



Twin Tempt

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, War

Description: What's an Army brat to do with two handsome soldiers?

Obey orders? Do exactly what I'm told?

Even if the orders are harder and hotter than even my wildest fantasies?

Liberty Jane

I may be an Army brat, but as the Colonel's daughter, but I have a secret plan to get out on my own --

if I can only manage to get that last \$800.

Enter Mona, my best friend. She knows how I can make some easy money.

The only problem?

I have to risk everything.

It looks like easy gig at a sketchy roadhouse just out of Army bounds.

She says nobody will know me.

And if I'm honest, this virgin is more than tempted -- I'm excited.

I just never thought that it would be this dangerous...

Until the two most handsome soldiers I've ever seen step in to protect me.

And I never want to let them go.

Will and Cass

So we're twins, and are obviously military - we can't hide our identities from a girl who has been surrounded by soldiers since birth.

We won't blow the cover of the Colonel's daughter.

And when the club owner wants Libby to do more than just dance and drags her to the back room to negotiate new terms, we aren't having it.

But now we're charged with protecting her.

We can't risk releasing her, and once we are in such close quarters,

We can't resist her innocent body...

No matter what the cost.

Total Pages (Source): 69

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Preface

Libby

My mind is churning, a thousand thoughts all trying to happen at once. I can barely sort it all out.

As I close the door behind me, I finally catch sight of myself in the mirror. It takes my breath away.

Mascara is caked below my eyes in uneven smudges, speckled with flakes like ash. My hair is an absolute fright, sticking out all over the place, tangled in blonde patches, totally unkempt.

But what really gets me is the mark on my left cheek. It's not huge. It probably even looks like a birthmark or even a line from the pillow I was sleeping on. But I know it wasn't there yesterday. I know what happened.

No, I'm not going to think about that. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine other thoughts that I could be savoring right now. Why should I focus on just that one?

The shower controls are basically the same as every other, and with just a little bit of fiddling I manage to get the water spray to a tolerable temperature. On second thought, I crank it up little bit. It's too hot when I get in, but I make myself stand there, bracing against the heat, forcing myself to tolerate it.

There aren't a lot of frills to the shower. No girly poofs. No shampoo at all—just

soap. But the soap is strong and rough, and it feels unbelievably good to get myself really clean. Scrubbed. Renewed. It feels like a million years since the last time I gave myself a good, thorough going-over.

But in reality, it was just yesterday.

Still, that feels a million miles away. Back when the only thing I was worried about was my next shift at the convenience store. Back when the only prospects I had for romance were the phony, exaggerated videos I saw on the internet.

Yesterday I thought I knew exactly what I would be doing today, and every day for the foreseeable future. It was all laid out in front of me, neat and tidy and predictably boring.

I'm not even the kind of person who takes big, sweeping chances. I have my wild side... well, I think I do. But mostly I am a good girl. The colonel's daughter. The one who keeps the house clean and tidy for the big boss. The one who can be counted on to do the right thing all the time.

Everything is different now.

There's no shampoo, so I guess soap will have to do. People probably manage without shampoo all over the world, after all. And soldiers are known for their adaptability, their uncomplaining dedication to only the barest essentials. No frills.

Washing my hair with the bar, I love the feeling of my fingers against my scalp. I feel so turned up, like a knob that's been edging closer and closer to ten. It's thrilling. I'm full of bees. I never really dared before, but now I think I'd like to get all the way up there, see how high this is all going to go.

Yesterday was just the start, I know. There is so much more to come. So much more I

haven't done yet. And now, it's a dream come true. Everything I ever wished for magically dropped into my lap.

Finally clean, I step back out of the shower and unfold the towel without looking at myself too hard in the mirror again. I know who I am, after all. My reflection doesn't change that.

Somehow, these borrowed boxer briefs actually fit. Not perfectly, of course. They're not made for girl hips and there's all this extra fabric in the front. But I kind of like the way they wrap around my thighs. They almost look like shorts, if you don't notice the button crotch.

And just before I slide the T-shirt over my head, I get a whiff of the scent. It cracks open in my mind like an egg. This hungry, feral craving. This strangely thorough desire. I never knew that I could feel this way... A deep void has split open within me, and I have to fill it with something. I can't just let it howl with emptiness. I need to find order in there.

Dressed in these borrowed clothes, my hair wet and hanging around my cheeks, I open the door to the bathroom again and step back into the living room, greeted by their direct, meaningful, truthful stares.

This is it. This is the connection I have always denied myself. This is the moment where I take the steps I can't retreat from. I'll never be able to go back to where I was.

I don't want to.

Chapter 2

Libby

The sliding screen door opens, and I hear Mona's bare feet slapping on the concrete patio as she walks toward the lawn chair next to me. With my eyes closed, I can totally picture her taking careful steps as she lines herself up with the recliner. She cautiously settles in the middle of the beach towel she spread out earlier, pinching a Diet Coke bottle between her thumb and forefinger with her other fingers jutting out at the perfect angle to keep her manicure from getting chipped.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” she sighs luxuriously as she arranges her limbs in the sunlight.

I hear the hitch of her breath as she sucks down some more Diet Coke. She practically lives on that stuff. If she were ever in a car accident, I would have to make sure there was a full IV bag of that blackish, mysterious liquid pumping into her arm the whole time. She wouldn’t be able to recover without it.

The cap of the suntan lotion squeaks open and she squirts out a bunch, then I hear the scraping friction of her smoothing it over her belly and thighs. A buzzing insect of some kind—a hornet or bumblebee or something—swoops low over my face, but it is gone in just a moment.

“This is nice,” she murmurs as she settles back again, dropping the suntan lotion bottle in the grass next to her. “Isn’t this nice?”

“Really nice,” I agree.

It’s not that I don’t want to talk to her or anything, it’s just that it really is nice. Beautiful day, close to the end of summer. It is about 85 degrees here in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The sun is at exactly the right angle in the sky: clear enough to bronze our skin, not so blazing hot that we get burnt to a crisp. There’s a nice little breeze too, so it isn’t too unbearably hot.

Fall will be coming soon, though we probably still have another month or so of beautiful, balmy weather. Compared to Seattle, where we used to live, this place is a regular tropical vacation. But as my father likes to remind me, his duties as an officer

in the United States Army are much more important than whether or not our location is suited to my personal tastes.

Well, that may be true, but Seattle does not have a lot of sun. There is no getting around that. It has a lot of... green. Green trees covered in green moss dripping from green vines that sprawl all over green hillsides. It has a lot of rain. If you are the sort of person who likes to either stay inside and look at the beau

tiful, foggy landscape through window, then Seattle is for you. Also, if you are the kind of person who likes biking over hills with your hair all kinky and sticking to your face, and your blue jean cuffs perpetually soaked so that they scrape against your ankles, then Seattle is definitely for you.

But if you are like me, and you enjoy being able to lie underneath the bright, cheery ball of flame that scoots across the sky every day, then North Carolina would be much more to your taste.

I open one eye just a sliver when Mona shifts around on her lawn chair. The sunlight reflects off of her ample thighs in golden, blinding sheets. She is wearing a turquoise-blue bikini with silver beads around her cleavage. The color perfectly sets off the deep, lustrous tan that she has achieved. She looks pretty amazing.

She told me that she has been working on that tan since she was about seven years old. I knew that tanning was not such a great idea long before I started nursing school, and now that I have done a few dermatology rotations, I can see what long-term exposure to the sun really does to a person. But I am nineteen, and Mona is twenty-one. If we stop soon... Well, probably... Well, I hope it will be okay.

Even through SPF 60 I have managed to get a pretty good base. Not as chocolatey as Mona, but respectable. Especially considering I spent the first sixteen years of my life in jeans and a baseball jersey or military fatigue piece, pretty much constantly. I've

never been the girly sort, or at least not until recently. Once we moved here and I met Mona, whose family conveniently lives right next door, I got a whole new set of influences in my life. I haven't touched my skateboard in years. It's still in the corner of my bedroom, but usually has a couple of tank tops thrown over it.

Probably because I was raised on Army bases, I always gravitated toward more tomboyish adventures. I liked climbing trees and playing catch. I liked getting muddy. I enjoyed hitting a ball though I never got to really play on organized teams, so I don't really understand the rules of individual sports. But I do like being strong and unbothered by what might happen to my makeup or nails. That's the important thing.

But over time, I got to appreciate the curvy, luscious beauty that Mona demonstrates. It's another way of life. I suppose I will always be a tomboy, but as my hair grows out and my body fills in, and my attitude changes to... Well, let's just say it has taken a turn from sports to... other things of a physical nature.

"Did you bring me a Coke?" I ask.

Without answering, she holds the sweating bottle out to me. I take a quick drink, only slightly disgusted by the damp bottle and skin-temperature liquid. So I guess that means she did not actually bring me my own Coke. Still, it is good to hydrate.

Twisting the cap back on, I just drop it in the grass underneath her chair. The grass is thick and green, trimmed to exactly the right height. Everybody on base takes very good care of their lawns.

Mona readjusts her arms, making sure that she's not casting any shadows by mistake. Sometimes she even raises her wrists over her head to make sure that she gets a little bit of tan in her armpits. That seems dangerous, but she swears she has never gotten a sunburn there.

“I like your suit,” she sniffs, her voice liquid and lazy.

“Thanks. I like yours too.”

“Did you get that at Target? I think I saw those purple ones at Target, right?”

I glance down at my suit, the eggplant-purple triangle stretched between my hip bones. It’s simple and undecorated, with only a double-tie detail at the hips. I don’t need overly flashy embellishments.

“Yeah, totally,” I smile. “I hate buying bathing suits, you know what I mean? It always seems like 99 percent of them are engineered to fit no one in the world. This was some kind of magical meeting. It fit right away.”

“Oh yeah?” she answers, her voice sly and drawn out as she enunciates every syllable. “And is that what inspired you to wax your girl bits?”

I bite back a gasp, instantly embarrassed. It takes all my self-control not to cross my legs protectively.

“Oh yeah,” she crows, “I can tell. You are bare as a Barbie doll down there, aren’t you? You naughty minx!”

“But... But... How can you tell? You just knew? What... by just looking?”

She giggles, the vibration jiggling the whole front of her bosom and belly. Sunlight shimmers off the tiny hairs there, making her glitter all over.

“Well, it’s pretty obvious,” she smiles. “I mean, I can practically see the outline of all your parts! Is it weird? Does it tickle? Wait... did it hurt?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

I shrug, still kind of embarrassed but happy to know she is at least a little intrigued. “It’s not so bad. I tried shaving it all once before, and that didn’t work out so well. Takes forever, and the razor got gross. Waxing was at least immediate! No waiting!”

She laughs, raising an arm to shield her eyes.

“Are you saying you don’t shave? What have you got going on down there?”

She waves a hand in the air vaguely. “Oh, I just trim around the edges, you know. A little landscaping here and there. The bikini line, you know. Nothing so dramatic as you. Carson likes me like this, thank goodness.”

I shift on the lawn chair, relishing the delicious tickle of the bathing suit fabric rubbing against my naked nethers. Truthfully, it was pretty shocking to go completely bare. There were tears, not gonna lie. But now, I kind of like it. I am soft and velvety, like a stuffed animal.

One more surprising detail: I can feel myself all the time when I am walking around, rubbing against the cotton crotch of my panties. I’m aware of my sex all day in a way I wasn’t before. It is sort of a secret thrill.

“But what if your boyfriend liked you to wax?” I pester her. “Would you do it then?”

That should get her. Mona prides herself on being some kind of feminine savant. She truly believes she is the center of Southern Belle wisdom in regard to subjects of romance and Getting A Man. I know she thinks I am her personal project. Since my mother died when I was in preschool, she has taken it upon herself to fill in the huge

gaps in my feminine education.

“Wow, you think up the weirdest stuff,” she scoffs. “Let’s hope I never have to find out! Anyway, he’s out of the state for a few more weeks, so I can let it go all jungly for a while. It’s nice to take a break.”

“You could try this while he’s gone! Get some experience in the matter,” I suggest, knowing full well she would never.

She snorts derisively. “Not unless I was abducted, roofied, bribed and threatened with bloodshed, Libby-love. No way.”

“Hey, it’s not so bad. I mean, it’s your body. You could do whatever you want.”

I realize I sound a little bit defensive, but after all, it’s a bit of a sensitive subject. Compared to liberal Seattle, North Carolina is pretty conservative. They have strong ideas about how women are supposed to act around their men. Maybe this was a little bit of an act of defiance. Or maybe I just liked it. Or maybe it isn’t anybody’s business!

“Whatever,” she sighs. “I just think you been watching too much porn, Libby. It has twisted your mind!”

“I have not!” I object loudly, then instantly drop my voice to just above a whisper. “I have not... I only watch, you know, a regular amount of porn.”

She twists her chin and looks me up and down slowly. “Just how much is a regular amount of porn, Libby?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug uncertainly. “Like, a regular amount. A normal amount. The amount that normal people watch.”

“Mmmm-hmmm. Or maybe you are some kind of freak.”

I start to say something, but then I remember she is just messing with me. She likes to get me riled up. Especially about these things where I am kind of sensitive. She thinks it is a hoot, is what she told me. Those are the words that she used: a hoot.

But it's just a regular amount of porn, or at least I think so. I don't know why it draws me... I just like it. Maybe it is my medical curiosity, like what drew me to nursing. Maybe it is just my per

sonality. But I enjoy watching the biology at work. I enjoy all of those specimens of different kinds of genitals, different sizes of everything, different places and angles and intensities for every kind of action. The variety just boggles the mind. If this is what real life is like, why shouldn't I explore it?

I discovered it when I was twelve, wandering the internet like twelve-year-olds do. Instantly I knew I was seeing something I was not supposed to see, and simultaneously could not ever stop seeing.

But despite the societal warnings about how such images and videos would warp my brain, I have remained pretty buttoned-up. Only a single kiss from a single boy, junior year in high school. So if porn turns you into some kind of raging hormonal sex beast, maybe I am immune.

Though I do think about it kind of a lot.

And I did just wax myself completely clean.

So maybe not completely immune.

“Well, you can do whatever you want with your lady bits,” she sing-songs. “I'm

happy with how fluffy mine are. Next time I see Carson, maybe I'll shave it into a heart!"

"Oh, now who's the freak?" I sass.

"Ha! Yeah, I guess. But it's worth it, you know? All those little gestures of effort—they add up. They mean something."

I'm sure she's trying to teach me some great lesson, but it sounds like one of those phony messages in a greeting card. I am not sure what the big deal is.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“They mean... you can do whatever you want?” I offer sarcastically.

“Oh, gracious, no!” she cackles defiantly. “It’s not like that at all, Libby-love.”

“Oh jeez, here we go,” I sigh, rolling my eyes.

She holds up an instructional finger. “No, you should hear this,” she starts in. “It’s not like those movies you watch, girlfriend. Good loving isn’t just all juices and shaved girl parts and making cow eyes. It takes time to get a good dicking, you know what I’m saying?”

“You’re talking to me from the 1950s, is what I am hearing.”

“Mm-hmm, I’m sure that it is what you hear, but that’s only because you don’t know!” she continues, undiscouraged. “I know you think being a freak liberates you, but the reality is that life is not like porn. Real sex takes practice. No pizza guy you just met is going to give you the proper dicking that a real, dedicated, practiced man can give you!”

“Yeah, all right, sure,” I answer, just to be polite. “And where do the heart-shaped pubes come in?”

“Eh, that’s just for encouragement,” she shrugs, lifting her chin toward the sun. “Just to let him know I was thinking about him.”

“Ha-ha, yeah okay,” I chuckle. Not sure she has a point, but it is entertaining to hear her old-Southern-gal way of explaining things.

“So, what are you planning on doing this weekend, you freaky little thing?” She yawns magnificently, dragging me out of my reverie.

“Actually... I’m not really sure,” I answer. “Dad has to go out of town for a little while, so I was thinking I might pick up another shift at the Krazy Mart? I could pretty much work the whole two weeks solid. Get all caught up.”

“Wait, what?” she asks breathlessly, twisting to face me. She shifts her whole body so that the mountainous curve of her hip is illuminated in glorious detail. Wow, I really wish I looked like that. If I lie on my side, I am lucky to get a foothill.

Mona snaps in the air between us.

“Libby? Are you listening to me?”

I open my eyes all the way and nod seriously. “Totally listening,” I affirm.

“You have a weekend off? Wait... You have two weeks? Alone? Without Sergeant Dad watching your every move?”

“Yeah. Actually he is a colonel...” I mumble, but she is not listening. She has been calling him Sergeant Dad behind his back since I have known her. She thinks he is “smoking hot.” Her words.

She reaches out to me with her metallic nails, scraping plaintively on my forearm and leaving tracks in the sunscreen.

“You gotta hang out with me!” she insists, pulling a face. “Come to Sweeney’s!”

“Oh, I would love to hang out with you! But I really gotta make money to finish out the semester. If I can get enough together to transfer to New York, that would be

amazing.”

She nods avidly, her eyes wide. “That would totally be amazing!” she agrees. “Sergeant Dad would definitely have to let you go if you magicked up all the cash all by yourself.”

I squint at her suspiciously. “Right. That is basically the plan...”

She pokes me with one long, pointed nail. “Which is why you should definitely come out with me! Don’t go to the Krazy Mart! Come out with your best pal, crazy Mona!”

“Oh, wait. Come on. No way,” I object, leaning back on my lawn chair. It creaks a warning, and I realize if I go any further I will be dumped out onto the lawn.

She sits up fully, not even caring if the sun is more on her left shoulder than her right shoulder now. That is how I know she is really serious.

“Come on, Libby,” she cajoles. “You can make two, maybe even three hundred dollars a night. How much do you make at the Krazy Mart?”

I shrug one shoulder.

“Libby? How much do you make at the Krazy Mart?”

I do a little mental math, though in truth I know all the numbers by heart. I have run through them so many times, they are practically a mantra. Twelve dollars an hour. Twenty hours a week. A bunch of mysterious deductions later, and I somehow have a hundred and eighty-five dollars dumped into my checking account about ten days later.

“So, it’s less than two hundred dollars, right?” she prods, her voice clear as a bell.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

I don't answer. It sounds so meager.

"Libby? Is it less than two hundred dollars?"

I groan and pout, but I finally have to nod and admit the truth. It is way less than two hundred dollars a day. It's more like... Oh, jeez.

"But Mona, I'm still nineteen. I can't just walk into the club and expect them to, what, let me serve beer? Valet cars? What would I even do there?"

Her eyes slide to the left, the only hint of guilt she is even going to show. I have a pretty good idea what Mona does, but not 100 percent. She told me that she is a bartender, and that they occasionally have what they call "lingerie shows."

Stripping is illegal in this county. Apparently, there is some kind of exception made if you happen to show up for work in your underwear and feel like dancing around while men give you money. Something like that.

She holds up her hands, palms out. "Okay, just hear me out... You'll just be a beer girl, all right? Take a bunch of the heat off me. I can always use the extra help on a Friday. There is only usually two of us working there, and the guys can get really thirsty, if you know what I mean. I'll get you a fake ID."

I feel my eyebrows going up. "A fake ID? Like you have that kind of thing just lying around?"

"Yeah, you can use Tammy's, don't you think? She's blonde like you."

Tammy is Mona's older sister. She went right into the Army after high school and got deployed immediately. Her bedroom looks just the way she left it, except for all the stuff that Mona borrowed and didn't put back yet.

"Tammy's ID?" I repeat, incredulous. "Is it even still valid? Do they expire? And it would say I was twenty-three. Who is going to believe I am twenty-three?"

Mona rolls her eyes extravagantly, pushing back a bushy mass of curly, shining hair with her palm.

"Ty isn't really going to be interrogating you, you know what I mean? He's going to take one look at you and that supermodel body and basically be thrilled you showed up. After all, why would he even suspect you are lying?"

I glance down at my long, not-very-curvy, not-entirely-formed body and try to imagine anything supermodel about it. Nope. Not really. Just a gangly tomboy, like always.

But then, I do have blonde hair and big brown eyes. Freckles. I look "wholesome" I hear. From the glances I have been noticing, I guess I must at least be worth a second look.

"Yeah, okay," I grumble, more or less seeing the logic of her plan.

Two hundred dollars... Three hundred dollars... I mean, that's some serious money. I thought that I could maybe make half of the cash that I needed to get to New York while my dad was gone. Eight hundred dollars. Working at the Krazy Mart, picking up a couple extra shifts? Maybe even mowing the lawn or two? I mean, there are definitely enough young men on base to keep most of the lawns pristinely manicured, but maybe somebody would take pity on me?

In my desperation, I even considered a bake sale. Cooking. Not in my top-ten list of skills. But desperate times, you know what I mean?

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. How hard could being a beer girl be? I know how to open bottles of beer. Read labels. Hand things to people. I mean, that's pretty much it, right? And listen to some shitty music while drunken soldiers play pool and act like nobody can see what they do when they are off-base?

Maybe I could do that.

"So what would I wear?" I ask carefully.

Mona gasps and claps her hands quickly underneath her chin. "Yay! Amazing!" she hoots triumphantly. "You can wear whatever you want! Actually... Let me dress you! Let me pick something out! It will be awesome!"

"Wait, wait, wait," I object. "That may be a little bit too far. I know how you like to dress. I don't think I would look right like that."

She reaches out and pokes me right on the top of my bathing suit bottoms, sending a surprise thrill through my lady parts.

“

Says the woman who just waxed her chocha," she smirks knowingly.

I flinch away, immediately grateful to see that my dad is approaching the door. Reflexively, I leap from the lawn chair and snatch the towel to wrap it around my middle.

Mona springs into action too, but in the opposite direction. She stretches out slowly,

flexing her toes as she hears the screen door slide open. Then she drapes her legs over the side and twists to standing, supple as a cat.

“Oh, Colonel Warner,” she coos charmingly. “I didn’t realize you were home.”

My dad steps out into the sunlight, his eyes flickering toward her for only the briefest of seconds. If he notices how shamelessly she flirts with him, he has never let on. Absolutely nothing like that leaks through his exterior. My dad is 100 percent Army morals and honor. He would never risk doing anything that would reflect on his sense of duty and propriety.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

No, really. I'm not making this up. He is that guy. In real life. Captain America.

"I just wanted to say goodbye before I head off-base," he smiles at me, instantly transforming into the warm, reliable father figure I adore.

I tuck the towel securely under my arm so that I am properly covered before rushing toward him. At the last second, I stop.

"Oh, wait, I'm covered in sunscreen," I explain, disappointed.

"Too late," he announces as he takes me in a full hug, kissing the top of my head tenderly. "I will just have to smell like coconut the rest of the day. It's a small price to pay."

Mona hovers behind me, subtly posing but not daring to really throw herself at him. I'm glad, because then we could not be friends. I can accept her crush, but that would definitely be too far.

"Are you really going to be gone for two weeks?" I mumble into his jacket.

"That's what they're telling me," he answers, which is his standard answer.

Sometimes things go long. Sometimes he's back earlier than expected. You just never really know. It's whatever he is asked to do.

"Okay, well, be safe!" Which is my standard answer.

He can't really tell me what he is going to do, and I know better than to ask. But he never makes me feel unsafe, and I never throw guilt trips at him. Well, not in the last five years or so. When I was younger, I would go full tantrum any time he tried to leave me with my grandparents or one of the aunts. But once we moved to North Carolina, we made a deal: he would trust me to be by myself for small amounts of time, and I would trust him to always return in one piece.

Seems to be working out so far.

"I'll miss you," he murmurs before pulling away, flashing me his famous smile before he changes his expression to the serious, guarded gentleman that he shows to everyone else in the world. That's the brief, professional glance he offers Mona before he retreats into the house.

When he is safely away, Mona fans herself extravagantly, rolling her eyes and pretending to swoon.

"What a man!" she declares, affecting the Southern Belle accent that really grates on my nerves. "Why, is it me or is the sun just blazing today? I feel... absolutely twitterpated!"

I open the screen door and gesture that she follow me inside. "Yeah, yeah, get a grip," I mutter.

Theatrically, she refuses to get a grip and sashays into the small, wood-paneled den still fanning herself with her hand.

"No... I really feel I am past the point where I can turn back! Libby... oh, Liberty Jane, the room is going dark!"

"That's because we just got inside," I grumble, barely playing along with her

spontaneous drama.

Like a sheepdog, I shuffle behind her, gently nudging her toward the front door. Every few seconds, she turns around to make sure that I am still annoyed. It seems to give her pleasure. When I finally get her all the way to the foyer, she changes her demeanor instantly, giving me a wrinkled-nose smile and innocent shrug.

“Okay, well if you will not let me dress you, I will send you a list of outfits I would deem acceptable, okay? Pick you up at eight thirty?”

A little voice chirps somewhere deep inside my brain, suggesting that maybe this is a more dangerous idea than Mona is really admitting. Krazy Mart is safe. Krazy Mart is boring.

But Krazy Mart is also pretty cheap.

“Okay, eight thirty,” I finally agree, pasting a thin smile on my face. “And you can send me that list of outfits. But I’m not making any promises.”

She raises a fist of triumph. “Yes!” she announces, before striding out the front door and jogging across the small front lawn that separates our driveways.

It’s nice to give her a little bit of joy, and I’m sure it’s going to be a good time. Absolutely sure. What could go wrong?

Chapter 3

Libby

Once my dad is on the road for a solid thirty minutes, I feel pretty confident that he isn’t coming back and can take some time to get ready. After a brief shower, I douse

my skin in vitamin E, hoping to counteract whatever damage the sun just did to it.

