because of last night?” Emily asked.

Jenny’s eyes closed, and she ‘looked’ down at the ground. Ash sighed, walked over, lay a hand on her shoulder, and took her coat, which she relinquished without argument. “If they could hang you out to dry because two bitches cornered you in a bathroom and started calling you names, they’re not real friends.” Jenny looked up, as Ash took her coat and tossed it over the coat tree. “Anyway, all we’re really doing today is waiting for a delivery for my mother. Why, did you have any kind of ideas?”

“Well, no. My girls and I would normally go out to the mall on a day like today, maybe go clubbing later; we’ll never sneak in with Emily, though.”

Emily returned to the entertainment center, turned on Ash’s Playstation 2, and took the controllers back to the couch. She sat down, as Jenny shrugged and sat on the couch next to Emily, who handed Jenny the second controller. Ash grinned at the two; an unlikelier pairing she couldn’t imagine, short of Cassiel and Kate, but they both started a competitive race. Ash sat on the other side of Jenny to watch.

Emily and Jenny both went at the race with a grinning competitiveness. Each of them had flawed technique, but they could easily outrace the AI drivers. Jenny was too aggressive on the throttle and seemed to believe the brakes were a deadly sin, whereas Emily had trouble drifting, and tended to be overly cautious in the turns. Both of them lost more time than really necessary in the turns—Jenny because she tended to handle her curves by slamming at a shallow angle into the opposite wall and accelerating away, and Emily because she tended to baby her car into proper turns around the curves. They were a good match for one another in terms of ability, and although Emily had superior technique, Jenny was quickly gaining skill with the game.

Several races in, Ash was enthralled by watching her best friend and her new acquaintance (friend?) racing. Emily's 240SX was lighter and handled better but, without the Unique parts from the career mode, had a hard time catching Jenny's Lexus, which, while heavier and poorer at turning, had a stronger engine. She commented and offered advice at times, equally to either competitor, and hadn't asked for a turn. Finally Emily looked up, but didn't offer.

"Ash? Did you remember to call Casper back about the parts to your mom's car?"

Ash's eyes goggled, and she snapped her fingers with one hand, slapping her forehead with the other. "I completely forgot! I'll go do that right now." She darted up, hearing Jenny asking Emily what she was talking about behind her, and Emily's explanation as she ran to their bedroom. She found the scrap of paper with Casper's number on it, picked up the telephone, and dialed.

The telephone rang and rang and rang, but eventually Casper's answering machine picked up. Ash recorded a message, "Casper, this is Ash; Ash Upton? You spoke to my friend Emily on Saturday about having Brent be on the lookout for parts to a red Porsche 996, and I was wondering if you had any leads. We're getting what the police recovered back today. Um..." She left her cell phone number as a call back number. "Call me whenever, or give the number to Brent if you want to. Thanks, bye."

"Ash! Get your shoes on!"

Ash blinked at the call from the other room, but didn't argue, pulling on her socks and sneakers, as Emily ran back into the bedroom. Ash stood up again as Emily was sitting down to put her shoes on, and running out to the front, Ash could see Jenny standing at the open door, pointing.

"There's a big truck in the driveway. There's a red car on the back."

"That'll be it. C'mon." Ash ran outside, and grimaced at the condition. Her mother's Porsche had been really stripped, and it was in a sorry state. The fenders were missing, as was the cover to the front-trunk and the hood over the engine, and the wheels had been stripped of their rims. The man in the passenger seat of the truck got out.

"Hey! You Marie Upton?"

"I'm her daughter, Ash."

"Close enough! Where do you want this wreck?" He jerked his fingers at the Porsche.

Ash pointed to the large garage. "In there!"

"All right. You open the doors."

"C'mon," Ash said, waving to be followed. Both Emily and Jenny followed her out to the garage, and Ash opened it. Her mother's garage was distressingly empty of tools, and distressingly full of normal junk. "Jenny, help me clear some space," she said; Jenny obeyed automatically, possibly because of the unusual nature of being told what to do with neither tyrannical overtones nor pouting request. "Emily, see if you can find some tools we can use. I want to see just how bad the damage is." Emily started her search, as she and Jenny shoved stuff to the sides of the garage, and the men in the truck backed the truck up to the garage, and began unloading the car, rolling it into the garage.

"Well, there you go," the rough-shaven tow-truck man said. "Somebody needs to sign for it." He held out an electronic clipboard; Ash took it, signing 'Ash Upton' to it. "Ah, well. Not *my* problem anymore. Enjoy your junk, ladies." The man handed Ash a key on a short chain, climbed back into his truck, and the driver took off, while Ash shook her head.

Emily came back up from a pile with a dusty box of tools. “Found these.” She set them on a box, as Jenny scowled at the interior of the car.

“Looks all ripped up—ah, and I don’t see a steering wheel in here.”

Ash looked up through the rear windshield, and shook her head. “Trim and stuff isn’t the biggie; I’m checking the engine.”

The modern Porsche equipment was different entirely from her Merkur and Ford engines, but she didn’t find any holes or obvious missing pieces. “Looks like they didn’t take anything except... oh, the battery.” She unlocked the passenger side door with the key the truck-driver had given her, peering in.

“Yeah... Looks like they did bit of a number on the inside.” The console molding had been pried up and was lying on the floor of the passenger seat. The steering wheel was gone, as was the instrument cluster and (predictably) the CD player/stereo. She shook her head, and pulled back out.

“What’s the prognosis?” Emily asked.

“Well, it’s *bad*, but it looks a lot worse than it is. It looks like everything was pulled out cleanly, more or less. Whatever insurance agent made the call to total this out is a god damned idiot.”

Jenny peered at her, leaning on the driver’s side door. “You... you really do know what you’re talking about. You can really put this thing back together?” She seemed somewhat awed.

“If I have the parts, I can. And the tools, those are important. And I’ll need to get hold of the tech manuals for the car, to be absolutely sure I’ve done it all right...”

Jenny’s head seemed to be spinning. “Wow... that’s...”

“A lot of work, yeah. That said... I *just might* have an idea where to start.” She pulled out her cell phone.

“When did you get that?”

Ash blinked, and a light clicked on. “Oh! This morning. Early gift from my mother.”

“Good. A girl’s not a girl without a cell phone these days.”

Ash felt an irritable irked sensation rise at that, and she turned her back. “Yeah, well... I called you from it, so your phone should have my number in it, if you want to add me.”

Jenny pulled her own cell phone out, while Emily asked, “Who’re you calling?” as Ash was adding a number to her own phone’s address book.

“Harry,” she replied, and walked out into the air, hitting the ‘dial’ button.

The phone rang only twice, before the other end answered—the telltale reverb told her it was a speakerphone. “Aries,” answered a familiar, female voice.

“Kate! The shop’s open again?”

“Ash! Good to hear from you—and yes, we’re open again. Harry finally got tired of watching the snowdrift in front of the shop turn into an ice bunker, so he actually did hire a small front-end loader to break it up. How’re you doing?”

Ash smiled at the chipper sound in normally dour Kate’s voice. “Ah, that’s... Actually, I’m fine. Doing better than I have in awhile.”

“That’s good to hear, little sister,” Kate replied. “So, business or pleasure?”

Ash blinked at the unusual question. “Err...”

“Is this a social call, or did you get into trouble and need a tow?”

“Actually, it’s business, sort-of, but I don’t need a tow. I need to know where I can find tech manuals for a car.”

“What, don’t tell you lost the ones Harry sold you with your XR4Ti, little sister?” Kate’s voice was chiding, and Ash rolled her eyes.

“No, actually. I’ve got a very sick Porsche 996 on my hands that needs fixing.”

“Wha? Di’ I heah’ thah right? You’ve gone an’ sold me baby fer a Porsche?” Ash grinned at hearing Harry’s voice, which seemed both at once affronted and proud.

Ash looked back—Emily and Jenny were sitting in the Porsche, talking. “No, Harry, it’s my mother’s car! I’m in Cape Cod.”

“Oh really? That’s good to hear! Well, that yer’ in Cape Cod, nah tha you’ve got a sick car. What’s wrong wi’ it?”

“My mom accidentally ran out of gas in a bad part of town. The crooks stripped the inside pretty thoroughly, took the hood, and the bumpers.”

A low whistle came from her cell phone. “That’s a rough job, that is, girl. Still, if yeh’ gonna fix ’er up, yeh’ll need to start wi’ the manuals. They’re nah cheap themselves.”

“Errr... how much are you talking, Harry?”

Ash heard the clicking of a computer keyboard in the background, and Harry’s voice continued “I don’ honestly know, Ash. Porsche dosn’ like owners doin’ much o’ their own stuff—like to keep their bloody ‘authorized dealers’ in th’ repair business.”

“You sound like you don’t approve.”

“I bloody don’, that’s why I sound like I don’. Anyway... Eh?”

“I found something, Ash,” Kate’s voice interrupted. “This looks like it’ll do you. It’s an e-book version, but it’s only twenty dollars.”

“Wow. I figured I was going to have to shell out like, two hundred dollars or something.”

“Aye, that sounds about righ’ if ye were buyin’ the manuals outright,” Harry replied. “I don’ suppose yeh’ need me to have th’ beastie towed back to Tempest for some work on ’er, eh?”

“I don’t know. I’ll see how far I can get up here. The problem may be finding the parts. They might almost literally fall into my lap, they might be on the other side of the country by now.”

“Aye, that sounds like a problem. Porsche parts’d be hard tae get ’hold of. Let me know if yeh’ run inna trouble an’ I’ll see what I can do.”

“Will do. Thanks.” Kate gave her the information on where to buy the e-book, and Ash looked back after hanging up—Emily and Jenny were just getting out of the car.

“How’d it go?”

“Pretty good. Kate found a copy of the technical manuals I’ll need in an e-book format. It’s only twenty, so I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“Right. So the real pain will be getting the parts.”

“And putting them back on,” Ash nodded.

Jenny looked back at the car’s missing hood. “You’re... seriously going to try this yourself?”

“Yeah. Why not? The hardest part will be re-installing the console; after that, it’s just a matter of lifting and bolting.”

“Yeah... It looked like whoever stripped it knew what they were doing—all the wire harnesses are hanging free, but nothing’s been just cut,” Emily said.

“That’s a relief...” She smiled, and realized her stomach was growling softly. She checked the time on her cell phone’s face; it was reading 1:09. “What say we go get lunch somewhere?”

Emily nodded, as did Jenny. “Marco’s?” the blonde asked.

“I dunno, I was thinking the Ale House.” Ash pointed up the street.

“Well, wherever we go, it’s my treat,” Jenny answered, as she and Emily walked out of the garage, and Ash shut the door.

“You don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do. After all, you paid for mine yesterday.”

Ash found herself unable to argue with that logic. She locked the door to the house and pulled out her car keys. Emily called out “Shotgun!” with a laugh, running towards the car, leaving Jenny and Ash chasing her. She reached the door first and grinned. “Guess you’re riding in the back, Jenny.”

“Okay...” Jenny crawled over the pulled-down seat when Ash unlocked the door, then Ash and Emily got into the front seats, buckling in. Ash started the car, and they pulled out, slowly.

“Where are we going?” Emily asked.

“I dunno. I’m fine anywhere, really. I’m just hungry.”

“Well, I said I’d pay, so...” Jenny piped up from behind. “You remember how to get to Marco’s?”

“Yes, I remember. Marco’s, then?”

“It’s fine by me,” Emily said, leaning back in her seat.

Ash nudged the Monster XR out into the road, aiming for the highway, and pressed on the gas.

“So,” asked Jenny, after awhile. “Why do people call out ‘shotgun’ when they want to ride in the passenger seat?”

“I honestly do not know.”

“I do! It dates back to the Wild West, in the days when payrolls, or money, or other valuables were transported by stagecoach. They were typically guarded by several armed men riding on the coach. Traditionally, the man sitting next to the driver had a shotgun, although in practice all the guards would carry a shotgun if they could. Because the coach was bumping up and down and rocking back and forth, you see, the scattergun made them a lot more likely to hit the target.”

Both Ash and Jenny were stunned momentarily by Emily’s sudden discourse. “Oh, wow... That’s an earful, sorry I asked,” Jenny replied.

“Neat to know, though. Now you can answer that if someone asks you.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Anyway, are you *really* going to try and fix that car? It’s kind of... wrecked.”

“No. I’m *going* to fix it.” Ash grinned. “And you two are going to help me.”

“Wait, *us*?”

“Well, yeah. I can’t do it alone, and I don’t really know anyone else up here. Besides,” she said, with a grin, “what else have you got to do?”

Ash caught a glimpse of a half-hearted sneer in the rear-view mirror. “Well, most girls don’t like spending time doing *boy-work* where you get your nails broken when we could be at the mall, or...”

Ash rolled her eyes, but Emily replied first. “Are you afraid of getting a little dirty?” she said, all-too-sweetly. “Because if so, then you must be kind of a wimp. We’re not even going to have to mess with the engine; that’s where the real dirty stuff is. This would be a few hours of lifting and bolting things back on.”

Jenny scowled at her, but Ash shrugged. “Well, when we get the parts, if we get them,” she conceded, “*we’re* going to be putting them on. I mean, sure, you could just go home, or just play Need for Speed without us, but wouldn’t you rather just try? Who knows, it might be interesting.”

Jenny looked like she was trying to come up with an objection that wouldn’t automatically make her look like she was as shallow as a wading pool, but Emily looked into Ash’s eyes, and Ash grinned. “Tell you what. You want to go to the mall after lunch? We’ll do what you want to do, then when—or if—we get the parts, you help us with the car. Fair?”

“Well...” Jenny shrugged, and nodded, looking out the window at the sea as the car barreled down the freeway. “Okay. You did help me out and all. And you didn’t finish me when you had the chance, and... well, I owe you.” She looked down, a bit sheepishly. “So, fine. If you want me to tinker with a car with you, I guess I can try. I’ll probably break something, though.”

Ash laughed. “You’d have to *try* to break these things. You’re not going to try, are you?”

“Uh, no. No, I’m not.”

“Good. Marco’s is on fifth, right?”

“Right,” Jenny answered, and reclined back in her seat, sighing softly.

#### The Highway, 2:22 PM

They rode peacefully for a while, but out of the blue Emily squealed, “Ohmigod! Look!” She pointed towards a red car that Ash was approaching quickly, but Ash could barely make it out.

“What the heck is that?”

“And *you’re* supposed to be the car nut, not me. Don’t you recognize it? Pull up alongside.”

The car was sleek, low to the ground, and its engine sounded like a jet more than anything. Even Jenny was looking—she'd unbuckled to pull herself up alongside Emily's face. "It's *hot*," Jenny said. "What is it?"

"I can't quite place it. It's..."

"A Porsche Carrera GT! Those things are *brand* new!"

"Oh! Doh! Of course... Do you think it's very fast?"

Emily scowled at her. "It's a *Porsche*. And more than that, do you *see* the size of that engine?" The car they were overtaking at about sixty was sleek, a red rider with a spoiler that was actually inset in the molding. The engine was easily visible inside what seemed to be a grille of some sort, set just in front of the rear axle—it was a monster.

"Okay, it's pretty, but why does the spoiler look decorative more than functional?"

"Aerodynamic efficiency. The spoiler deploys at about seventy. That's when the drag caused by the spoiler being deployed is exactly equal to the traction lost from upforce, and it only gets worse as it climbs—hence, the spoiler only extends when it's needed."

"Huh, that's cool. Should I?" she grinned.

Emily looked all around. "I don't see cops. That thing would burn *Kate*, though. And a freeway is a giant straight."

"Who's Kate?" asked Jenny.

"Maybe. But I still want to try. And Kate's a, well, friend. She drives a Jaguar XKR."

Ash glanced around—saw no police or suspiciously officious-looking unmarked vehicles—and pulled alongside the sleek, torpedo-like car. She gunned the engine twice, and the heavily tinted window rolled down, revealing a black-haired man in a business suit sitting in the driver's seat. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, and he was laughing, or looked like he was. Ash met his eyes—he grinned, gunned the engine, and held up three fingers on one hand.

"Buckle up, Jenny." Jenny hurried to buckle up, grinning widely, as the man lowered the first finger, then the second. He dropped the third, and Ash put the pedal to the metal. The Ford 5.0 Liter V8 in her Monster XR roared as she fed it all the gas it could guzzle. The speedometer and tachometer both rose, and Ash dropped the Monster into third gear as they tore away from the Porsche.

She had a few glorifying moments of superiority as the speedometer crept towards 90, dropping the Monster into fourth, and going for a hundred. Then she started to think that maybe she'd been duped into flagrantly gunning it with no competition. *That's* when the sound like a thousand banshee's howls drowned out even the Monster XR's engine. The Porsche behind her had launched off like a rocket and was rapidly overtaking the Monster XR. Ash knew it was essentially a futile battle, but she still wasn't going to *not try*. The speedometer crept up to a hundred and ten, and she slammed the Monster home to its fifth and final gear—not a position her shifter often got to see itself in.

Though the struggle was valiant and the cause just (in Ash's mind at least) her Monster simply had no hope of matching the Carrera GT's horses. "*Hell, Kate's Jaguar couldn't touch that thing's horses,*" Ash thought to herself as it pulled alongside. The driver waved at her; she waved back. He grinned before reaching down and shifting again. "*That's just showing off. He's probably shifting into fourth,*" she thought with no small measure of envy, as the driver rolled up the window. Then the Porsche resumed accelerating. Ash looked down—the Monster was struggling for each additional mph, and shaking under her; she knew she'd never control it properly at this rate. She was doing a hundred and forty and the Porsche was still accelerating. Ash waved at the retreating Porsche, its spoiler raised into the air, and uttered, "Hold on."

She brought the Monster back down with a fast and hard brake, then gulped as she heard sirens from ahead. She saw the red and blue flash—the cop cruiser took off after the Porsche. "My god... he's *running*," Emily murmured, pointing. Ash blinked, looking twice—the red car ahead was not only running, it was succeeding! The police cruiser's engine howled, but it just couldn't catch the red Porsche.

“He’s got to be fucking crazy,” Ash said, feeling her heart beating fast; it could just have easily have been *her*. She reflected on how stupid it had been to start an impromptu drag race on the middle of the freeway.

“If he gets it covered before they can set up a roadblock and lay low, think he’ll get away?”

“I dunno. It can be done, but doing this on the freeway is a lot different from dodging cops running down Greylock, which even I haven’t done.”

Jenny laughed softly. “What, you’ve never just flirted your way out of a ticket? It’s easy, just throw your hair back and bat your eyes...”

Ash blushed heavily, looking down at her instrument cluster for a moment before locking her eyes back on the road. “Uh... no. I haven’t. And I never will.”

“Good thing I’m with you, then.”

Ash felt a boiling rise in her. That wasn’t... it... it *irked* her; it was really quite galling. Especially when she thought back to that time Emily had convinced her to use her ‘feminine wiles’ on Colin to get those iridium spark plugs on the quick. “*Ich. Don’t even want to think about doing that.*”

She slowly became cognizant of the fact that Jenny was asking if Ash was okay, and Emily was hastily trying to explain that Ash despised using charm or looks to get her anything.

“Why? I may have ragged on you because, well, that’s what I did, but you’re pretty, well, hot. I mean, obviously you’re not as hot as I am, but you definitely have the body and the eyes for it...”

Ash felt a horrid feeling of dirtiness creeping over her. Whatever she might be feeling towards trying to be less stuck-up about her emotions, and even (dare she think it) looking somewhat... pretty, as evidenced by her chrome-colored fingernails, *that* was a line she had not, would not contemplate, and if there was a God, would *never* cross. Still, now was a *bad* time to have a freak-out session, and she did her best to squish that feeling.

“Jenny, do us all a big favor and *drop* this topic now, please?” Emily sounded almost panicked, as she could see the gender-identity panic, which had been mostly in remission the past few days, threatening to reassert itself in Ash with a vengeance.

“I’d appreciate that, Jenny. But to answer your question, I won’t do that sort of thing. *Ever.*”

Ash saw Jenny was a bit confused (or maybe ashamed) but she nodded. “Okay. Anyway, that was really, *really* cool, Ash.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it was.”

Ahead of them, the police cruiser had switched off its lights, apparently having given up the chase. Jenny pointed ahead of them, “Our exit’s coming up.”

“All right.” Ash put on her turn signal, and drifted into the proper lane.

#### Marco’s On 5th, 2:51 PM

Marco’s, unsurprisingly, hadn’t changed at all from the same time yesterday. The parking lot was more crowded, but the redbrick bistro with overhanging green awnings was more or less the same. Again, Jenny took point after Ash had parked the car, and Emily and Ash flanked her on their way to the door.

The maître d’ had them seated after seeing Jenny. He told a waitress—the same from the day before—to take them to a seat, which she promptly did. Marco’s was much busier today, and Jenny seemed to look around almost nervously. The waitress took their orders for drinks and left them to look at their menus, leaving them alone in the green bistro, full of the sounds of conversation.

Ash looked half-heartedly at the menu—it was covered with Marco’s logo and a picture of the front of the building—and decided to break the ice. “So, did you see anyone you know?”

Jenny nodded and leaned in; Ash and Emily likewise leaned in. “Yeah. I saw Clarita and Rachelle—the two from last night—in the far corner with a couple of boys. I also saw Annette in here with a girl I don’t know.”

“Annette?”

“My... well... I thought she was my friend, until I tried calling her this morning.”

“Okay, okay. She didn’t want to talk to you?”

Jenny shook her head. “She called me... well...” Jenny trailed off, looking down at her menu; Ash nodded and did the same.

Time passed in silence as Ash thought about what she wanted to eat. The waitress returned soon enough with their drinks and set them down. “Do you know what you’d like, or should I come back?”

“I’ll have the fettuccine alfredo,” Ash replied.

Emily said, “Veal parm? With the salad bar.”

“Mmm. I’ll have the same.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, give me the salad bar, too,” Ash added.

The waitress wrote it all down and said, “Help yourselves, girls.” She pointed to the salad bar and walked away. Ash took a deep swig of her soda, as Emily slid out from beside her. Jenny stood up from the other side, and then Ash scooted out and stood up as well.

Walking to the salad bar, Jenny cast furtive glances around. Her eyes led Ash’s to a table where two boys were boisterously laughing with two girls. They were the same girls Ash had gotten into a brawl with, both of them in more normal clothes, tittering at what the boys were saying. The titters quieted and they shot daggers at Ash. Ash stared back, and then looked forward at the salad bar. She and Emily drew up alongside Jenny, assembling their salads from a dizzying array of components.

“You okay?” Ash asked Jenny quietly.

“I-I think so... Thank you. Thank you both for letting me come with you.”

Emily shot a sidelong smile at the blonde girl, and Ash said, “Well, you know, they say if you save someone, they become your responsibility and all that. Honestly? I dunno. I can’t say why I did what I did, but I don’t regret it.”

Jenny looked up at her, blinking—crystal-ice-blue eyes meeting Ash’s green. “You don’t? I thought you two hated me?”

“Maybe that’s all the more reason to make friends?”

Jenny looked at Ash with confusion and... Submission? Affection? Some strange, close emotion evident in her eyes. “You are seven shades of retarded, Ash Upton.” She looked down at her salad plate. “Maybe that’s why you’re better than me?”

Emily blinked at Jenny’s odd statement, then blinked again when she found Jenny’s plate in her hands. “I-I need to use the bathroom,” Jenny murmured, and she scooted away, leaving Ash and Emily to walk back to their table, somewhat bewildered.

“That was strange, wasn’t it,” Ash asked.

“Yeah. I think she’s very confused, now.”

“Right...” She sighed, dramatically, resting her head on her hands, her elbows on the table. “She’s strange... but I think she feels, well... defeated?”

“That’s possible, Ash. She may, well... kind of be latching onto you as a... role model.”

Ash blanched at that thought, and took a bite of her salad. The flavors of cheese and honey-mustard blossomed satisfyingly in her mouth, and she closed her eyes, savoring for a moment. When she swallowed and opened her eyes, however, a most unfavorable sight faced her—the black-haired girl and white-haired girl from the night before, the ones who had assaulted Jenny and tore her top off, were moving to the bathroom.

“Trouble, ten o’ clock,” Ash said to Emily, who spotted them, and nodded.

“I see it. I’ll intercept this one; just stay here, okay?” Ash didn’t like it, but she nodded, and Emily moved up, angling for the bathroom.

