



A Man Worth a Million

By C. Jade Wyton

Written by C. Jade Wyton
Cover art by kawaiikaabii

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*Dedicated to all the bitches who tried to make me
stop writing. Bite me.*

Part 1:

It was the same every Friday:

Work.

Bank.

Chemist.

And then straight home to make dinner.

Nothing new ever happened. There was nothing that could.

There just wasn't enough in Talia's life that could bring about any sort of excitement.

She had no hobbies. No interests of her own. Nothing to do.

Well, nothing outside of reading the occasional library book her son would leave on the kitchen table.

Her social life was limited to the next door neighbours; a wonderful younger couple who were currently too busy with their studies to spend much time with any of their friends.

Talia always felt guilty whenever they wasted their free moments on her, and would often find herself making excuses to avoid them.

Not that she really had to, though.

She was *also* too busy for free time. She was paid too little for too many hours, and she knew her manager would never give her a raise. She was lucky the sleaze was too horny to fire her.

It was exhausting.

Talia spied the makeup by the chemist's register. It would be perfect to hide the dark circles that hung under her eyes. Maybe she could present herself better and apply for another job....

No. Her glasses would just smudge it. And she couldn't really remember how to put on makeup— And, besides, she couldn't afford it.

Not today. And not next pay, either.

She could barely afford the medicine she was buying for her son. Though, she could never dare tell him that his medication was why they were having microwave noodles for dinner again.

She thought he might have known, though. He was a smart boy. And the way he wouldn't meet her eye when she came home with his tablets told her that he'd guessed the reason they were behind on their rent.

She wished, with all her heart, that he wasn't such a clever kid.

'Have a great day!' the chemist beamed.

Talia recognised the tone and simply nodded in response; it was the same tone she used every day. That fake happiness that was expected when working at a register. She couldn't handle hearing it. Not after a six-hour shift of nothing but *that voice* echoing from the coworkers around her.

The door *ding-donged!* quietly as she left the air-conditioned store and the blistering summer heat hit her like a horrible wave that made her feel three time more exhausted than she already was.

She stuck her hands in her pockets, checking she had her house keys, and was surprised to find a five dollar note crammed deep down in one of the torn seams.

For a moment, Talia imagined taking the bus instead of struggling with the two hour walk home. But she knew that she couldn't; an extra few dollars would mean she had enough to get a week's worth of rice.... Or, she could get some macaroni.

If she was lucky, perhaps she could scrape together enough change to buy some cheap cheese to melt on top.

It would be a nice change from noodles and chicken stock.

So, instead of giving into the fantasy of public transport, she slipped the note and her son's medication

into her handbag and slung it over her shoulder.

It was going to be a hard week, she needed to—

Talia stumbled as a heavy force slammed into her side; her glasses falling from her face as a tug on her bag pulled her sideways. She instinctively tightened her grip on the strap and whirled around to face the blurry figure. Before she knew what she was doing, she had lunged forward to swing a fist at whoever had a hold on her— And they responded with a surprised yelp before kicking out at her; their foot meeting her stomach and sending her backwards onto the pavement as she gasped for air and her bag disappeared from her hand.

‘Fucking Christ!’ a voice exclaimed. ‘Are you alright?! He came out of nowhere!’

Hands gripped Talia’s shoulders and, still in a daze, she was hefted to her feet.

The blurry figure that had helped her circled the ground for a moment before bending down to retrieve her glasses.

She fumbled with them as they were returned to her, barely comprehending what was happening as she slipped them back into place.

What the hell was that?!

She heard another voice talking to an emergency operator and finally managed to catch her breath.

Had she just been attacked?

Had someone just taken her— Her....

Her bag....

Talia’s blood ran cold as her brain caught up with her body, and before she knew what she was doing she had lurched forward and stumbled away from the man who had helped her upright.

Her bag! He’d taken her bag!

Gavin’s medication was in her bag!

She barely heard the men behind her call for her to

wait as she sprinted down the street.

She could still see him. She could still see the man who'd attacked her.

The man who'd taken her bag.

The man who'd taken her son's medication.

'*HEY!*' she cried; feeling every ounce of fury in her entire body forcing its way out of her throat to shriek at the man. '*YOU BASTARD!*'

Her attacker glanced back at her and, realising she was gaining ground, veered into the nearest alley.

She pursued him; almost slipping as she turned at full-speed and came to a stop.

Where had he gone?

Talia glanced around with a frown, scanning the backstreet for the man. And then she felt something hard press into her back between her shoulders.

'Get on the ground,' the voice was calm and even. But it held a hint of frustration as its owner poked Talia in the back with his weapon. 'Or I will shoot you.'

Talia didn't obey. Instead, she set her jaw and swallowed the lump in her throat.

'Are you *deaf?*' the man growled, and the gun he was holding moved from Talia's back to her head. 'I said to get on the ground.'

'No,' Talia said, simply.

'I *said* to—'

'And *I* said *no*,' Talia interrupted, her voice so unexpectedly calm and firm she shocked herself. 'I'm not leaving without my son's medication. You can keep everything else— But if you take his medication, he might *die*.'

There was a moment of quiet hesitation, and Talia felt the pressure of gun that was pressed against her falter.

Against her better judgement, she took the opportunity to slowly turn around; until the gun was aimed

between her eyes and she could see the face of the man who held it.

He wasn't what she had expected, with short black hair and a clean-shaven face.... He looked like the main character in a spy movie, not an alleyway mugger. He was the sort of man she'd expect to see buying cologne and expensive cheeses— Or more, the sort of man who'd have someone buy his cologne and cheese for him.

'Don't turn around—' he hesitated again as she met his eye.

There was something familiar about him; something Talia couldn't place. Like she knew this man from a long, long time ago. And as he frowned back at her, his eyes growing tight and confused, she thought he might have seen something familiar about her, too.

But she couldn't recall where the feeling came from. And as his eyes darted up and down her, she realised that he couldn't figure it out, either. All she knew, as they stared each other down, was that she *hated* this man.

Talia felt her lip curl in a scowl and, for some reason beyond her own comprehension; she rolled her eyes.

'Wha—' he gave an offended gasp. 'Do you *want* me to shoot you?'

Talia just scowled. 'I *want* my son's medicine.'

'I—'

'He has epilepsy.'

The man's expression changed, then, and he stared at Talia for a long moment before slowly lowering his gun.

'Epilepsy?'

'Mhm.'

Another long moment passed —perhaps a longer moment than the last— before the man held Talia's bag out for her to take.

She snatched it back with a grunt that sounded almost like an animal's growl, and loudly unzipped it.

‘I...’ the thief licked his lips, before his face hardened and he raised his gun again. ‘I still want the bag.’

‘I have five dollars,’ Talia mumbled bitterly as she pulled out the paper bag that she’d gotten from the chemist. ‘You’d shoot me over five dollars?’

‘I’d shoot you to keep my fingerprints from the police,’ he said. Then, his frustrated look returned and he gave an annoyed grumble. ‘*Where do I know you from?!*’

‘Why don’t you check my ID and figure it out?’ Talia gave a snort and threw the bag at his feet.

The man frowned and motioned for her to back away before he picked it up. ‘Turn out your pockets!’

‘Fuck off!’ Talia snapped, and the man flinched. He was frowning, but Talia could see his hesitation and tried to take advantage of it.... She took a step towards him and then knew she’d won when he took two back. ‘I’m going to walk out of this alley,’ she said. ‘And I’m never going to forget your face. You’re going to regret this.’

Confusion, and perhaps a small surge of fear, flashed in his eyes as she met them. And he swallowed.... And then he lowered his gun and moved out of her way.

Slowly, Talia backed out of the alley. She didn’t dare look away until she could turn and run, and then she didn’t stop running until she was halfway home. She collapsed on the empty playground’s swing-set and started sobbing into her hand.

What the hell had just happened?!

She could barely believe it.

She thought she might be sick!

By the time she got home she was too tired to cook. She barely made it up the stairs to her apartment. All she could do was flop onto the couch and pray her son wasn’t hungry.

Part 2:

Dale threw the purse onto his kitchen bench and sighed.

That had been a *lot* harder than it should have been!

He knew he shouldn't have stolen the bag; it wasn't like he needed the money. But something about it had just been so *enticing!* The thrill of rebellion, and the rush of crime had been too much and he'd made another stupid, split-second decision.

And he'd fucked it up.

She'd seen his face.

Whoever she was, she seemed like a complete lunatic; talking back with a gun aimed at her!

Who the hell was that woman?!

He knew her from somewhere— He *knew* he knew her from somewhere!

Dale huffed as he retrieved a can of soft drink from his fridge and downed it in one go; nosily dropping the now-empty can into the recycling.

He wished he could remember. But there was nobody, as he cycled his memory through every person he had met in his entire adult life, who even *resembled* her!

Who the hell was that woman?!

She'd recognised him, too.

That was *more* than clear!

Maybe, if she hadn't had that look in her eye, he might have been able to convince himself he didn't know her. But she'd had that look. And he knew he knew her, because she *clearly* knew him, too!

He wondered if she was going to go to the police. That would be a pain. Steven would jump on the opportunity to ID him.

Though, with the vicious way she'd looked at him, he wondered if it wasn't more likely that she'd show up at his

house with a kitchen knife and stab him to death herself.

She had guts. He had to give her that. And she'd been a lot faster than he'd expected. He didn't think she'd be able to catch up to him. She'd looked *exhausted!* The way she'd stumbled out of that store he'd figured the firm shove he'd given her would have knocked her down. And then the kick to the stomach? He didn't think she'd have been able to *stand* after that, let alone *outrun* him!

Ugh, it was a mess.

He flopped onto his couch and let his dogs jump in his lap.

'What am I gonna do, boys?' he asked as he massaged behind their ears. He wasn't expecting an answer, but still sighed when the tiny dogs tried to climb to his face to lick him. 'Daddy's got himself a dilemma.'

Dale let out a breath. He was an idiot. He'd done literally the stupidest thing he could have possibly done. He should have just let go of the bag when she'd thrown that punch— But the kick had been a reflex. He hadn't even *meant* to do that to her! He'd just *reacted* to seeing a fist coming his way!

Who was she?

He closed his eyes and pressed his palms into them. He hadn't even thought about witnesses. Broad daylight. A street full of shops. He was definitely seen.

Christ, he needed to work on his self-control.

Why did he recognise her?!

He was so distracted by his thoughts he didn't hear the knock on his front door; only his dogs' barking alerted him to the presence of a guest.

He considered not answering it for a moment. Pretending he wasn't home in case it was the police— Or worse, that woman. But when the knock sounded again, louder this time, he pushed himself up with a frustrated sigh and made for the front hall.

‘Dale!’ a familiar voice called as his front door’s handle jiggled violently. ‘I know you’re in there! It’s Richard, let me in!’

‘Hey, Dick,’ he greeted, welcoming the well-dressed older man into his home and closing the door behind him. ‘You’ll never guess the day I’ve just brought upon myself.’

Richard stumbled as he tripped on one of Dale’s dogs; his cane clacking on the wooden floor as he barely managed to steady himself and glared. ‘What the hell did you do *this* time?’

‘Guess.’

‘I’m not guessing,’ Richard replied.

‘C’mon, *guess!*’ Dale urged. ‘Three guesses as to what I did, and how I fucked it up.’

A long, annoyed sigh escaped Richard, and he rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘You stole something?’

‘Yeah.’

‘From a store?’

‘Nope.’

‘A person?’

‘Yep.’

‘Oh, Christ, don’t tell me you were seen!’

‘Ding ding ding—’ Dale was cut off by Richard’s palm meeting his cheek with enough force to send his dogs yipping in fear back into the lounge. ‘*Ow?! Don’t slap me!*’

‘You deserve to be slapped, Richard growled. ‘What the hell is wrong with you?!’

‘I dunno,’ Dale shrugged. ‘I saw her bag. I grabbed her bag. I didn’t think anything past that—’

‘Of *course* you didn’t think! You *never* think!’

Richard grabbed him by the collar and gave him a shake. ‘You’re practically a goddamn *billionaire* now! The last thing you need to be doing is stealing handbags off the street again!’

‘Yeah, yeah, spare me your lecture,’ Dale grumbled,

tugging out of Richard's grip and smoothing out the creases left in his suit. 'Are you going to help me or not?'

'Help you with *what*?'

'I don't know!' Dale threw his hands up in the air, frustrated and defeated. 'Figuring out why I have the self-control of a toddler, perhaps?'

'*Dale*,' it was the most frustrated sound Dale had heard from his friend in a long, *long* time, as he squeezed the bridge of his nose again. 'You still have the bag?'

'Yeah,' Dale sighed. 'It's in my kitchen.'

Richard echoed Dale's sigh as he shoved past him into the kitchen and emptied the bag on the counter.

Dale followed, his feet dragging along the floor in a mix of embarrassment and shame. He joined Richard in the kitchen and began to poke through the contents of the purse with him.

There wasn't much to look at. There was a ragged old wallet that looked like it hadn't been replaced in years, a five dollar note, some tissues, and a single broken paperclip.

'That's depressing,' Richard mumbled, picking up the wallet. 'Talia Wilson.... Five foot— *This* is who you robbed?' Richard pulled a face. '*Jesus*, Dale, you know how to pick them. You're lucky you didn't *kill* her!'

'She was fine!' Dale defended. 'I didn't hit her that hard— I should have, though. Maybe she wouldn't have caught up to me if I had.'

'Sure, right,' Richard rolled his eyes. 'Wow, she's almost blind without her glasses. You really picked a good one, buddy. At least she won't be able to recognise you.'

'I... don't know about that,' Dale clicked the muscle in his jaw. 'She didn't just see me run by, she followed me into an alley and cornered me. I threatened her with my gun but she just... gave me this *look*. Like she knew who I was, and like she hated me. It was a little bit like the look you're giving me right now, actually.'

Richard drummed his fingers against the counter as he eyed Dale viciously. Then, he grabbed the bag and scooped all of its contents back into its main pocket. ‘Fine. I’ll deal with this for you. Again. But I’m tired of bailing you out of this shit— If anyone asks, you were with me all day. Right here. Discussing work.... Now go get changed into something that *isn’t* covered in dirt so that it’s *believable!*’

Dale nodded and hurried upstairs while Richard calmly went outside with the bag.

When Dale got back downstairs, Richard was carrying his cat into the house. He dropped her on the couch when Dale frowned.

‘Sahara got out?’

‘Just when I was coming back in, she’s fine,’ Richard grumbled. He motioned to Dale’s suit. ‘*That’s* what you chose to wear?’

‘I was thinking “business”, but with a hint of “close friend”,’ he explained. ‘Plus it matches the tone of your suit.’

Richard rolled his eyes. As he did, the dogs started yapping and scratching at the front door.

‘Chihuahuas! Why chihuahuas?’ Richard gave an exasperated sigh, and motioned for Dale to go into the kitchen. ‘Why not bulldogs or a dane? You had to get the smallest, most yappy, most *girly* dogs you possibly could have gotten!’

‘Don’t listen to him,’ Dale covered his dogs’ ears with his hands. ‘Grandpa Dick doesn’t know what he’s saying. You’re big strong boys!’

Richard took a deep breath as Dale retreated into the other room. And Dale watched as Richard opened his front door and was met by a pair of tired-looking police officers. One of them Dale recognised as a cop with a grudge and he rolled his eyes. Steven Clark.... Of course *Steven* was already on his arse, not even an hour after the incident.

Dale had nearly gotten Steven discharged from the

police, back when they were both fresh out of high school. And Steven had never forgotten it.

So Dale decided to play dumb, and quickly picked up Sahara.

‘How can I help you?’ Richard asked, obviously having the same idea. ‘Is something the matter?’

‘Someone reported an assault nearby,’ Steven grumbled, trying to push his way inside but being blocked off by Richard’s arm slamming into the doorframe. ‘I was wondering if Dale knew anything about it?’

‘Why would I?’ Dale’s fake-innocence was almost perfect as he rounded the corner back into the hall, stroking his cat. ‘I’ve not been out all day! Well— Besides a quick run down to the shops with Richard, but we got back quite a while ago.’

Despite Dale’s tone, the older officer didn’t look convinced. ‘You’ve stolen handbags before.’

‘I thought you said assault?’ Richard frowned, faking confusion as he glared at the two officers. ‘Not robbery.’

‘It was a mugging. A man assaulted a woman and took her handbag,’ the younger officer clarified.

‘And why, exactly, are you at *my* door about it?’ Dale asked.

The officer took a deep breath. ‘I know it was you. There hasn’t been a mugging in this area since last time you were arrested, and it went exactly like it used to.’

Richard raised a hand. ‘That’s not enough to convict him... or even to get a warrant. Were there witnesses?’

‘I know it was him,’ Steven pressed.

‘So there were no witnesses?’ Richard asked.

Dale shook his head. ‘If there were, he wouldn’t be here— Because he’d know it wasn’t me!’

‘Were. There. Witnesses?’ Richard’s tone was slow and flat.

‘Of course there were witnesses!’ Steven growled.

‘Do you think a report just spawned out of thin air?!’

‘And they saw Dale? Specifically Dale?’

Steven looked seriously at the two before his shoulders slumped. ‘The attacker wasn’t described.’

‘The witnesses gave *no description?*’ Richard growled. ‘You’re making heavy accusations, for a man with no evidence.’

‘I *know* it was him!’ Steven snarled back. ‘Don’t try and pretend it wasn’t!’

‘Hey— Wait a minute, I know you!’ Dale exclaimed suddenly. ‘You’re the officer who targeted me last time you needed a quick arrest!’

‘I targeted you because you *did* it!’ Steven snapped.

Richard gave a gasp and scowled, thumping his cane against the floor dramatically. ‘That’s right! You broke his wrist because you mistook him for an aggravator! You have no right to be here!’

‘I didn’t *mistake* him for an aggravator! He *was* an aggravator!’

‘Not according to the court!’ Richard snapped, motioning at the police to leave. ‘I demand you leave immediately! You shouldn’t be handling any cases against my friend. Your suspicion against Dale is completely unfounded! And unprofessional! You’ll be lucky if I don’t report this incident to your station.’

‘You won’t have to report it, I’m arresting both of you—’

‘Steven, no! You’re overstepping!’ the younger officer quickly stepped between the men. ‘He has no motive, an alibi, *and* we have don’t have a warrant!’ she turned, eyeing Richard for a second, before giving an annoyed huff through her nose. ‘*Yet...* We can come back later when we *have* one. And we *will* get it.’

The officers both frowned as Richard stepped back from the door and slammed it in their face. Then,

begrudgingly, they turned away and made their way to their car.

Dale and Richard watched through the window as the pair argued before finally driving away.

‘That went well. For us, I mean. It was an absolute mess on their part,’ Richard turned to Dale. ‘You still have that doorbell that records when people come in?’

‘Motion activated with video and audio,’ Dale acknowledged.

‘Perfect. Send me a copy of that confrontation. I’ll see if I can’t get those two put on leave.’

Part 3:

Talia couldn't get up. She was in too much pain. The muscles in her legs felt like they were fusing together and every move she made sent pain through her stomach that made her feel as bad as death.

'Mum?' Gavin whispered, putting his hand on his mother's head. 'Are you okay? You didn't make dinner, and you haven't left for work yet.... But it's okay, you don't have to feel bad about missing dinner. I ate noodles. And I took my medicine last night. The container's empty though. There's none for today.'

Talia groaned in response. *Her son shouldn't have to get himself dinner....*

'Do you need help?' Gavin asked. His voice dropped to a mumble when his mother groaned again. '*I'm gonna go get Anna.*'

Talia didn't have the energy to tell him no, and not even five minutes later her young neighbour was pulling back her shirt to examine the hideous bruise that had formed under her ribs.

'Gavin, can you ask Trish to get an ice pack out of the freezer?' Anna asked, softly.

Gavin nodded and hurried out again.

'How the *hell* did you get this, Talia?' Anna rounded on the woman, her voice hardening. 'Did you get in a fight?'

Talia let out a painful breath and nodded. 'He... tried... to take my bag....'

'It looks like the rib might be bruised,' she sighed. 'Try not to move or you could make it worse. I don't *think* it'll be broken, but try to keep still either way.'

'Gavin needs... school... medicine...' Talia gasped between aching breaths. She tried to hold the tears back as her neighbour put a hand on her gut to feel her injury. She couldn't help but think how lucky she was that Anna was

studying to be a doctor; she was always willing to help Talia with anything she needed....

‘I’ll get him sorted, don’t worry,’ Anna pulled Talia’s shirt down again. ‘But I don’t want you getting up. Do you have your phone?’

‘*Pocket,*’ Talia mumbled.

‘Call in sick,’ she demanded as Gavin hurried into the room again, shadowed by Anna’s girlfriend. Anna took the blue, slime-filled bag from Gavin and wrapped it in a towel before pressing it against Talia’s injury. ‘I want you to stay right where you are for as long as possible.’

Talia groaned, reluctantly agreeing to call her boss and live on the couch for the next few days as Anna quickly retrieved Gavin’s medicine from the coffee table and popped a dose out of its packet.

‘Alright,’ Anna let out a breath. ‘Gavin, are you ready for school? Have you had breakfast yet?’

Gavin nodded, and Talia felt a surge of guilt that hurt worse than her wound.

‘You,’ Anna pointed a finger at Talia. ‘Stay.’

Talia nodded as Anna ushered Gavin towards the door.

He protested, saying he wanted to stay with his mother and look after her, but Trish chimed in; telling him the best thing he could do right now was to behave and not stress her out.

‘Now, I’ve got to go study,’ Trish said, glancing back at Talia. ‘I’ll be next door. If you need me, text me, and *I’ll* come to *you*.’

A groan was Talia’s only response.

The apartment door shut quietly as Trish made her way out. She was less gentle with her own door, and Talia flinched at the loud slam.

And just like that, the world was silent.

Unpleasantly so.

She wished she could do something. Clean the kitchen. Have a shower. Wash the clothes.... She couldn't even get something to read— Even if she was able to stand, Gavin had returned all his required reading to the library the day before.

Talia sighed and stared at the broken clock on the wall opposite the couch. She remembered when its ticking kept her awake. Now she wished it would ding out the time of day, just to keep her entertained.

She swallowed, and painfully reached up and removed her squashed glasses from her face (she felt the skin pinch and regretted forgetting to remove them before sleeping). Then she turned to look at the kitchen table; a blur of colour and shapes met her, and she began quietly guessing what each object was.

After ten or so minutes she gave up. She couldn't stand doing nothing. No matter how painful it was; she was going to get up.

Talia took a deep breath and rolled, letting her legs drop off the couch. A horrible squeezing feeling spread across her gut like someone had grabbed her in a giant pair of tweezers and was trying to crush her. But she ignored it and let momentum help her to her feet.

The door seemed too far away and she was amazed when she reached it. She opened it quietly and glanced around before limping into the hall. Slowly, she made her way towards the stairs, stopping to rest at the split in the hallway.

'Going somewhere?' Trish's voice nearly made Talia jump out of her skin, and she turned to find her friend leaning on the wall by the stairwell door. 'I thought you'd do this.'

'I can't spend all day cooped up!' Talia protested. 'I need to go to work—'

'If I have to sit on you to keep you in bed, I will,' Trish interrupted, pushing herself up and marching

towards Talia. 'Back to your room!'

'Don't talk to me like I'm a child!' Talia snapped. 'I'm capable of making my own decisions!'

'Yeah, *bad* decisions,' Trish commented. 'Your track record of life choices isn't exactly a good one!'

'Says you!' Talia retorted. 'You're not even wearing pants!'

Trish just shrugged. 'I can live with the consequences of the neighbours seeing my undies. You? You're not gonna make it down the stairs without killing yourself.'

'Oh, I'll make it down!' Talia growled.

'Not if I stop you, you won't!'

For a second, Talia hesitated, then she moved as quickly as her injury would allow and ducked around Trish. She made for the door at a half run, half hobble, but was grabbed by the back of her shirt. Before she could respond, she was swung around and her glasses were yanked from her face. She let out a shocked cry and grabbed the brown and purple smear that now only partially resembled her friend.

'I can't see!' she exclaimed. 'Trish! Trish don't do this to me!'

The blur shook its head and gripped Talia's arm tightly. 'You're going to have the day off whether you like it or not, Wilson.'

'Don't you Wilson me, Goldberg,' Talia grumbled as she was led back through the hall. 'I'm older than you!'

'Nowhere near as mature, though,' Trish chuckled and let go of Talia.

Talia froze, terrified of losing her balance, until she heard the click of a door unlocking and felt Trish's hand take her arm again.

'Come on, you goblin,' Trish tugged Talia's arm and led her into the apartment.

Talia could tell immediately this wasn't her own home and groaned. 'You're babysitting me?'

'Yep,' laughing, Trish guided Talia through the dull grey lounge and into a bedroom that was so bright and pink it nearly sent her into shock. 'Don't worry, our bed's pretty comfortable. Even *you* might be able to lie down for more than a few minutes.'

In an awkward movement that took far longer than it should have, Talia lowered herself into the soft bed. She accidentally let out a sigh of relief as she stretched out, and ignored Trish's joke as the blanket was thrown over her.

'You can have these back,' said Trish, offering Talia her glasses. 'But don't make me regret it.'

Talia took her glasses and slid them on. As she did, a magazine smacked into the side of her head. '*Thanks.*'

'Alright, I need to do my assignment,' Trish told her. 'If you come out of this room it better be for the toilet, or I'll tie you to the bed. Shout if you need me.'

Talia nodded as Trish left the room. She left the door open, and Talia could hear her settle at her desk and start typing furiously.

With a sigh, Talia started to halfheartedly flick through the magazine. It was... difficult to understand. RAM? Fibre-optic? CPU? She didn't even know what a Wi-Fi was, let alone a network device operating system.

She discarded the magazine onto a pile of similar ones on the floor and settled for looking at the girls' bedside photos. There were a lot of them; selfies and portraits of them out with their friends, family, and —Anna's personal favourite, which she'd shown Talia at least a hundred times already— a picture they'd taken on their first date at their high school formal.

It made Talia feel almost jealous, though she'd never tell the girls that. She didn't want to sour their relationship with her own stupid problems.... She just wished Evan hadn't left. Maybe she could look him up—

She shook her head.

It wasn't worth it. It'd been ten years. The last thing he needed was a call from her. And the last thing she needed was to dig up the past.

Though, maybe he'd actually take some responsibility for Gavin, this time.

The apartment door slammed shut so loudly Talia flinched, and Anna's voice gasped as she burst into the lounge. '*Talia's gone!*'

'I got her before she got to the stairs, don't worry,' Trish replied. 'She's in our room.'

'She's going to kill herself!' Anna exclaimed. 'No— Wait! *I'm* going to kill her!'

Talia wanted to melt into the bed as she heard angry footsteps stomp towards the room.

'Talia! What were you thinking?!' Anna snapped. 'I told you not to get up!'

Talia groaned and buried her face in her pillow. 'Gavin?'

'Gavin's fine, it's *you* I'm worried about,' Anna collapsed onto the end of the bed and put her face in her hands. 'You're going to work yourself to *death*.'

'It's not like I have a choice,' she retorted. *No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't seem to get anywhere.* 'I'm trapped in this stupid, dead-end life forever.'

Anna sighed and flopped backwards on the large bed. There was a long silence before Trish crept in, laptop in one hand, Tummy Tims in the other, and her pyjama shirt half unbuttoned.

'Chocolate?' she offered Talia as Anna jumped up and helped her with her clothes.

Talia desperately wanted to accept, but she knew she couldn't; money was just as tight for the girls as for her.... She couldn't take something they'd saved up for—

One collided with her forehead.

‘I know that look,’ Trish grumbled. ‘Don’t worry, I stole these from the campus fridge. I didn’t pay a cent for them.’

Part 4:

It was another dead Friday.

Talia groaned and shifted painfully behind the counter. She was glad that work was so quiet, but she wished she had a seat. Even just five minutes off her feet would help ease the cramping in her stomach.

Anna was right, of course; she shouldn't have come back to work so soon. But it wasn't like she could have taken any more time off. The pantry was emptying quick and she couldn't bear the thought of not being able to refill it. Her pay was already halved because of her absence; she would barely be able to get Gavin's medicine at this rate.

She felt a hand slide against her hip and slapped it away, turning abruptly as her thoughts were interrupted by her manager. She swallowed as he kept walking, blowing her a kiss before a devious smirk turned the corners of his mouth.

Shitbag, she wanted to throw up. She wasn't sure how much more she could take of him. She fiddled with her hair for a moment, wondering how much damage she could do to if she shoved the barcode scanner up his arse. *He'd probably enjoy it*, she thought with a bitter sigh.

It wasn't fair. What had she done to deserve this? To be robbed, harassed, groped? Why was *she* the one always taken advantage of?

God, he got under her skin....

'I'm Randell Summerson, manager of Kladstone North's Big Double U,' Talia mocked. *'I'm a massive douchebag with a tiny dick and no life.'*

She tapped her nails on the counter, trying to stave off her building anger. She wanted to break something. Like the Tree Bear Bar display next to her.... Or Randell's neck. She closed her eyes and let out a happy sigh as she thought about the satisfying crunch.

If only, she opened her eyes and stared at the chocolate display. She wondered if she'd ever have enough in her budget to afford one for Gavin. He deserved a treat. *Fuck, it's only fifty cents*, she cursed silently. *How is it fair that I can't even spare half a dollar for my son?*

'Hey Talia!'

Talia flinched as her coworker passed her with a wave. 'Hey, Jim. You're early.'

'I need to talk to Randell,' he shrugged. 'I'll be back in five minutes and you can go home.'

She nodded as he passed, and then was alone again. She looked around the store, anxious to get out now that she knew her shift was almost over. She saw the camera in the corner above her and rolled her eyes; it had been broken for months but the owner was too tight-arsed to pay to have it fixed.

Then Talia's eyes fell on the Tree Bear Bar display again, and she frowned. It would be... *far* too easy.

'*Fuck it,*' Talia grumbled. She glanced around to make sure nobody was looking, grabbed a handful of chocolates off the counter, and stuffed them deep into her pants pocket. Just as she pulled her hand out of her pocket, the staff room door opened and Jim wandered out.

Talia let out a breath and gave him a wave, quickly making her way outside. Her heart was racing and she felt more awake than she had all day; a mix of guilt and excitement rushing through her.

The energy boost kept up until she got to her building; she wasn't even half as tired as usual after the long walk, which felt shorter than it should have been while her mind was occupied.

She quickly grabbed her mail and hurried to the stairs. The three flights up finally drained her and she had to rest at the top; which gave her the perfect opportunity to look through the mail.

She expected it to be bills. And most of it was, but...

there was one letter that didn't have a company name attached.

It was a plain white envelope with her address printed on a sticker with no return label. It was oddly weighted; a hard square was pressed into it from its trip in the post, like a credit card or a pamphlet was inside. The Christmas stamp from almost two years ago was probably the *least* weird thing about the letter.

Talia was almost scared to open it, but she took a deep breath and jammed her nail under the seal of glue, messily tearing it open.

It was her driver's licence.

She let out a sigh of relief. She didn't drive anymore (she couldn't afford to maintain a car), but she was grateful to have her ID back. Especially since the woman on the phone had told her about the thirty dollar replacement fee.

She closed her eyes and thought about the man who'd mugged her. He didn't seem like the sort of guy to send her ID back, considering he'd robbed her at gunpoint; she'd have thought he'd sell it or something. Maybe he wasn't as bad as she'd thought.

Talia actually felt herself laugh out loud at that.

Of *course* he was as bad as she thought: he'd attacked her! This was probably some sort of threat.

Why am I even laughing at this? Talia found herself thinking. *The man who attacked me knows where I live. I should be terrified. Hiding and feeling violated or something.*

Though, maybe she was just too used to that feeling.

She pulled one of the half-melted chocolates out of her pocket and stuffed it in her mouth, discarding the wrapper on the floor before continuing to search the envelope.

There was a folded piece of printer paper inside, with writing showing through. She pulled it out and opened it.

A hundred dollar note fell out and Talia nearly threw up. She picked it up and stared at it in disbelief. *Why would they give her that much money?*

She quickly read the note:

Please don't talk to the police.

She stared at the letter for what felt like hours before putting it back in the envelope and painfully pushing herself to her feet to start back down the stairs.

She couldn't believe it.... *A hundred dollars....*

Bread and soup sounded like a great dinner.

Part 5:

‘Spike! Angel! Here boys!’ Dale called into the backyard as he smacked the empty food can with a spoon, causing a loud, metallic clang that hurt his own ears but excited his dogs. ‘Dinner time! Come on!’

‘Can’t you concentrate on work for *five minutes*?’ Richard sighed, coming up behind Dale with Sahara held awkwardly in his free hand. ‘Your dogs aren’t going to notice if you feed them late. They’re *dogs*.’

‘How dare you,’ Dale joked, shutting the laundry door and throwing the can on top of the washing machine. ‘These are my children; your precious grandchildren!’

‘I’m not your father,’ Richard chuckled as Dale’s cat leapt out of his arm and ran out of the room.

‘Might as well be,’ responded Dale, stepping over the dogs as they ate. ‘You scold me enough!’

Richard let out a heartfelt laugh. ‘Come on, we’ve got to finish putting the email list together.’

‘Or what? You’ll punish me like a bad boy?’

‘Oh my god,’ Richard threw his head back and hurried out of the room. ‘Don’t ever say that again!’

‘Am I a bad boy, daddy?’ Dale called, following Richard into the lounge. ‘Am I being a bad boy? Do I need a spanking?’

‘I don’t know about a spanking, but keep talking like that and you’ll get a backhand!’ warned Richard. ‘Hurry up and get to work! Or... actually.... If you’re so restless, why don’t you go pick up some dinner? I’ll handle the emails if you get me a burger from Scruffy Hen.’

‘Alright,’ Dale scooped Richard’s wallet off the coffee table and stuffed it into his back pocket. ‘In a meal?’

‘Large. With a Coola Cola.’

‘That’s a *cool-a* drink,’ Dale winked.

‘Don’t you dare,’ Richard held back his snicker. ‘I

raised you better than that, you shit! Take my backpack and get a few larger bottles of cola, would you?’

Dale nodded, grabbing Richard’s bag and hurrying out of the house. As he climbed into his car he debated going to the quieter restaurant near the train station. But then he decided he didn’t really feel like driving for an extra ten minutes and went for the closer (though more crowded) one, in the food court of the nearby shopping complex.

He quietly rehearsed his order the entire trip, but still managed to buy the wrong drink for himself. He got seven Coola Colas instead of six and a Spite lemonade. He figured it was no big deal and didn’t bother bringing it up as he left the store. Instead, he just put the bottles in the backpack Richard had given him and headed towards the escalator.

Then he saw her, limping out of Kyles Supermarket with a half-full shopping bag.... *Talia Wilson.*

And she saw him.

He turned to hurry away, but her voice shouted across the crowded shop.

‘JOHN! Oh my god, John! It’s been FOREVER!’

Dale froze as people turned to stare. He knew he had to play along so he took a deep breath and forced himself to smile. ‘Talia! Oh, it *has* been a long time! I was just heading off, I have to bring some food home before it gets cold— Friend over, you understand?’

‘Oh, of course I understand!’ Talia laughed and linked arms with him. ‘But I’m sure we can walk to the car park together? I have to get your opinion on this amazing set of kitchen knives I’m thinking of getting— Maybe you could help me try them out before I buy them? See how they handle cutting *meat*?’

Dale swallowed at her tone. *Is she threatening me?*

‘Can we not walk so fast?’ she asked, tugging Dale’s arm and forcing him to slow down. She glared at him as she continued, speaking in a very slow and deliberate tone. ‘I’ve

got a pretty *nasty injury* I'm recovering from.'

He almost apologised, but instead shrugged and continued to the underground car park.

It was quiet. And for a moment Dale wondered if he could knock Talia down again and just drive off— But then he heard a car door slam somewhere in the lot and decided against it.

'Which is yours?' Talia asked, passing the heavy-looking plastic bag from one hand to the other. 'I don't see any spy cars around, Bond.'

'Ha ha,' responded Dale, flatly. 'It's the blue sedan.'
'Open it.'

Dale frowned. 'You're not getting in my car—'

'Yes, I am!' Talia snapped. 'Unless you'd rather I scream. *Help. Someone. I'm being kidnapped.* That sort of thing.'

'I'm not kidnapping you,' Dale snorted. 'If anything, it's the other way around!'

'Open the door,' Talia repeated.

'Are you crazy?' asked Dale as he unlocked his car and watched Talia settle into the passenger seat. A sigh, and he joined her. Then he adjusted his mirror, avoiding eye contact with her, before finally slamming his hands into place on the wheel and letting out an exasperated groan. 'I could be a murderer, you know! What about that son of yours?'

'You're too much of a pussy to kill me,' Talia responded nonchalantly. 'If you were that tough you wouldn't have pissed your pants in the alley.'

'I didn't piss my—' Dale cut off mid-sentence and turned to the windscreen, scowling. He let out a long, frustrated breath as he turned the ignition in the car. Then he drove in silence, not daring to even glance at Talia as he made his way through the quiet streets.

'Who's Richard?' Talia asked. 'You steal his wallet,

too?’

Dale slammed on his brakes. ‘Get out of my bag!’

‘Why? You went through mine,’ Talia shrugged and, as if to make a point, noisily unzipped the next pocket and stuck her hand in. ‘And that was a serious question. I swear I’ve heard that name before. Richard Moore....’

‘He’s a personal friend,’ Dale yanked the bag back and zipped it closed. ‘He runs Moore for More Investments. Used to own Kladstone Towers before he sold it to the Swifts.’

‘Ah,’ Talia’s lip turned up and her voice grew sour. ‘I used to live in Kladstone Towers.’

‘Really?’ Dale was taken aback. He never would have expected to meet someone else from the city —let alone Kladstone Towers, specifically— this far out. No *wonder* he recognised her! ‘I used to live there, too. Nice place.’

‘Not for me,’ Talia muttered. She didn’t elaborate, which made for an awkward silence as Dale slowly took his foot off the brake and let the car roll downhill.

‘Nearly there,’ he muttered as they reached the bottom. ‘Just another street over and we’ll be at my place.’

Talia looked at him, frowning, and at first he couldn’t figure out why. Then it hit him and he dropped his face into the steering wheel. A loud, ear-piercing honk punished him for his stupidity.

Why the hell did I bring her to my house? he groaned, and sat up straight again. ‘You’re not going to burn my house down now that you know where it is, are you?’

For a moment she looked like she was considering it. Then she shook her head. ‘This is too nice a neighbourhood. Your house is probably worth too much to just wreck like that. I might come back with some toilet rolls later, though.’

Dale shrugged, only half-sure she was joking. He couldn’t deny his house was nice; that was why he’d brought it. But the way Talia said it was almost as if it was

supposed to be an insult.

‘How much do you earn?’ she asked. ‘You’d have to get a lot to be able to afford a place around here. Unless you just rob your neighbours every other week.’

‘I earn more than most people,’ he admitted, deliberately staying vague. The last thing he needed to do was share too much information with this woman when she already had so much power over him from his earlier *mistake*. ‘How much do you get?’

‘A little less than eight hundred a fortnight,’ she replied.

Dale gawked at her. ‘*A fortnight?! How do you live?*’ he exclaimed, his mouth hanging open. He was so shocked he drove straight by his house and had to turn around.

The entire time he drove, Talia glared at him. She only looked away after he parked.

‘So...’ Dale took a deep breath. ‘What are you going to do now?’

She simply shook her head and sighed. ‘I’m sick of people taking advantage of me. I need your help.’

‘You’re not about to blackmail me—’

‘I want to work with you,’ Talia interrupted. ‘I’ll do anything. Stealing handbags, breaking into houses.... I’ll even give you the details for the bank login for Big Double U if you know how to avoid getting caught.’

That was *not* what Dale had expected. He stuttered for a moment before finally managing, ‘How do you know Big Double U’s bank details?’

‘My boss has it written down on a sticky note on his computer monitor. You can have it if you give me... um...’

‘A percentage?’

Talia nodded.

He couldn’t believe it. ‘You’re not working for Clark, are you?’

‘Who?’

The look of genuine confusion reassured Dale that she wasn't, and he shook his head. 'Look, I don't want to risk getting the cops on my back; I almost got arrested last week.'

'Oh really,' Talia's voice oozed sarcasm. 'For *what*, I wonder? Stealing handbags? Can't you just pay your way out of that, rich boy?'

Dale groaned and closed his eyes. He almost laughed with disbelief, but managed to hold it back. 'Look, I know you probably think I'm some sort of spoilt brat, but I worked hard to get where I am. I mean, when I was seventeen I was learning how to drive and buying my first house; you don't get that without pushing yourself!'

'Yeah, well, when I was seventeen I was eight months pregnant and living in a women's shelter,' Talia retorted, the bitterness in her voice making Dale flinch. 'I used to push myself so hard I'd pass out. Yet somehow owning a car earns you a house?'

Dale went quiet as Talia glared at him. And relief flowed through him when she finally opened the door and climbed out of the car.

'You know where I live; contact me before next Friday or I'll come to you. With something sharp. Your choice.'

He let her walk away in silence; not daring to reply or call her back. It wasn't *his* fault if she hadn't made anything of herself. And it certainly wasn't his fault if she'd spent her teenage years having kids instead of saving. Why should *he* have to help her get back on her feet?

He nearly jumped out of his skin when there was a knock on his window— But he let out his breath when he saw it was just Richard frowning in at him.

'Who was that?'

Dale swallowed. 'The woman I robbed.'

Part 6:

She couldn't believe it! How arrogant could one man be? How was it possible for one human being to be so *fucking* up their own arse that they—

‘Mum, are you alright?’

Talia realised she had been pacing and stopped; instead, she tapped the stirring spoon against her arm in an attempt to keep herself from raising her voice in frustration. ‘I'm alright, hon. How was school?’

‘It was okay,’ Gavin shrugged. ‘Jacob and I threw bottles at an old bike that was down by the creek until it fell in.’

Despite her anger, a smile formed at the corners of her mouth. ‘I told you I didn't want you going near the creek by yourself.’

‘I wasn't by myself,’ seeing his mother's mood lighten, Gavin began to bounce in his seat. ‘I was with Jacob.’

‘You know—’

‘*What I meant,*’ Gavin mocked. ‘*With an adult, Gavin.*’

Talia laughed and gave him a tap on the head with the spoon handle. ‘Stop that.’