Padding shamelessly naked around our small but efficient house, I fix myself a snack and pin up my hair into curlers while I consider what to wear.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Mona seems to have a never-ending assortment of bodycon dresses and very tall high heels. That is basically her work uniform. I don't really have anything like that, but I do have a couple of simple dresses. Maybe one of those will work?

As I stand in front of the full-length mirror holding this pink frilly thing in front of me, I realize there is no way in hell this church dress is seeing the inside of a bar. Absolutely not. That just ain't right.

But I know I have to have something. I mean, this is my chance to cut loose, right? This is my opportunity. What do I want to wear? Surrounded by a roomful of strangers, what do I want them to think of me?

I have no idea.

But what I do have is Google. Okay... and Pornhub. Biting my lip, I stare at the screen of my laptop for a few seconds and then finally type in "lingerie models Sweeney nightclub" and hope to get a few video hits.

And... there they are. I guess everybody uploads videos about everything these days. There are clips from twenty seconds to several minutes, dark and taken from weird angles, but still, I get the gist.

Though the image is totally pixelated, I can hear the bass music thumping underneath the chatter of the crowd as the videographer moves through the bar, narrating the whole experience. He sounds pretty excited. I guess the event is pretty popular.

After a few seconds, the crowd parts, and a young woman in a purple, transparent

negligée floats by. She pauses to blow a kiss at the person who is holding the cell phone. The camera tips down to catch her Lucite heels, then slides back up to her fluffy blonde hairdo before she glides back out of frame.

Then the camera sweeps around, focusing on the grinning face of the person taking the video. I recognize him, though I have only ever seen him from far away. That's Ty, the club owner. He inherited Sweeney's from his uncle or something, and by all accounts he's doing his best to turn it into the sort of place his uncle would've been mortified about.

So, okay... I guess it really is what I thought it was. After clicking on a few more videos, I see the same thing. Guys acting like drunken primates, girls wandering around in their underwear looking like silent movie stars.

That's not too bad, is it? I mean, there really are bartenders and beer girls there too. It's just a little rambunctious. It's not the end of the world.

Actually, it sounds kind of... hot, really. Kind of dark, kind of forbidden, definitely different than the evening I would have had in store at the Krazy Mart.

But my stomach twists. Will I fit in there? I'm going to stick out like a sore thumb. I'm going to stick out like a sore, scabby-kneed tomboy, to be more precise.

I shift my weight and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror again. My tan lines mark out glowing white triangles on all the important bits, enveloped in golden skin. Really, not too bad. I mean, obj

ectively, I guess I look okay? Not like Mona. But also not like the adolescent that I always picture in my head.

Straightening, I put my hands on my hips and force myself to look right at myself.

“Liberty Jane,” I say out loud in a stern voice, “you look fine. Don’t be such a wimp. Hike up your panties and go play with the big girls.”

That little pep talk almost does it, but then I still feel a little shy. I know just what I need. Some inspiration. Just a bit. Just a little encouragement.

Opening a private tab on my browser, I search for the keywords that I know will bring up the video I like the best. It’s pretty naughty. In fact, I don’t think I would even tell Mona about it, but ever since the first time I saw it, it has been my hands-down favorite.

Slowly I settle into the chair, only barely acknowledging the cool vinyl on the backs of my thighs as the video flickers to life. I leave the volume on low, mostly out of habit. I like to hear a little something, at least. But I don’t want it blasting out full-throated groaning.

Even though I know what’s going to happen, I watch the tiny screen with rapt attention. Some brunette walks into what looks like a college dormitory. She is expecting to find her boyfriend, I suppose, but he is not alone. His high school best friend is there to visit. The best friend is wearing a baseball jersey. I guess the idea is that they were on the same baseball team. The boyfriend is not wearing a shirt.

When the girlfriend walks in, you can see it in her eyes immediately. She wants them both. There is no discussion. She doesn’t even ask. And the guys never even seem to negotiate between themselves. It’s just known, psychically or something. Easy as you like.

As soon as she takes that first step toward them, it is all understood. The events are set in motion, and there is no turning back.

She actually goes to the best friend first, which I thought was shocking the first time I

saw it. She doesn't even ask her boyfriend for permission. She walks right up to the best friend and kisses him, her mouth open, her long fingers kneading the back of his neck while he kisses her.

Immediately the boyfriend is behind her, biting her shoulders, pulling her flimsy tank top down to her waist. Her breasts overflow from his hands, bulging out between his splayed fingers. She arches her back, writhing between them, sandwiched immediately. Overwhelmed. Embraced.

Even though I have seen this video dozens of times, it still trips a switch inside me. My belly is flooded with warmth. My fingers drift up my thighs, instinctively finding that warm seam that so desperately needs to be touched.

Rocking against my fingers, I am careful not to touch myself too vigorously. I am still a little tender from the waxing, and every sensation is magnified a hundred times. I am lit up like a string of Christmas lights. I am vibrating, slippery and hot, holding myself back as my fingers tease my lips, trying to time myself to the best parts of the video.

Here it comes. They've all undressed and now kiss and wrestle with each other, slippery as seals, beautiful molded flesh twisting in a complicated choreography. It takes my breath away to watch them trying to balance and satisfy each other at the same time. Trying to negotiate how they take turns, to make sure everybody gets off a fair amount.

And here, the amazing apex. I spread my thighs, rocking forward so that my fingers are pinned underneath me. I can slide back and forth, varying the pressure as I ride myself, urging closer and closer to climax.

The woman feigns surprise as her boyfriend spreads her ass cheeks. He squirts out a generous handful of lube that slides down the tanned channel of her spine and streaks

around her dark entrance.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

At the same time, the best friend licks his fingers and scissors her lips open from the front. It's amazing. They're going to do it. She knows it. She wants it.

Dropping her head back so that her eyes half close, she seems to almost go limp between them like a ragdoll as they both breach her orifices at the same time. One in her ass, one in her pussy. Simultaneous and outrageous. Huge, throbbing, almost brutal.

I match my rocking to theirs, knowing just how long it takes for her to reach a shrieking, shattering orgasm. That's what I want. Right there.

And I find it. Yet it still blows me away. White lights fracture in front of my eyes, splintering and then raining down in front of me like fireworks glittering against the night sky before dropping back to the earth in spent ash.

After it's over, another video automatically plays, but I don't want to see it. I just close the laptop and let the images linger on the inside of my eyelids like burned-in negatives.

Maybe Mona is right. Maybe I am kind of freaky now. Maybe porn has ruined me. But nothing that feels this good can be 100 percent wrong.

Chapter 4

Cass

Scanning the email again, I let the relevant words jump out at me. Offer... Service...

New York... Promotion? Sort of.

If I am being honest, half of me knows this is the right thing to do. After all, it's not every day that your run-of-the-mill paratrooper gets a chance to rise to leadership like this. I mean, coordinating all of the National Guard in the Northeast? Ensuring border and coastal safety from Maine down to the Carolinas? It's amazing.

But the other half of me thinks that another tour of duty is the way to go. Or as many tours as it takes. It's not just the rush of flying by night into enemy territory, strapping up, then leaping out into the black night air, silently falling to the earth behind enemy lines. Executing the mission with deadly efficiency. Returning a hero, even if you can't tell anyone about it.

I mean, that's the real American dream, right?

But I know that in reality, that dream has an expiration date on it. Eventually anyone who is any good gets promoted to leadership. And I am very, very good. One of the best. It is sad that means getting grounded while the people who report to me still get to fly, still get to jump.

If I took the job in New York it would be domestic training missions instead of enemy combat, but at least I would still be jumping. I would still be doing some good a few thousand feet in the sky.

Growling to myself, I snap the laptop closed. I don't have to make this decision tonight. I don't have to make this decision for a week. I'm sure the answer will come to me. Retire gracefully and take a leadership position at the oldest military base in the country, or continue signing up for tours until they put me out to pasture like any other soldier?

That is the question.

But not for today.

Will appears in my doorway, blocking the whole damn thing. He stands with his forearms on the top of the door frame, flexing as he leans into the room.

“Can I help you with something?” I ask.

“I’m ready to go,” he informs me. “It’s stuffy in here. Let’s go get a beer.”

Nodding, I realize that’s probably the best plan for the evening. It’s Friday, it’s hot, and staring at emails is not going to magically create an answer for me.

“Yeah, all right,” I shrug, standing. Glancing in the mirror, I seem to be decently dressed. Jeans. Clean T-shirt. Clean shave. Just got my haircut this week.

“Burgers?” Will asks.

He looks me up and down as though he is also glancing in the mirror. Since we are twins, sometimes it feels like looking at my own reflection. But we’re not exactly the same. I like action. Will likes plans. I like jumping. Will likes mapping out the strategy with little circles and triangles to indicate the different players in the op.

After high school, we both did a couple of years of college. Our dad wanted us to go right into the military, but our mother thought more schooling would make us better soldiers, in a way. More worldly. She said that education certainly couldn’t hurt a soldier.

But after two years, we had both had enough. The urge to serve was just too strong. Besides, growing up in North Carolina, you’re constantly surrounded by the most elite of armed forces. Paratroopers. Eighty-second Airborne. Special Forces. They say that when the president picks up the red phone, the phone rings at Fort Bragg. And as

far as I know, that is true. If it ever came to that, our nation would be in good hands.

Will got a two-year degree without even trying. It seemed like just showing up was enough for them to give him anything he wanted. That seemed to satisfy our mother, and she allowed us to enlist even though I hadn't gotten as far as Will did.

And then he even kept going. Now he has a bachelors degree in American history. He's a regular brainiac, practically a scholar of military strategy.

I am a better shot, though. Just saying.

So, despite being a man of few words, Will is actually the brains of this operation. He even outranks me, but if he is smart he doesn't bring that up too often.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

I would call him a bastard, but since we are twins that would make me...

“Burgers sound good. I could use a beer.”

As I walk forward, Will pivots out of the doorway. We are careful not to bump into each other too often in this tiny townhouse. I am glad we got housing close to the base, but it is barely bigger than the footlockers we had in the barracks during basic training. For two big guys, it takes a lot of mental energy to stay out of each other's way.

“Yeah, good,” Will says distractedly. “Let's get out of here.”

The email flashes through my mind again. I push it away, but realize that it would be difficult to escape thinking about it so close to government land.

“Hey, how about we go off-base?” I suggest innocently.

Will pivots toward me again, scowling.

“The NCO club has jalapeno poppers.”

“Every place has jalapeno poppers,” I scoff. “I'm just saying that it's nice to get out, right? Live among the free peoples? What, are you afraid they are going to offer you a college professorship or something?”

Will rolls his eyes.

“No, man, I’m committed to the cause. You know that. Five minutes.”

He walks away before I can catch his eye. This is a conversation we have had many times. Will doesn’t really love the military

the way I love the military. Like I said, he’s the brains. He would rather be writing books or some kind of bullshit like that than actually living the military life. Not that he would ever admit it. But I know my brother. He has a strong sense of duty, but would probably rather be performing that duty behind a desk if he could.

Still, I’m glad I won the argument. I don’t want to risk running into anybody here who might ask about the email. Not that anybody would. I mean, chances are slim. With 250 square miles of military base around here, and all of the secrets operations going on at any time, nobody really asks a lot of personal questions. We all know better. You never know when you’re going to run into somebody who is legitimately working on a top-secret project of national security. That thing where people joke about how “I could tell you, but then I would have to kill you?” Not really a joke around here.

Since it is Friday night, I know just the place. Will is going to hate it, or at least that’s what he will try to say. Secretly, he’s going to love it. I will make sure of it.

“Hey, quick,” I call out, slamming two shot glasses on the counter and filling them with Patron.

Will raises an eyebrow at me. “Seriously? Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Nah, I know what a lightweight you are.” I shrug innocently as I shoot back the ounce of tequila.

I can feel it seeping through my chest, warm and sharp. Feels good. Feels really good.

Will swallows his without complaint, and I fill the glasses up again without saying anything. He doesn't even remark on it, just knocks it back and then rinses out his shot glass in the sink.

"That's enough, let's get going."

Is it enough? I'm not sure. I take another quick shot for good measure, just in case. I'm a big guy.

All the towns around the base seem to still be half military. We would have to go practically to the state line to experience real civilian life. But at least we can get a taste of it here.

And you can tell who is active duty and who is civilian. People either have that look of predator or prey about them. Not in a bad way... it's just that there are sheep, and there are sheepdogs. And then there are wolves. The sheep don't really know they are sheep. It's our job to know they are sheep, and keep them safe in their happy little sheep lives.

But every once in a while, there are people who seem to kind of straddle the fence. Sometimes I will look at a guy and it takes a half a second to figure it out: is he really a soldier, or just some hard-on who wants to fight? The difference is courage. That's how you can really tell.

Like this guy Ty. I know what he is. Everybody can see exactly what he is.

Our boot heels crunch on the gravel as we cross the parking lot. Ty is sitting next to the door outside, slumped on a barstool while he stares at his phone. When he notices our approach, he stands up, heels shoulder-width apart. I don't know if he is doing it on purpose, but he is trying to front like he has some kind of military training. Like he's ready to go.

Next to me, I feel Will bristle slightly. He senses the challenge too. He may be the brains of the operation, but he is still a fucking giant. He could beat down Ty without breaking a sweat.

“Who is this guy?” Will asks under his breath.

Without breaking stride, I answer, “Club owner. Thinks he is tough. He’s nobody.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Ty breaks into a crooked, snaggletooth smile as soon as we are under the awning. It is a smile that could easily turn into a deal, if we were the kind of people who were here to make a deal. It is a smile that says he is offering more than just entry into his bar, if we happened to be looking for more.

We aren't looking for more. I hope he doesn't try offering any of the drugs or girls or gambling that he thinks he is kingpinning to Will. That would make for a very rough evening. Will doesn't appreciate that kind of stuff at all.

"Evening, gentlemen," Ty drawls with a slippery Southern accent.

I pull a twenty out of my pocket and hand it to him. He glances down with a slight scowl of disappointment. Apparently he was looking for more.

"Well, okay, go right in," he smiles, gesturing toward the door. Lights pulse from behind the darkened glass.

Before Will can really get a bead on that guy, I shepherd him toward the door. Once we're safely inside, he gives me a sideways look and scowl to let me know that it's too late. He figured out what kind of lowlife Ty is.

"Nice place you brought me to," he mutters sarcastically. "You come here often? You got some kind of secret life I don't know about?"

Peering through the darkness and inconvenient strobe lights, I locate a table and nudge Will toward it.

“Just sit down,” I suggest tensely. “Think of it as dinner and a show, okay? I’m just hungry. Aren’t you hungry? Let’s get some beers and try to have a good time.”

When I finally get him settled, I watch him look around the room out of the corner of my eye. He will find a way to have a good time, I know it. All I need to do is get him to relax a little bit and we can maybe live in the moment for once.

“Well, hello, boys,” the woman says, wiping down the middle tabletop with a bar rag and flipping out a napkin and pen to take our order. “Can I get you something to drink? You thirsty?”

“Couple of shots of Patron,” I answer right away. “And a couple of Budweisers... Basket of poppers and fried pickles... Will? You want something too?”

Will scowls and shakes his head, turning away. He is not amused by my little joke about ordering half the menu for myself.

“Honey?” the waitress insists, leaning toward him and dragging her fingers along the outside of his arm.

It is a Southern thing, the way women are affectionate, yet conniving. She’s trying to get him to engage. Using those charms God gave her.

And it works. I’m sure he doesn’t want it to, but I can see him relax just a little bit under the touch of her fingers. He’s a big scary guy, but he’s just a guy after all.

“Okay, yeah,” he finally sighs. “Cheeseburger, medium rare. Bacon and mushrooms.”

“That sounds delicious,” she coos, leaving his arm with a brief pat and scribbling a note on her stack of napkins. “I’ll be right back with those drinks.”

She gives us each a wink, shaking her light brown curls over her shoulders just because she can. She's curvy and... sturdy is the word I would use. Not a lightweight. She struts away, lithe as a bobcat.

"See? I knew you were gonna love this place," I smile, trying to get him to loosen up a bit. "You just gotta give it a chance. Trust me. It gets better."

"What is that supposed to mean? It gets better? Does it get cleaner or something?"

"It's not so bad, is it?" I ask, glancing around.

He's got a point, I guess. I am sure the lights are low for a reason. It's not a total dive, though, and we have definitely been in worse places. He's just tense.

"I don't know," he grumbles. "I guess it's not that terrible. Local culture and whatnot."

"That's the spirit," I smile.

Will flexes his shoulders, then relaxes.

"Are the burgers any good?"

"Yeah, really good."

"Can we get them to go?"

"Oh, ha, funny. No... I mean, maybe, but I brought you here for a reason. This place is okay. Trust me. The show should start any minute."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Will stiffens, looking around. “What show? What are you talking about? You didn’t say anything about a...”

But he is cut off immediately by the sound of a voice coming out over the PA system. A smoke machine blasts in the corner, sending a cold fog across the floor. Lasers shoot over the ceiling. It’s kind of ridiculous, but also kind of fun.

“Good evening, everybody! Welcome to Sweeney’s Friday night!” comes a voice that I instantly recognize as Ty’s.

It puts a sour taste in my mouth, but I will try to ignore that.

“Are you guys ready

to have a good time?”

A couple of hoots ring out from the back of the room and there is a smattering of clapping from over by the pool tables.

“I said, are you guys ready to have a good time? It’s Friday night, assholes! Let me hear some noise!”

Everybody but Will and I get in on the action, offering up a cheer, a yell, a whistle.

“That’s more like it! All right... you know the rules. Hands to yourself, unless she is asking for it! Singles are appreciated, you cheap bastards, but tens and twenties are better! These ladies work for a living. Let’s show them some hospitality!”

“Hold on, what is this?” I hear Will mutter.

But it’s too late. The show has started. I know he’s going to love it.

Three women walk out from the dark hallway at the back of the room, probably from the ladies’ room. The first two offer practiced, small-town beauty-queen smiles as they stride through the tables and barstools, moving their hips to the slow country jam that pulses through the speakers.

Big hair and glossy lips, they seem to be scoping out territory, trying to figure out where to best position themselves for tips. The first one is in a cute little nightgown that comes down just below her hips. I’m sure she is wearing panties, but I can’t see them from here. Her long legs end in bright pink slipper heels that clack against the floor as she walks past.

“Strippers?” Will asks quietly. “How is this even...”

“Oh, we’re not strippers!” the woman says suddenly, spinning around to reverse course and look him right in the eye. She shrugs one shoulder so that the strap of her nightgown slips down. I can see Will glance at the motion, then force himself to look back up at her eyes. Such a gentleman.

“This is a lingerie show, honey,” she purrs, just audible over the music. “Haven’t you ever been to a lingerie show?”

He glances at me, alarmed and half pissed. She senses his discomfort and smiles at me hopefully, giving our table one last chance. Then she seems to figure out she is not going to be making any money here, and shrugs sweetly as she abandons us.

“Well, you boys have a nice night. Just holler if you need anything, okay?”

As she sways to the next table, she leaves a cloud of sweet perfume in her wake. A dark-haired busboy delivers baskets of food and drinks while Will tries to figure out what he's going to say next.

“Cass, did you know about this?”

I pop a fried pickle into my mouth, trying not to wince as the hot oil sears my tongue.

“Did I know about the burgers? Hell, yes. They're great.”

“No... I mean, did you know about the—”

His voice trails off. I wait for a half a second and then follow his eyeline to where it ends. At the far end of the room, there is something that seems like it couldn't quite be real. Something that seems framed up, out of place. But significant. Something... Someone.

Part of our military training is learning to separate intuition from noise. We learn to appreciate that sometimes your body understands a situation first, and it takes your brain a second to catch up. You have to know the signs: you feel alert or edgy. You feel like an animal. Your body is smart. It knows things quickly. Brains are slow.

Right now, we both know the same thing. That blonde at the end of the room. The one standing with her shoulders flexed, wearing only a pale pink set of bra and panties. The one whose lean, muscled frame practically vibrates with tension, her eyes darting nervously around the room...

That's the one. That's our girl.

Chapter 5

Libby

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Just before we walk into Sweeney's, Mona grabs my wrist and stops me. I practically fall off the baby blue stilettos she forced me to wear. No joke. These things are not made for walking.

"Okay, just follow my lead, all right?" she hisses through her teeth. "Whatever I say, just agree like you know what you are doing. Play along, and everything will be all right."

I twist my shoulders in the T-shirt she let me wear, after some heated discussions about my taste in clothes. I get it: she does not approve. She doesn't think a "lady" dresses in jeans and a T-shirt on a Friday night, or something like that. Friday nights are for trawling for men, apparently.

I knew that going in, and took care in selecting my outfit. Figuring that we could reach a compromise, I really did try for "sexy" in my own way.

In my mind, I figured that the Rolling Stones were still pretty sexy, but when I got to her house she disagreed. She practically ripped my jeans off me, and when I objected, she demanded that I make some immediate alterations. As in, with scissors.

What started out as a simple blue jeans and vintage T-shirt operation turned into tattered, torn pants that I think are showing most of my ass, and a T-shirt that got magically turned into a halter with my bra straps hanging out for the world to see.

I mean, it does still say Rolling Stones on it, but only because Mona is exceptionally crafty. She kept the logo and turned the rest of it into strings that she tied behind my back and over my shoulders.

I feel naked. Thank God for underwear.

“Mona, maybe this isn’t such a great idea,” I mutter back, wobbling on the heels.

I wish I still had my Chucks on. I would be so much more comfortable than I am in heels. And I could run away, which would have been a nice option.

“You’re already here, Libby,” she reminds me sternly. “You’re already doing it. Now, come on.”

I don’t have much choice but to follow her as she drags me by the wrist across the parking lot. If I try to get away, I am more than likely to sprain my ankle or something.

Besides, I tell myself, two hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars. Just remember that.

A man slides off his barstool next to the front door as we approach. I recognize his stringy hair and scarecrow frame from the video. He looks me over with no shame. I can practically feel his eyes sliding from my toes, through all the holes in my jeans, circling my navel, and inspecting my tits before he meets my eyes.

His tongue rolls around his mouth, pushing out his cheeks and lips like he’s got a mouthful of octopus tentacles or something. When he smiles, I notice he’s missing teeth here and there, just a few so that the remainder are slanted at weird angles, spaced out too much. Brown at the edges.

“What did you bring me, Mona?” he asks slyly. “Who is this angel?”

“You just keep your eyes to yourself, Ty,” Mona snaps, positioning herself between me and him so that he can’t get too close.

I stifle a shiver as he bites his lower lip suggestively. What is it with this kind of guy? Am I supposed to be impressed just because he exists? Just because he is gracing me with his attention?

“I think I will call you Angel,” he purrs.

“Why don’t you just call her Tammy, which is her name!” Mona barks.

She flicks out an ID from the front pocket of her ginormous purse, waving it under his eyeline briefly even though he isn’t paying attention. Then she slides it back into her purse and starts pulling me toward the door again. I hobble helplessly behind her.

“She’s going to be our beer girl tonight, Ty,” Mona announces.

“Wait, no, the hell she is,” Ty scoffs. “I don’t need a bar girl. I am not hiring.”

I glance down at Mona uncertainly, and that hesitation is just enough for Ty to get his bearings and mentally reload.

“Mona, no shit. I’m not hiring. I’m not paying her. If you want your friend here, she can sit at the bar and keep you company. That’s it.”

Mona pivots to face him, knuckling her hip angrily. The glitter in her hair shimmers ridiculously in the sodium lights, like she is a starlet in the wrong movie. She should have been in the show with all the Broadway and famous people. Instead we seem to be in a reality TV production about mismanaged dental care.

They face off silently. Her left eyebrow is raised so high she looks like a comic book character. I can tell she is ready to throw down, though, no matter what he says. We are doing this.

“Ty, I am this close to walking out of this place forever. Tammy is here to help me. You are going to pay her, you understand me? Or you are going to be doing the show tonight yourself, how about that!”

He rolls his eyes, sucking his teeth as he postures, pretending like he is actually involved in a negotiation. He thinks he’s got the upper hand, so he just stares at me again, not even concealing what he is thinking.

“Hey, I always have a job for a pretty lady,” he shrugs. “But I’m not letting her in the bar. Why don’t you leave her here with me? I’m sure I can find something... productive for her to be doing. I always have a use for girls like you.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Mona leans backward subtly, pushing me with her shoulder toward the door.

“She’s coming in here with me, or I quit!” she announces loudly.

Before he can say anything, she’s got me through the door and into the dark, smelly interior of the bar. In a hurry, she tugs me back toward the kitchen and bathroom area. I try to keep up, practically stumbling over the legs of barstools as my eyes slowly adjust.

“Mona, just let me go home! I didn’t even really want to be here!”

Flinging open the door to the kitchen, she guides me through stainless-steel countertops and grills. The lone cook gives me a startled glance, then turns back to the sad burgers frying among the caramelized onions.

Overhead fluorescent lights flicker as she drags me to a small cubby at the back. Cigarette smoke drifts in through the six-inch opening at the back door, which is propped open with a cinderblock. Mona dumps her handbag on a pile of handbags in the corner underneath a stained commercial sink.

“Just leave your stuff there,” she huffs. “Nobody will bother it.”

“Mona, are you listening to me? I would rather just walk home, okay? He doesn’t want me here, and I can still make it to Krazy Mart for a shift.”

“What are you talking about?” she sniffs dismissively. “You’re here, Libby. You’re hired. Just leave your bag here and let’s get on the floor so I can show you what’s up

and get you started.”

Confused, I drop my bag on the

pile like she told me.

“What are you talking about? He said he wouldn’t hire me. You heard him.”