Ash was left looking out the window of the bistro, idly poking at her salad, when something *fancy* caught her eyes. A metallic black European car of some obvious sleek, powerful lines that she couldn’t

quite identify was seeking a parking space. It had metallic purple highlights, windows tinted a light silver, and rakish, spiral-pattern rims in deep purple. It was a beautiful, rear-engined machine, but the one behind it wasn't entirely a slouch, either. Riding like a big, blue boat on small-diameter rimmed Goodyears, the retro lines of a first-gen Camaro were distinctive, especially since it simply *said* Camaro on the side. The big muscle car passed close enough to the window for Ash to read the model badging on the front: Z/28RS. With white racing stripes on the hood and chrome trim, she could feel the rumble from the powerful muscle car's engine when she put her hand on the window.

"Wow..." Ash said, and thought it must be her day for seeing *nice* cars. Even if they weren't the kind she normally thought of, they were still beautiful. The black exotic turned into the parking spot immediately across from the window, and Ash saw the logo on the back; it was a Lotus Exige.

"*That might be a fun car,*" she thought, looking back to her salad and lifting another large bite.

### Marco's Bathroom, 3:03 PM

Emily walked into the bathroom immediately after the two sharks. Right away, she realized why Ash had felt the need to beat them—they were no more in the door than they were jeering at Jenny, who was at a sink, looking up as the door opened.

"Jenny? Oh, *Jennyyyy*," the one with white hair started, while the black-haired one jeered.

"*She's the girl from yesterday,*" Emily scowled, recognizing the girl who had insulted her and goaded Ash into throwing a punch.

Jenny scowled up at them, then her eyes widened when she saw Emily.

"What's wrong, Jenny? Looking for comfort in the arms of a pair of loser dykes now? You really have lost it," the white haired girl continued. Emily felt her blood start to boil, and she shook her head at Jenny, hoping the blonde would take her hint and wouldn't rise to the baiting.

Jenny's lip trembled. She *wanted* to retaliate, it was clear on her face; but she turned back to her basin, muttering, "Go away." It was weak, almost pathetically so, but it was a good start. The black-haired girl laughed, while the one with the white hair giggled.

"*Ugh. She reminds me so much of Cassiel,*" Emily scowled, as they launched into another round of jeers. The white-haired one seemed to be the intellectual leader, since she launched the attacks.

"So, which one's your girlfriend, hmm? The redheaded bull-dyke, or the ugly dyke with the awful blue dye-job?"

Emily felt her heat rising. She wasn't given to violence like Ash was—and she *reminded* herself of that—so she said, loud and clearly, "*Excuse me!*" and pushed her way through the middle of the jeering duo, walking between them and Jenny, then turning around. The surprised look of shock on their faces was satisfying, as they apparently had no clue she was there. "If you're just going to insult and berate me and my friends, why don't you both leave? Haven't you got anything better to do?"

She crossed her arms, staring at them. While the white-haired girl was shorter, the raven-haired girl was taller than most of the boys at her school. She took a moment to curse the Misfile for making her shorter and more easily dismissed, as the white haired girl sneered at her.

"Mmmm, no. Dykes don't tell me what to do, dykie-dyke."

Jenny crept up beside Emily, saying, "You keep using that word a lot, Clarita. Projecting, much?"

The white-haired girl recoiled with a snarl, and the other one smirked. "Clarita, you gonna take that from a dyke like her?"

Clarita snarled, but Emily followed up Jenny's lead. "It's true, you know. Statistically, the girls who feel the most need to gay-bash are doing it because deep inside, they hate boys and want a girl." It probably wasn't strictly true. Emily felt a pang of guilt for invoking 'statistically' without evidence. Still, it served its purpose in terms of the fight—Clarita went from aggressive to angry and outraged.

Clarita looked like she was about to throw a punch, and Rachelle looked ready to back her up. Emily was quickly trying to formulate a 'make my day; I'll have you thrown out of here and arrested

for assault' argument. She knew she couldn't stand up to these two in a brawl, not even with Jenny's assistance, and in a place like Marco's, she'd get in deep trouble.

But Jenny made her move first. She stepped towards Clarita, and Emily realized (with a flush) that she'd gone into full-on seduction mode. And she was *good* at it, so good she probably could've taught Molly a thing or two.

"Aww, Clarita... I understand," Jenny purred, her voice a perfectly modulated silk, as she sashayed slowly forward. "Why didn't you tell me?" She grinned, eyes gleaming, as Clarita took a nervous step back. With a flash in Clarita's eyes, Emily could tell that her jeering had been spot-on—the white-haired girl had exactly the same look Emily had many times while trying to deny her attraction to Ash.

"It's okay..." Jenny slid close to Clarita, as both of the aggressors took nervous steps back. Jenny's voice got low. "You can kiss me... I won't tell..."

With a cry of "A-agh! Freak!" that warbled slightly, Clarita turned and pelted from the bathroom.

It took Rachelle only a moment to get her parting shot. "Let's blow this loserville, Clarita!" as she followed her friend.

#### Marco's Dining Room, 3:06 PM

Ash was idly poking at her salad when she heard the door to the bathroom slam open. She looked up, but it was the white-haired girl from the night before pelting out and looking like she'd just been whipped, followed by her friend. Ash had a curiosity to know just what had gone on, but Emily had said she'd handle it, and Ash would let her.

She looked back out the window as the drivers of the fancy cars were getting out. The driver of the Lotus was a tall woman who—at almost six feet tall—dwarfed her car. She wore a long gray duster and had brown hair going white at the temples. Even she was dwarfed by the giant(ess) who got out of the Camaro, though. Easily standing tall above the woman who drove the Exige, the muscle car's driver had long black hair that fell below her waist, broad hips and shoulders, and wore a black trench coat that dusted the ground as she walked. The two spotted each other and waved. They met and started walking towards the door.

Ash's attention drifted back to the cars themselves. Both were clearly performance vehicles, and Ash took special note of the treads—racing tires, each of them. Ash wondered if the two were racers like herself. She'd love a chance to test her Monster XR against that Lotus on the old road—both vehicles were strong in the corners.

#### Marco's Bathroom, 3:07 PM

After Clarita and Rachelle ran out of the bathroom, Jenny turned to the sink, holding tight to the marble basin's rim, and took a deep, tremulous breath. Emily leaned over to look into her eyes, which were closed.

"Jenny," she asked, "are you okay?"

The blonde girl hugged her denim jacket tightly to herself. "N-No... I feel..."

"Guilty? About what you just did?"

"... Maybe," Jenny answered. "I-I... I just don't know."

"So, why'd you do it?"

"I wanted them to leave. I knew Clarita would be freaked out by being seen as a les-lesbian."

"So you came on strong to her?"

"She's terrified of being seen as liking girls."

"Does she?"

Jenny nodded, after a few seconds of looking at her hands in the basin, turning them over and over.

"Yeah. Didn't you see it?"

“I thought so, when she backpedaled. She was over-acting and gave it away.”

“Yeah. She’s terrified of being abandoned by Rachelle. She’s her only friend, but Rachelle is always slamming dykes this and fags that...”

“I see...”

Jenny shivered. “And Rachelle isn’t really smart enough or strong enough to lead. She acts it well, but Clarita’s the brains and the willpower behind them. Once I scared off Clarita, I knew Rachelle would run.”

“Huh... Does Rachelle...”

Jenny shook her head, then seemed to reconsider, and shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. I know she’s slept with boys and Clarita hasn’t.”

“Right. You don’t sound too hurt about the trying to seduce her.”

“I’m not sorry I scared her off...”

“You’re feeling guilty because Rachelle might hang Clarita out to dry like your friends hung you out to dry.”

Jenny nodded, her face contorting with a look best approximating self-loathing and misery. She looked phenomenally guilty, and Emily reached out, slowly putting a hand on the taller blonde’s shoulder. “If she’s really her friend, she won’t desert her. And if she’s not a real friend, is she really better off with her?”

Emily’s nugget of wisdom left Jenny looking confused as she tried to sort it out, and finally said, “I... I just don’t know.” She looked back at her hands again, and started washing them, slowly.

“Please, don’t tell Ash what I did.” Emily looked back at Jenny and blinked. “Please,” the blonde repeated.

“Okay. I won’t. You want her to think well of you, don’t you?”

Jenny simply nodded, going back to washing her hands (for the third time).

### Marco’s Dining Room, 3:11 PM

Clarita and Rachelle collected their dates and rushed out of the restaurant in a hurry, so Ash figured they must have gotten on the losing side of something. She didn’t see a mark on them (that she hadn’t put there, anyway), so she guessed that Emily or more likely Jenny had torn one of them down so bad they’d retreated. They’d gone in looking for trouble, so Ash figured it was fair that they bit off more than they could chew.

With a sigh, Ash looked back at the bathroom door, and realized that Emily and Jenny were still there. “I wonder if they ran into even more trouble?” she scowled softly. Then she caught a snippet of conversation in a Scottish brogue so thick you could cut it with a knife; it was distinctive because the word said had been ‘Tempest’.

Ash scooted to the edge of the booth, craning her head. The source of the voice was the smaller of the two drivers she’d seen out the door. She craned to hear, and heard the other driver—the giantess with a thick, husky voice that sounded like she was winded—saying, “I don’t know where it is. I might have passed it on the road, but I didn’t see if it was.”

“I dinnae know, either. An’ where is ’e, ’e said ’e’d be here, and I dinnae see his car.”

As they closed in on Ash’s booth, she held up her hand. “Excuse me, are you looking for Tempest, Massachusetts?”

The Scotswoman—wearing thin-rimmed glasses that made her hazel eyes seem the size of saucers—brightened immediately. “Aye, we are! D’ye know where ’tis?”

“I’m from Tempest. I can tell you how to get there.”

“That’s perfect. Here, give ’er the map!”

The other one took a map out of her trench coat pocket, putting it down on the table. “I can hardly read the writing on it.”

“An’ I cannae make heads nor tails o’ yer map lexicon.”

“No problem.” She unfolded the map, and winced—it was an especially poor map. “Here’s the problem, this is a really hard-to-read map. You want to take route six west from here until you get the chance to turn off onto I-495, which you should ride north until you get to I-90. Then just get on it and head west, you can’t miss it. There’ll be a big exit that says ‘Tempest’.” She checked her pockets. “Err, do you have a pen?”

“Aye.” The woman with the thick brogue pulled a thick, blue Sharpie marker out of her pocket.

Ash circled more-or-less where they were, then drew arrows on the turns they wanted to take.

“That’ll take you right there, but if you get lost, just head west. If you hit Albany, turn around and drive back east; you *can’t* miss it unless you’re trying to.”

“Thank you,” “Cheers, doll,” the pair said almost at once, smiled at her, and then headed off.

Ash scooted back over in her seat when she saw Emily and Jenny exit the restroom. Both of them looked more or less in good condition and even bright.

### Outside Marco’s Bistro, 3:31 PM

Ash was laughing as the trio exited Marco’s, slapping her hands together and bent over; Emily was grinning, shaking her head and giggling with her hand covering her mouth at the joke Jenny had cracked on the way out. “Oh... Oh wow, I think I need to stop and wipe the tears from my eyes...” Ash mock-wiped tears of laughter from her face, and straightened up, leading the trio back to the Monster XR while fishing the keys from their pocket.

“Okay, so... Whoa!” Ash danced back as another car rolled into Marco’s; she had been about to carelessly walk across its path. It was another muscle car, this one a vintage green, with a deeply rumbling, growling engine, and a high hood scoop. The driver inside was a man with black hair who looked familiar, Ash mused, but she couldn’t place him. Then she noticed the decal on the sides—it was a long black stripe running up the side and down sharply against the wheel well, interrupted briefly to spell out the word ‘HEMI’ in big block letters.

“Fuck, that’s loud!” Jenny groused, holding her ears, as the growling monster muscle car rolled further into the parking lot.

“That’s weird. That’s the second muscle car in here! I can’t place it, though.”

“And you’re supposed to be the car nut! That’s a real, honest-to-god Hemicuda!”

“Hemicuda?”

“A Plymouth Barracuda with Chrysler’s legendary 426 Hemi.”

“Huh... I don’t really ‘know’ muscle cars. Is that good?”

“It’s a monster!” Emily laughed at her, shaking her head. “You really hate history, even car history, don’t you?”

“No... I just don’t like non-Ford American car history.”

“Well, it’d smoke a Mustang—any Mustang—so that should say something. Let’s go.”

Ash led them back to the Monster XR and got in. Jenny called out “Shotgun!” a second before Emily did, and Emily laughed, crawling into the back as Jenny buckled in next to Ash. Ash put the car into reverse and pulled out. As she did, the big green car’s driver—who was waiting for them to vacate the parking spot—waved. “Hey, he’s the one who had that Carrera GT! He’s got a brand-new Porsche *and* a muscle car? Guy must be loaded...”

“I guess he got it under cover, then,” Emily said.

“All this car talk. You two know *so much*, it’s freaky.”

“Eh. I can loan you some stuff to read if you want to.”

Jenny made a face, but didn’t say no. “Anyway... where to now? The mall, right?”

“*Oh, right... the mall.*” Ash’s promise came back to her and she sighed. “Yeah, let’s go. Which way?” Jenny pointed, and Ash set the Monster XR into motion.

Parking Lot At The Cape Cod Mall, Hyannis, 4:07 PM

The trip to the mall was uneventful, although finding parking was difficult; they had to park fairly far out. Ash finally found a spot, powering into it ahead of some old Volvo who's owner flipped her off on the way by, and she sighed as she put the car out of gear, parking it.

"There, see? Not hard to find, was it?" Ash admitted it was not, then the ringing of a cell phone split the quiet. Ash and Emily both looked at Jenny, but the blonde shook her head. "Not my ring-tone; must be yours."

Ash took her cell phone out of her pocket. Flipping it open, the phone face read 'Mom', as it connected. "Mom?" she asked.

"Ash, dear, is Emily with you?"

"Yeah, she's with me. We're at the mall." Jenny got a nervous look on her face, and Ash nodded her head towards Emily, relieving Jenny visibly.

"Good, dear. Edward just called me; her mother called him looking for her. She's at her aunt's house, and is trying to get hold of Emily rather frantically, as I understand it."

"Oh... Oh, *crap*."

"Well, I don't know how 'oh crap' it is, but you need to tell Emily to call her mother right away. Oh, I know it's a long-shot, but is Jenny with you?"

"Yeah, she's with me, too." Jenny visibly paled, and pushed her fist into her forehead.

Ash's mother laughed on the other end of the line. "Oh, how wonderful. Her mother's going spare trying to find her. She's called all her other friend's mothers twice now. She never even thought to ask me, so I won't tell her unless she does. Have fun, dear."

Ash hung up the phone, and handed it to Emily, as Jenny looked like she wanted to burrow into the seat. "Em, call your mom. She's at your aunt's house? I guess?"

"Right, will do." Emily took the phone. "It's going to be a long-distance call..."

"Don't worry about it, Em."

The phone rang less than one full time before it was picked up, her mother breathing, "Emily? Is that you?"

"Yes, mom, it's me."

Her mother sounded harried, letting out a sigh. "Where in blazes are you?"

"I'm in Cape Cod, mom." Ash and Jenny looked decidedly uncomfortable, so she waved at them to indicate they could slip out if they wanted. Jenny, cringing, took the opportunity, but Ash waited it out.

The expected explosion went off, but it was a dud. "Cape Cod? *Cape Cod*? You're in... No, actually, that's good. Doctor Upton told me that most of Tempest has been without heat for the past few days. His house was one of the first to experience it, but I've checked the gas company, a main ruptured."

Emily let out a quiet sigh of relief. "Mom, I'm sorry, I-"

"Don't. At this point, I don't have time for it. You aunt was in a car wreck, Emily."

Emily went white. "*She was*?"

"Well, we both were, but she got hurt bad. I'm going to stay up here with her, probably for a while, a week or two. You're a big enough girl, Emily, and you've got a place to stay. I'm sorry I won't be able to see you over Christmas, but your aunt is badly hurt, and I have to stay with her."

"I-It's okay, mom."

"Good. You just stay out east with your car-friend and stay warm."

"Mom, I can probably get to Greylock."

"I know, dear, but it's across the whole state, and the weather people don't know if there's going to be another big blizzard, but they think it might. I'd rather you were somewhere I know you're safe."

"Okay, Mom... Thanks."

"You're welcome, dear. If you need anything, you can use the debit card I gave you, just don't go too crazy."

“Thanks, but Ash’s mom already gave us some spending money.”

“Nonsense, dear. We don’t need to go accepting charity just yet. Go ahead and buy yourself a Christmas gift, too. I’ll find something for you, but it’s so hectic I don’t know what I’ll find, if anything.”

“Um... thanks, mom. Is that all?”

“Yes, actually; I hear my sister calling for me anyway. Good-bye, Emily.”

“You look white as a sheet. Everything okay?”

Emily closed the phone, pressing it back into Ash’s hands, and clenched her orange-haired tuner’s hands. She looked into Ash’s eyes; Ash met her gaze, worriedly.

“Em?”

“My mom and aunt were in a crash, Ash. My aunt’s hurt, bad.”

“Good god... Emily?”

Emily shivered. “It’s... Do you remember that dream I had?”

“The one that scared you into kissing me?”

Emily nodded, leaning in, pressing her cheek into Ash’s. “I... I dreamt they’d been in a car wreck...”

“Em...” Ash kissed her cheek, softly, and Emily sniffed. “It’s a coincidence, Emily. Is she... okay?”

“I don’t know. She’s... she’s alive, my mom is staying with her.”

“That’s good, Em.” Ash kissed Emily again, sliding back, kissing the corner of her mouth, staring into her eyes. “You’re not... not going to be afraid of cars, are you?”

“Always worried about me, aren’t you. No. I’m safe with you. I *know* you’re a good enough driver to avoid accidents.”

“What about *you*, though?”

“Um?”

“You’re not going to be afraid to drive, are you?”

“Um...”

Ash narrowed her eyes. “Don’t you dare. You know what? *You’re* driving us home.” Ash grinned, staring into Emily’s eyes. “I’m not going to let you give up on something you’re starting to get good at because something happened to your mom and aunt in a car. You’re going to learn to drive and drive well. Okay?”

Emily couldn’t help but smile back at her, and she kissed Ash softly, closing her eyes. “Thanks, Ash. You make me feel so good about myself.”

“Not half as much as you make me feel good about *myself*... Thank you, Emily.” Ash pulled her in, but not half as strongly as Emily pulled her. They kissed, and Emily felt like fireworks were bursting in her chest. They pulled away, and Ash grinned. “That tingle... Mmm...”

The pair climbed out of the car, and Emily immediately went red as she spied Jenny standing off to the side, her face beet red, looking down at her feet. “Oh god, Jenny! I forgot you were—”

“No... just... *no*. It’s okay. I... I guess I knew.”

Ash approached her, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Jenny? A-Are you okay?”

The blonde looked up, and nodded. “Yeah. I’m... I’m fine. Let’s go.” She turned quickly, and Ash looked at Emily, who shrugged at her; Ash shrugged back, and they followed Jenny.

#### Inside The Cape Cod Mall, 4:16 PM

“Well, it’s a mall. There are many quite like it, but this mall is special. It’s mine.” Jenny smirked at Ash and Emily as she led the duo in a spearhead formation into the mall. Dead ahead, down a massive hallway, was a huge glorious fountain, with stores lining the hall on three massive, tiered floors.

Ash whistled softly in appreciation. “This place is huge.”

“It’s more impressive than the one in Albany, anyway. It may not actually be bigger.”

“Albany? Albany, New York?” Jenny asked them.

“Yeah. We went there Friday,” said Emily.

“Heh. I kind of wish I could’ve gone with you. It must be fun.”

“It was.”

“But this place looks... fun too.” Ash tried to make her voice sound enthusiastic, but both Jenny and Emily looked at her funnily.

“What? Not good enough for you?” Jenny asked.

Emily hurriedly attempted to defuse, saying, “No, no, it’s not that. It’s just that Ash doesn’t really like shopping.”

Jenny looked a bit offended, or maybe confused.

“What can I say? I’ll deal. It’s not like I *can’t* be dragged through a mall. Who knows, I need to buy gifts anyway.”

Emily smiled at her, and put her arm around both Jenny and Ash’s shoulders. “Right. So, let’s go? Oh, we’re going to have to go clothes shopping, I’m afraid...”

“Do we *have* to?”

“We *have* to. We’ve been here how long?”

“Uh... three days?”

“Right. And how many days’ worth of clothes did I bring? And how many did *you* bring?”

“F... oh. Right...” Ash sighed. “Okay. We may as well get it over with now. I see a directory, I’ll go have a look.” Ash practically dashed away, and Jenny blinked at Emily.

“She... doesn’t like buying clothes?”

“That’s my Ash. I practically have to drag her through clothes shopping. She really hates doing ‘girly’ things, because she hates being thought of *as* girly. She’d rather people notice her for her skill in a car than because she’s a girl.”

“That’s crazy. She’s *hot*. She’s got the same body her mother has, and a natural hair color so wild that it looks like an awesome dye-job.”

“That’s Ash. She’s more comfortable behind the wheel than in a dress... Dress!” Emily grinned, snapping her fingers. “You saw her at that party, right?”

“Uh, yeah. I did.”

“What did she look like? Did it make her look good? I didn’t get to see her wearing it.”

Jenny blushed, looking down. “Yeah. She looked really good in it. I had to slam her because she looked so much better than me, even.”

“Heh. What was it like?”

Jenny looked up at the ceiling. “It was white, with a black corset foundation and highlights. Her fingernails were as red as that car that outran us on the highway. She looked uncomfortable in it, though, and she could hardly walk. I thought she was drunk at first, the way she had to practically tie herself to Kay Wheeler to stay upright.”

“Sounds like Ash, all right.”

“Do you love her?”

“... Yeah. I really, really do.”

“I’m sorry... I...”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“All right.”

Ash studied the directory of the mall with a soft scowl on her face. The idea of going clothes shopping annoyed her—and a part of her was worried that she ‘only’ felt merely ‘annoyed’ about the prospect—but most of her was horrified of the thought of going clothes shopping with *Jenny* along.

*“Shopping for clothes sucks. I’m going to have to take my time, or Jenny will twig. But if I take my time, I’m more likely to screw up. This is a nightmare, how did I rope myself into this?”* Ash racked her

brains for an excuse, but short of feigning illness serious enough to go to the hospital, she couldn't think of one. Then the reflection in the black directory showed that Jenny and Emily were behind her.

"Come on," Jenny said. "This is *my* mall, I know the way around. Don't worry."

"All right." She and Emily followed Jenny, though she felt considerable dread about the prospect. The shop Jenny led them to though, was worse than anything she imagined; the interior was all pink. But not just any pink—*hot* pink; eye-searing hot pink walls and ceiling as far as she could see. Ash looked over at Emily, who gave her a helpless shrug and an apologetic expression. Ash gulped. "*Dead man walking*," she thought as they ventured inside.

Ash did her best to block out the sorts of things they were looking at. Thankfully, Emily deflected most of the heat by keeping up a running and vociferous conversation with Jenny about the things they were exploring: racks and racks of lacy, frilly, or otherwise sexy undergarments designed to entice rather than to be functional, in colors that ranged from flesh-tones in every flavor of humanity, to fruit colors in every color of the rainbow, to colors so unnatural that only mad science could have dreamed them up in Ash's estimation.

Ash checked her cell phone's face for the time—4:30 already—and shook her head.

"Ash, what do you think?"

Ash was shook from her reverie to see Emily holding a lacy—no, a virtually *see-through*—bra in a shade that could only be described as 'akin to a devil's hide'. Ash felt a blush rising in her cheeks.

"Uh... it's... um, nice."

"*Idiot*," Ash thought at herself, but Emily seemed amused, grinning and dropping the bra and its matching panties into her basket. Then she dived at a rack with hair barrettes, and Ash inwardly groaned.

"Oooh! Ash, Jenny, what do you think of this?"

"*This is gonna be a long trip...*"

It was. Both Jenny and Emily had bought a stack of lingerie. And of course, they had to spend a small eternity trying things on and confirming with one another that they looked good. When asked, Ash could do little but say that yes, it really looked good—or *hot*, in a few cases, and blush, though she thought she was blushing less towards the end.