‘Jacob said I can go to his house on Monday,’ said Gavin, changing the subject. ‘His parents will let me stay the night, too! Can I go? Please? I'll take my medicine!’

Talia shifted anxiously. She didn't want to stop her son from seeing his friend, and certainly didn't want to let his illness hold him back from a normal childhood... but... she still wasn't sure she trusted Jacob's parents with Gavin's medicine. ‘This won't be like last time, will it?’

Gavin shook his head. ‘That was three years ago! I promise I'll take it this time! They know I need it now, so they won't let me forget.’

Talia bit her lip and looked away. After a long moment, she turned back to her son and nodded. ‘Don’t forget to take your morning meds with you. And write down my phone number so you can call if something happens— And make sure to call me as soon as you get to their house!’

Gavin’s bouncing got more erratic and he let out a happy cry. ‘I will! If it helps you feel better, I’ll ask Mrs Conner to text you when I get there! And when I leave for school!’

Talia nodded. ‘And when you take your medicine?’
‘She won’t mind!’

It wasn’t quite enough to reassure Talia, but she didn’t have time to respond as a loud, firm knock echoed through the apartment and she had to rush to the door.

Her mind was racing as she hurried over. It wasn’t Trish or Anna; their knocks were usually softer. Or they’d just walk in. Talia was expecting her landlord—or maybe a salesperson—with how confident the knock was. She was surprised to find a tall, casually dressed older man with a cane and a very familiar backpack.

‘I’m Richard Moore, from Moore for More Investments,’ before Talia was able to shut the door on him, he took her hand and gave it a firm shake. ‘I heard you were harassing my friend Dale?’

‘Is that his name?’ Talia scoffed. ‘Well, I’m busy at the moment so you can come back and threaten me later—’

‘No threats,’ Richard held up his free hand submissively as Talia slammed the door. He continued to talk to her as if she hadn’t just shut him out. ‘You said you wanted to work with us? I can think of a few... *confidential* things you could do.’

Slowly, Talia opened the door again. ‘You mean illegal?’

He gave a nod, his smile too big for his face.

Talia stared at him, her lips pursed. She thought for

a long moment before she swung the door open and motioned for him to come in.

‘Thanks for letting me in,’ said Richard. Then he saw Gavin and grinned. ‘Hey, sport, what’s up?’

‘Managed to convince Mum to let me stay at a friend’s house on Monday,’ he answered, looking far too proud of himself. ‘Which, if you know her, is an achievement.’

‘Gavin,’ Talia sighed in a warning tone.

Richard let out a chuckle. ‘Oh, well, if you’re staying the night at a friend’s house maybe your mother would like to join me for dinner then?’

‘No. You’re too old to go to dinner with my mum,’ Gavin retorted, suddenly serious. ‘You’re way too old. You’re supposed to date people your own age.’

Talia didn’t mean to laugh, but she did, and had to smother it.

Richard, on the other hand, didn’t try to hide it. He let out a loud, hearty laugh and wiped his eye. ‘I’m not her boyfriend; I’m a friend of a friend.’

‘Anna?’ asked Gavin.

Richard shook his head.

‘Patricia?’

Again, Richard shook his head.

‘Then you’re lying,’ Gavin declared. ‘Mum only has two friends.’

Talia shushed her son by thrusting a loaf of bread from the table into his arms and telling him to turn off the stove.

He ran off with the bread as Richard pushed himself upright.

Richard looked around the room for a while, a hand on his hip and a curious look on his face. Talia was feeling a bit self-conscious until he spoke, ‘I remember growing up in a place like this; except that there was a mould problem in

my building. Promised myself as a kid that I'd make a better place for people to live.'

'Kladstone Towers,' Talia muttered bitterly. 'I used to live there. The place was nice enough but the people... not worth it.'

'That wasn't my fault,' Richard chuckled. 'I had to sell the complex thirty-one, maybe thirty-two years ago. Before you were born, at least. I'm not responsible for anything the new owners did.'

Talia let out a long breath and motioned to the table. 'Do you want to join us? We've got some soup on the stove.'

'Alphabet?' Richard asked, nodding to Gavin as he sat at the table.

Talia felt her gut shift at the thought of more chicken stock. 'Tomato.'

'*Tomato?*' Richard's brow raised almost as high as his voice. 'I've never met a kid who liked *tomato* soup.'

'I love it,' Gavin told him, climbing backwards onto his chair and resting his arms on the back-rest. 'It's nice to have something that's not chicken flavoured.'

'So, will you join us?' Talia asked again. She hoped he wouldn't.

'Thanks for the offer, but I've already eaten, so I'll let you and your son have a quiet night,' Richard tipped his head politely. 'Until Monday, let's say eight in the evening? I'll meet you at Trouffel with Dale.'

'I don't know where that is,' Talia admitted.

'Give me your number and I'll text you the address,' Richard quickly pulled out his phone and passed it to Talia, who typed her number in.

She triple checked it before handing it back. 'Text me the time, too? So I don't forget.'

'Of course,' Richard gave her a smile, Gavin a nod, and then turned and made his way out. 'Get your resume ready; it's going to be an interview. If you work for me, you

work for me *properly*.’

Talia swallowed as Richard shut the door, and collapsed into her chair at the table.

‘Are you going to get a new job?’ Gavin asked, dipping a lump of bread into his soup. He grinned widely when his mother nodded. ‘Good! The one you have now sucks. You need something better.’

Part 7:

Talia had completely forgotten that she was meeting Richard for dinner.

She'd gotten home and called out for Gavin, only for her mobile to buzz and the sudden realisation of what day it was hit her like a truck. She'd spoken to her son briefly before he got distracted by his friend and abandoned the phone with the Connors.

They tried to reassure Talia that Gavin would be alright with them for the night, but she still couldn't completely swallow the lump in her throat. The moment she hung up, she ran to the bathroom and was sick in the sink.

She was glad she wasn't going to meet Richard until eight. But she knew the four hours were going to be hell to wait. She was too tired to clean, so she quickly threw together her resume; a hand-scrawled list of her skills on lined paper. She cursed under her breath and realised she should have stopped at the library on the way home to print it properly.

She knew she still had the *time* to go to the library now, but she really didn't have the energy. And when she was done scribbling her work history (which was abysmally short: ten years at the one store) she collapsed on the couch with a heavy breath and closed her eyes.

She thought she'd only rested for a moment, but she was jolted awake by a text asking where she was. For a moment she was confused, then she saw the time and bolted out the door.

She arrived at dinner almost an hour late, sweaty and panting from running the entire way. She hurried into the restaurant and saw Richard and Dale sitting together near the window and stumbled over to join them.

'Hi, sorry!' Talia blurted as she collapsed into the

chair. She quickly pulled her coat off and fanned herself with the menu, trying to cool down. She realised too late she hadn't brushed her hair, and could only imagine how much of a mess she looked.

Richard gave a polite nod and poured a glass of water for her. 'Did you bring your resume?'

She almost kicked herself. 'No. I had it— I forgot to bring it with me.'

Dale rolled his eyes and stood up. 'Well, I guess that means this meeting's over. Nice to meet you, but I suppose we should be going—'

Roughly, Richard grabbed Dale's arm and tugged him back into his seat. 'Sit down! I hired *you* without a resume.'

Dale let out a sound like the halfway between a dog's whine and a bird's squawk as his chair nearly tipped over. He rightened himself before he looked around and blushed; obviously worried he'd drawn attention to himself.

He had, but it was only for a moment before everyone shrugged and went back to eating. Richard didn't even seem to notice the people staring and slid a menu over to Talia. 'I'm paying today.'

Talia gave a small nod and fumbled with the menu. 'What's the budget— Oh my god! The cheapest thing on this menu is *thirty dollars*? I can't—'

'Don't look at the prices,' Richard interrupted, placing his hand over the half of the menu that displayed the cost of the food. 'Just order what you think you'll be able to eat.'

'Really?' Talia squeaked, suddenly feeling *very* overwhelmed.

Dale let out a loud, exaggerated sigh. 'Yes, just order! Before we all starve to death!'

'Oh shut up, Dale,' Richard nudged his friend. 'The last time we came out for dinner you took two hours to order!'

Talia's mouth felt dry. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She drank the entire glass of water Richard had given her in one go and looked back at the menu.

She hadn't had much time to think before Richard called the waitress over and ordered his own meal. Dale ordered, too, and so feeling pressured Talia blurted that she'd like a lasagna.

'Are you sure that's all you want?' Richard asked. 'You could get something more if you like. A drink? Desert?'

Talia fumbled with the menu again and stammered that she'd like a lemonade. 'Maybe? If that's okay.'

'Ditto,' Dale waved his hand. 'Spite if you've got any. And maybe— Dick are you driving or am I?'

'No alcohol at work meetings,' Richard muttered, taking the menus and passing them to the waitress. His voice changed to a much nicer, politer tone as he addressed her. 'May we please get another bottle of water for the table... Kim, is it?'

'Of course, sir,' the waitress gave a smile (that seemed much more genuine than Talia's own work smile) and looked to Dale. 'Was that all?'

'Yeah, that's it,' Dale shrugged and shooed her off with a wave of his hand. Then there was a thunk under the table and he let out a cry.

It took a few seconds for Talia realised that Richard had kicked him. And when she did, she was half tempted to give him another. She figured he deserved it for one reason or another herself.... Still, she just crossed her ankles and watched as Richard and Dale began to bicker.

'Stop acting like a brat,' warned Richard. 'And don't you *dare* take your bad mood out on the staff here!'

'I *wasn't!*' Dale whined, rubbing his leg. 'And I'm not in a bad mood. I just don't see the point in wasting our time like this.'

'If you keep complaining I'll hire her out of spite,'

Richard joked, a smile creeping to the corners of his mouth. 'How would you like that?'

'Living up to your name, I see,' muttered Dale. 'Daddy Dick.'

Another thunk, and another cry from Dale that Talia pretended not to notice; she didn't want to know what he'd meant with *that* comment.

Then the waitress came back with a basket of garlic bread, and Talia forgot about the argument as her mouth began to water.

'May I?' she asked the boys.

'Of course,' said Richard, smiling.

Dale didn't respond and just grabbed one of the pieces for himself, stuffing it in his mouth and frowning at Talia like she was a dragon who was stealing his valuables from him.

'You have a problem with me eating *bread*?' Talia frowned back and took a more delicate bite. Flavour washed over her and the world faded as she was pulled away by the overwhelming taste of herbs and cheese.

It was the most delicious bread she'd ever tasted!

She barely heard Dale's response as she choked.

'You okay there?' asked Richard.

Talia nodded, and swallowed properly. 'Just ate a bit fast.'

'As long as you're okay,' he chuckled. 'Before you take another bite, could I hear your customer service voice?'

'Oh, uh—' Talia swallowed what was left of her mouthful and gave a small cough to clear her throat. 'Hi, I'm Talia. Welcome to Big Double U! We're having a store-wide discount on swimwear, would you like to see our catalogue?'

Richard raised his brow, and Dale stopped whining for long enough to look impressed.

‘That’s cool,’ said Dale. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard someone sound so much like an advertisement! Hell, not even advertisements sound that much like advertisements!’

‘Years of practice,’ Talia muttered, stuffing another piece of bread in her mouth.

‘Do it again!’ he laughed.

‘Good afternoon! Can I help you with anything?’ Talia said through her food. ‘Of course, sir. That would be in aisle three, just this way.’

‘Ho-Ho-Holy shit,’ Dale let out a laugh as the waitress approached with their meals. ‘You sound like an *actual* robot!’

Shrugging, Talia cleared a spot for her food and didn’t respond.

‘So Dale said you don’t like your current job,’ Richard gave a cough and swallowed his chuckles as he took his own plate. ‘What makes you think you’ll like working with us any better?’

‘I doubt either of you are going to grope me,’ she said flatly. She ignored the waitress’ shocked look and stabbed her meal with her fork. ‘That’s literally all it would take for you to be better than my current boss.’

‘You should report that, shouldn’t you?’ Dale mumbled; actually sounding serious.

‘He’s friends with the owner,’ Talia took a deep breath and tried to push down her anger. She took the can of lemonade the waitress offered her and didn’t bother to pour it into the glass. Instead she downed the entire thing in one go and crushed it in her fist angrily. ‘I just work at the checkouts. If I report him, *I’ll* be the one that gets fired. I can’t afford to lose my job.’

‘You could always get another,’ said Dale.

What the hell do you think I’m trying to do right now? Talia didn’t say the thought out loud. She just glared at Dale and scooped a forkful of lasagne into her mouth.

The first taste that hit her was the cheese; strong and tangy, it overpowered the rest of her senses and she felt the world disappear around her. Then she swallowed, and felt the rich sauce and meat press into her tongue and she almost couldn't breathe. It was like heaven had fallen from the sky and onto her plate.

She dug her fork into her food and scooped so much into her mouth that she could barely chew.

'Are you... crying?' asked Dale, glancing at the confused waitress. 'Jesus.'

'Oh my god,' she mumbled, stuffing more lasagne into her mouth with a sob. 'I didn't know food could taste like this.'

'Kim, could you please get her another drink?' Richard side-eyed Dale as the waitress nodded and, once she left, he spoke in a low, hushed tone. '*Dale, I need you to think for a second.*'

Bitterly, Dale poked at his steak. 'About what?'

'About her,' responded Richard. 'And what she could do for us.'

Talia wiped her mouth on her napkin and sat up; the meal gone far too soon. 'What I could do?'

Richard gave a nod. He seemed sure of himself and tapped his fork against his plate happily. 'People respond differently to a woman on the phone. Until now it's just been me and Dale with our *confidential* work. I'm curious what you'd be able to do with the opportunity.'

Confidential work, Talia swallowed, feeling her nerves starting to get the better of her. She wasn't sure she wanted to do this anymore. It was illegal... What if she got arrested? What would happen to Gavin, then?

'What *would* you do with the opportunity?' Richard asked. Then, he lowered his voice again. '*Dale's already said you'd give us Big Double U's details for a share.*'

Talia flinched. She'd forgotten she'd offered that. She was starting to feel overwhelmed by the reality of the

situation— She needed some time to clear her head. ‘Can I think about it for a while?’

‘You’ve had the entire weekend to think about it,’ Dale whined, only for Richard to kick him again. ‘I’m just saying, Dick! She’s either in or she’s not, you know?’

‘Stop being a brat,’ said Richard.

‘Fine, *Dad*,’ Dale snorted sarcastically.

‘Your drink?’

Talia jolted as the waitress put another drink in front of her. ‘Thank you.’

‘You can order more if you like,’ Richard told her, ignoring Dale’s continuous complaints from his other side.

‘I don’t want to be a bother—’

‘You’re not,’ Richard gave her a kind smile. ‘How about a steak? Red meat will be good for you. Kim, could we please have a steak? Medium rare.’

‘Why are you ordering her so much?’ Dale grumbled as the waitress went back to the kitchen.

‘Because it’s polite!’ Richard snapped. ‘And she looks like she could use a good meal.’

‘She’s *had* a good meal,’ scoffed Dale. ‘Can we just *not* hire her already and send her home?’

Richard glared at Dale until he shrank into his seat, looking even smaller than when Talia had cornered him in the shops. Then Richard turned to Talia and laughed, ‘I’m looking forward to working with you. If you want the job. I have a feeling that you’ll fit in perfectly.’

‘No!’ Dale cried, a horrified look appearing on his face.

‘Yes,’ Richard replied, turning to Dale to argue.

‘But— But—’ Dale dropped his voice to a whisper, and leant in close to Richard. ‘*But she’s scary, Dick! What if she stabs me?!*’

‘Grow up, Dale.’

Talia closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, tuning

out the boys' angry chatter. She was getting in over her head, she was sure of it, but she couldn't bring herself to back out. She needed this.

Then her phone rang and she almost fell off her chair in fright. Realisation hit her as she answered: *Gavin* needed this.

'Hey Gavin, are you alright?' she asked.

'*Yeah*,' Gavin's voice was quiet, almost a whisper, and Talia could tell something was wrong. 'I want to come home.'

'What's wrong?!' Talia exclaimed, her worried tone causing the table to fall silent. She barely noticed people turning to look at her. 'Are you okay? Are you hurt? Did something happen?'

'I'm okay,' Gavin replied, his voice cracking. 'I had a seizure, is all.'

'How long did it last?' Talia's heart almost stopped.

'It was just a jerk,' Gavin replied. 'But I feel sick.... Can Jacob come home with me? His mum said it's okay for him to stay over if you say yes.'

'Of course he can,' Talia let out a breath. Without thinking, she stood up and grabbed her coat. 'Are the Connors able drive you home? I'll meet you there.'

'We can give you a lift if you need,' Richard offered. Talia's heart leapt. 'Yes! Thank you!'

Part 8:

Dale couldn't believe what had just happened. He couldn't believe Richard would even *consider* hiring that woman. Not after she'd threatened him like she had!

'You're not *seriously* going to hire her, are you?' Dale asked, slowly pulling the car to a stop in front of Richard's house. 'She wants to kill me; I can see it in her eyes. This is just some ploy to get close enough to knock me off.'

'Stop being a baby,' said Richard. 'She just wants a job. And honestly, how often do we have opportunities to get help with the scams? *Local* help?'

Dale knew he was right, but that didn't mean he had to admit it.

'I'm going to the chemist tomorrow,' Richard mentioned as he climbed out of the car. 'You need anything?'

'Condoms? I have a date on Thursday.'

'I'm not buying your tiny condoms,' Richard laughed, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. 'I have a reputation to uphold.'

'Fuck you too!' Dale called as Richard made for his house. Then he laughed. 'Hah! See you tomorrow.'

Richard gave a wave before limping home.

Dale waited to make sure Richard got inside safely before pulling off the handbrake and starting the drive home. He didn't bother to turn on the radio; he enjoyed the revving of the engine and the scrape of the wheels as he sped over the limit across the damp road *far* too much to interrupt it with advertisements and chatter.

As much as he hated to admit it... Richard was right. Talia looked like she would be a good addition to the company. Even if she had to become a secretary or something to hide what she was *really* hired for.

Actually, a chance to boss her around didn't seem like a bad idea.... If she didn't end up bossing *him* around instead.

If only he could remember where he'd seen her, before!

He parked out the front of his own house and, pushing that last thought to the back of his mind, pulled out his mobile. A few presses and he was met with Richard's answering machine.

'Hey! Sorry Dick, you're probably showering or something so I'll be quick, I think I found a good use for Talia,' Dale laughed, fumbling to open his front door. 'I know you were talking about making her work as another front receptionist, but what about making her your secretary? You know, send *her* to get lunch so I can keep up with my paperwork. Get her to make coffee— For you, not me. Not sure she wouldn't poison it if she made it for me....'

Dale stretched as he got inside, and threw his keys on the table by the door.

'But yeah— I think it'd be a good way to start her off while keeping her close. She's got experience with customers so I can't imagine taking our phone calls would be too difficult for her,' he continued, heading into his kitchen and flicking on the light. 'Also—'

'Hello, Dale,' Steven's voice cut through Dale's thoughts and he leapt back into the kitchen bench.

'Jesus Christ! What the hell are you doing in my house?!' Dale exclaimed. 'How long were you sitting in my kitchen? In the dark. Dude. What the fuck?'

'I have an arrest warrant,' Steven mumbled, holding up a piece of paper. 'And I need you to come with me.'

'For fuck's sake,' Dale sighed into the phone. 'Dick, Steve's just broken into my house. Meet me at the police station would you?'

'He can't help you,' Steven grinned. 'Not this time.'

Dale just rolled his eyes and hung up. ‘You’re making a mistake, you know that right? This is going to end in you being humiliated. Just like last time.’

‘You know your rights,’ still grinning, Steven motioned for Dale to turn around and pulled his handcuffs off his belt. ‘Should I even bother repeating them?’

‘The more misconduct from you, the better off I am,’ Dale watched in amusement as Steven tried to open the cuffs, only for them to jam.

He knew he should have been anxious, but after dealing with Talia all day it was like comparing a dog on a chain to a swarm of wasps being launched out of a cannon directly at your face. And the dog didn’t seem so scary, now. Especially with his chain holding him back.

Steven swore and smacked the handcuffs against the kitchen bench.

‘I have a pair if you need,’ Dale teased. ‘Pink and fluffy. Though usually I’m not the one wearing them.’

‘Shut up!’ Steven hissed, pulling the handcuffs open. ‘Hands behind your back.’

There was no point in arguing, so Dale shrugged and calmly turned around for Steven.

The lack of reaction only seemed to make the officer angrier, and he tugged Dale’s arm up roughly and forced on the cuffs.

‘Gentle, buddy, only girls get to be *that* rough with me,’ Dale laughed.

Steven didn’t reply. Instead he grabbed Dale’s arms and shoved him out of the house. Just as they got outside, one of Dale’s neighbours pulled into her driveway; she climbed out of her car and stared curiously as Dale was dragged across his yard.

‘Hey! Penny!’ Dale yelled out to her. ‘Can you feed the pets for me? The door’s unlocked and the keys are on the table in the hall!’

‘Shut up!’ Steven hissed, shoving Dale.

‘Pet food’s in the laundry!’ continued Dale, ignoring Steven’s complaints. ‘I’ll pay you back when this is sorted out! Thanks girl, love you!’

‘Get in the car!’ snapped Steven, pushing Dale’s head down.

‘Careful now, don’t be so rough,’ Dale commented as he was forced into the vehicle. ‘An officer with a record of brutality making an arrest without his partner present? You wouldn’t want to leave a mark or anything.’

Steven grumbled and climbed into the car. They drove down to the station in silence; Dale was hoping Richard got his message. Spending the night with Steven gloating over him wasn’t exactly an *exciting* prospect. Especially when he remembered the so-called “witnesses” Steven had mentioned last time they’d spoken; the fact Steven had been able to get a warrant using them was worrying.

‘We’re here,’ said Steven, parking the car and turning in his seat. ‘You better behave yourself, or I’ll do more than break your wrist this time.’

‘Is that a threat?’ asked Dale.

‘A warning,’ Steven replied.

Dale just rolled his eyes before he let out a deep breath and shrugged. ‘Or, you know, I could always do this —’

Before Steven could stop him, Dale smacked the side of his head into his seatbelt’s D-ring.

‘Oh, Jesus!’ Dale groaned, wincing at the pain near his eye. ‘I think that might *bruise*, don’t you?’

‘You conniving shit!’ Steven snapped. ‘You think that’ll stop you from going to jail?’

‘It certainly wouldn’t hurt,’ Dale laughed, blinking away the colour that had appeared in the corner of his vision. ‘My defence, I mean. This is actually the most pain

I've been in all day. Steven, you must learn not to be so rough with your arrests!

'You really think anyone's going to believe you?'

'With your history? Yeah,' Dale grinned. 'I mean, that girl who was with you last time; she'd probably agree you were quick to get angry.'

'Shut up!' growled Steven. He didn't say more as he undid his seatbelt and dragged Dale out of the car.

Dale didn't argue and let himself be led into the police station. He was met by several other officers; all whom he was familiar with.

'What's up with his eye?' one asked. Dale recognised him as one of Steven's superiors; Stuart Banks.

'He smacked his head against the side of the car—'

'No, I didn't,' interrupted Dale. 'He hit me.'

'Hm.... Maybe you should go,' Banks said, He motioned to Steven and then to the door.

'I didn't hit him!' exclaimed Steven. 'He did it to himself!'

'Even if that's true, you know him,' Banks motioned again to the door. 'He knows how to work you up. The last thing we need is you lashing out like last time.'

'I hope you rot in a cell!' Steven hissed in Dale's ear before storming out.

'Bye, Steve-o!' Dale called after him. Then he turned to Banks. 'Can you take the cuffs off now?'

Banks shook his head. 'Not until this is cleared up. You remember how this works, I assume?'

Dale rolled his eyes and nodded. Of course he did. 'Am I going to an interrogation room or a lineup?'

Shrugging, Banks crossed his arms. 'We were—'

'That's him!'

The shout came from Dale's left, and he turned to see two young men, probably only a little younger than he was, pointing to him.

‘That’s the guy we saw!’ one continued. ‘He’s the one who robbed her!’

Banks let out a long, frustrated sigh. ‘*Not* going to let them see you until the lineup, but I suppose things don’t always work out. Shaw! I told you to keep them in the other room until we got everything ready!’

‘You guys don’t coordinate very well, do you?’ Dale chuckled.

Banks cut his eyes at Dale; a harsh, angry glint showing through for a moment before he pushed it aside to his usual false calm-and-neutral expression.

Dale just shrugged, and looked to the witnesses. ‘I don’t know what to tell you boys, but I think you have the wrong person.’

They hesitated, then looked to each other, unsure.

‘I know a friend of mine got assaulted a week or two ago,’ Dale continued, deciding to take a gamble. ‘She described the guy by saying he could have been my twin! Maybe it was the same man? I’m not sure if she reported it — Her name’s Talia Wilson?’

‘I don’t remember that name,’ Banks responded, flatly. ‘Maybe you could call her for us?’

‘Don’t think that’s necessary,’ Dale flinched as he saw Richard’s car pull up outside; a frustrated Talia clearly visible through the windscreen window, and two young boys in the backseats. ‘She’s about to come in.’

Dale watched as the two adults stepped out of the car, leaving the boys behind.

Banks turned and, seeing Richard, gave a furious scoff.

‘That’s the girl,’ one of the witnesses breathed. ‘She’s the one who got attacked!’

‘So it was just *one* assault?’ Banks’ annoyed glare was, to what little credit he could be given, replaced with a genuine-sounding sigh of relief. ‘That’s something, at least.’

‘I didn’t do it,’ said Dale.

‘We’ll see,’ Banks said, simply.

‘What’s happened?’ asked Richard, pushing open the glass door and holding it for Talia. ‘Stuart? Why’s Dale been arrested?’

‘A misunderstanding, I’m *sure*,’ Banks replied, sarcastically. ‘We have evidence that he robbed a woman.’

Talia scoffed and rolled her eyes. Then she caught sight of the two men besides Dale and her features softened.

‘You’re that guy, aren’t you?’ she asked quietly. She smiled when he nodded. ‘Thanks for looking out for me. But Dale didn’t do it; he’s a friend of mine. And he knows better than to wrong me.’

‘Boy, do I *ever*,’ muttered Dale, taking in a long, harsh breath through his teeth.

‘Well, I’d like to file a complaint,’ Richard abandoned his cane for Talia’s shoulder, and pulled a pen out of his breast pocket. ‘This has just been unacceptable. Clark has been targeting Dale for years, now, and I want action to be taken!’

An air of tiredness rose around Banks, who nodded and rubbed his temples. ‘I understand. I’ll go get Steven’s details while you start writing the complaint at the front desk. Shaw, can you deal with this? Take a statement from the girl? And...’ he hesitated, casting an annoyed side-eye at Dale before speaking through his teeth. ‘Let Dale go.’

Shaw nodded and flipped open a notebook. ‘Wilson, was it? Why didn’t you report this assault when it first happened?’

‘What one of a *billion* reasons do you want?’ Talia grumbled, crossing her arms. ‘Maybe because he returned my things when I caught up to him? Or because I was in too much pain to *walk* all the way here? Or because I had work to do and a son to look after and a police investigation for a crime that would *never* get solved would waste too

much of my time? Which, *by the way*, can we make this quick?! It's *well* past his bedtime and I've had to drag him out here while he's sick to deal with *your* incompetence—'

Dale bit his lip. He didn't mean to raise his brow, but he could feel himself avert his gaze like a guilty child as Talia began to rant at the officer.

So she was just like that, huh? Good to know he wasn't the only one her anger was directed at...

'WHAT?' Steven's voice screeched from another room and in a moment he was back in the main part of the station, arguing with Banks about Richard's complaint. He almost ran into Richard as he got in his face and shouted, 'I've been doing my job, you bastard!'

'Clark!' Banks exclaimed, pulling Steven away from Richard. 'Show some self-control!'

Richard stared at Steven for a long, long moment before shrugging and continuing to write on the form. 'That's going in there, definitely.'

'He hit me, you know,' Dale commented. 'Don't forget to add that in.'

'He smashed his face into the seatbelt buckle!' Steven retorted.

Talia rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, right, like he'd be smart enough to do that.'

'Yeah! Like I'd be smart enough to— *Hey!*' Dale whined.

Talia just grinned at Dale and winked, and Dale felt himself relax. She could have said anything here; she could have told the officers what really happened and had him thrown in a cell.... But she didn't. She had lied for him.

Probably for herself, too, he realised, as he cast another glance at the boys in the car. She needed the job with him and Richard. But that didn't stop Dale from deciding that he could trust her. At least for now.

He let out a breath.

Maybe they *could* learn to tolerate each other....

Part 9:

The apartment smelled like burnt noodles, and no matter how much Talia tried to air out the kitchen she couldn't get rid of the lingering smell from the fire.

She was glad it was a Sunday; the apartment manager only came in every second Saturday and it would take her at least a week to make it look like nothing had happened.... After all, it had taken all day just to make it look like the stove hadn't been utterly destroyed.

'I'm *really* sorry,' Gavin muttered, running his hand along the mop handle. 'I didn't mean for this to happen.'

'I know you didn't,' responded Talia, pulling herself out of the cupboard and stretching. She hugged her son close and kissed his cheek. 'It was really sweet of you to try and make me breakfast.'

'But I made a mess of it, and now you have so much of extra work,' sighing, Gavin leant against his mother and wiped his face on his filthy sleeve. 'And you spent all day Friday cleaning the house. And now it's all ruined again.'

'It's alright, Gavin. I'm just glad you didn't get hurt,' Talia comforted. Then she smiled and poked her son's nose. 'Now, I think we've done enough for today. Take your medicine and have a shower, and I'll get dinner ready.'

Gavin nodded and, propping the mop against the kitchen bench, hurried into the lounge. Just as he did there was a knock at the door and he hurried back in. 'Do we answer it? Or are we pretending we're not here in case it's Mr Potato?'

Talia choked on her laugh. 'Don't call him that!' she exclaimed, playfully cuffing her son around the ears. 'Mr Felix does *not* look like a potato!'

'Yeah, he does!' Gavin argued. 'He's big, and he's bald, and he has weird hairy lumps all over him!'

'Gavin,' Talia bit her lip and tried to make herself

sound serious. ‘Don’t call the landlord a potato.’

The knocking sounded again, and Gavin turned his head to peer at the door. ‘Do you want me to get it?’

‘If you would,’ Talia chuckled, ruffling her son’s hair. ‘I need to get changed.’

‘Right!’ Gavin exclaimed, running to answer the door as his mother headed into her bedroom.

If Talia didn’t have work in the morning she may have thrown on her Big Double U uniform instead of getting her only other casual shirt dirty.... But it was better than ruining her good shirt, she supposed.

‘Hey there, junior!’ Dale’s voice was clear through the thin wall. ‘Where’s your mum gone?’

‘She’s getting changed,’ Gavin replied, taking on a decidedly defensive tone. ‘What do you want with her?’

‘I work with her.’

‘At the supermarket?’

‘At her new job. That’s our boss, Richard!’

‘Oh, I know *him!*’ Gavin’s voice rose, and the wary note it had taken vanished as his footsteps moved away from the door. ‘He’s the one who took Mum to dinner! Yeah, you can come in.’

‘I certainly am,’ Richard laughed. ‘Don’t you remember Dale? He was driving when we picked up you and your friend.’

‘Not really. I wasn’t feeling good and it makes it hard to remember faces sometime. Hey, if Mum’s working for you, are you going to take her out a lot?’ asked Gavin. ‘You should! She was heaps good after we got home! I think she enjoyed whatever you fed her. And I like you, too. One: you made my mum happy. Two: you look like a news reporter, only old and rich! It’s cool.’

Talia couldn’t stop herself from grinning as she buttoned up her shirt. Gavin continued badgering the boys, so she called through the wall, ‘Go have your shower,

Gavin!’

‘Can I stay home from school tomorrow?’ Gavin called back. ‘I’ll help you clean the rest of the kitchen!’

‘No!’ Talia exclaimed, finally getting the last button and leaning out of her bedroom. ‘Get in the shower before I pick you up and throw you in, young man! And no more cheek!’

Gavin laughed and rushed past his mother into the bathroom. He tapped his cheeks playfully before shutting the door. Talia waited a few moments, until she heard the water start running, then made her way into the lounge to greet Richard and Dale.

‘I’m sorry about him,’ she chuckled, wiping her glasses with her shirt. ‘He’s at that age, you know? Testing his boundaries.’

‘It’s fine,’ Dale answered before Richard had the chance. ‘Kids are great! I’ve always wanted to have one, myself.’

‘It’s the women he has trouble with,’ laughed Richard. ‘Never had a serious relationship. They like him well enough, but he always ends up in the friend-zone!’

‘You know I hate that term,’ Dale replied, adjusting the collar on his suit. ‘Why date someone you can’t be friends with? I don’t get it, honestly. What would you even *do* together? Well, on the plus side I have way more friends than *you* do!’

Richard snorted a laugh. ‘If you say so.’

Talia had to cover her mouth to stop herself laughing out loud. ‘I’m sure you have more friends than I do, at least.’

‘Ah, yes, your *two* friends,’ shrugged Richard. ‘What were their names again? Anne and Natasha?’

‘Anna and Patricia,’ Talia corrected. ‘They’re actually the next door neighbours, so don’t talk too loudly about them.’

‘I’m done!’ Gavin hollered. Then there was a crash. ‘I’M FINE! JUST KNOCKED OVER THE SHAMPOO!’

Shaking her head, Talia let out a sigh. ‘Come say goodnight!’

‘Lively tyke,’ Richard commented. He grinned when the bathroom door slammed loudly. ‘Are you always this much trouble?’

‘No,’ replied Gavin, rushing over to his mother and grabbing her arm so he could lean against her in a way that nearly knocked her over. He kissed her nose when she leant down, then tugged on his sleeves and bounced up and down with excitement. ‘Sometimes I’m *more* trouble! Aren’t I, Mum?’

Talia grabbed him and blew a raspberry on his still-damp cheek, eliciting a squeal-like laugh before letting him rush behind the boys.

He began to circle Dale; clearly sizing the man up, and Talia just rolled her eyes at him.

‘Gavin, are you *sure* you don’t want dinner?’ Talia asked, sighing when Gavin shook his head. ‘You didn’t eat much at lunch.’

‘I’m fine, Mum!’ Gavin replied, seemingly content with his examination of Dale, and making for his room. ‘If I get hungry I’ll come out and get something later! And I *won’t* set it on fire, this time.’

Talia rubbed the side of her head as her son disappeared into his room, and turned back to the boys. ‘Dale mentioned something about taking phone calls, the other day?’

‘Yes, he was thinking you could do secretary work,’ Richard explained, raising a hand to cut Dale off as he opened his mouth. ‘You’d be surprised how many calls we get. What do you think?’

‘Phone calls sound manageable,’ said Talia. ‘What kind of calls would I be taking?’

‘You’ll be putting people through to Dale and me

more than taking calls yourself,' Richard told her; again, dismissing Dale's attempts to speak with a wave of his hand. 'You'll be helping us with paperwork, too. And managing our appointments. Just general office assistance.'

'That's not the sort of work I was expecting,' Talia said with a laugh. 'What happened to the *confidential* work you wanted me to do?'

'That will come in time,' said Richard. 'But we can't just throw you a pay-cheque without giving you an official place in the business. Secretary work means you'll be close to Dale and me, and it means I can give you... unexpected "bonuses" for extra good months of work. It also means you'll have a secure permanent income even when we're not using risky income methods.'

Talia laughed out loud at the term. 'Risky income methods? *Really?*'

'Plausible deniability is my speciality. I mean, "risky income methods" could refer to investing in upstart overseas businesses,' said Richard with a wink. 'Which is how we're handling the current job we're doing, by the way..... While transferring the money-that-comes-from-a-confidential-source to one of our overseas partners who-is-totally-not-in-on-it, we make investments in the company's name. Luckily for Moore for More, this small up and coming business we've invested in has a major stock increase from all their loving supporters who-are-totally-not-us-with-money-from-a-questionable-source. We then buy our stock back from them at a very high profit... and just in time! The business is shut down mysteriously as the owner makes off with all the investment money left from sources-that-are-totally-not-us-pretending-to-be-multiple-untraceable-individuals. But it's okay for us because we have our clean, legal profits.'

'Does that... work?' Talia asked.

Richard just shrugged. 'It has the times we've done it before. Not that we do it too often, just when our

company is having trouble— Or when an opportunity falls in front of us on a platter.’

‘And why don’t we take *all* of the money we get?’

It was Dale who cut Richard off, this time. ‘Well, we need to pay our overseas partners *somehow!*’

‘This way works well enough for them as it does for us,’ Richard added.

Then, there was a thump from Gavin’s room, and Talia quickly excused herself to check on her son.

She opened his door to find him on the floor, and her heart leapt to her throat. ‘Gavin—’

‘I’m good! Fell out of bed, is all,’ he reassured with a sheepish chuckle as he kicked out his leg to show her the way his foot had been tangled in his blanket. ‘Not having a seizure! Just being a clutz.’

A relieved sigh found its way out of Talia, and she stepped over to her son to help him up. ‘Did you take your medicine?’

‘First thing I did,’ he promised, before rising on his toes to peck a kiss on his mother’s cheek. ‘G’night, Mum.’

‘Night, Gavin,’ Talia grinned. ‘Do you need anything before I go? I’ll make you something to eat, if you want.’

Gavin shook his head, so Talia flicked the light off as she left the room and shut the door behind her. She listened at the door for a second in case Gavin changed his mind... But when he didn’t say anything she headed back to the lounge and met the boys.

‘What happened to your kitchen?’ Dale asked.

‘Why were you snooping?’ Talia retorted, not answering his question.

Dale shrugged, and held up a dinosaur-print mug. ‘I was thirsty. Wanted a drink of water. And seeing as we’re getting so familiar with each other, I figured I’d treat myself as a friend and help myself!’

‘Hey!’ Talia raised a scolding finger at Dale. ‘Listen

here you smug b—‘

‘Mum?’ Gavin’s voice called through his door, and Talia waggled her finger at Dale one more time before she headed back to his room. ‘I changed my mind. I’m hungry.’

Talia gave an amused sigh and shook her head. ‘Thought so. What do you want?’

‘Do we have any more bread?’

Talia shook her head. ‘All we have is a tin of soup, noodles, and some leftover rice.’

Gavin thought for a moment before shrugging. ‘I don’t mind what you make.’

‘I’ll heat up the rice, then,’ Talia told him. ‘You stay in bed and I’ll bring it in.’

‘But you always say I’m not allowed to eat in bed!’ said Gavin, grinning widely before dropping his voice to a cheeky whisper. ‘*Are we breaking the rules?*’

‘Just for tonight,’ Talia winked at her son and put a finger to her lips. ‘Sometimes it’s okay to break the rules... But only *sometimes*.’

She shut the door with a quiet *click* and bit her lip.

Sometimes it’s okay to break the rules? She nearly laughed at herself. And then she nearly slapped herself. *She was about to break the law.*

She’d *already* broken the law; she’d lied to the police. That was an offence, wasn’t it?

Fuck.

Talia rubbed her temple and let out a loud sigh as she made her way back into the lounge.

‘Everything alright?’ Richard asked, tapping his cane on the floor in a worried sort of way.

‘Yeah, Gavin’s hungry and I’m a criminal,’ said Talia with a mock-laugh. ‘Life’s perfect. Not at all stressful.’

‘Not getting cold feet, are you?’ Dale snickered. ‘Not now that I’m actually warming up to the idea of working with you?’

All she could do was frown. ‘Do I really have the option of backing out now? Even if I leave, I’ve still lied to the police.’

‘We won’t snitch if you decide to go,’ Dale reassured with a shrug. ‘It’s up to you.’

Talia sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose, shifting her glasses awkwardly on her face, before making her way into the kitchen. ‘I’ve got to make Gavin dinner. We can talk after that, right?’

Part 10:

It was way too much for Talia to handle. She couldn't believe she was going through with this plan. She was going to get caught. She knew it. Nobody was in the back room with her *now*, sure, but she just knew that someone was going to walk in at the last minute and catch her. Then she'd go to jail and never see Gavin again.

But... that was who she was doing this for, wasn't it? Gavin. She took a deep breath. She could do this. For him. To give him a better future and make sure he was safe.

Running over the instructions in her mind she pulled out her phone —her new phone, that Richard had brought her specifically for this job— and snapped a photo of the sticky-note attached to her boss' computer.

For a moment, she held her breath.

Nobody walked in. No sirens went off. The police didn't burst through the break room door.

Absolutely nothing happened, except for an annoying fake photo-shutter sounding through the room.

She exhaled loudly, then stuffed the phone back in her pocket before pushing her way into the store to continue her shift. Only a half-hour was left of it, but it still dragged on.

She was glad she could take on less hours now. Especially when it inconvenienced Randell. Though she still couldn't drop too few while Richard tried to get everything ready for her.

He'd said he'd wanted to sort out what was left of his paperwork and set up her office before she came in officially. Ironic, as she thought that paperwork was going to be part of *her* job. Though she figured Richard was handling... more sensitive paperwork that nobody else was supposed to see. But then, *again*, that was the sort of thing she'd been hired for.

She supposed Richard was just trying to make it easier for her to get started, like any half-decent boss would.

She rubbed her eyes and made her way to the counter, relieving one of her coworkers and watching as a customer approached.

She barely paid attention as she scanned their products and made robotic small-talk. Time ticked too slowly for her and those last thirty minutes felt longer than her entire 8-hour shift. By the time Jim came to relieve her, she was nearly asleep at the register.

She hurried home, pushing herself and managing to make the two hour walk in one and a half— Which she regretted when she got to the stairs and had to practically crawl up them. She barely managed to get to her front door. She wasn't sure how she did it, as she fumbled with the lock and stumbled into her home.

'Talia, glad you're here!'

Talia would have leapt out of her skin if she'd had the energy. Instead she dropped her keys and stumbled into her door, which closed with a slam. She swallowed, and turned to face the boys. 'You're early.'

'Sorry,' Richard chuckled, helping Talia with her things. 'Gavin let us in. I hope that was okay?'

Talia nodded, and pushed herself off her door. She made a beeline for the couch and sat next to Dale, who shifted over so she could curl up comfortably.

'You look tired,' he commented. 'Long day?'

Talia shrugged and took a deep, deep breath. 'It felt like a lifetime.'