“Oh, fuck that guy,” she rolls her eyes. “Ty says a lot of things he doesn’t mean. He is so high, he probably doesn’t even remember what just happened. You can’t believe a word he says.”

“Wait, what? He’s high? Then why were we... I don’t get it!”

She shrugs, scratching the back of her arm absentmindedly as she squints at a plastic cup full of lip glosses in various shades. After a moment, I realize that this area of the kitchen seems to almost be like a dressing room. There are dusty pots of makeup and mascara tubes with dried black globs of goo caking the sides.

That cannot be sanitary, is what I am thinking.

“There is nothing for you to get,” she sniffs, holding out a purple tube of lip gloss to me. “Put this on. I think this shade will look good with your hair.”

I take the lip gloss in my fingertips, noting how sticky the scuffed fake metal cap is.

“You want me to put this on my face? On my actual lips?”

“Jesus, it’s not poison, Libby! It’s lip gloss! They put stuff in it to make it... you know. Antibacterial and stuff.”

“Yeah, they definitely do not do that.”

Turning to face me fully, she cocks her head to the side and raises her eyebrows accusingly. I realize that I am at the very outer edge of her patience.

“Okay, Liberty Jane, I am just trying to help you, all right? You’re here, you’re going to serve beer, and I will make sure that Ty keeps his filthy paws off you so that you can earn some money for your future, got it?”

“Um, yeah, okay,” I mutter, figuring that she’s not really up for a solid argument right now.

“That’s more like it!” she snaps. “You know, a little gratitude wouldn’t hurt you every once in a while!”

“Yeah, okay,” I wince, wondering why she is being so mean all of a sudden.

She raises her eyebrows at me imperiously. Then pauses. Then waits.

“I mean... thank you?” I offer meekly.

Her shoulders finally relax and she takes a deep breath. “There. That’s all I wanted,” she grumbles. “And you’re welcome. Now, let’s get you out there and do some quick training. It’s not brain surgery or anything. I am sure you can handle it.”

It’s only been a few minutes, but apparently this is the time of night when the crowd really starts to roll in. The bar is darker, but now there is some kind of light show going on. The music is turned up. I keep an eye on Mona’s sultry back as she expertly navigates through tables, chairs, and customers. She doesn’t pay any attention to them, but they all turn as she walks by, looking her over with unhidden delight. It looks like everybody here already knows her.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Under a neon sign for Miller beer with a NASCAR team, there is a giant, waist-high tub of ice. The dark glass necks of beer bottles poke out among the glittering cubes, looking sort of like a sea of messages in bottles, floating.

She holds her hands out like a game show hostess. “All right, this is your station, beer girl.”

“Yeah, this looks like the place,” I agree, finally feeling like I am getting my bearings.

“So, you have your Budweiser, Bud Light, Miller, Miller Light, Coors Light, and PBR over here. Then you got your twenty-ounce cans over here. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“When the bar gets busy, people will come over and ask you for whatever. If they ask for a shot or a mixed drink, you gotta send them to me. But if it is just beer, bottles are five bucks, cans are seven.”

“Okay. Got it.”

“There is a tip jar, but you’ll end up with a lot in your pockets too. That apron is gonna come in real handy.”

“Okay, understood,” I nod.

“Now, you stand over there,” she points, stepping aside.

Obediently I position myself behind the giant tub and lean on it. She takes a step back and squints at me, tipping her head to the side before finally breaking into a smile.

“You look good... Tammy!”

I smile back, shrugging innocently as I survey my new bounty of icy beers.

“The busboy will keep you stocked with ice and fresh bottles. So that’s it! Any questions?”

Shaking my head, I remind myself that it’s two hundred dollars. Two hundred easy dollars. And we are already underway. My dad always says there’s no point in changing horses midstream.

No problem. I can handle this horse.

“And what are you going to do?” I ask her as she begins to lean away.

She gestures over her shoulder. “Oh, I will be behind the bar. You know. Just the usual stuff. Serving up burgers and fries. Shots and shots and shots. Friday night at Sweeney’s. You know.”

I smile blandly.

She looks around for a few more seconds then finally shakes her head in theatrical frustration.

“Okay, there is one more thing,” she finally admits.

“One more thing?” I repeat sweetly. “Like what? What kind of thing?”

She rolls her eyes. “Stop playing so innocent,” she sniffs. “You have probably heard about the lingerie show, right? It’s really not a big deal. Everybody acts like it is a big deal but it is not a big deal.”

“Okay... Want to fill me in?”

She looks around distractedly. “Just about nine o’clock, the other bartenders and I just kind of circle the bar. We walk around. Guys tip us. The music gets really loud. Not a big deal.”

“Oh, you just circle the bar? Like this? Just walking around? For tips?”

She narrows her eyes at me. I smile back.

“Is this where the lingerie part comes in?” I continue, determined to drag the information out of her even if she doesn’t really want to tell me.

“Yeah, pretty much,” she admits.

“You circle the bar... in your underwear?”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Rolling her eyes, she looks all around at everything except for me. I know she doesn't want me to, but I start laughing. And once I start, it just gets funnier and funnier. She leans toward me, waving her hand in my face to get me to shut up.

“Hey! What are you doing? People are staring!”

“Mona, that's funny!”

She shakes her head in exaggerated disgust. “Whatever. It's just a job. You should see the other things that people have to do when they work for Ty.”

“Wait... like what?”

Her mouth pops open in surprise, as though she said too much. Then she presses her lips tightly together. “You know what? Never mind. Just suffice it to say you are opening beers. That's it. When we get to the lingerie show, try to enjoy yourself, okay? I know how you like to watch, after all.”

I wiggle my eyebrows suggestively, doing my best impression of Ty as I look her up and down like she is a pork chop.

“Oh, baby... I am definitely going to enjoy myself!”

She opens her mouth in outrage and picks up an ice cube from the bin, flinging it at me.

“All right, smarty-pants! You are on your own!”

“Wait, no, I’m just kidding!” I call out as she walks away. “Mona, come back!”

But it is too late. As she turns her back to me, she raises one fist and extends one, single, middle finger in my direction. I know she is kidding, but I guess that’s the end of my training.

Two hundred dollars, I tell myself again as I survey the dark room and the people in it. Some look like military, most look like townies. They have the expectant attitudes of people who are definitely here for the show. I kind of half knew what Mona was going to say, but hearing her say it took me a little bit by surprise. I thought I was supposed to be the freak?

Well, I guess tonight will be entertaining. I’m glad I’m not on the menu.

Chapter 6

Libby

The first twenty minutes are a little bit rocky, I have to admit, but after that I seem to get the hang of it. The trick is to know where all the beers are. Miller Lite

is in this corner, and Bud Light is in this corner. Also, the back of the bottle opener is useful for opening up those big cans. Good to know, because I only have ten fingernails.

The guys hand me cash with a smile, sort of hopeful and open, like maybe buying a beer from me also gets them some conversation. I am polite and eager to move onto the next customer though, so that is just not going to work out no matter how hopeful they are.

After all, it seems like a dollar a beer is the standard amount of a tip. And if these

guys drink five beers each... Maybe forty different guys...

Two hundred dollars is a definite possibility! I guess Mona wasn't just shining me on after all!

And, yeah, I guess being a blonde gets me a little bit of a training bonus. Or being female does, anyway. Even the few times that I had to dig around in the ice with my bare hands, trying to find the exact combination of beverages, nobody seemed to get very impatient. It is still early, though. I suppose once they really get to drinking, their attitudes might get less friendly.

Or more friendly. Which is its own kind of situation.

The music isn't so bad. I actually find myself getting into it a little bit. I am more of an indie rock kind of gal, but I appreciate the lovelorn poetry of a good country song as much as anybody. I'm not entirely sure any of these country songwriting billionaires have ever actually ridden in a pickup truck or been on a dusty road, but maybe a few have. By that standard, I am 100 percent more country than they are, even if I grew up in Seattle. They're catchy, at any rate. I have to give them that.

And moving really helps out with these shoes. I have wished at least a thousand times that Mona had let me keep my sneakers on. I can feel the heel scraping the skin off my foot. Make that one thousand and one.

"Music is good, huh?" comes an oily voice.

I flinch automatically, then try to cover by reaching into the ice and rearranging some of the bottles. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to meet Ty's picket fence smile.

"Yeah... I'm kind of getting to like it," I answer truthfully.

He looks me up and down again, and I can almost feel his eyes circling the outline of my nipples underneath my T-shirt halter.

“Well, you sure are doing a good job,” he grins. “Looks like you’re a natural.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Oh, you think so?” I smile, pleased at this little bit of encouragement.

“Yeah, girl,” he murmurs, leaning in close. “Keep it up and I can have all kinds of work for you. Didn’t Mona tell you?”

“Oh!” I murmur, flinching back.

I definitely didn’t see that coming. What is wrong with me? How did I fall for that?

But he doesn’t seem to mind that I am visibly trying to get away from him. He presses in even closer. I can smell the whiskey on his breath.

“We just have to find the right position for you, you know what I mean? You got any other skills that I should know about?”

I shake my head tightly. I’m sure there are words that I could say, but they don’t want to come out.

“Tammy?” he persists.

I glance at him blankly before remembering that he thinks my name is Tammy. Oh yeah. Right.

“I think this is all I can handle,” I mutter quickly.

My eyes search the bar frantically. Where the hell is Mona?

“Oh, you are just being modest,” he continues, his voice snaking into my ear hole. “You don’t gotta be shy with me. We are like a family here. Hasn’t Mona told you that?”

My hands are starting to twitch from the cold, and I realize that I keep nervously clutching ice cubes.

“Well we are,” he insists. “Mona is like a daughter to me, you know what I’m saying? I taught her everything she knows. You’ll see. Are you looking forward to the show?”

I glance at him, blinking. I really don’t know what to say. What would my dad tell me to do? Probably I should retreat. And if I can’t retreat, crack him in the jaw with my elbow.

“Yeah, you are,” he continues, leaning in even closer. He’s backing me in the into the corner, making it half impossible for me to get away.

“Ty!” Mona barks, appearing suddenly on the other end of the beer cooler.

She glares at Ty threateningly until he stands up straight and takes a half step away from me.

“Can’t you see that you are making her uncomfortable?” Mona continues, stabbing the air with her lacquered fingernail. “Jesus! Give that girl some room, why don’t you?”

Ty sucks his teeth and shrugs, shuffling a few steps away and pouting the whole time.

“We are just getting to know each other, Mona. Don’t be jealous, girl. Christ.”

“As if!” she huffs. “Yolanda is asking for you. Why don’t you go see what she wants?”

He narrows his eyes at her. “Yolanda? Are you shitting me?”

Mona shrugs. “You better go see what she wants.”

I am not sure what just happened, but he actually does go away. He is so skinny that his narrow, light-wash jeans practically hang off his hips. He looks like a carnie. Or a meth head. Not what I always assumed a business owner looks like, anyway.

“Oh wow, thank you,” I breathe. “I was looking for you! He is so weird!”

“He can’t do anything to you,” she shrugs.

I make a mental note that I didn’t say he could do anything to me. It is sort of weird that she would just bring that up out of the blue.

“Well, I didn’t say he could do anything to me,” I sass back. “I was just saying he is weird and kind of in my personal space. What’s up with you? Are you okay?”

She is not looking at me, so I can’t really tell, but then she suddenly snaps her attention back to me and I see her cheeks are flushed. She leans toward me conspiratorially.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“You see him? Over there?”

I follow her gesture and scan the bar. There are an assortment of guys sitting there, most with their chins tilted up toward the TV and the assortment of sports that are being played right now. There are a couple of guys in shorts and flip-flops. A couple in T-shirts and camouflage pants.

“Do I see who? Where?”

She swallows, hard.

“Carson is here,” she whispers, leaning even closer.

Her eyes are wide with excitement, and I can practically see her pulse in her throat. Her cleavage heaves out of the low-cut V of her skintight dress.

“Carson? Are you serious? Which one is he?”

As soon as I say the words, I realize who he must be. At the far end of the bar, a man sits astride a barstool, backward so his legs jut out. He is half in shadow. Piercing gaze. A jaw so square you could slice paper against it. Shoulders the width of the door.

Special Forces. I’m almost sure of it. I’ve seen that look before.

“Oh... Wow!” Is all I can get out.

Mostly what I am thinking is, Carson is a real person?

“I know, right?” she answers excitedly.

“I didn’t even know he was around. Didn’t you just tell me he was out of town for a couple of weeks? So you didn’t have to shave your pubes into a heart or rhombus or whatever?”

“I know!” she squeaks, and it is clear she is barely listening to me. “I can’t believe it either! So...this is great, right?”

I smile supportively. “Yeah! Totally great! You must be so excited!”

Mona has been talking about Carson for as long as I have known her. In fact, she talked about him so much that at first I was convinced he didn’t exist. He sounds like a fantasy some adolescent girl makes up, not like a real person. Mysterious missions. A man of few words with a secret life. He can’t talk about his past or his future. The sort who arrives suddenly and sweeps her off her feet for a few breathless days, then disappears again with barely a word.

That’s not totally weird around here, with all of the military shenanigans going on. But until this moment, I was not 100 percent sure that he was anything more than a daydream.

“You didn’t know he was coming?”

She fans herself with her hand. Tiny tendrils of hair fluff out around her face, which is so red I can see it, even in the half-light.

“No! I’m totally shocked! Like... totally shocked!”

“That’s so great!” I say, because I am an awesome friend.

She gives me a scared, strained smile. “So, hey, can I ask you a favor?”

“Sure,” I shrug, handing off a couple of Bud Lights to a townie with a long ponytail.

That’s another two dollars for me in the apron. Ka-ching.

“Seriously? Oh, you are amazing.”

I shake my head. I do not understand.

She shrugs her shoulders almost to her ears. “See? The thing is? Carson wants to get out of here. Normally I would be stuck, you know? Like with nobody to cover my shift?”

“Okay?”

She claps her hands. “So you’ll do it! That is amazing!”

I raise my palms. Wait.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Hold on, what are you talking about? What is amazing?”

“That you will cover for me!” she squeals. “You are the best! I knew I brought you here for a reason!”

“Wait, Mona! I can’t do that!” I object immediately. Now it is all making sense. She wants me to cover for her so she can leave with Carson. So she can go do whatever with Carson, while I am stuck here.

“But you just said you would!” she pleads.

“No! I mean... I was just being nice. I don’t know how to do that! I’ve never been a bartender before. I don’t know how! And I don’t feel comfortable trying it out this way, with Ty being all creepy and stuff. I wish I could, Mona, but I just can’t.”

She grimaces and wriggles her nose. “Actually... I don’t need you to bartend, though. Like, if that’s the problem, you don’t have to do that.”

“What? I’m confused. So what are you asking me?”

She shifts uncertainly from side to side, tapping her fingernails against the plastic of the beer cooler. Another country song comes up, louder than the last one. I have to lean in to ev

en hear what she is trying to say.

“What was that? I can’t hear you!”

She rolls her eyes in frustration. “I said I need you to do the modeling, Libby. You don’t have to tend bar.”

Even though the bar is super loud, I feel like it falls almost completely silent.

“Hold on. Just wait a second,” I start.

She just stares at me as though we have some kind of psychic connection, which we do not.

“Mona? Explain it to me like I am twelve years old, okay? What is it that you need me to do?”

She stretches a little bit back and forth, clearly uncomfortable.

“You know how you picked out that nice bra and panty set tonight?” she begins again.

I just nod.

“Okay, so you are all set!” she explains, yet does not explain anything. “And you did shave all your nethers. And you did tan everything else. And of course you are gorgeous just the way that God made you...”

“Mona! Just spit it out!”

I am starting to catch on, but by golly, I want to hear her say the words out loud.

“The lingerie show!” she finally blurts out. “I need you to cover for me for the lingerie show. Okay? I don’t know why you want me to say it! You already know what I am going to ask!”

“No way!”

“Oh, come on!” she bawls. “It is no big deal! It’s just underwear! That’s it! All you have to do is strip down to your skivvies and walk around the bar real slow. The guys are going to give you a couple dollars here and there. You will probably make an extra hundred bucks!”

“Mona, if my father knew that you were trying to turn me into a stripper, he would find a way to have you used for target practice!”

Her expression darkens. “You know that is not funny.”

“Exactly!”

“But he’s here!” she whimpers, twisting around to stare at Carson who is now looking directly at us.

He really is handsome, and she’s practically vibrating with desperation.

“Besides, your dad doesn’t know where you are. And nobody here knows who you are! You know you’re kind of a freak. Isn’t it just a little bit exciting?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Mona, no.”

She turns back toward me and huffs, then narrows her eyes. “Come on. Be honest,” she insists. “It is exciting. I know it is, because I do it. It’s not like gross or anything. It’s just attention. It’s just compliments and money. You might like it!”

I look around the bar, trying to imagine walking around in just this bra and panty set I just bought. Oh my God, and these heels. Really? Is she serious?

“Come on... You’re gorgeous. It’ll be just like one of your porn fantasies, only in real life. As a matter of fact, pretend that is what it is! Act out one of your favorites, you know what I mean? Make it your own!”

I roll my eyes at her, though I have to admit instantly I am thinking of a video montage of my favorite scenes. I mean, she does have a point. This is kind of like a stage, away from my real life, kind of anonymous. Fake name and everything?

“And then what? Ty is going to try to hire me? Lock me up in the back or something?”

“I don’t think he has any chains in the back,” she mutters.

“Wait, what? I was just kidding about that.”

“Oh, I was just kidding too! You don’t have to worry about Ty. I won’t be gone all night. I’ll be back before closing time! Maybe even just a couple of hours!”

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I try to tell myself that there are a million reasons this is a bad idea. My father. Shame and humiliation. A total lack of experience. The general sense of grossness.

Then again, porn is all about self-expression, right? Liberated fetish? Letting your freak flag fly? It really is just running around my underwear... I mean, I was running around in a bathing suit earlier today, and that is pretty much the same thing. What's the big difference?

She stares at me, her eyes wide, until she finally nods. "You're going to do it," she smiles knowingly. "You're totally going to do it. You're the best, Libby! I mean... Tammy!"

I point at her as another customer comes up, just to make my point. "You're coming back for me," I insist.

She holds her hands up innocently. "You bet I am," she smiles, and that is the last time I see her for almost two weeks.

Chapter 7

Will

The best thing that I can say about this place is that it is dark. Even though the lights in the corner pulse like crazy, I can barely make out anybody else's face. That means they can barely make out mine. So I hope the chances of being recognized here are practically zero.

There are some places soldiers are not supposed to go. Famously there's a shopping center that is completely off-limits—and yet doesn't go out of business. We're supposed to show a certain sort of decorum. This bar is not technically one of those

places on the list, but it probably should be.

Maybe at one point it was reputable or at least clean. There are framed pictures screwed into the walls. Vintage photos of farm plots and fishing contests. Ladies in Victorian dress on wide summer porches. That is the sort of thing I wouldn't mind taking a closer look at.

But now it's just a dive bar with modernized lights and televisions. Cass must have come here at some point and had a decent time, and now he's trying to loop me in. I appreciate that. It's not his fault I'm in a sour mood. I just have a lot on my mind. Plans. The future. Our enlistment is drawing to the date where we have to sign up for another tour or take new postings.

We need a plan. And he's been skittish, avoiding my eye and avoiding the topic every time I bring it up. Maybe he has something in mind. Something I won't like.

But we aren't going to figure that out today, I tell myself. So what's the harm? Here we are—might as well try to make the best of it.

Cass suggested beers and burgers. That sounds like a great idea. I'd like to get fed and get out. I was looking for a way to wind down, and this hillbilly roadhouse isn't it.

The lights go down suddenly, and the voice of that sketchy-looking bouncer comes out over the sound system. He says a show is about to start.

Cass refuses to meet my eye.

"Hey... what's going on here?" I ask as steaming baskets of fried food are dropped in the middle of the table.

To be honest, those fried pickles look amazing. The scent of hot oil coats the inside of my nose. I realize how hungry I am.

“Cass? Are you listening to me?”

But he isn’t listening. He’s looking at the girls circling our table who are dressed in... practically nothing. One is in a nightgown sort of thing, and the other in a close-fitting bodysuit with sparkles around her cleavage.

“Cass? What is this? Are these strippers?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Oh, honey, we’re not strippers!” a woman says, pivoting to face me directly.

Her nightgown slips off her shoulder but I am more interested in the look in her eyes. Hungry, haughty. No nonsense. It’s a look that says she might flirt if I paid for it. But it’s not sincere.

“This is a lingerie show. Haven’t you ever been to a lingerie show?”

Cass is chowing down, totally engaged in the French fries and girls. Since I don’t answer her, the woman in the nightgown just moves off to another table. I wait for Cass to glance my way again, so I can get a feeling for just how committed he is to this show. Yeah, I get it now. He thought I would like it once it started. He thought it would be funny and out of the ordinary. Nice try, but this isn’t my scene and never will be.

But now his attention is focused on the far wall. He tenses, clenching his jaw.

I follow his sight line to the back of the room. A woman stands there, swaying self-consciously back and forth. She is different than the others. She doesn’t have that hardened look. She doesn’t seem practiced.

She’s wearing a simple set of bra and panties, pale pink, with shiny crisscrossed bits and patches of

lace. Simple. Kind of modest. She’s tall and strong. Not hard like a soldier, but not soft like a civilian. Somewhere in between. I can see the outline of her core muscles as she breathes deeply, closing her eyes and swaying with the music uncertainly at

first, then with more commitment.

Her first steps kind of wobble on her tall, baby-blue heels, but she settles in quickly to a cat-like stride. She lowers her chin and squares her shoulders before she reaches the first table. The transformation is remarkable: from awkward and tentative to confident and determined. It's like she is an actress, committing to her role.

But still, there is something authentic. As she circles the first table and heads toward us, I can see it in her eyes, maybe in the way she brushes her hair back with the heel of her hand. This is not someone who takes her clothes off for a living. This someone who is enjoying herself. Maybe forcing herself to enjoy herself, but yes. There is definitely some kind of sincere pleasure there.

When her eyes flicker past our table, she stops up short and pauses, taking a visible breath. She looks at Cass and me, a sly smile twisting the corner of her lips. For a few long moments she stands there, country music pulsing in the space between us, her breath held beneath her swelling bosom, her eyes glittering.

"Fuck, yes," I hear Cass mutter under his breath.

Her strides are long and slow as she approaches, and I can barely look away. There's no trace of hesitation now, just a playful look of mischief in her deep brown eyes. When she's close enough, she reaches out and brushes her fingertips against my bicep, then walks behind me, dragging her fingertips along my shoulders.

Circling the table, she reaches Cass and touches him too, in exactly the same way. It's as though she wants to make sure we are really brothers, and really twins. The delight on her face is unmistakable.

"Hello," she grins, dimpling her round cheeks. "How are you tonight?"

Cass doesn't say anything. He's breathing through his nose. His hands are frozen against his knees.

"How are you?" I answer for both of us.

She turns her chin toward me slowly, apparently relishing even that small motion. Her smile is sincere, practically surprised.

"You know what? I think I'm really good!"

I almost want to laugh at that. "You think you are really good?" I repeat. "Are you usually really good?"

She shrugs, taking a moment to widen her stance. Her hips sway slowly with music, not in a theatrical way, but in a way that shows me she is really living in her body right now. She is in the moment.

The skinny bouncer appears right next to us, causing her to stiffen suspiciously.

"You boys military?" he says with a knowing grin. "I knew you would appreciate what we got. Isn't she something?"

Cass swivels on his barstool and gives the guy an appraising glance. His eyes meet mine. The message is clear: this guy is trouble.

"Just passing through," I answer noncommittally.

I sent her discomfort, her wariness now that the bouncer is here. She seems ready to move, depending on which way he goes. She is ready to make some kind of defensive maneuver.

“How do you like our Tammy?” he continues, grinning shamelessly with a mouth that is only half full of teeth. “She is new. Think I should keep her?”

Tammy. That’s her name? That doesn’t seem right.

Tammy stretches a thin, unconvincing smile across her pretty mouth. If she was an animal, that would not be an inviting look.

“Well, come on, girl!” the skinny man continues, his voice grating. “Why don’t you do something? Show them something! These guys came here for entertainment, am I right, boys?”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

He reaches out audaciously with both arms and claps each of us on our shoulders. He's lucky Cass doesn't turn around and tie him in a knot like a Red Vine just on principle.

Cass unfolds a twenty-dollar bill on the table and slides it toward her, deliberately not looking the guy in the face. The woman squints at it, apparently not quite sure what to do with it.

"What the hell is that for, just standing there looking pretty?" the skinny man cackles. "Well, take it, girl! You got a couple of generous gentlemen, here. Why don't you give them a little something to invest in!"

I see a flash of frustration cross her features. Impatience. Annoyance. The look of pleasure she had just moments ago seems to be fading quickly. I wish this guy would find someone else to annoy.

But she is a trouper. She leans toward me slowly, her eyes eager and determined. I am frozen in my chair, wondering what will happen next. How close is she going to get? What is the rule for this kind of performance?

To my utter surprise, she keeps coming. Slowly... Far too slowly... She reaches out and balances her hand on my thigh and leans in, her lips parting, her eyes closing. For a second there is only a few millimeters between us, her breath dancing over my lower lip, her eyes locked with mine.

Then, suddenly, she kisses me. Her sweetness is an explosion in my mouth. Her lips are impossibly soft, practically vibrating over mine as the tiny triangle of her kitten

tongue pokes sweetly against mine. It takes everything I have not to wrap my arms around her and crush her against me. She's like food. She is like a meal I have hungered for. She is honey to a starving man.

I force myself not to move. I force myself not to pull her onto my lap, though everything in my body wants me to do exactly that. The last shreds of caution and thoughtfulness somehow work together to keep me from doing what I want. But only barely.