Getting to the register, Jenny took the lead. "Emily, give me your stuff. This place is owned by the company my mom works at; my card will get us a discount."

Ash looked around with a renewed heat. "This is the kind of stuff my mom sells?"

"Yeah, it is. Not this line, but this kind of stuff. My mom works with this line, and a few others. Your mom didn't give you a discount card?"

"Um... I don't remember. If she did, it was ages ago."

"I doubt she'd use it anyway, Jenny."

Ash shook her head as Jenny used her card to check everything out at a discount and they went on their way, Emily taking the receipt and paying Jenny for her share.

"Yeah. Fortunately, there's other places here that sell stuff more your speed."

Ash went pale. "*More* clothes shopping?"

"Of course! The day is still young, and that was just lingerie."

Emily laughed at the look of doom on Ash's face, and called cheerfully out, "Dead man walkin'!"

A sinking feeling erupted in Ash's heart as Jenny laughed, and the trio marched on. "*This has got to be my punishment. For what, I'm not sure yet. But I must have earned it somehow...*" Ash gloomed.

"Why did you say 'dead man', though?" Jenny asked Emily.

Ash gulped quietly. "*Uh-oh.*"

Emily covered smoothly, saying, "That's just how you say it. It dates back to Attica prison guards; it's what they'd call out when they were escorting prisoners to be executed. They didn't change the call when they started executing women, so it's just what you say."

“Oh, okay.”

Ash sighed softly, shaking her head as they walked on. Something caught her eye, though, and she scooted back. “Oooh!”

Both Emily and Jenny turned around, walking back to see what she was staring at, as Ash walked into a store full of leather apparel—mainly men’s coats.

“Ash? Ash? Where are you...”

Emily was ignored as Ash arrowed in on the target in her eyes. She finally got to it, a mannequin wearing a blue jacket. The back was a gray panel with the Ford Racing logo and red stripes.

“This?” Jenny asked, a bit aghast. “The first time you get properly interested for something to wear, and it’s a Ford jacket?”

“Not just any Ford jacket—a Ford Racing jacket. My car’s built by an old marque of Ford’s, Merkur.”

Ash turned back to grin at the jacket. She quickly stripped her Bomber off, and Emily took it. She took the Ford jacket from the mannequin and put it on, looking for a mirror. Not seeing one, Jenny took a compact out of her purse and held it up for Ash, who stood to the side, looking at it.

“It, um...” Jenny shrugged. “I dunno. The colors on it don’t really do anything for your colors, and... well, it’s a car jacket. It’s a *boy* jacket.”

“I like it. It’s showing off *my* colors—my racing colors.”

“Eh... I won’t say it looks *bad* on you,” Emily said. “Definitely brings out your whole ‘tomboy’ thing, but... Ah well, it’s your money, how much is it?”

Ash shrugged and looked for a tag. She found one, and winced—it was a three-digit figure (in front of the decimal place), and the first digit was *not* a one. “Ech... I *want* it, but that’s too rich for my blood. I just bought a jacket Friday, anyway. I don’t need a new one so soon.” She took the jacket off and hung it back on the mannequin, taking her own back and putting it on.

Jenny rolled her eyes. “You *really* don’t know how to look good, do you? We can work on that.”

Ash scowled, as she led the way back out of the store, its air thick with the smell of leather. “Maybe I like the way I look?”

“I like the way you look, too. But I’m not so sure that you look good on purpose now as opposed to it being coincidence.”

Ash rolled her eyes, opening her mouth to snipe back, then held her tongue for a second. “Wait, you like the way I look?”

Jenny paused in mid-stride, and she blushed, called on what she said. Ash caught Emily’s gaze; Emily shrugged, smiling back, and Ash coughed, as Jenny started walking again, faster and forward.

The next shop they arrived at was (of course) a clothing store. This one had more outerwear. The store was a leviathan, an outlet of a larger retail chain built onto the mall, two stories tall, and so large it had its own escalators and elevators.

“Ah-hah, here we go!” Jenny jumped, and practically tugged Ash past a bewildering and frightening array of girl’s clothes that went by almost in a blur. Emily held back a giggle as Ash found herself surrounded by what she imagined was purpose-designed designer tomboy wear. She gulped softly, and Jenny grinned back, adopting Emily’s cry of, “Dead man walkin’!” The look of glee on her face had Ash spinning in a panic. When she saw it mirrored on Emily’s face, standing behind her and blocking the only straight shot out of the labyrinth of clothes, Ash felt that she really knew what being condemned to death felt like as she squished the screaming voice inside her that was telling her to panic and make a break for it. She briefly recalled the bars of the Droid March from the first Prequel movie to Star Wars, as Jenny cheerfully started yanking things off racks, shoveling them into her hands. “What size are you, anyway? You look like a solid C...”

Some eternity later, Ash futilely looked at the face of her cell phone—it was only 4:59, transitioning to 5:00 as she looked at it. There were potentially *hours* left in the day. She was sitting in a fitting room, staring at a stack of clothes. She was heartily glad that at least none of them were underwear, and

she sighed. *"I really, really hate this."* She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and took her jacket off, tossing it over the coat hook on the side of the small stall. *"May as well pay the piper."* She stood up, pulled her T-shirt off, and turned around to put it somewhere she'd find it.

"Gyah! Am I cursed?!"

"What? What's wrong? Is there a spider or something?"

Ash shivered. "Worse. Every *single time* I step into a fitting room, there's a poster of my **mom** staring down at me!"

The curtain parted at the side so Jenny could stick her head in, causing Ash to furiously grab her T-shirt over her breasts. "Really? Where? Ah! That has got to be *freaky*."

Ash turned beet red. "Out!"

"Huh?" Jenny squawked as Ash put her whole palm over her head and pushed her physically out of the dressing room.

"Out!"

"Okay, okay! Prude..."

*"The sooner I get this over with, the better,"* Ash grouched, quickly divesting herself of her shoes and pants, and pulling on the first of the 'outfits' Jenny had assembled. Turning to face the mirror, she had to admit it would've looked good on any other tomboy: a light, white denim jacket, a white denim skirt with a flame pattern at the end around her knees, and white T-shirt. "No," she grouched. "I don't do skirts."

Again the curtain parted, and Ash squawked, turning around; again, it was Jenny. "Why not? You'd look like a tough girl in that, but not afraid to show off."

Ash could feel herself getting annoyed. "I don't *like* to show off."

"Fine, fine. There's a pair of pants with the same fire pattern in there, so at least try that on before you can the whole outfit."

The white denim jeans were light and loose, with the fabric flames crawling up to the knees. "Okay, I'll try it." Jenny expectantly watched, and Ash pushed her out of the fitting room again, to a muffled protest.

She hated to admit it, but some of the outfits Jenny had thrown together were actually *really* good-looking, and even modest enough for Ash's taste. She was busily separating them into piles of 'maybe' and 'no way', when she heard Emily's voice outside the fitting room. "Ash? Hey, check this." Ash looked up in time to have a brassiere land across her face.

"God, no." Fighting down the urge to panic or whimper, Ash took it off her face. "What the hell?"

"Isn't that the brand we found you last time?"

Ash fumed, checking the label. "Uh, yeah."

"Good, you're in luck. I found a rack in your size, so I grabbed five."

Ash sighed, closing her eyes. "That's... *wonderful*. Thanks, Em." At least that saved her the horrors of a try-on if they were identical to the one she had on now. She heard Emily and Jenny talk about some article Emily had found herself, and went back to sorting through the clothes Jenny had forced upon her. *"Man, how do I end up doing this? The word 'whipped' comes to mind."*

An interminable time later, Ash had tried on all the clothes she was willing to try. And though she *hated* herself for admitting it, some of them were not actually bad. She handed the ones she was willing to buy out to Jenny, who put them in a basket, and had just finished pulling back up her pants when she heard, "Hey Ash, how does this look?" as the curtain was whisked open.

Emily was standing in front of her, one hand cocked on her hip, the other hanging loosely at her side. She was wearing an outfit of blue: new sneakers, pale blue jeans, a deep, navy blue shirt cut to reveal a fair amount of cleavage, and a rather huge, floppy pale blue hat. The centerpiece, however, was the pendant—it was a thick, bright metal neck-chain with a large Nissan badge hanging from it.

"Uh..." Ash was stunned; Emily looked *great* in it. "Wow. Where'd you get that?"

“The boys’ section.” She made an apologetic smile. “I looked and looked, but they didn’t have a Merkur badge; the closest I could find was this Ford one.” Emily held out a similar chain with a blue oval on it, the letters ‘FORD’ in big block letters in the middle.

“Thanks. You... you look really good in that.” Ash felt a blush creeping up her cheeks as she smiled at Emily.

“So do you.”

Ash looked down, realized that only her bra was protecting her top, and let out a cry of panic, pulling the curtain back into place. “*Out!*”

Ash heard Emily (and Jenny; god no, had she seen?) tittering in amusement, as she quickly pulled her shirt and jacket back on. Finally, she huffed, and opened the curtain. “Are we done yet?”

“Yeah, we’re done,” the blue-haired girl answered. “Just put the ones you’re not taking in the hamper there, and they’ll be re-hung.”

“Good.” Ash shook her head. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Okay, but one more stop in here, first. All right?”

“Fine. I hope it’s quick.”

“It is.”

Jenny led them to the gloves section—a bewildering array of gloves, from fashionable to punk rock, was available. “I need a new pair of gloves,” she explained, looking through the selection.

Ash rolled her eyes, but Emily said, “We could probably use gloves too, Ash.”

“Will I get out of here faster if I buy a pair?”

“Mmmmaybe.”

Ash sighed, and started to look. She didn’t have to look far, though, because a pair jumped out at her—a set of fingerless leather gloves, cut off just above the first knuckle. She picked them out of the pile. “Happy?”

Emily laughed, shaking her head. “They look like you,” she admitted, as Ash tried them on. “Gonna wear ’em out?”

“May as well. Let’s go.”

#### Cape Cod Mall, 5:29 PM

“Where to, now? And I swear, if it’s another clothing store, you’re both taking the bus home,” Ash asked (and warned) as they exited the store with bags full of clothes.

Emily laughed, and Jenny rolled her eyes. “Jeez, the way you carry on, you’d think you didn’t *like* shopping for clothes.”

“I don’t.”

“Just kidding. Sorry, sorry. That’s the last, I promise.”

Ash let out a sigh of relief. “Good. There wouldn’t happen to be an arcade in this mall, would there?”

“Yeah, there is. It’s this way.” Jenny led them through the mall, and around a bend where an assault of smell hit them like a wave. “It’s on the other side of the food court,” the blonde explained, leading Emily and Ash through. The smells and sights were an assault as the trio forged their way through.

“Hey, look. That place is called the Magic Wok.” Emily pointed, and Jenny looked over.

“The Chinese place? I’ve never tried it.”

“Well, let’s hit it on the way out, hmm?” Emily said.

“I don’t see why not. Unless you’re afraid to try something new, Jenny?”

The blonde smirked at her. “No, it’s okay. I—hey!”

Someone had yanked on Jenny’s hair. Ash pushed past Jenny as she turned to see and grabbed the arm the hand belonged to. It was the white-haired girl from before, along with Rachele. “Still hanging out with these losers?”

Ash squeezed her wrist, and she let go, as Jenny bared her teeth and Emily closed ranks on the other side of her.

“*Clarita!*” Emily scowled. “Haven’t you got anything better to do?”

“Hmmp!” Clarita took her wrist back. “Still need this butch dyke to come rescue you?”

“Seriously. What the hell is your major malfunction?” Ash said.

“*You* are. You and your stupid dye-job prima supremo and this stupid bitch.”

Ash clenched her fists, but Emily shook her head. “Be quiet, Ash. We don’t need to start trouble.”

The aggressors smirked and crossed their arms. “That’s right. You bitches just run along now and get out of our mall. This is *my* mall now, Jenny! And everyone knows you’re a dyke by now, too.”

Ash felt her blood boiling, and she could practically feel the heat radiating from Jenny. But Emily stepped in front of both of them, cutting her off. “This mall is a public place. It’s not yours. And if you don’t stop harassing us, I’m going to call security and have you thrown out.”

Clarita sneered. “I’d like to see that happen. *You* outnumber *us*; you started it. Come on, Rachelle.” They turned to walk away, and she called back, “I don’t want to see you here in an hour, Jenny!”

Jenny looked down as the two girls retreated, and Ash smirked. “What a couple of bitches.”

“... Am I any different?”

“Eh?” Ash looked at Jenny, as Emily picked up the bags they’d dropped when it seemed a physical fight was about to break out.

“I’ve done exactly the same thing to other girls. To *her*, even. Am I any different?”

“I dunno. *Are* you?”

Jenny looked down, not having an answer. Finally she said, dejectedly, “We should go...”

“Like hell; we just got here!”

“Right. The best way to deal with bullies is to just stand up to them,” Emily added.

“Not these bullies. Things might be different in your little Podunk town, but here, standing up to someone who can beat you just gets you torn apart.”

Emily smirked and crossed her arms. “You think we can’t hack it in a big city like this?”

“Well, *I’m* not leaving because two girls that I’ve already proved I can beat the tar out of want me gone. So you can either walk back to my mom’s house and get your car, or you can spine up and we can go have some fun in spite of the bitches.”

Jenny looked up, and blinked. “You’d...” Then a *ding-da-dang!* rang out, and she blinked. “Oh, that’s mine.” She opened it—and gasped. The image of herself in the bathroom, approaching Clarita with her arms out was there, with the words ‘Lesbo Jenny’ written across it. Emily and Rachelle were visible in the picture, too. The picture had been taken sideways, from behind, and low to the ground.

“You *really* need to check those stalls before you start a fight in there,” Ash commented. “Still, it looks like you’re about to grab her and throw her out.”

Jenny closed her eyes. “I...”

Ash put an arm around her shoulders, shaking her. “No you don’t. It doesn’t matter what they say. Just turn that thing off and let’s go have some fun, okay?”

“H-How can you... How can you just...” Jenny looked like she wanted to break into tears.

“You just *do*. You push it to the back of your mind, you forget it.” She took Jenny’s cell phone, turned it off, and put it back in Jenny’s hand. “C’mon. To hell with them.”

“She’s right, you know. What’s your favorite game?”

Jenny perked up, slightly, and smiled softly. “Uh, this way, I’ll show you.” She led them onwards to the arcade.

Jenny’s favorite game, it turned out, was Dance Dance Revolution. She was up on the pad, tearing through a song that Ash couldn’t keep up with her on, while Emily leaned on the railing watching them and grinning. The song finished, proclaiming Jenny the victor. Ash stood down, breathing a bit hard.

“Wow... I would not have guessed DDR was your game. Then again, I wouldn’t have guessed you’d come to a place like this at all...”

“Another?”

“Oooh, me!” Emily jumped up alongside Jenny, and Ash shook her head, grinning as they started another song.

“I’m gonna go see what else they have, okay?”

“See ya,” Emily called back, as she furiously stomped to the beat.

Ash chuckled, wiping her brow and meandering off through the arcade. There were the usual DDR machines and shooters and such, and she got into a game of the perennial shoot-up-the-insert-horror-here, but it wasn’t until she got to the back of the arcade that she gasped. “Wow...”

Ash laughed as she stood beholding a four-unit linked wall of Need for Speed GT. She turned around and ran back to the DDR machines, where Emily was getting down, winded but grinning, and Jenny stretching on top.

“Back for another round, Ash?”

“No way. C’mon! I found something!”

Emily grinned at the smile on Ash’s face. “She found a racing game.”

Ash nodded, picking up her bags from the pile at the base of the DDR machine. “C’mon!” She led the other two to the Need for Speed-branded arcade cabinets.

“Told you.”

“Isn’t that the same game you have at home?”

“No, I have Underground Two; this is different.” She put her bags down, and slid into the booth closest to the wall. “This has much more powerful and rarer cars available.”

“Oh really?” Emily slid into the booth next to her, leaving Jenny to take the one on her other side, and the fourth one empty. “Like wha—oh my god. Is that a McLaren F1? How is that even fair?”

“They almost certainly tuned it down for the game, but yeah. It is.”

“McLaren F1?” Jenny asked.

“The McLaren F1 is *the* fastest street-legal car in the *world*.”

“Whoa. That’s...”

“Nice.”

“Well?” Ash asked.

They put in their tokens and started the game, selecting cars. Emily went straight for the McLaren F1. Not wanting to copy her, Ash spun the wheel until she found a car that made her grin—a Ford Crown Victoria police cruiser.

“Hey, this is pretty!” Jenny had found a Lotus Elise.

“One of the lightest cars in the world. Lotus goes fast by being very light, instead of really very powerful. It’s a nice car,” Ash said.

Jenny grinned, and locked in her selection. “You’re going down, Ash!”

“In your dreams, Jenny. In your dreams.”

The counter started, and the three of them put the hammer down, as Emily laughed at the others.

Three quarters of an hour later, Ash had solidly set the top record on the machine. Emily had found the McLaren to be too fast and touchy for her taste, but she’d switched to a Porsche 911 Turbo which worked *very* well for her; she made second place on the machines. Jenny was still struggling, though with the Lotus Elise she’d managed to claw her way up to fifth, and she’d set an additional record of 6th with the McLaren F1.

Ash laughed softly, looking alongside at Jenny and Emily, as the leader board showed their names. They had signed as ‘XR4Ti Ash’ and ‘240SX Emily’ again, and Jenny had taken the hint, signing as ‘SC Jenny’.

Emily said, “You’re getting good at this, Jenny. You might have the talent for it.”

Jenny preened under the compliment, smiling. “Thanks.”

“Oh my god, what are you playing?”

Ash felt her good mood shatter and she groaned. “Clarita, right? Really, what are you doing? Haven’t you got anything better to do than mess with us?” She turned around. The white-haired girl and her raven-haired friend were flanked by a large boy with white hair who looked to be about James’ age, and the one Rachelle had been with at Marco’s.

“You’re *still in my mall*.” Clarita smirked. “I think that means I need to teach you a lesson.”

Ash rolled her eyes, stood up, and leaned on the seat of her machine. The two boys had moved in and were blocking the way out. A cold fear started to rise in Ash’s guts, even as she forced her face to stay level, fingering her Ford pendant with one hand and clenching the other in her pocket, over her cell phone. Irrationally, she almost wished that Rumisiel and Vashiel would choose now to put in a good appearance. Then she scowled. “*To hell with that! I don’t need them to protect me! Might need them to protect Em and Jenny, though...*”

“What, nothing to say, bitch? I told you to get out of my mall.”

“So what, now you’re going to get your boyfriends to beat up a couple of *girls*?” She smirked, stepping towards Clarita; the white-haired girl jumped back, while the white-haired boy narrowed his eyes and spoke up.

“This the dyke that beat you up, sis?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s her.”

“After you *assaulted* Jenny in a bathroom stall. I got you *off* her.”

The white-haired boy pulled Clarita away, and shoved his way in, getting in Ash’s face. “Don’t *nobody* lay a hand on my little sister!” He smelled like sweat, battered in sweat, and deep-fried in a layer of, for a change, sweat.

“Careful, Mark. That one hits like a boy.”

“Right.”

The four jumped in a flash, and only Emily got off a half-scream before her mouth was covered. Both girls and the white-haired boy jumped Ash, grabbing her and covering her mouth, while the other boy grabbed Emily and Jenny by the heads. Ash struggled but couldn’t call for help, couldn’t get her teeth into his palm, nor could she get a hand free to swing. Rachelle opened a door that had been hidden in the wall, and they tugged the struggling trio through.

When they were let go—or rather, *thrown* against a trio of old and unpowered arcade boxes—they were in a fairly vast concrete storehouse attached to the arcade.

Rachelle gloated, “Nobody can hear you back here.” She clenched her fist. “I owe you, orange.”

“I owe her plenty, but not as much as I owe you, bitch.” Clarita leveled a finger at Jenny, who bared her teeth in response.

Ash looked aside at Emily; she was shaking, but clenched her fists. “H-How do you think this i-is going to look? Two big men and two girls grab the three of us and force us into a back room? Th-The arcade’s probably calling the cops right now.”

Rachelle laughed. “No they’re not. My uncle owns the arcade; I know where his security cameras are. Nobody saw us.”

Ash narrowed her eyes. “So, what’re you going to do, huh? You think I’m just going to let you beat the tar out of us and not report it?” Something flashed in Clarita’s eyes, and Ash pushed forward.

“That’s right. You gonna kill us? If not, I’m going to call the cops when we get out of here.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Yes, we would,” Emily said. “I don’t know what kind of silly ‘fashion-code rules’ you bitches think you’re playing by, but I won’t just limp home in shame.”

It was working, and Jenny pressed home. “Yeah. How do you think this’ll look? Two big guys grabbing three young girls and tossing them in a back room that nobody can hear out of? Oooh, that could get ugly.”

Clarita looked into Jenny’s eyes. “Y-You wouldn’t!”

“I don’t have to. She will.” She nodded at Emily.

“You’re damn straight I will.”

They took another step forward. Ash could see the two men starting to get ‘oh shit’ looks in their eyes, as the magnitude of exactly how badly what they’d just done could be construed if it were reported to the cops hit them. She felt metal clank under her foot and looked down. Pay dirt! She knelt and picked up the red metal crowbar, holding it near one end with the hooked bill at the other. The hexagonal metal shaft felt surprisingly *right* in the hold of her gloved hand, leather against metal.

“So, what’s it going to be?” She stepped forward, and Emily fished in her purse, but came up empty. Ash narrowed her eyes, stepping in front of her friends; another step forward and the four staring at her broke ranks, sliding aside. “I thought so. Get out of our way.”

Rachelle, her boyfriend, and Clarita skittered away, but the big one, Mark, blocked their path. “What are you gonna do, dyke? Hit me?”

Ash leveled her eyes at his. “Get out of my way.”

“You gonna hit me, girl? I’ll take that thing and shove it so far up your little dyke snat-Arrrrrgh!” The sound of electrical discharge filled the air; Jenny had pulled a taser-gun from her purse. The white-haired boy thrashed and writhed from the needles stuck in his side. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!” He went down on one knee, screaming hoarsely (and high-pitchedly), “You crazy dykes!” when Jenny let up. He scrambled backwards, hiding behind a powered-down game cabinet as Emily, Ash, and Jenny broke for the door.

“Locked!” Emily cursed, as she tried the door handle. Ash whirled around with the crowbar in hand, ready to swing, but neither the fashionistas nor the boys were willing to come within taser range, let alone crowbar distance.

“You *crazy bitch*,” screamed Clarita from behind a cabinet, as Ash held the crowbar at the ready, and Jenny wound up her taser lines for another go. “Why’d you have to come and ruin everything?”

“I didn’t! You started this! Just give us the keys to get out of here and we can end this!” Ash screamed back. “We didn’t want any of this! Why can’t you just let us be in peace?”

“You crazy bitch! I had her—I *had* her dead to rights! I could be on top! It could’ve been *my* face on the cover of *Vogue* instead of Jenny! I could’ve been *me*! It should’ve been *me*!”

“Is... is that what this is about? Your crazy fashion-feud?” Ash shook her head in disgust, and spat on the floor. “This is crazy! Here we are brandishing weapons at each other, over *fashion*? You *kidnapped* us so you could get your picture splattered by the spooze of a thousand teenage boys?”

“Ew...” both Jenny and Clarita said.

“This is insanity. This is *pure* fucking insanity.” Ash felt Emily’s hand dig into her pocket for her cell phone. “Come on. Just throw me the keys and let’s leave. No cops. No fighting. Just put it down.” She warily eyed the four as they crept around, closer, behind cabinets. Jenny covered the big white-haired boy with her taser and he yelped, actually diving *into* a pile of game cabinets and clawing his way over them.

“Look, you want to humiliate me, right? How about you just give my friends the keys and I’ll...” Jenny trailed off, her lips quivering. “Come on.” She took a step forward, and dropped her taser-gun. “What do you say? Let them go. They’re not part of the scene, Clarita.”

Clarita looked across the aisle at Rachelle; they seemed to be considering it.

“Fuck that,” Ash growled, pulling Jenny back. “Like hell I’m gonna let these four do god-knows what to you and run. What kind of a pussy-girl do you think I am?” Ash knelt, picking up Jenny’s taser, and pushing it back into Jenny’s hand.