'Did you get the details?'

She pulled the phone out of her pocket and held it out for Dale.

'Awesome,' Dale chuckled, throwing the phone to Richard. 'Haven't done something big like this in years.'

Going to be heaps of fun!’

That didn’t sound like Talia’s definition of fun, but she didn’t say anything. She didn’t have the energy. She could barely keep her eyes open. The lights were just too bright. Maybe she should ask the boys to turn them off....

No, that would be stupid. They had to work.

She closed her eyes and sighed. She had to gather her thoughts and... focus.

‘Pizza’s here!’ Richard exclaimed.

Talia frowned and opened her eyes, which were stickier than she remembered. ‘When did you order pizza?’

‘About half an hour after you passed out,’ Dale told her. ‘Gavin wasn’t going to let us off without getting him something to eat; said if he had to wake you it would be *our* fault and he’d never forgive us.’

Talia turned to look at her son as he danced around with a large flat box and couldn’t bring herself to scold him. Instead she watched as he leapt at the table and started to devour the pizza like it was the first time he’d eaten in a week.

‘Don’t make yourself sick,’ warned Dale, ruffling Gavin’s hair playfully. Then he sat beside Talia and held out a slice. ‘Want some of the cheese one?’

Too sore to move, Talia just groaned and opened her mouth. For a moment they sat there uncomfortably. Then Dale sighed and held the pizza close enough for her to take a bite. She barely cared how awkward it was. She was too tired and hungry.

‘Must have been a hard day, huh?’ Dale asked as he grabbed her another slice.

‘Mum has to walk home from work,’ said Gavin, offhandedly. ‘It takes her a long time.’

Richard frowned. ‘How long?’

‘Like two hours; longer than it takes me to walk home from school, anyway,’ he told them. ‘She’s always like

this when she gets home.... Sometimes she's even worse. A few weeks ago she couldn't even get up in the morning and I had to get Anna to come look after her— Anna's in med school, so she's smart, and almost always knows what to do when someone's sick.'

'That's not.... That's not good,' said Dale. He paused for a moment, then put a hand on Talia's head. 'I could give you lifts sometimes. I've got nothing better to do most days.'

Talia shook her head. Getting a lift home wouldn't matter when she worked with him— Or, maybe it would matter more? She didn't know. How far away was Moore for More's office? How far away was his house...? She couldn't remember. She was too tired to do math.

'You sure you don't want help?'

No. She wasn't sure. She was tired from a long day of work. And embarrassed from needing to be hand-fed. And she was still hungry, even after she finished her third slice of pizza. She felt like she needed to tell someone how scared she was. She opened her mouth to tell them, maybe to let out some of her internal turmoil and conflicting horrors about what she was getting herself into, but her mouth froze open and she just stared at Dale. She couldn't think of how to say it. She couldn't... bring herself to say anything. Not when she needed them so much. And not while her son was there, watching her with a grin as he poured himself another glass of cola.

So instead of saying everything she wanted to say, she just sighed and mumbled, '*More pizza.*'

Part 11:

Today wasn't so bad, Dale thought, settling himself on his couch and clicking open his laptop. *A bit weird. But not too bad.*

Talia hadn't been aggressive like he'd expected her to be— Though she'd fallen asleep again about halfway through the meeting and Richard had decided to leave instead of waking her. And honestly, Dale couldn't blame Talia. If *he* had to walk home all the way from Kladstone North... well, he just wouldn't do it. And he enjoyed that sort of exercise!

Dale shook his head and sighed, clicking onto his current movie site. He was surprised it hadn't been taken down in the six months it'd been up, considering it was full of bootlegs. Though maybe that had something to do with the .utsi domain. He had no idea what kind of domain that was supposed to be. Maybe he should look it up?

He shrugged. He'd probably just find out about some dumb cryptojacking scandal— And it would probably be run by someone he worked with overseas. It didn't really matter all that much to him.

'What have we got today?' he mumbled, clicking past the adware to the featured movies.

Ensnared?

Pass. Round Mouse Studio's movies had just dropped in quality too much since *Chilly Princess* came out.

Wild Soul Horse?

Great show, but he'd seen it seven times already. There was only so many times he could watch a horse jump over a ravine.

He rubbed his temples, still unable to pull his mind away from Talia.

Had she been that exhausted the day he'd robbed her? Had she had to walk home after he'd knocked her

down? Had... Gavin had mentioned she'd not been able to get up a few weeks ago. Had that been because of *him*?

Dale sighed and pushed the thought to the back of his head, unselecting G rated movies in his search.

He didn't like seeing the consequences of his actions, that was for sure—

Pussy Slayer 3.

He hesitated, then shrugged.

Sure, why not?

If Richard snooped through his downloads folder again that was *his* problem. He should know by now what sort of movies Dale liked.

Though... it was M rated? With a title like that it didn't sound like it was meant to be. And an *action* movie? Probably just miscategorised by the uploader; that happened a lot on these sorts of sites.

Dale figured it was nothing, and clicked through the ads to the download page. After a moment of searching he found the real download button and got up to get something to eat while he waited.

It may have been two in the morning, but that wasn't going to stop him from making some toast.

'An early-early breakfast,' he justified to himself as he spread butter on the toast and headed back to the couch. His download was done so he opened the video and started watching.

A beautifully animated rainforest appeared on his laptop, complete with birds chirping and distant insect-singing ambience. Dale nearly swallowed in shock at how beautiful it was as large, hand-written lettering faded onto the screen:

Pussy Slayer 3: Rainforest Revenge.

'This is the prettiest porn opening I've ever seen,' Dale chuckled, taking another bite of his toast. 'What the hell is with the effort?'

As he watched, the scene panned slowly across the rainforest, beautiful music playing. Then the serenity was broken as animated characters exploded through the plant-life and onto the screen. A strongly-built woman —who was a dog with the body of a human? Oh! *Anthropomorphism!* — ran through the foliage, brushing leaves aside and panting heavily as she was pursued by... cat men on bikes with machine guns.

‘Huh, maybe it wasn’t miscategorised,’ Dale muttered, wiping his hands on his pants. He watched in quiet awe as the obviously-main character pulled a gun out of her jeans and aimed it at the obviously-villainous cat soldiers. ‘*Pussy Slayer*.... Didn’t realise they were being so literal.’

He watched, completely transfixed by the movie, until the credits started rolling. He’d hardly noticed it was three hours long; and only after he’d closed his video app did he finally feel how tired he was getting.

‘That was not what I was expecting *at all*,’ he breathed to himself. ‘Holy shit that was *awesome!* Who made this? I need the first two!’

In an instant, he was looking up the studio from the movie’s credits. Wolfdog Animations....

‘Oh,’ Dale didn’t mean to say it out loud, and he certainly didn’t mean for his voice to break, but he couldn’t contain his surprise when he found the creators’ website.

An independent studio dedicated to bringing free entertainment to our followers.... Several movies.... Donations help keep us free....

Dale stopped skimming.

Donations?

He could donate, if it meant they’d make more movies like that. He’d *definitely* donate if they made more of those movies!

‘What’s a good minimum donation?’ he asked himself, clicking on their PayUs donation button. ‘I mean...

a thousand dollars sounds like a decent amount. Though, I really liked watching that movie.’

He bit his lip and looked through a few more of the website’s pages, opening them in new tabs and glancing at all the free movies they had made. All of them looked amazing— Even their older stuff looked a decent quality. He couldn’t help clicking the download button on each of them as he flicked through the tabs.

‘Fuck it, fifty-thousand sounds fair,’ muttered Dale as he opened the donation page again. ‘The amount I’m downloading....’

Part 12:

‘This seems really wrong,’ Talia muttered, tapping her finger on the side of Dale’s laptop. ‘Like, morally wrong. As in, worse than last week when you convinced me to steal those shoes wrong.’

‘Hey, if idiots are willing to put their personal information in a survey like this they should *expect* it to be sold to marketers,’ Dale muttered, spooning a little too much yoghurt into his mouth to be able to talk properly.

Talia sighed and rubbed her temples. ‘Still? It doesn’t seem right.’

‘You misspelled “email” there,’ Dale laughed. ‘It’s mail as in mailing a letter. Not male as in a man.’

‘Male man, mail man, what’s the difference?’ Talia joked, waving a hand dismissively as Dale leaned over her.

‘I prefer saying mail *carrier*,’ replied Dale. ‘Girls deliver mail all the time. It’s just good ethics to use gender-neutral terms when you’re able to.’

‘Really? You’re talking about ethics right now?’ Talia scoffed, and motioned to the computer. ‘You’re literally showing me how to set up online scams.’

‘But I’ve got good work ethics while doing it!’ Dale defended proudly. ‘Such as making sure you sit with your back straight, wearing nice presentable clothes, and providing you with the tools you need to complete the job easily and in a timely manner—’

‘Shut up, or I’ll smack you.’

Dale let out a bark of a laugh and flopped back into his chair. ‘Alright, you’re basically done with the survey code, now we just want to host it on a hired server and put up some advertisements.’

‘I’ll let you handle that,’ said Talia. ‘Gavin’s going to be home soon. I want to surprise him with an early dinner.’

‘Feeling good enough to cook, huh?’

‘A day off will do that,’ Talia laughed, pushing herself out of her chair and rubbing her eyes. She’d never felt this itchy in the face before; but then, she’d never looked at a screen for so long before, either. ‘It’s so strange to just sit around all day. Not looking forward to having the night shift tonight, though.’

‘I get you.... What’re you making?’ asked Dale. He followed Talia to the now-repaired kitchen and watched her pull out a large frying pan.

‘Well, Trish raided her campus fridge yesterday and gave us some leftovers,’ Talia said. ‘That’s where the yoghurt came from, by the way. You’re eating stolen yoghurt.’

Dale looked to his food, then shrugged and ate another spoonful. ‘It’s like volunteering at the school cafeteria all over again.’

‘You stole food from your school’s cafeteria?’ Talia frowned. ‘Why am I not surprised?’

‘Hey, if you knew anything about Kladstone Primary, you’d understand.’

For a moment, Talia was quiet, then she let out a long sigh and threw the pan on the stove with a loud clang. ‘I went there.’

‘Really?’ Dale raised his brow in surprise. ‘I mean, I suppose that makes sense? It *was* the closest school to Kladstone Towers— I still can’t believe you lived there, by the way.’

‘Same building, same school,’ Talia chuckled. ‘No wonder we recognised each other.’

‘No wonder we wanted to *kill* each other!’ Dale added.

A sound, somewhat like a chuckle but mostly like a snort, grunted out of Talia’s nose and she shook her head. ‘Why don’t I remember who you were? Or why I want to strangle you so badly. What did you *do*?’

Dale shrugged. ‘I used to play soccer by the weird

statue out front of Kladstone Towers.’

‘The one shaped like a broken lamp?’ Talia asked.

Dale snickered childishly. ‘I always thought it looked more like an alien dildo.’

‘Of course you did, you’re a guy,’ Talia retorted with a grin. Then a memory crept into the back of her mind and she felt her smile disappear. ‘By the statue, huh? With a tall orange-haired kid?’

Dale’s face lit up. ‘Yeah! Jazz!’

Oh.

Talia felt her heart drop, and she looked away from Dale; distracting herself from the anxiety that rose in her by playing with the rubber strip that was glued to the bench’s corner.

And, as the anxiety pricked in Talia’s chest, Dale cocked his head and furrowed his brow.

‘Talia?’ he asked, his voice soft with concern.

‘He stole my underwear once,’ she said, quietly. ‘Him and some of his friends held me down and took them. Were you a part of that?’

‘Jesus Christ, no!’ Dale exclaimed, his face draining of colour. ‘I had no idea he did that! I wouldn’t have hung out with him if I did!’

Talia sighed and shook her head. ‘What number were you?’

For a moment Dale hesitated, confused, then he put his empty yoghurt packet on the bench and stuffed his hands in his pockets. ‘You mean those dumb jerseys we made? I was number six.’

Talia laughed at that. Loudly. She didn’t mean to, but it came out of her in a long cackle that nearly made her breathless. ‘That was *you*? Oh. I remember *you*! You threw my books in the drain!’

‘I don’t remember that!’ Dale exclaimed. ‘I wouldn’t do that to a girl!’

‘You *did!*’ Talia gave Dale a shove, laughing when his jaw dropped. ‘I caught you walking home after school one day with twelve—’

‘Roy—’

‘Whatever his name was,’ Talia rolled her eyes and took in a deep breath, trying to stop herself from laughing again. ‘I asked if we could hang out together, and you pushed me over and took my bag —*you*, not him— and then you emptied it into a storm-water drain and ran off.’

Realisation washed over Dale’s face and he jumped, clapping his hands together and pointing. ‘Oh my god you were Metal Tooth!’

A thousand thoughts ran through Talia’s head and she opened her mouth to respond— But nothing came out. She was too shocked by the nickname to make a quip and instead stood dumbly, staring at Dale with her jaw dropped and her eyes wide.

After a moment Dale seemed to notice what he’d blurted and blushed, rubbing the back of his head with a sheepish grin. ‘It was the, uh, braces.’

‘I got that,’ finally finding her words, Talia gave him a sad smile. ‘You know, my dad was so angry about me losing my school books he gave me a black eye?’

‘I remember you used to come to school with bruises,’ Dale looked away. ‘Sorry about the rumours.’

‘Ah, yes, the supposed fights with Nicole,’ Talia grinned. ‘You made that up?’

‘Jess did,’ Dale explained. ‘Number four.’

‘Ah, *him* I knew,’ said Talia, her face scrunching in a half-scowl of disgust. ‘He went to high school with me. Now that I think about it, I’m not surprised he was friends with Evan.’

‘Who?’

‘We dated for a bit, it wasn’t a big deal,’ Talia shook her head and turned back to the frying pan she’d almost

forgotten. She'd regretted bringing Evan up as soon as his name had left her mouth, and she hoped Dale wouldn't push to know more.

Luckily, instead of asking questions Dale gave an understanding nod as Talia lit the stove. 'I'm sorry about everything I did. I... I remember I put you through a lot, didn't I?' he winced as Talia nodded. 'I promise I'm a better person now.'

'You mugged me,' Talia pointed out, her voice flat.

'Yeaaaaah,' Dale drawled. Then, he gave an awkward smile. 'But at least I didn't call you fat!'

It was *just* silly enough to earn a snicker, as Talia turned to go through the fridge. 'Ah. Whatever, it's fine,' she told him. 'We were kids. Besides... remember the dog poo in the letterbox?'

'That was you?' this time it was Dale's eyes that went wide. 'I always thought that was Sam!'

'Nope,' Talia couldn't stop herself from grinning proudly. 'You guys sprayed me with water while I was trying to get home one day and I just got so mad I had to get revenge!'

Dale laughed, leaning back against the kitchen bench. 'You got it on my birthday cards!'

'Oh no,' biting her lip to hold back a laugh, Talia pulled out a sealed packet of bacon and began fumbling with the plastic. 'I'm so sorry.'

Dale shook his head and helped her open the meat. 'It's fine. I never cared much for my birthday, even as a kid. I only really liked the cards because of the money part.'

'Really? That's a shame,' Talia mumbled, throwing the bacon into the pan. 'I always have a bit of a party; best time of the year for me. Trish and Anna come over and we pool our money for a cake and a bottle of wine.'

'See, I don't get that,' Dale shrugged. 'Why wait for just one day of the year to have a good time? Just go out and get a cake whenever you feel like cake, I say.'

‘It takes us that long to save up the money,’ Talia retorted, her voice becoming as harsh as the sizzling bacon. She didn’t mean to sound so rough, but her voice came out as a hiss. ‘Believe me, if I could have cake every day, I would. Chocolate. That’s the best sort. And Gavin likes it too.’

‘I think if I’ve learnt anything, it’s that Gavin likes food regardless of flavour,’ Dale joked. ‘I think he’d eat clay if you let him.’

‘He used to,’ Talia replied, the edge gone from her voice. ‘He didn’t grow out of it until he was eight. *Eight years old* and he was eating dirt.’

‘To be fair, I think I can recall you doing the same!’

‘Oh please; it was the worms I was interested in, not the dirt.’

Dale snorted a laugh and handed Talia more bacon. ‘Fair enough. By the way, is it cool if I buy Gavin treats? Chocolate and stuff?’

‘Sparingly, yes,’ Talia told him. ‘Not too much, though. Most foods are alright; it’s just the sugar you need to be careful of. Too much sugar without anything else will make him sick. No more than... one chocolate bar per two sandwiches, I suppose. And only if he’s got lots of water to drink, too.’

‘Cool, cool,’ Dale grinned. ‘You know, I’m glad he likes me so much. He’s a good kid.’

‘You played soccer with him, of *course* he likes you,’ Talia laughed, and scooped her dinner into a bowl. ‘I have to ask about that, though. What is it with you and kids? Last week when we went out for lunch with Richard I saw you cooing over a baby like it was a litter of kittens.’

‘I just like kids,’ Dale responded, shrugging. ‘As I keep saying, I want to have some, eventually. Hopefully be a better father than my own. But hey. Low bar to step over.’

‘That’s so *cute*,’ Talia snickered. ‘I know what you

mean, though. When I had Gavin I was absolutely terrified I'd be as bad as my mother. Turns out it wasn't as likely as I thought and being a decent person isn't actually that hard.'

Dale let out a laugh. 'It's not always easy though, you have to admit.'

Talia gave a humoured snort and handed Dale the overflowing bowl of bacon. 'Put this on the table, would you? Before Gavin gets—'

The apartment door slammed loud enough to make the pair jump, and Talia frowned.

'I hope you don't always slam the door like that!' she called.

She was met with a gasp and the sound of a bag being dropped. 'Mum you're... home?'

'Yes! And I hope that slam was a one-off!' Talia retorted, grabbing the bowl back from Dale and marching into the lounge. 'Because if I find out you've been slamming doors like that you're going to be in a lot of trouble!'

Gavin looked guiltily at the ground and shuffled in place, obviously not wanting to tell his mother the truth. It took him a long while to look up, and when he did he gasped again, this time in joy. 'Bacon!'

'Yes,' said Talia, flatly. Then she grinned as her son raced to the table and smacked his hands against it excitedly. 'Anna and Trish gave it to us, so make sure you thank them tonight when they come over— They're looking after you for a little bit.'

'Really?' Gavin's voice dropped. 'Where will you be?'

'I'm on night shift for the rest of the week,' Talia told him. 'You'll be at school most of the time I'll be at home, so the girls' will be looking after you.'

Gavin seemed to deflate, then; the spark in his eyes leaving him alongside his breath as he sigh and slumped against the table. 'Ugh.'

‘*Ugh?*’ Talia echoed; guilt poking softly at her. If she could have avoided it, she would have. But she couldn’t just leave Big Double U— Not immediately after what she’d done. That would be too suspicious... she had to continue work as normal, for just a little longer, so she didn’t raise suspicion.... ‘I thought you *liked* when Anna and Trish looked after you.’

‘Yeah, but not for a *week!*’ Gavin groaned. ‘They don’t *get* me!’

‘What do you mean, they don’t get you?’ Talia shook her head. ‘They love you!’

‘Yeah but they’re *girls,*’ Gavin groaned— Much to Dale’s amusement, as the man smothered a chuckle. ‘I don’t want to spend a week living with girls!’

‘Your mother’s a girl, champ,’ Dale commented. ‘You don’t like living with her?’

‘She’s a different *kind* of girl,’ Gavin retorted, before lifting himself up and casting his mother a pleading look. ‘Can I stay with Dale, instead? He’s a guy. He gets me.’

‘I can’t ask him to do that,’ Talia said, crossing her arms.

‘Then I’ll ask for you!’ Gavin said, a hint of cheeky sarcasm in his voice as a grin twitched to his lips. ‘Dale? Can I stay at yours?’

For a moment, Dale was quiet as he swallowed down his giggles. Then he cast a glance to Talia and gave a shrug; as if asking for her permission to answer.

Talia gave a more exasperated shrug in return.

Which Dale returned with another shrug— This one even more playful than the last.

And Talia’s next shrug was even *more* exasperated, as she threw up her hands and slapped them down heavily against her sides.

Dale turned back to Gavin, and offered the boy a grin. ‘Sure, Gav. I don’t mind.’

Part 13:

The couch wasn't the most comfortable place to sleep, but Dale didn't mind. He was glad to have stayed over while Talia went to work; Gavin had been so depressed while she was gone, so Dale had taken him out for ice cream to cheer him up. It seemed to have worked, too. Just getting out of the apartment seemed to perk the kid up. Plus, Gavin had a blast picking the music for the drive. Then after getting home he'd read a book on Dale's phone.

He was in bed now, and Dale had taken the opportunity to text a few friends about maybe being too busy for their usual hangouts. He wanted to be available while Talia wasn't, just in case.... Though he hoped he wasn't overstepping. He wasn't trying to be weird. He just wanted to help when he knew Talia needed it. Even if they didn't know each other that well, yet....

He wanted to make things up to her.

'Dale?' squeaked Gavin.

'Hmm?' Dale slowly blinked open his eyes, and took in a deep breath. He'd nearly been asleep. 'What's up?'

'I had a nightmare. Can I sit with you?'

'Sure, sport,' Dale said, yawning and pushing himself up so Gavin could sit next to him. 'What was the dream about?'

Quietly, Gavin patted down a spot on the couch before sitting. He looked at the floor for a while before swallowing, and muttering, 'I dreamt that we got kicked out of the apartment.'

'Oh, Gav—'

'We had to live on the streets, and Mum got really sick, and she couldn't— She went to hospital and....'

'Gavin, deep breath,' Dale wrapped an arm around the boy and gave him a squeeze. 'It's alright. It was just a

dream. It's not going to happen.'

'But— We don't have any money,' his voice trembled as he curled into Dale. 'Mum spends it all on my medicine.'

'No, not all of it, I'm sure a lot of it goes to the rent—'

'It doesn't,' Gavin interrupted, his voice too serious to be coming from a boy his age. 'I saw the mail. I'm not supposed to read it, but Mum left it on the table and I... wanted to know. Our landlord's not happy because the rent hasn't been paid in a long time, and he can't keep letting us live here for free. We have to pay or we can't stay here anymore. That's what he wrote.'

Dale's mouth felt dry. 'She's... behind on the rent? She can't cut anything out? No morning coffee or weekends out?'

'She doesn't do *any* of that!' Gavin sobbed, burying his face in Dale's shirt. 'She doesn't even eat every day! She tells me she does, but I know she doesn't.'

Dale hesitated, unable to find his words. A heavy, anxious feeling poked at him and all he could do was pull Gavin close and squeeze his shoulders in hopes of comforting him.

'I hope when Richard pays her it's better than what she gets from her work at the shops,' Gavin sniffed. 'Then she can leave that other stupid job and not be so tired all the time.'

'Yeah, well... Richard's a good guy,' Dale managed. 'He'll make sure Talia gets paid right.'

Gavin sniffed and curled up on the couch. He didn't say anything else as Dale threw the blanket over him. He just wiped his eyes and buried his face into the cushion to sleep.

It felt like hours before Dale was able to get his thoughts together. A hit of reality was dawning on him; he'd had it so easy since he'd met Richard that he'd just kind of assumed *everyone* was able to cope. That people who were failing just hadn't worked hard enough.... And now meeting

Talia was forcing him to look at it from another perspective. He'd been denying it but... today had made it impossible to ignore. How much *one* day off had meant to Talia. How stressed Gavin always was.... How little they had was so obvious; he could barely believe he'd been denying it so long.

He let out a sigh and pushed himself off the couch. He didn't think they'd notice if he poked around. He wouldn't move anything. Just look. Starting with the kitchen.

The very... *very* bare kitchen which still had scorch-marks poking through the thin coat of paint that attempted to hide it. Dale shook his head and opened the fridge; there was bacon, butter, and half a bowl of rice. Nothing else.

'Wow,' Dale sighed. 'No wonder Talia didn't let me go through fridge before. That's... depressing.'

He closed the fridge quietly, letting its dull light fade until the room went dark. Then he quietly made his way across the room to the bedrooms and bathroom.

The bedroom doors were a little more cheery than the rest of the house; they were covered from top to bottom in photos and drawings. The first drawing Dale saw was an orange cat obviously made by Gavin. Then he glanced down to what would be Talia's eye-level and grinned at the photo of her and Gavin sitting around a birthday setting.

Gavin's door was a little different; it was mostly his own drawings and signs with a few photos of him and his friend. His name hung at the top of the door in big, bold letters written on loose sheets of paper.

For a moment Dale hesitated. He knew he shouldn't go into the bedrooms. He knew it but... somehow, he couldn't stop himself from turning the handle and peeking in.

It was bare.

There was a bed, a soccer ball, and a basket of

clothes with no wardrobe to put them in. A few stuffed toys littered the floor, but they were old and tattered.

Dale swallowed and carefully stepped through the door, though entering the room didn't seem to change how empty it was. Shivering, he rubbed his arm and took everything in.

The last time he'd been in a building that felt this unhomey he was in the holding cell at Kladstone's police station. Though, the holding cells didn't have rubber padding on every corner. Somehow the little black strips made the room feel tighter than the cell had.

The tiny window didn't help make the room feel any less like a prison, either. Especially when it faced a brick wall that was so close to this building he'd probably be able to reach out and touch it. And the drawings on the wall did little to help make the room feel more like a home— They were drooping in a depressing way, as if there wasn't enough tape to hold them up.

He sighed and nudged the washing basket with his foot. It was barely full, containing three or four torn shirts he recognised too well. He'd just thought they were Gavin's favourite clothes; now it was clear they were his *only* clothes.

'What kind of ten-year-old doesn't have a computer?' Dale said to himself sadly, half-joking to try and make himself feel better. He couldn't bear the bedroom much longer and stepped out, instead making his way to the bathroom.

It was just as depressing, with toilet paper obviously stolen from a public toilet, shredded rags that were supposed to be towels, and a bar of soap that was made of seven smaller bars of soap squashed together. It all made him want to stop looking.... But at the same time he couldn't pull himself away as he found a rusted shower chair and an old brush that was more hair than bristles. He cringed at the thought of having to use it, and distracted himself by

turning and examining the stains on the walls instead. His eyes drifted back to the hall and he saw Talia's bedroom door.

He knew he shouldn't. He knew he really, *really* shouldn't— But suddenly he was standing in the middle of her bedroom, staring at the broken bed and the bedside table which was overflowing with letters that had menacing red and yellow lettering stamped across their fronts. The only thing on her bedside table aside from the bills was her retainer; sitting out with no case and looking old and worn.

Dale looked away and realised, as his eyes trailed the floor, Talia didn't even have a clothes basket like Gavin did. Her clothes were just sat in a folded pile on the floor. All three outfits.

'Two shirts,' Dale muttered, crouching down and checking the label. He sighed when he saw they were from a clothing brand that had been discontinued almost six years ago.

Was this really all she owned? It didn't seem possible that this was all she had.

Licking his lips anxiously, Dale pushed himself back to his feet and glanced around. Drawings practically wallpapered the room, all of them looking like Gavin's work from various ages. It was a... surreal feeling. There was nothing, and the room felt like a jail, but no matter which way he looked all he could see were bright pink hearts and pictures of "me and mum who I love" and he couldn't place the uncomfortable itch it gave him.

The only way he could avoid looking at the walls was to look at the floor— And then his eyes fell to a shoe-box that poked out from under Talia's bed.

Don't do it Dale, he thought to himself. *Don't look in the box.*

He immediately crouched down and grabbed the box, taking off the lid and peering inside.

It was the least-empty thing in the house, and even

then it was mostly old hair ties and bracelets, worn bookmarks, old letters, and a tiny, badly carved wooden bird.

Dale nodded, pursing his lips, and went to put the lid back on. As he did, however, he noticed an old photograph, which had been torn up and taped back together, buried among the contents. He carefully pulled it out and saw it featured a teenage Talia on a school bus, forming a heart with her hands as a teenage boy had his arm around her and grinned widely at the camera.

Dale's stomach did a flip. The boy looked *exactly* like Gavin. He had the same thick blonde hair and deep blue eyes as Gavin, and Dale knew right away who it was.... He could barely handle flipping over the photo to read the back.

Evan & Talia forever

He almost threw up. He jammed the photo back in the box, and slid the box back under Talia's bed.

He really shouldn't have looked.

He really, *really* shouldn't have looked.

Hurriedly Dale rushed out of Talia's room and into the bathroom. He splashed water in his face and let out a loud breath, trying to keep himself from freaking out.

What the hell did he think he was doing, going through her personal things?! What was *wrong* with him?

'Dale?' Gavin's voice whispered from the door.

Dale looked up from the sink and quickly wiped the excess water from his face with a swipe of his hand. 'What's up?'

'I need the toilet,' said Gavin.

'Yeah, sure,' quickly ducking out the door, Dale let Gavin into the bathroom. 'When you're done I'd like to have a chat.'

Gavin nodded and quietly shut the door behind him, leaving Dale standing awkwardly in the hall.

After a second of hesitation Dale rushed back into Talia's room and sifted through her bills. He grabbed three important-looking ones —the rent, a very overdue debt with a pawnbroker, and her mobile phone bill— and stuffed them into his pocket.

As he came out of Talia's room again Gavin opened the bathroom door and frowned.

'Why were you in Mum's room? She doesn't like people going in there. Even Trish isn't allowed.'

'I was just grabbing something for her,' Dale smiled. Then he beckoned Gavin over and crouched down to talk to him. 'You said you were scared of your mum getting in trouble because of money?'

Slowly, Gavin nodded.

'Well, would you feel better if I helped pay some of the rent for her?'

Gavin nodded, faster this time. 'But you can't tell her until *after* you do it or she won't let you, because she's stubborn!'

Dale chuckled at that. 'Yeah, I know.... And hey, what would you say if I took you food shopping? I want to get you two so much food you can't fit it all in the pantry. Would you like that?'

'YES!' Gavin shouted, then quickly covered his mouth. 'When?'

'Well, if we're both having trouble sleeping, now would be as good a time as any,' said Dale, grinning. 'That way your mum'll get a good surprise when she gets home.'

'Okay, we can't go to Kladstone North or she might see us and get mad,' Gavin warned. 'But I know there's a Kyles nearby that's open all night because it's next to a petrol station! We could go there!'

'Sounds like a plan,' Dale chuckled. 'And after we're done shopping we can leave a note here with all the food and you can come to my place and sleep over. That way your mum won't yell at us when she finds out we stayed up

late— She'll have to walk all the way to my house if she wants to yell at us, and I don't think she's *that* dedicated to being angry.'

Gavin's eyes sparkled impishly. 'Hah! You don't know Mum very well at all, do you?'

Part 14:

‘Dale from Moore for More investments, how can I help you?’ Dale muttered into his phone. He held back a yawn as he rubbed his eyes and wound down his car window to get some fresh air. Gavin would be out of school soon, and he wanted to be there to pick him up. ‘Yes, we do allow scheduled withdrawals. Would you like me to forward your call to one of our financial advisers? Ah. Well, if you’d prefer you could always come into our Northern Branch and talk to them in person. Oh no, you don’t have to make an appointment, you can just walk in anytime between nine and five. Alright, have a good day.’

The phone beeped as the client hung up, and Dale chucked it onto the passenger’s seat and leant back against his chair.

He was usually fine to stay up late, but he’d made the mistake of watching another one of Wolfdog Animation’s movies. He’d told himself he’d just put it on and fall asleep during it, but three hours later he was staring at the credits, more energised than ever.... Which of course meant he’d crashed in the middle of the day and gotten a slap around the head from Richard, who’d told him to go home and get some rest.

He managed about ten minutes before he’d gotten a phone call from Talia, who’d not even noticed the pile of food in her living room until after she’d woken up from what was most likely a work-induced coma. She’d been frantic, switching between sobbing grateful tears and stubbornly yelling at him because she “didn’t need help!”

Luckily for Dale, she’d ended the call with grateful sobbing. He was pretty sure that was what she was going to go with; though he’d have to be careful next time he saw her in case she decided to deck him.

‘Hi, I don’t think we’ve met?’ a voice spoke beside

Dale and he jumped in his seat; turning to the well-groomed man outside his car. ‘Robert Salinas, I’m the school’s principal. I don’t believe I recognise you.... Who are you waiting for?’

‘I’m Dale Anderson,’ Dale gave a smile and offered his hand through the open window. ‘I’m a friend of Talia Wilson, she’s got me looking after Gavin for the week. She said she called you to let you know?’

‘Ah, yes, she did,’ said Salinas. ‘Good, good. I just wanted to be sure.’

‘Yeah, no, I get it,’ Dale gave an understanding click of his tongue. ‘Last thing you want is a stranger hanging around a school, right?’

Salinas gave a nod, but didn’t otherwise respond. Instead he crossed his arms and glanced at the school as a bell rung loudly over the loudspeaker. Then he turned back and lowered his voice. ‘Is everything alright with Talia?’

‘What do you mean?’ Dale blinked.

‘Gavin’s usually a good kid,’ said Salinas. ‘But the past month he’s been... well, *troubled* I suppose. He’s never had detention before —not once— but somehow he managed to get himself sent out of every class he had last week. You can understand why I’m worried?’

‘He’s stressed,’ Dale confirmed. ‘I didn’t realise it was that bad, though. Does Talia know?’

Salinas sighed, glancing to his side as kids sprinted around him and climbed into cars. ‘We’ve talked about it, but she’s... private about it. I know she’s had a hard time, and I think she might be embarrassed to talk about it, but I *need* to know these things so I know how to handle—’

‘DALE!’ Gavin’s excited shout caught both men’s attention and they stopped their conversation to look to the school, just in time to see Gavin leap a fence and fall face-first into the concrete street.

‘*Fuck—*’ Dale muttered, almost falling onto the path himself in his haste to get out of his car. ‘Gav! You alright,

mate?’

Gavin let Dale help him to his feet, his grin still firmly plastered on his face as if he hadn’t just skinned his knees and elbows and nose. ‘You’re here!’

‘Of course I’m here!’ Dale chuckled, pulling a tissue out of his pocket and carefully wiping the dirt off Gavin’s face. ‘Your mum told me to look after you, so where did you think I’d be?’

‘Well, usually I walk home,’ said Gavin. ‘I basically never get picked up from school! Can I sit in the front seat? Can we get food on the way home? And can we go back to your house? I really like your dogs!’

‘Calm down and let me answer at least *one* of those questions before asking another,’ laughing, Dale ruffled Gavin’s hair; though the boy batted his hand away. ‘I figured you’d want to stay over again, so I asked your mum about it and she said it was fine.’

‘Awesome!’ Gavin exclaimed, rushing to Dale’s car and clambering into the front seat. ‘Can we get Ms Danielle’s on the way home? I want a Burger Basher meal!’

Salinas gave a chuckle and smirked at Dale. ‘I don’t think he’d be able to eat that on his own.’

‘I don’t know,’ Dale responded. ‘I saw the kid eat an entire Big Bert’s pizza once.’

Salinas looked impressed. ‘Those things can feed a family.’

‘And he managed it in one sitting,’ Dale laughed as Gavin began to slam his hands against the dashboard. ‘Ah, Christ, I better get him something before he sets off the airbag. Gav, mate! Gentle with the dash!’

Part 15:

Dale still couldn't believe how much Gavin had eaten. He'd practically inhaled his first meal, and then begged for another. And then *another*, which Dale couldn't believe he'd finished. He'd half-expected Gavin to feel sick on the way home; but as soon as the car had parked the black-hole of a child had sprinted up the path and began calling to the dogs through the front door.

And then the snacks— Dear god, the snacks!

The amount of food Gavin had eaten since they'd gotten home was incredible. At least four bags of chips and an entire loaf of bread. Dale started to wonder if the reason Talia never had food wasn't because they were poor, but because Gavin was a mutant with an endless stomach who could never be satisfied.

He'd finally had to put his foot down and told Gavin he'd had enough after his second litre of juice. And to his credit, Gavin had handled it well. He didn't complain or try and sneak more food. He just thanked Dale for letting him have so much and asked if they could go outside and play soccer, which they had done until it got dark.

They were just finishing packing up when a car pulled up in front of Dale's house. With a jolt of horror, Dale realised he'd forgotten about Laura.

'Oh, shit! *Laura!*' he exclaimed, tripping on the pavement and stumbling to the car as a beautiful young girl climbed out. 'Oh my god, Laura! I'm *so* sorry!'

'Sorry for what?' Laura blinked. Then she looked Dale over, rolled her eyes, and grinned. 'You forgot about our date, didn't you?'

'I meant to text you—'

'Who's that!' Gavin called from the front door, running out and circling Laura excitedly. 'WOW! Dale, is she another one of your friends? She looks *awesome!*'

‘Is... your profile didn’t say you had a kid,’ Laura stammered.

‘Oh no! No!’ Dale quickly shook his head, and tried to shoo Gavin towards the house. ‘I’m watching him for a friend— Gavin, go back inside! It’s a school night. .’

‘You let me stay up all night last night!’ Gavin retorted, continuing to circle Dale’s date.

‘That was different! We had things to do!’ Dale responded breathlessly. When he realised he couldn’t control the boy he just sighed and glanced to Laura. ‘I’m really sorry. I meant to text you I just... got distracted.’

‘It’s fine,’ giving a weak smile, Laura looked down to Gavin. ‘I can see why you forgot.’

‘Who are you?’ Gavin asked. ‘How do you know Dale?’

‘I’m Laura, I met Dale online,’ Laura answered gently. ‘We were supposed to be going on a date tonight, but I think he might have forgotten about me.’

‘A date?’ Gavin echoed slowly before a huge smile found its way to his face. ‘I can help with that! Dale! Can I help you with your date? C’mon! You obviously need help if you *forgot* about it!’

‘Gavin, I—’

‘You should stay for dinner!’ Gavin exclaimed, running back to the house and shaking the railing along the side of the porch. ‘DALE! You have to let her stay for dinner! Otherwise you’ve stood her up, and you know that’s not on!’

‘He’s... energetic,’ Laura muttered, watching as he disappeared into the house.

‘Would you believe he spent the last four hours running around in circles?’ asked Dale.

‘*Bloody hell,*’ Laura mumbled under her breath, a grin working its way to the corners of her mouth. ‘I feel for his parents.’

Dale chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. 'Sorry about the date. Would you like to stay for dinner? We're having some takeaway delivered. Chinese. It should be here soon.'

'Sure,' Laura replied, letting Dale lead her into the house. 'Did you get enough for three people?'

'I got enough for seven,' Dale admitted, nodding to Gavin as he sprinted past. 'That thing right there is some sort of gremlin. I want to fill him up before midnight.'

Laura snorted so hard she had to cover her mouth to stop herself from choking on her laugh.

'Oh, good timing!' Dale turned as he heard the rumbling of another car and hurried outside to collect their dinner.

He was grateful when Laura followed him out to help carry the food. And he made a point to tip the deliverer... they were a *lot* earlier than he'd expected, and the food was properly packed and hot.

It was going to be a great dinner.

'**YES!**' Gavin screeched as the food was put on the kitchen bench. 'Pass it here!'

'Your mum told me to make sure you ate at the table,' Dale scolded. 'Go sit down and I'll grab some bowls— You too, Laura, you're a guest.... Plus, I have to make up for forgetting about tonight.'

'Yeah, he totally has to make up for that!' said Gavin, rushing to the other room. There was a loud *bang* as he leapt into—and presumably over— his seat. 'I'M OKAY!'

'You better be!' Dale called back, rolling his eyes playfully at Laura and motioning for her to join Gavin. 'Otherwise your mum's going to kill me!'

He heard Laura laugh as Gavin began chattering away, and quickly scooped the food into several bowls before joining them.

‘—And sometimes Mum looks at flowers and makeup when we go shopping,’ said Gavin, bouncing up and down as Dale gave him his dinner. ‘I think she wants to dress up nice, like you’re dressed up now. But... she can’t really afford it. I feel bad about it sometimes.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ Dale said gently, petting Gavin on the head. ‘Don’t feel bad about that.’

‘But it *is* my fault!’ Gavin exclaimed, wide-eyed. ‘If she didn’t have to buy me my medicine she’d have *heaps* more money and could get herself really nice things all the time! Have you *seen* how much my medicine costs? It’s so *much money!* If she didn’t have to buy it we’d be able to pay the rent on time!’

‘Gav, relax—’

‘Sometimes I wonder if Mum would have been better off if I hadn’t been born,’ said Gavin, jamming an entire dumpling in his mouth; he didn’t seem to realise how serious a topic he’d brought up, as he continued. ‘But then there’d be nobody to look after her. I gotta look after her, because you *know* she won’t do it *herself!*’

‘Ga-Gavin—’ Dale couldn’t believe how casually Gavin was talking about this. Not when he felt like his own soul was descending from his body into the ground as Gavin continued chattering about his mother. He glanced at Laura, who looked uncomfortable and was rubbing her cheek anxiously, and knew he had to try and change the topic before—

‘And it’s not like grandma and grandpa are gonna look after her!’ Gavin continued loudly. ‘They think God’s punishing her because she wasn’t married to my dad when she had me— They say I’m an abomination and my seizures are to punish us for going against God’s will!’

‘Gavin!’

‘Mum just says they’re crazy and old and need to die soon—’

‘GAVIN!’ Dale exclaimed, louder than he intended.

The room went silent as Gavin was cut off mid-sentence. Then, he slowly put down his food and rubbed his arm. ‘Sorry.’

‘No— I didn’t mean to shout,’ Dale gave Gavin’s shoulder a squeeze. ‘You’re not in trouble. It’s just... I couldn’t get a word in, and I don’t think this is appropriate to talk about right now.’

Gavin gave a nod and picked up his food again. ‘You know, *you* could be my dad.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ Dale chuckled. He cast a glance to his date, who shrugged. ‘Your mum and I just work together.’

‘She likes you,’ Gavin told him. ‘She doesn’t know it yet, but she does.’

Laura let out a nervous chuckle and shook her head. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘She lets him look after me!’ replied Gavin. ‘And bring me to his house. She never lets anyone besides Anna and Trish look after me! She’s even nervous about Jacob’s parents! So she must like Dale a whole lot. But she pretends she doesn’t like him at all, which means she *like*-likes him, like in the movies.’

‘Gavin, that’s *just* in movies,’ Dale sighed. ‘I don’t think that’s how your mum feels.’

‘How would you know?’ asked Gavin, sticking his nose in the air proudly. ‘She’s *my* mum! I know her better than you! And she likes you a lot! You should marry her, and be my dad!’