Too soon, she releases me from the kiss. I see her nostrils flare as she breathes in, smiling incredulously. Then to my utter shock, she leans across the other side of the table and kisses my brother. Just before she does, he glances at me in shock and amazement.

But he does what I could not. As soon as her lips touch his, his arm circles her back, drawing her waist toward his, pulling her into the space between his open knees. Her hands skate over his shoulders and lock behind his neck as he kisses her back the way I wanted to kiss her back.

For a moment, I forget where we are, surrounded by people... in this shitty bar. I forget, but then the skinny man makes me remember.

“Yyyyyeaaaaahhhhhh!” he brays, smacking me with his open palm.

It is everything I can do to keep from pounding him into the floor. That is not what my training was for, I know, but right now I am working on animal instinct.

“That is what I am talking about!” he yells out as the crowd begins to take notice.

People begin to clap, to yell out encouragement. Cass and the woman don't seem to hear anything. I fight the urge to join them.

Finally she pulls back, staring deep into Cass's eyes as she carefully separates from him. They have an instant connection. I can tell. A connection that is magnetic, that I should be part of. If there weren't a table between us...

Suddenly there is a crack at the far end of the room, the sound of wood on wood like a pool stick hitting the wall. The skinny man startles and rushes off, leaving the woman alone with us.

For a few seconds we all look at each other, silently acknowledging that we have come to a fork in the road. We can separate here and go our individual ways. Or...

"Tammy? That's your name?" I hear myself say.

I need to hear more. If not this, then something else. Anything. I just want to hear her voice again and know she is real. Curiosity opens up a void inside me. I want her to fall in.

After another moment's consideration she looks at me directly. I can see she has asked herself some kind of silent question, and also given herself some kind of answer.

"Tammy," she repeats. "Yes, that's fine."

"Tammy is not your real name," Cass adds.

We all know it, but the question is so what? Does it matter? She can say she is anyone. It's her prerogative.

Another song starts, this one a grinding, sweaty shuffle, the kind of song you would hear way out in the country in a roadhouse shanty, under string lights on a night with a full moon. Tammy lets her head fall back and sways from side to side gently as if in

a dream. Cass and I watch her, rapt, unable to turn away from this mysterious creature.

Her hands float out from her sides, rising as her dance turns more sinuous, more determined. I'm not surprised when she wraps her fingers around the back of my neck, but I am surprised when she pulls me closer—and my brother along with me.

As soon as I get a whiff of her I'm turned on. Her scent is overwhelming, snaking into my lizard brain, switching every circuit to go. Again, her lips are impossibly sweet. Her fingers dig at the back of my neck, pulling me forward, practically to falling. Her tongue flutters against my teeth, pushing my mouth open, dragging me past my last shreds of self-control.

I want her. I'm going to have her. It may not make any sense at all, but she will be mine.

Chapter 8

Libby

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Once I got the movie going in my head, everything else came together. Yolanda and Terry pulled me off the floor to the ladies' room, giggling and rolling their eyes.

“Okay. Let's see those undies,” Yolanda commanded me, pointing at my ripped jeans and T-shirt halter. “Mona said we're supposed to get you to do the show, right? So let's see what you're working with.”

“Yeah,” Terry giggled as she wiggled out of her striped dress, leaving only a sparkling catsuit underneath. “She said you are going to be great. We are definitely supposed to tell you that.”

I admit, I was pissed at first. I felt like this whole set up had been a trick. She probably knew about Carson and had the whole thing arranged in advance. I felt like this was the kind of bait and switch my dad would find a million “I told you so's” to tell me for the rest of my life.

If he ever found out. Which absolutely could not happen.

But then I remembered Mona's last lines... This is a fantasy, right? Even if she tricked me into it, the whole situation was like a movie. Practically a dream come true. And every situation is based on the attitude you bring to it. That's another thing my dad tells me. Attitude makes a difference.

So I got down to my underwear and held my arms

out for inspection, pleased that Yolanda clucked her tongue in approval right before she pushed me out the door.

“Just watch what we do,” she muttered as we reentered the dark bar through a cloud of artificial fog. “Don’t crowd me. Find your own table, but just look for some friendly faces and then strut your stuff until they give you money. Then move on. That’s all you gotta do.”

It took a second. There was a hard fist of terror where my heart was supposed to be. I just stood there like a deer in headlights.

Then I remembered the movie.

Not the best video I ever watched... Kind of confusing, really. Definitely an amateur attempt. But the girl was like me: college age, blonde, nervously exposed around a bunch of strangers. It was a swim meet. Some kind of intramural competition. She was an alternate, found herself surrounded by the opposing team. As in all those movies, she took that nervous first step and then let nature take over. Nature always takes over, I guess.

Yolanda and Terry moved out into the crowd, quickly becoming half invisible in the low light, though I could tell they were doing just as they said: looking for friendly faces. Trying to find someone to say hello, maybe give them a couple bucks, then move on.

Just do it, I told myself. Attitude. Get some.

Though my heart was pounding, I forced myself to stop, close my eyes, and listen to the music. Listen to anything, let it happen. Open my mind and find a way for nature to work its way through me.

Okay, I talked myself into it. Now I think I’m ready. I open my eyes and look around the room with a new attitude.

Yes, I am in my bra and panties. Yes, you may look at me. Yes, I am fabulous.

My name is Tammy.

Sweeping the room like a searchlight, I can see a path through the darkness. A few of these guys are definitely looking at me with interest, but then I see one in particular. One face, one steady and piercing gaze.

Oh no, make that two.

Just ahead, I sense something so perfect it is like I invented it. Two men staring at me who are so alike, they must be brothers. They might be twins. And yet, I feel something between us so strong it is like a tractor beam. The rest of the room disappears, and there is just a tunnel between us.

Slowly I walk forward, measuring my success by the way their expressions change. Their eyes cover me in a shameless pattern of inspection. My belly. My breasts. My thighs. With each step, I feel it stronger.

Nature takes over. Like a typhoon, like a tidal wave, I am swept along. I barely need to think in words. Everything is sensation and urge, a primal collection of directions that exist without language. I feel taller, stronger, curvier than before.

I can feel the attraction between us, especially in the way they take in every move I make. Their animalistic stares seem practiced, but not predatory. Aware, intelligent, and profoundly real, they both gaze at me with a naked intensity that thrills me to my core.

As I reach the first one, I dare to reach out and drag my fingers across his arm, then over his broad, thick shoulders. His skin reacts to me, with all the little hairs standing on end at my lightest touch. Electricity sizzles between us, sending bolts of energy up

my arm.

His brother is just the same, responding under my touch, frozen to his spot though I am very small, and he is enormous. It's amazing. I have both of them, 100 percent of their attention, all of it for me. There has to be four hundred pounds of throbbing male flesh in front of me, and all I need to do is drag my pinky finger across it to get it to respond.

The first one speaks to me, something like hello. He has a low, grumbly voice that seems to erupt from somewhere deep within his chest. It takes my breath away, and I almost can't believe that I have to find words to communicate. We don't need that. We don't have to do that. This is something better. Something profound. Something ancient.

It's happening, really happening, but then...

Ty.

Dammit.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

I feel like I've been shot out of the air like a drone. Ty comes over and starts smacking these big guys on the arm with his yellowed, creepy hands. I just freeze, hoping that he will lose interest or something pretty quickly.

But you know what, I do not even care.

All I care about is the taste of this one's mouth, the way he trembles as he holds back like a dam that's just about to break. I can feel the surge of power behind his control as my lips find his, feel how close he is to breaking through. It's all up to me. I can do what I like.

Everything is a blur. I want this. I want the other one too. I reach forward and let my fingers slide over his shoulder, curling behind his neck and I feel the mirror image motion from him. He takes me by my waist, graceful and strong, and pulls me to him. He's salty and hungry. I can taste it on his strong, thick tongue.

My breath is gone. I have to hang on to him like an animal clinging to a tree trunk during a flood. He pulls me off my feet and I am helpless, caged in his massive arms, drawing breath from between his lips.

It's just like the movie. Back and forth I go between them, tugging them into position. I want one in front of me, and one behind. I want it so much that the thought blows away anything else that might be in my brain. No talking, no music, no bar, no lights... Just this mouth on mine, then the other mouth on mine. Just this dizzying flood of sweet and salt, with their hulking bodies getting closer.

Now one is behind me, biting my shoulder while the other is kissing me breathless.

We move all together like dancers, twisting, rocking in unison as we edge closer and closer to our inevitable union.

Oh my God, it's so perfect.

It's so...

Yes...

“What the fuck is this!”

The bang startles me and I stumble, practically falling like I am falling out of a tree. The man whose arms are around me holds me firmly but sets me back on the ground. I didn't really know I was off the ground, but now I am definitely back on it.

The other man edges in front of me protectively, cutting Ty off from having a direct path.

“You need to back up,” my protector informs him.

Ty squares up, dragging the back of his hand underneath his nose in a vicious swipe. He sucks his teeth and bares his gums.

“This!” he barks, pointing at the table. “You want to explain this?”

Confused, trying to return to normal human function, I follow his finger to see what he is pointing at. It's my ID, right there on the table. How did it get there? Then I realize he's also holding my handbag in his other fist, shaking it vengefully.

“Why do you have my purse?” I mumble, shaking my head.

“Don’t you even start that with me, little lady!” Ty growls back. “This is you? This is yours?”

I just shrug and move back a millimeter, grateful for the hulking military guard that I seem to have magically acquired. Happily, they seemed to have picked a side, and it is mine.

“You can’t be going through my stuff,” I huff, but my voice isn’t 100 percent convincing.

“You can’t be giving me a fake ID!” he snarls back. “You know how much trouble you could get in? Big trouble, that’s how much! Arrested! Maybe even jail!”

I shrug one shoulder to buy some time. Can he be right? I don’t think so. I really wish Mona were here.

Ty backs up and holds out his hands. “All right, show’s over, guys. Step away from the little lady.”

My protectors don’t even glance at me. They just square up and make a wall, but I step around them. Ty offers them a smug nod as I hobble past obediently, suddenly embarrassed and feeling quite naked again.

As soon as I am within reach, Ty circles his thumb and forefinger just over my elbow, pulling me back toward the kitchen. I follow, shocked and clumsy on these high heels. Everybody in the bar turns to watch as he drags me out of the bar and into the kitchen.

“What are you doing!” I yell at him as we enter the kitchen.

I don’t even feel it coming. And when it lands, it takes me a

full ten seconds to figure out what just happened. But I hear the sound—crack. I see the motion of his swinging arm. I watch the palm of his hand right before it hits me with a kind of distant curiosity.

But I am suddenly half doubled over, my own hands cupping my cheek. I realize he just hit me. He just slapped me.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

My cheek burns, my eyes stinging with humiliating tears that I can't control.

"I knew you was trouble!" he hisses at me, bent over so he can yell right in my ear.

"You're gonna lie to me? Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"Jesus, I'm sorry. It's not a big deal..." I hear myself muttering, but the words sound blubbery and strange.

"It's a big deal if I say it's a big deal!" he yells back and I feel his hands on my shoulders, his fingers digging in. It hurts for real this time. It feels like he's trying to dislocate my shoulder with just his hands.

"You're gonna pay me back for this! You hear me? You owe me a debt now, little girl, and you are gonna do some real work for me, you hear me?"

Shaking my head frantically, I try to pull away, try to get back to the door. But the moment I feel like I have some distance, I'm yanked back, hard, and realize he has a handful of my hair.

The kitchen door swings open with a bang, and Ty jerks my head back hard. Through bleary eyes I see the two figures of my protectors burst through the doorway.

"The fuck you doing here? Employees only!"

"You'll make an exception," the first one says with a decisive, furious note in his voice.

“The hell I will,” Ty announces. “This is a boss / employee situation. You guys need to get out of here.”

“Not going to happen,” the other one informs him. He meets my eyes, searching my face. “Let’s go, Tammy.”

“Ha!” Ty barks triumphantly, twisting his hand in my hair so that I wince and arch back into him even though I don’t want to. “You guys don’t even know who this is. Her name isn’t Tammy. She is nobody to you, okay? But to me... oh yeah. I can definitely make use of this one. So fuck off!”

My heart is beating fast as I stand there, arched back, my legs quaking underneath me. Everything is a blur, but I know something will happen.

“We can’t do that,” the first one says.

“Tammy?” the other one adds. “Do you want to come with us?”

“I told you, her name isn’t Tammy! It’s Liberty! Can you believe that bullshit? Stupid fucking name.”

The guys stop, glancing at each other and scowling. Then as though they choreographed it, they separate. One takes me gently by the shoulders and pulls in one direction, and the other takes Ty more roughly by the shoulder and pulls in the other direction, separating us neatly.

In a half a second, the first one has me out of the kitchen, wrapped in his strong arms as he hustles me to the back of the room.

“Get your things,” he commands me as he nudges me toward the ladies’ room door gently, but not very gently.

I know an order when I hear one, and I dart into the ladies' room to get dressed again, kicking off the blue heels toward the corner. I would rather be barefoot.

When I come back out, both guys are standing there. One of them gives me back my handbag while the other maneuvers me toward the back door. It only takes a few seconds, and we are back across the front parking lot. A car door opens and I crawl into the back seat of a Jeep, then hang on as we peel out of the lot.

The top is down, and the warm North Carolina night air blows my hair all around. When I think that we are far enough away, I work up the courage to break the silence.

“You guys? What’s going on?”

The man in the passenger seat twists around and gives me a serious, contemplative squint.

“Not trying to be rude, ma’am, just trying to figure out what to do with you next.”

His sudden politeness catches me off guard and I stifle a giggle. People don’t usually refer to me as ma’am. People don’t usually refer to me at all. If there’s a soldier near my father, I might as well be part of the furniture. They do not risk offending him by eyeballing me.

“Well, you could take me home? I mean... I’m really embarrassed about all the drama. Maybe we could just forget all this ever happened?”

The passenger looks at the driver, who shakes his head tightly.

“Normally I would, ma’am, but unfortunately it looks like your identification was left behind.”

“Shit,” I mutter, yanking open my handbag and flipping through the contents. Goddammit. I can’t believe Ty went through my personal stuff. What was he even thinking? What an asshole.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“I can get it tomorrow? I mean... my friend Mona could get it for me. I don't even have to go back, I'm sure.”

Again the guys glance at each other, and again there is that tight shaking of the head.

“Guys? Are you listening to me?”

The passenger nods at me seriously, his expression apologetic but unmovable.

“Unfortunately, we don't think that's safe, ma'am,” he informs me. “At this point it seems like you're going to need to come with us.”

“What? No... just take me home. I'm sure it will be fine. Please?”

For a moment they don't say anything, and all I can hear is cicadas and crickets as the Jeep roars down the country road.

“Guys?”

“Liberty Jane, I'm sorry,” the passenger says again. The sound of my own name startles me. He seems to like it too. If I am not mistaken, there's just the smallest hint of smile on his tanned, lined cheeks.

“You're sorry? Sorry for what?”

“Sorry I don't have a better plan, ma'am,” he answers. “But you can trust us, Liberty Jane. You're safe with us.”

Chapter 9

Libby

Nonmilitary people probably wouldn't understand this, but once the guys told me what they were doing, I immediately understood. They recognized my name. They know my father. I won't get more information out of them than that. They won't tell me how they know him, whether they had been under his command, or anything else. It just doesn't work like that.

But what I do know is that they believe taking me back to my own home is not safe, and wherever they are taking me is.

And I absolutely trust that is true.

As we drive down the road back to base, I realize I have a decision to make. "Tammy" is still very much a part of my mind. I was having a good time being Tammy. I don't feel any particular urgency to go back to being Libby. Certainly not the formal Liberty Jane. That girl would not be in a situation like this.

Just when I see the lights of the fort entrance, the driver makes a left-hand turn and then another, before finally pulling into a gated drive lined with townhouses. Off-base housing. Some of the nice stuff.

Probably for the best, because I don't know if I could get back on base without my ID.

I feel safe in the back, looking at the stars overhead as we drive down the tree-lined streets of the subdivision. Finally we pull into a driveway, and then into an open garage. The driver turns off the engine.

The passenger opens the door and gives me a smirk as he pulls the seat up so I can exit. But before I can step out into the garage, he slips a hand behind my knees and picks me up effortlessly. I stifle a giggle of surprise.

“Your shoes, ma’am,” he explains with barely a crack in his serious demeanor.

“Oh... Right.”

Well, this is fun. One of them opens the door, and this big hunk of a soldier carries me through it. I feel small and light as a feather as he transports me into a nice, tidy living room.

Gently he sets me down on the carpet and we all stand there for a moment, looking each other over awkwardly. Now in normal light, I can see what I couldn’t see in the bar. They are definitely twins. Identical military haircuts. Clean-shaven, thick jaws. Broad necks. Shoulders carved out of marble. Arms carved out of granite. They loom over me, breathing steadily, watching me like I am either their prey or their sworn duty.

I expect it to be gone, but it’s still there: that seething connection. It’s like we’re all standing at the edge of a cliff with the wind pushing us forward. Just one bit of pressure, one little tap, and we all go tumbling over the edge.

Am I ready to take that step?

“Thank you,” I mutter awkwardly, fighting back a nervous smile. “I feel like I should explain. “That’s not how I—”

“—no need to explain, ma’am.”

I stop short. This could get weird. I am determined that this will not get any weirder

than it already has.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Okay, first of all? Please stop calling me ma’am. That’s nice and all, but unnecessary.”

“But, ma’am—”

I hold up a hand.

“Seriously? I am going to have to insist. Please don’t tell me about your training or your manners or how you were brought up. Call me, um, Tammy.”

They glance at each other, eyebrows raised. I snap my fingers in the air between us.

“Yeah, can we agree that is okay? It sounds like an acceptable compromise to me. That way none of us have to think about anything too hard.”

“Do you have a plan then, Tammy?”

I shrug, bouncing several scenarios through my mind. I could go home, I could sneak out, I could try to find Mona... What the hell happened to Mona?

But it doesn’t matter right now. Right now there is literally nothing that I can do but wait.

“At some point, I will have to retrieve my ID. Right? At some point I have to go home.”

“If he has your ID, then he knows where you live,” the first one says. “You can’t go

home until we figure out how to handle the situation.”

I nod. My cheek still stings where Ty slapped me, and I have to admit I’m not eager to run into him again, alone. I at least want a moment to piece this out.

“We can make sure he doesn’t do anything to you,” the other one offers.

He doesn’t give any details, and I don’t feel the need to ask. I am positive that

he could make sure in a number of different ways that the threat of Ty has been eliminated. Better not to ask.

“I also need to make sure that Mona is all right. My friend. Who works there. She left earlier tonight. I will call her tomorrow.”

They look at each other again.

“All right... Well, then, we have some time to kill. Looks like everything is okay for now.”

“Right,” I agree. There is so much more that we could say. So much more that needs to be said.

“I’m Cass,” the first one says, then jerks his thumb in the other direction. “That’s Will.”

It seems ridiculously awkward all of a sudden, and I can’t help but giggle.

“Those are our real names,” Will shrugs.

But I can’t help it. Suddenly it’s sort of funny, no, really funny. Downright

ridiculous. Kind of hilarious. The movie that was playing in my head has gone completely off the rails.

“You know what? Those are wonderful names. Those are perfect names. Thank you for saving my ass, I really do appreciate it. So, can we back up to where we were?”

Cass raises his eyebrows. I see him flare his nostrils as though sniffing the air.

“And where exactly were we?” he asks in a low, careful voice.

“We were just getting to know each other,” I answer, calling up Tammy again.

That was good. Tammy was good. Letting nature call the shots was good. I want that back.

“Are you sure about that?” Will asks, leaning forward only slightly.

I can sense it again, the force that is holding back everything in his mind. Such a strong sense of self. Such a force of nature.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“I’m absolutely sure,” I answer.

Just like that, I pick up where the movie left off. I am the girl who comes in the room, sees what she wants, and goes for it.

Chapter 10

Cass

She can’t go home, and we can’t put her anywhere else until we know she’s safe. She is safe here. Now what are we going to do with her?

Will vibrates with nervousness. Having her in our space crosses a line that we have both known is there, but never dared to name out loud. It is something that we always knew would happen, deep down. If there were ever a moment like this, the result was a foregone conclusion.

And she is perfect. The perfect beauty. The perfect attitude. She understands us, I can tell. She’s grown up around military men. She knows what kind of animals we are, what kind of choices we have to make. She’s not coming into this with her eyes closed.

We all know exactly what this is about.

The talking is over. She takes two steps in her bare feet toward Will, standing up on her toes to reach him. He doesn’t try to stop her. He opens his arms to catch her and she latches onto him completely. Arms looped behind his neck, back arching into

him. He takes her in his arms without argument, scooping her up to lift her off the floor so that she is nearly his height.

Exactly. Exactly this. This is so right.

I come up behind her, reaching around to find the button of her jeans, sliding them back over her hips. Those pink panties again, so soft, so flimsy. I barely want to touch them, afraid that they will come apart in threads.

But I need to see more of her. As she kisses Will, I find myself toying with the elastic on the panties, and then pulling them down. There's nothing else I can do. They need to be gone.

Her legs are long and tanned, strong like a runner. Her skin is soft under my hands, and she's pliant, pliable, moving with me effortlessly.

As she kisses Will, I spread her thighs with my thumbs, looking for that soft, pink seam. To my surprise, she's totally bare. Completely shaven. Nothing hidden, nothing obscured from view. Just this perfect, plump pussy, ready to be spread.

All my conscious thought clicks off like a light switch, and my brain is just filled with images, commands, urges to be obeyed. Her thighs are firm in my hands as I spread her legs, opening that seam little by little. Her secret inner lips are like a stripe of bubblegum, glistening wet, begging to be tasted. Before I know it I've dragged my tongue over those frilly edges, relishing the velvety texture of a newly shaved pussy, trying to keep myself from taking the whole thing in my mouth at once.

But when she moans, pushing back against my face, I can't help myself. Her pussy lips fit inside my mouth perfectly, and I suck at them madly, rolling my tongue over the surface back and forth before diving into the channel, plunging deeper with every swipe.

Her juices are thick and sweet, just like her mouth. On my knees, I position her so that she straddles my face and I suck voraciously at those lips. She wiggles against me without restraint, driving me insane. It's like a starving man given a drop to drink. I need it, all of it. I can't hold back.

Her pussy is so tight, the entrance is barely a slit. I can see it, but I don't think anyone has ever been in there. A virgin? Jesus.

"On the floor," I hear myself grunt, before picking her up and moving her to the center of the rug. "I need more room."

Will takes the change in position as an opportunity to take off her halter, snapping the closure of her bra at the same time. Her tits are round and firm, topped by candy-pink nipples that end in small, serious points. He has one in his mouth before she lies down and the sound of her moans pushes me even further.

"Keep her moaning," I direct him. "I want to open her up."

Will doesn't say anything, just begins rolling her nipples between his fingers, kissing her until she arches her back. Her knees fall open, trembling as her hips rock with every wave of desire.

Now that I can really look at her, I see how beautiful she is. Plump, juicy pussy lips like perfect handfuls. Shaved absolutely smooth, all the way back to her puckered, perfect little asshole. Her inner lips are frilly and pale, glistening like they are dusted with sugar. At the top is her shy, hooded clitoris, as fat as a pearl.

Gently, I push the hood back just a tiny bit. I know I need to use just the smallest amount of friction on this delicate, hidden part of her, but I want to drive her mad. I want her beyond sanity. I want her to give in completely to anything we might want to do to her.

She gasps when my tongue slides over her clit, and I feel her lips clench and then relax. Again, I roll her clit under my tongue, swirling at the edges. Then again. Then again, until she rocks against me, syncing her motions with mine.

She is almost there, I can tell. Will has her tits covered in glossy tongue marks as he teases and tempts her to higher and higher levels of desire.

A gush of nectar coats my tongue, and I take that tiny pearl in my lips, suckling insistently, gently battering it with my tongue until she flexes her knees, pushing hard against me. She squeals a shuddering arpeggio of bliss and flexes her knees against my ears. Will is relentless, laving her tits as she heaves beneath him.

My face is soaked. I can feel her cum drying on my chin. But still, when Will catches my eye I practically want to salute him.

As soon as I am certain she is okay, sleepy and shivering in the half-life of her orgasm, I have to sneak away. I'm going to explode.

I rush to the bathroom, painfully aware of the throbbing, rock-hard erection that threatens to burst through my jeans. The shower snaps on, blasting the room full of sound and steam. With my forearm against the tile wall, I let the water course down my back and fist myself two, three, four times, the image of her perfect pink pussy vivid in my mind.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

I come almost immediately, the force so strong it splashes against the wall above the nozzle then drips down toward the drain. It seems to go on and on, ropes of thick, white jizz that swirl in a spiral before disappearing.

My brain goes fuzzy, dissolving to white noise like a TV between stations. It takes a long time to get straight thoughts back into my head, and when I do, one thing is clear.

She is still here. With us. In our place. We can't let her go just yet.

And there is still more of her.

Chapter 11

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Libby

When I wake up in the morning, it takes me a second to remember where I am. First I realize that I am immobilized, pinned under something heavy. I can't move my arms or legs. Feels like I am trapped under concrete.

But slowly, I realize what this is. I am crushed beneath two large, solid soldiers, as dense as cement blocks.

The evening comes back to me in a rush: my brief stint as a beer girl, Mona taking off with Carson, the lingerie show, the captivating twin soldiers who caught my

attention, Ty dragging me into the back room and popping me in the chin, and capping it all off with the most amazing orgasm I have ever felt.