Jenny shook her head, quietly saying, “They want to hurt *me*, not you. Look, I did... I did the same to them when I was on top...”

“I don’t care. Fuck knows why, but you’re my friend, and I’m not gonna let that happen. One for all and all for one, right?”

“That’s the Musketeers, Ash. But it doesn’t matter. This ends *now*,” Emily spoke up, holding up Ash’s cell phone. “I’m getting three bars this close to the door, and I’ve already punched in nine-one-

one. Give us the keys, or I press the button, and then the cops are on their way, no matter what happens.”

Ash saw the pale in the girls’ eyes, and Mark’s voice went hoarse. “Give them the keys, Clarita.”

“What?” Clarita hissed.

“God’s sake, Clarita, I’m nineteen! It’s one thing to scare your bitchy little friends a little, but I could go to *prison* if they call the cops! It’s over! They got us.”

“Clarita, come on.” It was Jenny, who had put her taser somewhere, and was holding her arms out. “I’m sorry for what I did to you, okay? And I’m sorry you got beat up last night. But this is over. Just give us the keys, and we’ll leave. I’m *sorry*, okay? Just... let us go, all right?”

Clarita slowly walked out from behind a game cabinet, and looked at Jenny. “Take your shirt off.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Take your shirt off. *And* your bra.” She took out a cell phone, flipping it open, holding the front towards Jenny. “I want everyone to know what a slut you are. Then we’ll let you go.”

Jenny shook. Then she sighed. “Fine.” She reached down, but Ash shook her head.

“Like hell. You just don’t give up, do you?” She stepped in front of Jenny, crossing her arms, the crowbar pressed into her side, but ready to be swung at a moment. “I don’t care *what’s* gone on in the past. The past is past, and if you do that, I *will* call the cops.”

Emily snapped a picture of Clarita holding her cell phone with Ash’s phone. “You know what they call that, Clarita?” Emily asked. “They call it child pornography. She’s not eighteen.” Then she whispered, “You’re not eighteen, are you?” to Jenny, who shook her head. “Right! She’s not eighteen. That’s *at least* child pornography, not to mention extortion, kidnapping, assault and battery. It would probably even fit a technical definition of rape, too.”

“Come on. Just give us the god-damned keys.”

Clarita bared her teeth, but relented, putting her arm down. “*Fine*. Rachele, give them the damn keys. You bitches win this round.”

“This isn’t a game! A game is what we were playing when your goons grabbed us! I just want to get out of here and go home.”

The keys clanked to the ground next to her, and Jenny picked them up. She tried the key in the door and it unlocked with a \*snick\*. She slid out the door first, followed by Emily. Ash locked the door again, while it was still open, as Clarita yelled, “Hey!” Ash shut the door, made sure it was locked from the arcade side, and dropped the keys in the seat of the Need for Speed GT game.

She was shaking as she fished her own keys out of her pocket and gave them to Emily, who put them in her pocket. “Let’s get out of here. We can eat somewhere else.” Jenny and Emily nodded; Jenny was shaking badly. Ash stashed the crowbar in her bag. The trio made a beeline for the exit.

#### On The Road Away From Cape Cod Mall, 6:49 PM

Emily was guiding the Monster XR on the road, as Ash sat in the front passenger seat, staring at her hand. It was shaking. None of the girls had spoken for a while, and Ash sighed. Finally, she broke the silence. “That was *crazy*...”

“I thought they were going to... to r-rape us for a minute or so...”

Jenny was silent for a few moments. “Me, maybe. I don’t think they’d have done anything to you, Emily. Maybe beaten Ash up.”

“Why you?”

Jenny sighed, closing her eyes. “I... I...” She looked down at the floor, as Ash craned back to look at her. “Okay, a... a while ago, I did something really mean to Clarita. Before she met Rachele, that is. She came in, like you did that one time, looking all-exotic with her natural white hair, and she looked like she was about to take my spot as the prime girl. So I got her. Me and Annette. She goes to our high school.” She sighed and took out her cell phone. “We... well, we spied on her. I paid a sneaky boy to

find the combo to her locker and looted it between classes. I found a Playboy in it. I'd heard her always slamming on the gay boys and the lesbians, so I figured she was a closet case. We caught her in the showers, and... well..."

Jenny handed her cell phone forward; it was set to a video titled 'Bitch'. Ash had a sinking feeling as she pushed play. "We caught her in the showers, after class." Jenny's voice was on the video. "This yours, huh? You little dyke. You little faggy dyke!" A hand—most likely Jenny's—reached out, grabbing Clarita's breast, squeezing. Ash felt sick. "You like that, huh? Yeah." She held out the magazine, still in its wrapper, and zoomed in on the address—it was clearly addressed to one 'Clarita Redfield' at a P.O. Box. "Yeah, you like this?" A shriek issued from the phone's speaker, and Ash shut it, feeling ill. She handed it back to Jenny.

"We grabbed her, humiliated her. I wanted to show her who was the top bitch. I needed to make sure she was in her place." Her words sounded hollow. "Gods... I feel so..." She sighed. "You shouldn't have fought for me, Ash. You should've just let them have me. I deserved it."

Ash was silent for a moment. She looked up at Emily, whose face was a mask of concentration on the road. Ash looked back into Jenny's face, tilting her head up to stare into her crystal-blue eyes. "Did you... rape her?"

Jenny trembled, looking down. "We threatened to. Annette found a plunger from somewhere... We shook it in front of her, but we didn't."

Ash closed her eyes as Jenny continued her confession. "I never felt guilty about it before. Never even thought about it. It's just one of any number of awful things I did to other girls to stay on top. To scare them into being just a *bit* clumsy in front of the cameras, or not *quite* dolling up perfectly."

"Huh... You're right. That *is* awful. I really shouldn't have fought for a girl who did all that." Ash turned back to face the road, and heard a soft snuffle from behind her. "Good thing I didn't, then."

"Huh?" Jenny's voice held terrified optimism in it, and Ash looked at Em, who nodded.

"Delete that damn video. And any other blackmail stuff you have." She heard Jenny's fingers on the phone's buttons, and it beeped at her, again and again. "So, Jenny. A new day, a new pair of friends, eh? I won't be friends with a monster, but..."

Jenny unbuckled behind her, leaning up to hug Ash from behind the seat. "Ash, you could have destroyed me any number of times now. You have more axes over my head than I've ever had over anyone, but you're not even grinding them." She closed her eyes. "I hate to admit it, but you're... Well, you're so much stronger than I am; you're so noble, so brave... You're so much more of a girl than I ever was."

"Gee, thanks," Ash thought, but she reached up, putting a hand over Jenny's. "Gimme your phone." Jenny handed it over, and Ash checked it—she'd cleared the whole memory, wiped everything but her address book clean. Ash nodded, and handed it back. "Buckle up."

Jenny buckled up, and she started typing again. Ash looked back. "What're you doing?"

"Writing to Clarita. I'm telling her I'm sorry, I'm sorry for everything. And that I deleted it, all of it. I don't know if she'll believe me, but I have to say it."

"Okay..." She settled back into her seat with a smile, and Emily grinned at her.

"In the business of dispensing absolution now, Ash? What *would* our angels think?"

"Angels?" Jenny asked, curiously. Emily winced, biting her cheek visibly, but Ash covered smoothly.

"Yeah. My shoulder-angel. Don't you have one?" She put two fingers on her shoulder, dancing around. "You know, a metaphysical, quasi-imaginary figment of your own conscience?"

Jenny shook her head. "I never had one until now... Her name is Ash."

Ash turned back to face dead ahead, blushing heavily. "Uh... \*hem\*... Okay." She twiddled her hands together, beet-red, as Emily guided the car down the freeway.

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 7:39 PM

Ash called her mother and asked if she was home yet. She wasn't, but said she would be, so Ash volunteered to get dinner. Her mother agreed, so they stopped at a pizzeria in Truro on the way back, getting a large to go and an order of wings. Emily parked the Monster in front of Jenny's Lexus, and as they were walking up to the door, the growl of a Jaguar rolled up behind them, parking alongside the Monster. Ash's mother got out, her long brown hair flowing behind her, and she waved at the trio. Ash waved back as her mother walked towards them.

"Whew," Marie said as she walked up behind the girls. Emily unlocked the door with Ash's keys, while Ash carried in the food. "You should call your mother," Marie said sidelong to Jenny.

"Oh? Oh, right..." Jenny nodded. "I'll do that," she said, sheepishly, flipping open her cell phone and walking back outside.

Ash watched Jenny slip away, and sat down, sighing heavily.

"Bad day?" her mom asked.

"Yeah. *Really* freaking bad day." She sighed, laying her head on her crossed arms, and her mother laid her hand on Ash's shoulder. Ash turned to the side, sighed heavily again, and hugged her mother.

"It's okay, Ash. You want to tell me about it?"

Ash looked up, blinking blearily at her mother, and shook her head. "I really don't," she said, with a sigh. "Just a lot, and I mean a *lot*, of crazy stuff."

Her mother reached up, ruffling her hair slightly. "Okay then. You feeling better?" Ash nodded, and her mother smiled, standing up. "Good, because I'm starved."

Emily giggled softly from the doorway. "Me too. We should probably wait for Jenny, though."

"I'll go have a look."

From the front window, Ash looked out, watching Jenny, leaning on the side of her Lexus, and talking into her cell phone. She looked like she was screaming, or nearly; Ash winced.

"Hmm," murmured Emily, who had slipped up next to her. "Her mom must be yelling at her pretty hard." Ash nodded, as the yelling outside wound down, and Jenny stuffed her cell phone back into her purse, walking back to the steps and into the house.

"Everything all right?" Ash asked.

"No. It's not..." She sighed, walking to the couch and sitting, putting her head in her hands. "My mom is *furious*. That picture made its way to her, and now she's pissed. Yelled at me about being careless and stupid." She sighed, leaning back on the couch and staring at the ceiling. "I don't even want to go home."

"You can stay here if you want," Ash said. "I'm pretty sure my mom will say it's okay. (*Given that she lets total strangers stay in her home at the drop of a hat...*)" Ash thought back to the summer, when James and the Brothers Angelic had dropped in most uninvitedly.

"You'd... let me?"

Both Emily and Jenny looked at Ash in surprise.

"Well, where else you gonna go?"

"Thank you."

"Anyway, dinner's on. Let's eat."

The girls went to the kitchen, where Ash's mother had already partitioned the pizza and wings out into equal measures for all, and poured soda.

"Oh! I forgot," she said as she sat down at her seat, while Ash, Emily, and Jenny took their seats. "You said you wanted to be kept in the loop if any events were going to happen, right?"

Ash shrugged noncommittally. "Can't hurt to hear, right?"

Her mother laughed. "Always the tomboy."

Emily leaned in, though, eagerly. "I'd like to know."

"Well, we're having a special do this Friday."

"But... Friday is Christmas Eve," Ash observed.

“Yep! The company is putting on one of the big events. *Annnnd* since it *is* Christmas Eve, they’re offering half again the going rate for the night. Seven and a half thousand dollars for one night.” Ash hemmed, but Jenny sighed, laying her head on her fists.

That got Ash’s attention, and she raised her head, looking at Jenny. “You okay?”

“My mother makes me go to all of these events, but I never see more than a tenth of the pay anyway.”

“Ouch. Harsh.” Jenny nodded, and sighed softly.

“Can I go?” Emily asked, hopefully.

“Absolutely! I’ve got a couple of dresses lined up that I need girls to put them on.”

“That’s great!”

“Yes, it is.”

Emily turned to Ash, piercing her with a glare. “Ash, we’re going, *right?* You still owe me for not letting me have a chance to see the last one...”

“I... I dunno. It’s a lot of money, but I don’t really need it right now, and...”

“Oh, and the best part, Ash? You’re never going to believe who the corporate co-sponsor is.”

“Who?”

Her mother had an ear-to-ear grin on her face as she said, “Porsche AG. The venue’s a huge, marble-floored showroom next to a speedway. Porsche wants to show off their hottest cars for a huge holiday gala, and we’re providing the girls and the dresses.”

Ash blinked. Then she grinned. “Well... okay, that might not be so bad,” she said, grinning as she imagined the opportunity to get close to something nice, like an advance show model of next year’s 997, or (dare she hope) a 911-997 Turbo!

Emily laughed softly. “Yeah, well. We’ll see...” She grinned at Ash, a grin that made Ash feel nervous.

“Uhhh...”

“We’ll talk about it later.”

Dinner was good, albeit a bit spicy. They moved from the kitchen to the living room while eating and started a movie. Ash’s phone rang in the middle, however. “Whah? Oh, it’s me.” She ran and took the phone out of the pocket of her jacket, flipping it open and walking out of the house to take the call. “Hello?”

“Ash? Ash Upton?”

“Yes. Brent?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I tracked down that stuff you creatively lost.”

“You did? Where?”

“Eaaasy. See, here’s the problem. It’s fallen into the possession of one of the local race garages. I told the owner it was a racer’s mom’s car that got stripped, and he wants to offload it to you as a consequence. Bad for business to sell a racer’s folks upriver, you know? But likewise, he doesn’t want to wind up in trouble with the police, and as he spent some dime getting the stuff in the first place, he’d like to at least break even, y’know?”

“Yeah, I get you. How much?”

“A grand for it all. And another hundred if you need it towed anywhere on the cape, two hundred anywhere else in the state.”

“Eleven hundred, eh? That’s... steep, but reasonable. Can you arrange it?”

“Yeah. You want me to?”

“I’ll call you back when I have the money. Is cash all right?”

“Cash is the only way it’ll go down, since, y’know, this is all off-the-books.”

“Right. Thanks, I’ll go see what I can do.”

“Call me back before nine if you get everything sorted before then. Else it’ll have to wait until morning.”

“Right. Thanks, Brent.” Ash hung up, shivered, and walked back inside.

“You were out an awful long time. Something important?” Emily asked.

“Uh, yeah. You could say that...” She walked over, sitting on the couch between her mother and Jenny, looking up at her mom. “Uhh, mom? Can I get like, an advance on the money for the whole dress-wearing thing?” She winced inwardly at the thought, but she was kind of locked in now.

“Sure. How much do you need?”

“Eleven hundred.”

“Eleven hundred? What for?”

“Er...” *That* got her. “Um... I... can’t tell you,” she said, feeling extremely lame. “It’s a surprise... for you. And I need it in cash, before tomorrow morning.”

Her mother narrowed her eyes. “Um... are you okay, Ash? You’re not in any trouble, are you?”

“What? No!” Ash objected. “It’s just... *please?*”

“Well... all right. It’s *strange*, but I know you’re good for it.” She ruffled her daughter’s hair. “Just be careful, honey. If you’re in trouble, please tell me.”

“I will, mom.”

“Good.” Marie stood up and walked to the kitchen. She returned with a piece of paper. “Here you go. Go and withdraw what you need from the ATM at the bank up the street.” Ash looked at the paper; it was wrapped around her mother’s ATM/debit card, and had a PIN number on it. “I trust you.”

“Okay. I’ll go do that, then. It really is time-urgent.” Ash slipped out of the house again.

“*Crap.*” The monster XR was blocked in, between the garage, Jenny’s Lexus behind her, and the Jaguar she won for her mother yesterday beside it. “Fuck... Oh well.” She flipped open her new cell phone and called Brent back, arranging the delivery for ten the next morning.

Brent finished by saying, “I really hope you’re not planning to set my friend up. You’d really fuck up the whole racing scene if you did, and nobody will want to deal with you again.”

“I’m not going to call the cops. I just want to fix my mom’s car!”

“All right, all right.”

She was about to go back inside when Jenny’s car started on its own. Confused, Ash turned and watched as Jenny walked out, wearing her coat. “I just realized you were blocked in.” She walked towards her car. “For a switch, how about I drive you around?”

“Yeah, okay.”

She followed Jenny to her Lexus, and they got in. She buckled in first; watching her, Jenny got a sheepish look on her face, and buckled in as well. “You really buckle in all the time?”

“All the time.”

Jenny nodded, and closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. “So, what’s this about?”

“It was Brent calling. He found the parts to my mom’s car. They’ll be coming tomorrow at ten.”

“Oh... oh really? That’s... that’s good.” Jenny slowly backed the car out of the driveway.

“Yeah, it is. You still want to help us put it back together?”

“Yeah... I said I would. I will.”

“I figured you’d renege if I actually got the parts back.”

Jenny nodded, saying, weakly, “I probably would have, yesterday... And I only said it because I figured the parts were in Oregon or somewhere stupid by now.”

“Yeah, I thought so.”

Jenny smoothly guided her Lexus down the street. “So...” she started and trailed off.

“Why did I offer to let you stay?” Jenny nodded, silently, and Ash paused, thinking of her answer. Finally, she said, “Well... honestly, I can’t say. What you showed me was... Awful. Criminal, in fact. But... I feel sorry for you. I feel kind-of responsible for you. Maybe I think that if I can help you be a better person than that’s better than any punishment... I just don’t know.”

“Thank you, Ash.” She was silent for a few moments before continuing, “I almost envy you. You’ve got a girlfriend you’re happy being close to, even unashamedly. You don’t care what other people think of you. You’re strong, you’re courageous, you’re your own girl...” She sighed. “My mom was mad at me. You know what she said? She said, ‘How could you let yourself get snapped in such a compromising position?’”

Ash winced, as Jenny continued. “She doesn’t care how I feel. All I’ve ever heard from her is how I have to be the most beautiful, the most attractive, the most desirable...”

“She sounds like Emily’s mom.”

“Really?”

“Yeah... Em’s mom... She got pregnant when she was young, like, in high school young. She was on her way to some high-powered college, but Emily’s pregnancy kind of derailed it. Now she pushes Emily harder than anyone should be pushed. Emily’s life has been focused on getting into college for the last... well, hell, her whole life.”

Jenny made a face, pulling into the bank’s parking lot. “Yeah... my mother’s like that. She’s always yelling at me to lose weight, to be the best I possibly could be, to be the prettiest, the most... y’know.”

“I get you. And you hate it?”

Jenny nodded, parking the car in a parking spot and sighing. “I can’t be that perfect.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” Ash retorted.

“My mother doesn’t care. I *have* to be perfect for her, for the cameras, for the pictures and the papers, and...” She sighed, laying her head on the steering wheel. “I started intimidating other girls when I was eight. There was a school play, and the newspapers were going to cover it; maybe even get a few seconds in the evening news. Mom was pushing me *so* hard, so hard to get the lead. There was another girl... I forget her name, now. How fucked up is that?”

“So, it was basically a dead heat for who was going to get the lead. This girl, this other girl, she had this doll that she loved so very much. It was a rag-type doll, you know, made of cloth, button eyes? I... I *kidnapped* her doll. I told her that if she didn’t give up trying out for the lead, or that if she told anyone, I’d burn it. I...” Jenny snorted softly. “I sent her an *eye* to show her I was serious. She withdrew from the running. I got the lead...”

“God... I’m fucking despicable, aren’t I?”

“Well... yeah. That was pretty awful.” Jenny didn’t say anything to that, and Ash blushed after a few moments, silently and awkwardly getting out, walking to the ATM on the side of the bank. She withdrew money—and cursed at the machine, as it spit out ten \$50 dollar bills, blinking ‘\$500 transaction limit per day’. The orange-haired tuner cursed, smacked the brick beside the ATM, and walked back.

After Jenny started the car, she sighed. “You love her, don’t you?”

“Emily?” At the blonde’s nodding, Ash sighed fondly, closing her eyes. “Yeah... I really do.”

Jenny sighed softly, though not nearly as fondly, in response. Ash caught it, and looked over. “Are you okay?”

“No... I’m... I’m not. I’m... crying?” Jenny reached up, touching her face below her eyes.

“What’s wrong, Jenny? Jenny?”

The blonde girl sighed, and leaned back in her seat, opening her eyes. “I don’t... I don’t know.” She sighed, softly. “If you were a boy, or even any other girl I wanted as badly as I want you, I wouldn’t hesitate to tear Emily apart to get you. I got Joshua that way...” she said, trailing off briefly. “He had a girlfriend before me. I tore her down. I made her look ugly when she wasn’t; I made her chest look small when it was really quite nice. I made her look undesirable compared to me, in every way possible. I did everything I could think of, and he hardly looked back when he dumped her for me.”

Ash let out a whuff of breath, and buckled in. “So, what’s different?”

“You.” Jenny looked over at Ash, her eyes sad. “You’re... different. Special.” She slid up, leaning over; Ash felt a rising sense of uncomfortableness in her gut as Jenny put one hand around the back of

her head, but she didn't push her away. "You're different," Jenny whispered in her face. "You're... you're so noble, so strong. You wouldn't abandon Emily like that, any more than you could abandon me back in the mall."

"Jenny?" Ash asked, nervously, as the blonde leaned closer.

"You wouldn't like me if I tried. You wouldn't even tolerate me around you, let alone ask me to do things with you and Emily."

Ash's discomfort was joined by no small measure of sympathy. "You... you want me... to..."

"To think well of me," Jenny answered. "I've never cared what anybody but my mother thought of me before. But I do care, now. You're strong, you're brave, you're confident in ways I never was, and probably never will be. I want you, Ash. I want you so bad it hurts. But you don't want me that way."

Ash knew she was blushing. Compliments were still not something she was good at taking; even from Emily, they made her blush. Having a teen idol confessing her desire for her? That was just all kinds of awkward. But even in the desire, there was a pitiful, sad aspect to Jenny. "You measure yourself by the people around you, don't you?"

Jenny nodded her assent, closed her eyes, and laid her head on Ash's shoulder. "Yes. Yes, I do. It's the only measure of myself I've ever had. I'm not... good at anything, really."

Ash scowled, about to think up a biting retort, but Jenny silenced her by speaking first. "But you... You *and* Emily. You two tolerate me. By all the measures you seem to possess, I'm worthless, despicable..."

"Contemptible?" Ash supplied, and Jenny nodded.

"But you still keep me around. You've literally stood between me and physical harm, even when it meant that two very large boys might beat you or worse. I thought you were doing it because you *wanted* me... And I could've accepted that. Gladly, even."

She opened her eyes, and used her free hand to caress Ash's cheek. Ash thought for a moment her skin was crawling, but the sensation was altogether not unpleasant—and that worried her.

"I've... had boyfriends like that, ones who stole me away for my looks, for my body. I've let them dominate me when it was necessary or advantageous. Thinking about you possessing me in the same way... All those boys made me feel a cold disgust in my stomach; but I'd happily, gladly let you do *anything* you wanted to me.

"But you don't even want it. You don't want to... to touch me, to possess me. You don't want me to be naked for you. You don't want my money; you seem to have more of it than I do. You don't want me for my other friends..." She snorted, softly. "Hell, in going with you, I've probably lost them all. I doubt Annette will speak to me again. So, what do you want from me?"

Ash sighed softly at her predicament; Jenny was pressing into her, and she *was* rather soft. She raised her hands, wrapping one around Jenny's back, the other supporting the back of her head. "Has it occurred to you that maybe I just want to try and be your friend?"

"Yes, it has. I don't understand it; I... I've got nothing to offer you that you want. You *have* a pretty girlfriend, one who's tons better than me. You don't seem to *want* anything *from* me. You just want me around. I don't understand it, but you do, and that's what makes you better than me."

"Jenny, I..." Ash started, then she blinked. "Wait, you think Emily's pretty?"

"Yes, I do; she's really quite attractive. She may be small-chested, but she's still really pretty, and kinda hot, too."

"... Yeah, she is," Ash murmured, fondly, picturing Emily. Then she blushed, hotly. "Is it just me, or is it too hot in here? I really don't feel comfortable having this conversation."

"Okay..." She took the car out of park, and pulled back onto the road.

"Turn left," Ash said.

"But your mother's is right," Jenny said, confused.

"Yeah. The ATM only let me draw five hundred. I need to go to the other bank in town and draw another five hundred."

“Okay... Wait, don't you owe eleven hundred?”

“I'll make it up out of the money my mother gave me yesterday morning. I didn't spend much of it.”

“All right. I understand.”

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, December 21, 2004, 4:37 AM

When Ash and Jenny had returned, sleeping arrangements had been devised; Ash and her mother pulled the main couch out into a bed. Ash had donated a T-shirt and pair of her boxer-like shorts for Jenny to sleep in, while the dirty laundry had been put in the washer for the night. Though Ash, Jenny, and Emily played Ash's Playstation for a while, the tiring day had them all retiring to sleep before 11.