‘Gavin, I’m not going to marry your mum,’ said Dale, shaking his head.

‘*Yet*,’ Gavin mumbled in reply. Then he stuffed the rest of his dinner in his mouth and stacked his dishes as he swallowed. ‘Can I play on your computer after the dishes are done?’

‘You can go play now,’ Dale sighed, quickly taking the plates from Gavin and putting them back on the table.

‘I’ll handle cleaning up. That’s not your job.’

‘See! You and Mum are *exactly* the same!’ Gavin exclaimed. ‘Control freaks who won’t let me help with the chores!’

‘Hey!’ Dale exclaimed, half-following Gavin as he sprinted out of the room. ‘You have an hour before bed!’

‘Can I sleep in your room again?’ Gavin asked across the house. ‘Your bed is super comfy!’

‘I assumed I’d lost it till you went home!’ Dale called back. He felt himself laugh at the idea of spending another night in the guest room, while his guest took his own. Then he turned back to Laura and shrugged. ‘He’s a good kid. Sorry he kept going on about his mum.’

‘Ruined the mood a bit, yeah,’ Laura giggled, then she let out a breath and rubbed her hands together anxiously. ‘Look, Dale.... You look like you really like kids, and I’m not really.... I don’t want them, and I can tell you do. I don’t think this will work.’

‘Ah,’ Dale gave a nod. ‘Yeah. That’s a deal breaker.’

‘Sorry for wasting your time.’

‘No! Not at all!’ laughed Dale. ‘I had a nice time. And hey— You have my number, we can meet up sometime as friends?’

‘Sure,’ sheepishly, Laura put down her fork and stood up. ‘I’m actually free next weekend if you want to hang out. I’ll text you about it— Though I should probably be going. Dinner was... interesting.’

‘Thanks for showing up— And sorry I forgot,’ Dale quickly gathered Laura’s bag and coat. ‘Do you need a lift home?’

‘I drove here.’

‘Right! Forgot that, too,’ Dale chuckled. ‘Still, I’ll walk you out.’

Part 16:

Talia paced restlessly around the apartment. She was anxious to see Gavin again. The night shift had been even more exhausting than she'd thought it would be and she hadn't managed to as much catch a glimpse of him the entire week she'd been working. Which, given all that was happening to the store, she really needed the comfort of seeing her son, right now.

The money had finally been taken from Big Double U's account and the owners were forced to close the branch while they investigated Randell's boundless incompetence. Talia had breathed a sigh of relief when she heard that they didn't suspect anyone in the store; it had been discovered that Randell had put several photos of himself on his social media with his monitor —and thus, the bank details— visible behind him, and the blame was being put completely on his idiocy, as it was assumed that was where the theft had come from.

Nobody had even thought to cast her a single glance during the explanation, and when she'd realised that she really *was* going to get away with it, she'd almost leapt in the air with glee.

It wasn't even taking the money that made her happy— It was the look on Randell's face. That fucking *look*, as all the years of collecting vile karma caught up to him.

The vindication of revenge, after he'd made her life actual hell and harassed her for years, was one of the sweetest and sickest joys she'd ever felt.

And now she had some time off until she started her work at Moore for More; time that she could spend with her son.

Still, despite all the good she felt, she couldn't help worrying about Gavin.

Dale kept texting to tell her everything was fine but... she couldn't bring herself to believe it. She couldn't relax until she saw he was okay for herself.

And even then, she'd probably have to check him over to make sure he had no bumps or bruises.

'Mum!' Gavin's voice called through the door, which began to shake excitedly as he banged on it heavily. 'Mum! Open up! Let me in! C'mon!'

'Gavin!' Talia exclaimed, unable to stop herself from running to the door and tugging it open so she could throw her arms around her son. 'Oh, Gavin! I missed you so much!'

'Mum! Dale is *amazing!*' exclaimed Gavin, briefly hugging her back. 'He showed me his dogs and his house and his car! And he let me sleep in his bed! And best of all—He let me help him with his *date!*'

'His *date?*' Talia asked, pulling away from her son and looking up at Dale. 'He went on a date while looking after you?'

'He forgot about her!' Gavin explained happily. 'She showed up at his house and ate dinner with us! But then I think I messed up, because I told Dale he should marry you, and now she doesn't want to go on a second date.'

'Gavin!' Talia scolded. 'I'm not going to marry Dale!'

'But you like him!'

'No, I don't,' sighing, Talia kissed Gavin on the cheek before turning to Dale. 'Sorry, you're just not my type.'

Dale snickered and gave the two a shrug. 'It's fine, plenty of girls think that.'

'Give Mum the money!' Gavin exclaimed, flapping his arms excitedly. 'Mum! Richard came over, and he gave Dale your first cheque. He said you weren't home, but he's not going to be available for a while, and so Dale had to give it to you instead when he dropped me home.'

'Did he?' Talia glanced at Dale, giving an impish grin.

‘Was Dale intending to give it to me, or was he going to be sneaky and keep it for himself?’

‘Hey, I wouldn’t do that,’ retorted Dale, pulling the letter out of his suit and handing it to Talia. As she leant forward to take it, he leant in and whispered, ‘*I totally would.*’

Talia punched him in the shoulder and rolled her eyes. She carelessly ripped open the envelope, pulled out the cheque, and then checked how much— *TEN-THOUSAND DOLLARS?!*

‘*WHAT!*’ she shouted, her voice breaking. ‘That’s too much— What— No! You messed up! Richard wrote the wrong amount!’

‘Did he?’ Dale asked, plucking the cheque out of her hand and glancing at the number. ‘Huh, no. That seems about right.’

‘How much is it?’ Gavin asked, grabbing Dale’s arm and swinging off it. ‘How! Much! Is! It! Show me!’

Dale gave his arm a shake, freeing it from Gavin’s tight grip, and nudged the boy away. ‘You’re a bit young for this. Go play with your Three-Screen.’

‘His what?’ Talia asked, feeling faint.

Shrugging, Dale handed her back the cheque and shooed Gavin away. ‘I brought him some video games—’

‘We can’t afford that!’ Talia exclaimed.

‘What part of “*I brought him*” was unclear?’ scoffed Dale, grabbing Talia’s shoulder and pulling her into a side-hug. ‘They’re a gift from me!’

Talia forced herself to relax and leant against Dale to support herself. ‘Uh... Thanks for that? And for the groceries. And the towels.... And everything else.’

‘Not a problem, my dearest and newest coworker!’ Dale ruffled her hair, and she pulled away with a frustrated snort.

Talia fixed her hair as she looked back at the cheque.

She stared for a long moment before giving a tired smile. ‘I don’t even know what to spend this on, now. I guess I’ll just put it aside for when we need it—’

‘Or get some new bedding,’ Dale suggested. ‘Gavin was going on about how much he loved my blankets. He’d probably like some for himself, here.’

‘You’re too good,’ Talia shook her head and chuckled. ‘I guess I could.... And I could take Anna and Trish out to dinner.’

‘Yeah! That sounds great!’ Dale grinned. ‘You deserve a night out with your friends!’

‘I’ll get Gavin a new uniform first—’

‘Already did that,’ Dale told her. ‘It’s in his bag.’

Talia stared at him.

‘Yeah. His old shirt was so worn my washing machine just —*crrk!*— ripped it in half. So we went clothes shopping.’

Talia rolled her eyes; trying not to let herself feel like Dale had overstepped. If Gavin had needed it, he’d needed it, right...? ‘Any more surprises I should know about?’

For a minute, Dale bit his lip and thought. Then he clicked his fingers and let out an excited exclamation, ‘Right! Richard wants me to teach you how to use a gun!’

‘WHAT?! *WHY?!*’

‘Well, it’s a long story,’ Dale rubbed the back of his neck. ‘But to cut it short, I’m the reason he limps.’

Talia put her face in her hands. ‘So let me get this straight: you shot Richard—’

‘Yep—’

‘And he wants *you* to be the one to teach me how to use a gun?’ Talia let out a long sigh as Dale gave her a confident nod. ‘Is he *sure* about that? Or is he actually *wanting* to end up in a wheelchair?’

Part 17:

‘A onesie?’ Talia asked, rolling her eyes as Trish leapt off the bus. ‘Haven’t you been at school all day?’

‘It’s *university*,’ Trish responded. ‘Basically everyone in my class wears their worst clothes. And we’re heading to a twenty-four-seven Ms Danielles; I’ll bet you all my money—’ she fished in her pockets for a moment before pulling out a handful of lint, ‘—Which is apparently zero dollars.... I’ll bet you the sandwich I found in the campus fridge that at least one other person is in their PJs.’

Anna bit her lip and tried not to laugh as her girlfriend waved a half-stale sandwich in Talia’s face.

‘Well, I didn’t want to ruin the surprise,’ Talia gave an exaggerated sigh. ‘But we’re not going to Ms Danielles.’

‘What?’ Trish stared in shock. ‘You said we were going to dinner! We can’t afford anywhere else. Need I remind you of my lint?’

‘Yes we *can* afford it,’ though she tried not to, Talia couldn’t help but grin as she batted Trish’s handful of lint out of her face. ‘I got a new job!’

‘*What!*’ Anna let out a squeal that barely sounded human. ‘Oh my GOD Talia! That’s so great! Where?’

‘You are looking at the new secretary for Moore for More Investment’s CEO!’ Talia felt her voice rise, and she had to swallow her excited shout as the girls gasped. ‘I actually got accepted for the job a while ago, and I only *officially* start full-time next month, but I’ve been doing some casual stuff for them and my first pay-cheque cleared with the bank today! And I just really want to take you both out to dinner. You girls have always been so good to me and I want to do something for you, for once!’

‘Oh my god,’ Anna put her hand over her smile and let out an unbelieving breath. ‘How did you get the job?’

‘I met this guy—’

‘The one who looked after Gavin?’ Trish interrupted. ‘And brought like a billion doughnuts? Which were delicious by the way.’

‘Yes, but don’t interrupt me,’ Talia laughed, pointing a finger at Trish before turning back to Anna. ‘I met this guy the other month while I was out shopping. We spoke for a bit and I mentioned I wanted a new job, so he introduced me to his boss! We had an interview and he must have really liked me because he asked me to be his personal secretary!’

It was only *half* the truth, and though Talia hated to lie to her friends, she knew she couldn’t tell them what had *actually* happened.

Anna clapped her hands together and jumped up and down. ‘Oh my god! Talia, that’s fantastic! I don’t want to pry but —I guess I’m going to— how much do you get paid? It *has* to be better than Big Double U’s pay, right?’

Talia felt her grin grow wider and she whipped out her phone —the new one she’d gotten for work— and held it up to the girls; showing them her bank balance.

‘Oh.’

‘My.’

‘God.’

The girls stared at Talia’s phone for a long, long while before looking back to Talia, their eyes wide.

‘*Monthly*,’ Talia’s voice broke with joy.

‘MONTHLY?’ Anna screamed, causing the crowd to turn and stare. ‘OH MY GOD TALIA! TALIA! MONTHLY?’

‘MONTHLY!’ Talia shouted back. ‘YES! And— And I was thinking maybe— After everything you’ve done for me I could pay you back? Food and rent and clothes!’

‘We— Couldn’t—’ Anna choked.

‘Yes you *could!*’ responded Talia.

Trish straightened up, and pointed a finger at Talia,

‘Listen here, Wilson—’

‘Don’t you Wilson me, Goldberg!’ Talia interrupted. ‘You’re not getting a choice in this! I’m sharing this with you whether you like it or not, so suck it up and tell me something you’ve been wanting to get so I can give it to you!’

Trish and Anna looked at each other for a while before Anna turned back to Talia, sniffing and wiping her eyes.

‘Are you serious?’ she asked.

Talia nodded, ‘Just name it!’

For a second, Anna hesitated. Then she opened her mouth to speak— And was interrupted by Trish.

‘How about we start with your first promise?’ Trish quipped. ‘And you buy us dinner?’

Part 18:

Talia rolled over in bed and groaned. Her stomach felt like it was collapsing in on itself. Ten years of cheap dollar meals and noodles and she'd never once gotten food poisoning; but the first time she'd treated herself to a dinner out she'd spent an entire week in bed, throwing up into an old kitchen pot.

And no. Richard buying her dinner that one time didn't count. She hadn't paid for that.

Anna put a hand to Talia's head and sighed. 'Sorry, Talia. Should have picked somewhere else for dinner.'

'Should have listened to Trish,' chuckled Talia. 'Eating Ms Danielles again wouldn't have been so bad.'

'Maybe not for you, but it's all we'd eaten for a week!' said Anna. 'I was dreading going out again! I couldn't handle another Beef Buster.'

'At least you didn't get the lamb,' Talia sighed. 'I can't even imagine how bad it would have been if all *three* of us got sick.'

'It's good that Dale's been free,' Anna said with a grin. 'It was really nice of him to look after Gavin for you again.'

'Honestly, I think he'd give *me* money to let him babysit,' Talia laughed for a minute— Then felt faint.

'In here!' Anna exclaimed, grabbing the kitchen pot and thrusting it under Talia.

For a minute, Talia felt like she was going to be sick. But then the feeling faded and the colour returned to her cheeks.

'Well, that's an improvement over yesterday,' Anna comforted. She squeezed Talia's shoulder and dropped the pot back on the floor before pushing herself to her feet. 'I can't believe I still haven't managed to meet Dale yet!'

'I know,' Talia gave a weak grin. 'You're always *just*

missing him! You'd love him.'

'When he's not being an absolute prat, you mean?' Anna winked. 'You've told me enough about him that I know he'll be as difficult to deal with as Trish is!'

'Oh my god, he's *infuriating!*' Talia exclaimed. 'Sometimes I just want to punch him!'

'I've got to go grab some stuff from the shops,' Anna made her way towards the door. 'Will you be alright if I leave you here for a bit? I'll send Trish in.'

'How's she doing?' asked Talia.

'Almost completely better,' said Anna. 'Funny, considering she ate more than you.'

'She's used to eating garbage,' Talia replied. 'Half the stuff she takes from her campus is out of date. Remember when she came home with that two-year-old chocolate?'

'Of course I do!' Anna snorted, making her way to the door. 'She had diarrhoea for a week!'

'Are we talking about me?' Trish's voice called through the wall. 'Because I have NO! REGRETS!'

'You should!' Anna retorted, now out of Talia's view. 'I swear, Trish! If your diet doesn't kill you, it's going to kill *me!*'

Trish let out a laugh before a loud crash sounded through the apartment.

'I've told you not to lean back in your chair!' Anna let out an exasperated sigh, then dropped her voice so Talia had to strain to hear. '*Can you keep an eye on Talia while I'm gone? I have to go to the chemist, Gavin's running out of tablets and I want to make sure he's got enough for the week. The last thing we want right now is for him to end up sick, too.*'

'Only if you kiss me!' Trish responded, causing Anna to let out a loud laugh.

Then they went quiet and Talia sighed; she'd been the third wheel to enough of their dates to imagine how

longingly they were staring into each other's eyes.

She didn't want to eavesdrop anymore, so she rolled out of bed and made her way into the lounge; dragging the old, clunky fan behind her and plugging it into the wall with another sigh. She switched on the TV as the fan began to spin, and flicked through the channels. Or tried to. She accidentally changed the volume at first, and then had to examine the worn remote to try and figure out which controls she needed.

She pulled off her glasses to get a better look, then put them back on. Then took them back off.

'The plus and minus to the left of the big circle are the volume,' Trish told her as she shut the apartment door. 'The arrows on the right are the channels.'

'Thanks,' Talia muttered, slipping her glasses back on. 'Anything you feel like?'

'Put it on seven, there's a documentary on this huge online scam that's been happening,' Trish suggested. 'They're stealing personal information through online surveys. Pretty interesting stuff.'

Talia felt herself pale. And not from her food poisoning.

A documentary on... online surveys stealing personal information?

'Talia, you alright?' Trish asked, casually lifting her shirt up at the fan's breeze and wiping the sweat off her brow. 'You need me to go get a bucket?'

'No— No,' Talia swallowed, and quickly switched the channel over. 'I'm alright. It's just the heat. Um... hey, TV with a remote! That's pretty nifty! I remember when I was a kid my parent's TV just had these little knobs and, uh...'

'Technology scaring the old lady?' joked Trish.

'Oh, don't you start! I'm only five years older than you!' said Talia. 'Twenty-eight isn't *that* old.'

Trish cackled and flopped onto the couch next to

Talia. 'Keep telling yourself that, grandma.'

'I'm not—'

'MUM, I'M HOME!' Gavin's voice called over the reporter's droning voice, and he slammed into the door.

'Open up! Let me in! Let me in!'

'He lost his key again...' Talia cast a pleading glance at Trish, who gave a dramatic sigh and pushed herself to her feet.

'Alright, arthritis, I'll let your grandson in.'

Gavin almost bowled Trish over as he ran into the house, his friend Jacob trailing behind him. The two boys disappeared into his room within seconds and started talking loudly about sports.

'Gavin! Keep it down! You don't want to disturb Mr McLaren again!' Talia called, thinking of her *downstairs* neighbour; a grumpy old man with too much free time.

'Hey, Talia!' Dale greeted, welcoming himself into the apartment. 'Hot today, isn't it? How's the food poisoning going? Feeling any better or do I get to keep your son for another week?'

'Oh, no, I'm hiring him out,' Talia joked. 'Seven-hundred for a month.'

'Bargain,' Dale chuckled. He glanced at the television and nodded. 'You actually brought that old thing? I told you, you should have gotten one new instead of secondhand! Or if you *needed* it to be secondhand you could have taken one of mine; I'm replacing them all so I have three wide-screens that I'm trying to ditch.'

'Jesus Christ, Dale!' Talia snapped. 'You don't need three TVs!'

'Yes I do!' he whined. 'One for the lounge, one for the bedroom, and one for the games room!'

'That's how I see it, too!' Trish agreed, snorting into her hand. 'If Dale weren't a man, you know? Can I grab one of those tellies?'

A grin found its way to Dale's face, 'See, Trish gets it! I'll bring it over tomorrow if you like?'

'Trish isn't exactly sensible with electronics, either,' Talia retorted. 'She's *obsessed* with them! You two are honestly so alike, you know!'

'No we're not,' Trish laughed.

'Oh, go steal some more sandwiches!' Talia quipped playfully.

Trish coughed loudly, and motioned for Talia to be quiet, but Dale just laughed and punched her in the shoulder.

'You steal food?' he chuckled. 'Don't look so nervous. I used to do that *all the time!* Hey! You're studying IT aren't you?'

Trish nodded, 'Yeah?'

'You're a cookie grabber.'

For a minute there was silence; then Trish let out a loud, ugly snort and doubled over laughing. She laughed and snorted. Then laughed and snorted again. Then she dropped to her knees and let out a surprisingly long snort and choked.

Talia didn't get it.

'What's a cookie grabber?' she asked. 'Is it some sort of... computer term I don't know about?'

'It's an outdated term for someone who steals your browser information,' Trish explained.

'Browser?'

'Like passwords and stuff,' Dale told her, a cheeky grin on his face.

Like they were doing?

'Oh, right,' Talia gave a nod, and tried to convey a knowing look back at him.

'So, I should head home! I've got a date tonight!' Dale seemed to catch the glance and stood up a little straighter. Then he turned to the television and let out a

loud laugh, pointing to the documentary. ‘Oh man, I know *that* scam!’

That confirmed it for Talia. This documentary was literally about Dale— And, she supposed, also about her now.

She waved politely to Dale as he left, and then turned the TV off. She couldn’t bear to watch it. Not right now, anyway. Trish would just have to deal with it.

Luckily, Trish didn’t seem to remember she’d been interested in the documentary at all. Instead, she headed to the kitchen and came back with a tub of ice-cream and a 2-litre bottle of Coola Cola.

‘Is that a good idea?’ Talia asked. ‘You just recovered from food poisoning. You’re going to make yourself sick again.’

‘Maybe so—’ Trish exclaimed, shovelling the ice-cream into her mouth. ‘—But that just means I get more attention from Anna—’ she undid the bottle’s lid and drank for what felt like a full minute. ‘—So who’s the real winner here!’

‘I doubt it’s you,’ Talia chuckled as foam sprayed out Trish’s nose.

She watched as her friend doubled over onto the floor and coughed up a spray of bubbles. A second passed before she sat back in her chair and continued eating.

‘Really?’ Talia scoffed.

‘*What?*’ Trish responded.

‘Girls, I’m back!’ Anna exclaimed, pushing open the apartment door. ‘Trish! Put one of those two things back, you get ice-cream *or* soft drink! Not both!’

‘You missed Dale again!’ Trish responded.

‘*Dammit!*’ Anna exclaimed. ‘Am I *never* going to meet this man?!’

‘He literally just left,’ said Talia. ‘You didn’t see him on the stairs?’

‘Nobody,’ Anna shook her head and put Gavin’s medicine on the dining table. ‘He must have used the carpark stairwell.’

‘Damn,’ Trish chuckled through a mouthful of ice-cream.

‘MUM!’ Gavin called from his room. ‘MUM, CAN YOU HELP ME?’

‘I’ll help,’ said Anna. She made her way to Gavin’s room, then hurried back in. ‘Apparently not. He needs you specifically, Tally.’

Sighing, Talia pushed herself off the couch and made her way to her son’s bedroom. She found him showing Jacob the new soccer ball he’d gotten on a shopping trip with Dale.

‘Hi, Mum!’ Gavin grinned.

‘Hey honey, what did you need help with?’

‘Nothing,’ responded Gavin, his grin growing wider. ‘I just wanted to see if I could make you come in.’

‘*Gavin!*’ Talia snapped. She tried to sound angry, but Gavin’s impish expression tickled her and she couldn’t help but smile back. ‘Gavin, I’m sick. I need to rest.’

‘You can rest on my bed!’ Gavin suggested. ‘Then you can spend some time with me? I miss you.’

Talia let out a deep breath and sat next to her son. ‘Fine. But in return you have to promise me you’ll stop being so cheeky.’

Gavin nodded. ‘Do you want a drink? I’ll get you a drink!’

Before Talia could respond, Gavin leapt off the bed and ran out of the room. He started chattering happily to Anna and Trish in the lounge, and Talia felt herself giggle as the TV was turned on again.

‘Hi, Miss Wilson,’ Jacob squeaked from the other side of the bed.

‘Hey, Jacob,’ Talia pulled Jacob into a hug and

ruffled his hair. ‘How’s school been?’

‘It’s been okay,’ said Jacob. ‘We have a new librarian. She looks like a cartoon character.’

‘Is that in a good or a bad way?’

‘You know when you get the bad guys in movies that have pointed noses?’ Jacob asked. He didn’t wait for an answer before continuing, ‘She looks like that.’

‘I’m sure she’s not anything like them,’ Talia reassured. ‘Sometimes people just look different. Remember that movies aren’t always right.’

‘I know. I actually think she’s really nice,’ Jacob said. ‘She’s starting a book club and trying to get some comics, and she lets us in during lunch and helps with our homework—’

‘I’m back!’ Gavin exclaimed, rushing into the room with a cup of water. He gave it to his mother and then grabbed the soccer ball and waved it at Jacob.

‘Is that a *challenge*?’ grinning widely, Jacob jumped off the bed and tried to smack the ball out of his friend’s hands.

They wrestled with the ball for a moment, as Talia watched on with a tired smile and sipped at her water.

Then, she spied an unfamiliar bag by the leg of Gavin’s bed—it was a shopping bag, decorated with a photo of penguins and labelled with the name of the local aquarium—and leant over to poke at it.

‘Where’d this come from?’ she asked.

‘Oh, that?’ Gavin pushed back a lock of his hair, letting Jacob take the ball from his other hand as he did. ‘I told Dale, when he was looking after me, that I hadn’t been to the aquarium before, and he said I should and took me. He let me get some stuff from the gift shop while we were there.’

An awful, heavy feeling fell over Talia as she hesitated; her hand hovering over the bag.

‘The *aquarium*, huh?’ she asked, trying not to let her son hear the quiver in her voice.

‘Yeah,’ Gavin gave a chuckle. ‘He said I should have been able to go *years* ago, and that it was a bummer that I hadn’t gone before, but I said—’

The cup in Talia’s other hand shattered as she gripped it too hard, and she slammed her fist into the frame of Gavin’s bed as she tried to push down the anger she felt at what Dale had said. She hadn’t cut herself, but she half-wished she had as she looked down at the broken plastic chunks that fell to the bare wooden floor.

Gavin swallowed as he watched his mother, and carefully continued; clearly realising she’d become upset. ‘But I said it wasn’t such a big deal. There are lots of things lots of people want to do that they can’t. That’s just life....’

Somehow, Gavin’s response made Talia feel even *worse*.

That her son had become so accustomed to not doing the things he wanted to do—that she couldn’t provide him with things that every other kid his age seemed to be able to do—made her sick to her stomach.

And on top of the guilt was anger; so hot and furious she could barely contain it. She’d worked so, so hard to provide everything she could for Gavin, and now that she was *finally* in a position to give him the experiences he deserved—Dale had *robbed* her of the opportunity to do so!

She couldn’t *stand* it!

‘*Mum?*’ Gavin squeaked as his mother rose to her feet.

She didn’t even realise she was halfway to the stairwell until Trish and Anna were shouting after her, asking where she was going.

‘Look after the boys!’ she called over her shoulder. ‘I’m going to belt the living daylights out of a movie-star wannabe!’

Part 19:

It was all Dale could do, not to heave a sigh of boredom as he sat on the couch, his date beside him with her eyes locked on the movie she'd picked out.

It was rare for Dale to feel so bored with a woman at his side— But, somehow, this girl Mia had made the two-hour date feel like seven and a half.

Everything he'd done or suggested had been met with an expression of dislike. From what to have for dinner, to where to go after eating. She'd turned up her nose at his furniture, and even had the audacity to rearrange the cushions on his couch before sitting down.

And worst of all? She hadn't liked his dogs.

They were absolutely *not* compatible.

The only issue was that *she* hadn't seemed to realise how incompatible they were, and Dale couldn't bring himself to ask her to leave.

Not forwardly, anyway; he *had* tried to imply the end of the date after they'd had their dinner, but she'd either not picked up on it or ignored him, and now she was in his *house*.

The sensation of his brain melting away into a gluggy puddle behind his eyes was like torture, and he wished something interesting would happen. And not the same kind of interesting Mia seemed to be hoping for, as she ran a hand along his leg in a flirtatious way.

He wondered, for a moment, how exactly to *remove* her hand from his leg without being rude; before he heard a loud banging on his front door and leapt to his feet.

He knew he should have probably been concerned, given how aggressive that knock was— But he was *desperate* for an excuse to call the night to an end.

Any excuse.

Hell, he'd even take Steven trying to arrest him

again, at this point!

So against his better judgement, Dale made his way to his front door and opened it.

‘Talia!’ Dale greeted, cheerfully. ‘Hey! What are you — *Whoa!*’

He barely dodged the palm she aimed at his cheek, and stumbled backwards through his front hall.

‘How dare you!’ she growled, advancing on him. ‘How *dare* you!’

‘How dare I what?’ he asked, backing up further as Talia grabbed one of his decorative vases and threw it at him— He caught it, and hurriedly retreated into the lounge as she made to grab another.

‘Mia! Bedroom! Now!’ he exclaimed, grabbing his date’s arm and tugging her out off the couch.

‘DALE!’ Talia shrieked. ‘GET BACK HERE!’

He didn’t turn around, of course, and quickly dragged Mia into his bedroom and slammed the door; he’d just gotten a chair under the handle when it started jiggling and Talia snapped at him angrily again.

‘DALE!’ she hissed. ‘Get out here *right now!*’

‘Not if you’re going to throw shit at me!’ he replied. ‘Calm down, and *then* we’ll talk—’

Dale was cut off by Talia loudly slamming into the door and screeching something that he didn’t quite catch.

His dogs started barking, and for a moment he was scared they would try to have a go at Talia and someone would get hurt— But then he remembered he’d put them outside for his date and sighed with relief. He looked out his bedroom window, just to make sure he could see his dogs in the yard, and met eyes with his very concerned-looking neighbour, Penny, who he shrugged and made a confused face at before turning back to Mia.

‘She’s not usually like this,’ he said calmly. ‘She’s been sick and I think it’s gotten into her head a bit. She’s

actually really nice.'

'What— What did you *do* to her?' Mia managed, her eyes wide.

'Nothing!' Dale responded as the banging on his door continued. 'I have *no* idea what she's upset about! We've barely seen each other all week!'

'COME OUT HERE AND FIGHT ME LIKE A MAN, DALE!'

'Christ, give me a minute...' Dale let out a heavy breath and searched his pockets until he found his phone. 'I'm going to call a friend, he'll know what to do.'

Mia nodded as Dale flicked through his contacts until he found Richard's contact. He turned back to Penny as he rung Richard's home phone; shaking his head as she made a zero-zero-zero motion with her hand and held up her own phone. She got the message he didn't want the police involved, and put her phone down as Dale motioned to his own.

Richard's home phone rang out, so Dale tried his mobile.

'Dale, mate!' Richard greeted, even more cheery than usual. 'Hey, what's going on? I'm glad you called, I'm actually pretty near your house and—'

Talia let out an annoyed shout and something in another room shattered.

'HEY!' Dale called through the wall. 'Stop breaking my stuff!'

'Is that Talia?' Richard asked. 'What did you do to her *this* time?'

'Nothing!' Dale whined. There was a pause where he could hear Richard sighing through the phone, so he pressed: 'I genuinely don't know what I did! She's madder than when I—' he hesitated, almost having mentioned robbing her, and quickly glanced to Mia before muttering to his phone, 'Then when I *tackled* her.'

‘You *tackled* her?!’ Mia asked, incredulously.

‘Talia and I have a complicated relationship,’ Dale noted as several more things in the other room were thrown noisily to the floor. ‘I don’t make a habit of tackling women—I *love* women!— but she’s different.’

Mia just shook her head, looking vexed as she furrowed her brow and opened her mouth without actually speaking.

Richard chuckled into his phone; clearly making no attempt to hide how humorous he’d found Dale’s explanation. ‘Alright, I’m already on my way. Just hang on a few more minutes and I’ll be there.’

Dale didn’t get a chance to respond before Richard hung up; not that he would have known what to say, anyway. He was too distracted by the sounds of Talia rummaging through his guest room.

‘Hey! Get out of there!’ he called out to her. ‘Stop going through my shit!’

‘You go through mine all the time!’ she retorted angrily. ‘If you can go through my stuff I can go through yours!’

‘I didn’t—’

‘Gavin told me you were in my room!’ she interrupted. ‘And I’ve seen you snooping through the cupboards! And need I remind you about *the handbag incident?*’

‘*Oh my god,*’ Dale muttered under his breath, then turned to Mia. ‘She’s ridiculous!’

‘You went through her bag?’ Mia asked, grimacing.

‘It’s a long story. And besides, she—’ Dale slammed a hand on the wall that separated the rooms. ‘*You went through my bag, too!*’

‘You went through mine first!’ Talia retorted, sounding even more furious as something slammed against the wall. ‘You just *love* stealing from me, don’t you?! You

take *any* opportunity you can! You just take and take and take, with *no* regard for what's actually *important!*

'Wh—' Dale knew Talia couldn't see him, but it didn't stop him from throwing his hands up in exasperated confusion. 'I haven't *stolen* from you! At least— Not *recently!* *WHAT* do you think I took?!

'Milestones!' was the furious answer, as something else hit the wall.

'What the *hell* does that mean?!' Dale shouted back. 'What do you mean I took *milestones* from you— Is this about Gavin?! What do you think I did to him?!

'YOU TOOK HIM TO THE AQUARIUM!'

'YOU'RE MAD THAT I TOOK HIM TO THE FUCKING *AQUARIUM?!!*' Dale didn't mean to raise his voice, but he couldn't help it. Talia was so confusing and frustrating, he couldn't stop himself from matching her volume; and he heard his voice break in a high-pitch squeak as he did. 'YOU'RE MAD THAT I TOOK HIM TO SEE THE FUCKING FISH?! YOU'RE BREAKING MY SHIT OVER SOME GODDAMN PENGUINS?!'

Something that sounded like a lamp shattered against the wall, and Talia let out a furious, wordless scream.

'Talia!' Richard's voice floated from the front door, and Dale let out a sigh of relief. 'Stop threatening Dale!'

'I'm not *threatening* him!' Talia called back. 'I'm *warning* him: the minute he steps out that door, he's *dead!*'

'That's a bit much, don't you think?' Richard asked, the click of his cane making its way towards Dale's room.

Talia's footsteps met Richard's in front of Dale's bedroom door, and they muttered a conversation that Dale couldn't make out.

'Alright! Fine!' she exclaimed. 'FINE!'

A short knock sounded on Dale's door, and Richard called through it, 'Alright Dale, you can come out.'

After a moment of hesitation, Dale dared to tug the chair away from the door.

‘Let’s see if we can’t settle this like sensible adults,’ Richard said as Mia hurried past him. ‘Oh jeez. She was pretty, too.’

‘Nah, she’s wasn’t my type,’ replied Dale, heaving a long, heavy sigh to try and keep his voice even. ‘No harm done.’

‘Doesn’t like dogs?’ Richard joked, motioning in the direction of the back door, where the dogs yipped excitedly.

‘Among other things,’ Dale muttered. Then his shoulders dropped and he offered his hand to Talia. ‘Look, I’m sorry. I— I don’t get *why* you’re upset at me, but I swear; I didn’t *mean* to upset you. I was just trying to take Gav out for some fun. I didn’t realise it was such a bit deal.

For a moment, Talia just glared at him. Then she closed her eyes, looking faint. ‘I think I’m going to be sick....’

‘It’s not *that* bad,’ Richard slapped her on the back.

‘No, I think she means *literally* sick!’ Dale exclaimed as Talia paled. He grabbed the vase Talia had thrown earlier and thrust it into her arms just in time. ‘You alright? Let it all out.’

She retched again, and he ran a comforting hand over her back as she groaned.

‘Come lie down,’ he said gently, leading her into his room.

Talia didn’t argue with him, which was surprising. Instead she flopped onto his bed and went silent.

‘Talia?’ Dale muttered, nudging her arm. ‘Christ, she’s gone.’

‘Let her sleep,’ said Richard. ‘She looks like she needs it.... Sucks about your date, though. Looks like you’re going to spend another six months looking for a new girlfriend.’

‘Six mo— I can get a girl in a day!’ Dale defended. ‘I’ve had *way* more girlfriends than you!’

‘Yeah, no shit,’ laughing, Richard began searching through his backpack. After a moment of rifling, he pulled out a handgun. ‘You left this in the office like an idiot. Honestly, what were you thinking?’

‘Oh, shit!’ Dale quickly grabbed the gun from Richard and stuffed it in his top drawer. ‘I’ve been looking for that all day! Where the hell was it?’

‘The cleaning staff found it in the toilet,’ Richard sighed. ‘I’ve told you before not to bring it to work.’

‘Sorry, I just—’

‘No “sorry”s, Dale,’ Richard interrupted. ‘No guns in the office. Last chance. Bring it again and I’ll take it away.’

‘You can’t just take my stuff!’ Dale whined.

‘Yes, I can,’ Richard retorted. ‘You said it yourself: I’m your father.’

‘Don’t punish me, *daddy*,’ Dale snickered. He coughed and bit his lip when Richard glared at him. ‘I mean — Sorry. Yes. No guns at the office.’

Part 20:

‘Are you *sure* you’ll be alright?’ Dale asked, leaning against the wall and groaning. ‘These stairs knocked it out of *me*, and I’m not the one who’s sick.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ Talia panted. ‘I’m used to it.... I.... I’m sorry, again, Dale. I don’t know what got into me.’

‘Hey, no harm no foul. I was trying to find a way to get her out of my house, anyway,’ Dale replied. He pushed himself up as Talia caught her breath, and continued down the hall with her.

‘So where did Richard head off to?’ Talia asked. ‘He didn’t come over just because of me, did he?’

‘Nah, I left some stuff at the office and he was bringing it to me on the way to meet a friend at some club,’ Dale clicked his fingers and looked to the roof with a frown, trying to think. ‘I remember being surprised I’d never been there before? It was called something like... uh... Red Lounge or something.’

‘Red Ledge?’ Talia corrected, recalling the bright neon lights shaped like a cliff’s ledge. ‘Anna and Trish have taken me a few times. It’s actually a pretty nice place. Not surprised you haven’t been there though. Not your scene.’

‘What makes you think that?’ Dale scoffed, obviously offended. ‘All club scenes are my scene! Why would this one be any different?’

‘It’s a gay bar,’ Talia said flatly.

‘Oh,’ Dale hesitated, then nodded. ‘Yeah, you’re probably right. Not my thing.... What were you three doing there?’

‘What do you think?’ Talia laughed and rolled her eyes. ‘As I said: Anna and Trish took me! Not that I minded. There were some pretty nice girls. Probably would have brought a few home if I didn’t have Gavin to worry about.’

Again, Dale hesitated. 'You're into girls?'

'Yeah,' Talia shrugged. 'Though I think I prefer guys.'

'Oh, bi?' Dale chuckled. 'That's pretty neat. Gives you a lot more options!'

Talia laughed as she came to her apartment's door. 'You'd think so, but not really. It's just too hard when I've got Gavin and work to deal with.'

She wasn't even finished pulling out her key before Gavin yanked open the door and threw his arms around her.

'I thought you'd died or something!' he exclaimed. 'You were gone so long!'

'I'm not dead,' said Talia, petting her son on the head and shuffling him back into the apartment. 'Is Jacob still here?'

'Yeah, he's still here,' Gavin nodded, motioning to the kitchen table, where Trish and Jacob were eating. 'Can he stay the night? Please? Please please *please*?'

'Call his parents,' Talia told him. 'If they say it's alright then I'm not going to argue.'

Jacob practically vaulted off his chair in his hurry to get his phone, and Gavin raced after him. They disappeared into Gavin's room for about three seconds before running out again, dialling as they leapt onto the couch.

'I see you're back,' Trish mumbled through her leftovers. 'And you didn't kill Dale! Aw, that's nice.'

'Yeah,' Talia chuckled. 'Anna can finally meet him.'

'She had to go,' Trish snorted a laugh, accidentally spilling food down her chin. She quickly wiped it off with her sleeve and shrugged. 'Her dad's being himself again. You know how he is with refusing to listen to health and safety warnings and setting his garage on fire.'

'He alright?' Dale asked.

'Oh, yeah, fine,' Trish chuckled. 'Her mum, on the

other hand— She sounded like she was having an aneurysm over it or something. Anna went to go calm her down.’

‘They said it’s fine!’ Gavin exclaimed, making his mother jump as he appeared at her side. ‘On the condition we do all our homework *right now*, but, uh—’ he lowered his voice, looking sheepish. ‘It’s from the class we missed.’

‘You mean the one you wagged?’ Trish laughed. ‘I’ll help with it!’

‘No,’ Gavin said firmly. ‘You’re bad at maths! Mum?’

‘Your mother’s a bit too sick,’ Dale answered gently. ‘But I can help. My whole job is math!’

‘Really?’ Jacob squeaked. ‘What do you do?’

‘He works with money!’ Gavin exclaimed, grabbing Dale’s arm and dragging him away. ‘So he’s got to get it right every time or he’ll go to jail! He’s *perfect!*’

‘Say thank you!’ Talia called after her son as the boys disappeared. She turned to Trish as Gavin’s door slammed shut. ‘He’s either silent or screaming, I swear. It’s like there’s no in between.’

‘He’s been a lot louder since you got your new job,’ Trish pointed out. ‘Definitely cheered up since you got paid.’

‘He’s stopped getting detention, at least,’ Talia sighed and flopped onto a chair. ‘Though, I got a call from Salinas saying he snapped at his English teacher.’

‘Oh, god, what did he say?’

‘She told him not to talk in class,’ Talia couldn’t stop herself from grinning as she recalled the story. ‘And he retorted that he was surprised someone as old as her could still hear him from across the room!’

Trish let out an explosion of a laugh and choked on her food. She took a minute to swallow, pumping a fist to her chest to help it down, before shaking her head and smiling. ‘He gets it from you, you know. You’ve said some pretty nasty stuff before.’

‘I have not!’ Talia retorted.

‘Yeah you have!’ responded Trish. ‘Like, just today you said you were going to, quote, “belt the living daylights out of a movie-star wannabe.” How did that go, by the way?’

‘I broke a plate and scared off his date,’ Talia felt embarrassment creep to her cheeks. ‘It was really.... I was in the wrong. It’s just that since leaving work I’ve been having.... I don’t know, outbursts? I thought I’d be happy leaving Big Double U, but I just.... It’s hard to deal with. I’d worked there almost a third of my life. It’s a big change.’

‘You should see a therapist!’ Trish declared, downing the last of her food. ‘I know a good one; my sister used to have anger issues, too.’

‘I don’t have anger issues!’ Talia snapped, slamming a hand on the table. Then, when all Trish did was pull a knowing face at her, she rolled her eyes and let out a long sigh. ‘Fine. Give me their number.’

Part 21:

The walk to Dale's house had been exhausting. Talia could barely breathe by the time she got there and had to lean on his fence for a moment. She knew she couldn't go inside before catching her breath; she'd never hear the end of it from Dale if she did.... His offers to drive her everywhere were nice, but they made her feel.... She couldn't place the feeling. Small? Pathetic? Useless?

She shook her head. She probably *should* have called him, considering she'd had to bring Gavin with her.

She glanced to her son, worried that he was as tired as she was, but sighed with relief as he bolted energetically up the path and slammed into Dale's front door.

'DALE! LET US IN!' he shouted over the dogs' barks. 'IT'S US!'

Talia groaned, and quickly stepped to her son's side and stopped him from banging on the door again. 'Gavin, be polite.'

'Dale doesn't mind,' Gavin replied.

'But I do,' she retorted. 'I don't want you getting into any bad habits—'

She was cut short as Richard answered the door; Dale's cat held firmly against his chest. He watched as Gavin bolted inside and then nodded to Talia as she passed.

'You look nice,' he commented. 'You got your hair done? And is that makeup?'

'Yeah. Thanks,' Talia blushed and slipped inside. 'I just wanted to feel pretty for a day, you know?'

'You're always pretty though!' Dale's voice called from the kitchen, and Talia felt herself blush warmer as he joined them in the lounge. 'Oh, wow, you look *amazing!* That dress really suits you!'