Immediately my pussy clenches. My body remembers that orgasm like it is still happening. Oh my God. Never in a million years would I have guessed that a man's tongue would feel so much better than anything I have ever had on my pussy before.

If I would've known? You better believe I would've been doing this all along.

Jesus, now it all makes sense! I always thought that porn was so exaggerated, with everybody rolling their eyes and moaning all the time. People having orgasms that look like they are possessed by demons. Women groaning theatrically when somebody gives a nipple the barest lick.

I thought that was all bullshit.

Boy, was I wrong.

It was amazing. It was like some kind of primal secret. So soft, so hot, so exactly what I needed. Nothing has ever felt like that before.

I want it again.

Slowly I pick up my head, trying to figure out what our current situation is. One of them... Will? He is snoring lightly on my left. His face is turned away, and he's lying on his back so I can see the length of him. His side is overlapping mine, pinning me down protectively. I wonder if he did that on purpose to make sure I can't sneak out.

His chest rises with every rumbling breath, massive and broad. There is a light dusting of pale fur from his collarbones down to his navel, past where I can see without sitting up.

Cass is on my right, with his thigh draped over mine. He is lying on his stomach. His back is smooth, tanned to the waist where there is a strong demarcation to paler skin. His butt cheeks are round and firm, almost too shapely. I really want to squeeze one. Like, really bad.

My fingers twitch. All this, right next to me? Right here? It's too good to be true.

I don't know what time it is, but it's got to be early. I usually wake up before seven, definitely. Even without an alarm. I love the early mornings.

I wish I could go back to sleep, but I can't. Even though this is so cozy, so comfortable, I'm itching for... Something.

Tentatively, I move the fingers on my right hand, pinned so far underneath Cass. To my surprise, I can feel the bristly, soft patch of pubic hair at his groin. It's nice, like beard stubble. Lush and thick, soft as fox fur. Stroking it with my fingertips, I listen for any change in his breathing.

He doesn't do anything, but I sense his body changing. As I softly run my fingers back and forth through his furry thatch, I feel his hips shift just slightly. Just enough, and there is a void created underneath him, one where I can tunnel through to find his cock.

Biting my lip, I take the chance to touch it. It's velvety smooth, but firm underneath. My fingers wander blindly along the length, curious to test the width, firmness, girth. I circle my middle finger and thumb and squeeze lightly, delighted to hear his breath hitch in his throat.

I almost know what to do... I've seen this a thousand times. The angle is a bit uncomfortable, but if I twist I can get my hand underneath him so that I can run the tip of his cock against the palm of my hand.

He shudders, his eyes still closed. Every time he moves, I take it as encouragement. I can hold him a little firmer, stroke him farther. After a little while, gaining confidence, I dare to run my fingers up and down his complete length, twisting slightly at the end the way I have seen in movies.

A moan reverberates in his chest. He shifts toward me and nuzzles his face against my shoulder. I feel his hands slide against the bottom of my belly and realize he's awake now. How long he has been awake, I don't know.

On my other side, I feel Will take my hand in his and draw it to his already-hard cock. Guiding me, he closes my fingers over his shaft and moves my arm from base to tip. Then, with a sigh, he rolls onto his side, mirror image with Cass on my right.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Perfectly elegant, easier than I ever would've thought, I am giving simultaneous hand jobs to two perfect, handsome, goddamn American heroes.

It's a dream come true.

Rolling my wrists, it's easy to get them both on the same rhythm. I keep the motion long and smooth, focusing on the sensitive tips. Cass cups my breast against his palm, plucking my nipple gently. That only makes me hotter and I find myself grinding my hips, closing my eyes to get the full image in my mind's eye.

This is better than anything I could've imagined on my own. They move with me, thrusting gently against my hands, so big I can barely close my fingers around them. Will reaches down and cups my pussy in his strong, talented fingers, slipping a finger into the wet channel, making me moan out loud.

"Yeah," he groans as he thrusts harder.

"Yeah," Cass echoes, thrusting harder as well.

Pushing against my heels, I lift my hips to get more pressure on my clit as I pump both their meaty cocks in my hands. They curl around me, dripping streams of pre-cum onto my belly. The liquid slips between my fingers, lubing them up for the final thrusts before they both come, spraying identical loads of cum across my belly, roaring identical calls of lust into my ears.

Again I am pinned beneath them when they lunge, clenching as the final spurts erupt from the shining heads, then fall across me breathlessly.

It's an amazing amount of weight, but I don't mind. I kind of love it. I could be buried like this.

So much to think about, so many sensations jumble in my mind all at once. I try to sort them out, but then give up completely and let sleep wash over me like a warm wave.

Chapter 12

Will

I don't think I have slept in this long since I was about thirteen years old. It has to be... what... nine a.m.? That is insane.

But gradually, the dream slips away and I let reality creep in around the edges of the fog in my mind. Just a little bit at a time. Baby steps.

When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is wave after wave of tangled blonde hair. The strands tumble over each other like they are racing to a goal. Right after that, I smell her. Us. All of us...

Yeah. That was not a dream.

Carefully untangling my arms and legs from everybody else's, I roll out of bed, landing silently on the floor and heading for the kitchen. Some good, strong coffee is what I need now. Preferably a gallon or so.

With the coffee pot bubbling, I look around for something to do. Something to clean. Something to organize. But our small townhouse is already clean and organized. That's just how we are.

That is how we have always been. Raised in Fort Bragg, then immediately to college, then right back into the service. We have the habits and training of uncluttered thoughts. Uncluttered lives. Mission-focused brains.

Well, maybe Cass has a rebellious streak. A little bit, here and there. After all, he did take me on an unexpected detour last night, didn't he?

Speaking of Cass, here he comes. Wearing cotton boxer briefs and a smug expression, he walks up and jerks his chin toward the coffee pot.

"I will take a cup when it's ready," he announces as he yawns and flexes against the countertop.

Black and strong, the coffee is almost too hot to drink, but I need it. We stand there in silence for a few minutes, reenergizing.

"Well?" I finally say.

He takes another swig, then holds his mug out for a refill.

"Well, what?"

"Are we going to talk about this?"

He takes back his mug and squints at me with a sideways smile. "Which part did you want to talk about?"

Fair question.

"Okay. Let's start with what are we going to do with her? Keep her here?"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

He shrugs, reaching down to scratch inside his shorts with one hand.

“If she will let us, why not?”

I clench my teeth.

“Be serious, Cass. What are we going to do with her?”

“I am being serious,” he scoffs. “We stepped into a situation, offered a solution... And this is it. Why would we stop now without a better plan?”

“Yeah, okay. That’s a good point.”

He sniffs and looks around, clearly less bothered by this than I am.

“Is that really what’s on your mind? How quick you can get her back out the door?” he asks carefully.

I shrug and shake my head. “Basically, yes. That and the part where I don’t want to be accused of abducting the colonel’s daughter. That is the basic outline of my thought process right now.”

“I’m sure she will stick up for us,” he grins.

“Let’s hope so.”

“Are you sure you’re not freaked out by the threesome?”

I catch his eye, trying to suss out the breadth of this question. Freaked out? No. This was inevitable. Not exactly on my to-do list for yesterday, but definitely coming.

“No, she’s into it. That’s all that matters.”

“Yeah... She’s amazing,” Cass nods, his voice distant and flushed with wonder.

“Pretty sure she’s a virgin.”

“Pretty sure? How would you know that?”

“Well, I had her pussy half a centimeter from my eyeballs, and it all looked factory issue to me. Practically still has the cellophane on it. But feel free to take an inspection, bro. I think she likes you.”

Shaking my head, I just turn around and dump the rest my coffee in the sink. Washing the mug, I can buy a few seconds to clear my head.

I don’t know what it is that’s blocking me up. It feels like a fog, but not exactly. A distraction. Some kind of noise in my head that wasn’t there before. Little flashes of her smile, her skin, memories of her scent. It’s coming, I can tell. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

“So I guess it’s settled? We will keep track of her

until she tells us she wants to do something different?”

I hear him tap out a rhythm on the counter behind me. Something nonchalant.

“Sounds good to me,” he answers breezily. “Our objective is to keep her away from that jackass with the teeth. Seems simple enough. Maybe we can just go with the flow? I know that’s kind of not your style.”

Bristling, I turn back around. He is grinning smugly, the kind of expression that used to get us into fistfights.

“Maybe you don’t know what my style is,” I counter.

“Yeah, dude, I know everything about you. I’m in your head. When you bust a nut, I can feel it from a mile away.”

“That’s just the shockwaves from the explosion.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Ha! Good one. What I’m saying is... This feels good. Let it feel good, don’t overthink it. Reality will set back in soon enough.”

Raising an arm, he dips his head to smell himself and pulls a face, then backs off and heads out of the room. Seconds later, I hear the shower snap on.

Chapter 13

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Libby

Hunger wakes me back up after the air fills with the scent of food. Is that bacon? It must be. Coffee?

The bed is musty and messed up, with the sheet pulled back from the corner of the mattress and blankets on the floor. As I slide to the end, I realize I am in sort of a predicament. No clothes. No underwear. Not even a pair of shoes.

Okay. Time to get the situation under control.

My handbag is sitting on the corner of the dresser, and with a smile I realize one of my rescuers must have left it here for me. That is so thoughtful.

Digging around, I'm happy to find that my cell phone is still in it. Ty didn't make off with that too, and I still have 40 percent charge.

And Mona did not even text. I can't believe it.

I smash the avatar of her face with my thumb and wait for the call to connect. After a stupidly long time, it goes to voicemail. Oh no. No way. I try to reconnect the call and wait, determined to keep calling until she picks up.

Finally, I hear her on the other end, sleepy and annoyed.

“What time is it?”

“I don’t care what time it is! Where were you?”

“Excuse me?”

I give her a couple seconds to wake up or sit up or whatever it is that she needs to do. Besides, I didn’t actually plan out what I was going to say. Slowly, I start again.

“You said you were coming back for me,” I remind her bitterly.

“Oh, yeah, right,” she chuckles, her voice throaty and satisfied.

I am 100 percent certain she is not wearing any clothes right now. Carson is probably right there, listening in to every word.

“Mona! You said you were coming back for me!”

“I heard you the first time, Jesus!” she snaps back, sounding slightly more awake. “I got busy, okay? Maybe had a little bit too much to drink. Why are you yelling at me first thing in the morning?”

“Because. You. Said. You. Were. Coming. Back.”

“Yeah, well, obviously it didn’t work out that way,” she snaps. “But you’re talking to me now... so, how did it go? How much money did you make?”

Oh, the money. I didn’t even think about that till now.

“Nothing,” I hiss.

“What? What are you talking about?”

I stand there and shake my head for a few seconds, overwhelmed by the sick feeling that suddenly clenches my stomach.

“I made a couple hundred? Like you thought? And then Ty went through my purse and found my ID.”

“Wait, what?” she yelps, suddenly wide-awake. “Slow down. What the fuck did he do? Start at the beginning!”

“I don’t even fucking know! One minute I was doing my thing, or whatever that lingerie show is supposed to be. The next thing I know, Ty is waving my ID around, talking about how he’s going to call the cops on me unless I do some kind of special work for him.”

“Jesus!” she hisses.

“Do you know anything about this? What kind of work is he talking about, Mona?”

I hear her mutter under her breath, making some uncomfortable noises.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Mona? Answer me. What do you know about this?”

“Well, I am really surprised that he went through your purse!”

I stop, my eyes narrowed.

“Hold on. Are you serious? Is that the part that is really surprising for you?”

I can practically hear her shrugging.

“That is pretty terrible, Libby. I am so sorry he did that!”

“He slapped me, Mona. Across the face.”

I can barely get the words out. Just thinking about it clenches at my chest, the humiliation, the utter shock of it all.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Stay right there! I’m coming over!”

“No! You can’t.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I am not home. I’m not home!”

“Wait, what are you talking about? Where are you?”

Now I am so pissed off, I barely want to tell her anything. From the tone in her voice, she is not completely surprised about any of this. What kind of lowlife has she been working for all this time?

“Listen...” I start again, trying to stay calm. “Whatever kind of shit you are involved with at Sweeney’s, you have to get out. Do you understand me?”

She sighs for a long time.

“Libby, you don’t understand. I have to work. Everybody has to work. And things get complicated. Nothing is ever ideal, you know?”

“You can’t stay there! He is crazy!”

“Naw, girl. You’d have to walk a mile in my stilettos to really understand.”

The sadness in her voice is clear. Now that I’m thinking about it, I guess I always knew that there were things she wasn’t telling me. Big chunks of details that she was leaving out. Like the lingerie shows. I didn’t even know what she was doing even though we have been friends for years. I know her period cycle, her favorite flavor of potato chips, and the secret product she uses to make her hair so fluffy and full.

But I didn’t really know any of this. I knew she had to work to help support her family from a young age. I knew it was hard. There must be so much about her life I don’t even understand.

“You could have talked to me, you know,” I tell her softly.

“Meh. You wouldn’t understand.”

I’m starting to understand now, I think but don’t say.

“Anyway, if you’re not home... Where are you?” she starts again. “Are you on the base? I can be there in ten, fifteen minutes, tops.”

I think about explaining it to her, but not just yet. One major upheaval at a time is probably the best course of action.

“He has my ID,” I tell her again. “I can’t go home yet because it has my address on it, and I would be alone until my dad gets back. I am not really sure how serious he was about trying to get me arrested, or if that was all just a threat to get me to do what he wants.”

“He is all talk, I promise,” she scoffs, and again I get the impression this is no big surprise to her. “He would definitely not call the cops on you. He doesn’t need that kind of attention. You could have called his bluff.”

“Well, maybe if I had had you there to guide me through this mess, I would have known it was a bluff and called it? If you were there? Because you said you were coming back?”

Pause.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Okay... I see what you’re saying,” she admits finally, and at least I am beginning to hear a note of guilt in her voice. “I will go get your ID. Anything else you want me to do? I will bring Carson in case he gets fresh.”

“This is serious, Mona. All of this is serious.”

“I know. You’re right.”

“You have to quit that job.”

Silence hangs between us. I am reminded of something my dad has said a few times. Everybody makes choices.

When he says it, it always sounds sad. I doesn’t soun

d like some people pick the wrong ice cream flavor. It sounds like what he means is: everybody makes compromises they wish they didn’t have to make.

“So... Carson? Is he still around?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Why, yes he is!” she answers, brightening considerably. “And around... And around... And around...”

“Yeah, okay!” I laugh. “I don’t need details. Just as long as you are okay.”

“I am totally okay. I am more than okay. But I am going to go get your ID. I’ll text you when I’ve got it.”

“Okay, sounds good,” I answer. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay, bye.”

Once the call is disconnected, I start to get a sense of the mess I have found myself in. Why didn’t I just go to Krazy Mart, like I had planned?

But turning around, I see the rumpled bed again and remember there were definitely a couple of positive things that came out of that.

A couple of huge, positive things.

And I still don’t have any clothes.

I should go say hello.

Chapter 14

Libby

Dragging the top sheet off the bed, I wrap it around my body just under my arms and set out to find where that delicious smell is coming from.

I don’t know how I know, but I am sure that is Will behind the counter, standing over the stove with his head bent in concentration. Shirtless and gleaming, I relish the sight of his thickly muscled back. The perfect shapes of his strong body belong in one of my biology textbooks. He looks like a diagram. I can point out each of the muscles from the base of his skull to the bottom of his spine. It’s mesmerizing.

And it’s kind of weird, because I’ve been surrounded by soldiers for my whole life. I never really took the time to look at them. Now I have to wonder if they all look like

this.

Maybe just these two.

The guys have always been more or less explicitly off-limits. With my dad being an officer, he never even had to tell me that there was a line there. Was he being protective? Probably.

I suddenly remember that Cass and Will both know who my father is. They both sprang to protect me. Out of loyalty or duty, explicit or implicit, I couldn't guess.

Kind of awesome, when you think about it.

"You should eat something," he says without turning around.

My cheeks burn from grinning so hard.

"Should I?" I ask innocently. "Like what?"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Like just sit yourself down in a chair and I will feed you, that’s what,” he smirks, twisting around to wink at me.

His smile is a ray of sunshine. Amazing how that works. Everything seemed so serious just a minute ago. Now I am walking on clouds again.

The bedsheet is tucked securely under my arms, but I am not sure for how long. Carefully I hitch it over my hips a little bit as I sit at the counter, swallowing the gush of saliva that fills my mouth. The scent of the kitchen is overwhelming.

He moves to the side, then returns immediately with a mug of steaming coffee.

“Milk? Sugar?”

“Just black is fine,” I smile as I take it from him.

He pauses to smile back. I see his eyes skating over my shoulders as he drinks me in. He is still a little shy, a little guarded. Not like Cass, who is downright brash. Will holds back, I can tell. But once he lets go, he lets go all the way.

“How do you like your eggs?” he asks with a modest cringe. “Actually... can you take them scrambled? I know how to make them scrambled.”

“Scrambled would be great,” I smile back.

“Very little shell, I promise,” he adds as he turns back around.

The coffee is welcome in my body, reminding me how much I need to recharge. I'm definitely short some fluids, and I think my brain could use a reboot.

In a few moments, Will slides a steaming plate of fluffy scrambled eggs in front of me, crisscrossed by three glistening strips of dark fried bacon. Extra crispy, just the way I like it.

"Haven't quite figured out how to manage hash browns," he explains shyly.

"Oh my God, this is amazing," I sigh as I pick up my fork. "Seriously. I can't remember the last time anybody cooked for me that wasn't working in a restaurant."

"What? Are you kidding me?"

As I stuff myself with the eggs, about as daintily as a raccoon mother, I try to think back. Mona has only mastered the art of the drive-through. My dad doesn't date and doesn't cook. I suppose the last time anybody with any kitchen skills was in my life was back in Seattle, back when I was in high school.

"Well, my Aunt Sadie used to make this gumbo? That was pretty good. Sausage, shrimp, rice, tomatoes... Actually all kinds of vegetables. She had a garden too."

"That does sound good," he says as he slides into a chair next to me with his own plate of breakfast. "Nobody since then?"

"Not since we moved here," I answer, trying not to talk with my mouth full. "I can make the basics. My dad can live on jerky and canned peas if he needs to. My mother passed away when I was little."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

“It’s okay,” I say stupidly. But what else do you say?

Briefly I feel guilty that I just started eating without waiting for him. What kind of manners is that? But he doesn’t seem to mind.

“I guess my aunt’s gumbo is the most memorable meal from being a kid. I should email her or something and let her know. I’m not sure I was very nice to her, honestly. My dad would kind of dump me at her house when he went on trips, and I guess I was mad at him and probably took it out on her.”

Will nods, his expression serious and open. Suddenly I feel a little silly.

“Wow... listen to me!” I chuckle. “I’m just babbling about my whole life! Jeez. Ignore me.”

He shrugs. “No, it’s interesting. I like hearing about your life.”

This makes me even more nervous. “Seriously? How could that be interesting?”

Shaking his head, he stares at his plate for a second. “Honestly? I’m not really sure. Everything you say is... I don’t know. Interesting, like I said. I can’t explain it.”

I think about what he said for a minute. Then I want him to say more. I don’t know why; he could talk about anything. I just really like the sound of his voice. It’s deep and rich, like plucked strings on a standup bass. It oozes masculinity and confidence.

I suppose that is just as insane as him wanting to hear boring stories about stews my aunt cooked. How am I supposed to know what kind of attitude his voice oozes? What a silly thing to think.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Cass walks into the room, making hungry noises.

“Breakfast? Seriously? Tammy... Did you cook this?”

I flinch back, totally surprised by that word. Tammy.

Will senses my discomfort and gives me a encouraging nod.

“No, I cooked it,” he calls out.

“No way!” Cass barks as he piles his plate high with eggs and bacon and comes over to the small dining table. He kicks his leg over the back of the chair and settles down, slowing in the middle of the motion as he realizes Will is giving him a meaningful look.

“What? Did I insult you? I meant to say thank you. Thank you for the eggs.”

“Maybe you should not call me Tammy,” I interrupt, grimacing. “It feels weird after all. I know I said... well, let’s just forget it.”

“I’ll call you whatever you want,” Cass grins brazenly with a piece of bacon between his fingers. “Just pick a name. We can do this all day.”

He keeps his eyes on me as he tears off a chunk with his teeth. I like watching the way his neck moves as he swallows those first big bites.

“It’s just that I will probably forget who you are talking to. I keep forgetting. You say

Tammy and I don't know who that is. It's silly."

"Sounds reasonable," Will shrugs.

My belly tightens for no reason. I feel kind of ridiculous all of a sudden. Last night I felt empowered; now I feel conspicuous. Fake job, fake name, making a scene, making a spectacle of myself...

"Hey, hey, hey," Will says, reaching out to take my hand from the table. "Are you okay?"

Startled, I look down at his big hand folded around mine. It seems weird that he noticed. It seems weird that he is paying attention to my thoughts, to my feelings.

"Yes," I answer honestly. "Actually, I am okay."

"Seriously?" Cass adds, though his cheek is still filled with bacon. "Looked like you checked out for a second there."

I smile at him, not quite sure what to make of it. But clearly he is paying attention to me too. Not just playacting, but really paying attention.

Searching in my memory, I try to think of a movie that looked anything like this. Three half-dressed adults having breakfast. Talking. Sharing minor personal details.

I come up with nothing. I have to be honest, porn never prepared me for this. I suppose in real life, people make actual connections.

Okay, if this is how it's going to be, I can do this. I might even like it. I feel sort of... Revealed. Like a lottery ticket that somebody just scratched off.

“No, I’m here,” I finally answer. “Totally here.”

“Good to hear,” Will says. “We can call you whatever you want.”

“Just call me Libby,” I shrug, happy to hear the word again. “That’s what everybody calls me. Except if I’m in trouble, then I am Liberty Jane. But hopefully I can stay out of trouble here.”

“Oooooohhhhhhh, I’m not going to be able to make any promises about that,” Cass smirks slyly. “Trouble is sort of what we are all about.”

My eyebrows go up. “Oh really? You want to fill me in on some of those details?”

“Most definitely,” he grins. “All day long, if you are up for the challenge.”

Will shakes his head and

chuckles into his coffee mug. Apparently he does not entirely improve of his brother’s naughty sense of humor.

“I would love to take you up on that... but I would also love a shower. Is that a possibility?”

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Anything you need, ma’am. Sorry. I mean, Libby. Anything you need.”

Will rolls his eyes. He shakes his head like he is confused for a second and then stands up from the table with his plate clean. I didn’t even notice him eating his breakfast. But that is another soldier thing: eating fast while the eating is good. No time for delays.

While Cass and I finish up, Will leaves the room and soon comes back with a neatly stacked pile of clothes. He flips through them one by one, shrugging.

“Here’s a towel... A T-shirt? And, um, a fresh pair of boxers. Sorry I don’t have anything more appropriate, but... you know. They’re clean, I promise.”

A smile so big I feel I can barely contain spreads across my face. This is probably the sweetest thing he has done so far. Reaching out, I take the small pile from his hands and touch his fingers with mine. Again, there is something satisfying and complete about that connection. Just the brush of his fingertips is enough to remind me of everything else that we have done together. Every kiss, every sigh.

“It’s perfect, Will,” I manage to say through my aching cheeks. “Better than I can say.”

Chapter 15

Libby

While in their shower, I can’t help but think of the strange way this all came together.

Sounds like a script from a movie. Sounds like a fairytale, in a lot of ways. Ty is definitely some kind of cartoon villain. And Cass and Will? Too perfect to be anything but superheroes.

I shift back and forth between states of confusion and moments of absolute clarity. One moment my mind will be bustling with a jumble of thoughts all at the same time, so noisy that I can't pick out just one. The next moment, everything dissipates. Everything becomes completely clear.

Those are the moments where I think about just how this all feels. From the moment I stepped out of the ladies room at Sweeney's and got my head into it, that was when I really felt in control. Not a battle of swirling emotions, but a simple physical directive: focus on what feels good.

And these guys make me feel... amazing. Outstanding. Like nothing I've ever experienced before.

The towel that Will gave me is soft and fluffy. Wiping a smear of steam away from the mirror, I check myself out again. My tan lines are even darker than they were yesterday, and it really highlights the bareness of my shaved crotch.

"Great timing," I mutter to myself, shaking my head.

So completely naked. This is the day the universe decides to hand me a man who wants to see me naked? Not just one... Two? Seriously?

I've never been shy about shaving my bikini area. It's just for convenience, something I started doing when I was fourteen or so. But going completely bare was a spur-of-the-moment decision. Maybe I was bored. Curious. Maybe I wanted to see what it felt like.

But now... On the one hand, I'm embarrassed that these guys probably think I am some kind of freak, like Mona does. On the other hand, the sensations were amazing.

A shiver runs through me as I remember Cass falling to his knees behind me, grabbing my legs and opening me up like a flower. Will's mouth covered my mouth so I couldn't even gasp in surprise. Suddenly, I had both of them on me, filling me with sensation, fulfilling a secret fantasy I had barely admitted to myself that I had.

And yet, there is so much more to come.

I'm ready. I am beyond ready. I can barely wait another second.

After I slip into Will's borrowed clothes, I open the bathroom door and sheepishly look out into the living room. They both turn around immediately at the sound and meet me with identical stares of greeting. They look extremely pleased to see me.

"Okay, that seems to suit you," Will smirks as I pad into the room.

Looking down, I smooth the oversized T-shirt against my hips.

"Oh yeah? You think this is a good look for me?"

"Absolutely enchanting," he nods.

"Really?" Cass shrugs. "I actually think she's a little... overdressed. Maybe?"