Emily asked Ash when they went to bed why they had taken so long; Ash's only answer had been 'ask me later'. The duo had gone to sleep, but...

Emily woke up again. She looked around; something had her attention, something she couldn't specify. She had awoken atop Ash, so slipping away from her wasn't hard; she tucked her tuner back in as she stood up, looking around. Nothing seemed missing; all the cars were outside when she padded lithely to the window to look.

A noise disturbed her contemplations of the moon outside, and she turned back. Ash had rolled over, wrapping her arms around a pillow and half-spilling herself out of the bed. Emily smiled to herself at the sight, walking back and gingerly pushing Ash's bare legs back into the bed—she offered a gentle caress before covering Ash back with the blanket. *“I hope her dreams are more satisfying than I am at the moment.”* She leaned in, kissing Ash on the forehead, but Ash refused to wake so easily. Emily slid her hand under the covers, over Ash's, warmly squeezing it. *“I'm ready for you, Ash. I'm going to be nervous, and awkward, and we're going to make stupid mistakes, but I'm ready to give you all you're ready to take.”* She smiled softly as Ash nuzzled into the pillow, and looked back.

*“Mmmm. That feeling's not gone...”* Emily frowned now; this was a puzzle, and she was going to solve it! *What* was it that had her attention, below the level of conscious thought? She pulled on one of Ash's remaining tees and walked around the room, inspecting everything. *“Nothing here...”* Emily walked to the door. *“Ah-hah. Out here?”* She quietly opened the door, sliding through. Nothing in the entrance, so she moved through the archway to the living room. With a definite feel of 'getting closer', she looked around, eyes canvassing the walls, the couch, the bed pulled out—*oh!*

Part of her screamed at her to turn around, look away, close her eyes, cough, do *something*. But that part was paralyzed into nothingness by the rest of her. She had come across Jenny lying on the couch-bed: stark naked, back arched, legs braced, one hand moving between her thighs, the other obviously squeezing one of her breasts. A carefully quiet moan—more of a hard sigh—escaped her lips.

*“God, no. I can't be seeing this.”* Emily's mind railed at her to go away, to leave Jenny in privacy, but she stood transfixed, watching as their new acquaintance masturbated. Emily knew she was blushing, probably all the way to her toes by the feel of it. It made her *acutely* aware of how long it had been since she'd last pleased herself (a small eternity), and even the last time she'd gotten off at all. She wanted to compare it to watching a train wreck, but that nagging voice in her head told her, *“You could look away if you wanted to.”* With a terrifying realization, Emily became conscious of the fact that watching the spectacle was actually arousing her; she bit her lip.

*“No. No, no, no, I don't want to be aroused by this,”* she shouted to herself, as Jenny started to move her hips harder, gyrating them against her fingers. *“She's not... Not Ash? What does that matter; she's there, she's certainly pretty. You like it; admit it. It's not like watching this means anything except that yes, you like girls.”* Emily bit harder into her lip, trying to force herself to turn away. She slid one foot back, making to turn around.

Jenny's groan caught her cold, the sound quivering through her, reverberating through her guts. Emily's eyes focused back on the blonde girl; she arched like a bow, letting out a long, muffled groan

through a bit lip of her own, squeezing her breast with her long, painted nails. She held in the position for long moments, before collapsing to the bed with a grunt of escaped air, her head falling to the side, her eyes opening.

“*Oh, shit.*” Vibrant magenta eyes met light, crystal blue, as horror spread across both faces.

Jenny thrashed for the blankets, whispering, “Oh, god, no... please, don’t!”

Emily had turned to flee. “Don’t what?” she whispered back, even as she scooted around behind the door’s arch, looking back out.

Jenny pulled the blankets up to her neck. “D-Don’t tell Ash... I-I’ll leave! I’ll get out of your way, I won’t ever bother you again, just don’t tell her...”

Emily blinked at that, as confusion blossomed. “What? What are you talking about?” She walked into the living room, slowly, behind the couch.

Jenny crawled up to sit against the back of the couch, still clutching the blankets up to her shoulders. “Don’t tell... don’t tell her what I was doing. Please! I’m sorry I woke you up. I’ll leave, I won’t... Please, don’t.”

“Wait, you’re begging me not to tell Ash I saw you mas... masturbating?” Emily felt her cheeks growing even hotter.

“Please... I... I don’t want her to think I’m a creep.”

“Why would she?” Full of confusion, Emily stepped around the side of the couch, staring at Jenny, who had, if anything, started to blush harder.

“You... you didn’t hear... Ah...”

She was caught, and Emily narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

The blonde haired girl looked down at the sheets covering her legs and blushed. “I... um... please, don’t tell her.” She looked up into Emily’s face, her voice full of earnest desperation.

Emily sat on the edge of the pullout bed. “I won’t. Just tell me what you’re talking about, or I’m going to be thinking about it all night.”

Jenny paused a moment, then nodded. “I was... I had a dream about her. I woke up moaning Ash’s name... and...”

“Oh... *Oh!*” Emily felt her cheeks starting to burn again, and she slid further into the couch, beside the arm, sitting back against the back of the couch. “Oh, Jeez. You were thinking about her when you... No wonder...”

“Yeah, I was. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Emily rolled her eyes, pointedly. “What’s on your mind is your mind, and not my business. Or Ash’s, for that matter.”

“You’re... not angry?”

“No. I... Okay, look. Three, four months ago, before I... before I’d accepted that I wanted girls, that I wanted *Ash*, Ash met a girl. Her name was Missi, she was a freshman, and *totally* into Ash. Hero-worshipping her, totally ready to go the all for her. I... I got *so* jealous of her, that I... I practically did everything short of attacking her to make her look bad in Ash’s eyes. I...” Emily snorted, softly. “I called her the ‘president of the itty-bitty-titty-committee’, I disparaged her morals and her tattoo. I felt threatened by her. I wanted Ash for myself, but I didn’t want to admit, even to myself, that I wanted Ash. It... it put a lot of strain on our relationship, me and Ash, this Missi girl.”

“What happened?”

“Missi wanted Ash. She wanted her so badly, but Ash wasn’t ready to be physical with her... Hell, she’s still not ready.” Emily sighed, letting a bit of frustration sink into her voice. “Missi pushed, and pushed, and Ash wound up lying to her to get away, then she tried to dump Missi. It... Missi didn’t want to be dumped.”

Jenny winced at that.

“So, if I got nuts over any and every potential rival for my girlfriend, I’d wind up driving her off. I won’t do that to her. And I won’t—and can’t—be angry at you for wanting her, either.”

“Thank you, Emily,” Jenny said with a soft sigh, releasing the blankets (which fell to her lap), and she slumped forward. “I... I feel so pathetic.”

“You’re not.” Emily looked at the blonde’s face. “Why do you like her so much?”

“I... I dunno. It’s like she’s a leader, maybe. Being around her, I want to please her so badly; I want her to be happy with me. I... I want to let her do anything, everything to me.”

“You sound like you want her to control you.”

“I... yeah, actually that sounds right.”

Emily laughed softly, sliding her legs under the covers. She wrapped an arm around Jenny’s shoulders, rocking her softly. “Trust me, Ash isn’t like that. She may seem like the take-charge kind of girl, but she’s even shyer and nervous than me once romance or sex comes up.”

“She is?”

“She is. She’s not the kind to throw a girl to a bed and ravish her. Sometimes I wish she would.”

“She... you... haven’t...”

“No, we haven’t. Look, both Ash and I have had... a lot of bad stuff happen to us in the past, okay? We’re very slow, and somewhat neurotic, about sex. Hell, I’ve seen you do something more daring than I’ve seen her doing.”

Jenny blushed at that confession. “Jeez... I’m, uh... sorry.”

“Don’t be. Anyway, it kind of helped me clear something up.”

“It... it did?”

“Yeah. I’ve been *so* confused, trying to figure out if I really was a lesbian, or if it was just Ash.”

“Oh... umm... which is it?”

Emily chuckled, and shook her head. “Why should I tell you?”

“Um... I’d like to know if it was any good,” she ventured, sheepishly.

“I’m going to need a cold shower before I can get back to sleep. Happy?”

“Heh... why don’t you...”

Emily felt her blush begin to creep back up. “No place to do it. I’d wake Ash up if I tried in our room, and probably even if I tried in the bath.”

“Oh... um... why not here?”

Emily blinked, and then she goggled, staring at Jenny. “Did... did you just ask me to masturbate with you?!”

Jenny blushed and looked away in response. “Sorry. That was stupid of me. I wasn’t thinking at all there.”

“No shit,” Emily huffed, sighed, and leaned back. “I... Okay, so you turned me on. I don’t know you *nearly* well enough to do anything that crazy, even if I *didn’t* love Ash.”

“Okay, okay, I know, it was stupid. I’m sorry,” Jenny cringed.

“And furthermore, I... Wait, you asked me to... I... didn’t think I was your type.”

“Um... what do you mean?”

Emily held her hands up, about an inch and a half in front of her cloth-covered breasts, then made an exaggerated hourglass motion over her stomach. “You know... like that?”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Do you really think I’m *that* shallow? Wait, never mind; you probably do.”

“Well, yeah. I kinda got that impression.”

“I’ve spent so long finding every little thing I could to make other girls look uglier than me. Yeah, I could name enough ‘flaws’ in you to make anyone who heard it without seeing you think you were some hideous beast. But I could do that about myself, too.” She looked up, and smiled weakly. “I actually think you’re pretty. And kinda hot, in a very bookwormish way. And your hair... Most girls I know wouldn’t dream of dying their hair that color, but it just looks natural on you. And this widow’s peak...” She reached over, brushing Emily’s widow’s peak. “You really shouldn’t hide it under that headband. It’s actually, you know, really pretty. You stand out, and you didn’t need implants to do it.”

Emily blushed softly, hemming slightly. “Wait, your breasts aren’t...”

“Real? Does that really surprise you?” Jenny lifted her right breast, tracing a line on the underside; Emily honestly couldn’t see anything, but supposed that Jenny was tracing a surgical scar. “Yeah. They’re implants. Mom got them for me when I was fifteen. They’d naturally be closer to the size of yours. And I’m guessing, given how much Ash tries hard not to look pretty, that hers are the genuine article?”

“Yeah.”

Jenny chuckled softly, and sighed in response. “Figures.”

“If it’s any consolation, I think she’d very much rather they were smaller.”

“Really? Jeez, she has the real deal that cost my mom four grand, and doesn’t want them?”

“That’s Ash.”

“You really do love her, don’t you?”

“I do. She... I don’t want to imagine life without her in it.”

“Are you afraid of losing her?”

“No... Maybe. I don’t think so... But I guess I’m afraid I’m not as hot as she wants me to be.”

“Has she ever given you any reason to think that way?”

“No, never. It’s just...”

“You’re afraid you’re not as attractive to her as you could be?”

“... Maybe a little.”

Jenny laughed softly. “Okay. Take your shirt off.”

“Er... What?”

“I said, ‘take your shirt off’. Let me see what you’re afraid of.”

“Are you just trying to get me naked?”

“Maybe a little. But I’m serious; I’ve spent the better part of the last decade of my life being the most attractive I can be.”

“... Fine. Why not; this has been a weird night anyway.”

Emily pulled her shirt off, sitting under Jenny’s scrutinizing gaze. Jenny scooted forward, sitting on her knees, pulling Emily’s arms up, seeming to measure her, poking, prodding—and yes, groping. Emily blushed most at that.

“Well, what can I say? You’re certainly attractive, Emily.” Jenny folded her hands in her lap. “You want to snare your orange-haired friend? You seem like you’ve already got her head-over-heels for you. You may not have the biggest chest at the ball, but there’s nothing wrong them: normal shape, right heft, there’s nothing abnormal about your nipples. You may not have a perfect ‘10’ hourglass, but nobody does. Not even me. Your hips have a nice curve to them without being exaggerated, you’ve got a cute innie twat with a fetching freckle and no ugly thatch, your thighs are—”

“Wait, you looked at my... v-vagina?!” Emily felt a cold horror spreading across her face.

“Um, yeah?” Jenny laughed. “What’re you afraid of?”

“N-Nothing. It’s... Jeez, this is too weird. This is like her dad remembering my name by describing my vagina.”

“Her *dad’s* seen your vagina?!”

“No, no, *nothing* like that. Her dad’s a doctor, he’s my gynecologist!”

Jenny breathed a sigh of relief. “Whew... that’s... that’s good... Wait. Upton... Ash Upton... Her father is... Doctor Edward Upton?!?!”

“Oh, god! Don’t tell me you’ve met him! *Please* don’t tell me he’s your gynecologist! This is too freaky.”

“Not anymore. He... Okay, a couple of years ago, when my mom was really into feuding with Ash’s mom, she got the idea to seduce her estranged husband and try to marry him. She practically danced a happy-jig when she found out he was a gynecologist.”

Emily shivered softly. “Oh god, please don’t tell me they...” Emily clutched herself. “That would be *way* too many shades of fucked up.”

“Nope. Thank god. He didn’t bite, and she got tired of driving us both all the way across the fucking state to get an exam... Hey, you guys live in Tempest, don’t you?”

Emily nodded, sighed with relief, and leaned back, as Jenny laughed. “How weird is that?”

“It’s... actually, about par for the course given how fucked-up the past year has been.”

Jenny laughed softly, and leaned into the couch back next to Emily, clutching a pillow under her.

“Yeah, that is weird. Hey, when did you find the time for a full waxing, anyway?”

“Uh...”

“You’re hairless. I know it wasn’t today; was it yesterday sometime?”

“I don’t... I don’t grow any hair there.”

“Oh... really? You don’t?” Emily shook her head, and Jenny laughed. “That’s really handy. I wish I was like that.”

“You do? I always felt like it was... y’know, it made me feel weird that I never got any hair on my vagina.”

Jenny shook her head, and rolled to her back, spreading her legs. “See that? I’m going to have to get it waxed off before this next ‘thing’. *Every single time* I need to wear a bikini or, so help me, a thong. It hurts like a bitch.”

“Yellow?”

“Yeah. Just like my head.”

“It looks so soft...”

“It’s a pain in the ass, honestly, and literally. I’d trade you in a second.”

Emily laughed softly, sighed, and looked up at the ceiling. Then it hit her. “Whoa... This is fucking weird.”

“What is?”

“This... Heh. It reminds me, after Ash and I left for home, after that party this summer. I told her about kissing her in her sleep, because I’d wanted to try and figure things out. And she told me to grab her breasts. I laughed at her, and I told her that contrary to... what some porno might have you think, girls don’t really grab their breasts and compare them. Except that’s pretty much what we’ve just done, isn’t it?”

“More or less...” Jenny shrugged, sitting up and stretching. “What time is it, anyway?”

Emily checked her watch, twice. “It’s almost quarter after five.” She yawned softly, smiled slightly. “So, was it good?”

“Er... was what good?”

“The dream?”

Jenny blushed. “Yeah... it really was.”

“What was it like?”

Jenny responded by glancing around conspiratorially. “Well, um... actually...” Her voice got tiny as she said, “You were in it, too.”

“I was?!”

“Yeah... It was... Mmm.” She blushed harder, curling up. “You and Ash... just... controlling me, sort of. Telling me what to do: give massages, get something, eat one of you out... Then Ash pushed me back on the bed, and the two of you started...” She trailed off, looking away, her cheeks *bright red*, even visible in the poor light. “Fucked up, I know.”

“Heh... Yeah, it is, but I’ve had fucked-up dreams, too.”

“Like what?” Jenny rolled back to look at Emily.

“Well, this one time... Before I told her about how I felt, I had a lucid dream. I *knew* it was a lucid dream, and I wanted to wake up from it, but I couldn’t, because I didn’t *really* want to wake up, you know?” Jenny nodded, and Emily continued. “In it, Ash was over me... Like she knew what I really, really wanted, in the deepest part of my heart...”

“The part that knows all the dirty, dark little secrets, and all your dark desires, right?”

“Yeah. She... she took my clothes off, but even though I kept asking her to stop, she told me that only I could stop it, and only if I wanted to. She... she pushed me down, and...” Emily realized she’d started blushing, getting heated at recollecting that dream.

“She made you get off?”

“Yeah... I... Mmm, Jeez. I’m getting hot again.”

“Mmm...” Jenny smiled, and Emily smiled back.

Suddenly it seemed like Jenny’s eyes were getting closer. “*No, you are getting closer,*” she thought. She gasped softly, as she barely felt the brush of Jenny’s lips on hers. It was entirely different from kissing Ash—instead of fireworks bursting in her chest, it was akin to being tasered at the base of the spine; it electrified her. She gasped, pulling back, blushing. “Oh god, I’m sorry...”

Jenny smiled softly, holding her hand up. “I didn’t think you’d even get that far. Moment-of-weakness?”

Emily nodded, trembling. “Y-Yeah... Fuck, I’m messed up.”

“Nah, not really.” Jenny laughed. “Not nearly as much as I am.”

“Why’d you let me?”

“Well... I wanted to see if it felt the same as kissing Ash.”

“Did it?”

“No; completely different. Good, though.” Jenny looked away, blushing. “Maybe... Mmm...”

“You really *are* attracted to me, aren’t you?”

“Did you think I was lying?”

“Maybe a little.”

“I wasn’t. You’re both really, really attractive girls. And I’m attracted to you both.”

“What do you want in a girlfriend, then?”

“I... Mmm. Someone like you have in Ash: someone strong enough to stand me up when I’m afraid to stand on my own, who’s not afraid to fight, but who’s tender and comforting. Or maybe someone like Ash has in you: someone brilliant and intelligent, cute and soft... someone I can watch out for, protect... and make feel right. There’s something so *easy* about the two of you. In unguarded moments, you have the most perfect dynamic. You’ve made your lover out of your best friend, haven’t you?”

“Yes... Yes, I have.”

“I envy you. I wish I had even a friend like you two have in each other, let alone a girlfriend of her.”

Emily stretched her arm out, placing her palm on Jenny’s back, between the shoulder blades.

“You’ll find someone. Just keep up how you’re doing.”

“I wish I could share your optimism.”

“Then smile and look up.” Jenny looked over at Emily, who was smiling. “It’s going to be a brand-new day tomorrow. Who knows what it holds! Cheer up.”

“I’ll... I’ll try.” She smiled, and closed her eyes, pulling the covers back over herself and cuddling into the pillow.

Emily stood up, whispering, “Good night,” as she picked up her tee. She didn’t put it on, as she turned to move away.

“Hey, Emily,” Jenny whispered out from behind her.

She turned back. “Yes?”

“You... you weren’t surprised when I said I kissed Ash, were you?”

Emily shook her head. “She told me. We trust each other.”

Jenny closed her eyes. “You’re not gonna tell her...”

“I might tell her you kissed me. But I won’t tell her what I saw you doing.” Emily leaned in, with an amused grin. “That’s between you and me, unless *you* want to tell her.”

Jenny grinned, and leaned up, on her knees on the side of the bed. “Thank you, Emily.”

Emily smiled and put her hand on Jenny’s shoulder. “She really does like you. For the life of me, I can’t fathom why. But I like you, too.”

“Mmm...” She smiled, and leaned in; Emily found herself drawn, leaning in as well. “Want to give it a good try?”

Emily bit her lip. A big part of her wanted to. She could feel Jenny’s breath on her lips. She shook her head, though. “I... I want to, but... I don’t feel... you know... I’m tempted, but I don’t think it’s a good idea?” Jenny looked a bit crushed, and Emily sighed softly. “Let me get to know you better, okay? Then, maybe...”

Jenny sighed and nodded, smiling softly. “Okay.”

“Good night, Jenny.”

“Night, Emily.”

Emily turned around, walking quickly away, flustered by the invitation—an invitation that she’d found hard to turn down. But then she opened the door and walked back to the bedroom she and Ash shared, and smiled at the sight of Ash, curled up under the covers, illuminated by the strong moonlight.

*“There you are: my tuner, my lover, my mate.”* Emily walked over, pulled the covers down, and leaned in. Ash murmured at the disturbance in her dream. Sliding onto the bed, one hand into Ash’s palm, the other around her friend’s head, she kissed Ash: strongly, passionately, needily.

It worked; Ash’s eyes flew open, and she started to kiss back as Emily gently licked her lips. With an even more surprised, wider-eyed stare, Ash parted her lips and teeth, lacing her fingers into Emily’s. Their tongues met, and Emily moaned softly at the taste of her love’s tongue on hers.

“Good morning,” Ash whispered, as they parted the kiss.

“Yes. Yes it is.” She nuzzled Ash’s cheek, savoring the lingering concussions of the firework-like sensation in her chest that Ash’s lips engendered, and she smiled. “Was that a good wake-up call?”

Ash nodded, blushing slightly. “I feel a bit like that princess who got kissed awake, but other than that... Mmmm...” She wrapped her arms around Emily, who offered no resistance at being pulled down atop Ash. “You’re in a good mood this morning, Em.”

“Yeah... yeah, I am.” She smiled, kissing Ash’s lips again. “Frisky, too.” She slid her legs under the covers, wrapping them around Ash’s thigh, snuggling close to her, although she didn’t quite go far enough to press her vagina to Ash’s skin.

“What happened?”

“Had a long talk with Jenny.”

“And that put you in the mood to kiss me awake?”

“Yep.” Emily leaned in, nibbled on Ash’s earlobe, and was rewarded with the sound of a sigh of pleasure from Ash. “Ash? Do you ever think about touching me?”

“You mean, sexually?”

“Yeah. That’s how I mean.”

“... Only every night.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“I’m afraid.”

Emily rolled over, pressing her back into Ash’s chest, and tugging Ash’s hands around her. “Touch me however you want, however you feel you can, Ash.”

“Em? Are you okay?”

“I’m better than okay.” She smiled, caressing Ash’s hips, and pressing her feet into the top of her friend’s—their toes laced together, red-painted and unpainted.

Ash hugged her, tightly, and started to kiss the nape of her neck. “Like this, Em?”

“However, Ash. I’m... I’m just glad to be held by you.”

Ash replied by kissing her again, and hesitatingly moving a hand down her stomach. Emily spread her legs, but Ash could get no further than just below her navel.

“Too afraid?”

“... Yeah. I’m a puss, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re Ash.” Emily arched her back and rolled so they were lying on their sides, but still embraced. “And I love you. Hold me, Ash. Even if you can’t fiddle me, you still can’t fail to make me feel beloved.”

Ash let out a soft laugh. “What’s brought this on?”

“Like I said, a long talk with Jenny.”

“What was it about?”

“Can’t tell you that,” Emily giggled, and she clasped Ash’s free hand between her own—their fingers laced together, and she held that arm to her chest, against her breasts. “Ash... do you like my breasts?”

“Um...”

“I know they’re not as big as yours, or Jenny’s... Do you still like them?”

“Yeah, I think they’re great.”

She moved her hand up, and cupped one—Emily gasped softly with the sensation, and she smiled.

“Thank you, Ash...”

“Anytime, Em...” Ash yawned, softly. “Can we go back to sleep, now?”

“Unless you’d rather do something else.”

“Mmm... Ask me when we wake up again.”

Emily laughed, and closed her eyes as well, drifting into an easy sleep in the embrace of her closest.

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 9:37 AM

“All right, girls. I’ll see you later!” Marie called on her way out.

“We’ll be fine, mom,” Ash called back, waving as her mother closed the door.

“Finally. Thought she’d never leave. I was beginning to worry she’d be here when the parts arrive.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “I’d almost think you wanted it to be a *secret* that we’re fixing her car.”

“Well... kinda.”

“Right. Anyway, don’t we need to get that manual printed out? Or at least the important sections?”

“Right. I’ll get right on that.”

Jenny volunteered, “I’ll clean up what’s left of breakfast.”

“Then I’ll wait for the truck.”

They split up, and Ash ran to her mother’s computer. She used her own debit card to purchase the PDF manual for the Porsche 996, and started it downloading. Fortunately, her mother had broadband, and the thousand-page manual came relatively quickly. She was only halfway through looking through the index for what she needed when Emily yelled, however, and she ran downstairs. She pulled on her jacket, and looked out the door—a pick-up truck had rolled in, with the bright red hood of her mother’s car secured in the bed.