'I know, right!' Gavin squeaked happily. 'We went shopping and she got clothes and makeup and flowers and

new glasses! And I got shoes and a big box of DVDs!’

‘What DVDs?’ Richard asked.

‘All of the Park Monsters movies!’ excited, Gavin began bouncing on the couch. ‘I’ve already watched the first two! I would have seen more, but Mum didn’t let me stay up any later.’

‘You were up until eleven!’ Talia chuckled. ‘Most kids your age aren’t allowed to be up past eight!’

‘I know,’ Gavin snickered. Then he picked up one of Dale’s dogs and hugged him tightly. ‘Can I use your computer, Dale? It’ll give me something to do while you work, so I won’t be bored and annoying!’

‘Gavin!’ Talia scoffed, trying to hide her laugh. ‘Don’t be rude!’

‘It’s true though,’ Gavin retorted, his cheeky grin widening. ‘If I use Dale’s computer it will keep me occupied, and I won’t be vying for your attention while you’re trying to work!’

‘Aren’t you a little brat,’ Richard chuckled, ruffling Gavin’s hair. ‘What about your three-screen?’

‘I’ve finished all my games,’ Gavin admitted. ‘I’m waiting for a new one to come out!’

‘Alright, that’s fair enough,’ laughed Dale, retrieving his laptop from a nearby shelf. ‘You remember my rules, right? Don’t go in my downloads folder, and don’t touch the web browser.’

Gavin nodded, and settled down in a nearby armchair; both of Dale’s dogs leapt up to join him as he did, and Talia felt her chest flutter as he giggled and pet them.

‘And remember to filter the games to PG when you open Storm!’ Dale chuckled. ‘Or your mother will *kill* me!’

‘Boy, would I,’ Talia laughed— Then she noticed the biscuits on the coffee table and grabbed the plate. ‘May I?’

‘Go nuts,’ shrugging, Dale gave a half-hearted chuckle. ‘I made them yesterday for a date, but... I ended

up cancelling. I haven't felt much like dating lately.'

'That sucks,' Talia muttered, biting into the soft chocolate biscuit. She felt the flavour wash over her and gave a half-moan. 'These are amazing. You *made* these?'

'Yeah, they're not too hard to cook! I can make them again sometime if you like?'

'Please,' Talia mumbled through her mouthful. 'I could *live* off these!'

'I think we should try and focus,' Richard commented with a chuckle. 'Talia, you have a lot of paperwork to deal with. And Dale, one of your clients called today; they want their high-priced stock sold and used to buy cheaper stock? I tried to talk to them but they were adamant they wanted you to do the work, so I grabbed their details and told them I'd pass it on to you.'

'Oh! It's Mrs Yamada,' said Dale, picking up the paperwork. 'She's a little old and a little... well, old. If that makes sense? I used to work with her husband so she trusts me; she's convinced the government's out to get her and has spies in all the major businesses. So, you know. I handle things privately for her.'

'Oh, *her*,' Richard gave a knowing nod. 'I remember her.'

'Do you.... Uh, do *we*, get many clients like this?' Talia asked, glancing over Dale's shoulder at Yamada's paperwork.

'All the time!' laughed Dale, quickly moving the documents out of Talia's view. 'Mrs Yamada is one of the more extreme, though. Also, you're not allowed to look at my client files; sorry. Should have mentioned. I know you're in on a lot of the *confidential* stuff but.... This is a different kind of confidential.'

'Oh,' Talia blushed and quickly bit into another biscuit. She chewed slowly, to try and avoid another embarrassing conversation, but as soon as she swallowed Dale nudged her and grinned widely.

‘So you have a big day tomorrow! First day in the office is the hardest.’

Talia gave a weak smile. ‘Honestly, I’m terrified.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Dale. ‘Mostly you’ll sit around next to our offices, getting us coffee and filing documents. Probably deal with people who demand to speak to the manager, which I’m sure you’re used to by now. If you need help with anything just say.’

Talia nodded, though she hoped she wouldn’t need to ask for help.

‘And we don’t do any of our other work in Moore for More’s offices,’ Richard commented. He leant in close and whispered so quietly Talia almost missed it. *‘If you want to call someone pretending to be a phone company to get their bank details, you do it on your own time, with your own burner.’*

‘Right,’ Talia tried not to seem too nervous.

‘Anything else I should know? Uh, any of the workers a little handsy or something?’

‘Well there’s Remmy,’ Dale commented. ‘He’s handsy, but not in the way you think. He has extra fingers. They’re pretty cool. I’ll get him to show you if you like—’

‘No, I’m good,’ interrupted Talia. ‘So nobody I have to worry about?’

‘If there was they’re already fired,’ Richard commented. ‘Moore for More has standards. I expect you to follow them, too.’

‘Right.’

‘So I’ll pick you up at seven?’ Dale’s question took Talia by surprise and she didn’t have time to respond before he continued, ‘Drop Gavin off at school, stop off for breakfast, then to work?’

‘W.... We never discussed you picking me up,’ Talia muttered, the feeling of being small and worthless creeping up on her again. ‘I made plans with Anna to get Gavin to school already, and I was going to take the bus.’

‘Oh, I just assumed because it was on the way that I would swing by. No big deal, right?’

‘Yes, it’s a big deal,’ Talia frowned, heat creeping to her cheeks as she spoke. ‘You can’t just *assume* I want your help! I can handle myself fine!’

‘I— Uh,’ Dale swallowed what he was saying and grabbed another pile of paperwork. He flicked through it nervously for a few moments before giving a loud cough and hurrying into the kitchen. ‘I’ll make some more biscuits!’

Talia let out a long, hard sigh as Dale avoided apologising to her. But she didn’t say anything. She didn’t want to fight with Dale the day before work. Especially not over him trying to do something nice— Even if he was an idiot. And she didn’t want to cause a scene in front of Gavin. Not when he seemed to look up to Dale so much.... Her heart sunk at the idea of it.

She dared a glance at her son and saw him peeking out from behind the laptop with a worried expression.

‘Mum?’ he asked quietly.

‘It’s fine,’ she told him.

Gavin nodded, though he didn’t look convinced. ‘It’d be nice to get a lift to school.’

Talia opened her mouth to respond, but Richard beat her to it.

‘DALE! I think you owe Talia an apology!’

Dale poked his head out of the kitchen and pouted. ‘For what? Offering to help?’

‘For being rude and not asking people before planning their day for them,’ Richard told him, motioning towards Gavin with a flick of his head. ‘*It’s not. A good. Example.*’

Talia could barely describe the look that passed over Dale’s face and he glanced from Richard to Gavin and back. It was a mix of guilt, and embarrassment, and realisation—

But also almost prideful. Like he knew just how much influence he had on the young boy. And like he took that responsibility seriously.

After a moment he gave a cough and straightened up. ‘Talia, Richard’s right. I’ve been rude and immature, and I’m sorry. I should have talked to you about it before just assuming you’d say yes and making plans. I hope I haven’t made things difficult for you. My offer to drive you and Gavin is still there, but I understand if I’ve offered too late and you’ve already made plans.’

‘I’ll have to talk to Anna about it first,’ Talia told him, pushing away her frustration and trying to take on a similar tone. For Gavin’s sake. ‘I can speak with her and call you tonight?’

‘I’ll make sure to keep my phone on me,’ Dale nodded, his obviously-fake politeness turning into a more genuine chuckle as he continued, ‘Hey, finally out of training! Tonight you’re going to sign your first *official* document.’

Talia couldn’t help but grin at that. ‘Can’t wait.’

Part 22:

Four hours.

That's what the clock said.

Dale wasn't sure how much more reading he could take.

He rubbed his eyes and sighed, wandering back to the lounge and carefully putting a bottle of water by Talia's work. He couldn't help admire her when he did; she looked *gorgeous*. She'd done herself up well.

Talia jumped when she noticed him, but quickly thanked him and took a long drink as he headed to the front door. The heat hit him as he opened it and he shuddered a little, glad that summer would be ending soon.

'Gav? You thirsty?' Dale asked, poking his head outside.

'Yeah!' Gavin squeaked, abandoning his soccer ball and rushing onto the porch. 'Can I have juice?'

'Sure,' Dale opened the door a crack wider so Gavin could slip in. 'Hey, thanks for being so patient with us. Not the best way to spend a Sunday. You must be bored out of your mind!'

'I'm alright,' practically dancing to the kitchen, Gavin looked up at Dale and grinned. 'I like your house! You've got a big yard, with no holes in it! And Spike and Angel are cool! And you let me use your computer! And you have lots of good food and your chairs are really comfy! Honestly? I love it here!'

'Glad to hear it,' Dale laughed, grabbing a bottle of juice from the fridge and passing it to the boy. 'Don't worry about a cup, it's almost empty.'

'Mum would kill you if she knew,' Gavin gave a cheeky grin and took a sip— Almost choking when Talia's voice called from the other room.

'If I knew about what!'

‘Nothing!’ Dale replied. ‘Just not bothering to dirty a cup when there’s only a few mouthfuls of drink left in the bottle!’

For a second Talia was quiet, and Dale held his breath. Then she let out a laugh and both he and Gavin let out sighs of relief.

‘Alright! Just this once, though!’

‘Close call,’ Dale winked as he turned to Gavin. ‘Thought she was going to lose it again.’

‘She’s been working on that really hard,’ Gavin grinned. ‘She’s going to a doctor about it!’

‘A doctor?’ Dale blinked. Talia was going to a doctor because she.... ‘Oh, you mean a therapist?’

Gavin nodded. ‘Trish gave Mum his number after she went to your house to yell at you.’

‘GAVIN!’ Talia’s sigh was so loud both boys flinched. ‘Don’t go telling people about my doctor appointments! That’s private!’

‘It’s just Dale!’ Gavin called back. ‘Dale’s cool!’

Richard’s laugh sounded from somewhere upstairs, short and sharp, and Dale rolled his eyes.

‘I’m cooler than *you!*’ he shouted. ‘You’re just jealous that I get all the girls!’

Richard laughed again. Even louder this time.

Dale shook his head and let himself laugh, too. He knew Richard was just teasing him, so he wiped his nose on his sleeve and headed back to the lounge. After a long day like this he was glad to be having a laugh. Even if it was at his own expense.

Dale watched as Gavin leapt onto his mother and curled into her side, yawning and scratching what looked like a mosquito bite on his arm.

Talia let out her own yawn and slid the last of her paperwork into its folder. ‘Thank god it’s finally done. There’s nothing else you have hidden from me, is there?’

‘Not here, no,’ Dale replied. ‘There’s another folder or two at the office, though. But that’s for tomorrow.’

Talia nodded. For a minute she looked conflicted, then she yawned again —so sudden she forgot to cover her mouth— and Dale saw tears form in the corners of her eyes as her yawn turned into a squeak.

‘You look *exhausted*,’ he commented. ‘You can stay the night if you like. I know Richard’s not going home. It’d be like a high-school sleepover. We can braid each other’s hair and have a pillow fight.’

Talia shook her head. ‘I need to get home. The slow cooker’s on and I need to talk to Anna about tomorrow.’

‘What you cooking?’

‘Beef and gravy in one of the pots,’ Talia replied. ‘And a tomato and eggplant mix in the other.’

‘Ooh,’ Dale’s mouth watered at the thought of the tender meat. ‘If I drive you home can I steal a bowl?’

A relieved expression found its way to Talia’s face and Dale wasn’t sure she knew she was making it.... It was sort of cute, though he’d *never* tell her that.

‘That’d be great,’ she said. ‘I wasn’t looking forward to walking home and, honestly, I was feeling too awkward to ask you for a lift after snapping at you earlier.’

‘Hey, no,’ Dale chuckled and held up his hands in a playful defence. ‘We could be in the middle of the biggest fight in history and I’d still want to make sure you got home safe. *Never* hesitate to ask me for sh— Tuff. Shtuff.’

The corner of Talia’s mouth twitched as Dale caught himself, and Gavin giggled into his mother’s side.

‘*He was going to swear*,’ Gavin whispered.

‘He sure was,’ the twitch turned into a tired grin, and she nudged her son. ‘Luckily he didn’t though, because I would have had to tell him off.’

‘So, uh, dinner?’ Dale asked with a laugh.

‘Sure,’ Talia yawned and pushed herself off the

couch. She helped Gavin up before rubbing her eyes and stretching. ‘Richard can come, too. And Trish’ll show up as soon as I unlock the door; she’s been texting me about it all day.’

‘And I can finally meet Anna?’ Dale asked, unable to hide the excitement he felt at *finally* meeting Talia’s other friend.

Talia shook her head. ‘She won’t be back until eleven.’

Disappointment washed over Dale. ‘Aw, seriously?’

‘It’s a shame. But she’s got class,’ Talia shrugged. ‘Are we going to invite Richard?’

‘Yeah, I’ll ask,’ Dale turned in the rough direction of the stairs and took in as large a breath as he could. ‘OI! DICK! WE’RE GOING TO TALIA’S FOR DINNER! GET IN THE CAR!’

He turned back to Talia’s raised brow and exasperated expression.

‘That’s not what I meant by “invite him,” but *sure*,’ she muttered, her voice cracking. ‘Gavin, Dale’s not a role model. Do we understand that?’

Gavin giggled, and gave a nod which clearly showed he didn’t agree with his mother.

‘She’s right, you know,’ Dale joked. ‘I’m a rude bugger. A perfect example of what not to be!’

‘You’re real nice, though,’ responded Gavin. ‘You’re always trying to help. Even if you’re not smart about it.’

‘He’s not smart about *anything!*’ Richard’s voice called from the stairs; followed by heavy clunking as he limped his way down to join the others. ‘Trust me, I’ve known him for almost twenty years now. Math’s all he’s good for.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ chuckled Talia. ‘He’s a pretty useful chauffeur.’

‘Hey now, I’m also a good cook,’ Dale grinned

proudly as his friends all laughed. Then he posed dramatically and flexed his arms. 'I mean, just look at these bad boys! Do you know how easy it is to open jars?'

'Man, I wanna be that strong!' Gavin exclaimed, poking at Dale's arm. 'But in my legs! So I can kick into the net from all the way across the field!'

'Sounds like a *goal*,' Dale winked at Gavin. When nobody laughed at the pun, he sighed and shrugged. 'Goal? You don't get it?'

'Oh, no, we got it,' Richard scoffed, his hand meeting the back of Dale's head as he passed.

Dale grunted as Talia did the same, and smoothed his hair back into place. 'Come on! That was a good one! Gav?'

Gavin shook his head and gave Dale a thumbs down. 'Bad.'

Part 23:

Talia sniffed, rolling over and pulling her face off the couch cushion as the clinking of cutlery filled her ears and the smell of cooked meat wafted her into the waking world.

‘Why is the pillow sticky?’ she muttered. She shook her head as she realised it was her makeup, not the fabric, and frowned. ‘When did I get home?’

‘About five minutes after you fell asleep,’ Dale’s voice laughed from the dining table.

Talia snapped her head up and looked at the group of people sitting in her apartment. She stared at them for a moment, taking them in. Dale. Gavin. Richard. Trish.

‘Anna’s not back yet?’ Talia yawned.

‘It’s only nine,’ Trish commented, taking a bite out of some very wet-looking, off-coloured bread. ‘Good beef. Try it as a sandwich. Tastes like heaven.’

‘I like it with the potatoes!’ said Gavin.

‘Potatoes?’ Talia asked. ‘I didn’t think I made potatoes?’

‘Dale did,’ Richard commented. ‘We were waiting for you to wake up, so we made some extras to pass the time. Then Patricia came in and started eating, so we figured it wouldn’t be *too* rude to begin without you.’

‘Of course she did!’ laughed Talia. Then she sat up and stretched. ‘How’d I get upstairs? Oh— No. Dale? You didn’t—’

‘HE DID!’ Gavin yelled. ‘He carried you! All the way up!’

‘It’s three flights!’ Talia exclaimed.

‘You’re not too heavy,’ said Dale, sipping his drink. ‘Though I almost dropped you at one point. I don’t envy the me from the universe where I did.’

‘Yeah, nah. He’s dead and you know it,’ Talia snickered. ‘So, what else did I miss?’

‘Gavin took his meds,’ Dale commented. ‘And a bird flew into the kitchen window while we cooked. Scared me so much I accidentally threw a carton of juice into Richard’s face.’

‘It went everywhere!’ squeaked Gavin.

‘Kind of like your lipstick,’ Trish commented, pointing to her own mouth and wiggling her finger. ‘Might want to go wash your face.’

‘Christ,’ Talia muttered, slipping off the couch and hurrying into the bathroom. She dared a look in the mirror and was met with the ugliest version of herself she’d ever seen. ‘*Frick!*’

She quickly splashed water onto her face and tried to wash off her makeup. She only smeared it worse, though, and let out a frustrated shout.

She turned at a gentle knock on the open bathroom door and felt embarrassment flow through her entire body as Dale slipped in.

‘Need a hand?’ he chuckled. ‘I’ve helped girls with makeup before. And —not being weird or anything— but I’ve woken up smeared in lipstick more than once. I can get this off in a jiffy.’

‘Thanks,’ Talia sighed. ‘Though I’m not interested in hearing stories about you making out with girls.’

‘Oh, no,’ Dale laughed as he started to inspect Talia’s newly-stocked shelf of moisturisers and makeup. ‘I mean I’ve woken up wearing it. Don’t know how it happened, just that I got drunk with friends and woke up looking like a Picasso hooker.’

Talia felt a little less stupid. ‘Good to know I’m not the only one.’

‘Yeah, this is nothing,’ he said gently. ‘Just a bit of cleanser, a damp cloth, and some patience.’

Talia sighed and held up her head for Dale. ‘Patience. Not sure how much of that I have left these days.’

‘You’ve got loads of it,’ Dale comforted, gently starting to rub cream into her cheeks. ‘Unless it comes to me. You have no patience for my dumb shit.’

Though she laughed, Talia still felt her cheeks burn hot. ‘Sorry. I’m trying to work on that.’

‘Gavin said,’ Dale grinned. ‘So, you have some anger management issues, huh?’

The heat crept from her cheeks all the way down her neck to her shoulders and she could feel her heart pounding. Embarrassed, she pulled away from Dale and looked at the floor. ‘I just... have too much energy now. I’m not used to not doing things. Physical things I mean. It’s hard to deal with. I don’t know what to do about it.’

‘You could always come to the gym with me,’ Dale suggested. ‘I can get you a membership if you like.’

She... wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Did she want to go to the gym with Dale? It seemed... embarrassing. The idea of exercising in front of strangers made her chest tight enough but— In front of *Dale* seemed so much more.... More....

‘I usually go Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays after work,’ he continued, gently turning Talia’s face back so he could continue with her makeup. ‘So I could drop you off home afterwards and everything. No big deal.’

Talia shrugged. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Why don’t you come with me tomorrow and check out the place? It’s pretty good; they let people come in a few times before making them buy a membership.’

‘I don’t have gym clothes,’ blushing, Talia fought the urge to pull away again. She could only imagine what she’d look like in one of the stupid, skin-tight outfits she always saw girls wearing in magazines. She couldn’t bear the thought of being seen like that.

‘You don’t need them,’ Dale chuckled. ‘At least not the first few times. Just come and hang out, have something to eat, get to know the people. Basically just get

comfortable with the idea of being in a gym; it's not as bad as you're thinking.'

'I'm not—'

'Yeah you are,' Dale interrupted. 'I can tell. I promise it's not like on TV. Nobody's going to judge you for never going to a gym before.'

Talia scoffed. 'You *really* want me to come, huh?'

'*Yeah!*' Dale's voice rose a pitch, and he coughed to clear his throat. 'I mean, yeah. It'll be fun!'

Talia let herself smile. 'Alright. If I'm not too tired after work tomorrow I'll come to the gym with you.'

'Perfect!' Dale exclaimed. 'Both you coming, and the makeup removal I just did. Check yourself out!'

Talia turned to the mirror and let out a relieved breath. She looked like herself again; not as pretty as she had with her makeup, she didn't think, but better than she had five minutes ago.

She grinned at Dale and followed him as he headed out of the bathroom.

'Hey! Look! She's normal again!' Trish clapped her hands and laughed. 'Man, I should have gotten a photo for Anna. She would have *died* to see you like that!'

'I doubt it will be the last time she embarrasses herself,' said Richard. 'She's a bit like Dale in that regard.'

'I am *nothing* like Dale!' Talia scoffed. Then Dale nudged her and she laughed. 'Alright. Maybe I'm a *bit* like Dale.'

'I think we've got a *lot* in common,' commented Dale. 'I can write a list if you like.'

'I bet you can't even think of *three* things!' Talia mocked.

'Alright, let's see,' Dale tapped his chin. He was obviously trying to make a serious face, but he was failing miserably and Talia couldn't help grinning at the adorable expression he made as he put a finger to his lips and

smirked. ‘Kids, for one. We both love kids. And we both hate police—’

‘Yeah, screw the police!’ Trish exclaimed, throwing pieces of bread in the air like confetti.

‘Thanks, Trish,’ Dale chuckled as crumbs showered into his hair. He brushed them out and then clicked his fingers with excitement, ‘Parents! We both hate our parents! And uh.... We both love Lemonade.... Cheese.... Dogs.... Same primary school. Both impulsive—’

‘WHAT?’ Trish exclaimed. ‘Same WHAT?’

‘Talia didn’t tell you?’ Dale asked. ‘We used to see each other a *bunch* as kids!’

Trish shook her head and turned to Talia, who felt herself blush. ‘TALLY! How could you not tell me that!’

‘I forgot,’ Talia shrugged. ‘It’s not a big deal, though. We used to beat each other up. That’s all.’

‘I have a scar from this one time she bit me!’ Dale laughed, lifting his leg awkwardly onto the table and pulling up his pants to reveal his ankle. ‘I mean, fair enough, I kicked a soccer ball into her face and then laughed at her. But I didn’t expect her to leap at me like some sort of rabid animal. Her bracers sliced right through and I needed *ten* stitches!’

Talia shrugged again, and quickly moved the dinner away from his foot. ‘I’d had a bad day.’

‘Wow, sounds like you two haven’t changed a bit!’ Trish snorted, shovelling in another mouthful of food. ‘Honestly, though. I agree with Gavin. You two are *perfect* for each other!’

‘We— No!’ Talia exclaimed, hot blush shooting back into her cheeks and neck and shoulders. ‘We’re not— I mean— *No!*’

Dale chuckled and nudged Talia. ‘You don’t sound so sure about that. Am I growing on you?’

‘You’re a growing pain in my *you-know-what*,’ she

tried to frown and make herself serious, but she couldn't. She couldn't deny that every time she saw Dale she felt more comfortable around him— She'd go so far to say he made her feel strangely *safe*.... But she wasn't *in love* with him! He was her *friend*. A really good friend. A friend she didn't want to admit she liked as much as she did. 'You're a good friend. That's all.'

'I'll take it!' Dale exclaimed, throwing his arm around Talia and giving her a happy squeeze. 'Friends with *another* cute girl! I'm just winning every day! Does this mean I get to be a part of your birthday parties now, or am I still excluded?'

'*Aaaaalrriiiight*,' she droned, long and deliberate. 'I'll make sure you get an invite to my next birthday.'

'AND MINE!' Gavin exclaimed, banging his hands on the table to get everyone's attention. 'It's next month! I'm gonna be eleven!'

'You're practically a teenager now!' Dale chuckled. 'And me not getting you a single gift! I'll have to talk with your mother about what I'm allowed to get you!'

'Anything's fine as long as it's age-appropriate,' Talia shrugged.

'How about a computer, then?'

'YES!' Gavin screeched, not giving Talia the chance to say no. 'YES YES YES!'

Talia sighed. She wasn't sure a computer was a good gift for someone Gavin's age.... But if he'd been using Dale's she supposed it couldn't be *too* terrible? He'd have to watch out with his epilepsy....

'I'll get you one that handles games better than my laptop,' Dale promised. 'That way you can show off to everyone at your party.'

'Oh, it's only going to be Jacob,' Gavin told him.

'What?' Talia blinked. 'What about the rest of the invitations I gave you?'

‘I put them in the bin!’ Gavin declared. ‘Because I don’t like anyone at school and I don’t want them ruining my birthday.’

Both Dale and Trish let out loud, explosive laughs— And both tried to smother them as soon as they saw Talia’s glare.

‘I think that’s fair,’ Richard chuckled. ‘Better to have one good friend than a hundred bad ones.’

Gavin gave a proud nod and turned to his mother. ‘If it’s only me and Jacob and you and Dale, can we go to Ms Danielles for the party? *Please?*’

‘I...’ Talia opened her mouth to argue, but couldn’t find the energy. She gave up. ‘Alright.’

Part 24:

Talia hadn't expected to have so much free time. She'd gotten herself so prepared for another day of hard work, like last night, that she'd been almost disappointed when she'd finished the last of her paperwork. It had taken, what? Ten minutes?

She sighed and let her head drop onto her desk. The phone hadn't rung since that *one* call in the morning. And Richard had spent most of his time making outgoing calls. And Dale—

Fucking *Dale!*

Talia lifted her head just so she could drop it onto the table again.

He had been the sweetest, most considerate coworker she'd ever had. Introducing her to everyone. Showing her around. Getting her drinks and snacks and— And—

And she *hated* it. Because it was *all* she had been able to think of *all* day!

That, and Trish's comment about how *perfect* they were for each other.

Talia closed her eyes tightly, and let out a long sigh. She *wasn't* in love with Dale.

She *wasn't*.

It was just Trish's dumb jokes getting to her, and her over-thinking it.

'Alright, Ash, I'll see you then! Have a good one!'
Speak of the devil....

Talia pushed herself into a proper sitting position as Dale stepped out of the elevator and stuffed his phone in his pocket.

'Hey, Talia!' Dale beamed. 'How's the day been treating you?'

Talia shrugged. 'I walked into the men's bathroom

by mistake. Some guy named Spencer was crying in one of the stalls. That cleaner guy— Aiden, I think his name was? He was trying to comfort him.'

'Oh, yeah, Spencer,' Dale nodded. 'Emotional guy. Dealing with a lot. Just met him downstairs and told him to take the week off... Manage to find the girl's room?'

'Didn't bother looking,' Talia replied. 'Figured the men's room was just as good. Closer, at least. Expect me in there often.'

Dale snorted in amusement. 'I was going to have my lunch break now. Want to join me?'

'*Anything's* better than sitting on my butt until closing,' said Talia. 'Just let me tell Richard we're going.'

Dale nodded as Talia quickly gathered some documents and made her way to Richard's office.

She opened the door without knocking and walked straight in, dumping the papers on his desk and blurting, 'I'll be back in an hour.'

Richard stared at her, and slowly pulled the pen out of his mouth.

She nearly kicked herself when she realised what she'd done. 'Uh, I mean— I'm having my lunch break. I'll be back in an hour.'

Richard let out a loud laugh and nodded. 'Grab a book or something for yourself while you're out. I don't think today's going to get any more interesting.'

Talia nodded, and quickly rejoined Dale outside the office.

'So, where are we going?' she asked. 'Can we avoid fast food? I'm still sick of burgers.'

Dale agreed with her as he slid into the elevator. 'There's this really nice Japanese place I go; you'd probably like their beef noodles.'

'Sounds fun,' said Talia. 'How far?'

'Five-minute drive,' Dale replied. 'Remind me to get

food for Dick when we leave. He loves the place. He'd kill me if he knew I went and didn't grab him some takoyaki or something.'

'I'll try,' Talia promised.

Part 25:

It had been a good day. Dale couldn't believe how easy it had been to get Talia to join him for lunch. He'd expected her to decline at least twice before having Richard stick his head out the office door to tell her to eat.

But he was happy she'd gone with him; they'd gotten there before the worst of the lunchtime rush, and gotten a good table by the air conditioning.

Talia had devoured her food and Dale could see where Gavin got his appetite. He was glad he'd ordered extra to share, because Talia was obviously too embarrassed to order more on her own—

Hello!

As they entered the gym, Dale let his eyes wander down the curves of an exiting trainer. He didn't recognise her; she must be new. *A welcome addition.*

'Hey,' Talia punched him in the shoulder. 'None of that.'

'None of what?' Dale asked, his voice high in a laugh. 'I was just looking!'

'Yeah, at her *handbag!*' Talia joked, her mouth turning in a cheeky smirk.

Dale gasped, feigning offence. 'Oh, how could you! I would *never* steal *her* bag! She's not pretty enough.'

'Ahah!' Talia mocked. 'Your true motives come to light! I knew it!'

'Yeah, it was all a detailed conspiracy,' said Dale. 'I saw you and was like, "what's the worst possible pickup line?" and, well, you know the rest.'

Dale watched as a blush crept up Talia's cheeks and she dismissed him with a giggle and a wave of her hand. He grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her away from the front desk and towards the gym.

'Hey, Mark!' Dale waved to the clerk as he dragged

Talia past. 'She's with me!'

Mark sighed. 'So you mean she's not signing in like she's supposed to?'

'Oh please, I'm not a Neanderthal!' Talia scoffed, elbowing Dale in the ribs and heading back to Mark's desk.

'Ah, nice to see a friend of Dale who's *not* as big a cock as he is,' grinned Mark. 'Thought it was just me and Richard with common sense. I'm Mark.'

'Come on, Mark, give her a laugh!' Dale snorted. 'Tell her your full name!'

'She doesn't need to know my—'

'It's Spunt,' Dale interrupted, grinning widely when Talia covered her laugh. 'Mark Joe Spunt.'

'Yes, yes, my name's hilarious, I know,' Mark made a show of rolling his eyes at Dale before turning back to Talia. 'And you?'

'Talia,' she replied. 'Wilson.'

'Oh, you're *Gavin's* mum!' Mark exclaimed. 'Hah! Dale's brought him in a few times!'

'How'd that go?'

'Everyone here loves him,' Mark said. 'Very active. Don't know how you handle him! You must have the patience of a saint.'

'Unless it comes to me,' Dale chimed in. 'Or, as I discovered today, vending machines.'

'It stole my change!' Talia defended, her blush reappearing as her cheeks turned an endearing pink. 'What are you grinning at?'

'You're cute when you're flustered,' feeling himself smirk, Dale leant in close and bumped his nose against Talia's. 'Boop! Should lock you up in my room. I've got the handcuffs for it.'

'*Oh-hoo* I'm sure you do!' Talia scoffed. She tried to play it off, but Dale saw her blush more as her breathing deepened.

‘Like the idea of that, do we?’ he joked.

Talia rolled her eyes and turned away from Dale, obviously trying to ignore him. She grabbed the pen from the front desk and took the clipboard from Mark a little too quick to be polite; though he seemed to understand.

‘You get five free sessions to try the gym out,’ Mark explained. ‘Non-consecutive, so you can come today, tomorrow, in a month’s time, or even next year. Just whenever you get the time. Then, once you’ve used your five times you’ll have to buy a membership to keep using the facilities.’

‘Sounds interesting,’ said Talia, barely looking up as she filled in the document. Her cheeks were a darkening crimson now, and she cleared her throat before handing the clipboard back. ‘I might have to come in on days Dale’s not here.’

‘Hey!’ Dale mocked offence.

‘Good luck with him,’ snickered Mark. ‘He’s something special.’

‘Oh, you don’t have to tell me that,’ Talia smirked back.

‘Alright, enough teasing, Spunt,’ Dale said, blowing a raspberry and hooking his arm around Talia. ‘Me and Tal are going to go get *fit!*’

Dale guided Talia away from the desk and through the main entrance into the gym. He saw her mouth drop as they came through the door, and he gave her a second to take in the room.

‘You were right,’ she managed. ‘This is *nothing* like what I was expecting.... Where do we start?’

‘Whatever you want to do,’ Dale replied. ‘If you don’t feel like working out you can just hang out with me and watch.’

‘Okay—’

‘Dale! Hey!’

A huge smile spread across Dale's face as he saw Laura sitting by the bikes.

'Hey Laura!' he exclaimed, giving a wave and hurrying over. 'Still on for the weekend?'

'*Duh!*' she replied, then nodded to Talia. 'Who's your friend?'

'Nice!' Dale pumped his fist. 'Talia this is Laura, we went on a date once. Laura, this is Talia; Gavin's mum.'

'*Gavin!*' Laura laughed. 'That boy. How do you manage him? No offence. He's lovely. Just... active.'

For a minute Talia was stunned, then she gave a warm smile and shrugged. 'You just do.'

'Hah! Ah. Yeah.... *Sooo* Dale,' Laura turned back to Dale and gave him a wink. 'Got a girlfriend yet?'

'Nah, I'm actually thinking of taking a break from dating for a while,' Dale replied. He felt himself blush a little and tried not to side-eye Talia as he spoke. 'I've got a bit of a crush, actually. But I don't think she likes me back. Just letting myself get over her before I start searching again. You know; to be fair on the other girls.'

'Such a gentleman,' Laura joked. 'It's not me, is it? Because I'm still down for something more casual.'

'No, no, it's fine,' said Dale. 'I want something serious. But I'm not sure I'll get that with this girl, either, so I'm hesitant to say anything.'

'It's made him flirty as hell,' Talia scoffed. 'Dale, seriously. You need to get it out of your system. Just ask her out before you kill me.'

Laura let out a laugh as Dale coughed. He wasn't sure if Talia was playing around or not. Had he really been flirty? Was he making her uncomfortable?

'Or actually, maybe don't,' Talia shrugged. 'If being horny makes you offer to drive me places I'm not going to complain.'

'I'm not— I'm not horny!' exclaimed Dale. '*You're*

horny!’

‘Mature,’ Laura gave a giggle and quickly grabbed her bag. ‘Anyway, I have to go. Get the bus before peak hour starts? You know how it is at this time.’

‘Yeah, sucks that buses get caught in traffic like that,’ said Dale. ‘HEY! You know what would be cool and useful? Sky buses.’

‘You mean... planes?’ Talia asked.

‘No, I mean like— Like buses! But in the sky.’

‘Planes,’ Talia repeated flatly.

‘No— Like— Never mind,’ sighing, Dale turned back to Laura. ‘I’ll see you Saturday?’

‘If you don’t get hit by a sky bus,’ she ruffled his hair as she passed and gave him a wink. ‘But yeah, Saturday! We can watch that Microscopic Equines movie or whatever it is.’

‘Sounds like a date!’ Dale exclaimed. ‘I mean, not a *date* date—’

‘If you didn’t point it out I wouldn’t have thought of it that way!’ Laura interrupted. ‘Just pick me up anytime past five.’

‘Cool cool,’ said Dale. He waved to Laura as she left, then turned to Talia. ‘So... I’ve been flirty? Really? It hasn’t been making you uncomfortable has it?’

‘A little,’ Talia blushed. ‘But it’s not a big deal.’

‘Sorry. I’ll try and reel it in.’

Talia shrugged and wiped her red-hot cheeks before turning back to her friend. ‘So what do we do now? At the gym I mean. Is there anywhere I have to sit or....’

‘Nah, just hang out wherever,’ Dale motioned to the weights on the other side of the room. ‘You’re welcome to watch me workout if you like. But you could also just head to the cafeteria and relax. Or there’s a steam room. But I wouldn’t sit in there too long. Dehydration and all that.’

‘Dehydration? It’s steam?’ Talia questioned. ‘I

thought steam was water?’

‘So’s sweat,’ replied Dale. ‘And steam makes you sweat a *ridiculous* amount, so, yeah.’

Dale watched as Talia made a face. She obviously didn’t understand, but she shrugged it off instead of arguing and headed over to the weights and sat on one of the stools.

‘How much do you lift?’ she asked.

‘Just fifty-odd. Sometimes I go closer to sixty.’

Talia’s eyes widened. ‘Kilos, you mean?’

‘Yeah?’

‘That’s as much as I weigh,’ she gave a sigh and shook her head. ‘*Jesus Christ.*’

‘Huh, no wonder you were so easy to get up the stairs!’ Dale laughed as he checked over the weights. ‘Tell you what; I’ll lie down and you can jump into my arms and I’ll bench-press you instead of the weights. That way you won’t feel embarrassed sitting there doing nothing.’

‘Because being hefted into the air like a duffle bag isn’t embarrassing?’ Talia raised her brow. ‘I’ll pass.’

‘Fair. You can spot me then,’ Dale grinned. ‘Let’s go get changed.’

‘How do I do that?’

‘Get changed? It’s easy enough,’ joked Dale. ‘You slip an arm out of your jacket sleeve—’

‘You know exactly what I meant you *bastard,*’ Talia interrupted with a huff. ‘Spotting. What is it?’

‘You help me lift—’

‘Forget it,’ Talia scoffed and crossed her ankles. ‘You go get changed. I’ll sit here and let you do all the work.’

The laugh that came out of Dale was too much of a giggle for his liking, so he quickly nodded and hurried to the change rooms. He hoped Talia hadn’t heard it. Or that she at least didn’t think it was unmanly.

He couldn’t help coughing a few times as he changed. Deep coughs to try and drop his voice.

‘Dude, relax. Are you trying to impress a girl or something?’ asked a humoured voice from the other side of the lockers.

‘Yeah actually, you caught me,’ Dale replied, slipping on his shirt and carefully placing his suit in his locker.

‘That’s exactly what I’m about to try and do.’

‘Well then,’ the voice chuckled. ‘Good luck with that.’

‘Thanks,’ Dale couldn’t help grinning as he headed back out of the changing room. ‘Have a good one!’

He hurried back to Talia, who hadn’t moved from her seat but had pulled out her phone and was casually playing a game he didn’t recognise.

‘What’s that one?’ he asked. ‘Looks fun.’

‘Twelve Quests,’ Talia responded, quickly slipping her phone back into her pocket. ‘I’m up to quest twenty.’

‘Math doesn’t quite add up there!’ Dale replied.

He waited for Talia’s response but she just stared at him. It took him a minute to read her expression but when he did he gave her a nudge.

‘Yep! This is what’s under the suit! Wild, I know.’

‘You should wear normal shirts more often,’ Talia breathed. Then she coughed and looked away.

‘Wish you’d taken me up on the offer to bench-press you?’ Dale asked.

Talia snickered and shook her head. She still didn’t meet Dale’s eye as he settled himself onto the bench.

‘Just forty kilos today,’ he mentioned. ‘I can’t see too many of the regulars around and I don’t think you could lift fifty off me if I dropped it!’

‘Good luck, because there’s no way I’ll be able to lift forty, either,’ Talia rolled her eyes.

‘Yeah, but Anthony can.’

‘Anthony?’

‘He’s by the treadmills,’ Dale pointed him out, waving when Anthony saw him. ‘We spot each other

sometimes. He's a good guy. If I drop the weight on myself just give a shout and he'll come over.'

'Alright, if you're sure,' Talia said slowly. 'And that's it? That's all I do?'

'Yep,' Dale almost knocked the wind out of himself as he flopped back down harder than he meant to. He adjusted himself properly before heaving the weight off the bar and beginning his set. 'So how's planning for Gavin's birthday going?'

'It's alright,' Talia half-laughed. 'He still wants to go to Ms Danielles. I tried talking him out of it but he won't budge on that.... And I don't know what to get him. Ten years I've spent looking into shop windows and wishing I had enough to spoil him. Now finally I have the money, but he seems to have everything he wants already, and there's not a single thing I can think to buy him.'

'What about a desk setup?' Dale suggested. 'I'm getting him a computer. He's going to need somewhere to put it.'

'*How the hell can you talk and lift at the same time?*' Talia muttered. Then she sighed and shook her head. 'It doesn't seem like enough. You're getting him something great; I don't want my gift to just be something for that thing to sit on.'

'Sorry,' Dale felt himself blush, and was glad he could pretend it was from lifting. 'I didn't mean to upstage you with that.'

'It's fine,' Talia gave a tired smile. 'You were thinking of him. It's actually really sweet.'

'I know I am,' Dale grinned at Talia, and felt his cheeks grow hotter as she returned it. 'You sure you don't want to give the weights a go? Look at how easy they are!'

'No, I'm good,' she laughed. 'Tell you what though, I'm craving chips.'

'What sort of chips?' Dale asked, putting the weights back onto the bar and pushing himself up.

‘Potato.’

‘All chips are potato,’ he responded.

‘Oh my god,’ Talia put her face in her hands.

‘Bagged. Chicken. Crinkle cut.’

‘We can head to the cafeteria if you want,’ said Dale.

For a moment Talia hesitated. Then she blushed and looked away. ‘You’ve barely had a chance to workout though.’

‘Today’s all about taking it easy and getting comfortable,’ Dale pushed himself up and offered his hand to Talia. ‘So if you want to go get chips, we’ll go get chips. Then we can chat in the food court for half an hour before I drive you home.’

‘I suppose,’ Talia replied. She let Dale help her up before rubbing her arm nervously. ‘If you’re sure.’

‘It’ll be fun! I can introduce you to Zoey. She works at the cafeteria most days. I dated her once.’

‘Do you have any female friends you *didn’t* use to date?’ Talia’s question was broken by her giggling and she put a hand over her mouth to stop herself laughing louder. ‘*How often do you get dumped?*’

‘Well there’s you. And Trish,’ Dale responded, ignoring her last comment. ‘And hopefully —one day soon— I’ll be able to add Anna to that list!’

‘Oh my god, *Anna!*’ exclaimed Talia. ‘How have you not met her yet!’

‘I don’t know! It’s ridiculous! Is she hiding from me or something? I want to meet her *so badly!*’

‘She’ll be at Gavin’s birthday,’ Talia told him.

‘Hopefully. Unless something comes up.’

‘She better be,’ Dale responded. ‘Otherwise I’ll have to camp out in her lounge for a week.’

‘What about work?’

‘Work can suck it!’ Dale laughed. ‘I have new friends now! Who needs Dick when you have girls like you and

Anna?’

‘Wow, you sound *just* like Trish,’ Talia snickered. ‘Can’t count how many times I’ve heard her say that.’

‘Doesn’t she like Richard?’ Dale asked. ‘I thought she did?’

‘N-No she does,’ Talia bit her lip. ‘She’s.... I was just cracking wise. Don’t worry about it.’

Dale shrugged. ‘Alright? But if she’s got a problem with Dick you can tell me.’

He wasn’t sure why Talia laughed, but she shook her head and waved a hand to dismiss him as he led her to the cafeteria, so he didn’t ask about it. Though maybe he—

‘Zoey!’ he called, immediately distracted by the girl serving at the counter. ‘Hey! How’ve you been?’

‘Great!’ Zoey responded, pulling off her gloves and wiping her brow. ‘Who’s this?’