My belly twists with nervousness as he stands and walks over to me, his steps measured and confident. As his arms fold around me, I naturally get up on my tiptoes and arch into him. It feels practiced and perfect, like a dance move that we have done a million times.

“Like, what is this?” he fusses as he pulls at the T-shirt. “Wouldn’t you be more comfortable without all this?”

“I might...” I pout, smiling with my lips just millimeters from his.

I want to kiss him so badly, but I want him to kiss me even more. I love that feeling of being taken. Being kissed. Being wanted.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

His hands are callused but smooth as they drag the T-shirt back up and off. I raise my arms over my head and let him reveal me. Even though I am shy, I let him lean back and take a good look at my naked body. The room is bright with morning sun. There is no way for me to hide. I know he can see everything.

“Beautiful,” he mutters, his eyes shaded by dark lashes as he inspects every bit of me.

He kisses me suddenly, hard, with a musk on his breath that I know is his arousal. That taste—I hunger for it. I feel like I could drink him in.

Nature quickly takes over and I let the wisdom of my body tell me what to do. My hands clasp behind his head. My spine seems to know where to go soft so that he can pick me up lightly and crush me against him while his tongue thrusts into my mouth.

Behind me, I feel Will’s breath fluttering against the back of my neck. His hands knead my muscles, trying my flesh like I am a loaf of bread, curiously exploring the textures and shapes of my back and legs.

Conscious thought wants to interrupt me, but I know that is a terrible trick. As soon as I start thinking, I get confused. In this space, I need something deeper than words. Not thoughts, but whatever is more primal than that. Urges. Desires. Wishes instantly fulfilled.

The void inside me winks at me again. It is like a dark well, something that fills up from the bottom. In it is all the longing I have that I never knew how to access.

But now, with these men overwhelming every sensation, the void is all I can feel.

Urges surge in me, bringing a strange sensation of need into my belly and hips. I need Cass to touch me. I need Will to bite a little harder.

Almost as though he hears me, Cass suddenly pulls back from the kiss, his lips glistening with moisture. He searches my eyes as his palms cup my cheeks.

“Fuck, Libby, you keep kissing me like that and I’m going to have to take you to bed!”

I nod urgently. Everything is on fire. My body knows what to do. I have never felt anything quite like this.

“Yes! Yes, Cass...”

His green eyes are filled with desire, and he practically trembles with the strain of standing still.

“But, Libby...”

With a start, I realize all of a sudden that he knows. They probably both know. I’m a virgin.

“Cass, I want it. So much!”

Will’s hands slip over my waist and close across my belly. I lean back into him, fixing Cass with a determined glare.

“Don’t you?” I challenge him.

“Oh, I don’t think you know what you are asking for,” he groans lustily. “Both of us... Your first time... It’s too much.”

But, stubbornly, I'm not going to be denied. He wants me, I can tell. I could feel just how much this morning when I jerked them both off.

I love the way his eyes dart to my nipples every time I shift my weight. Knowing this, I sway back and forth just slightly, just enough to trigger his reflex to stare.

"Cass... I want it," I whisper.

He bites his lip, focusing hard on the pale triangles of my tan lines.

"Will?" I ask plaintively, reaching back to lace my fingers behind his head. I have to reach up so high that I almost can't make it. I have t

o stand on my very tiptoes.

"You're not going to be able to take us both," Will whispers in my ear.

"Yes I am," I pout stubbornly, determined.

Cass quirks an eyebrow at me. "Are you serious? Libby, there's no way."

But I know he doesn't think that. I can see the swollen package in his track pants. I can see how much he wants me.

"I want it," I say again.

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Those are the words. That is the only thought. I shouldn't have to explain this. I want it, and that is all I know.

Cass glances at Will over my shoulder, as though negotiating this situation with him. Negotiating the terms of my surrender? That might be one way of looking at it.

Negotiating the terms of their surrender, is another way.

Finally something seems to change. They came to an agreement. I can tell.

Cass looks down at me with a sly, determined expression.

"You really want this? You're sure?"

I bite my lip, nodding tightly.

"Once we start, we won't be able to stop," Will warns me.

Cass smirks evilly. "Oh, I don't know, Will," he drawls. "Is she convincing? Do you really think she means it?"

Will chuckles, deep in his chest. "Yeah... I don't know."

Coming closer, Cass brushes his lips over mine, teasing, making me lean toward him then pulling away.

"I don't know either," he whispers.

I begin to shudder, my muscles quaking from the effort of trying to get closer to him.

“What do you want me to do?” I whisper back.

He smiles, drawing back slightly so that he can see into my eyes.

“I want you to beg.”

“Please,” I reply automatically.

He wrinkles his nose, then shakes his head.

“Not convincing. Are you convinced, Will?”

“Not at all,” Will announces.

Again he comes closer, his soft lips tantalizingly near, yet frustratingly far away.

“Yeah... You’re going to have to convince me,” he tells me. “You’re going to have to really, really want it...”

Will’s arms close around me tighter, his thumb and forefinger pinching my nipples almost to the point of pain.

“I do... I do want it...”

“Not enough, Libby. You have to want more.”

“Yeah,” Cass agrees, “I think I need to hear you scream it.”

Before I can draw breath, I’m lifted suddenly into the air. Startled, I realize that Cass

has thrown me over his shoulder and we are headed to the back of the house, back to the bedroom.

I barely have time to catch my breath before I'm falling, then landing in the middle of the soft comforter with a bounce. Will and Cass land on either side of me, arranging themselves over my limbs.

Closing my eyes, I submit to the urgent desires of both men. I feel my borrowed boxers being pulled off as Will takes my mouth in a breathless, crushing kiss. Totally exposed, my legs are spread apart, and hands explore me in a dizzying tumble of overlapping sensations.

I can't tell who is who, and I don't need to. They work in perfect synchrony, one kissing my mouth, while the other bites my waist. Hands massage my breasts as other hands stroke my pussy lips lightly.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

I'm reduced to a throbbing collection of shivering urges, each one rising to the surface and being met immediately. As soon as I feel like I need pressure, pressure is there. As soon as I feel like I need friction, friction is there.

Fingers slide past my lower lip, opening my mouth. A new sensation startles me and I open my eyes, astonished to see a magnificent cock just centimeters from my open lips.

Looking up, I catch Will's determined gaze. He scowls at me in concentration as he arranges his body over mine. His manhood is thick and straight, curving back slightly like a saber. The veins are smooth and thick beneath the skin. A rosy head crowns his dick, with a fat slit dripping a pearl of pre-cum that makes my mouth water.

As I watch, transfixed, his strong hand closes around his cock, stroking it expertly from the base to the tip. He slows at the end and draws the pad of his thumb across the pre-cum, smearing it deliciously across the head.

"Stick out your tongue," he urges me, his voice foreign with the thickness of lust.

Obediently, I push my tongue out over my lower lip. Balancing his weight on the headboard, he straddles my shoulders and aims his fat cock at my waiting tongue and mouth.

"Ohhhh, fuck, yeah," he groans as he swipes the head of his cock across my tongue.

"Uhhhhh nnnn hnnn," I grunt encouragingly, wriggling under his weight.

My hands close around his steel-hard thighs, pulling him closer. But he holds back, only teasing me with the tip. I watch, enchanted as he fists himself two, three times, pulling back and then coming forward again when I am starving for his taste. Then, just as I get a bit of his salty nectar, he pulls back again.

“Tell me you want it,” he groans.

“I want it!” I reply obediently.

“Open your mouth!” he barks, startling me, and I have to do exactly as he says. As soon as my tongue is out he slaps the head of his dick against it and then slides in, filling my mouth until I can’t breathe. I’m choking but I still want more. My eyes water but I still want more. Even when he tries to pull out I grab his thighs and suck, hard, bringing his meat all the way to the back of my throat.

“Oh fuck! Yeah, take it!” he moans, stuffing my mouth with urgent, deeper thrusts. “Yeah you want it. Yeah that’s—unnnnhhhhhhhh.”

Eyes stinging, I force my tongue to relax under the relentless assault of his meat. He begins to thrust harder, deeper, his hips rhythmically flexing like a smooth machine. Every thrust brings him closer, and I feel his body changing as he gets even harder, even thicker.

Just when I think I can’t go any more, I feel my legs pushed far apart. I can barely breathe around all the dick that is in my mouth, but suddenly I am gasping as a wet, hot tongue goes to work expertly licking my throbbing sex.

A moan spirals out of me, and the vibrations prod Will into deeper thrusting. My hips work on their own, circling, blindly searching for more friction. The combination of sensations is overloading my mind with sensory input and I feel myself spinning in space, dizzy even though I’m not moving anywhere.

Still, I can't choke or stop sucking his cock. I want it all: every inch of me plundered. Every deep itch scratched.

With a roar, Will buries his meat in my mouth, stretching deep into my narrow throat as he unloads his seed directly into me. His thighs clench under my grasping fingers. Simultaneously, Cass begins sucking my clit, his tongue thrumming against my pearl as he lifts me off the mattress.

Shattering, spinning, the orgasm blasts through me. I am full with Will's dick and this fireworks explosion in my sex. I blast apart into pieces, totally obliterated.

As the climax rips through me, I vaguely feel more happening. Cass is not done with me yet. Warm, golden waves lap at my consciousness, begging me to slip into the warm dark. But there's more.

As I am floating on a pool of half-conscious bliss, Cass continues working my pussy. Back and forth, his tongue slides up and down my slit, pausing to poke gently at my entrance. Yes. This is good. This is so good.

Curiously, he pushes with only the gentlest pressure, leaving the more intense sensation for my inner lips and clit. I've acclimated to those sensations but this new invasion hints at a deeper pleasure, one I haven't explored.

My pelvis rolls in unison with his rhythmic pulsing, encouraging him deeper. I feel Will's weight shift behind me as he moves down the bed, his body wedging behind my hip.

My thigh drapes over Cass's shoulder as they reposition me onto my side. Still blissed out, I am totally at their mercy. Wherever they want me, that's where I will go. The pressure... that delicious pressure. I feel it now, right at the breach. I want more of it. Even if it hurts a little bit, it's worth it to feel the pressure. It's worth it to

fill the ache that is inside of me.

And as I feel that pressure, I feel another strange sensation as Will begins to stroke the crack of my ass. His fingers are firm, but gentle. Still, I know exactly what he means to do.

Yes, is all I can think. Yes, I want it all.

The mattress heaves again as Cass crawls up next to me. He kisses me, his lips salty and sweet with my own musk. His tongue plunges into my mouth and I suck at it gently, savoring the taste of my sex on his lips.

“Tell me you want it,” he whispers into my mouth.

My hips rock against his hand and Will’s hand, letting my body feel around blindly for the ways to get them inside me. I need it so much now, I can barely hold on to words.

“Yessssss,” I manage to groan. “I want it.”

“Do you really?” he teases.

His teeth nip at my bottom lip as he finally slips a finger inside me. Just one, and it fits so perfectly. Another pulsing pressure builds inside me as a finger slips in and out, tapping on some secret passage that turns the volume up on every scream my body is giving.

“Oh, yesssss!” I moan, grinding harder against his fingers.

The next time that he enters me, I feel pressure on my ass as well. It is hard to separate the two feelings from each other, and when they happen at the same time, fireworks begin to go off.

“Beg me, Libby,” Cass commands me. “Beg me to fuck you.”

I’m insane with lust, barely able to put the words together. My mouth is dry. There’s only one thing I need. Only one thing I can conceive of.

“Fuck me, Cass,” I manage to groan. “Oh my God, fuck me now!”

“Yeah, that’s it,” he smiles, before taking my mouth.

With his hand behind my knee, he opens my legs as far as they will go. Will slides a lubricated finger in and out of my ass while Cass lines the head of his thick cock up with my tight entrance.

It’s so tight, it burns, but he doesn’t stop. Further and further he goes, plunging

forward until I want to scream and beg him to stop. But no. I won't do that. I want this so bad, I will take anything to have it.

With an audible pop he drives past my maidenhead, finally into the dark, seething void of my pussy. My body throbs

with elation as Will and Cass both fuck me, invading my borders, rendering words completely useless. All there is is naked, grunting desire. The sound of bodies sliding against each other, the irrepressible urge to fuck and fuck and fuck.

I hold on for dear life, pain subsiding and pleasure roaring through like a freight train. That's all there is, this overwhelming sound, this wordless primal scream.

Before I know it, I am coming again, clasp my ankles behind Cass's hips, dragging him as deep inside of me as he can get. I hear him call out, feel the gush of wetness inside me that squelches out between our bodies and puddles beneath my hip.

Maybe I black out, but maybe I don't. The three of us join together in an animal space, complete at last.

Chapter 16

Cass

Nobody thinks it's weird when I decide to head out for a run. Just regular military training, after all. Nothing unusual.

But it is the middle of the afternoon, and it is hot. Usually I would wait until the sun went down. Not today. I am full of energy. I am practically invincible.

As my heels pound the asphalt, I center myself, finding that dopamine calm in the

middle of my swirling thoughts. This is good. This is what I want.

Amazing.

It is almost too much having Libby in the house. She is both perfect and perfectly shocking. I mean, what more could I really ask for?

Well, I could ask for better timing?

But then again, what would better timing even mean? After I take the job in New York? Or after I turn down the job in New York? I don't even know what I am going to do yet.

The fact is, there are a lot of things that Will and I haven't talked about. We are both trained now. We're both coming to the part of our career where we are supposed to make a decision. Find a career. Take a path.

Training is over and it is time to begin putting it to good use.

Will has that degree in history and all his military experience. He can do anything he wants. As a matter of fact, he could probably do any of a thousand different things. He could teach. He could go into politics. He could go into private security service. Or he could stay in the Army and probably rise to colonel, maybe be a general by the time he is done.

The world is his oyster.

Without a degree, my options are more limited. I know that the offer in New York is one of the best offers I will ever get. Outside of private security, management opportunities for enlisted men are sometimes difficult to find. I could go back to school and get a degree too, but to be honest I am not that guy. I don't see myself

sitting behind a desk watching someone fill up a whiteboard for the next four years of my life.

I'd rather go on tour.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Still, I don't feel like I can make this kind of decision without Will's input. As twins, we have a certain bond. Certain things I just expect we will do together. A certain way of living.

In other words, I don't think I can go there without him. I could. I don't want to.

And as soon as I think about that, Libby comes right back to the front of my mind. That was another lifelong fantasy. Though Will and I have had girlfriends separately, something was always missing. It didn't match up right. It didn't feel like it was supposed to feel. This is what feels right.

This felt so amazingly right.

The look in Libby's eyes when she begged me to fuck her... Oh my God. I won't be able to think about that while I'm running or I'm likely to terrify people in cars with my hard-on.

But then again, how can I stop thinking about it now? Now that I've seen it, I want to see it again. The naked desire. Totally without artifice. Absolute and sincere. No sense of anything being hidden away. She just opened her legs and let us fuck the living daylights out of her until she squealed and came in buckets all over my cock.

Seriously. I cannot think too hard about this.

Okay. I'm not going to think the word "hard" again.

Running! I need to think about running. Breathe in for three steps. Breathe out for

three steps. That's better. Look at the trees. Look at the...

Oh. Sweeney's.

I let my pace slow to a stop at the raggedy line of trees at one end of the parking lot. There are no cars here right now. The rest of the strip mall is vacant anyway. Only Sweeney's is here, with its dilapidated shingle façade and hand-painted sign. Actually, it's missing the apostrophe. I didn't even notice that.

Also it says steaks, seafood, cocktails. An old-fashioned side. I wonder how long this business has been here?

Since there is no one around, I jog to the back door and scope the place out. There don't seem to be any cameras. It wouldn't be too difficult to find a way in, probably.

The question is, what would I do if I got inside? Steal some frozen fried pickles?

No. If anything else is going to happen here, it's going to have to be when everyone is around. It doesn't have to be violent or anything. But Libby does need her ID back.

And if Ty gets taught a lesson in pursuit of that object, how am I going to stop that situation? Seems like that would be up to Ty.

All of a sudden, rage blooms in my mind like drops of blood in water. Exploding outward, filling the space. A stain.

That fucker thought he had complete control of the situation. He thought he could do anything. He thought she would just obey whatever outrageous demand or threat he made.

You know, teaching him a lesson is probably a good idea.

A small voice in the back my head tells me that any lesson I taught anybody would probably interfere with my New York prospects, but I swiftly tell that voice to shut up. After all, I haven't entirely decided to go, right? Plans can always change.

But it probably isn't safe to be here. Resuming my run, I circle toward the county road that cuts back toward the townhouse. Nothing to see here. I even pass some privates who are also running. See? Totally normal.

Running does help to quiet my mind. It helps me to organize my thoughts. At least, it helps me to prioritize. What is important, after all? God, country, family. That's all I need.

Chapter 17

Libby

Everything feels different now. I feel so alive. Confident. Serene. Filled to the brim.

Cass and Will even look different now to me. Now I see the potential there. The first moment I saw them, I felt something, but I didn't know for sure. Now I know. Now I know why being around them felt like falling forward into space. It's so natural, I can't believe I never felt it before.

Maybe I was waiting for them. Maybe every body you see is not a body for you. Maybe there are only certain ones out there, like keys fitting into locks.

We fit together exactly. It feels like we were meant for each other.

I sit on the sofa, flipping through a coffee-table sized picture book of Japan after World War II. The architecture and landscapes are beautiful, but I can barely concentrate. Instead I find ways to watch Will as he walks around the house. Just

observing, just appreciating.

I wonder what he does for the Army, though I know it is completely inappropriate to ask. Sometimes people will tell you, but otherwise you just don't bother to ask the question. Special ops? Could be. He is definitely smart enough. I get the feeling that he has some education by the books on the bookshelf. Or maybe that is Cass? No... My guess is these books belong to Will.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

There is a history of the Civil War, then two more. In fact, there are books for each war our country has been in, and thick anthologies of historical philosophies. I wouldn't know that, except it says "historical philosophy" on the spine.

Not a math major, definitely. There is a book on economics, but it seems to be a general knowledge sort. No real science. In contrast to my bookshelves, which are almost entirely filled with medical textbooks and fiction from when I was a teenager, this collection seems quite masculine.

No literature either, outside of a few anthologies that seem standard issue. He kept those, but he didn't keep his ma

th textbooks. So definitely a humanities guy.

And what a piece of humanity he is. Dressed in long basketball shorts and a tank top, I can watch his muscles move underneath the fabric. He's thick and broad, not wiry like a teenager. He has been strong for a long time. He looks settled in his body. Solid.

Cass is the same way, thick in all the right places. I bet they were heartthrobs in high school. Probably played the same sports. Maybe even dated the same girls.

To my surprise, that thought irritates the crap out of me. Dated the same girls. As if.

Am I jealous? That's a new one.

"What's so funny?" Will suddenly asks, interrupting my train of thought.

When I startle and look up at him, the book slips from my hands and lands on the floor.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” I babble, reaching for it.

He swoops in before me to snatch it up, giving it an appraising look.

“Japan, huh?” he asks with a smile. “Are you interested in travel?”

I shrug one shoulder. “I haven’t really had a chance to give it much thought, to be honest. Yes? I mean, why not?”

He smiles, settling onto the sofa next to me and sending a thrill of butterflies flapping wildly through my core.

“Have you gotten to travel a lot with the colonel?”

This is a safe question, worded carefully. I appreciate the way he is asking me.

“No... We lived in Seattle for most of the time I was growing up. I have family out there. He has always gone off on trips for a few days... A few weeks. He doesn’t take me with him.”

“That’s too bad,” Will nods thoughtfully. “I think travel teaches you things about the world you can’t learn from a book. I think it’s important.”

I can’t help but smile at his words. This is quite a personal conversation for a soldier. Actually fairly deep.

“Where would you travel, if you could go anywhere?” I ask him gently. “I mean... You don’t have to tell me. I know that is kind of personal —”

“I think Brazil?” he answers with a faraway squint. “Maybe Peru or Chile? I’d really like to see the Amazon. See the South American pyramids. I think that would be pretty fantastic.”

“Seriously?” I ask, surprised.

He raises his eyebrows like I might have insulted him mildly. “Yeah, seriously. Why wouldn’t I be serious?”

“Oh... It’s nothing. It’s just that usually when you ask people where they want to go, they all say Paris... London... Rome. Stuff like that.”

He shrugs, smirking. “Maybe I’ve had a little bit too much of Western civilization,” he admits with a chuckle. “I’d like a real shift in my frame of mind, you know? Asia... Africa... That sort of thing. London and Paris just seem like more of the same to me. But of course you don’t know for sure. You never really know until you get there.”

I let that sink in for a few moments. He really is deep. Definitely the educated brother.

“And... Cass? What about him?”

He smiles slyly. “I’m sure you’ll have a chance to ask him,” he answers noncommittally. “But in general we tend to stick together. Twins, you know. I realize it’s cliché, but it doesn’t feel right when we are too far apart.”

A million questions crowd in my mind, but I know better than to ask. Eventually I will understand. They will tell me, or I will just come to know. But I can’t pry too deep. Bad military manners.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“And what about you?” he sighs, crossing his ankle over his knee in a gesture that I see as wonderfully relaxed and comfortable. “Do you have plans to go somewhere? I am going to take a wild guess that you are not enlisted.”

I reach out and tap his shoulder with my index finger approvingly. Happily, it gives me a little thrill of contact.

“You would be correct!” I announce. “I’m not enlisted. Not that I couldn’t be... But I decided to go to school instead. Or I decided to go to school first, I guess. I might enlist later. Or I might not.”

“So, not totally settled then?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that...” I answer shyly, realizing that I sound like I’m being evasive. Why am I doing that? Habit, I suppose.

“You don’t have to tell me more,” he shrugs pleasantly.

“Oh, it’s not a secret!” I chuckle. “Sorry, just not used to people asking me personal questions, I guess.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Yeah... I bet you do. Well, I am a little over two years through school. I have a plan to get out of town and go to New York to finish up.”

“New York, huh? Seems like everything is there.”

“You too?” I ask politely.

“Sort of,” he shrugs. “There was something floated to me, but I’m not sure how Cass would feel about it. And I haven’t made the time to ask him, which is on me. But anyway. Just funny you mentioned New York. What’s holding you back?”

“That plan is not 100 percent approved.”

I finish with a grimace, feeling as though I’ve really let the cat out of the bag. But he doesn’t seem judgmental at all. He seems sort of delighted by the idea.

“Oh, a secret plan? Like a run away and join the circus kind of plan?”

Laughter tightens my core and I realize this is fun. Really fun. Personal.

“More like a run away and join the ranks of community healthcare providers kind of plan!” I laugh. “There is a great program in New York where I can finish school while I do work with at-risk communities. My dad wants me to stay here, of course, but I feel like this is a great opportunity for me to do something I really love doing. You know?”

His eyes sparkle with interest. As he looks at me, it gets easier and easier to talk about this, even though I haven’t had any real practice. Mona listens, of course, but I have never told anybody else.

“I know exactly what you mean!” he says confidently. “So, how do you get there? Is there an application process?”

“The application is already approved,” I explain, shrugging. “In fact, all I need is the last eight hundred dollars for my housing deposit. That’s it. Eight hundred dollars to goal.”

“Ahhhhhhhh,” he sighs for a long time, knowing and sympathetic. “And does that explain how you ended up in your underwear at Sweeney’s?”

Embarrassment colors my cheeks crimson. Somehow, I had forgotten all about that again. But there it is again, oh my gosh. What a disaster.

“Honestly? Yes,” I admit, cringing. “And wow, that did not go as expected! Mona said it would be easy... in and out, a couple hundred dollars closer to my goal. Now I am zero dollars closer and I need a new ID.”

“Yeah, easy plans usually turn out to be the worst,” he rolls his eyes.

“I know, right? I should’ve known better, but the thought of reaching my goal before my dad got back was too tempting to pass up. I fell for it. And in my defense, Mona wasn’t exactly forthcoming about the details of the job, or about Ty...”

I feel him tense beside me, sense the anger he immediately reins back.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t talk about it,” I apologize nervously.

“You have nothing to be sorry for!” he barks, half startling me.

When I flinch back, he takes my hands in his, looking down for a moment while he collects himself. His thumbs trace deliberate circles on the backs of my hands.

“Sorry... I don’t mean to raise my voice,” he explains calmly, though I can still hear the emotion he is holding back. “Not sure why I have such a bad reaction to that guy, but I do. All I can tell you is I think he is really bad news.”

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

I nod silently.

He looks me in the eye, his gaze intense. So intense, I almost want to look away, but I don't.

"I'm not kidding, Libby," he says softly. "We will take care of this for you. You don't have to go back there. I promise."

I don't say another word before he's leaning forward, his lips soft against mine. The rest of what he has to say pours between us in that wordless space we share. I know exactly how he feels, and it makes me feel something too. Something I can't name. Something I shouldn't name.

But I know it's real.

Chapter 18

Cass

It seems so simple that we all settle in. Even though Will and I have never had anybody around for quite this long, not even relatives, Libby is different. Days go by in a breeze, almost too fast. We eat, we fuck, we chat about things. She is wicked smart, knowledgeable about a broad array of things. Moreover, she seems to really understand our way of life. There are no awkward explanations about our roles in the military, our past, our futures.

It's simple. Uncomplicated.

It doesn't hurt that she is a great cook. Not like a fancy cook, more like a manly piles of meat and potatoes kind of cook. She's not shy about eating, either. No salads and Diet Coke for this one. She eats like... Well, she eats like a soldier.

Of course, we have kept her very busy, with a vigorous schedule of physical activity. It's not my fault. We have been alone for a long time. We have a lot saved up.