“Showtime!”

Walking out into the crisp, cold air, the driver was already getting out of the truck, walking towards them. “You got the green?” Ash pulled it out of her pocket—a thick wad of twenty fifty-dollar bills, with a hundred on top. He nodded. “Then I got the stuff. Where you want it?”

“Back the truck up to the garage.”

“Right-o.”

It wasn’t hard with the three of them; even the hood was easy enough to manhandle into the garage. After checking to be sure that everything was there—and it was—Ash paid the driver, who said, “I didn’t see nothin’, hear nothin’, or do nothin’, and neither did you ladies.” He left.

“And now... We’re left with a stack of car parts, a box of tools, and a car that needs fixing,” Emily observed.

“Right. We’re probably going to need more tools. Still, this shouldn’t be too hard to finish. This isn’t actually that bad; this is a day or two’s work.”

“Well... the real bitch will be re-attaching the steering wheel. We should do that last, since everything else can go in first anyway, and if we do it wrong, the airbag will fire.”

“Let’s not connect the battery, too, until we’ve finished everything.”

“All right. I’ll go print out the parts on the steering wheel. You two have fun trying to get gages back in.”

As Emily went back towards the house, Ash turned to Jenny. “Wanna learn how to put a car’s instrumentation back in?”

“Um... sure...”

### Interlude

Fixing the car turned out to be surprisingly easy. The instrumentation went back in without a fuss, although there was some cursing (and Jenny cut a finger) while putting the hood back on the engine compartment and reconnecting it. Jenny had to go home Tuesday night, but she arrived promptly on Wednesday morning to help with the continuing fix and repair. By midday Wednesday the repairs were done, and Emily had volunteered to test the restored vehicle.

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, December 22, 2004, 12:13 PM

“Okay now, this thing has a Tiptronic paddle-shifter. You know how it works, right?”

“Yes, I do. Your mother left the owner’s manual in the glove box. I read it last night, remember?”

“Yeah, I do. Remember, take it easy—if something’s going to go screwy, I’d rather you were able to bring it to a stop than not.”

“I know how to drive, Ash.”

“I know. I taught you.”

Emily got into the Porsche, strapping in.

“Shotgun!” Jenny cried with a laugh, strapping in, as Ash had been about to walk to the other side.

Ash laughed. “Fine, fine. You can have the first run.”

Ash smiled as she watched the Porsche pull out and take off—it had a beautiful, quiet rumble to it, as it whirred off into the road. Things had started to calm down weather-wise, and the days of sun had melted the snow off the road, although it had hardened it into bunkers on the grassy areas.

She leaned back against the hood of the Monster XR, staring out at the road, with a smile. Things were looking up. She saw Emily run around the block once, twice, at a sedate speed. Then she pulled around the corner again, and Ash heard the powerful engine on the Porsche roaring as Emily pushed it. She had to get it up to at least sixty before coming down, and turning around to come back. But what was most surprising was what pulled into the driveway *after* the red Porsche 996—a black Jaguar XK with her mother behind it. Ash’s jaw dropped. “*Well, that’s one cat out of the bag.*”

Her mother looked as shocked to see the Porsche as her daughter was to see her, and Ash walked towards the cars as they parked. Her mother got out of the Jaguar, blinking. “My... That’s my car! I didn’t think it was delivered yet...”

Ash laughed. “We put it in the garage Monday, remember?”

“Oh, right! I’d forgotten; I’ve been dealing with his party thing. It’s... you *fixed* it?” She sounded astonished.

“Yep!” Emily said as she got out and leaned on the side. “Runs like a dream!”

Ash’s mother laughed softly, and then she ran forward, hugging her daughter tightly. “Sweetie, I... ah, is this what you wanted the money for?”

“Yeah, mom. We put it together yesterday and this morning. The damage wasn’t bad at all.”

“Really? Huh. They told me it was totaled, and that I should probably send it straight to a junkyard. I had them send it here because I thought you might like to pick over its bones first.”

“Well, whoever told you that was full of it; must not have known what the hell they were doing. She’s absolutely fine. It looked pretty grisly, but it wasn’t.”

“That’s nice... that’s very nice.” Her mother smiled. “Why did I come back? Oh, right. Some of the girls and I were going to pre-view the venue, and since it’s next to a motorway, I thought you’d like to come, so I came back to get you.”

“That’s nice. Hey, are they doing anything on the track today?”

“I don’t think so...”

Emily had already picked up, and she laughed. “Test track!”

“What? Oh, you...” Ash’s mother grinned. “You want to take the Porsche and test it? Okay. I’ll need to call the insurance company, and the DMV. I’m going to need to get it re-insured and see if the DMV needs anything done, but since you usually have thirty days for this kind of thing...”

“What are we waiting for, then? Saddle up!”

### Cape Cod Speedway, 1:19 PM

The speedway’s parking lot was more or less empty; only a few sedans in the spots closest to the adjoining showroom. By far the flashiest cars were the Monster XR, the Jaguar, and the Porsche that pulled in when Ash’s mom led the two cars there. Ash saw that Jenny’s mother was waiting outside the doors. She winced, watching as her mother got out of the Jaguar, walking over to her. “No time like the present.” Jenny and Emily were still in the Porsche, so she got out and stretched her legs and arms, then Emily and Jenny did likewise.

“What took you so long?” Jenny the Elder snarked at Marie, who smiled at her.

“You’ll never believe what these three did.” She pointed at the red car. “They fixed it!”

The elder Jenny snorted down her nose at the red Porsche. “It couldn’t have been that broke, then.”

“They totaled it out. Anyway, I thought they’d like a look at the venue, since they’re going to be attending. Let’s have a look, shall we? Come on.”

Ash shrugged, sticking her hands in her pockets and falling into step behind Emily, with Jenny behind her. They filtered into the glass-walled showroom, and Ash whistled. “This place is huge.”

“Mmmm-hmm! You three have a look around while I go and schmooze the operator. With any luck, I should be able to get them to open the gates and let you test the Porsche out.” Marie took off with that, towards a group of men, mostly in business suits.

“Well, huh... Lots of space in here, right?”

“I think, though don’t quote me, that these circles rotate,” Emily observed.

The flooring was black and white marble or marble-like tile, but it was interrupted by occasional large circles of white marbled material.

“Cars, cameras, and a sea of people. I’m surprised you agreed to this. Holiday gigs are crazy.”

“They are?”

“Why do you think they gave half again the going rate?”

“I figured it was just because it was Christmas Eve.”

“Any holiday-related gig is like that. At least this one should be mildly interesting, given that this room is going to be full of cars and not just people.”

“Yeah... Crap, am I gonna have to do that stupid ‘drape yourself like a cloth’ thing over the car?”

“Isn’t that why you volunteered? No, wait, let me guess; you’d rather be behind the wheel?”

“Well... yeah.” Ash blushed.

“Guess we’d better start practicing your ‘car-drape’, eh? Good thing we have a Porsche.”

Emily laughed. “Trust me, she knows how to drape herself over a car. Now granted, most of that is done with the hood *up*, but I think she needs far more help with walking in heels.”

It hit Ash like a thunderbolt. One of the few things she dreaded only slightly less than missing a period—heels. And worse, since she’d already borrowed against the winnings...

“Ash? Are you okay?”

“My god, she went pale. That is so funny!” Jenny was laughing at her while Emily was snapping her fingers in front of her face.

Ash started out of it. “Whuh? Oh... Damn it. I’d forgotten.” Ash sighed, shaking her head. “There’s no helping it. I’m in the hole for that money, so... Let’s make the most of today, then.”

“Always the optimist.”

Jenny giggled at Emily’s joke. “Let’s see how long it takes to walk this place from one end to the other.”

“Okay. But, uh... why?”

“Have you got anything better to do? There’s no cars yet, and it doesn’t look like your mom’s done convincing them to let us play on the speedway. At least this way we look like we’re accomplishing something.”

“Huh... can’t argue with that. Wonder what they’re talking about?”

“The guy looks annoyed, but like your mom has him by the short and curlies. She probably told him something he doesn’t like, but that he’s gonna swallow because he wants this deal to go down smoothly.”

They had half-traversed the huge showroom and back again, when her mother waved at them, so they walked over.

“Ash, Jenny, Emily, this is Mr. Fitzgerald. He operates the speedway, and he’s agreed to open the track for you to test my car.”

“Your mother makes some... persuading arguments, young lady. That said, if I think that something dangerous is happening or going to happen, I *will* shut it down at once. If you see any red flags, lights, or hear any sirens, stop your cars wherever you are and get out.” They all nodded. “And another thing; I expect safety rules to be followed. Everyone will be buckled in securely, and I’ll have Jimmy fetch helmets out of the store for you.”

“I’ll just buy those. I’d rather she had a helmet anyway.”

“No need; just consider them *gratis*. Go and get the cars you want to run and take them to the rear lot. Jimmy’s the race boss, so you listen to him.”

“Er... who’s Jimmy?” asked Ash.

“This one.” A man in a tank top with a neck beard held up a hand, “Yo! That would be me. Go get your rides and take them to the back lot. I’ll get those helmets and open the gates.”

Ash turned and walked back for the parking lot, with Emily and Jenny on her heels. She heard Jenny (the first) and her mother talking, but wasn’t about to wait and hear bad news—the three practically ran for the cars, strapping in (Jenny with Ash) and driving to the back lot. They waited several minutes, and the gate opened.

“Okay, come on in, slowly! Park ’em in the pits!” Jimmy was holding a megaphone, and directing them with a glow-lamp on a stick.

Ash was grinning as she eased the car onto the track.

“Ash? Are you okay?”

“Huh? Better than ever!”

“Your hands are shaking...”

“Yeah. This is almost as exciting as the time I raced Kate.”

“Kate?”

“Friend of mine. Kate the Kamikaze. She beat me, but not by much. And she was in a Jaguar XKR.”

“Oh right, you mentioned her when you raced that car on the way to Marco’s. That’s... Wait, like the car Joshua used to own before you won it for your mom?”

“Yeah, except hers is race-customized and tuned. She’d flatten Joshua’s car in any kind of race.”

“Cool...”

Ash parked the car in the first pit, and Emily parked in the pit behind her. Ash got out as Jimmy was walking towards them, carrying a stack of three boxes containing helmets. “Okay now! Here’s how this is going to work. Never thought I’d see the day we were opening the track to a bunch of teenage girls, but your old ladies have more pull with Fitz than I’ve ever seen.”

Ash scowled. “You got something against girls?”

“Nope. I got something against teenagers. Lost too many of my friends to teenage racing accidents.” He plunked the helmets down on the hood of the Monster XR. “Now, here’s how this is going to go. I’m going to need to see anybody who’s planning on driving today do some qualifying laps alone, to prove to me they can handle these cars at speed. If I see anything hinky, I’m dropping the reds right then and there. Since these are production cars, I’m not going to bother with an inspection, since I don’t think these are capable of getting much better than a hundred, hundred and twenty, tops... Wait.”

He stepped back, looking at the Monster XR. “You own this car, Red?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Jimmy looked at her with a newfound respect. “That’s Harry’s car. Harry’s baby. I never thought he would’ve sold it.”

“You know Harry?”

“Know him? I helped keep him in business. Tempest high, class of ninety-eight.”

“Tempest high, class of, assuming all goes well, oh-five. You were a racer?”

“King of the Mountain, ninety-seven and ninety-eight.”

Ash grinned and leaned on the Monster XR’s side. “King of the mountain, current.”

Ash looked sidelong—Jenny and Emily were whispering to one another. She looked back at Jimmy, who was taking the helmets out.

“That’s... real nice, then. Takes me back. But I ain’t going to give you an inch of leeway. In fact, I’m gonna hold you to a higher standard, since you’re the current principal.” He handed the helmet to Ash. “Fitz is giving you these here helmets. I wasn’t joking when I said I lost a lot of friends to the Mountain. Some of ’em nobody and nothing short of an angel or a parachute could’ve helped, but too many of ’em cracked their heads open ’cause nobody wears a damn helmet. You’ve got a racing harness in this, right?” Ash nodded. “Good. Now you’ve got the helmet to go with. If the king starts wearing these, maybe the rest of the jackasses will follow suit. And hey, you two done gabbin’? I ain’t just reminiscin’ about my glory days with the King here, I’m tryin’ to lecture you all about safety on the track!” Jenny quieted up, listening; Emily had paled a bit.

“Good. Now then, since you’ve got two fine cars here, I’m going to assume you’re going to want to race against each other at some point. I know the King here can do it—you don’t get to be King without being good at it—but are either of you two racers?”

“Uh... kind of... in-training...” Emily muttered, and Ash chuckled.

“She hasn’t actually raced yet, but I’ve seen her take the Mountain. I’m teaching her.”

“Well, that’s dandy. Maybe you’ll get some experience here. And you?”

Jenny shook her head at him. “Never.”

“All right. Well, if you want to give it a try, I’ll let you. Just don’t fuck up, or it’s my ass.”

“I... don’t know how to drive a stick.”

“The Porsche’s automatic,” Emily pointed out. “Well, semi-automatic.”

“Semi? One of those nifty Tiptronics?” Ash nodded, and Jimmy laughed. “Well, I *ought* to disqualify you right there. NASCAR rules, at least.”

“Why?”

“They don’t like paddles; I dunno why. Good thing we’re not racing NASCAR rules then, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, good thing.”

“Who’s up first?”

“I’ll go,” Ash said. “I want to get this over with.”

“All righty, then. Just let me put in the batteries and set up these helmets.”

Jimmy fiddled with the helmets for a while, and then handed one to each of Ash, Emily, and Jenny. “Okay now, they’re voice-sensitive; you talk, they transmit. I’ve set us all to one frequency.”

“They’re in the helmets?”

“Yep.” Jimmy held up a hand-held. “This one’s mine. Anyway, get in your car, take it to the start, and wait for my instructions.”

Ash did as she was told. It was... Exhilarating. Waiting behind the wheel of the rumbling Monster XR, with wide, smooth speedway in front of her. She gunned the engine just to hear it roar.

A voice crackled in her ear, “Okay! First lap, don’t exceed sixty, and no fancy drifting or anything. Just a smooth, easy sail.”

“Right,” Ash said. “Did you hear that?”

“Five by five. You’re good to go when the green flag is waved. It’s up on your left. Your friend volunteered to wave it.” Ash looked up—Jenny had climbed the stairs to the tower, and had taken the flag in hand. The flag waved, and Ash put the pedal down. Her tires squealed, the Monster XR did a burn-out. It was like fire racing through her veins. The only thing that was missing was the pack of competing cars and the roar of the crowd. The first lap was agonizingly slow as she hugged the inside lane. The track had more straight than twists, but it had some devilish twists at each end, the middles only broken up by gentle chicane curves.

“Three minutes forty, and smooth sailing. You know what you’re doing. Go ahead and take it up to a hundred,” Jimmy radioed in.

Emily chimed in afterwards, “You’re doing great, Ash!”

Ash smoothly accelerated, hugging the chicanes with ease, and she took the end-point twists with adroitness. Coming out of the last curve on the near twist, Jimmy radioed again.

“Okay, enough with this farce, you know what you’re doing. Give it your all. I wanna see Doctor Harrystein’s Monster in action.”

Ash grinned widely, ferociously, putting the pedal down and shifting down again. The Ford V8 under the hood shifted from a quiet roar to one to shake the stands, as Ash watched the speedometer climb. It was beyond exhilarating—it was pure speed running through her veins as she went into the second set of turns at a hundred and twenty. Turning her foot, she stepped hard on the brakes while holding the gas and pushing in the clutch, and locked the wheels—the Monster slid as the tachometer soared. She drifted around the first corner, letting off on the brakes and clutch as she downshifted two gears, the Monster recovering from the skid doing seventy and climbing.

“Ooooh, fancy,” Jimmy commented over the radio; Ash listened with one ear, the other on the sound of the engine.

She smoothly cornered the monster around the next three turns, and got to the longer turn. Stepping on the gas, she drifted around the last turn, accelerating out into the straights back to the finish line.

“*Real* fancy. I can’t even drift that last one half the time. You really are the King.”

“Yeah, Ash! You’re doing awesome!” Jenny said.

“I wish I could drift half as well as you can,” Emily laughed over the radio.

Ash put the hammer down, racing for the finish line. “Hey, you want another run solo? If you get a rolling start from sixty, I can officially enter it for the time trials. You could place high in our production car tables in that Monster.”

“Okay... why not?” Ash laughed, and slowed down as she approached the finish/start line.

“Okay, this one’s for real. When you see green, step on it and don’t look back.”

“Right!” She hovered the car at 60 mph.

“Okay, that’s good, that’s good. I’ve got your lead-in on my radar gun, you’re golden, King.”

Jimmy was aiming a radar gun at her car, and Jenny was standing ready with the green flag. She hauled back as Ash approached the checkered line, and really threw her all into waving it.

Ash floored and the Monster roared as she soared down the speedway. She grinned, putting her all into it. She drifted the Monster through the chicanes, and the first hard turn. She kept the run up, her

wheels screeching on tarmac as she roared back down the opposite line, like a blur. It was exhilarating. She was almost in a trance as she slid smoothly through the return curves, flooring it again.

“Don’t let off till you see the checkered flag, King, you’re almost home!”

Emily was waiting with the checkered flag on top of the tower, with Jimmy and Jenny. She hauled back. The Monster roared over the line, and the flag waved. Ash let off the engine, bringing the car back to a stop in her pit, with a laughing fit of adrenaline.

“*Nicely* done, King. You placed fifth, *ever*, in all non-pro car times!”

“Heh... What’s my time?”

“Two minutes twenty.”

Ash laughed. “Who’s ahead of me?”

“Just me, a couple friends of mine, and the Kamikaze. Turn your car off, kid. Let’s get you refueled.”

Ash shut off the Monster XR, laughing and getting out. She sat against the side of the car, the smell of burnt rubber thick and pleasant—to her, anyway—as Jimmy, Emily, and Jenny ran towards her. Jimmy was carrying a PDA, which he handed her.

“Here, input your name and car type.”

Ash typed in ‘XR4Ti Ash’ for the name, and ‘Mercur Custom’ for the car type.

“XR4Ti Ash, eh? Don’t want people to know your real name?”

“Nah. Plus, I always sign that way when I’m showing off my driving. Hey, Kate’s been here?”

“Yeah. She’s placed second. Use to be first, but a friend of mine with a *really* expensive car spent a week straight until he beat her record by a few seconds yesterday. It won’t last, though. She’ll probably show up sometime in the next month after I e-mailed her.”

“What makes you say that?”

“She set that record in only three runs.”

Ash laughed, sighing. “Sounds like Kate, all right. Emily, you up?”

“You betcha! I’m definitely not passing this one up.”

She ran to her car, and Ash stood up, stretching. “Dibs on the checkered flag this time.”

“All right,” Jenny replied, as Jimmy led them back to the tower, climbing the stairs ’round the back.

Emily was directed to the starting line. She handled the car smoothly on her opening run, though she babied it around the turns for the second, slowing down to no more than the original sixty.

Ash shook her head. “You’ll have to do better than that, Em! Don’t baby it!”

“I’m trying not to. It’s just...”

“No. No ‘it’s just’. There’s only ‘do’ or ‘don’t’, and I *know* you can do!”

Ash could hear determination in Emily’s voice as she was pulling to the second set of corners, saying, “Okay. Okay!”

Jimmy smirked, laughing at Ash. “Nice pep-talk there, Yoda. Maybe they oughta call you the Jedi Master of the mountain.” Ash laughed softly, staring out through the binoculars—Emily was racing into the turns. “She’s going eighty... Eighty-five... She’s not babying it.” Jimmy was two-handing the radar gun at the far-off red Porsche, and the tires squealed. “Not quite a drift but *close enough!*” Jimmy laughed, as Ash watched Emily slide the Porsche around the curve, and into the second, third, and fourth. She pulled back into the straight to head back to the starting line. “You ready for the time trial, Blues?”

“Err, yeah. No, wait, no, I’m not. Damn. She’s almost on empty.”

“No problem, pull into the pits. We’ll fill you up with high-test.”

“All right.” Emily parked the Porsche in the pits, and Jimmy ran down, filling her up.

Ash handed the green flag to Jenny as they stood atop the tower, looking about. It was a bright, dry day at a motor speedway that she had to herself and her friends.

“*Life is good, today! Friday may be doom, but I’m going to enjoy this!*” she thought to herself, as Jimmy climbed back to the tower.

“Okay, Blues. Turn around and go down the speedway, then get yourself a rolling start to sixty.”  
“Right!”

Emily rolled down the speedway in reverse, and turned around, hard. The Porsche 996 faced the start line and accelerated toward it. Ash watched with the binoculars as Jenny waited on the green flag.

“Okay, okay... yeah, you’re golden, Blues, that’s a perfect sixty! Go!”

Jenny waved the green flag, and Emily floored it. Ash spied her face through the helmet and the windshield, and grinned. “Go for it, Em.”

Emily was definitely going for it; she pushed the Porsche into a proper drift around the first turn of the first set of switchbacks, and squealed around the rest, sliding the car’s back end out. She smoothly negotiated the turns and floored it again, Ash’s eyes locked on the red Porsche 996 through the binoculars. She managed to cut the chicanes smoothly, almost as smooth as a straight line.

Jimmy whistled. “She’s going a hundred fifteen. That’s a fast car.”

Emily repeated the drift and slide-turns through the far set of twists, and accelerated hard coming out of the last turn.

Ash picked up the checkered flag, leaning over the side of the tower as Emily took the chicanes smoothly again. The red car roared down the track, and she hauled the flag back, throwing her full strength into waving the flag up and down as Emily soared across the finish line.

“Two minutes twenty-nine. That’s impressive. That car is stock, right?”

Ash answered, “Straight stock.”

“Niiice. That places you tenth in our overall non-Pro, and second in the stock car lists, Blues.”

Emily sounded giddy, laughing over the radio, as Ash ran down the tower to the pit she parked in. Emily was no sooner out than Ash was hugging her, laughing and saying, “You did *great!*”

Emily hugged her back, pressing their helmets together. “That felt awesome!”

They parted, and Ash laughed, pulling her helmet off, with a grin. “I knew the speed bug had you!”

Emily smiled softly, shyly. “Yeah, well... thanks to you, Ash.”

Ash felt like kissing her; she probably would have, if not for Jimmy’s obnoxious voice. “Hey, do you two want to race, or are you havin’ a moment heah?!”

Ash blushed, and hid it with a scowl, turning around. “We were having a moment.”

“Yeah... Race? Don’t give me anything less than your best, Ash, or I’ll be very upset!”

“That’s *my* line!”

Ash made a run for the Monster XR, pulling her helmet back on, while Emily pulled open the door to the Porsche again. Ash heard the Porsche start as she was buckling in, and started the Monster as Emily was driving past her, to the starting line.

“All right, ladies, how do you wanna do this? One lap or two?”

“Two works for me. Em?”

“Two’s fine.”

“Right, then. Pull up to the starting line.”

Ash pulled the Monster XR up, on the outside lane. She looked left, and Emily looked right, giving her a thumbs-up. Ash gunned the Monster’s engine; Emily responded by gunning the Porsche.

“When you see green, go. Three. Two. One.” Jenny waved the green flag as hard as she could, while Jimmy yelled, “Go!”

Ash floored the gas and the Monster’s engine roared, pushing her forward. She shifted into second, and looked at her mirrors. Emily was falling back, but not very fast. Ash grinned, then blinked as Emily tapped the brakes, smoothly falling back. “You’re not quitting on me yet, are you?”

“Quitting? I’m drafting!”

The Porsche slid smoothly into her rear view mirror, and Ash rolled her eyes, laughing. It wasn’t a bad plan; the Monster had superior acceleration thanks to the tuned Ford V8 under the hood, but it also had a huge aerodynamic profile. Sliding into the slipstream coming from the Monster, Emily was basically stealing all of Ash’s acceleration advantage for herself.

They hit the chicanes, and Ash skirted the red-and-white striped edges of the tarmac close to the grass, straightening and smoothening the actual line, but Emily held the drift through it.

“You’re not going to be able to hold that through the curves, Em.”

“I don’t have to.”