‘Gavin’s mum, Talia,’ answered Dale.

‘Oh, should I cook twelve hamburgers for her then?’ snickering, Zoey lent over the counter and gave Talia a wink. ‘You *do* know Dale’s been feeding him way too much, right?’

‘I’m aware,’ Talia replied. Her grin grew wider as she lent on the counter herself, so close to Zoey their noses almost touched. Zoey looked unsure as Talia’s eyes glinted with an energy that Dale could only describe as *wicked*. ‘I’ve seen you in photos before. You know Trish?’

‘*Goldberg?*’ Zoey let out a laugh, and any anxiety she’d had before vanished completely. ‘Oh my *god*, you’re *that* Talia?’

‘Whoa, you know Trish too?’ Dale felt himself grinning as widely as the two girls as he tapped a hand on the counter. ‘How?’

‘We went to uni together!’ Zoey responded. ‘I mean — Different classes, but we used to sit together during breaks sometimes. Now it’s mostly online chatting. We

were planning on meeting up next week, actually. She's introducing me to a girl over lunch.'

'A girl?' Dale asked.

'Oh, right, I'm pan now,' Zoey shrugged. 'Did a whole lotta soul searching. Figured out I'm not entirely straight.'

'Pan?'

'Similar to bi,' Talia responded, not looking back at Dale as she continued talking with Zoey. 'Speaking of introducing you to girls! She tried to set us up on a date once, did you know?'

Zoey gasped, deep and loud. '*No!*'

'Yes!' Talia laughed.

'Oh that cheeky little—'

Part 26:

Going to the gym had been the worst thing Talia had ever done— Because Dale had been right. And she'd had to admit he was right. Right to his face.

She didn't care how much fun she'd had. She'd accidentally *flirted* with Dale.

Which meant Trish was right as well.

Fuck Trish and her stupid being-right-all-the-time, Talia thought to herself with a sigh. *And fuck Dale and his stupid, revealing singlet.*

The tap turned off in the kitchen and Talia rolled her eyes and tapped her painted nail on Dale's laptop.

She was frustrated.

And she was going to slut-shame Dale for deciding to drive home shirtless.

'Find something you like yet?' Dale called over the heavy *clank* of spoon against mug.

'If you break my cups I'll kill you!' Talia hissed back. Then she grunted and turned back to the too-white screen. 'This is stupid. I don't need a computer.'

'Yes you do,' Dale replied nonchalantly. 'You don't have to use it for personal stuff if you don't want to, but you need to be able to update the digital calendar for Dick.'

'Can't I do that on my phone?' Talia groaned.

'You can, but you'll be throwing your phone out the office window after a week of it,' Dale replied. 'The app's editing function is *awful*. Viewing? Fine. But making new appointments? Makes you want to flip tables.'

'I already want to flip tables.'

Dale's giggle was a little too high-pitched for Talia's liking as he came back into the lounge and put a pair of coffees down between them. 'And vending machines.'

'It took my change!' Talia defended.

'And you did over four thousand dollars worth of

damage,’ Dale gave a nod that would have been severe had he not been grinning. ‘Dick said nobody’s going to be able to go into the cafeteria for at least two days until the glass is all cleaned up.’

‘Well, he should have invested in a better machine, shouldn’t he?’ Talia snorted.

Dale giggled again. ‘Guess he’s not very good at his job, huh?’

‘What?’

‘*Investing.*’

‘Oh, shut up,’ Talia felt the corners of her lips turn up, and even though she tried desperately to hold back her smile, she felt her voice rise as high as her brow. ‘Okay, though. I’ve narrowed it down to five computers. But I don’t know which one to get. This one has eight RAM, this one has sixteen— Which is better?’

‘Depends on what you want to do,’ Dale chuckled, sliding his laptop around and flicking through the open tabs. ‘Oh, same operating system as our primary school computers? You really *do* hate change.’

‘Look— Shut up and tell me which one I want.’

‘Well, uh, this system is good for typing and stuff but you can’t play many games on it or anything. You okay with no games?’ Dale shrugged when Talia nodded. ‘Alright. I’d say if you’re not getting games.... This one here. It’ll run everything it needs to smoothly, but it’s not as big as the more powerful models and it’ll be easier to carry around.’

‘Okay then,’ Talia sighed. Happy that was *finally* over with.

‘And it’s *ordered!*’ Dale announced, slamming a finger down on his ENTER key a little too hard.

‘That fast?’

‘Yeah, I use this site a lot and have my ordering details saved.’

‘How many... computers do you buy?’ Talia frowned.

‘Oh, no, it’s not just computers. I get most of my electronics from here,’ Dale laughed, closing his laptop lid and holding it out to Talia. ‘Can you put this in my bag for me? With minimal huffing?’

‘I don’t *huff*,’ Talia huffed, snatching Dale’s laptop and marching over to his bag as he laughed. She almost swore when she realised what she’d done. She tried to play it off as she unzipped Dale’s bag and took a deep breath.

Slow breaths, she reminded herself of her therapist’s instructions. *In. Out. In. Ou—*

‘Really, Dale?’ all of Talia’s anger was replaced with surprise as she yanked a pair of pink, feathery handcuffs out of the bottom of Dale’s bag. ‘All those jokes you made! I didn’t realise you *actually* owned a pair!’

About five different expressions passed over Dale’s face—which Talia could almost swear matched perfectly with the five stages of grief—until he settled on acceptance.

‘I forgot those were in there.’

‘But *why*?’ Talia laughed. ‘*Why* would you need these in your *work bag*?’

‘It’s.... I.... An indescribably weird no-questions-asked favour for Richard?’ Dale gave a cough and took the handcuffs from Talia. He played with the safety latch for a minute before clicking them open and holding them out. ‘Do you... want to try them on?’

For a minute Talia stared at him. Then she sighed and figured... *why not?*

She held out her wrists and let Dale clip the handcuff around one of them. ‘Oh, please officer. I have a son! I have a *son!*’

‘Well, that’s too bad!’ Dale responded. ‘My name is Sergeant *Awesome*, and I’m arresting you for being too pretty.’

‘Please! No! I won’t do it again!’ Talia mock-cried as Dale tugged her towards the couch.

He sat her down and clipped the other side of the handcuffs to the coffee table's leg, then snatched the remote off the floor. 'We both know that's a lie! Repeat offence means you're sentenced to watching TV with a friend! Sorry, I don't make the rules.'

'Oh, no! Not TV! Anything but TV!'

'Resisting arrest?' Dale scoffed. 'Well, we'll see how much you resist arrest after *this!*'

Talia almost squealed as Dale grabbed her by an ankle and flipped her over on the couch. She felt herself blush as he settled down beside her, and was too embarrassed by her moan-like sigh to protest as he began massaging her feet. She hoped Dale hadn't heard it. He didn't comment.... But his face was visibly pinker than it had been before as he used one hand to rub her foot and the other to switch on the television.

'Rediscovery Channel?' he asked. 'Or Chef's Network?'

'What about some murder mysteries?' Talia suggested.

With a nod, Dale flicked through the channels until he found what he was looking for. 'Ah— Nice! How do you fancy some good old Homestead Homicides?'

'God, that show is the *worst!*' Talia laughed. 'Oh! A sex scene already? No, don't cut— Classic Homestead Homicides. Gets you excited and then cuts outside the door right at the best bit! *Cowards!*'

'But you still get to hear it!' retorted Dale. 'I've seen this episode before, by the way. That's his sister. They killed their mother because she walked in on them *doing the nasty.*'

'*No!*' Talia exclaimed, feigning shock. 'What? *Incest* in Homestead Homicide being the reason for the murder? That's just *unheard of!*'

'Come on, Cindy!' Dale cheered, abandoning Talia's leg so he could clap his hands. 'Bang that brother of yours—'

‘Do I *want* to know what I’ve just walked into?’

Dale and Talia both jumped as Trish snorted a laugh and kicked the apartment door shut.

Talia felt the tug of the forgotten handcuff pull her back down and nearly ended up on the floor. ‘Trish— Oh my god— I *swear* there is an explanation for this!’

‘Uh, yeah, and I’m *desperate* for it!’ Trish replied. ‘Handcuffs? Really? I knew you had some weird fantasies, Tally, but I’d never have guessed *you’d* be a *sub!*’

‘I’m not— I mean— I—’ Talia could barely find the words she needed to defend herself against Trish’s impish tongue-flick. ‘*We were just messing around!*’

‘What do you mean by *weird* fantasies?’ Dale snickered into his hand.

‘Well, she—’

‘You tell him, you *die!*’ Talia exclaimed, trying to move but only managing to tug the coffee table toward herself. She quickly undid the cuff’s latch and sat up. She knew her face was bright red as she tried to meet her friend’s eye. ‘I *will* kill you!’

Trish snorted another laugh and joined the pair on the couch. She playfully punched Dale in the shoulder and put her feet up on the table. ‘Is this the episode with the horse?’

‘The one that eats half the body?’

Trish nodded as Dale put an arm around her— And laughed as he threw the other around Talia.

Talia almost protested as Dale pulled her against his chest and ruffled her hair. But then she heard his heart beating even and strong and didn’t want to pull away, as much as she hated admitting it to herself... and would *never* admit to anyone else. She forced herself to sit up when Dale let her go, though, and quickly fixed her hair.

‘So, about what we talked about last night?’ Trish gave Talia wink and her usual shit-eating grin. ‘Was I

right?’

Talia let out a heavy sigh and rolled her eyes. She could feel her cheeks burning as she lied, ‘No.’

Part 27:

It was unbelievable how much flour Gavin had managed to get everywhere. Dale had left the room for, what? Two minutes to put the bins out? And come back to what looked like a gruesome bakery murder scene. He'd had to send the kid to shower after putting the cake in the oven. His clothes wouldn't be clean and dry until tomorrow — Which was fine, because he was staying the night and had his pyjamas. Talia didn't have to know he'd almost ruined his new shirt.

'Spike! Angel! Come on boys! Come here!' Dale began to bang the empty dog food can with the spoon and stuck his head out the back door. 'Dinner time!'

'Don't your neighbours ever get sick of you?' Richard asked with a chuckle.

'Well, Penny's been asking a few questions lately,' Dale snorted his own laugh and closed the door behind his dogs. 'Like, "*Whose kid is that?*" and, "*Why were you arrested?*" and, "*Who's that woman who screamed at you?*"'

'Talia?' Richard guessed as he let Sahara escape his hold.

'Yeah,' replied Dale. 'By the way, I like your badge. It looks familiar? Is it from a TV show or something? I can't place it.'

'It's the gay flag,' Richard snorted. 'Christ, Dale. Are you *that* dense?'

'Wh— No! I knew it was something, didn't I?' Dale lifted his hands in a submissive gesture and shrugged. 'I forgot that event was on in the city. I would have gone with you if I'd remembered!'

'You *should* have come,' Richard's eye roll turned into a grin as he tapped his cane on the floor. 'You would have met Anna. Her and Trish were there.'

‘Aw, man! *Anna* was there?’ Dale gave a disappointed groan. He should have figured *Anna* and *Trish* would have gone, with *Talia* being bi. They were the sort of supportive friends to do that type of thing!

‘Yeah, and *Aiden*.’

‘Who?’

‘You know *Aiden*,’ Richard scoffed.

‘No? Genuinely. No.’

‘Jesus Christ, Dale!’ slamming his cane into the floor, Richard pointed an accusing finger and scowled as the dogs started barking. ‘He only cleans your damn office every night! You can’t tell me you don’t even know his name!’

‘Oh. That cleaner guy? Knowing his name never seemed that important—’

‘Not important?’ Richard gave a snort. ‘Well, I’ll tell him to skip your office and leave you to clean up your own garbage, will I?’

‘No— That’s— I didn’t mean it that way—’ Dale stammered. ‘I just meant that— I mean he’s— He’s—’

‘Why are we yelling at Dale?’ Gavin’s voice asked from behind the men, and they both turned to find the young boy, clothed and dry, watching them from the hall. ‘Did he do something stupid again?’

‘Disrespectful, more like,’ Richard replied. He raised his brow in an exaggerated manner and pointed to Dale again. ‘He doesn’t even know the cleaner’s name!’

‘That’s bad,’ Gavin grimaced. ‘Our janitor’s called *Dave*. I like him. He got my ball off the roof last week.’

‘Hey, so what was *Aiden* even doing at pride?’ Dale gave a weak chuckle. ‘Is he gay?’

‘He was there to support a friend,’ Richard shook his head— Then something dawned on him and he turned to Gavin. ‘Actually, he was there with *Jacob*’s family.’

‘Oh! Yeah! They go every year, cos his aunt’s queer!’ Gavin nodded. Then he glanced to the kitchen and shuffled

in place. 'Can I have some chocolate?'

'Sure, but only a little bit,' Dale laughed as Gavin sprinted off. 'And don't tell your mother! Ah, jeez. He's going to eat the whole block, isn't he?'

Richard gave a nod.

'I better go stop him,' Dale sighed and quickly hurried after the boy. 'Gav! No more than a row, alright?'

'I broke off two!' Gavin replied. 'Is that okay?'

'Your mum would kill me,' said Dale. 'One row.'

'One and a half?'

'Don't push your luck!'

'Alright, one,' Gavin replied, snapping his chunk into messy halves and sliding the obviously-smaller half back into the box.

Dale had to bite his lip to stop himself from grinning. 'I saw that.'

'But Mum didn't,' Gavin's face broke into an impish grin before he devoured his treat. 'And now she never will!'

'Well aren't you a twerp today?' Richard limped into the kitchen and leant against the counter. 'What's sparked this bad behaviour?'

'Mum's not here,' said Gavin. 'I only behave because it makes her happy. Otherwise, I can do what I want!'

'Oh-ho, you're a little shit aren't you— *Snot!*' Dale quickly corrected himself. 'Fuck— I mean damn— *I mean dang!*'

'I think I can have more chocolate,' without waiting for approval, Gavin turned around and retrieved the other half of his chocolate.

'I said one row,' Dale sighed.

'And Mum said no swearing,' Gavin replied nonchalantly.

Richard let out an explosion of a laugh and jabbed Dale in the side. 'Oh, he's got you there, Dale. Which would you rather Talia yell at you about?'

‘Well I’d prefer *neither*, honestly,’ Dale scoffed. He rolled his eyes as Gavin ate and quickly moved the last of it from the bench to a high cupboard. ‘I like being alive, thanks.’

‘*Just like you like my mum*,’ Gavin mumbled.

‘Hey now,’ Dale shook his head. ‘Don’t say things like that.’

‘Well, I’m not supposed to lie,’ Gavin retorted. ‘You like my mum! It’s really obvious!’

‘It’s not—’

‘Oh, *it is*,’ Richard cut in. ‘You two need to stop being stubborn and face the facts.’

‘The facts are we’re *friends*,’ Dale lied. ‘I don’t like her, and even if I did I’m ninety-nine percent sure she doesn’t like me back.’

‘You were also ninety-nine percent sure that you could eat two kilos of steak,’ Richard replied. ‘And I haven’t forgotten how that went!’

‘Hey, that was a long time ago—’

‘It was last year.’

‘I could eat that much steak!’ Gavin bragged. ‘Bet you!’

‘You can’t eat two kilos of steak,’ Dale laughed. ‘Not in one sitting, at least.’

‘Bet you I can!’ Gavin pressed. ‘And if I can, you have to ask Mum out on a date!’

Dale snorted. ‘Do you even know how much two kilos is?’

‘Yeah, like half a cat,’ Gavin crossed his arms and frowned. ‘I could eat half a cat!’

‘But you— You shouldn’t!’ Dale choked on his laugh as Gavin marched to the fridge and began going through the drawers.

He pulled out a half-defrosted pork roast and checked the label. ‘*This* is two kilos!’

‘No!’ Dale snatched the roast back and put it away. ‘Your mum will kill me if you’re sick tomorrow!’

Gavin rolled his eyes as Dale quickly shooed him out of the kitchen and onto the couch.

‘Come on,’ Dale sighed. ‘Why don’t you watch TV while I make dinner? What do you want?’

‘Two kilos of steak,’ Gavin said stubbornly.

‘How about a regular amount of steak?’ Dale suggested. ‘Or tacos?’

Gavin sighed, seeming to realise Dale had him beat. ‘I like tacos.’

‘Hard or soft shell?’

‘*Both!*’ Gavin declared. ‘I want to put a soft shell inside a hard shell!’

‘Shell-ception,’ Richard commented. ‘Clever idea. Did you come up with it?’

Gavin shook his head. ‘Jacob did. He’s awesome! He’s the best person in the world.’

‘Is he now?’

‘Yeah,’ Gavin’s smile disappeared, and he glanced to the floor. For a minute he fiddled with his shirt, then looked from the floor to the adults and back. ‘I love him.’

‘Best friends are like that,’ Dale replied, putting a hand on the boy’s back. ‘Don’t look so down about it. There’s nothing wrong with loving your friends.’

Gavin gave a sigh, though Dale wasn’t sure why.

‘Gav? Is something wrong—’

‘Dale, why don’t you go make dinner?’ Richard interrupted. ‘I’ll take Gavin outside and we can talk.’

‘You sure?’ Dale wasn’t sure he wanted to leave Gavin alone when he seemed so down.

‘Yeah, I’ll fall over and cheer him up,’ Richard pinched Gavin’s cheek, and Gavin gave a weak smile. ‘And he can tell me about whatever it is that’s bothering him.’

‘He can tell me anything too—’

‘Not if you’re going to become his step-dad, he can’t!’ Richard retorted. ‘This might be something super-secret that parents can’t know about! And then if you become his step-dad you’ll know! Which is *totally* not-on, right Gavin?’

Gavin giggled, his eyes lighting up with their usual cheeky sparkle. ‘You mean *when* he becomes my step-dad!’

‘I’m not— I’m not going to be your step-dad!’ Dale exclaimed. He turned to Richard as Gavin sprinted out the front, giving a defeated sigh. ‘Dick. It’s not going to happen.’

Richard gave a snort. ‘I’ve seen the way you look at Talia!’

‘No— Dick,’ for a moment Dale hesitated. Then he let his shoulders sag and shook his head. ‘Yeah. Okay. Maybe I do like her.’

‘So then, what’s the problem?’

‘*She* doesn’t like *me*.’

Richard laughed as if Dale had told a joke. Then he met Dale’s eye and his smile disappeared, and he raised his brow with a disbelieving scoff. ‘For Christ’s sake, Dale! You’re the most oblivious man I’ve ever met!’

Part 28:

She couldn't get him off her mind.

All day she'd been thinking about him, and how she felt about him.

It wasn't fair that he'd left her behind.

She shifted in bed and sniffed as a tear escaped her eye, rolling down and catching on the bridge of her nose.

She'd been so invested. She'd been willing to drop everything for him.... And he'd abandoned her. He'd abandoned her, just like everyone else.... The *one* person she thought would never hurt her had just up and gone the moment things got hard.

Eleven years and she still couldn't wrap her head around it.

She was glad that Gavin was at Dale's house tonight. This year had hit her particularly hard and she wasn't sure she'd have been able to make it through the day with her son without crying.

Cursing, she sat up and rubbed her eyes.

Why was she so weak? *Why* couldn't she just *forget* everything that had happened and *move on*? How was *any* of this fair?

She let out a long, heavy sigh.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't—

Her train of thought was interrupted by her phone buzzing and she quickly checked the text.

It was from Dale, telling her Gavin was in bed.... A relief. She'd been worried he'd get too worked up about his birthday to sleep.

Though it *was* late. At least, later than usual. Almost ten at night.... But that was alright. He was old enough to stay up, wasn't he?

Talia sniffed, feeling the horrible bubble of emotion

in her chest tug her heart down.

Christ. It had been eleven years since she'd had Gavin.

Talia took a deep breath and tried to keep the sob inside her as another text came through.

"Convinced him to use the guest room. My bed is MINE tonight. Yay!"

She let out a small laugh, which only helped the sob find its way out. She tried to smother it but it was too late. Tears were running down her face and she was crying again.

Damn it, she almost swore out loud. *Why couldn't she just be over him already?*

She was so stupid! She was—

"What are you doing?"

She sniffed back the tears and sent back her own text: *"Simmering."*

"Oh. Do you need to talk?"

She wasn't sure. Did she need to talk?

Ugh, why had she said simmering? Why hadn't she just said she was trying to sleep or preparing for tomorrow?

She dropped her phone on the bed beside her and pushed her face into her pillow, wiping her nose and her eyes and smearing her tears and snot everywhere.... As she deserved, being as *disgusting* as she was.

Her phone buzzed again, and she ignored it, not even bothering to read the text.

Then her phone lit up with the familiar photo of Dale, overlaid by a large green phone symbol, and she couldn't muster up the will to ignore him.

'Hey,' she muttered, barely lifting her face from the pillow as she answered.

'Hey,' Dale said gently. *'Tell me everything.'*

'It's nothing.'

'It doesn't sound like nothing,' he replied. *'It sounds*

like you've been crying.'

'I—' she paused. She didn't want to lie to him, but she didn't want him to know how stupid she was being. So she just sighed and hoped he'd take that as an answer.

'What is it?' he asked.

'I, uh....'

'Talia?'

She wanted to say it was fine —that she was fine— but as she opened her mouth she felt another sob come out, followed by a waterfall of tears.

'*It's not fair!*' she cried. 'Why did he leave me? Why did he— I would have done *anything* for him! All I wanted was for him to— To love me! I just— Wanted him to stay— Is that too much? I didn't— I didn't want a baby! Why— I didn't want this! I didn't— I didn't—'

'Talia! Talia, it's okay,' Dale's voice crackled into Talia's ear. 'Take a deep breath. Deep breath.'

She wasn't sure she remembered how. 'I just— It's not— I didn't—'

'Breathe,' Dale told her. 'In... and out. Okay. Listen— It's okay. Breathe in... and out.'

She tried. It wasn't easy. But she tried to slow her breathing to match Dale's own as he instructed her.

'I didn't want this,' she managed.

'I know,' Dale replied. 'I'm sorry.'

'I didn't want Gavin,' the words just came out, and she felt the cold chill of guilt grip her as she heard what she was saying... but she couldn't stop as she continued, 'I wanted— I tried— My parents didn't let me get an abortion! And then— When Evan— When he broke up with me they said— They didn't— Want— An unmarried mother in their— Their house—'

'Breathe, Talia,' Dale reminded her.

'*I'm a terrible mother!*' she blurted.

'No, you're not,' said Dale.

‘I almost gave him away!’ Talia sobbed. ‘I was— I was going to give him away! But then I saw— I saw his face and I— I couldn’t! I couldn’t....’

‘*Breathe,*’ his voice was so soft Talia wasn’t sure he’d actually said anything. ‘You’re okay. You’ve done a good job.’

‘I haven’t.’

‘You have.’

‘But I—’

‘Talia, listen to me,’ Dale interrupted firmly. ‘You’re a good mother.’

She didn’t believe him. ‘But I was going to give him up.’

‘That doesn’t make you a bad mother,’ Dale replied. ‘Even if you *had* given him up. It wouldn’t have made you a bad mother.’

She swallowed, and rubbed her eyes. ‘I just.... After Evan left I didn’t know what to do.’

‘And you still did a great job,’ Dale comforted. ‘You’re the best mother I’ve ever met. You should be proud of yourself.’

She wasn’t so sure about that....

‘Do you want my honest opinion?’ Dale asked.

‘Yeah, sure....’

‘Evan’s an asshole.’

Talia was expecting more. For him to continue and say Evan was just a kid when it happened, and it was unfair to expect him to give up his life and his future.... To say what everyone else always said, over and over and over.

But then he didn’t. He didn’t say another word, and they both sat in silence until Talia sniffed and swallowed and finally managed, ‘Is that... it?’

‘Yeah,’ Dale confirmed. ‘My whole opinion. Evan sounds like an asshole.’

‘Y.... Yeah,’ Talia agreed. ‘Yeah. He was.’

‘And you deserve better than that,’ replied Dale. ‘So, if you know where he lives, I’m more than happy to break into his house and shred all his socks.’

A laugh escaped Talia, and she shook her head for a moment before remembering Dale couldn’t see her. ‘It’s fine. I don’t need you to defend me.’

‘I know,’ Dale gave a chuckle. ‘But I’m still going to do it.’

‘Defend me, or shred Evan’s socks?’

‘Both,’ he responded. The impish spark in his voice made Talia giggle— Which only grew louder as Dale gave his own laugh.

They laughed for a while, and Talia could feel her nose clearing and the wet streaks on her face dry as she did. And as her laughter slowed to a stop, she felt a little dizzy. But not in a bad way.... Like she’d been carrying something heavy, and now it was suddenly lighter.

With a relieved sigh she realised that was almost true. She’d never dared say it out loud before now; that she didn’t want Gavin. Not to Trish. Not to Anna. Not even to herself.... But after saying it, it felt a little less horrible. A little less like something a monster would say, and a little more human.

She could hear Dale breathing as he waited patiently for her to say something, and she took a deep breath and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

‘Thanks for talking,’ she said. ‘I feel better. It... means a lot that you listened.’

‘That’s what I’m here for,’ Dale replied. ‘Do you need me to come over? Dick’s here. He’d watch Gav for us if you need company?’

‘No it’s— I’m fine,’ Talia let out a long breath. She meant it this time. ‘I think I just need some sleep.... Goodnight, Dale. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘Night.’

She hung up, and everything seemed to escape her as she rolled over and looked to the roof.

Evan was an arsehole.

She'd never looked at it that way.... It seemed so obvious, now that Dale had said it.

Evan was an *arsehole*. He'd abandoned her when she needed him.

And that.... That wasn't her fault.

She took in another deep breath and rolled out of bed and onto the floor. Reaching under the bed she pulled out the old, tattered shoe-box of trinkets that she kept hidden away and took off the lid.

There was the photo. On top? She thought she'd put it on the bottom. But she must have been wrong.... It was fitting that Evan's face was the first thing she saw.

She carefully pulled out the tape-covered photo and stared at it.

She felt... *nothing*. So she put the photo back in the box and stood up, carrying it into the lounge. And then into the hall. All the way to the garbage chute beside the stairwell. And then she watched as the box slid all the way down into darkness.

The thing that shocked her most was the relief. It was gone.

That was it.

Eleven years.

And it was that easy.

Why hadn't she done that sooner?

'Talía?'

Talía gave a start and turned to the stairs to see Anna and Trish, home from their studies and looking as tired as she felt.

'You alright?' Trish asked, pointing to her own face. 'You look like you've been....'

'Crying,' Talía confirmed.

‘Evan?’ Anna asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘Talia—’

‘I threw it out,’ she blurted. ‘The photo. The bird he made me. The whole box! It’s gone. I just.... It felt like the right time.’

Trish’s face broke into a wide grin. ‘Wow, Tally. I’m proud of you. That’s big.’

Talia smiled back. ‘I spoke with Dale. He helped.’

‘Ah,’ Trish replied. Much to Talia’s surprise, she didn’t offer any joking commentary as she put an arm around her friend. ‘Come on. Let’s get you to bed.’

Part 29:

‘Jeez, it’s busy today,’ Dale commented, plopping down next to Talia with his food. ‘Usually this place is only half this crowded. Though, I only really come here at night.... Is this what a Ms Danielle’s is like during the day?’

Talia nodded, poking at her fries with a sigh before picking up her half-melted sundae and slurping at it like soup. ‘I tried to talk him out of it, but he really wanted to come.’

‘Well, it is his birthday,’ Dale shrugged. ‘Where’d Dick go?’

‘He made a *friend*,’ Trish gave an impish snort and pointed to the other side of the restaurant. ‘Probably not going to see him for the rest of the party.’

Dale glanced over and saw Richard in the restaurant’s cafe, sitting oddly close to another man as they chatted. ‘Guess I’m not good enough for him.’

There was a giggle from Dale’s other side, and stood up so Jacob’s mother, Emma, could sit next to Talia. Dale didn’t sit beside her; taking his place on the other side of the booth, next to Jacob’s father.

Dale almost sighed as Talia and Jacob’s mother began to talk. He wished he’d sat on Talia’s other side. But that was now taken by Anna and Trish, who sat huddled together in the tight space between Talia and the wall. They didn’t seem to mind having to practically sit on each other, at least. He half-wished he was able to do that with *his* friends.

He watched as Trish leant over Anna to put Talia in a headlock, practically squishing the poor girls as she knocked over her own drink.

Shaking his head, Dale decided to go out to the playground to keep an eye on the boys. He grabbed his food and headed out, taking a seat with Jacob’s aunt and....

‘Aiden, right?’ Dale asked.

‘Yeah,’ Aiden nodded. ‘Nice that you remember who I am without the name-tag.’

‘Well, it’s only polite,’ Dale chuckled, grateful that Richard had scolded him the night before. He held out a hand to Jacob’s aunt and gave a warm smile. ‘And I think you were passed over when everyone was being introduced?’

‘Oh, Meg,’ she quickly leant over and shook his hand. ‘Dan’s sister.... So you’re *the* Dale? I’ve heard a *lot* about you. I’m surprised we haven’t met before now, actually, what with you knowing both Aiden *and* Trish.’

Dale just shrugged. ‘To be fair, I’m not really close with either of them.’

‘Well, thanks for the TV either way,’ she grinned, then waved to someone inside. ‘I’m going to go in for a bit. You two behave yourselves.’

Dale waved politely as Meg headed inside. Then he looked over to Aiden and immediately regretted not saying something as an awkward silence yawned between them.

‘So...’ Dale started.

‘Hmmm,’ Aiden mumbled into his coffee.

‘Awkward.’

‘Yep.’

‘Uhuh...’ Aiden glanced inside, as if hoping for a reason to excuse himself, then let out a sigh and put his coffee down. ‘You and Talia like each other, yeah? When are you going to ask her out?’

‘Wh-What?’ Dale felt himself blushing as he raised his hands and shook his head. ‘No. No. We don’t.’

‘I’ve seen you two at the office,’ Aiden’s face broke into a grin, and he raised his coffee to his face again to hide it. ‘And Mark said you, quote, “practically kissed her” at the gym the other week.’

‘You know Spunt?’ Dale was equally amazed and

embarrassed as Aiden nodded.

‘He’s my roommate. We have a betting pool going on about how long it’ll take you two to get together.’

‘Aw, come on—’

‘He reckons it’ll be before Winter,’ Aiden continued. ‘Trish said the same.... I don’t know, though. Talia seems really stubborn. I don’t envy you.’

Dale was so shocked he wasn’t sure what to say, so he tried to deflect the conversation. ‘W.... Well, what about you and Meg?’

‘What about us?’

‘You look like you’re into her! Why don’t *you* ask *her* out?’

‘I already did,’ Aiden replied with a shrug. ‘We went out a couple of times but, uh.... Yeah. She didn’t seem too into it.’

‘Oh... sorry,’ he regretted bringing it up. ‘I uh, know how that feels.’

Aiden just shrugged. ‘I mean, if I don’t make her happy then I guess I’m not the one. Glad we’re still friends, though.’

‘Oh, yeah!’ Dale laughed. ‘I’m friends with *loads* of my exes!’

Aiden snorted into his drink, spilling it over himself and choking as he laughed, ‘Why am I not surprised!’

‘Hey, sorry I took so long,’ Meg reappeared at the table and sat with the boys, followed closely by Emma. ‘You two look like you’re getting along.’

‘Laughing at my love-life,’ Dale admitted.

‘Oh, the crush on Talia!’ replied Meg. ‘Oof. That’s all I can say. Big *oof*. Talia’s lovely and all, but she’s not exactly the sort of girl who’d be easy to date.’

‘I imagine it’s worth it,’ Dale gave a shrug. ‘I’m... considering it.’

‘Go for it,’ Meg picked up her bag and pulled out her

lipstick, which she handed to her sister-in-law before turning back to Dale with a sympathetic look. 'Poor thing's always so lonely, and you two seem like you'd work well together.'

'You think?'

'Yeah,' Meg responded. 'What do you think, Em?'

'Gavin's been happier,' Emma replied, passing Meg's lipstick back. 'And I haven't seen Talia smile this much in years. You've been good for them.'

Dale couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at hearing that.

'It's a relief to see they're finally in a better place,' Emma continued. 'Talia never actually told us about her situation, of course, but it was really obvious she was in a bad way. Poor thing looked half-dead, sometimes. And when Jacob told us Gavin didn't always have lunch at school.... We tried to be subtle about packing enough in Jacob's bag to share, but I think they *both* knew what we were doing.'

Dale gave a solemn nod. He wasn't sure what to say to that.

Luckily he didn't have to think of a response as Gavin and Jacob came running over and pounced on him and Emma.

'Okay, we're done!' Gavin exclaimed.

'Really? *Already?*' Dale heard his voice break. 'I thought kids were meant to play until their parents *forced* them to stop!'

'Yeah, but it's getting late and Mum gets tired,' Gavin replied matter-of-factly. 'Besides, if we go home early I can set up the computer you got me!'

'Ah, I see! You have an ulterior motive!' Dale retorted, shooing Gavin towards the restaurant door. 'What about you, Jacob?'

'I'd like to stay longer, if that's okay?' Jacob

squeaked, looking up at his mother with pleading eyes. ‘I really want another ice cream.’

‘I’m okay with it if your dad is,’ Emma replied. ‘Go ask him.’

Dale pushed himself up to follow the boys into the restaurant. He grinned when he saw Talia, and felt Meg elbow him in the side as she passed him to sit with her brother.

‘Hey,’ Talia gave Dale a wave. ‘Richard left. Can I get a lift home?’

‘Sure,’ Dale felt his chest swell at the idea of *finally* spending some time with Talia tonight— But he pushed it down with a cough and turned to the rest of the party. ‘Anyone else need a lift? Trish? Anna?’

‘We’re good!’ Trish replied, almost dropping her burger in the flourish of a motion she made. ‘Talia — wonderful person, don’t know if you’ve met her— gave me and Anna some money, and the two of us are headed off to see a movie.’

Talia blushed as Trish began loudly praising her and grabbed Dale by the arm. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘Alright,’ Dale chuckled, leading the way into the car park. ‘Come on Gav! You can have the front seat!’

‘Banished to the back!’ Talia mock-gasped. ‘I see your priorities! Giving *Gavin* the front seat on his *birthday!* Ridiculous!’

‘Oh, absolutely,’ Dale scoffed. ‘And you know what else? He gets to pick the music, too!’

‘You *monster!*’ Talia exclaimed, much to both boy’s amusement. ‘Gavin, are you hearing this?’

Gavin nodded and tugged open the car door for his mother. ‘He’s not a *gentleman* like me.’

Dale felt a giggle escape him, and coughed to hide it— But he saw that Talia had heard it by the glint in her eye.

Part 30:

Gavin had been chatty the entire drive home.

To be expected, Dale thought, *with the day he's had.*

Glancing into the back of the car as he pulled into the apartment's car park, he couldn't help but sigh. Talia looked too peaceful to wake up. He wasn't sure he'd have the heart to do it.

'Told you she gets tired,' Gavin gloated. 'Are you going to carry her up the stairs again?'

'Don't think I have a choice,' Dale laughed his response, clambering out of the car and walking to the back seat to retrieve Talia.

She didn't seem to notice as she was hefted into the air, and simply lay heavy and limp in his arms. She didn't even give a mumble of protest as Dale used her head to push the car door shut.

'She'd be so mad if she knew you did that!' Gavin snickered.

'Well then, don't tell her,' Dale replied. 'Come on. Upstairs, and I'll set up your computer for you.'

'Okay, but I think I'll play it tomorrow,' Gavin decided, practically dancing up the stairs. 'I don't have headphones, and I don't want to wake Mum up.'

'I don't think *anything* could wake her up right now,' Dale joked as he followed Gavin to the stairs. He trudged up the apartment building— Scoffing when the boy opened the stairwell door and smirked at him. 'What?'

'You like Mum,' Gavin grinned. 'Otherwise you wouldn't've carried her up all those stairs!'

'She's my friend!' defended Dale. 'I'd carry *any* of my friends up stairs!'

'Even Richard?'

'*Especially* Richard!' he confirmed. 'Dick needs the most help, with his bad leg!'

‘Okay, that’s fair,’ Gavin decided. ‘But you still love my mum. I can tell.’

He almost denied it— But then, as they came to the apartment door and Gavin went fishing in his mother’s pocket for her keys, he found himself laughing instead. ‘You know, she’s a really wonderful woman. I don’t know how a little brat like you came out of her!’

‘So you admit it?’

‘Sure,’ Dale sighed with relief as Gavin opened the door, and headed straight to Talia’s room to put her in bed. ‘I admit it.’

‘YE—’

‘*SHH!*’ Dale held up a hand to silence the boy. ‘Don’t wake her!’

‘*Sorry,*’ Gavin whispered, watching as Dale tucked his mother under her blanket. ‘Are you going to ask her out?’

‘Maybe. I’m not sure. What do you think I should do?’

‘I think you should!’ Gavin said. ‘She gets really happy when you’re around, even if she pretends she’s not! And it’d be nice to have you come over more so she could be happier more often!’

Dale laughed. ‘You’d be alright sharing her with me?’

‘Yeah!’ Gavin gave a nod. ‘You can make up for it by giving me *your* attention!’

‘Okay,’ Dale grinned at the boy. ‘Well. Don’t tell your mum about it just yet, but I’ll ask her out sometime, okay?’

‘When?’

‘How about.... Next time she’s in a good mood?’

Gavin’s eyes lit up with an impish sparkle as he snickered, ‘So you mean *never*?’

Dale ruffled Gavin’s hair playfully and headed into the hall. He shut Talia’s door before following Gavin into his own room. ‘So,’ he started as he rearranged Gavin’s bed;

prepping it for the boy to sleep in. 'Are you excited for Christmas? That's coming up in a month or two, isn't it?'

'Christmas is okay,' Gavin shrugged, climbing into bed and settling down. 'Mum and I usually go to the park in the mornings, but I think this year's gonna be different.'

'Yeah?' Dale chuckled, making his way over to the boxed-up desk that lay in the corner of Gavin's room. He started opening the box, and laying out the pieces of the desk. He was determined to get Gavin's computer set up before he went home; he didn't want to leave that burden on Talia. 'Are you looking forward to seeing what you get from Santa?'

'Santa?' Gavin echoed.

'Yeah, Santa!' Dale confirmed, grinning and turning to Gavin— Who had a very concerned look on his face. 'Uh... Gav? What's up? Why are you looking at me like that?'

There was a long moment of quiet between the pair before Gavin finally spoke, sounding very careful with his words in a way that Dale couldn't tell if he was joking or not: 'Dale? I'm sorry. But Santa's not real,' he said. 'I thought you knew that.'

Dale was caught *very* off-guard by Gavin's serious tone and for a moment he found himself stammering in disbelief.

'Wh— Y— Of course I knew that!' he exclaimed. 'I thought *you* didn't know!'

'Sure you did,' Gavin rolled his eyes, and Dale realised he *still* couldn't tell if he was joking or serious.

'Gav, why would I, as an adult, think Santa Clause is real?' Dale asked.

'I dunno. You think a lot of stupid things,' Gavin shrugged.

'Aw,' Dale gave a playfully-offended huff and turned back to the desk he was building. 'Well, Gav, I'm glad to see you think so highly of me!'

Part 31:

The holidays had been more hectic than ever. After Gavin's birthday, Talia had started preparing for Christmas. She'd been looking forward to being able to treat everyone; Anna and Trish especially. After all they'd done for her over the years, she'd planned to get them *everything* they could have ever wanted....

And then, she'd discovered how *Dale* celebrated Christmas.

He may not have cared for his birthday, but that son of a bitch was not shy about Christmas.

Talia couldn't believe Richard had pulled the "it's your job" card and made her help him wrap the *three hundred* gifts he'd gotten for his friends— Excluding herself, of course, who he'd surprised with a set of camel-fur blankets.

Talia had looked them up in private that night and almost thrown her laptop out the window when she'd seen the two thousand dollar price tag.

At least now that Christmas was over she could breathe a sigh of relief. She'd felt a lot better since the heatwave had ended; Autumn was a lot safer for Gavin than Summer, and he hadn't had a seizure since the beginning of February.

Though, she still hated having to send him back to school. It broke her heart just as much every year. And now she was anxious with his excursion to the museum— And on top of that, the money from Big Double U had officially come back to Moore for More through their overseas partner, and that was a terrifying reminder of how much her life had been changing lately.

'Dale, could you pass me my notebook?' Richard asked, pulling Talia's attention away from her thoughts. 'The one next to Talia?'

‘It’s only, what, three steps away?’ Dale snorted. ‘You feeling lazy?’

‘Not lazy enough to not beat you to death,’ Richard pointed his cane at Dale. ‘My leg hurts. And it’s your fault, so you can be the one to get up and get me my stuff.’

‘You’re really never letting that go, huh?’ Dale pushed himself from his seat with a sigh, and trudged over to the table.

Talia passed him the book, trying not to let herself be distracted from her work, but she was finding it hard to focus already, so there wasn’t much hope for her concentration.

‘You shot me,’ Richard replied. ‘Of course I’m never going to let it go!’

‘Hey! It’s not *my* fault you kept a *loaded gun* in your pocket!’ Dale’s voice broke in a squeak and he gave a deep cough to clear his throat. ‘If you’d been smart, I would have just taken your wallet and been done with it!’

‘What happened, exactly?’ Talia asked, resting her chin on a hand and side-eyeing the boys. ‘I’ve heard enough to know it’s Dale’s fault, but not enough to actually understand what happened.’

‘*My* fault?’

‘Dale tried to pickpocket me and squeezed the trigger of my gun instead,’ Richard explained. ‘He was... thirteen? So he was lucky I was able to get him off with a warning after the police got there. I doubt I could have convinced them it was an accident if he was older.’

‘Got us in contact, though,’ Dale snorted a laugh. ‘I asked him to shoot my dad. He said no, of course. But he thought I was a cute kid so we’ve been stealing handbags together ever since!’

‘I’ve never stolen a handbag in my life,’ said Richard. ‘I’ve disposed of almost a thousand of them, though, because *this moron* keeps getting himself into trouble! First month knowing him he came to me in tears because he got

caught shoplifting from a Kyles and thought his parents were going to kill him. It's like he can't help himself!

Dale cast Talia an embarrassed glance as she snickered, and he rubbed the back of his head. 'So.... The money from Big Double U. What are you planning on doing with your share?'

'Donating most of it,' Talia replied.