Sometime in the middle of the week, I realize the deadline is approaching for the National Guard leadership position in New York. I need to make a decision. To do that, I need to have an uncomfortable conversation with Will.

Can I do it? The conversation... Yes. Actually deciding to make a permanent relocation somewhere on the East Coast, I'm not so sure. Part of me thinks I need to make decisions on my own. The other part of me thinks this is fine, so why ruin it?

"We are out of coffee!" Libby calls out from the kitchen, closing the upper cabinet door.

She runs a hand through her tousled blonde hair, lifting the hem of my T-shirt up to where I can see the curve of her left butt cheek. My mouth waters instantly.

"You know what? We're out of macaroni too. And onion powder. And almost out of cayenne!"

"Hey, can you check the white sugar? How are we fixed on that?"

She shoots me a glance then l

ooks around the kitchen quizzically.

"Sure... Where is it?"

“Right there,” I gesture with a smile.

She turns around and opens the other upper cabinet, then stands on her toes and rocks to from side to side, craning her neck.

“I don’t see it!” she calls out. “Are you sure it’s in here?”

“Probably top shelf! Maybe you need to climb up?”

To my surprise, she does it, simply hops onto the counter on her knees and stretches out so she can poke through the items on the very top shelf of the cabinet.

I can’t take it anymore. I rush across the room before she can get down and bury my face between those plump, inviting ass cheeks, letting my tongue dart between her pussy lips to taste the thick, musky scent.

“Hey! Heyyyyyyyyyyyy...” Her voice trails off as she softens, thrusting back against my tongue.

Balancing with a hand on top of the refrigerator, she opens up and lets me tongue-fuck her for a couple of minutes, moaning into the open cabinet until she comes all over my face.

When she begins to crumble, I catch her up my arms and carry her back to the couch, her eyes half closed in shuddering bliss.

“The sugar...” she mewls weakly.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Yeah, I was just kidding about that,” I admit as she settles between the cushions. “It’s in a totally different cabinet. I just wanted to see your ass.”

She shakes her head slightly as the dopamine courses through her, enjoying the last dregs of her climax. Since she is still wet, I slide my fingers along her slit, opening up this pussy that I’m on, this pussy that I trained up since it was practically a kitten.

“Hey, you guys want to head to the—oh, what have we here?” Will asks, appearing around the corner.

My fingers are already coated in her juices, but I’m happy to have company.

“Just a little afternoon snack,” I explain. “You got time?”

“Hell, I will make time,” he announces as he pulls his shirt over his head.

“No... No, wait,” she interrupts, moving away from me.

I catch her by the ankle, but she shakes her head playfully.

“No... seriously. We are out of things. Majorly out of things. And I need... Well, I need some girl things.”

“Girl things?” I repeat, looking her over. I think she looks nice in boxers and T-shirts. What more could she want?

“Yes, girl things,” she says again, rolling her eyes. “Real shampoo, for instance. A

razor. Actually, can we go by my house? Or maybe it's time I went home?"

I catch Will's eye. He and I agree on this thing completely.

"Libby, you're not a prisoner here," Will explains gently. "But we both feel you should stay."

"You know, I've been thinking about that," she starts, wrinkling her nose uncertainly. "I am sure that Ty has already forgotten about me. Mona probably already got my ID back. He's probably moved on to some other shenanigans."

Again, Will catches my eye.

"You could be right," I nod reasonably. "But, you could be wrong. This mission is already in progress. Why don't we just continue on this course, just to be safe?"

She tips her head to the side and rolls her eyes. "That means no," she pouts.

Will grins triumphantly. "Yeah, that's a good girl. That definitely means no."

She doesn't put up too much of a fight, and I would like to think that's because of our undeniable charms. But then again, it probably has something to do with the way her dad raised her up.

She looks down irritably and pinches the hem of the T-shirt.

"Okay, then, about the supplies? Maybe a run to Target? You can watch over me while I pick out some groceries?"

Will shrugs dismissively. I have to admit, my erection is a little more disappointed than that. But I guess there's no harm in going along.

“Yeah... Okay. That’s a good idea,” I finally agree.

She claps her hands quickly under her chin and squeals in delight. “Yes!”

The Target store is just a few miles away, and it does kind of feel good to get out for a field trip. With the top down on the Jeep, the sun shines gold through her hair and she leans back as the wind flutters the blonde fringes over the bridge of her nose, smiling into the sky.

Her torn jeans hang loose over broad hips as the three of us walk into the store, side by side. I notice a few curious glances from soccer moms and the occasional soldier. I guess we are just a sight. No denying that. If I saw brothers that look like us walking around the store with a woman that looked like her, I would give a second glance too. Human nature.

Libby quickly fills up the cart as Will pushes it for her, efficiently selecting items at every aisle as though she has a mental shopping list. I’m excited to see chocolate chips and walnuts go into the cart, and I suddenly hope that there might be some cookies in my future.

Homemade cookies. Could I really get that lucky?

She also has an eye for grains and proteins, the sorts of things that you need to keep your strength up. It’s nice. Feels sort of... I don’t know. Like being taken care of? Nice, like that.

After the cart is practically overflowing, she twists around with a smile, then stumbles, scowling. I catch her under her elbows and she straightens immediately, embarrassed.

“You okay?”

“Oh, of course I’m okay,” she replies quickly, brushing her hair back with the back of her hand.

She glances down, and I follow her eyes, seeing her slightly differently all of a sudden. She’s wearing a pair of my shower shoes, and obviously they don’t fit. And she’s wearing my T-shirt, and that really doesn’t fit either, no matter how cutely she tied it.

“They have clothes in this place? Shoes?” I ask her.

She shrugs shyly. “Well, sure they do...”

“All right, let’s go pick a couple of things out. Things that actually fit you. Whatever you want.”

She breaks into a brilliant smile. “Seriously? You want to... buy me clothes?”

Holding out an elbow, I wait for her to take it so I can guide her down the aisle toward the clothing section. Her cheeks are red and she can’t seem to hide the little smile that wants to break through.

She’s never had a man buy her clothes before?

Actually... have I ever bought anything like that?

“I will meet you guys over there,” Will smiles. “I want to look at the bestsellers.”

“Oh, okay!” Libby grins back.

Will rolls the cart away as Libby and I go in the opposite direction. Her fingers are small and delicate in the crook of my arm, and I have to admit it feels sort of silly, but also sort of fun to promenade through the middle of the store like this.

As soon as we hit the women’s section, she dives toward the back, to the last racks.

“Wait, these are nice,” I point out, waving at a selection of mannequins in flowery, strapless dresses.

“Oh, yeah, those are really nice,” she agrees. “But this is the clearance rack. They keep it at the back. Usually 50 percent off. I like to check here first.”

“Whatever you say. You’re the boss.”

“Hell yes I am!” she smiles, clearly delighted by this portion of the field trip.

Weirdly, I expected this to be much more difficult than it is. Shopping is one of my least favorite activities, but being with her makes it effortless.

She flips through the hangers on the rack, stopping every once in a while to pull out a tag and scowl at the price. Sometimes she seems to like something and takes it off the rack so she can hold it up, shoulder height, and scowl at it even more.

“Is there something in particular? Should I be helping?” I ask helplessly.

She shakes her head like the idea is preposterous. “No, you’re perfect! I will know it when I see it.”

“You’ll know it when you see what?”

She shrugs, shaking her head again. “You know... It. The thi

ng. Whatever it is. It will speak to me.”

“Ahhh... It’s going to speak to you,” I reply, finally getting the clue. This is some kind of girly sorcery. I am not meant to understand.

She continues flipping through the rack till she gets to the end, then sidesteps to the other one. Finally she pulls out a dress and lays it across the top, then quickly two more, all in different colors.

“Is that it? The thing that speaks you?” I ask wryly.

With a haughty stare, she plucks the dresses off the rack and folds them over her arm.

“As a matter of fact, they—”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Her eyes widen. Her voice chokes off the end.

My body tenses in response. Something is wrong.

Tracking the line of her gaze, I sweep the landscape and immediately see what she sees.

It's Ty.

We're at the back of the women's section, with at least four rows of clothes between us and him. He pauses in front of a rack of panties, glancing around furtively before plucking out a white, lacy pair and drawing it close to his face to inhale deeply.

"Jesus, what a weirdo," I mutter under my breath.

Libby doesn't say anything, but I notice that I have instinctively positioned myself in front of her. She stands behind me, totally still, with the tips of her fingers resting against my lower back.

"He didn't see you, Libby," I reassure her.

"I know," she whispers, but I can hear the unease in her voice.

Ty is sure taking his time. Is this what he does for fun? Loiter around the women's underwear displays?

"Okay, come on," I command her, reaching back to take her small hand in mine. The

moment that Ty dips his head to investigate a different design of thong, I lead Libby quickly along the back wall to an opening that I'm happy to see is an unstaffed room of dressing alcoves. They're all empty, so I pull her to the farthest one, the family-sized room with the locking door.

She follows me without objection, and I thumb the button behind us, closing us off in what I am pretty sure is a foolproof escape plan.

Turning around, I see the confusion and alarm in her expression.

"Hey... Hey... Look at me," I tell her in a low, confident voice. "You're cool. We're fine. He didn't even see us."

She nods tightly, her breath pulsing out through pursed lips. After a few moments she takes a deep, sustained breath and lets it out in a trembling shudder.

"You were amazing!" she breathes.

This catches me off guard.

"Who me? I was amazing? Just doing my duty, ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am," she mutters, just before she dives forward, wrapping her arms around my neck and jumping into my arms.

Chapter 19

Libby

Seeing Ty knocked the wind out of me.

I don't know why. He didn't see me. And even if he had, what would he have done about it? Nothing.

Probably.

But still, the sight of his sunburned face and stringy mullet stopped my heart in my chest. After that, I wasn't sure what happened. Cass stepped in. His voice low and commanding, I automatically did whatever he said. Without thinking, without questioning. I just did what he said.

Now, here in the tiny room with the door locked, he is everything I need.

I reach up, practically climbing him like a tree, holding on for dear life as I kiss the breath from his lips, filling myself with his scent, with his strength. After a surprised moment, he kisses me back even harder, sucking my tongue to the root, his fingers digging into my ass cheeks as he holds me astride his hips.

We are silent, hidden, refugees from a comic book villain. Still, my need is monumental. Huge. I need something solid.

Untangling myself, I climb down him and unbutton his jeans, pushing him back against the mirror. He spreads his heels shoulder-width apart as I strip him naked to his knees.

He is already hard for me, thick and heavy. His cock stands out straight, curling slightly downward. The head is dusky and fat, with the slit filling up as I watch.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Falling to my knees, I plant myself in front of him and bury his cock in my mouth, stuffing my face with his meat until it chokes out every sound.

Cass tangles his fingers in my hair, biting back his groans as he flexes. He wants to stay quiet, but I want him moaning. I want him to be my voice. I want him to drown out any thought in my head.

I'll take it all. From the tip all the way down to the base so that he slides past the back of my mouth, deep into my throat. Once there, I try to breathe, feel the suction that drags him even deeper.

"Yeahhhhh, fuck, Libby! Uggggh," he whisper-moans, but that's not enough.

No, I don't want him in control. I don't want him cautious and correct. I want control now. I want to climb on top of the situation.

So I suck even harder. Remembering to be gentle, I hold his balls against the palm of my hand and pulse my fingers in the broad space behind them with every thrust, feeling the way his balls load up.

Still not enough. He shakes with every thrust, but he still has a little bit of control left. I want to undo that. Following instinct, I slip a finger past his taint to his asshole, and hook it inside. His breath sucks in, but he doesn't say anything. A little deeper, and I feel the walnut texture of his prostate under the tip of my finger and tap it lightly each time he hilt in my mouth.

The effect is immediate. He comes like a firehose, an animal growl shuddering

through his lips, his fingers twisting out strands of my hair.

His asshole sucks around my fingers like a mouth, daring me to stroke his secret G spot even harder. But I know I need to be gentle. Too much of a good thing can ruin a man.

He comes and comes, milked until he's dry, until he goes limp in my mouth like a wilted flower stem.

I keep sucking until the very last drop is exhausted. Only then do I feel full. Only then do I feel like I've really accomplished something.

He slumps forward, panting dramatically. As he slides down the wall toward the small, vinyl stool, I watch his features melt into absolute submission. He hasn't shown me that before. He's always been in control. He's always kept a little bit back.

But here, I see a part of him only for me. A secret that we can share. A transaction of the most intimate kind.

He breathes deeply, not even bothering to pull his jeans back up for several minutes as I sit on the floor with my back to the door. I love every detail about this. His dick curled against his thigh, now smaller and darker but still impressive. The golden hairs on his legs that lie so neatly. The girdle of muscles in his pelvis, standing out like ropes.

"Jesus," he pants, disbelieving. "What was... Did you do that?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," I smile. "We were both here. Pretty sure I did it. You did it too."

"No, I mean... The extra. I felt like I was coming for days. That... Did you do that on

purpose?”

Wiggling my eyebrows, I try to make sure I don't smirk too triumphantly. “Oh, you think only women have assholes for fun? Is that what you're saying?”

“Well if that is what I was thinking, I will never say it again,” he chuckles, defeated. His head lolls back and forth.

“I guess you liked it? Is that what you are saying?”

Pride fills me. It was a risk, but I've seen it in videos a hundred times. Little did I know the effect it has in real life.

“You blow me away,” he shudders, twitching as another wave of pleasure slams through him. “Fuck! So good!”

Giggling, I walk to him on my knees and press a finger to his lips.

“We have to be quiet, Cass,” I scold him gently. “We don't want to be corrupting the youth of Target!”

“People get arrested for stuff like this you know,” he warns me, smiling.

“Gotta catch me first,” I quip.

There. I feel better. Sassy. Back to myself. How about that for the magical power of blowjobs?

After we hang out in the dressing room for a few more minutes, Cass finally rises, collects himself, and goes out to make sure the coast is clear. He returns shortly, holding out a hand for me to take.

“Don’t forget your dresses,” he advises me, just before we leave the room.

All of a sudden, everything is normal again. Here we are, a couple of people walking through the women’s section of a department store, a few brand-new outfits under my arm, this big handsome stud holding my hand. Downright wholesome.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“You guys! You had me worried!” Will calls out as he walks up with the grocery cart.

He and Cass murmur with their heads together for a few seconds, and he pauses, alert as a guard dog, while he searches the store for signs of Ty.

“You’re all right?” he asks me in a low voice, urgent and concerned.

“I’m all right now,” I confirm. “Cass took good care of me.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks seriously, but when he glances at me, his expression changes as though he knows everything that went on. “Just how all right is all right?”

I shrug nonchalantly and drape my new dresses over the back of the cart. “Let’s just say I owe you one, okay?”

“Damn, timing is everything!” he complains as we continue on the aisle toward checkout.

I hear the envy in his voice, but I know I can pay back the debt.

Chapter 20

Will

“Okay, what do you want to watch?” Libby chirps, flopping onto the sofa next to me and crossing her bare ankles over my knees.

She wiggles the TV remote in her fingers and smiles brightly until I close my laptop.

“I don’t know... I was just going to do a little catching up—”

“You can catch up later,” she smiles mischievously, placing her bare foot on top of my laptop so I can’t open it again.

Her toenails are just polished. Peach color with frosty sparkles that catch the light. She wiggles them as I watch.

“You like?”

Her puppyish charm is definitely effective. Though I was determined to wrestle with some big decisions, now that seems less important.

“I definitely like.”

“Good!” she smiles sweetly. “So, are you a blood and guts kind of guy? Sports?

Romantic comedy?”

“Oh, jeez... I don’t really know. The last time I watched TV I guess it was football?”

“Is football on right now?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I shrug. “I don’t like it. It was just on.”

“Yeah, that really isn’t helpful at all. So let’s continue. Sci-fi? Reality TV? Documentary?”

“Do you like documentaries?”

“Oh, Mona and I were totally addicted to this show called Bloody Biology. You ever heard of it?”

“No, don’t think so.”

“Oh! It’s amazing, if you can handle the blood. It has kind of stupid title, but it’s really just about these groundbreaking surgeries, the ones where doctors find out stuff they never knew before, you know? Really get in there and see how people work.”

“Okay, I’m game,” I shrug.

She raises her eyebrows. “What? Seriously? Are you sure?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Well if you get grossed out you can always cover your eyes,” I tease her.

“Ha!” she scoffs, twisting sideways and flinging her arm out so she can start flipping through the controls on the TV. After a series of menu screens, the show begins with some predictably cheesy music and a dramatic narrator.

Though I wasn’t expecting it, the show is pretty interesting. It is all about how there had been a practice of surgically modifying people to stitch their organs into place. They thought there was a epidemic of organ displacement, resulting in fatigue, fainting, even heart attacks. Their solution: creating netting to arrange organs in a sort of internal trapeze.

Most of the show is voiceover and reenactment, with a lot of Victorian drawings and actors with waxed mustaches.

“This isn’t very gory,” I shrug, wrapping my arm around her as she wiggles into the space next to me.

“This episode isn’t,” she agrees. “But wait... there’s a twist.”

“The surgeries are unnecessary?”

“What!” she gasps, annoyed. “You’ve seen this one!”

I laugh, pulling her closer so I can bury my nose in her hair. She smells like flowers or something. Some kind of girly shampoo I noticed in the shower.

“No... I have just heard the story before. When people started using x-rays diagnostically, it appeared as if everyone’s organs had sunk from the places they were supposed to be.”

She squints at me suspiciously, a sly smile twisting her pouty lips. “Yeah, exactly. Because all their drawings had been done from cadavers.”

“Cadavers that were dissected while they lay on their back!” I finish. “Is it funny? I mean everybody made an assumption about what they thought they already knew. A new technology changed everything. It took a while to adjust.”

“Probably messed up a bunch of people’s lives,” she adds.

The garage door opens and closes, and Cass comes in, limping and grimacing. When he sees Libby, he straightens immediately, valiantly pretending that he wasn’t just acting like he had sprained his ankle.

“Hey, are you okay?” I call out, because I know it will annoy him to have to admit it.

He shoots me an accusatory glare. “I’m fine,” he growls. “Just a cramp. No big deal.”

“A cramp!” Libby calls out with an inappropriate amount of cheer. “I can help with that!”

He shakes his head suspiciously. “No, that’s okay. I just need to stretch it out a little bit.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she sniffs as she climbs off the sofa.

I stifle my reflexive resentment that Cass yanked her attention away from me. She skips over to him and jumps up to kiss him on the cheek, then bounces past into the

kitchen and opens the freezer. I hear the clatter of ice cubes going into a bowl.

“Go ahead and sit down,” she directs him, pointing. “I’ll be right over.”

Cass limps dramatically in my direction. I swear he’s doing this for an Oscar.

“Guess you got to move over,” he smirks at me as he lowers himself onto the sofa, getting his sweaty legs in my personal space.

“Looks like you’re getting old. Maybe you should take it easy.”

“Really? That’s how you want to play this? I will kick your ass up and down the street to shut you up if I have to, and don’t you forget it.”

“I’d like to see you try it, gimpy.”

“All right, both of you. Knock it off,” Libby huffs as she returns, sitting in between us and pulling Cass’s leg gently onto her lap.

Curious, I watch what she does. She removes his shoe, her brow furrowed in concentration. Then she walks her fingers up and down the back of his leg until he winces like some kind of drama queen.

“Okay, there it is,” she announces.

“Don’t cry,” I suggest helpfully.

“Eat me,” he offers back.

Libby stops, twisting around to glare at me.

“Are you serious with this? Your brother is injured. Can you leave him alone?”

“Not really injured,” I grumble as she turns back around. I guess she means it.

“Okay, that really won’t hurt. At least, I don’t think it will hurt. I’m just going to work around it until the muscles stop spasming, okay?”

“You can do whatever you want, Libby,” Cass smiles. “I can take it.”

I can practically feel them grinning at each other, and I am tempted to open my laptop back up again. But she told me not to, and though I am pretty sure she was playing just now I don’t actually want to tick her off.

Her fingers are lovely to watch. Long and thin, nimble and graceful. She plays the back of his leg like a piano, gently kneading his muscle until he begins to relax. He even offers a few sighs to encourage her.

Maybe I should take up running.

“See? That’s good, right?” she coos softly.

“Yeah, that’s perfect,” he smiles back.

Well, I was here first. That's my thought. He went out for a run. But I was definitely here first.

The back of her dress is a crisscross of thin straps, with a bow in the middle. As she works the muscle in his leg I reach out and tug on the dangling end of the bow until it loosens and unties.

"I feel you back there, Will," she giggles. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, whatever I want," I answer.

Cass catches my eye, but I answer him with a challenging squint. If he feels like taking this away from me, he's going to have to stand up to do it, and I think there's a good chance he actually did have a leg cramp.

Points: me.

"I'm trying to work here," she chides me softly.

The tie falls away easily, loosening the back of her dress so that I can slip the straps off her shoulders.

"I am too."

When I kiss the back of her neck, she shivers in response. I feel the hairs raise on her arms and I run the palms of my hands along her shoulders.

"You're salty," I whisper against the back of her ear.

"You are making it very difficult to concentrate," she whispers back.

“That’s exactly what I am trying to do.”

One by one, I bite a light row of nibbles from her ear to the crest of her shoulder. It’s hard enough that I can see the mark, but not too hard. I like that ridge in her skin, the orderly tattoo, however temporary.

Sliding my hands into the back of her dress, I reach around to cup the weight of her breasts against my palms. Her nipples are already erect and taut, the pink circles puckering beneath my touch.

“Hey, my leg is still tight,” Cass complains, but I hear her sighing under my touch.

She’s mine again. He’s going to have to wait.

The dress slides up over her hips, and the lilac panties slide down. Her hips fit in my hands as I lift her up, dragging her back toward me. With just a few moves I am behind her, throbbing and ready, lined up with her wet, slippery snatch.

Cass stares me down, his expression changing from playful annoyance to desire and curiosity. I want him to watch

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

. Positioning her on her knees, I kneel behind her on the sofa so that she has to straddle Cass's extended legs.

My fingers slip between her pussy lips and she moans, throwing her head back so that it lands on my shoulder. Her fingers grip the back of the leather sofa with a creaking sound.

"That's it, Libby," I murmur in her ear. "Tell me what you want."

"You know what I want," she replies softly.

"Tell me," I repeat more forcefully.

In answer, she reaches back and strokes my cock from base to tip, her fingers drumming just the way she did for Cass.

"This," she sighs. "I want this. Inside me."

"Yes, girl. And I want to give it to you."

I love the feeling of her fingers, but I love the feeling of her pussy even more. From any angle, she is tight as a drum. Not broken in, and if she's isn't broken in yet she may never be. I know where the divot is, but I always have to force the head of my cock past the tight outer edges. I always have to hold back, afraid I'm going to tear her open, but somehow she stretches to accept me and I am sheathed in her hot, dark passage. So welcoming, so inviting. I take her in one long, slow stroke, driving to the center of her. Briefly, I realize that in her upright position, everything inside her is

pushing back against me, but I plow through. This is mine. Her body is mine.

It only makes it better, knowing that she wants it too.

After I get as deep in her as I can go, I shake her hips, making sure she is firmly seated on my fat, hard cock. She groans, full of my meat.

It's so hot, I feel like I'm going to explode right away, but not yet. Cass is enjoying the show. He moves his hand slowly inside his shorts, yanking himself hard as he watches me splitting our girl.

She moves with me, calling out like an animal with every deep, almost unbearable thrust. I see the beads of sweat begin to gather under her hairline as she works to take all of me.

It's always too much, every time. But she bears it like a trouper. She wants it just as bad as I do.

"Willlllll," she groans as I thrust a little faster, pulling all the way out, then plunging all the way back in.

Cass mimics the same movement, fisting himself from base to tip. He is thinking about the wet length of her pussy too, I am sure.

With a grin, he gives me a glance, then shifts suddenly underneath her, as though he just came up with something new. As he moves, I hold her steady for whatever he has planned.

When his lips close around her clit, I make sure to pump her even harder. She yelps in surprise at this new barrage of fucking, and it spurs me on even more. With Cass eating her pussy and me fucking her from behind, she is all ours.

My balls clench as I drive deeper, releasing my love right in the middle of her body. She falls forward slightly, pinning Cass underneath her as he continues to suckle her clit. When she comes, she breaks out in a satiny, luxurious sweat that covers her entire back. I watch her writhe underneath me, barely holding onto consciousness as this vision unfolds. Cass comes too, shooting his load in an arc that lands at the top of his bare belly.

We all land in a pile of limbs and heavy breathing, spent in the most glorious way.

Chapter 21

Libby

Mona picks up on the second ring.

“Hey, stranger!” she sings into the phone.

I have to admit that I am really happy to hear her voice.

“Hey yourself,” I answer back. I know I am supposed to be mad at her, but all of that seems sort of far away now.

“Are you still in witness protection? Any news from the enemy?”

“Oh, I don’t know... Sometimes it all seems silly, you know? But other times, I remember that he seemed pretty serious when he said he was going to rat me out.”

“Yeah, well, he’s known for running his mouth. He’s a character.”

A character. That seems like an understatement. But I just let it go.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“Yeah, so, I miss your face!” I admit openly. “What’s new? Is Carson still around?”

She huffs in frustration. “He’s moving, can you believe that? He got a permanent post.”

“Oh no, that’s awful!” I pout sympathetically. “Is it far? Can you visit or something? What are you going to do?”

“Shit, I don’t know, Libby,” she groans.

To my surprise, I think I hear real emotion in her voice. First I find out he is real, now I find out she actually cares about him? Will wonders never cease?

“I mean, if it’s worth it?”

I hear her shaking her head. I can practically see the vision of her curls moving in my mind’s eye.