The Porsche’s engine roared, and Emily slid smoothly to the inside, passing her as they headed into the turns. Ash snarled, hitting the brakes as Emily pushed the Porsche into a drift. Ash couldn’t really pass—safely, anyway—and so wound up trying to pass on the shorts leading up to the curves. It didn’t work, but she blasted pass as they narrowed out to the straights, the Porsche having lost too much speed to the turns.

“Mmm. She’s got the right idea, but that engine’s too limited to accelerate fast enough,” Jimmy commented.

“I’m not out of this yet.” She flat floored the Porsche behind Ash, and the shift sounds changed. “Let’s just put this thing in override mode.”

Calling her own shift points instead of letting the automatic do it, Emily accelerated harder, and combined with Ash’s slipstream, gained on Ash as the cars barreled down the track opposite the starting line. This time Ash entered the turns first, and she drifted hard into the first turn—but so did Emily. It was really quite thrilling, watching that red Porsche drift into her line of rear-view sight and accelerate towards her as she was setting up for the next turn. Emily, however, was watching carefully; knowing Ash’s lines let her use them as a baseline for her own, and she managed to not *lose* any distance, at least.

“So, you wants to play, mmm?” Ash pushed down on the gas as she accelerated back into the straight, followed by Emily. The Porsche probably had a slightly higher top speed, but the straights weren’t long enough for that to really play decisively. The green flag waved as she passed over the finish line, followed by Emily.

“Lap two! The King’s in the lead by two seconds.”

Ash wasn’t about to give up the lead, but she didn’t have much of a choice. Emily blew past her going into the turns—tires squealed and wheels turned, as the Monster and the Porsche blew around the first of the switches, but Emily had her lines dialed in. Ash couldn’t pass, even though she tried on the third, but she came out of the last turn dead on Emily’s bumper.

“And in a surprise turnaround, Blues is leading coming out of the first switches!”

Ash grinned. “Two can draft, Em.” With the Porsche ahead of her disrupting the air and giving her a slipstream, the Monster’s V8 pushed it easily. She tried to pass on the inside of the chicane, driving entirely on the red and white stripes, but Emily did the same on the second, leaving them in a dead heat as they barreled towards the final turns, with Ash on the outside.

“Ho-Ho! This could be good. Better get out my camera.”

Ash grinned, licking her lips. She might need a mistake to make this one—ah! The mistake was made! Emily couldn’t get the Porsche to drift in the tight space between the side of the track and the Monster, and she had to slow down hard to make the turn. The red car fell behind the gray Monster, and Ash took the lead, accelerating away. The red car followed her through each turn, gaining because Emily somehow managed to stay in her slipstream through the rest of the turns.

“Nice!” Ash called out, stomping the gas as they hit the final straightaway.

“I’m not done yet,” Emily called back.

The red Porsche roared right in behind her, and Ash scowled. She cut close to the chicane again. *Too close!* Her front-right tire ate grass, and she erked as the difference in surface caught her off-guard. She avoided a spin, but it slowed the Monster, and Emily popped off to the other side, the Porsche’s engine roaring.

“*Oh no. Oh no you don’t!*” Ash thought.

Ash floored it—Porsche and Merkur roared, and Jimmy laughed. “You taught her *too* well, King! Looks like it’s gonna be a photo finish after all!”

Ash glanced to her left—Emily was almost hunched over the steering wheel, focused dead ahead. Ash’s eyes returned to the track, and she floored it, letting the engine drift into the redline a bit before shifting down to fourth.

Then they were over the finish line, and she could almost hear the “Ca-CHICK!” of the camera, Jenny waving the checkered flag like a maniac.

“Holy hell, that was *incredible*,” Jenny shouted.

“Yeah, it was. The winner by a front quarter panel—The King!”

Ash and Emily slowed the cars, bringing them to a stop in the pits, with Jimmy and Jenny running towards them. She shut her car off and unbuckled, getting out. Emily came running towards her, and she caught her in a hug and a laugh, adrenaline and endorphins running through her. They hugged, tightly.

Then Jimmy belted up, laughing and holding his PDA, which had the digital image on it. Emily’s bumper was ahead of Ash’s front wheel-well, but Ash was over the finish line first. “That was an incredible run. You were ahead by about a hundredth of a second.”

Ash pulled her helmet off, laughing, the wind running over her hot head. Emily pulled hers off as well, heaving and laughing. “Well, we *definitely* know the Porsche is working at a hundred and ten percent!”

Ash laughed, and lay back against her car, holding a hand over her heart. “I thought for sure you had me there.”

“I thought I did, too!” Emily smirked, and closed her eyes. “Whew... I need to calm down... Heheh.”

Ash laughed softly, and smiled. “How fast were we going, anyway?”

“My radar gun had you going at about a hundred and thirty. The whole run took four minutes fifty.”

“Nice...” Ash grinned, and Emily chuckled.

“Uh-oh.” Jenny spoke up. “Your boss is headed this way, and he doesn’t look happy.”

“Fitz?”

The race coordinator was approaching them from a door next to the vehicle gate, Ash’s and Jenny’s mothers flanking him. They looked... shocked. Mr. Fitzgerald looked furious, however.

“Uh-oh. I’ve seen that look on his face before. That’s his ‘I told you to do something and then you did it and now I’m angry about it’ look. You girls go and run to your parents, I’ll deal with Fitz. Just play it cool.”

“Hey, Fitz!” Jimmy yelled, walking towards the approaching trio; Ash, Emily, and Jenny followed. “You shoulda seen these girls out here, they drive better than you do! They both placed!”

Ash’s mom ran ahead of Mr. Fitzgerald and Jenny the Elder. As Mr. Fitzgerald and Jimmy started to talk, escalating into heated tones, her mother held her shoulders, staring into her eyes. “Ash, are you crazy?”

“Uh, no.”

“Is that how you normally drive?”

“No? Just when I’m racing. I told you that already, didn’t I?”

Her mother shook her head, ignoring the *déjà vu*. “I can’t believe you *did* something like that. And Emily, too. You two could’ve been hurt!”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Mrs. Upton, we were *fine*. Ash knows what she’s doing, and she’s the one who’s teaching me. I had the car under control every single second.”

Ash’s mom looked back and forth between them, as if she wanted to yell at them—she settled for hugging them both, tightly. “My heart was in my throat when I saw your cars going sideways.”

Ash eked at the hug, which was crushing her chest, but Emily elaborated. “That’s called drifting. We did it on purpose. It saves speed going around a corner.”

“You two do such crazy things...” She pressed her lips to Ash’s forehead. “Was it worth it?”

“Are you kidding? This is quite possibly one of the coolest things I’ve ever done.”

“No! Absolutely not! If the insurance company hears of this, it’s our heads!” Mr. Fitzgerald’s exclamation drowned out Ash’s mother’s response, and the three turned to look at them.

“Fitz, stop yellin’ at me. I did just what you said: you told me to take ’em out here, let them qualify, and then if they weren’t likely to get killed, let ’em race.”

“I had no idea they had cars that fast or could drive them the way they did!”

“Oh, so it’s okay to let unskilled girls drive unprepared vehicles around the track, but when they’re proper drivers and have good cars, it’s not?”

“Yes! I didn’t think they’d get faster than sixty!”

Ash rolled her eyes, and Jimmy shook his head—he *literally* put his foot down, raising it and dropping it. “Fitz, I put up with a lot of your crap around here ’cause I like the course, but I’m not gonna put up with being yelled at for doing *exactly* what you told me to do. You told me to qualify them and let them race, so I did.”

Mr. Fitzgerald looked quite upset at being told off. “I can find another race boss, you know!”

“No, Fitz, you can’t. We both know I’m the only schmuck around who’d take your crap for the crap you pay me. And if you fire me for doing just what you told me to do, I’ll tell *everybody*. Nobody’ll work for you again.”

The argument looked like it was about to escalate, and Ash nudged her mother; her mother nodded, interrupting the fight with an “A-Hem!” She stalked towards the fight—Mr. Fitzgerald turned to her, while Jimmy scooted out of the way. “Am I understand, Mr. Fitzgerald, that you are given to renegeing on agreements and arrangements because they turn out to not suit you?”

“Uh... no, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“It sounds like you’re saying ‘I told you something would happen, and then it turned out somehow I didn’t expect, and I’m trying to change things in mid-flow’. That’s not the kind of thing we like to hear when we’re currently in the middle of arranging a huge media event that’s already been announced.” She waited a beat. “That’s not what you’re saying, is it, Mr. Fitzgerald?”

“No, of course.”

“Good.” Ash’s mother smiled at him. “Is there anything else?”

“No... I need to talk to the caterers. Excuse me.” Mr. Fitzgerald turned and left.

Jimmy laughed. “Hah! That was a good one, lady. I’ve never seen him backpedal so fast. Anyway, I doubt he’s gonna let us run any more today, so I’m gonna go pack everything up and open the gate. Good meetin’ y’all.”

Ash chuckled, then she frowned. “Where’s Jenny?”

“I’m behind you.” Ash looked around—Jenny was standing next to her mother, smiling at the display. “That was funny. But I think we should probably get out of here before Mr. Fitzgerald finds another excuse to get mad at us.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Come on, Jenny, we need to get this deal sorted,” Marie said.

“Hmmp,” replied the elder Jenny, but she followed Ash’s mother anyway.

Jenny was the first to ask, “Well, what now?”

“I dunno. My mom’s home?”

“I’m hungry, but... hell, I don’t even feel like going to Marco’s.”

Emily grinned. “Oooh, Ale House!”

Ash brightened. “Good idea.”

“All right. And what then?” Jenny asked.

Ash shrugged, which made Emily grin. “*Welllll*, since we have this party thing Friday, I guess we teach Ash to walk in heels *now*.”

Ash groaned, despair sinking in. “You’re evil. You know that?”

“Dead man walkin’!” Emily and Jenny shared a laugh as Ash sighed, hanging her head and walking back to the Monster XR.

On The Highway, Passing Truro, 2:39 PM

“Mmm... That was *awesome*, wasn't it?” Jenny grinned at Emily who returned the grin, her hands firmly around the Porsche's wheel.

“You have *no* idea. It was *incredible*.”

“Better than sex?” Jenny's retort was meant as a tease, but Emily's face became poker. “Er... bad topic? Something change between that night and today?”

“No... no, nothing changed. It's... it's different. Context.”

“Oh... Ooooh, okay, dropping that subject.”

“Thanks,” Emily murmured. She looked ahead at Ash's orange hair visible through the rear window of the Monster XR.

“So, it was good? Driving like that?”

“Yeah. Yeah it was. It really, really was.” She grinned again, remembering. “It was incredible.”

“I wish I could've gotten a drive.”

“Sorry. Maybe next time?”

“Maybe... Will you two... you know... show me how to drive like you do?”

“I... Well, why not? You'd need a real car, though. Or to get that convertible claptrap of yours turned into a real car, but I wouldn't hope for anything from it.”

“What's wrong with it?”

“The Lexus SC is a convertible. That's a death knell right there.”

“Um...”

“You're wondering why?” Jenny nodded. “All right. For one thing, I already explained power-to-weight to you, right?”

“Well... not so I understood it.”

“All right. Um... Okay, do you know what I mean when I say the difference between power and speed?” Jenny nodded in response. “Okay. Well, it's simple. The less weight you have to move, the more effect power gets you. This car can drive strong with one or even two people in it. But if you chained another car to the frame, it would move a lot slower, right?”

“Yeah. Ash explained this already, with how a bulldozer can pull five tons and a car won't.”

“Well, sort of. Anyway, cars do have weight. The less weight you have, the higher your horsepower-per-ton ratio is. The higher the ratio is, you can get the same performance with less power, or more performance with the same power.”

“Okay... yeah, I understand that. Less weight, means the car moves faster and responds better, right?”

“Yep. Well, convertibles are a lot heavier than normal hardtops. The machinery to do the conversion is really, *really* heavy, and your Lexus SC is a metal hardtop convertible, which means it has all the weight of a normal hardtop, plus the convertible equipment. And worse, chopping the top off of a car wrecks its rigidity.”

“Rigidity? My car doesn't twist, you know. It's solid.”

“You wouldn't notice it. Look, the top of the car is part of the frame; it adds structural integrity. When you simply chop the top off, you seriously compromise that structural framework. This is bad in and of itself, since a powerful enough engine can actually make a car's frame twist. It can even make one wheel come off if it twists the car enough. But even more, to restore rigidity, most manufacturers simply weld on long steel beams to the bottom of the frame, which, you can guess...”

“Is heavy as hell.”

“Right! Some convertibles can be okay—a Miata, for one. The ones that are designed from the ground-up as convertibles, instead of being chopped-off normal cars, can have rigid framework without chop-job steel beams, but the conversion equipment is still heavy.”

“Okay... Hm. Crap. So my car...”

“Would not be a good choice for the Mountain, or the Track.”

“Hmmm... How am I going to talk my mom into buying me *another* new car?”

“It doesn’t *have* to be new, you know. The car Ash is driving? It’s almost as old as she is. And my 240SX was built in ninety-four.

Jenny looked scandalized. “You own cars more than ten years old?”

“Well, yeah. My 240SX wasn’t the fastest car around when I got it, but Ash and I have done a lot of work on it, and I had a turbo installed. She’s pretty fast now, and handles like a dream... Not nearly as fast as this Porsche, true, but it does handle better.”

“Huh... so... if I sold my Lexus... what would you recommend?”

“Depends on how much you’re talking about, Jenny. I got my 240SX on the cheap, but I had to do a lot of work to it. Watch out, if the tuner bug bites you, you’re going to be spending a *lot* of money on your baby.”

“Huh... so...”

“Well, buy used, Jenny. You can get a fast car at a discount price, and stuff reputation. If you’re serious about driving, your reputation comes from your performance, not whether you bought your ride new or used.”

“Okay, okay. Say I could offload my Lexus for... I dunno, eighteen, nineteen grand. I could probably come up with another five, if I begged my mom and pointed out the fact that I make as much doing shoots for her as she makes doing corporate work.”

“About twenty five grand? You want an oh-two Nissan 350Z. Well, *I* would want it, I can’t tell you what to want.”

“What else could I get?” Emily shrugged.

“Depends on what you like in a car. Ash worships handling over raw horsepower, which is understandable since we race on the Old Road on the Mountain near Tempest. That kind of rubs off on me, too. I guess you could get something like a Ford Mustang GT, a Mitsubishi 3000GT—one of Ash’s friends drives one. They’re also sold as a Dodge Stealth, if you want an American name.”

Jenny hrmmed. “Dodge... Don’t they make a car called the Viper?”

“The Dodge Viper SRT-10, yes. You’re way off on the price range, though.”

“By how much?”

“Four times what we’re talking. They sell at about a hundred grand.”

Jenny winced at that. “This is so confusing. How do you keep this all straight in your head?”

“You just... Well, you just *do*. Look, I got an idea. I don’t think you’d pick it up from reading a textbook like I did, but how about a magazine? We can drop by a convenience store on the way back, buy a copy of Motor Trend or something.”

“All right. Do you think that will help?”

“It will, I think.”

“Thanks. Hey, Ash is putting her helmet back on.”

Emily peered ahead and indeed, her orange-haired tuner was putting her helmet on. Emily reached into the back, but Jenny had gotten there first, and pulled their helmets out of the boxes. She helped Emily put hers on, and put her own on.

“This is convenient,” Ash’s voice came over the radio connection.

Jenny giggled. “A lot better than driving on a cell phone, for sure.”

“Okay. Anyway, what’s the plan? Ale House then home for the torture?”

“Actually, I was thinking we could stop by a convenience store first. I want to get a magazine.”

“Okay. What for?”

“It’s a surprise. Tell you when we get there, okay?”

“Okay... This should be good.”

“I think you’ll like it.”

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 4:13 PM

*Click. Click. Click.* Ash wobbled with each step. “I feel ridiculous,” she complained.

“Well, you *look* ridiculous too, wearing a pair of your mother’s heels with your normal get-up. Still, *balance* is important, not looking good here.”

From the table, Jenny chuckled softly. “Yep. Looking good is important on *Friday*, so getting your balance tonight is important. You don’t want to have to hang off your date’s arm all night like last time, do you?”

“Ugh...” Ash scowled, grabbing the refrigerator door’s handle to hold onto as she slowly turned around, glaring at Jenny. “I’d just as soon do *without* a date, to be honest.”

“It’s kind of a prerequisite. You get used to it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of...”

“Why are you worried, anyway? You’re almost certain to get Kay Wheeler again. He and your mom are thick as thieves.”

Ash scowled. “I dunno. Besides, I was gonna ask my mom to send him with Emily.”

Emily’s eyes half-lit up, and she blushed slightly.

Ash grinned. “Ahh. Still crushing over him?”

“Maybe a teensy bit,” Emily admitted, holding up her thumb and finger about a millimeter apart.

“He’s *totally* uninterested,” Jenny interjected.

“I know. It’s just...” She pulled out a seat, sighing, as Ash slowly walked towards the other side of the room. “Hell, I mean, I even have Ash and all, and I’d never want anyone else, but... but... y’know, he was like, my *idol* when I was an adolescent.”

“What kind of girl actually calls herself at a younger age an adolescent?” Jenny asked.

“What kind of girl reads *Motor Trend*?” Ash pointed at the magazine in Jenny’s hand. “And what kind of girls race cars they wrench on themselves?” She jerked a thumb at herself, with a pinkie pointing at Emily.

Jenny laughed, putting the magazine down. “Okay, okay, you’ve made your point.”

“Say,” Ash said, feeling as though a light bulb had snapped on in her head. “Why can’t *we* go together?” She waggled the thumb and pinkie. “Me and Emily. That would let you take Kay, right?”

Jenny smirked, shaking her head. “Doesn’t work that way. For one thing, I thought you still hadn’t come out to your mom?”

Ash blushed, as she grabbed the sink. “Oh *yeah*... that.”

“It’s not so bad. If you’re lucky, you’ll get someone who’s as boring and vapid as, well... me, and you can lose him pretty easily, especially if you start talking ‘car’ while popping open the hood of something nice.”

“All right. I guess I’ll try that.”

“Just put on a smile for the cameras. It can be a pain, but...” Jenny grinned. “I guess I’d better teach you two to do that, too. Need a mirror...”

“Oh Jeez,” Ash complained, realizing it was going to be a *long* day...

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 6:03 PM

“How come you two get to play and I’m still stuck walking around in these damn things?” Ash grouched as she walked—actually walked—across the living room, behind the couch. Meanwhile Emily and Jenny, who had taken to using a Nissan 350Z and Ford Mustang GT in the game respectively, roared through another circuit of Bayview’s highway, Jenny in the lead.

“Because both of us know how to walk in heels, and if you fall, you’ll look stupid,” Emily replied with a giggle, as she slid next to Jenny’s rear quarter panel. Although Jenny let out a cry of indignation and attempted to evade, she couldn’t prevent herself from being spun out by Emily’s PIT maneuver, and T-Boned by a box van to boot. The car and van flew, and Emily soared on ahead with a laugh.

Ash shook her head, sighing and walking to the stairs, and back to the kitchen door. “I hate the weird way I have to walk in these. It makes my ass bump.”

“That’s the *point*, Ash. They’re *supposed* to make you walk sexily.”

Ash heaved out a sigh. “I know, I know. It doesn’t make it not stupid. Shove over,” she murmured, and Emily squished into Jenny, letting Ash sit where she was. “You like the Mustang, eh?”

“It’s sluggish getting up to speed, but I love the way it looks and sounds.”

“Did you fill it with sound stuff?”

“Uh, yeah?” Jenny replied.

“That could be why...” She loaded her own Mustang—carbon fiber *everything*, and absolutely no extraneous visual parts. “Let’s go.”

“You’re on,” Jenny smirked, as the race started again.

Engines roared as the cars burnt off the starting line, and the pair were off. Jenny was getting better, but she wasn’t good enough to seriously challenge Ash. By the time Ash’s mom got home, the scores were seven for Ash, five for Emily, and four for Jenny. Ash handed her controller off to Jenny as the door opened, getting up and letting Emily and Jenny duel as she opened the door.

Her mother huffed in, carrying a number of large, heavy bags, shaking her head. “Whew. It’s getting colder and windier out there. We might have a white Christmas after all, at this rate.”

“That’s good,” Ash smiled, shutting the door for her mother, who walked straight into the kitchen to drop her things.

“Ah... Anyway, I called the insurance company and the DMV today, and... Are you wearing my heels?”

Emily snickered from the couch as Ash answered. “Uh, yeah. I’ve been practicing in them all afternoon.”

Her mother brightened into a broad smile, and laughed. “That’s good! That’s very good.” She grinned, and sat in the recliner, with a sigh.

Ash sat back on the couch, sighing. “These things are really uncomfortable.”

“Yeah... They’re made that way. You get used to it.”

Ash scowled at that thought, which got another laugh from her mother. “Let me guess, you’d rather wear drag if given the choice?” Ash flushed furious red, and her mother grinned. “Some girls can pull off the suit and tie look really well. Still, I’ve already got some dresses on the line.”

Ash sighed, which provoked another giggle from Emily, as she soared over the finish line, with Jenny quite literally on her bumper. “Oh really? Is it red?”

“In fact it is. Hers is, anyway. Yours is blue and white.”

“Did you see what I’ve got?”

“Unfortunately, no. Your mother’s guarding it like the goose that laid the golden egg. I do have it on good authority that it is white, though.”

“Oh really? That’s good.”

“*Yep. This is gonna be a lonng couple of days,*” Ash thought. “What were you saying about the DMV, mom?”

“Oh, right! Yes, I called the insurance company and told them that I need to insure a car again, and told the DMV about how you fixed a car that was totaled out and that I needed to know what would need to be done. The DMV says they’ll have an inspector look it over when I bring it in and can issue new plates, but I haven’t heard back from the insurance company. I think we might manage to squeeze that in tomorrow.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“So, anybody thought about dinner yet? Any ideas?”

“We could get a pizza somewhere.”

“That sounds good. Or I could cook.”

“*Maybe not such a bad night after all...*”

Marie wound up cooking, and the rest of the night was mainly spent with Ash grumbling under the tutelage of her mother and Jenny, being coached in how to walk in heels. Emily already knew, but both of them needed to be coached to put on a smile while they were feeling angry or miserable.

“I think she’s got it,” Marie had exclaimed, when she saw Ash smiling at the refrigerator while they were coaching Emily. It was exhausting, and it made her angry, but at least when it was over, sometime near nine, she had collapsed onto the couch gratefully, kicking the heels off. Emily and Jenny had packed in on either side of her, and they played Need for Speed until ten.

Jenny had asked to stay again, but was foiled when her mother called her cell phone, demanding she come home. She did, leaving Emily and Ash to go to bed, promising to return to coach them again the next day.

#### Ash And Emily’s Bedroom, Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 11:59 PM

“Ash?”

Ash had just finished pulling her shirt off. She looked over at Emily, who had already gotten her bra off, and was sitting on the side of the bed. “Yeah, Em?”

Emily’s cool fingers wrapped around Ash’s upper arm. “Thank you, Ash. I had fun today.”

Ash smiled in return, reaching behind herself and unclasping the bra; she dropped it, hardly bothering to disdain it even, and sat next to Emily, who leaned into her. “I’m glad,” she murmured, wrapping her hand around Emily’s shoulders. Her blue-haired friend and lover smiled, closed her eyes, and reached over to turn off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

“Mmmm. I’m so glad,” she repeated, leaning into Emily, inhaling with her nose buried in Emily’s blue hair, and sighing happily. “God, my feet hurt, though.”

“Lie back.”

“Hmmm?”

Emily’s hand pressed into the center of Ash’s chest, gently pushed her back, and Ash lay back on the bed without complaint. She heard Emily stand, and the rustle of her pulling her pants off. Then Emily’s fingers found the waistband of Ash’s jeans, and pulled them off her (her panties as well) in one fell pull.

“Em?” Ash blinked, and gasped when Emily’s fingers touched her feet. She knew she was blushing, as Emily started to rub.

She murmured, “Tell me if I’m hurting you, please...”

Ash trembled, and let out a quiet moan. “A-Ah... that...”

“Does it hurt?” Emily’s voice was filled with apprehension, and Ash moaned again.

“No... it’s... good,” she murmured, and Emily giggled. The bed shifted as Emily sat on it, and Ash laid her head back into the pillow.

“Wh-Why are you?”

“Aren’t I allowed?” Emily pinched her little toe.

“I never said that...”