'Really? We went through all that effort to steal it, and you're just giving it away?'

'I made my point, I'm satisfied with the outcome,' Talia rolled her eyes. 'But I don't need half a million dollars. You know who does, though? The women in the shelter I stayed at while I was pregnant.'

'Fair enough,' Dale gave a nod. 'Seems like a good place to put it, huh?'

'Better than letting it rot in a bank.'

'I couldn't agree more,' Richard chimed in. 'I always make a point to send money back home.'

'Home?' Talia asked.

'I grew up in Sunbright Coast,' Richard explained. 'It was a poorer neighbourhood, but the people looked out for each other. If you needed anything you could just knock on a door and ask. So, you know. I try and give back now that I can afford it. Funded a new community centre, actually! Beautiful building. Has a basketball court and a garden. Heard the kids are loving it.'

'Why'd you come to Kladstone?'

'For *love*,' Richard laughed. 'High school sweetheart was going to uni here and I wanted to follow. Got cheated on first semester though, so I left school and opened Kladstone Towers.'

Talia blew a raspberry and flopped over her paperwork dramatically. 'Never give up anything for high school boyfriends. That's what I've learnt.'

'That was my ex's attitude,' Dale put a hand on

Talia's back, sending a shiver through her that made her cheeks burn. 'I don't blame her though. She got an apprenticeship in a science lab and moved to the other side of the country. If I was smart enough to build a spaceship I wouldn't date me, either!'

'That was Penelope, right? How's she doing?'

Richard asked.

'Great! She's running tests on how low gravity affects mice breeding in space, or something like that. I don't really get it, but it sounds important.'

Dale's hand disappeared from Talia's back and she almost asked him to put it back, but caught herself as she was opening her mouth. 'Yeah, she sounds too good for you.'

'I know, right?' Dale laughed as he sat beside Richard. 'She's on her fourth kid, actually. Human kid. Not mouse kid. She's got *hundreds* of those.'

'As you would, if you were breeding them,' said Richard. He flicked through the notebook Dale had given him and let out a heavy sigh before discarding it to his side. 'I'm having trouble thinking straight.'

'More than usual?' Talia gave a wicked grin. 'How's Derek?'

'Who?' Dale asked.

'Met him at Gavin's birthday,' Richard shrugged. 'He's doing good. We're going to a bar later this week. Actually, could you clear my schedule on Friday?'

'Don't think you had anything on anyway.... But it sounds like you're going to have a good night,' Talia gave him a nod and stood up. 'And I can't focus, either. I think it's a good time for a break. Coffee?'

'Sure, I'll make us some,' Dale followed her to the kitchen.

'Oh, I was offering to do it,' Talia reassured, putting a hand up to shoo Dale back to the lounge.

‘My house, my responsibility,’ Dale replied, making the same hand motion back and slipping past Talia to the cupboard.

‘It’s my *job*,’ Talia retorted. ‘What I get paid for?’

‘And I’m your boss—’

‘No you’re not,’ she interrupted Dale as he opened the cupboard and snatched the jar of coffee away before he could open it. ‘*Richard’s* my boss. And he *hates* how you make coffee.’

Dale gasped. ‘No he doesn’t!’

‘Yes I do!’ Richard called from the other room. ‘Talia makes the coffee! But if you want to be useful you can order us some lunch!’

Still with an offended look on his face, Dale raised his hands in defeat and made his way back into the lounge, where he and Richard started arguing about what food they were going to get.

Talia didn’t bother to chime in as she started filling the coffee maker. Everything they listed sounded good and she was hungry. If she joined the arguing it would only take longer for them to decide. So instead she settled for not under-filling the coffee filter (like Dale would have) and patting Sahara as she leapt onto the bench-side cat tower.

‘*Pretty girl*,’ Talia mumbled, scratching the unusual-looking cat’s ear. Her affection was returned by a loud, low meow that was almost humorous.

‘Hey, she likes you,’ Dale laughed as he returned to the kitchen. ‘She’s usually pretty anti-social with strangers. She must be getting used to you always coming over!’

‘What breed is she?’ Talia asked. ‘I don’t recognise it. Some sort of oriental?’

‘Yeah, some sort,’ Dale replied. ‘*Aren’t you, squishy-beans?*’

Talia almost laughed as Dale put on a baby-voice and playfully squeezed his cat’s face and nuzzled her. After a

moment he seemed to notice Talia biting her lip and stood up straight, avoiding eye contact as a deep red spread over his cheeks. She got the feeling he wanted to say something, and she could only guess what as he pulled out his phone and began hurriedly typing.

‘Uh, we were thinking of getting Korean chicken?’ he mumbled, still refusing to meet Talia’s eye. ‘Thoughts?’

‘Sounds good,’ Talia confirmed. ‘Nothing too spicy for me, though.’

‘Original pieces, then?’

‘Sure.’

‘And... it’s done!’ Dale slipped his phone back in his pocket, then pointed behind Talia. ‘And it looks like that’s done, too.’

Part 32:

Dale hoped the food arrived soon. Talia was obviously hungry. Not that she would admit it. She'd refused the snacks she'd been offered multiple times, saying she'd rather wait for lunch. But she was getting more and more agitated as they waited, and she hadn't been able to focus on her work at all since they ordered.

Hell, Richard had started to ask for a drink while they waited and Talia had snapped at him to shut up. It was actually pretty funny, Dale thought, especially when she'd realised what she'd done and quickly excused herself and retreated to the bathroom for a little longer than she actually needed.... But neither man held her bad mood against her. They just hoped the food would help her relax a little.

'Alright, now, you remember how to upload the survey?'

'Yeah, yeah, just the same as last time,' Talia huffed. 'You can stop leaning over me, you know! You're *always* getting in my personal space.'

'Alright,' Dale backed off and raised his hands submissively as Talia let out a loud, exasperated sigh. 'You feeling okay?'

'I'm fine.'

'It's just that you seem a little—'

'I said I'm fine!' Talia slammed a hand on the table, almost knocking her laptop off. Then she put her other hand on her face and let out another sigh. 'Sorry.'

'It's fine,' Dale comforted. He had to resist the urge to pat Talia on the back as she began typing again, and was grateful when there was a knock at the door. 'That's probably the food. I'll go grab it.'

'Whatever.'

Dale hurried through the hall to the front door,

pulling his wallet out of his pants pocket as the knock sounded again, harder than was polite, and he hesitated as his hand met the handle and hushed, annoyed voices spoke from behind the door.

He wasn't fully sure he wanted to answer it, with the arguing he could hear, but before he got the chance to lock the door it swung open and Gavin attempted to run inside.

'No!' cried a very frustrated-looking woman as she grabbed the boy and looked up to Dale. 'I'm so sorry, sir! I couldn't stop him.'

'No, it's cool,' Dale laughed. 'Gav, mate, what are you doing?'

'Proving a point!' Gavin replied, wiggling out of the woman's grip and standing proudly with his hands on his hips. 'We were at the museum earlier, and we were walking to the market to get lunch, and nobody believed me when I told them I knew someone who lived here, because this is a really rich street full of rich people. So I had to show them that I wasn't lying!'

'Right,' Dale nodded. 'Well, yeah. I know you. Verified.'

'*See!*' Gavin turned to the yard to address a group of children. 'I *told* you my mum's boyfriend lived here!'

'Whoa, there, brat,' Dale raised a hand. 'I'm not her boyfriend.'

'Yet!' Gavin exclaimed. 'You said you were gonna ask her, so you're *going* to be!'

Dale felt himself blush and motioned for Gavin to be quiet, glancing back to make sure the boy's mother hadn't heard him. '*Shush!* She's over, Gav!'

'Then ask her now!'

'We're working.'

'Coward,' Gavin crossed his arms. 'Just *ask* her!'

'*Not in the mood she's in, I won't,*' Dale retorted, quietly. '*She'll rip my head off.*'

‘Um, look, I’m really sorry,’ Gavin’s teacher put a hand on Gavin’s shoulder and tried to lead him away. ‘But we have to go. We’re going to be late for lunch.’

‘Lunch, huh?’ Dale passed his wallet from hand-to-hand. ‘Waiting on that, ourselves.... How much you got for food, sport?’

‘Mum gave me twenty.’

‘Just twenty?’ Dale asked. ‘Can you even get food for twenty dollars? Is that a thing?’

The teacher sighed and shook her head, though Dale didn’t understand why.

‘Tell you what,’ Dale opened his wallet and pulled out two fifty dollar notes, causing a gasp to echo through the class as he did. ‘Here. Just don’t tell your mother that I gave it to you, alright?’

‘Sweet!’ Gavin exclaimed. ‘I won’t— Uh, hm.... Hi, Mum.’

Dale whirled around as Gavin looked to his feet, and was met with a very frustrated, tired-looking Talia.

‘Gavin?’ she asked, shoving past Dale. ‘What are you — Dale! Did you give him that?’

‘Um.... Yeah, I did,’ Dale shrugged. ‘Kids need pocket money.’

‘He doesn’t need a *hundred dollars!*’ she exclaimed. ‘What is *wrong* with you!’

‘Hey, no, look I—’

‘I am *sick* of you thinking you know better than me!’ Talia yelled, stepping up to Dale and glaring at him. ‘You’re not his father!’

‘I mean, I’ll happily buy him off you, how much you want for him?’ Dale joked. He wasn’t sure why he said it, but he regretted it immediately as Talia pointed a finger so close to his nose he could feel the tip of her nail brush against it.

Oh, god. Why had he let that come out?!

She looked at him furiously and pursed her lips, but didn't say anything. She just breathed heavily, and deeply, and was obviously holding onto a few very angry, very vulgar words.

Thankfully, before she could let them out, a car pulled up. It had a fast-food logo on the side and Dale glanced over as an awkward-looking man stepped out and surveyed the scene.

'Order... for Dale?'

'That's me,' Dale replied, calmly turning away from Talia and making his way down the front steps and through the children to the man with the food.

'Dale! I'm not done with you!'

'Yeah, I know! I'll be back in a second!' he called back casually. He already had his wallet out, so he grabbed another hundred as a tip for the driver. 'Sorry about the scene, and thanks for the food.'

'Uh... yeah,' the driver took the money and stared down at it, stunned, before slowly making his way back to his car.

'Have a good one!' Dale waved to the driver. Then he headed back to Talia, who glared at him with her hands on her hips.

'Don't you dare ignore me Da—' Talia was cut off as Dale put a piece of chicken in her mouth. She frowned as she spat it into her hand and Dale slipped past her into the house. 'I hate you.'

'You're just hungry,' he replied nonchalantly.

'I am *not*—' Talia cut off as Dale stopped in the hall and turned to her, making an exaggerated breathing motion. She got the hint and took a deep breath, which she let out slowly. Then she took another. And another, mouthing numbers as she did. And then she shook her head and spoke calmly, 'I'm still mad at you.'

'But you're not yelling,' Dale replied, playfully poking a finger at her. 'A good example for the kids.'

Talia groaned, and looked back to Gavin. ‘Gavin, hon? Sorry you had to see that.’

‘That’s okay,’ Gavin replied. ‘Can I come in and stay with you?’

‘Gavin— I’m working. And I’m *really* stressed out today,’ she bent down and kissed him on the cheek. ‘I love you though, okay? More than anything in the world. I’m just *really* busy. Maybe— Look. How about you keep that money Dale gave you, and tomorrow after you’re done with school you and I can go out?’

‘Okay,’ Gavin agreed. He hugged his mother, then peered around her to Dale. ‘Bye, Dale! Don’t forget what you’re supposed to do! Don’t. Forget.’

‘I haven’t forgotten,’ Dale said through gritted teeth, motioning for Gavin to be quiet by pretending to pinch his lips. ‘I’ll do it when I’m good and ready.’

Gavin gave him a thumbs up in return, and hurried back to the class. He waved again to his mother, who waved back before closing the front door and giving a heavy sigh.

She leant against it for a moment before side-eyeing Dale. ‘What’s Gavin talked you into this time?’

‘Just a thing,’ Dale replied, feeling himself blush. *What a brat, trying to out him like that!* ‘Nothing too important. Come on, let’s eat. You’ll feel better.’

Talia just grunted and put her hands in her pockets as she followed Dale to the dining room. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Dale said as he plopped the food down in front of Richard. ‘Eat anyway.’

He was almost scared she was going to yell at him again, with the look she gave him. But she begrudgingly settled in the chair closest to the window and took the food she was given with a half-hearted thank you.

Dale had planned to eat in silence so Talia could have a break and settle down, but when Richard put his cup down and cleared his throat Dale knew that wasn’t going to happen.

‘So, Talia,’ Richard started. ‘I remember asking Dale to teach you how to use a gun. How’s that been going?’

‘Alright,’ Talia grunted. Then she coughed and sat up straighter. ‘I mean, it’s going alright. Actually, it’s a lot of fun to take things out on the firing range. Though, I still don’t understand why I need to know how to use a gun.’

‘Precaution, in our line of business,’ Richard replied. ‘The confidential stuff. Not the company. Not that anything tends to happen. But it’s always good to be safe.’

‘Right,’ Talia took a deep breath, and Dale thought he caught a hint of fear in her eyes before she swallowed it down. ‘Well, I hope it never comes up.’

‘It shouldn’t,’ Dale comforted, reaching across the table and taking Talia’s hand. ‘I’ve never needed it before. And I piss off a *lot* of people!’

Talia’s eyes lit up at that. ‘Don’t I know!’

Grinning back, Dale began to clear the now-empty plates from the table and headed to the kitchen.

‘Hey, uh, Dale?’

‘Yeah?’ Dale paused at the door, turning to look back at Talia.

‘Sorry,’ she muttered. ‘About before. I think you were right, and I was just annoyed because I was hungry.’

‘It’s fine!’ Dale responded, resuming cleaning. ‘I shouldn’t have given Gavin money without asking you first. That’s on me.’

‘I was rude before that,’ Talia sighed. Then she chuckled. ‘I swear, though, I was about ready to send you to the hospital when I saw that. If there hadn’t been witnesses I very well might have!’

‘Wouldn’t be the first time a cute girl’s sent him to the E.R!’ Richard laughed as he banged a hand against the table, causing Talia to jump in her seat.

Dale just rolled his eyes. ‘Come on, Dick. You’d think after six years it’d be just a *little* old.’

‘That story will *never* get old,’ Richard retorted, wiping the tears that were forming in his eyes. ‘Talia. Do *not* let him kick you out before he tells you the Ashleigh story.’

‘She doesn’t need to know the Ashleigh story!’ Dale exclaimed, feeling his cheeks start to burn. ‘*Nobody* needs to know the Ashleigh story!’

‘You told Laura,’ Richard retorted.

‘*Ashleigh* told Laura,’ Dale sighed, dropping into his chair and putting his face in his hand. ‘I knew I never should have introduced them.’

‘You’re still friends with the girl who sent you to hospital?’ Talia asked.

‘Well, she didn’t *mean* to send me to hospital. And it was mostly my fault.’

‘Now I *have* to know what happened,’ Talia declared, deliberately making a show of settling into her seat. ‘I’m not going home until I hear it!’

Richard laughed, and Dale just sighed as the older man stood and gave a wave. ‘Well, kids, I have to go. Dale. Tell her. She’ll love it.’

‘Ugh, fine,’ Dale huffed, slamming a hand against the table and pushing himself out of his chair. ‘Talia. Come upstairs and I’ll show you exactly what happened.’

‘She didn’t trip and accidentally knock you down the stairs, did she?’

‘If *only!*’ sighing, Dale motioned for Talia to follow him through the house just as the front door shut. ‘See you later, Dick!’

There was no reply, which only made Dale roll his eyes again.

‘You’d think he’d want to hear it again, with how funny he finds it,’ Dale joked as he made his way up the stairs. ‘Anyway. You have to promise you won’t laugh when I tell you. It’s embarrassing.’

‘Oh, I can *not* promise that,’ Talia gave Dale a wink, which turned into a grimace as they arrived at his bedroom door. ‘Oh, god. No. This is a *bedroom* story?’

‘*Yep*,’ Dale’s exasperated sigh said it all as he pushed the door open and ushered Talia inside. ‘You still want to hear it?’

‘Most definitely.’

He sighed again.

‘Alright. So. My bed used to be up against this window, right?’ he motioned to the large window with a wave of his hand.

‘*Mhmm*,’ Talia gave a nod. ‘Don’t like where this is heading. But go on.’

‘Well, I was having sex with Ashleigh— She’s a nice girl, still pretty close, actually. I should introduce you to her —’

‘The story?’

‘Right. Right,’ Dale turned back to the window and shut the curtains. ‘So I was about here. Curtains were shut because, well, obviously we weren’t going to have them open. And, uh, I was on top of her. It was good, but I was having troubling getting... a grip? I needed something to hold onto because my old bed didn’t have that bed-head my new one does.’

‘Yeah...’

‘So I put my hands on the window, like this,’ Dale placed both his hands firmly on the window. ‘Only, because the curtains were shut I didn’t realise it was open. And I leant all my weight into it.’

‘Oh. Oh no.’

‘Oh yes. I fell off my date, out the window, and right onto the stone patio,’ he laughed. ‘Landed on my head, too. Doctor said I was lucky I didn’t break my neck!’

‘Your thick skull cushioned your fall,’ Talia joked. ‘I’m glad you weren’t hurt.’

‘Just my pride,’ Dale replied. Then he opened the curtains and pointed to the house next door, where they could clearly see a young woman reading in her lounge. ‘Worst part of the story was that was the day Penny was moving in. Her and her sister saw it. And I mean, there’s only so much you can do to fix a first impression like that.’

As Dale spoke, Penny looked up and met Talia’s eye. The two shared an awkward wave before Dale shut his curtains again.

‘I mean. We’re friends,’ he clarified. ‘But I can see it when she looks at me... I’ll always be that naked guy who fell out a window.’

‘Understandable,’ Talia replied. ‘That’s the Ashleigh story?’

‘The short version, yeah,’ Dale replied.

‘*Short* version?’ Talia’s brow raised almost as high as her voice, and her face broke into a wicked grin. ‘There’s *more*?’

‘Well, I was naked and concussed,’ Dale could feel himself blushing as Talia marched over to his bed and sat down. ‘And somehow not unconscious. So, yeah. There’s a *lot* more to the Ashleigh story.’

‘Tell me,’ Talia demanded.

Part 33:

‘Do you *really* think he’ll be alright with Gavin?’ Talia muttered.

She’d already asked three —or was it four?— times. But as she pulled on her seatbelt and shuffled anxiously in her seat, Dale thought it was obvious that she needed it hear the answer again. So he just smiled as he replied, ‘Dick’ll be fine!’

‘It’s just that Richard’s... you know. And Gavin’s... you know,’ she tugged her belt again and glanced out the window, her eyes following a man and his dog down the street. ‘Especially with today being... well, you know.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Dale couldn’t help but chuckle. ‘It’s *my* birthday, after all! I didn’t forget about it or anything.’

‘Gavin wasn’t happy about not being allowed to come,’ said Talia. ‘What if he doesn’t behave for Richard? What if he— Maybe I should go home.’

‘Come on, Tally!’ Trish’s foot met the back of Talia’s chair, jolting the poor woman as she gripped her belt and blushed. ‘Chill. It’s not like Gavin’s gonna hurt the guy. I mean, at most he’ll just outrun him and get an extra half-hour before bed!’

‘That’s exactly the sort of thing I’m worried about,’ Talia sighed. ‘Richard’s not exactly strict with him.’

‘Hey, no, Dick can be strict!’ Dale replied. ‘Example: I kept telling Gav not to put his stuff in the walkway. I told him *so many* times, and still there it was, in the middle of the hall! Then Dick comes over and *poof!* Gone as if by magic! I don’t know what he said to the kid, but it worked.’

‘Probably “please”,’ Anna piped up. ‘Usually works for me.’

Talia shook her head as a loud slurp followed, and Dale peeked into the rear view mirror to catch a glimpse of Anna meeting his eye as she drank her frozen cola. He

couldn't understand how she could drink it, honestly! It may have only been early winter (*technically* it was still autumn), but it was only ten degrees out. It was *way* too cold for an ice drink and sleeveless top!

'You're special though,' he retorted. 'Gav knows you won't hesitate to tell on him if he misbehaves.'

'What, and you wouldn't?' Talia scoffed.

'I mean,' Dale tapped his fingers against his steering wheel and snickered. 'It depends on what he was doing and if he blackmails me! That kid knows how to dig up dirt.'

'Ooh, boy, does he!' Trish cackled. 'Big mood, though. I don't report *anything* back unless I have to. I'm not a cop!'

'I can't believe I let you two watch him!' Talia gave a loud sigh and rolled her eyes. 'Well, congratulations. I certainly feel better about leaving him with Richard, now! Not so much about ever letting either of you two look after him ever again!'

Anna's next slurp was comically loud, and her overconfident grin told Dale it was deliberately so. He almost called her out on it— But then her eyes widened and she choked. 'Oh, wow, Dale! *That's* your house?!'

'I see why Tally's been hanging out with you so much,' Trish teased, letting out an impressed whistle. 'Oh, shit, is that Zoey's car? You know Zoey?'

'It was her idea to invite you,' Dale chuckled. 'I mean, I probably would have anyway. But Zoey's been dying to see you again and she knows I know you, so.... Yeah. Thought it'd be fun!'

'Sweet!'

Talia let out a groan as Trish kicked the back of her chair again. Then, without waiting for Dale to park, she unclipped her seatbelt and clambered out of the car.

Dale's heart almost leapt out his throat as he slammed on the breaks. 'Talia! Jesus Christ!'

The freezing, wet air hit Dale and made him shiver as Talia slammed the door shut behind her, and he let out a groan.

God, he hated winter.

‘Yeah, she’s like that,’ Trish replied. ‘She stands up on the bus before it pulls over and is at the door before it opens. Impatient, isn’t she?’

‘She might’ve been more patient if you stopped kicking her,’ Dale snorted, taking his foot off the break and putting his car in reverse.

‘*Mmmhmmm,*’ Anna took another loud slurp of her drink, which sounded almost empty, before unclicking her own belt and stepping out onto the road after Talia.

‘ANNA!’ Dale heard his voice break as the car jolted still again. ‘Oh my god, Anna! Anna! Why, Anna?!’

‘Because we can,’ Trish let out a snort of a laugh and clambered out after the others.

‘Trish! At least shut the door, Trish!’ Dale called after her. ‘Come on!’

Unsurprisingly, Trish ignored Dale and instead blew a loud raspberry as she hurried into his house— And all Dale could do was let out a sigh and roll his eyes as he reversed into his driveway.

He shivered as he hurried around the car to close Trish’s door, and then made his way through the yard to his house.

It was locked.

‘You’re kidding me?!’ he called through the door, shaking his head and grinning when he heard the chorus of laughter from his lounge room. He knocked, then called out to the group, ‘Parcel delivery!’

‘Ooh, I’ll get it!’ a familiar voice moved from the lounge to the hall and the door was yanked open by a tall, blonde woman. ‘Hello hello, then! Where’s this parcel?’

‘Ashleigh, it’s nice to see you again,’ Dale gave a nod,

feeling the warm air from the house flow out to greet him. He held out his hands as if passing her something. ‘Sign here, please.’

‘Oh, of *course!*’ Ashleigh took the air that Dale had offered her, and pretended to write on it. As she handed it back Dale couldn’t help but notice she looked tired. ‘Now, the parcel?’

‘Right here,’ Dale pointed at himself.

‘Aw, dang,’ she gave a dramatic sigh and rolled her eyes. ‘They got my order wrong! I ordered a *completely* different model!’

‘I’m afraid you’ll have to take that up with customer service. Their number redirects overseas, and it can take over two hours to get through to them.’

‘Ugh, fine, I *suppose* you’ll have to do, then!’ Ashleigh stepped away from the door and threw her hands up in mock defeat. ‘I’m sorry, girls! We got the wrong product! No hot macho-man tonight, it’s just Dale! Disappointment all around!’

Playful groans filled the air as Ashleigh closed the door behind Dale. As she turned back, he nudged her.

‘You alright?’ he asked, quietly. ‘You look tired.’

‘Yeah, I’m good,’ she grinned, though it didn’t hide her exhaustion. ‘Just work. You know how modelling is. Older you get the harder it is to get contracts.... They want the *young* and the *fresh!*’

‘You’re still young and fresh,’ Dale reassured.

‘Not by industry standards, I’m not,’ Ashleigh shrugged, then headed for the lounge. ‘Don’t worry about it. It’s cutthroat, but I’ll manage.’

Dale quickly hurried after her and was greeted by a cheer. There were less people than he’d expected there to be, but it wasn’t a bad turnout for something so last-minute.

‘Seven of us, huh?’ he counted, glancing over the

group as he sat with them in the pile of blankets they'd pulled out of his cupboard. 'All just chilling on the floor?'

'Yeah, seems like it,' said Zoey. 'Oh, right. Spunt was gonna get a lift with me after work but he was too tired. Told me to give you a kiss from him, though!'

Before Dale could respond, Zoey had shifted forward and planted a kiss on his cheek. It took him a few more moments to realise what she'd done and, after a second of hesitation, he mock-gagged and wiped his face.

'Aw, ew! Spunt germs! Why would you do this to me, Zoey?' he teased. Then, as the girls' laughter died down, he shrugged. 'By the way, I *swear* I invited more guys. I wasn't being weird and only asking girls to come.'

'No, we figured,' Ashleigh laughed. 'Not everyone can do next-day parties. *Some* of us have lives!'

'So what are you doing here, then?' Dale retorted.

'Well, I didn't say *I* had a life, did I?!' she quipped back. 'And speaking of girls with no lives, who're these lovely ladies?'

'Oh, don't put it like that! They have lives!' Dale exclaimed. 'Right, girls? You have lives!'

'On weekdays, sure. But weekends are pretty boring lately,' Trish joked. 'I'm Trish. This is Anna, and Talia. You?'

'Ashleigh,' said Ashleigh. And Dale thought he caught a cheeky look from Talia as she continued, 'I used to date Dale, like, years ago. That's his neighbour, Penny. And this is... Zoey, was it?'

'We know Zoey,' Anna chimed in. 'Trish and her went to uni together.'

'Oh, perfect!' Ashleigh put an arm around Penny and grinned. 'So nobody is without a buddy!'

'Some of us are a bit more than buddies,' Trish elbowed Anna in the side before wrapping an arm around her and pulling her into a tight hug.

Dale's heart skipped a beat.

Was Trish talking about him and Talia? *No*. She couldn't be. There was no way for her to know he was going to ask her to— Unless Gavin had told her? But... Gavin had promised he hadn't told anyone. And Dale trusted him with that. Besides, he was almost completely sure that if Trish found out about his crush, Talia would know within the hour. Trish couldn't keep that sort of thing a secret... no way.

Maybe she just meant that her and Anna were roommates? Or— Ah! It was probably because they were best friends!

'Hey! Earth to Dale!'

A pillow slammed into Dale's face and he was tugged back to reality. 'What?'

'I said "Happy Birthday"! Zoey threw another pillow, though Dale caught this one. 'Twenty-eight! You're so *old!*'

'Twenty-eight isn't old!' Talia huffed and rolled her eyes, though Dale could see her grin. 'I'm twenty-eight!'

'Exactly. You're old,' Trish replied. 'Pretty sure you're the oldest one here!'

'Actually, Penny's thirty,' Ashleigh corrected.

'WHAT! No way!'

'Y-Yeah, I am,' Penny managed, pulling one of the thick, heavy blankets over herself. She glanced around the other girls before shrugging. 'I have a good skin-care routine, that's all.'

Ashleigh grinned, and pointed to a wrinkle by her eye. 'You'll have to teach me. These little fucks have started showing up and I need them gone ASAP.'

'Sure, I'll lend you some of my stuff if you like,' Penny said. Then she shuffled. 'So... party games?'

'Party games!' Ashleigh echoed, clapping her hands together loudly. 'Yes! What do we start with?'

‘I’d suggest paper, scissors, rock, but I always end up picking scissors because, well,’ Trish winked at Anna. ‘You know.’

‘Nasty!’ Zoey threw another pillow, this time hitting Trish so hard she toppled backwards out of the nest of blankets she’d made. *‘Dis-GUST-ing!’*

‘Hey, come on,’ Dale raised a hand. ‘There’s nothing wrong with having a preference! I always pick rock. I know it’s a losing strategy but that’s just part of the fun.’

Zoey hesitated. Then glanced to Anna and mouthed something Dale couldn’t make out. Then, when Anna shook her head, Zoey let out a laugh that was even louder than Trish’s and flopped onto her side.

‘Am I missing something?’ Dale asked. ‘Because it feels like I’m missing something.’

‘Nobody tell him,’ said Trish. ‘He’s gotta figure it out himself.’

‘Figure what out?’ Dale asked, much to the amusement of the party. ‘What am I missing?’

‘You’ll get it one day,’ Ashleigh pet Dale’s shoulder and grinned before turning back to the others. ‘What about truth or dare?’

‘Oh, FUCK yes!’ Trish exclaimed. ‘I LOVE truth or dare! Zoe, pass us that bottle!’

The girls all began to shuffle into a circle, clearing the blankets from the centre of the floor, and Dale was left sitting in stunned silence.

What was he supposed to be figuring out himself?

‘Come on, Dale!’ Zoey pet the spot between her and Talia. ‘Sit your butt down over here with the *ladies!*’

Oh, whatever. He’d think about it later.

‘So, gotta be honest,’ Dale heaved himself across the floor to join the girls. ‘I’ve never actually played this game before.’

‘Oh, thank god! I thought it was just me,’ Talia

blurted, her hand finding its way to her chest as she let out a deep breath. 'I was too embarrassed to say anything, but I have no idea what we're doing.'

'Eh, just go along with it,' Trish nudged Talia playfully. 'It's easy to figure out. It's pretty much in the name. We go around in a circle, and everyone gets to pick if they tell the truth to a question, or do a dare.'

'Right. And what's the bottle for?'

'We spin the bottle to pick who gets to ask the question or dare.'

Ashleigh let out a laugh. 'Jeez. That's not how I used to play it. We used to spin the bottle to figure out who got dared.'

'You say "dare" like truth wasn't an option,' said Zoey.

'Oh, believe me, with the friends I used to have, it wasn't!' Ashleigh brushed the hair from her face. 'Anyway, if we're going in circle order, I vote that the birthday boy goes first.'

'Sure,' Dale felt himself grinning. 'Hit me with a truth!'

'Ah, drinks first!' Ashleigh exclaimed, leaning over to retrieve a bottle of wine from her bag.

She held it out to Dale, but he shook his head. 'I'm driving Talia home.'

'And we both have work in the morning,' Talia added.

'Fine, be wet blankets! But you're missing out!' Ashleigh gave an over-dramatic roll of her eyes as she cracked open the bottle and took a long drink.

'Yeah, on a hangover,' Talia retorted.

'Tally. Chill out,' Trish gave Talia a shove and a wink before setting her empty bottle down and spinning it. She watched it eagerly as it spiralled slower and slower, coming to a stop on Zoey. 'Alright, what que-'

‘Sex fact!’ Zoey blurted, causing a groan to echo through the other girls. ‘Hey— No! I get the question, and I say to give us a sex fact!’

‘That’s not even a question!’ Penny exclaimed.

‘Alright, *fine* then!’ Zoey put her hands on her hips and mock-sighed. ‘What is a sex fact about yourself?’

‘Coherent,’ Anna chuckled.

‘It was close enough!’ Zoey lifted a pillow as if threatening to throw it, then turned back to Dale. ‘Come on, you *have* to answer!’

Dale was having a hard time controlling his laughter. He could barely think of an answer as he took a deep breath and cleared his throat to try and turn his giggle into something deeper. ‘Okay. Give me- Give me a moment! I thought we were meant to *build* into the personal questions.’

‘But I mean, why?’ Ashleigh held up her drink. ‘Mundane is mundane. I agree with Zoe. Straight into the awkward stuff! That’s what a party is all about!’

‘*Jesus Christ*,’ Talia’s mutter was so quiet Dale almost missed it as she put her face in a hand and shook her head. ‘Just answer the question, Dale. Get it over with.’

‘Right, well... I’ve never had sex without a condom.’

‘What, *ever*?’ Trish blurted.

‘Not once! And believe me when I say that there were opportunities,’ he turned to Zoey and jabbed her in the side. ‘Like with this horny piece of meat, for example!’

‘Hah! Alright, alright, well,’ Zoey raised her hands and gave a wicked smile. ‘I don’t have secrets, so I *have* to go with a dare now, don’t I? Spin it!’

Dale lent forward and gave the bottle a hard twirl. It came to a stop on Talia, who pursed her lips and looked torn.

‘Whatever you’re thinking, Tally, go with the meaner one,’ Trish said, earning a side-eye and a smile

from her friend.

‘Right, uh...’ Talia shuffled in place and let out a breath. ‘The meaner one.... Shirt. Your shirt. Take it... off?’

‘*That’s* what you consider mean? I’d do it without the dare!’ Zoey scoffed, yanking her shirt over her head and revealing her bra, which Dale couldn’t help but think was... oddly familiar, but *not* on *her*. ‘Jeez, you’re vanilla. You just want to see some tits, don’t you?’

‘What— No!’ Talia responded, a rosy blush making its way to her cheeks. ‘It was— It was the meanest thing I could think of on the spot!’

‘*Sure* it was!’ Trish elbowed Talia. ‘I *knew* I should have set you two up!’

‘Shut up!’

The argument faded into the background as Dale tried to remember where he’d seen that bra.... It wasn’t Zoey’s bra. He knew that much. It didn’t fit her properly, and he’d *definitely* seen it on another girl before.

‘I’m sorry, can I just—’ before he could stop himself, Dale had moved behind Zoey and was pulling on the bra’s tag.

‘Whoa, Dale, you good?’ Zoey cackled. ‘The dare was just for the shirt, mate!’

‘Isn’t that Leah’s bra?’ the realisation hit Dale, and he let out a scoff. ‘Did you fuck Leah?’

‘Now, now. I already did my dare,’ Zoey pulled the bra’s strap up and let it go with a loud *snap* that made the other girls cringe. ‘You’ll have to wait until next turn to find that out!’

‘You did! You fucked Leah!’ Dale exclaimed. ‘Oh my god, I didn’t even know you *knew* Leah!’

‘Trish introduced us,’ Zoey shrugged. ‘No big deal.’

‘Jesus,’ Dale couldn’t help but shake his head as he settled back into his place on the floor. He couldn’t believe it. Were *all* his exes turning gay?

‘I’ll take a dare,’ Ashleigh cut in, spinning the bottle.

It landed on Anna, who flopped onto Trish’s legs and began to tap her fingers on her chin. ‘Hmm.... Is suggesting you sit in Zoey’s lap too much?’

‘Nope!’ Ashleigh practically leapt on top of Zoey, who gave a loud grunt, and then lent back so their cheeks were pressed together. ‘Hey there.’

‘Hey there,’ Zoey responded, sounding winded.

‘Oh, I like the air in this room,’ Trish cackled. ‘Can’t believe we haven’t met before, Ashleigh. You seem like an absolute *scream!*’

‘I guarantee you I am,’ Ashleigh brushed the hair from her face and grinned wickedly, settling into place with a wiggle that made Zoey groan.... Or was it a moan?

Dale couldn’t tell, and instead decided to continue the game. ‘Truth for you, Penny?’

‘I was going to. But now it’s just embarrassing to be that predictable.... So I guess I’ll do a dare,’ Penny adjusted her blanket again as the bottle was spun. ‘Ah. Is that Zoey or Ashleigh who gets to ask? Because either way that’s *terrible* for me.’

‘Let’s say Zoey,’ Dale decided. ‘Because it’s Zoey’s spot. If it points to the empty air where Ashleigh’s *supposed* to be we can say that’s her turn.’

‘Makes sense,’ Zoey managed, shifting under Ashleigh awkwardly and trying to catch her breath.

‘Do you need me to move?’ Ashleigh asked, a hint of something Dale didn’t quite catch in her voice as she went to pull away, but Zoey pulled her back. ‘Ooh, okay. I see how it is.’

‘You’re not getting out of your dare *that* easily,’ Zoey panted as Ashleigh began to shift again. ‘Right, Penny. I have to think of a dare. Uh.... *Fuck.*’

‘I’m not doing *that*,’ Penny joked.

‘Ashleigh can you *please* get your elbow out of my

cooch?’ Zoey breathed. ‘You’re *destroying* me!’

‘Heh, *cooch*,’ Trish snickered. ‘Thought you would have liked that, Zoe!’

‘Not when her whole weight’s leaning into it, I don’t!’ Zoey gasped in a breath of air as Ashleigh shifted again. ‘Oh my god. You know how to make a girl uncomfortable!’

Ashleigh just winked and pressed back harder into Zoey, who grunted painfully.

‘Can you two maybe stop flirting long enough to give me my dare?’ Penny rolled her eyes.

Flirting? Dale hesitated. *Was that what they were doing?*

‘I don’t know, I’m enjoying the show,’ Trish cackled. ‘If Zoey doesn’t want to give you a dare though, we can spin again—’

‘NO!’ Zoey gasped as Ashleigh bounced in a mock-attempt to get comfortable. ‘Penny! Drink! The entire bottle! Now!’

‘This one?’ Penny asked, picking up Ashleigh’s abandoned drink. ‘I... guess? Okay?’

It was gone quicker than Dale expected, and for a second Dale wondered if Penny had done something like this before— But then she lurched sideways and barely caught herself, and instead he was left wondering the same thing for the opposite reason.

‘Truth,’ Anna blurted before spinning the bottle. ‘Ashleigh?’

‘Pads or tampons?’ Ashleigh asked, jamming herself into Zoey again.

‘Neither,’ she responded. ‘I use a cup.’

‘A *what?*’

‘A menstrual cup,’ Anna replied. ‘It’s a reusable silicon insert that catches the blood. It’s sort of like a tampon, but you don’t need to change it as often.’

As Anna explained, Trish reached into her bag and

pulled out a little plastic egg — Dale recognised it as one from a chocolate surprise— and popped it open to reveal a small, suction-cup looking object. She held it out to the girls and grinned.

‘It’s clean, and you girls are welcome to hold it, just know that it’s been inside me.’

Ashleigh didn’t hesitate. She climbed off Zoey and grabbed the cup, examining it closely before passing it to Penny— Who passed it to Zoey, who offered it to Dale.

‘Uh, it’s cool if I touch it right?’ Dale asked.

‘Of course it is!’ Trish snorted a laugh. ‘What, you scared of it?’

‘What— No, it’s just that I’m a guy,’ Dale shrugged, and took the cup. It was... squishier, then he had expected. ‘I wanted to make sure it was alright with you, first. That’s all.’

‘Dale’s never been squeamish about periods,’ Zoey chuckled. ‘Unlike my *last* boyfriend! Like. I bleed. Get over it! Ugh.’

‘They save a lot of money,’ Talia muttered, blushing when she met Dale’s eye.

‘And there’s like, practically no leaking!’ Trish grinned.

‘Holy fuck, seriously? I want one!’ Ashleigh blurted. ‘Where do I get them?’

‘Online. There’s a few different brands,’ Anna pulled out her phone. ‘Give me your email and I’ll send you some links.’

‘And while you do that! Truth!’ Trish grabbed the bottle and gave it a hard spin. It landed on herself, so she spun it again. And again. ‘Dale! Ask me a question!’

‘Right, uh...’ Dale had to pull himself away from Anna and Ashleigh’s conversation to finally hand Trish her cup back. ‘How... did you and Talia meet?’

‘Oh, wow, nothing saucy?’

‘Nah, nothing saucy,’ Dale shook his head. ‘Just something I’ve been meaning to ask for a while.’

‘Well, it’s sort of boring, sort of sad,’ Trish shrugged. ‘It took us two months after moving in to meet her. Not that we didn’t try. We knocked on her door and she ignored us, even when we *knew* she was home. She made every effort to avoid us that she could. Then, I was coming home from class one night and there was a blackout. I couldn’t see shit, and I tripped over her on the stairs. She was just like, lying face down in the stairwell, sobbing into her purse. I had to literally *drag* her up the stairs to her room, and she was *super* uncooperative about it!’

‘I was too tired to make it home,’ Talia blushed. ‘When the lights went out I just... gave up and decided I was done with the day. Didn’t really care where I was.’

‘Oh, jeez,’ Dale sucked a breath of air in. ‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t be. It was years ago.... Anyway, I uh,’ Talia paused, looking around the room, before grabbing the bottle. ‘My turn, isn’t it? I guess I’ll go with a dare.’

‘Oh, fuck yeah!’ Ashleigh clapped her hands as the bottle fell on her. ‘Kiss Dale. On the lips. As a birthday gift!’

Talia glanced to Dale, and Dale felt his heart leap as he caught the look in her eyes before she looked to the floor.

‘I’m not doing that,’ she responded.

‘Come on! It’s a dare!’ Ashleigh said. ‘You *have* to!’

‘Oh, no, *Talia*—’ Trish hesitated, and Dale could tell there was something she knew that he didn’t. ‘Uh...’

The look Talia gave Dale as she shuffled closer made his heart clench. It was like she was feeling all the same, weird mix of emotions he was. And then, as he glanced from Talia to Trish and back, he realised it:

Talia liked him, too.

All their conversations, and bickering, and stupid jokes all came back and, finally, Dale saw it. It all made

sense. Everything did.

It had been obvious. Right in his face. Right in *everyone's* faces! And he'd been too stupid to notice.

He wished he'd said something about his own feelings sooner.

All the time he'd wasted, not saying anything....

He could only imagine what he'd missed. The moments. The opportunities. Everything....

He *really* wished he'd said something sooner.

'Dale?' Zoey asked tentatively.

'Huh?' was all Dale could manage as he forced himself to come back to reality. 'Sorry I— I zoned out. Talia, you don't have to kiss me. It's fine.'

'Uh, it's a little late for that,' Trish gave a scoff and crossed her arms. 'Did you not notice?'

'Notice what?' he asked. Then he tasted the strawberry on his lips and realised that while focused on the pounding of his heart in his ears, he'd missed the kiss. 'Oh, shit, wait— You did it already? I was distracted!'

'By *what!*'

'I was just thinking about—' he knew he couldn't say it.

'About what?'

'Work? Tomorrow. My paperwork. I just realised I have something for a client that's overdue,' he glanced to Talia, who blushed, and Dale wondered if she knew he was lying. And then he glanced to Trish, and could tell by the look in her eyes that *she* knew it was bullshit. 'So. My turn again, huh? Well... how about a dare?'

Part 34:

It had been a long night. Talia could barely keep her eyes open as she rocked in the passenger seat of Dale's car.

It was calming, looking out the window at the dark, wet road. It reminded her of when she was young, and things were simpler. Easier.

She almost wished it didn't. She didn't want to remember her parents talking in the front seat as they drove around the block in an effort to lull her to sleep. Like they actually cared about her, or something....

She glanced into the rear view mirror with weary eyes and couldn't help but smile when she saw Trish brush the hair away from Anna's face before stealing a kiss.... And Dale missed it as he glanced into his blind spot to turn.

Of course he would miss it, Talia felt herself laugh. It was weak, and tired, but it found its way from her chest to her nose and she felt the urge to cover her mouth as Dale pulled into the apartment's car park.

'Something funny?' Dale asked.

'Just... *nothing,*' Talia muttered, resting her head against the window again.

Gavin would be in bed by now. That was a relief. She didn't think she'd be able to get him in bed herself if he wasn't.... But as Dale had said before, he always seemed to listen to Richard.

Talia was snapped back awake by the sound of Dale pulling on the hand-break. She didn't think she'd fallen asleep, but she must have. Just for a moment or two as Dale had parked the car.... Had she?

God, she was tired.

'Hey, wake up, hon,' Trish gently shook Anna until she let out a yawn and mumbled herself conscious again. 'We're home. Come on, I'll tuck you in with the heated blanket and rub your feet.'

The girls climbed out of the car and wearily stumbled through the lot to the stairwell door.

‘Trish seems like a great friend,’ Dale commented as the girls started up the stairs.

Talia was too tired to think of something mean to say. She could barely muster up the energy to *think* about how stupid he was.

Stupid and charming.

It scared her, how much she liked him.... How much she’d enjoyed the kiss. She had loved it. And although she’d spent all night trying, she couldn’t seem to convince herself otherwise.

She’d had the perfect excuse for it, too. And Dale never had to know that it had been something she’d been *wanting* to do. That it was a type of intimacy she’d been craving for so long she hadn’t even realised just how much she’d needed it before it was over.

Maybe he’d enjoyed it too?

Wishful thinking, she told herself.

Though.... He’d licked his lips all night. Long after the lipstick mark had disappeared. Like he was hoping for the feeling to come back, just like she was.

Maybe she should say something....

No. She couldn’t.

Why not?

Because—

Because....

Because she had to go to bed.

Yeah.

She had to go to bed.

Bed....

And she realised she was already in bed, and Dale was halfway out her bedroom door.

‘Dale?’ she muttered. *Had he carried her up the stairs again?*

‘Yeah?’ he paused to let her speak, his form silhouetted by the hallway light that spilt into the room and cast yellow-black shadows along the walls.

A hundred thoughts tried to find their way out of her head. But in the end, a weak, ‘Stay?’ was all she could manage.

Dale let go of the door and made his way across the room, each step letting more of the light in— But his shadow never pulled away from her face. Even when he sat beside her, he shielded her eyes from the harsh yellow light.

Talia lifted herself onto an elbow and took a deep breath.

She had to say something.

About her feelings. About her fears.

She had to tell him how much she wanted him.

She had to.

Tell him.

Tell him!

‘I’m sorry,’ she muttered. ‘I’m sorry I’m always so... so *me*. I’m trying not to be. I want to be a better person, but... it’s hard.’

Dale’s hand met hers, and she felt a shiver crawl from her toes to her ears as their eyes met.

He didn’t say anything as he lifted her blanket and slipped underneath it.

She felt warm, and wasn’t sure if it was her blush or if it was Dale’s arms around her as his fingers ran through her hair and his lips slowly... so, so slowly... pressed against hers for the second time that night.

It was so perfect.

So wonderful.

Nothing could ever....

Nothing could ever disturb this....

Could it?

Talia closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

Then she jolted awake as a shape with the size and weight of an eleven-year-old boy leapt onto her legs and shouted that it was late for school.

School?

Oh no— *Gavin!*

She'd slept in!

Talia tried to clamber out of bed, but tripped on Dale.

Dale?

She half-processed the thought before she heard her son's feet hit the floor and her brain started to bounce between the two boys in her bedroom.

Gavin—

School—

Dale—

Kiss—

Gavin—

Dale—

Gavin—

'Talia?'

'*School!*'

She climbed over the top of Dale to reach her bedside table, and fumbled with Gavin's medicine.

'School?' Dale echoed. 'Oh, shit— Gavin!'

He fell out of bed after Talia and bolted into the kitchen with enough force to almost demolish it. Talia grabbed his keys as they fell to the floor behind him and practically threw Gavin's medicine into his mouth.

'Keys!' she exclaimed. 'Medicine!'

'Lunch!' Dale responded. 'Car!'

'Downstairs! Hurry! Go! Go! Now!'

The door closed behind the trio with a loud *bang*, and their footsteps echoed down the stairwell as their voices faded and the apartment was left to fall quiet.

Part 35:

Talia had seemed surprised to find Dale in her bed that morning. But he understood. He was just as surprised to have woken up in her bed with her. He barely remembered joining her the night before.

He thought, though, as Talia quickly fixed her makeup in the rear view mirror and he straightened his shirt collar, it was a nice surprise.... Except for Gavin almost being late to school. That part hadn't been quite so nice. They'd gotten there before first period started, at least. Even if he had missed homeroom.

'So...' Dale felt himself swallowing as he glanced to Talia again. 'Last night.'

'Mhm.'

'Should we talk about it?'

'Work first,' Talia replied, refusing to meet his eye. 'We have a long day. And we're already late.'

'Right...' Dale trailed off, and glanced around the empty car park. They were early, actually. But he wasn't going to correct her. He knew that wasn't the point. And that she knew they weren't late. He wasn't going to put her on the spot like that. 'So. You ready to go in?'

'Am I ever?' Talia shrugged and threw her makeup back into her bag. Then, to Dale's relief, she smiled. 'Come on. Let's go before too many people stink up the elevator.'

A laugh found its way out of Dale as he climbed out of the car and headed into the reception room. He threw a quick greeting to the front-door receptionist (Steph? Beth? He'd have to ask her name again, or Richard would kill him!) before following Talia into the elevator.

Then it went quiet again as Talia pushed the buttons and faced the doors as they closed.

Dale felt himself shuffle awkwardly as Talia stood, just a little too stiffly, beside him.... And when he dared a

glance, he caught her doing the same— And both of them coughed and turned away again.

The doors couldn't open fast enough, and Talia slipped out before Dale could have fit his shoulders through. Not that it changed much. About three seconds later they were standing awkwardly together again in front of Talia's desk as she eyed the paperwork Richard had left for her.

'So...' Dale glanced to his office. He didn't want to go in. He didn't want to spend the day with a wall between them, when there was so much to say instead. 'Work, huh?'

'Mm,' Talia tapped her foot anxiously, her eyes still on her paperwork as her hands found their way behind her back and her glasses slipped forward to the end of her nose. 'Work.'

'Work,' Dale repeated. Then he gave a shrug and turned to his office. 'Well, then. I guess I'll just....'

He'd barely taken two steps before Talia's hand found his arm and he turned back, just in time for her to lift herself onto her toes and peck him on the lips. He felt his entire body tense as she dropped back down and looked away again.

'We'll talk after work,' she muttered. 'I just need some time to think about things.'

'Yeah,' Dale gave her a nod. His knees were so weak he thought he might collapse as he swallowed and licked his lips— Tasting that lipstick again. 'I understand. Just... after work, right?'

'Right.'

'Right,' it took all of Dale's effort to turn back to his office. And his heart stopped when he saw Aiden standing awkwardly in his doorway, half-filled bag of garbage in one hand, broom in the other.

'Oh.... Uh,' Aiden looked past Dale, and Dale could only guess that Talia was glaring daggers at him as he blushed and rushed to the elevator. He pressed the button too many times, both while waiting for it to arrive and while

waiting for the doors to close.... And then, as they were closing, Dale saw him drop his things and pull out his phone.

Probably to gossip to Meg. Who would tell Trish. Who would call Talia.... And who knew how that would go?

Dale certainly didn't— So he hurried into his office and closed the door.

Part 36:

Talia was furious at Aiden. The bastard had slunk off home after telling Meg about the kiss, and Talia hadn't been able to strangle him to death in the break room like she'd been hoping to after she'd gotten off the phone with Trish.

Smart idea he had, fucking off after a stunt like that.... But he had to come back to work *sometime*, and when he did... she was going to kill him.

Dale pulled up into the pickup bay of Gavin's school and Talia let out a heavy sigh. She knew it was coming. He hadn't said anything the whole drive, and they knew they had to talk about it before they picked up Gavin.... He'd ask questions about what he'd seen that morning. And Talia had no idea how to answer any of them.

Dale's fingers rapped against the steering wheel for a moment before he leant back in his seat and let out a sigh of his own.

'So,' he started.

'So....'

'You want to talk about what happened?'

'I don't know,' said Talia. 'I guess we *have* to, don't we?'

'I suppose we do,' Dale replied. 'Well.... First things first; do you like me?'

Talia looked away, focusing her gaze on the school yard and scanning the building for signs of students. 'Yes.'

'Do you want to date me?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know?' Dale asked, his fingers tapping on the wheel again.

'I've been trying to decide all day,' Talia admitted. 'That's why I didn't want to talk about it sooner. Because I'm just not sure. It's... overwhelming. And I'm sorry. I

wish I had an answer.'

'Hey, it's alright,' Dale replied, and Talia felt his hand rest on hers. When she turned to him his gaze was soft, and kind, and full of love, and it made her heart wrench sideways and upside down. 'You don't have to be sure, yet. You can think about it.'

'You'd wait for an answer?' Talia almost scoffed. 'That's.... I don't know how long it'll take me. What if it takes me a week to decide?'

Dale shrugged. 'Then I'll wait a week for the answer.... Though, I'm going to ask you about it every day.'

'God, I want to strangle you! Stop being so sweet!' Talia groaned. She caught a glimpse of Dale's grin as she turned and dropped her head against the window with a huff. They both sat for a while, staring at the nearby buildings, before Talia let out an exasperated breath and turned back. 'Dale?'

'Yeah?'

'Thanks,' she managed. 'For being patient with me. I appreciate it.'

'It's alright,' he replied.

Then the bell rang, and less than a minute later students were pouring out the doors into the yard.

'Here they come,' Dale said.

'Oh, no, is that Jacob?' Talia groaned— And then felt herself relax as Jacob waved goodbye and veered off in another direction. 'Oh thank god. I did *not* want him being involved in this conversion.'

'Yeah, talk about awkward,' Dale gave a half-hearted laugh, which became much more genuine as Gavin pulled open the car door and leapt in. 'Hey, Gav, how was school?'

'Was alright,' Gavin replied, throwing his bag in the foot-well and pulling on his belt. 'What were you doing in Mum's bed last night?'

For god's sake, Gavin! Talia almost screamed as she

watched her son through the rear-view mirror. *Have some tact!*

Thankfully, Dale chuckled. Though it was awkward. 'Just chilling.'

Gavin's brow furrowed, and he looked confused as he stared at Dale. '*Chilling?*'

'Yeah, chilling!' Dale repeated. 'Nothing wrong with two people just, you know, hanging out!'

'In bed together?'

'Yeah!' said Dale, his voice cracking as he blushed. 'Just two good friends. Hanging out.'

Gavin looked at his mother. Then to Dale. Then back and forth again before he rolled his eyes. 'You asked her out, didn't you?'

'Yes,' Dale admitted.

'Like you said you would.'

'Yes.'

'Wait, you knew he was going to ask me out?' Talia turned in her seat. 'Since when?'

'I dunno. A while,' Gavin shrugged. 'He asked me if it was alright. Because if you said yes we'd have to start sharing your time. He wanted to make sure that I'd be okay with that. And I told him it was cool.'

'He really asked you that?' Talia's gaze moved to Dale, and she felt a wave of emotions hit her as he smiled and shrugged. Like it had been no big deal.

But it *was* a big deal. For him to care enough about Gavin to ask first— And that Gavin trusted him enough to be okay with it.... Her heart almost ached from it.

Why was he so sweet?

'So, did you say yes?' Gavin asked. 'He's not dead. So it can't have gone *too* badly.'

Talia laughed at that —louder and longer than she meant to— and she had to sit up straight and take a deep breath before she was able to answer. 'I told him I'm not

sure. That I would think about it for a while, until I was.'

'You can do that?' Gavin's eyes widened. 'Huh! I figured you had to choose straight away!'

'Nah!' Dale responded cheerfully as the car gave a rumble and began to move. 'It's a big choice that changes a lot of things, so it's okay to want to think about it first!'

'Huh,' Gavin leant back against the car seat. 'Guess there's a lot about dating I don't know yet.'

'Well, you're only eleven,' Dale comforted. 'Give it some time, you'll figure it out. No reason to rush.'

'Right, and you've had a lot of practice, haven't you?'

'Yep.'

'Good,' said Gavin. 'You can teach Mum, then! She's never dated anyone! At least, not since she had me. So she's not the best at it, and is gonna need a lot of help.'

'Gavin—' Talia cut off with a sigh and eyed her son through the rear-view mirror. 'Honey. Please. I'm not *completely* useless.'

'*Mmm*,' Gavin pulled a face, and Talia wasn't sure whether or not she should have been offended. 'When it comes to dating you kinda are.'

'Gavin—'

'I think you're just bad at talking to people,' Gavin continued. 'Like. In general? It's not something you're very good at. Even with Trish and Anna you can get kinda weird and mean.'

'Hey, Gav, keep the roasts for dinner,' Dale cut in. Then he eyed Talia and gave her a cheeky grin. 'Just because something's true doesn't mean you need to say it.'

'Dale!' Talia snapped, feeling her cheeks burn hot. 'You boys, I swear to god! I will get out of this car *right now* and walk home if you don't watch your mouths!'

'We're on the highway,' Dale commented. 'I'm going eighty.'

'You think that'll stop me?' Talia put her hand on

her seatbelt buckle and raised her brow. ‘You think I’m afraid to prove a point?’

Dale didn’t reply. Instead, he reached for the dashboard— And Talia heard the car doors lock as he pressed one of the buttons under the radio.

‘Smart choice,’ Talia commented, resting her hands on her knees.

‘Well, I want you alive,’ Dale chuckled. ‘You know. On account of the whole “loving you” thing.’

Talia blew a raspberry and rolled her eyes. She tried to look severe... but she couldn’t stop the grin that was forcing its way to her face as the car slowed at a red light and Gavin craned his neck to see the cars ahead.

‘Have cars *always* had those red lights?’

‘The brake lights?’ Dale asked with a laugh. ‘Pretty sure all cars have brake lights, sport.’

‘No, not the ones by the wheels,’ Gavin pointed. ‘The ones above the back window.’

Talia followed Gavin’s finger to the car ahead and frowned.

Had cars always had those lights? She never recalled seeing them before.

She glanced to the car beside the car in front— Which also had the light.

Another car over.... Yes! It also had the light.

‘See? One, two, three,’ Gavin pointed from the bottom two lights to the top, which promptly disappeared as the car began moving again. ‘Is that really a brake light?’

‘Yeah? They’ve been around since forever,’ said Dale. ‘Pretty sure it’s illegal for new cars *not* to have them.’

‘I never noticed them before,’ Gavin gave a shrug.

‘Me either,’ Talia admitted.

‘I guess you two just haven’t spent much time around cars,’ Dale laughed. ‘Not surprising.’

‘Can you tell me more about cars?’ Gavin asked.

‘Eh, I don’t know too much about them, really,’ Dale shrugged. ‘That’s more Dick’s thing. All I can do is parrot stuff he’s told me.... Anyway, almost home. Any plans on what you’re gonna do?’

‘Yeah, I’m gonna play Old Scrolls,’ Gavin grinned. ‘I’ve been trying to finish all the side quests before I do the main quest, and I got a new companion. He’s a rat-man who casts fireballs!’

Talia shook her head as Gavin continued explaining his game to Dale; she didn’t get it. She *tried* to understand, but she just couldn’t wrap her brain around the kinds of games he played. They all seemed a little weird, and a little violent....

But, well... they weren’t too bad. And at least he was showing her what he was doing, she supposed. She had that over most of the other parents she’d known.... Even Jacob didn’t show his parents stuff like that, from what the Connors had told her. So she guessed she was lucky. And it wasn’t like she didn’t have fun watching her son do something that made him so happy....

It was good to hear him laugh so much.

And just as she thought about it, she heard him start snickering, and wondered what joke she’d missed as Dale turned into the apartment’s car park and slotted into one of the spots.

She’d only half-undone her seatbelt before Gavin leant over the seat and planted a kiss on her cheek.

‘I’ll meet you inside!’ he decided, reaching into Talia’s pocket for her keys. She didn’t have time to argue otherwise before he was out of the car and halfway into the stairwell.

‘Gavin wai— Ugh,’ Talia leant back in her seat as her son disappeared.

‘There he goes,’ Dale’s voice floated into the car as he pulled open Talia’s door for her. ‘Fast little bugger, isn’t he? *Nyoom.*’

‘Nyoom,’ Talia repeated, though a little flatter than Dale had said it. ‘Sometimes I wish he’d slow down. Just a little bit.’

‘Aw, but then he wouldn’t be Gavin, would he?’ joked Dale. Then he offered Talia his hand. ‘Come on. You alright?’

‘Yeah, I...’ Talia hesitated, then took his hand and let him pull her up. ‘I’m fine. I just....’

She lost her train of thought.

And when Dale waited patiently for her to continue she felt her cheeks start to burn, and she looked away and pulled her hand back.

‘Talia?’ Dale’s voice was soft as his hand took hers again and gave it a squeeze that trapped butterflies in her stomach. ‘Hey.... Look at me?’

She dared to turn back, and as she met his soft, kind eyes she felt the butterflies trying to push out of her throat.

‘Talia,’ Dale managed, his voice cracking with the same emotions that had paralysed Talia. ‘Please be my girlfriend?’

And the butterflies escaped her as a laugh.

She didn’t mean them to.

But they escaped her, and she found herself choking on giggle after giggle as she collapsed back into the car and covered her mouth with her hands.

She had known that the question was coming, but she hadn’t expected it to sound like that out loud. And she hadn’t thought he would word it like that.

So simple.

So straightforward.

So completely stupid.

“Please be my girlfriend.”

Why had he said it like that?!

God, why!

She could barely breathe— It was too much! The

way he'd asked her had just been too much and now she couldn't stop laughing as tears welled in her eyes and she choked on a happy sob.

'Talialia?' Dale took her hands. 'Are you alright?'

She tried to answer, but instead of words she let out a horrid-sounding wheeze, throaty and deep, which was followed by a breathless cackle.

'Talialia?'

'*Please be my girlfriend!*' Talialia finally managed as tears streamed down her cheeks. '*Please— Be my—*'

She let out another cackle and wheeze, which turned into a coughing fit as she desperately tried to catch her breath.

'Are you okay?' Dale asked, pulling her close.

'Why'd you ask it like *that?!* You could have asked literally *any other way!*' Talialia managed, hoarsely. Then she snickered, and gave a loud sniff, and buried her face in Dale's chest. 'For Christ's sake, Dale. Alright! *Yes!* I'll be your girlfriend!'

Part 37:

Things had been going so perfectly since his birthday that Dale could barely believe it. He couldn't believe Talia had said yes. Especially when he'd only asked her twice, and on the same day.

But that second time... it had just felt right to him. And he supposed it had to her, as well.

She'd cried on the way up the stairs that day.

It was strange, how things had turned out. Everything was so different— But also, so much the same.

The biggest difference, really, was that Talia had been happier.

Their relationship hadn't been a magical fix, and she was clearly still having a lot of trouble being open with him.... But she was definitely happier. And right now, that was all he could ask for.

This was only the third time she'd let him stay over in the month since they'd gotten together. He'd have stayed over every night, if she'd let him. Or, even better; he'd have had her stay at *his* house. Though... she still wasn't comfortable enough for that, yet. And it was clear it would be a while before she was. So, as much as he would have loved to wrap her up in his softest bedsheets and kiss her to sleep every night, he instead settled for the not-quite-weekly stays in her room.

Dale was distracted from his thoughts as Talia stretched and stole the blanket, and he had to bite back his laugh as he stole it back. He tugged her close against his chest, catching a glimpse of the clock on her bedside table and quietly cursing that he only had another ten minutes with her before the alarm went off.

Though, as he heard Gavin's feet hit the floor in the other room, he realised he wasn't going to get it.

Dale had barely let out his sigh before Talia's door

creaked open and the light from the hall shone in.

‘Gav, it’s not seven yet,’ Dale muttered. ‘Don’t you want to sleep a little longer?’

‘No, I’m awake,’ Gavin replied. ‘I.... I want to talk to you about something, Dale. It’s important.’

‘*Alright,*’ Dale took a deep, throaty breath, and forced himself out of bed. He stretched, then stumbled down the hall after Gavin. ‘Guess I’ll make breakfast for everyone, huh?’

‘That’d be nice,’ Gavin said, pulling a chair from the table to the kitchen. ‘And we can talk while you do?’

‘Yeah, of course,’ Dale yawned as he went through the cupboards. ‘Bacon and eggs?’

‘Yes please. Scrambled?’

‘Sure,’ Dale pulled out what he needed and, with another yawn, started cooking. ‘So, what did you want to talk to me about?’

‘Well... it’s about...’ Gavin hesitated. Then sighed. And then he went quiet.

‘Gav?’ Dale said gently.

‘Mm...’ a blush crept over Gavin’s cheeks as he looked to his feet and kicked out at the wall. But he didn’t say anything. Instead, the only noise was the sizzle of their breakfast.

Dale waited for Gavin to continue. He tried to look patient, though he wasn’t sure he was fully hiding his concern as he eyed the boy; whatever it was seemed to be a big deal. A big, stressful deal... He hoped Gavin wasn’t in trouble. But he couldn’t push him; Gavin had come to him, so he had to wait.

Dale was almost done cooking when Gavin finally spoke.

‘Dale, you had a lot of girlfriends before my mum, right?’

‘Yeah, a few,’ Dale replied. ‘Why?’

‘Well... I want to know.... How do you ask someone out?’

Dale felt the knot in his chest unravel into relief. ‘You have a crush?’

Gavin gave a nod, though he kept his eyes to the wall. ‘I’ve been watching you and Mum, and I think how I feel is the same.’

‘Ah,’ Dale gave his own nod. ‘I see.... That’s cool. What’s her name?’

‘No— Not a girl,’ Gavin admitted. ‘It’s Jacob.’

‘Jacob?’ Dale paused.

Gavin gave another nod, though he still didn’t meet Dale’s eye.

Oh.

That was why he’d been so nervous.

Dale watched Gavin kick at the wall again and felt the knot in his chest come back as he realised just how nervous the boy looked.

The fact he was anxious about liking a boy.... Dale supposed he had probably seen some homophobia before, with Talia being bi.

That wasn’t fair. Gavin was too young to be scared of something like this.

‘Oh, *Jacob!* From school! Yeah!’ Dale forced his own anxiety down and gave a laugh. He quickly scraped the food out of the pan and onto a plate before he headed to the table, ruffling Gavin’s hair as he passed. ‘Jacob’s pretty cool, isn’t he?’

‘Yeah,’ Gavin gave a smile, and finally looked to Dale as he dragged his chair back to where it belonged and started serving himself breakfast. ‘Yeah he’s cool.... Do you think I should ask him out?’

‘Why not?’ Dale turned to the hall as he heard Talia’s alarm go off. ‘He’s nice, so what have you got to lose— Hey, save some eggs for your mum, right? She’s mean when

she's hungry.'

'She's mean anyway,' Gavin teased.

'Yeah, but not to *you!*' Dale retorted, gently smacking the boy's hand away from the food. 'Eat what you've got already, you little brat!'

'Okay, okay,' giggling, Gavin began to poke at his food. 'Should we wait for Mum?'

'Nah,' Dale waved his fork playfully. 'The sooner you eat the sooner you can get dressed. And the sooner you're dressed, the sooner we can get rid of you!'

Gavin's giggle grew at that, and he shovelled far too much of his food into his mouth at once as Talia stumbled into the room. Her nightgown was pulled up at an awkward angle and her hair stood up on one side, and as she made her way to the boys and collapsed into her spot at the table face-down, Dale couldn't help but let out a chuckle.

'*You don't look much better,*' Talia muttered into the tablecloth. Then, Dale watched as she opened her mouth and let her retainer simply fall out onto the table, spit dripping after it before she closed her mouth again and made a very uncomfortable *wet* sound.

'Probably not,' Dale agreed as he smoothed down his hair. 'I think the only presentable one here is Gavin.'

Talia looked up at her son. She stared at him for a moment before reaching across the table for the tissue box, which she pushed towards Gavin. 'Wipe your mouth, honey.'

'Hey, so,' Dale nudged Talia. 'You remember how I hung out with Anna and Trish yesterday?'

'Mhm?' Talia gave a tired nod and poked at her food.

'Well, we walked past one of those pop-up wedding boutiques and they took an interest.'

'Yeah!' Gavin lifted himself halfway out of his chair, his eyes lighting up. 'They want to get married!'

'Sit down, Gavin,' Talia mumbled.

Gavin settled down and began cramming the second half of his breakfast into his mouth.

Dale chuckled. 'That's really sweet—'

'Eat slower, Gavin!'

'—I didn't know they had boyfriends.'

Gavin stopped, his mouth half-full, and gave Dale a confused look. Then he looked to his mother. *'Hmhm?'*

Talia shook her head.

Then Gavin's confused look turned to a frown and he swallowed. 'Dale, you're kinda stupid.'

'Wh—'

'Gavin, don't call Dale stupid!' Talia exclaimed.

'It's true, though!'

'I don't care how true it is, don't call him stupid!'

'Why not?' Gavin asked, far too much humour in his voice as he grinned at his mother.

Talia opened her mouth to argue, but Dale put up a hand.

'Gav, stop working her up,' he warned. 'Go get dressed, let her eat in peace.'

'But—'

'Gav, she's tired.'

Gavin paused. Then he slid out of his chair and slipped around the table to Talia, who shifted so he could kiss her on the cheek.

'Sorry, Mum,' he mumbled. 'I was just mucking about.'

'I know,' she gave a half-sigh, half-laugh, and planted her own kiss on Gavin's forehead. 'But you have to be nice to Dale, alright? I want to keep him, you know. You can't chase him off on me now.'

'Right,' Gavin chuckled back. Then he glanced to Dale. 'But I don't think Dale's going anywhere.'

'I don't know about that,' Dale teased, leaning back in his chair and waving his hand dramatically. 'I very well

might, if you keep bullying me! I mean—’

Dale was cut off by his own shout as the chair gave out underneath him. He fell to the floor in a heap as the flimsy plastic chair legs were flung in different directions across the room— One narrowly missing Gavin as he leapt aside, and the other skidding towards the kitchen.

‘Oh my god!’ Talia exclaimed, leaping from her own chair. ‘Dale! Are you alright?!’

‘I’m fine!’ Dale felt a laugh escape him as he rolled to his feet. ‘Your chairs are terrible, Talia!’

‘They’re fine if you sit on them *properly!*’ Talia scolded as she looked Dale over. ‘Are you hurt?’

Dale shook his head and laughed again as Talia placed a hand on his cheek and looked up at him with worry. ‘I’m fine. But I think you’re going to need a new chair.’

‘No, you can just sit on the floor,’ Talia joked as she gave a relieved sigh. Then she shook her head and leant against Dale, who wrapped an arm around her. ‘Jesus, Dale. Are you trying to give me a heart attack?’

‘Yeah, that way I get to have Gavin all to myself.’

‘Jokes on you, Trish is his godmother,’ said Talia.

‘Darn,’ Dale gave a chuckle, then motioned to Gavin. ‘Right. You. Stop giggling! Go get dressed and grab your meds.’

‘Okay, okay,’ Gavin gave one last snicker before turning and hurrying to his room.

Dale and Talia watched for a moment before Talia let out a heavy sigh and pulled away from Dale.

‘We should get ready, too,’ she said.

‘Probably,’ Dale agreed. ‘After you’ve eaten, though.’

‘I’ve had enough—’

‘You’ve had *one* bite of egg,’ Dale interrupted, guiding Talia back to her seat and sitting her down. ‘You finish your breakfast, young lady.’

‘Hah! Haven’t been called that in a while,’ Talia gave a snort and picked up her fork, which she waved around in a joking manner. ‘What do you think you’re trying to do, hmm? Flirt with me?’

‘Oh, absolutely not,’ Dale gave a mock-gasp. ‘You’re *way* out of my league! You’d never go out with me! I’d be silly to even try!’

‘I don’t know, I hear you have money,’ said Talia. ‘I might consider it, if you’re rich enough.’

‘Well, then!’ Dale reached into his pocket and slammed down a fifty dollar note. ‘Will this do?’

Talia hesitated.

‘What?’

‘Fifty dollars?’ Talia observed. ‘In your pyjamas pocket?’

‘Yeah?’ Dale gave a shrug. ‘Is that... not normal?’

‘No, it is *certainly not*,’ she replied. ‘Most people don’t keep money in their pyjamas, let alone that much.’

‘They *don’t*?!’

‘No, Dale, they don’t,’ Talia confirmed.

‘Huh,’ Dale stuck his hands in his pockets and chuckled. ‘Well, I blame the fact I’m not used to pyjamas, yet.’

‘Not used to them?’

‘I only brought this pair so I could stay over,’ Dale explained. ‘Usually, I don’t wear anything to bed.’

‘Oh for— Dale!’ Talia let out a loud sigh. Then she looked up, past Dale, and frowned. ‘Gavin, I thought we told you to get ready.’

Dale spun around to see Gavin in the hall, dressed, but not in his uniform.

‘I *am* ready!’ Gavin complained.

‘Where’s your uniform, sport?’ Dale chuckled.

‘Pretty sure that’s a part of being ready.’

Gavin gave a dramatic sigh and rolled his eyes. ‘Did

you forget?’

‘Forget what?’ asked Talia.

‘Ugh! You did! Come *on*, you only signed the form last week!’ Gavin whined. ‘They’re doing that “take your kids to work day” thing!’

Dale’s palm met his forehead. ‘Ah, shit!’

Part 38:

The burst pipe had, in the words of Moore for More's IT manager, "*completely fucked*" the server room. So when Richard had left for his meeting he'd left Talia in charge of organising the rest of the staff until the systems came back online.

Now Dale wasn't a bitter man, but Richard's decision to leave Talia in charge made him, in his *own* words, quite a bit annoyed. He'd been working in the company for over ten years as Richard's second-in-command, but Richard had barely cast him a glance before pointing to Talia and rattling off instructions.

It probably wouldn't have stung so much if Talia had actually *wanted* to be put in charge. But she hadn't, and it had put her in a bad mood— Which had put the entire office on edge.

Dale supposed he was lucky that Gavin was with them; he thought if the boy hadn't been there when Talia's desk-lamp broke, she might have thrown it through the window.

It was honestly a terrible time for Richard to have to leave; nobody could get anything done and for the first half-hour of the day they had been standing around the break room like a flock of confused penguins. At least Talia had let Dale help organise things. He knew the rest of the staff better than her and could point them in the right direction.

And now that everything upstairs had been sorted out Dale had moved himself, Talia, and Gavin down into the server room with the IT team to sort out the last of the damage to the company's computers. Though, all that was left of the team was Natalie, the manager, as the rest of the department had all left to get replacement parts and tools.... Talia had commented that Natalie and Trish would get along, if they ever had the chance to meet, and Dale had

found himself agreeing.

There was a heavy sigh from Dale's side and he turned to watch Talia push herself out of her chair.

'I think I'm going to get some lunch,' Talia said as she tugged on her blazer. 'Gavin, honey? Do you want to come, or do you want me to bring you something back?'

'Bring me something back,' Gavin answered, his gaze not shifting from the inside of the laptop Natalie was working on. 'Please.'

'Alright,' Talia gave her son a kiss on the cheek, and made for the door. 'Burger?'

'And chips,' Gavin replied, distracted. Dale gave the boy a nudge and he glanced up at his mother. 'Please.'

'Same here,' Dale answered.

'Nothing for me, thanks,' Natalie commented. 'I have food in the fridge.'

Talia gave a nod (which Dale returned with a warm smile) and slipped out the door.

Gavin tapped his hands against his knees as the elevator outside made an audible *ding*, and after a moment of quiet he turned to Natalie. 'Okay, so, now that Mum's gone I can ask the *real* questions!' he blurted. 'Are you pregnant, or fat?'

'Gavin! *Fuck!*' Dale exclaimed, spinning the boy's chair around so he could scold him. 'Don't ask that!'

'Mum said you're not allowed to swear in front of me.'

'And I doubt you're allowed to call people fat!'

'I won't tell if you don't,' Gavin gave a wide grin and glanced back at Natalie who had, luckily, burst into a fit of laughter.

'Oh, boy, Richard sure wasn't kidding about you!' Natalie wiped a tear from her eye before ruffling Gavin's hair. 'You're a right brat, you are!'

Gavin giggled. Then turned to face Natalie. 'So?'

‘So?’

‘Are you pregnant?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Cool! So you’ve had sex?’

Dale almost screamed. ‘G— What?! Where did that— Gavin *what?!*’

‘We’re learning about it in class,’ Gavin said simply, spinning around to talk to Dale again. ‘We started sex ed this week and it’s weird. I didn’t realise it was so easy to have a baby! No wonder Mum ended up with me.’

Dale wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

He wished Talia hadn’t left.... That he’d thought to offer to go get food for everyone, instead. Facing the rain outside would have been worlds better than this—

‘Can I have a brother?’ Gavin asked, much to Natalie’s amusement.

‘That’s— That’s up to your mother,’ Dale was too stunned to think of another answer. ‘Ask *her?*’

‘Alright, I will,’ Gavin replied. Then he turned back to Natalie. ‘Are you having a boy or a girl?’

‘We’re not sure, yet,’ Natalie replied. She said something else, but Dale barely heard it as he sat in shock.

No amount of forums or parenting advice books could have possibly prepared him for dealing with *Gavin*.

Dale could barely believe the comments the kid made when his mother wasn’t around— Not that the ones he made when she *was* around were that much better, but at least he seemed to have *some* sort of filter switched on when Talia was in earshot.

God, how did a boy like this manage to come out of Talia?

‘So, when are you gonna ask Mum to marry you?’

‘What?’ Dale was pulled back to earth by the question— And by the explosion of laughter that escaped Natalie.

When Dale didn't answer, Gavin leant forward and spoke slowly, '*When are you going to ask Mum to marry you?*'

'Gav, it's been a month,' Dale said, flatly.

'Yeah, but at breakfast Mum said she wanted to keep you,' Gavin retorted. Then, he banged his hands on Natalie's desk and spoke even slower; raising his voice over the woman's laughter. '*You. Have. An. Opening!*'

'That's not an opening, Gav,' said Dale. 'That's.... That's.... *Not* breaking up is the most basic thing to want in a relationship!'

Gavin let out a huff, and crossed his arms. 'She's not getting any younger, you know.'

'Gavin!' Dale exclaimed, letting out a heavy sigh when the boy snickered. 'You're a brat, you know that?'

'Yes,' Gavin replied, spinning in his seat. 'Mum tells me *all the time!*'

Dale just sighed, and shook his head. He couldn't believe this boy, sometimes!

'You know it's Mum's birthday, soon?' Gavin stopped spinning, and leant so far forward in his chair Dale was scared he'd fall. 'She's turning twenty-nine! That's at *least* ten years older than I am!'

'At least,' Dale agreed, unable to stop himself from grinning at Gavin's joking tone. 'And yeah, I know it's... well, I wouldn't call three months *soon.*'

'You will when you try and find her a gift,' Gavin retorted.

'Why, is she picky?'

'Not with my gifts,' Gavin bragged. 'But she will be with yours, so you better start looking now so you don't mess up and get her something stupid like you did for Christmas.'

'W.... Wow, Gavin,' all Dale could do was shake his head. He glanced up at Natalie, who bit her lip and

shrugged, before he stood up and stretched. 'I thought she liked the blankets.'

'She doesn't use them,' Gavin shrugged. 'She only takes them out when you come over because she doesn't want you to feel bad.'

'Oof,' Natalie tried to smother her laugh, and finished screwing the laptop she'd been working on back together. 'Okay... I think I should maybe— You know what — This computer's done, and I'm going to head upstairs and give it to Alan. You boys.... You two have fun.'

'Right,' Dale had to hold back his own laugh as he gave her a nod. 'You go do that. I'll keep this one in check.'

Natalie gave a wave, and then disappeared into the hall. Gavin and Dale looked out after her as the elevator gave a ding, and then Dale turned back to Gavin.

'Alright, so,' he sniffed. 'If you're so smart, what should I get her?'

'Something practical,' said Gavin.

'I thought the blankets *were* pretty practical,' Dale gave a shrug.

'No, they cost *two thousand dollars*,' Gavin retorted. 'Each! That's not practical. That's stupid.'

'Hey—'

'That's what Mum said! To Trish! I heard her.'

'What? Aw, man,' Dale flopped back into his chair and sighed. 'Okay. So... hmm.... Something practical... What's practical...'

'Last year Trish got her a Kyles gift card,' Gavin offered.

'Groceries?' Dale asked. 'That's not a very fun birthday gift.'

'How did Mum ever fall in love with you?' Gavin gave an exaggerated eye-roll, and motioned widely with his hands. 'You *know* she doesn't like fun!'

'She likes a little bit of fun—'

‘Wrong!’ Gavin interrupted. ‘She doesn’t. Name *one* fun thing she likes!’

Dale took in a sharp breath. ‘Ooh-kay. Uh...’

‘*See?*’ Gavin poked at Dale, who batted his hand away.

‘Don’t rush me!’ Dale chuckled. ‘Give me a moment. She likes... cheese?’

‘For her birthday?’

‘Shhhhhush!’ Dale waved a hand. ‘She likes movies! I could take her to a movie.’

‘Nothing good’s coming out, though.’

‘Ah, fair point,’ Dale tapped his chin. ‘Hmm. This is a tough one.’

‘Yeah, see why I said you should start looking now?’ Gavin sat up straight and gave Dale a severe look. ‘She’s *impossible!*’

‘Who’s impossible?’ Talia’s voice came from Dale’s side, and he almost fell out of his chair as the woman quietly shut the door behind her. ‘What are you two talking about?’

‘Oh nothing, just—’

‘Dale wants to get you a birthday gift but all his ideas are stupid,’ Gavin declared. ‘His was thinking of getting you *cheese.*’

‘No— I said she *liked* cheese!’ Dale quickly corrected, feeling himself blush. ‘Not that I was going to get her cheese!’

‘Hm, I *do* like cheese,’ Talia gave a half-chuckle; though Dale thought she didn’t look very happy.

‘But not for your birthday!’ Gavin’s snicker seemed much more genuine than his mother’s laugh, and he leant forward in his chair again. ‘Oh yeah! Mum? Can I have a brother?’

‘No,’ Talia replied nonchalantly as she put down the paper bag she was carrying. It was soaked —just like she was— and Dale felt himself frown as she began to go

through it.

‘Did you *walk* to Ms Danielle’s?’

‘Yep,’ Talia replied, brushing her wet hair out of her face.

‘You should have gotten a taxi!’ Dale exclaimed. He pushed himself up and pulled off his jacket, which he made to put around Talia’s shoulders— But she shrugged him off.

‘That would have cost more than the food,’ said Talia. ‘It’s not a big deal.’

‘It’s ice cold outside!’

‘So?’

‘You’ll get sick!’

‘No I won’t,’ Talia retorted. ‘I don’t get sick!’

‘Last year you got so sick I had to look after Gavin for you!’

‘That was food poisoning! It was different.’

‘No it wasn’t!’

‘Yes it was.’

‘No, it wasn’t!’

‘Yes! It was!’

‘You know what?! Gavin’s right!’ Dale gave an exasperated groan, and threw his hands up. ‘You *are* impossible!’

‘Good,’ Talia said flatly, and pulled out Dale’s meal. She held it out to him and frowned. ‘Now shut up and eat your lunch.’

Dale took the food with a heavy sigh and threw it down on the table. ‘At *least* take your wet blazer off?’

Talia echoed Dale’s sigh, but complied.

‘That’s called a blazer?’ Gavin piped up. ‘I thought it was a jacket.’

‘So did I,’ Talia said. Then, for the first time since getting back, she grinned. ‘But apparently, according to *someone*, those terms aren’t interchangeable.’

‘That’s dumb,’ Gavin muttered, unwrapping his

burger and stuffing it into his mouth. ‘Dale, you’re dumb.’

‘Don’t call Dale dumb,’ Talia said, biting back her grin. It was obvious she was struggling not to laugh as her son spun himself around in his chair and stuffed his face.

‘Why not?’ Gavin asked through his food. ‘Now that you’re dating I can say whatever I want to him!’

‘Incorrect,’ replied Talia. ‘Now that we’re dating you have to be three times as nice to him. Or I’ll ground you.’

Gavin blew a raspberry at his mother, and Dale covered his mouth to try and hide his snicker.

He failed and Talia rounded on him, and he found her wet blazer flung from her chair to his face. He would have toppled to the floor if he hadn’t been lucky enough to land in his chair; and he was grateful that he’d already put his food down.

Dale peeled the blazer off and gently hung it on the back of his own chair, chuckling to himself as Talia finally started unpacking her own meal.

‘What was that you were just saying, about being nice to me?’ Dale asked. ‘Maybe *you’re* the one who needs to be grounded. Or maybe I’ll make you sit in the naughty corner and think about what you’ve done. How’d you like that?’

Talia turned back to Dale to respond, but cut off with a laugh and motioned to the top of her head. Then she hurried forward and ran her hands over Dale’s own, smoothing down his hair. ‘I’m so sorry, Dale.’

Dale could only guess what he must have looked like as Talia slicked his hair back down into place.... And as much as he wanted to stop her so he could pull out his phone and check it out, he found himself leaning into her hands; the feeling of her fingers running through his hair was magical. And she continued even after he knew his hair would have been fixed....

He didn’t want it to stop; but then the elevator dinged and Talia pulled away, greeting Natalie pleasantly,

and Dale leant back in his chair with a disappointed sigh.
Oh well. He needed to eat, anyway.

End of work in progress.

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