“Then why ask?”

“I... um...”

Emily giggled before replying, “Because I want to. Because I love you. Because you’re my best friend, and my girlfriend. Besides, isn’t this the kind of thing you always imagined the girl should do for you?”

Her face flushed as she dwelled upon that thought. “Um... Jeez, you say it that way, it makes me feel like an ass.”

Emily giggled, reached up and lightly swatted Ash’s hip. “Ash, you *are* an ass... when you start trying to be macho and stuff. I like it when you *don’t* try. When you just *do*, when you’re so stupidly noble without posing or posturing. Like when you picked up that crowbar, or the way you drove so

fast, even when there was an inch of actual ice on the ground, when you thought we were going to be late and you wanted to get me...”

“I honestly thought you were going to yell at me about that,” Ash murmured back, as Emily laced her fingers into Ash’s toes.

“No, Ash. I thought about it, but... you know, we rub off on one another. And I like that...” She laughed, and crawled up Ash, lying atop her, one of her legs between Ash’s, her breasts pressed pleasantly into the tuner’s, their faces so close. Ash kissed her, softly, and Emily smiled back, visible in the pale moonlight.

“I’m not supposed to like that kind of thing, you know. You riding to my rescue like some kind of orange knight. But I do. It’s so...” She shook her head, and curled her arms on Ash’s chest, above her breasts, laying her chin on her forearm. Ash wrapped her arms around Emily in return, one hand in the small of her back, the other between her shoulder blades.

“What is it?”

“It’s so *you*, Ash. You can be annoying, when you’re trying to assert your machoness and masculinity, but when you don’t try...” She leaned in, kissing Ash’s cheek, softly. “You’re capable of such bizarre extremes, Ash. There have been times you’ve frustrated me, or pissed me off so much that I didn’t want to see you. And now... there’s now.”

Ash put a hand in Emily’s hair, gently cupping her head. “I... Do I make you happy, Em?”

“Yes, you do. Knowing you, being your friend, your lover... Ash, it feels like you’ve awakened something in me.”

“I have.”

“Hmm?” Emily tilted her head, and Ash smiled.

“Whenever you’re with me... Well, you’ve braver, more assertive. You’re willing to take bigger risks than I think you would have before the Misfile, Emily.”

“Like getting in your mother’s Porsche and standing next to you on the start?”

“Exactly. Your cornering’s come a long way since September, too.”

“Yeaaaah. Thanks to you, and all those nights on the Mountain.”

She leaned in, nipping at Ash’s ear, causing the tuner to sigh, happily.

“You can do this, Emily.”

“Do what?”

“Race. Tune. You’re *good* at it. I’ll be disappointed if you *don’t* take King of the Mountain.”

Emily snickered softly. “And I’ll be disappointed if you don’t beat Kate.”

“Some day I will. I just need to get more speed out of the Monster XR...”

“What about... another car, Ash?” Ash scowled, and Emily grinned. “I love the Monster XR as much as you do, Ash. But you’ve put a five-liter V8 in it and it still can’t catch her.”

Ash shrugged her shoulders, and leaned up, rubbing her cheek on Emily’s. “I think I could’ve beat her, if I could have just blocked her pass... But I don’t think I can get ahead again.”

“Why not?”

“I think her attention was... divided, that last race.”

“Hmmmph. Well, that settles it, then. We either have to do something to the Monster XR that’ll give it the power to catch Kate’s Jag, or we have to get you a faster car somehow.”

Ash snickered softly, and rolled to the side, kissing Emily’s lips, tenderly. “Heh... Listen to us; we’re naked in bed, and we’re talking about my car.”

Emily grinned, and she reached down, clasping her fingers into Ash’s. “I know. That makes me... hopeful, actually.”

“Why?”

“Because I know I love you. Because I know it’s not just another pointless teenage crush, like I had on Kay. We’re talking about the things that bring us together, and about each other, and not, you know, rushing to orgasm as fast as possible.”

Ash felt her cheeks blushing when Emily uttered the word ‘orgasm’, and she sighed, a bit unsettled. “Em... am I holding you back?”

“What? How do you mean?”

“I mean... um... are you... you know, ‘ready’, to go further, and I’m holding you back?”

“Ash, I’m *ready*, but I’m not impatient.” She rolled Ash onto her back, lying on her side against her, and Ash smiled when Emily caressed her stomach. “I know you’re nervous, Ash. I know you’re nervous about sex, and sexuality. And I know it must be terrifying for you, on some level.”

“It is.”

“Mmm.” Emily laid her head on Ash’s shoulder. “I... I wish I better understood how you’re handling, Ash. I just...” She blew her breath out, and sighed. “I lost two years, maybe an inch of height and maybe just a *bit* of cup size, but that was all. My body is basically the same now, at sixteen again, as it was when I was nearly eighteen. You not only lost a penis and two testicles, you *got* a new vagina, a new pair of breasts, and a brand-new bouquet of hormones you’ve never experienced before. I... I feel like I’m fumbling about, trying to help you through something I don’t quite understand.”

Ash smiled at Emily’s confession, and reached down, taking her hand and squeezing her fingers, which made Emily smile. “Emily, you’re more of a help than you know. You’re an *incredible* help to me, you’re... You’re the reason I survived the Misfile sane. Goodness knows I’d have murdered Rumisiel long ago if it was just me and him.” Emily giggled softly, and kissed Ash’s shoulder. “It’s... it’s scarier than going through puberty the first time, you know? Because now I’m in mid-lurch in an unfamiliar body, and once a month I bleed from the crotch and get emotions so strong...”

“Ash, are they really stronger? Or do you just have a harder time clamping down?”

The orange-haired tuner let out a chuff of air, looking up at the ceiling, then over to the side, over Emily’s shoulder, at the darkened night sky. “Honestly, Em, I don’t know... I... Aw, fuck.”

“What’s wrong?”

Ash groaned softly. “I’m an idiot, of course. I didn’t think we’d be over a week, so I...”

“Forgot to bring your pads, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Damn it, I’m due for that most *wonderful* of feminine features sometime next week, too.”

Emily nuzzled her head into Ash’s neck. “If it’s any consolation, I didn’t think to bring my tampons, either... And I’m due about the same time, too.”

“Huh... I guess I feel like I’m in good company, then.”

“Yep. We’re both chowder-heads, I guess... Mmmm. Creepy though it may be to discuss menstrual flow, I’ve gotta wonder... We started off-key, didn’t we? Staggered, as it were. Now we’re both in the same week. Do you think that effect where female roomies can get their periods at the same time is happening to us?”

Ash felt cooler—she went pale. “Ugh, I hope not...”

“Why is that?” Emily raised her head, sounding a bit miffed.

“No offense, but we can *both* get more than a little cranky... I don’t want to get all emo and yell something I’d regret at you, you know? And it would be doubly worse if we were both getting all angry at the same time.”

Emily smiled, and leaned over, tilting Ash’s head. Ash’s heartbeat sped up as Emily kissed her, slowly; she spread her lips when she felt Emily’s tongue on them, and trembled when she tasted her girlfriend’s tongue. The kiss parted, slowly, and Ash gasped softly at the sensation. “Mmmm... Mmmm, thank you.” She reached up, caressing Emily’s cheek, and Emily smiled back at her. Then she sighed, and rolled onto her back, laying her head on Ash’s shoulder again.

“I kind of envy you, too. I mean, I know that’s horrible to say and all... But you’ve been, well, both sides of the tracks. You can shed light on a lot of life and gender’s little mysteries, I bet.”

“Like what?”

“Well...” Emily sighed, softly, and smiled. “I dunno. I’d feel stupid asking. And it’s like... how can you answer my questions without a common frame of reference?”

“What are you trying to ask, Emily?”

Emily took in a breath. “Okay, in all *seriousness*, what’s different about orgasming as a girl as opposed to as a boy?”

“... Oh, Jeez... um... I dunno... The main thing that comes to my mind is that I never had a, you know, ‘wet’ dream before...” Ash felt her cheek—definitely hot. “That night, it was so... so strongly emotional. I felt so... so jealous about your date with Casper, I...” She bit her lip.

“You what, Ash?”

“I... Oh man, I’m gonna sound pathetic saying this. I cried myself to sleep.”

“You... Oh, oh Ash, why didn’t you *tell* me?”

“Because... because I knew you didn’t want it. Because I didn’t want to ruin our friendship. I...” She took in a shuddering breath. “I just cried there, thinking about you. And, well... I had that dream; I told you about it.” Emily nodded, and squeezed Ash’s hand, softly.

“Mmmm...” Emily murmured softly, and closed her eyes. “I... well, before I met you, I never had a sex dream that made me orgasm, but... I had ones that made me wake up really, really badly aroused.”

Ash hemmed softly; more than a little curious, titillated, and maybe aroused. “Like what?”

“Oh... heh, no... I can’t say; I’m too embarrassed.” Emily smiled, blushing warmly, and Ash grinned, leaning over, kissing her cheek. “That is how I... well... first started... you know...”

“Yeah... How, exactly?”

“Er... Ash, did you just ask me how I started... masturbating?” Emily sounded a bit incredulous; but her voice was also tinged with anticipation.

Ash looked to the side, and blushed. “Um... yeah, I did.”

“*Well...*” Emily blushed, and closed her eyes. “Um... okay. Jeez, um...” She nervously chuckled, and sighed. “Well, okay. Um... I was about fourteen or so. I forget when exactly, sometime slightly before my fourteenth birthday, I think. I’d read all the books, you know, like, years before, before I started really hitting puberty, even. I, um... I got excited one day, daydreaming up at that poster.” She rolled her head to the side. “And one word of this to Kay Wheeler, and I promise, I will never, *ever*, speak to you again.” Ash made a ‘zipping’ motion over her lips, and Emily nodded. “Thank you. So, I just got excited, so, um... I tried reading a novel to take my mind off it, but it had some... Well, the protagonist was a policewoman named Eve Dallas, and there were some *very* good scenes in it between her and her husband. It seemed like everywhere I turned almost, I was finding depictions of sex, and I was... Well, to tell the truth, I was going bonkers with desire, okay?”

Ash nodded, and Emily bit her lip. “So, well... I, um... researched the topic, you could say...”

“Right. On the Internet?”

“Yeah...” Emily sighed. “The topic of masturbation, I mean.”

“Wait, you were going stir-crazy horny, you had the whole Internet at your fingertips, and you actually *researched* how to masturbate?”

“Yes, yes I did, okay?”

Ash turned her head, nuzzling Emily’s cheek. “That’s my Emily.”

Emily blinked, and smiled at the soft, tender touch. “Okay, yeah...” She smiled, and slid her legs to the side, rubbing her foot on Ash’s; Ash rubbed back, and Emily let out a sigh, sinking her back into the bed, her head into Ash’s shoulder.

“So I got into the shower. You know how I showed you how to sit down in the shower and just relax?” Ash nodded. “Well, you see... I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how best to masturbate in the shower. If I had the bath on, it didn’t feel right, but I couldn’t... well, keep my balance standing upright. So I eventually sat down, but with the shower on. I laid back, started rubbing myself with my fingers...” She sighed, softly, after biting her lip.

“Was it... um...”

“Good? Yes, very.” Emily let out a slow shudder, biting her lip. “I... It took me a lot longer to start... to actually try a finger in myself, but... Yes, yes, it was good.”

Emily rolled to her side, looking into Ash's eyes. "What about you?"

"Me?" Ash gulped, audibly.

"Yeah. Will you tell me about *your* first time, um, self-discovering?"

"Oh god... I... I opened the door to that one, didn't I?"

"You opened it, held it, and said 'ma'am' as I walked in." Emily grinned, biting Ash's ear, which drew a moan from Ash.

"Okay, okay... um... phew... Okay." She took a deep breath. "I guess it started... about the same time? When I was mid-thirteen, towards fourteen? I, um... I'd gone a whole day in school, really, really horny. I kept having to carry my books in front of my crotch horny. I got home, I was going crazy, but I was in luck, dad was gone. I knew where he kept some dirty magazines, some Playboys. I, um..." Ash blushed hotly. "Well, I'd read those books too, I had a fairly good idea, you know? I found one of those girly mags, I took it to my bedroom... I..." She bit her lip, blushing hotly. "Well, you know... I started rubbing myself. It was scary at first, but got really good really quickly, and, well..."

"Wait, on your bed? No towels or..."

"Yeah, on my bed, no towels or anything. Yeah, I know, that was really shortsighted of me. I didn't think about what was going to happen."

"Heh... What'd you do?"

"Nothing at first, I was a bit freaked. I just... um... slept on the other side of the bed that night."

"Ew..."

"Hey, I didn't say anything mean about you."

"That's true. Sorry, Ash." Emily smiled sheepishly. "What'd you do?"

"I waited until the next morning and washed my sheets. I lied about having a wet dream."

"Oh..." Emily chuckled. "Wait, I thought you didn't sleep naked?"

"I didn't, not until these past few days. That's why I think my dad didn't believe me, but he didn't say a word."

Emily snickered softly. Then she grinned, nuzzling Ash's cheek. "So, were you cut or uncut?"

Perturbed, Ash blinked. "W-What's it matter to you?!" Her face burned, and Emily grinned.

"Heh, just wondering..."

Her blush lightening, Ash bit her lip. "Um... uncut. Why did you want to know?"

"Mmmmh. No clue... Maybe I wanted to give you a bit of a hard time..." She grinned, and Ash groaned.

"That was horrible."

Emily grinned even wider, kissing Ash's cheek, softly.

"So, um... If you do care, you must... um... have a preference?"

"Well, I've always thought uncut looked better... And I've read that the whole circumcision thing can bring a lot of problems."

"Heh..."

"You're biting your lip a lot. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay... I just..." She fidgeted, and Emily stroked her feet again, bringing a soft sigh.

"You're getting aroused from this talk?" Her tuner nodded, and Emily kissed her cheek. "You know... you could... well..."

Ash bit her lip, harder. "I tried once. Remember that time I mentioned I had a valid AdultCheck password? I tried... but I couldn't quite bring myself to touch. I just..."

"You're afraid it'll cost you *who* you are?"

"I was... Maybe I still am."

"I don't think it will, Ash. At first it might have, but now... I'm certain that *who* you are is inside you, and I don't mean hormonally or physiologically, either. You're Ash, and you're *mine*, and I'm yours. And I know you're strong, and noble, and mighty inside, Ash."

Ash smiled and turned her head. Their lips met, and Emily squeezed her hand.

“So... If you want to try, I’ll help you any way I can. If you don’t, I’ll wait, for as long as you need, and I don’t care what it costs me.”

“Costs you... Oh hell, I’m an *ass*.” Ash groaned, unpleasantly. “This talk has gotten you all bothered, hasn’t it?”

“I’d hardly call being aroused by talking about sexual exploration with my lover ‘bothered’, Ash... but yes, I am kind of hot,” Emily murmured.

“Yeah, you are, and beautiful, and sexy, and... Mmmm...” She closed her eyes as Emily kissed her, kissing back, warmly. “And you light my lips a tingle...” Ash smiled, and nuzzled Emily’s cheek.

“Does my kiss...”

“Yes, Ash. You feel like fireworks bursting in my chest.”

Ash closed her eyes. She bit her lip, and spread her legs, slowly sliding a hand down her stomach, laying it on her hips, above her mound. “Um...”

“Do you want me to show you what to do?”

“Wouldn’t that be creepy?”

“It would’ve been, months ago. Now?” She slid her hand down Ash’s arm, laying it over her hand. “Do you want to try this, Ash? Are you afraid?”

“Yes... And yes,” was the answer, and Ash kissed Emily’s cheek. “I’m more terrified than any time I’ve ever gone down the Mountain, by this, by you... Afraid I’ll make you unhappy, or hurt you, or do something phenomenally, *colossally* stupid that nobody who grew up a girl would do and make you hate me... Afraid I’m hurting you by being so neurotic...”

Emily bared her teeth, and rolled up, over, sitting on top of Ash, her legs splayed to either side. Ash blushed harder as she realized that Emily’s vagina was pressing into the back of her hand. She froze, petrified, as Emily leaned down, staring into her eyes. The bookworm’s were not hard, but very sincere, and very strong, as she began whispering.

“Ash, you are *not* hurting me. You *will not* and *cannot* hurt me by making a mistake. If I don’t like something, if something pains me, or you’re doing something in a way that I think I should tell you about, I *will* tell you, I promise. And I expect—I *demand* the same from you. Do you understand? If I’m hurting you, or making you uncomfortable, I *demand* to know, so I can stop.” She leaned in, pressing her lips to Ash’s cheek. “I know you’re still learning a lot of things about yourself. To be honest, so am I. We both need someone we can trust, and Ash, I trust you. Do you trust me to not get angry at you?”

Ash nodded, slowly. “Um, Em... you’re... um...” She bit her lip, and flexed her hand. A wave ran over Emily’s face, replacing her sincere, almost desperate face with one of ambivalent pleasure.

“Sorry,” she murmured, slipping off of Ash. “I didn’t even think...”

“That’s okay. I guess you really do trust me, don’t you?” Emily nodded, and Ash smiled. “You can... um... put your hand back on mine... If you maybe guide me, I think I can... try...”

Emily nodded, and put her head on Ash’s shoulder. “I don’t need to see. Do you?”

“I think it would be better if I didn’t, actually.”

Emily put her hand back on Ash’s, and she smiled, slowly sliding Ash’s hand down. Her fingers traced the contours, sliding slightly to the side. She felt Ash’s mound with her fingertips, alongside Ash’s—Ash gasped, biting her lip.

“Okay?”

“Yeah... I’ll be okay... It’s just...”

“Was it good?”

“What?”

“Touching me.”

“... Yeah. Yeah, it was.” Ash blushed harder, as Emily slid her hand down. Emily’s hand was distinctly cooler than hers, and Ash felt her lips and eyes tremble.

“Is this good, Ash?”

“I... Yes, but it’s... scary, too. Like, like I want to keep going, but a tiny part of my mind is throwing up a huge objection...”

“Do you want to?”

Ash nodded; Emily started to guide her hand up and down, pressing in gently. Stars blossomed behind her eyes, and Ash’s whole body trembled, arching. “A-Aaaaah!”

Emily smiled at the sound. “That was a good sound, wasn’t it?”

“Y-Yes... I... God, I haven’t felt this way in *so* long...”

Emily grinned, and kissed Ash’s cheek. “You know, the clitoris and the penis grow from more or less the same flesh. Does it... feel similar?”

Ash let out a soft, tense-with-pleasure laugh. “Always Emily, all the time...” She squeezed Emily’s other hand. “Something feels similar... straining... but I... I’m not sure what.”

“Is it this?” Emily’s fingertip stroked her, and Ash gasped, curling her hands and toes.

“Ah! God! That was... that was strong.”

Emily snickered softly in return, kissing her cheek. “That was just the top of the hood. You’ve got a really pronounced clitoral hood when you’re aroused.”

“Jeez, that wasn’t even...”

“Nope. It gets stronger.”

“God, I don’t think I’ll survive that...”

Emily smiled, and slid her hand down, further. Ash trembled as her lover stroked along her lips. Then it hit, as Emily’s fingertip gently tried to sink in. The Terror.

She cried out in fear, sitting up, curling. Emily’s hand was away from her before she got fully upright, and Emily was holding her from the side.

“Too far?”

“Too far!”

Ash trembled, her mind a chaotic wash of conflicting feelings: pleasure, the *desire* for the pleasure, her feelings for Emily, and the terrible fear, the terrible sense of alienation that had been suppressed for the most part.

“Oh... Oh, I... I feel so...” She let out a pure whine sound, and Emily squeezed her harder. “I feel like... like just after the Misfile. That... that brought it all back. The feeling of...”

“I’m sorry, Ash... God, can I help?”

Ash took a deep, shuddering breath, biting her lip, hard. Then she nodded, laying her head on Emily’s shoulder. Emily held her, tightly, kissing her cheek.

The feeling subsided after a minute or two; soon they lay back, Ash’s head on Emily’s shoulder.

“Gah... That ...”

“Are you okay, Ash?”

“... No, I’m not. I... I don’t like this feeling...”

“The... the arousal? The touch? Being in love?” Emily sounded afraid, but Ash shook her head.

“No, I love all of those. E-Especially being in love with you.” A hard breath escaped her lips, and she kissed Emily’s shoulder. “I don’t like the feeling of being conflicted... I don’t like feeling like an alien body-snatcher or something...”

“Why do you feel that way?”

“I don’t know... I...”

“Ash, try thinking of it this way. *You* are yourself.”

“... I’m... Ash?” she asked, confused.

“Ash Upton.”

“Ash... I am Ash Upton...” She smiled, as Emily kept reinforcing her.

“The hell-fire haired tuner who defies death on a weekly basis.” It cracked Ash into a grin, as she repeated it. “The child of Marie and Edward Upton, the best friend and lover of Emily McArthur,” she finished.

“You didn’t say ‘son’ or ‘daughter’...”

“That’s right, I didn’t. You’re a weird, special case. I think you, Ash, may be both.”

“Eh?”

“Ash, would you *want* the Misfile to be fixed, this instant?”

“Um...” A tiny voice in her was screaming ‘yes’, but the majority refused to render a verdict. “I can’t... I can’t say. Would you?”

“No, Ash. I wouldn’t.” Emily squeezed her hand. “Six months ago, I’d have said yes without a second thought. Now? I’d *so* much rather be here, in this bed with you, than in some dorm room in Harvard, staring out at the grounds, or studying my head off.” Ash smiled, softly, and Emily kissed her cheek. “If it helps, try thinking of the Misfile as an unintended opportunity. Okay, an opportunity that you didn’t exactly sign up for, but one nonetheless. You get to try out an entirely new body.”

“Huh... I dunno if I can think of it that way, but...” She looked at her hand. “Okay. I may not have *wanted* it, but it’s *mine* now. And damn it, I’m not going to be afraid of something that’s mine. I *will not!*” Ash clenched her small, girlish hand into a strong fist.

Emily giggled quietly, and kissed Ash’s cheek. “That’s my Ash. You just need to psych yourself up right, and you can turn any situation into an advantage for yourself, can’t you?”

Ash turned her head, kissing Emily’s cheek. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

“What’s a best friend for, mmm?” Emily kissed back, and hugged Ash tightly, nestling into her neck. Ash sighed, heavily but contentedly.

“Can we try again? Another night?”

Emily nodded, and kissed her girlfriend’s cheek. “Will do.”

“... Does it hurt?”

“What?”

“Putting a finger... inside?”

“A little, if you do it wrong, and especially if it’s your first time.”

“Oh... Jeez, it’s gonna hurt, isn’t it?”

“Nope. Don’t forget, your body’s already been where you haven’t.”

“Oh... *oh*, shit, right...” Ash blushed, heavily. Then she shivered. “Yeeech. Now I’m all...”

“Heh... Don’t fret it, Ash. I’m sure girl-you dealt with your hymen and all *long* before James.”

“These things should come with instruction manuals.”

“What?”

“Vaginas.”

Emily snickered. “If it makes you feel better, since you’re driving used, it probably wouldn’t have had the manual anyway.”

Ash let out a chuckle at the comparison. “Point. Would’ve been nice if the previous owner had left *some* kind of documentation. I’ve spent a lot of hours looking for a diary, or a file, or anything on my computer, from before the Misfile. Not a damn thing that sheds any light on where she’s been that I haven’t, what she’s done, what she was like. I guess girl-me didn’t keep a diary, or a blog or anything, and must’ve wiped the hard drive shortly before Misfile day.”

Emily raised her head, with a bemused smile. “I guess that just means we get to work out all the kinks together, doesn’t it?” She pulled Ash in, and Ash kissed her, softly.

“Mmmmh... Em?”

“Yes?”

“Isn’t it really sissy of me to like this?”

“Like what?”

“The way you’re holding me?”

“Not. At. All.” She laid Ash’s head back on her shoulder, and ran her fingers through her hair. “And don’t start with that ‘girl of the relationship’ stuff on me, Ash. I wouldn’t take it even if you had a penis right now. Lovers are partners, just like best friends are. Got it?”

Ash smiled, and closed her eyes, relaxing, putting one hand in Emily's. "Got it."

"Then relax. And sleep on my shoulder, I don't mind."

Ash nodded, and sleep—merciful, warm, and dreamy—enveloped her, arms around Emily, Emily around her.

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