“God help me, it actually might be worth it, Libby. Christ. What have I gotten myself into?”

“A relationship, by the sounds of it,” I quip.

“Ugh, that sounds awful!”

“Ha! Go figure! After all those lectures on how to get a man, you actually got one!”

“Yeah, very funny, Libby-love. You’re one to talk, miss thing. One day, a relationship is going to find you too. It’s practically unavoidable!”

I can’t say anything. I bite my lips closed.

“Yeah, well...” She sighs, letting her voice trail away. “What are you going to do. So, you really haven’t been home, huh? What is the plan?”

“Well, actually, that’s why I was calling,” I start, trying to figure out the fastest way to explain everything to her. But really, there is only one way.

“Okay, go on,” she prods gently.

“Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything, babycakes.”

“Can you check on the house? Just walk around to make sure everything is okay. You have a key.”

“Oh, sure! Of course. No problem.”

“And... um, can you maybe pick me up a couple things? My laptop? Kind of an overnight bag situation?”

The line goes quiet while she thinks this over.

“And then...”

I take a deep breath. “And then can you maybe bring it here? To where I am? To me?”

“Hell yes!” she agrees immediately. “I literally thought you were never going to ask! Just text the address and I will be there in two shakes!”

“You’re really the best, you know that, Mona?”

“Pshhhht. Well, of course I am,” she sniffs. “I will see you in just a bit!”

Summoning the red button to disconnect the call, I cringe. Was that enough?

That is all I should say for now. I could prepare her, but why? The look of surprise on her face is going to be amazing.

When the doorbell rings, Will gives me a cautious stare from where he stands in the kitchen, arranging freshly baked cookies on a plate. I know it sounds cheesy, but I assumed the cookies would convince them this was a good idea too.

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Cass just shrugs with his cheeks full, less cautious than Will, it seems.

The door swings open, and she gives me a giant, enthusiastic grin before leaping across the threshold and crushing me in a hug.

“Girl! Liberty Jane! You’re alive!”

“Only for a few more minutes until you crack my spine,” I grunt, barely.

She sets me down gingerly, plucking a strand of hair off my forehead while giving me a motherly once-over. Her eyes narrow suspiciously.

“Are you skinny? Have you been eating? You look different.”

“I assure you that I have been eating. In fact, I baked cookies! Come on inside.”

“Well, yeah, sweetie!” she coos affectionately. “Why don’t you show me around your witness relo—”

She steps into the living room, then pulls up short.

“Oh, hello, I didn’t see you there,” she explains, pushing her hair back with her palms nervously.

“Mona, this is Will.”

Will walks forward, extending a hand in a brief, polite handshake.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am,” he says in that formal, sexy voice of his.

I’ve heard it a thousand times, but it still thrills me to my core.

“Oh, please do call me Mona,” she titters in her polite, Southern way.

“And this is Cass,” I continue.

Cass crosses the room from the other direction, also shaking her hand.

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am,” he murmurs.

“Well, my goodness!” she exclaims, literally fanning herself with her fingers.

She shakes his hand, but turns to me in confusion and a little bit of alarm. Then she turns back to the guys and give them each a terse once-over, then turns back to me.

“This is where you’ve been,” she declares.

It’s not a question. It is the opening remarks of her personal style of investigative reporting. Cass, Will, and I stand still as she begins to walk a path around the perimeter of the room, her eyes darting from surface to surface as she assembles the evidence into a narrative on the fly.

“This is a nice place,” she announces.

Will begins to thank her, but I stop him with the palm of my hand. She will get to him soon enough.

“Nice place... Books. Sofa. No art. No band posters.”

“What is she doing?” Cass whispers theatrically.

“Reading the room,” I answer simply.

Her hips sway as she saunters into the kitchen, pausing to open drawers and cabinet doors, finally the refrigerator where she stands for a full fifteen seconds.

“You guys are military.”

“Big deal. She got that from the military-issue lettuce crisper,” Will jokes nervously.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Actually, she probably got that from the sparse sense of organization and the townhouse's proximity to the base, but I don't want to blow her act.

Plucking a cookie off the pile, she nibbles a corner thoughtfully and glances at the three of us, then away. She sees the bathroom door and brightens.

A lot of information is contained in the bathroom.

We all just wait as she makes her inspection and then she comes out, stomping to stand right in front of me. Her eyes flash with a combination of

emotions I don't fully understand. Is she angry? Outraged? What?

"You know what I'm going to say," she says accusingly.

Oh. That. I can see it in her eyes.

Freak.

Her eyebrows arch in perfect parentheses.

"Tell me I'm wrong," she challenges.

I cross my arms. Over my head, Will and Cass exchange looks.

"See? I'm not wrong," she finishes, finally breaking into a smirk. "Oh, Lordy, what is your father going to say, Liberty Jane?"

“Yes, Liberty Jane?” Cass repeats with laughter in his voice.

Mona points viciously at him. “You are not allowed to call her that. That is just for family.”

“Yes ma’am,” he answers obediently.

“That’s right,” she sniffs, tilting her head to stare at me again. “So, you’re okay? You sure?”

“Never better,” I shrug, feeling my insides get lighter. She approves. I can tell.

“Well, that’s really what’s important.”

I feel Will and Cass relax next to me. They know they had gotten the seal of approval too.

“I ordered us pizza,” I suggest. “Should be here any minute. Can you stay?”

She reaches out to fuss at the corner of my dress, plucking it for no reason.

“Of course I will, honey,” she coos. “I want to talk to your gentlemen, anyway.”

Will crosses his arms. He is a gentleman, but he’s also impatient.

“Actually, we want to talk to you too,” he says.

She nods slowly as though she knew it was coming. I want to giggle. I love her Southern wisdom act. It is one of my favorite things that she does.

The pizza arrives shortly, and we all gather around the table to take slices on small

plates. I notice the guys are not eating like a pack of rabid dogs as usual, in honor of our company.

Mona keeps an eye on both of them, continuing to check them out even though the charade of her initial entrance is completed. She really does care about me, and I'm sure this is blowing her mind more than a little bit.

“When is your dad getting back?” she asks.

I wrap a string of melted cheese around a fresh slice of pizza before dropping it on my plate.

“Just a couple of days,” I answer. “I will call him tomorrow.”

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

She looks around the table, then around the room in general.

“And then what? You’re going home?”

“We couldn’t leave her alone after a credible threat,” Will explains. “If anything happened to her, we would never have been able to explain that to the colonel.”

“Make sense, I suppose,” she nods.

Cass scowls briefly. “Well, do you have different information? How credible is a threat from Ty?”

She stiffens. The guys both see it, and I do too.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that,” she admits.

“Have you been back to work?” I ask. “Has he... said anything?”

“About you? Not really. I have your ID, and I left it in your laptop case. Honestly, I don’t think that you will hear from him. And if he knew who you were, you would definitely not hear from him. He’s just a coward with a big mouth.”

Will refuses to stop looking at her.

“And that’s all? Is there more?”

“No, I... Well, it just made me think,” she admits. “Maybe it’s not a good

environment. For anybody. For me.”

“Did something happen?” I ask carefully.

“What? Oh, no! Well, not to me. Not exactly. But you know how it is. You talk yourself into things. You make a decision that seems right at the time. Suddenly it’s three years in and you’re still working for a guy with a mullet and seven missing teeth, you know what I mean?”

“Time does fly,” I smile sympathetically.

Everybody makes choices, comes the voice in my mind.

I know that there is more that she can tell me, but she won’t say anything in front of Will and Cass. Maybe later, when we are alone. Maybe then I’ll get the rest of the story.

And maybe not. Maybe the story ends without me knowing anything.

“To tell you the truth, I thought you were being a little bit of a drama queen,” she shrugs.

“It wasn’t up to her,” Will replies simply.

“Okay, well then maybe you are the drama queen!” she scoffs, but then her attitude slowly changes. “Then after a while I saw it all with fresh eyes. The girls. The drugs. And days going by, as they do.”

She sighs sadly, as though counting to herself all the days that have gone by.

“Oh!” she barks suddenly, holding her hands up. “And I almost forgot! I got your

money, too!”

“Wait, what?” I gasp. “Are you kidding me? That’s amazing! How much?”

She pauses, grinning. “Three hundred and forty dollars, sweet cheeks.”

“Oh my God!”

Patting my hand, her eyes sparkle. “Worth every penny, Libby-love! You worked your ass off for that money. Is it enough? Can you get to New York?”

Cass sits up straight. “New York? What’s this about?”

I exchange looks with Will, remembering that I had a conversation with him, but not with Cass.

“Oh, it’s just... Well, I’ve been saving up money. For a nursing residency. In New York. But I don’t have it all.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“But you could,” Will interrupts with a kind smile.

Shyly, I shake my head. “No, I still need like four hundred bucks. I still need to convince my father. I still need... well, a lot.”

Cass stares at me intensely.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, reaching out to his hand on the table. “I wasn’t keeping it from you. It just didn’t come up.”

He shakes his head. “No, that is not what I meant. It’s okay,” he explains. “It’s just that I thought you knew—but no. You just had your own New York thing.”

“What?” Will interrupts. “You thought she knew what?”

“About New York,” Cass replies, confused. “Wait, do you know about New York too? How did you hear about that?”

Will holds up a hand, and I catch Mona’s eye. She is wide-eyed and delighted by the strange, mirror image theatrics unfolding in front of her.

“How did I hear about what? That doesn’t make any sense. How did you hear about New York, Cass?”

“By email, how else?”

“Well that is how I heard about it too! That and a phone call from the head of the

history department—”

“History department? What are you talking about? The National Guard doesn’t even have a history department at Fort Hood.”

“National Guard? Who said anything about the National Guard?”

By now, Mona and I are both racked with laughter. We can see it, even if they can’t.

“Okay, okay, okay, what is going on here?” Cass says, annoyed. “Will, are you talking about my job offer from the National Guard?”

“No... I’m talking about my job offer from the history department at Fort Hood.”

“Those are the same place.”

Will begins to smile. “Yeah, but they are two different job offers.”

Cass shakes his head in disbelief. “Are you shitting me? Do you know how long I’ve been sitting on this, trying to figure out how to talk to you about it?”

“I don’t know... about a month?” Will answers, shrugging.

Mona pulls a face. “Sounds like you guys got some weird twinsy hoodoo going on. What are the odds?”

Will scrubs his face with the heel of his hand, shaking his head in disbelief. “Man, I should’ve figured it was going to be something like this. We made it a lot harder than it needed to be.”

“Probably won’t be the last time,” Cass says.

All I can do is smile. That was one of the funniest things I think I ever saw. I'm so glad Mona was here to witness it, because nobody would ever believe it.

“So all you need to do, Libby, is figure out h

ow you're going to get to your residency, right?”

I take a breath, peering into Will's gaze, seeing myself in his green eyes. He holds me steady, plain and earnest, telling me something silently that I would never ask him out loud.

Cass reaches out and slides his fingers underneath my palm so he can grasp my hand lightly in his.

“Well?” he asks softly. “What do you think?”

My head is spinning. What do I think? It's hard to say. I know that words get in the way, though.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

When I let them fall away, the answer is clear. The path is forward. And it leads to New York.

Chapter 22

Libby

Weirdly, knowing that we are all stepping forward together makes the next couple of days sort of strange. Sort of spotlighted, as though everything we are doing has an expiration date.

No, not an expiration date. But a big “to be continued” sign underneath it.

At some point we all agreed to sleep in Will’s bed together. Not in words, just silently, the way we seem to agree to most things. Every night, we have fallen together on the same king-size mattress, usually sleeping after an hour or so of vigorous, energetic exercise.

Today though, it’s a little different. It’s real. It is, apparently, a thing.

Tomorrow I need to go home and explain my choices to my father. Right now it seems inevitable. He will accept it. Something has changed in me; some kind of childish shield has cracked away. Now I know the decision is mine to make, and he will naturally understand.

Cass removes his T-shirt slowly, watching me from his corner of the bed as I slip out of my floral dress and fold it neatly on the dresser. Mona brought me some

nightgowns and if he weren't already staring at me, I would definitely slip away to the bathroom to put one on. That is something Mona taught me: the allure of nightwear. It seemed kind of pointless to me, but she explained that the point of nightwear was to be removed by your special fella, as she called him at the time.

I would like to do that. I will save it for another time.

Will comes in, closing the door behind him. He smiles at me broadly, his cheeks creasing.

"Now, that is what I like to see," he announces, his eyes skating over my naked body.

I lean back against the dresser, fixing him in a challenging stare.

"Which part?"

He slides his track pants down to his ankles. His cock is stiff and ready, already at attention.

"The whole thing, Libby. Every inch."

"You have already had every inch," I smile.

"Oh, no," Cass interrupts. "There is still so much more we haven't done yet."

My eyebrows go up and my center twists with anticipation. Cass kicks his track pants to the laundry basket in the corner and stares at me brazenly, his eyes glittering with lust, his mouth open as he stares past my skin and into my body.

"Show me," I whisper.

He holds out a hand, and I cross the room to him, suddenly more shy. When I take his hand, he draws it to his lips, kissing my palm, fluttering his tongue against my hand in a ticklish, sensual way.

“Just do everything I say,” he murmurs.

Will flanks my other side, taking my other hand. His kisses are tender, but with a bite. He likes to show me his teeth, to draw designs with the pressure that last for minutes, sometimes hours. I adore his love bites. Sometimes I wish they were permanent.

I know this dance. They will move my body in the ways that suit them. They will draw sounds and emotions from me I never knew I had. All I have to do is submit. Not like a victim, but like a treasure. Something being carried away. Something being adored.

Tugging me toward the bed, Will kisses underneath my jaw, burning a line from my earlobe to my nipple. My body shivers in delight, sending racing courses of goosebumps from my scalp down to my ankles.

I fall next to him, arching and undulating under his touch, letting my fingers wander off over his sculpted flesh. Every time he moves, I can feel the muscles underneath: bicep, trapezius, deltoid, mastoid. Every one perfect in its precise shape and size.

Behind me, Cass pushes my hair off the back of my neck so he can drag his tongue down the furrow of my spine. I feel his strong, thick tongue tracing each vertebrae to my tailbone, then farther. He opens my legs with his hands as his tongue swipes up and down the cleavage between my buttocks.

Will's lips are sweet and strong. I could kiss him for hours. I have kissed him for hours. I open my mouth wide as he thrusts his tongue inside, mimicking the motion of his cock. I can envision it so clearly, my body spasms unintentionally. I know it is

coming.

But Cass has a surprise for me. I hear the squeak of a bottle opening, then feel a cool, luxurious abundance of moisture on my asshole. He spreads a generous amount between my cheeks, so much that I can feel it sliding down my thighs. His fingers splash through the lubrication, spreading it everywhere.

In response, I relax, knowing that he will slide a finger into my dark hole any second. I never knew it felt so good, but now I crave it. I love that sense of fullness.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Pushing back against him, I want to invite him to probe me now. Now, while Will's tongue is in my mouth, while Will's cock is still pressed against my belly instead of between my thighs. Just my ass, I want Cass to take it.

"Yeah, you want that," he mutters, reading my mind.

But what I feel is not his finger. His cock slides between my thighs, then slips between my ass cheeks. It's so thick, I feel myself pull away.

"No," he grabs me firmly, squeezing my thigh in his hand. "Give it to me, Libby. You know you want to."

"It's too big," I object meekly.

"Not for you, sweetheart," he continues in a hot whisper against the back of my neck. "It was made for you."

As if to prove his point, Cass slips a finger past my pucker, then two immediately after. His fingers slide easily in and out of me and I feel myself open up, grasping for more.

"You see? You're begging for it."

Two fingers, I am almost certain. They pump in and out, slowly, stretching me a little wider. Then three. Three fingers in my ass all at once.

Slowly, I acclimate. It feels uncomfortable at first, like it's going to be too much, but

then my body adjusts. I go from thinking it's too much to thinking it is not enough. I press back against him, craving more. Wanting it all deeper.

Will kisses me hard, sucking my breath away as Cass's finger fucks my asshole. Will's fingers twist my nipples gently, adding another layer of sensation to baffle my defenses.

When Cass's dick slides between my ass cheeks again, I am more than ready for it. I know he was right. I need that fat cock in my ass.

"Ohhhhhh, Libby," he grunts in my ear as he shifts his weight.

The fingers retreat, replaced by what feels like a fist. It is so fat, it just pushes against my ass, stretching me slowly. But he doesn't give up or retreat. His breath is hot in my ear as he slides ever so slowly past the first tight ring.

It seems impossible, but then he is in me. I feel the tissues snap around him, hear his gasp of relief and lust.

Not too fast, he starts to thrust. Just a little bit at a time, he pushes deeper, then pulls back. I feel my fear melting away with each inch that he invades.

"You got some for me?" Will asks me suddenly.

I open my eyes, so overwhelmed with sensation that at first I don't understand. But his fingers dance over my pussy, sliding into my vagina, running along the back wall to meet the mass of his brother's cock, just a thin membrane away.

It seems impossible, but I know what he's going to do. Cass holds steady, his arms trembling with the effort to restrain himself. Will bites my lower lip as he angles himself beneath me, then slides his cock into my pussy, stuffing me with an obscene

amount of dick.

But it is just the right amount. They work in unison, guiding my hips for leverage, holding me tight so that everything works the way it should.

I can feel the passage where they almost touch each other, but not exactly. After this slow first thrust, they begin to work more quickly, drawing out and leaving me empty, then thrusting forward together, filling me back up, driving me to madness.

My mind shatters into a million pieces. I can't begin to explain everything I'm feeling, but I know that I am safe, that I am exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Sweating, turning, balanced in synchrony, our bodies piston together in an impossible combination. Both dicks plunging into me, my body welcoming and satisfying both of them.

In a short time, I find my hips pulsing to help them along. I can clench just a little bit and sense their surprise, the gradual shattering of their control. When it seems like I can't take any more, they both hilt themselves, fucking me so deep I think I will split. Hot cum douses my insides, splashing to the end of the void and then making its way back out.

Astonished, I hold them both as they shudder and empty themselves into me. These giant animals. These magnificent men. They have shown me so much trust and brought me to places I could never have imagined.

I thought I knew what this would be like. I thought I had seen everything a person could see. Curious and willing to explore, I imagined I was the sort of person who had done the research needed to understand what fucking was really about.

But I had no idea. This is the real thing. Not pictures. Not pretty and lit by

professionals. Real, sweaty, grunting, desperate. Trusting. Daring.

I am warm in their arms. So safe.

Chapter 23

Will

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Libby stands proudly in front of the mirror, squinting at her new dress, smoothing it over her hips with her palms.

“I think you missed a spot,” Cass interrupts, grinning.

“What? Are you serious?”

I punch him on the shoulder, hard enough to make a difference.

“No, I was kidding!” he objects. “On a related note, I would like to file a complaint.”

“Jeez, don’t mess with me,” she fusses, scowling.

I hold her from behind, trapping her hands in mine, forcing her to stand still against me for just a moment. I can feel her heartbeat through her back, fluttering like a caged bird.

“It’s going to be fine,” I assure her.

Her eyes meet mine in the mirror.

“You know? It’s going to be weird.”

She’s probably right. No point in arguing with her.

Cass gets her bag into the Jeep and we all climb in like some kind of field trip. The sun is bright, but clouds are hanging low in the west, promising a change in the

weather later today.

It's not a long drive. We make it in silence and pass the guard station.

I see the door open as we pull into the driveway and I yank the emergency brake, cutting the engine so that Cass and I can scramble to attention before Colonel Warner gets to the driveway.

Libby scrambles from the back seat, leaping to greet him with her arms out.

"Liberty Jane!" he proclaims, scooping her up in a crushing embrace.

Cass and I pretend not to watch, but of course we do. We remain at attention, eyes fixed to the horizon. She kicks her heels delightedly. He swings her in a half circle before setting her down.

Liberty Jane. I love that name.

His demeanor changes completely as he approaches us. We snap automatic salutes, pausing until he completes his before dropping our arms.

"At ease," he commands us.

Tension fills the air as he walks back and forth in front of us, his jaw clenched.

"Didn't think I would be running into you boys today," he says.

"Yes, sir."

"Anything to report?"

“Daddy,” Libby interrupts, reaching out to slip her hand into his. “I have a lot to tell you.”

Colonel Warner pauses, then drops his gaze to smile at her. He would have every right to make today very difficult for us, but clearly he is choosing not to.

“Boys,” he says instead of goodbye as he follows Liberty into the house.

Liberty Jane. I’m going to have to remember to call her that.

“Jesus,” Cass sighs when he is out of earshot. “That was stressful.”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“We are probably lucky he didn’t make it worse,” I remark as I hop back into the driver’s seat. “You think we should stay? Provide backup?”

“Nah,” he shakes his head. “She’s a big girl. She can take care of herself.”

Epilogue

Libby

The pots bubble on the stove, filling the kitchen with steam and a dizzying combination of aromas. Reaching overhead, I flip the exhaust fan on and listen to the white noise for a few moments, trying to organize my mental list.

Cake. Chili. Chili condiments. Bread in the oven. Pasta salad. Green salad. The two-foot submarine sandwich from the deli around the corner.

What else. What else? I know there is something.

Cass lounges in the living room, leaning back on the sofa with his heels on the coffee table. I sweep around the perimeter of the room, snapping to get his attention.

“Hey! You said you were going to get the extra chairs from the basement!”

He leaps to his feet and grins sheepishly because I caught him slacking. “Yes ma’am!”

“And don’t call me ma’am!” I call after him as he disappears through the basement

door.

“Anything I can do?” Will asks gently, or maybe carefully is the right word. “I mean, before you yell at me? Just tell me now, and I will do it.”

“I would love it if you would set the table,” I answer gently.

That is how I have to do it. Remember to be gentle. Remember to be nice. They are always nice to me. It’s not their fault that I’m so damn uncomfortable right now.

Actually, you know what? It kind of is their fault.

Snow falls gently outside the front window, obscuring the front lawn from view. But I don’t see any new tracks, so I don’t think anyone is here yet. I still have time.

I head back to the kitchen, crossing Will’s path as he carries a stack of plates to the dining room.

“It’s all under control,” he smiles reassuringly.

Is it? Probably. And even if it isn’t, what is the point in worrying about it? It’s not the Super Bowl. It’s just a normal, family dinner. Just regular Sunday stuff, like people do all over the world.

The exhaust fan is doing a good job of clearing the steam from the kitchen so I can breathe. When it gets too humid, I feel like there is no room in my body for my breath. I have to raise my arms over my head to get just a little extra room for my lungs.

And I have to be careful. I can’t climb up on the counters. I can’t carry the big slow cooker by myself. There is just no damn room.

A sudden jolt nearly doubles me over, reminding me comically of yet another thing I can't do. I can't go more than forty-five minutes without a trip to the bathroom.

"Yeah, I hear you, I hear you," I murmur to my belly, drawing my palm across the impossibly swollen surface. It doesn't even look like me. I've been invaded by aliens.

Two aliens, to be specific. Twins. Who could have guessed it?

As I hobble to the bathroom, waddling shamelessly, I have to laugh at myself. Stop and smell the roses, after all. I mean, it won't be like this for much longer. And honestly, I don't want to forget a moment of it.

As I wash my hands, I hear the front door open and voices in the foyer. Without waiting, Mona dashes down the hallway to bang on the bathroom door.

"I'm in here!" I announce.

"I know! Why do you think I'm knocking? Let me in!"

"Don't you have any sense of privacy—"

The words disappear on my tongue. She is holding up one hand, fingers splayed. In the middle of her hand, a huge diamond glitters in the center of a bright gold band.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

“What! What is that?” I exclaim.

“It is happening!” she squees, shoving her way into the tiny bathroom with me and slamming the door shut.

I’m jealous as she hops up onto the bathroom counter with ease, not even thinking twice.

“Tell me! When did he ask you?”

She rolls her eyes for dramatic effect. “Just yesterday! We went on one of those tourist tours, you know? Through Manhattan with all of the teenager field trippers and Germans and Japanese trying to get to the Empire State building? You know?”

I nod tightly. “You bet I do. I can’t wait to do stuff like that again.”

For a moment she pauses, pouting. Her hands reach out to pat me gently on my gigantically swollen abdomen.

“I need you boys to hurry up and get the hell out of there, you hear me?” she hollers at the twins in my womb. “Your mama and I have a lot of margaritas to catch up on. Double time!”

“Boy, do we ever! Margaritas sound absolutely delicious,” I sigh hungrily, practically able to taste the crushed salt on the rim of the glass.

“All in due time, sweet cheeks,” she pouts reassuringly. “I promise! It will happen!”

“I know, I know...” I say for the millionth time. “But enough about me. You went to the top of the Empire State building?”

“Oh! Right! So we just move along, doing our tourist thing, and we get to the binocular things? Whatever you call them? The ones where you put money in and then you can see the Statue of Liberty and stuff?”

“Oh yeah, classic.”

“Isn’t it, though? Well, he pushes me toward one machine in particular, but it won’t work. I put in another quarter, and it still doesn’t work. I start banging on top... No dice. Apparently I was making quite a spectacle of myself, because security came over!”

“Did you get ejected from the Empire State building? Please say yes. That would totally make my day.”

“Well... No. Sorry. It was all part of the plan! The security guard came over and gave the machine a good punch, and the thing cleared up, but when I looked through it, there was a note at the end! And the note said, Will You Marry Me? And I pretty much just lost my everlovin’ mind right on the spot! Isn’t that beautiful?”

“Aww, sweetie! It really is! I am so happy for you.”

She gazes down at her hand, twisting it so the rock catches the

light. It’s kind of huge, really. More than I would’ve guessed.

But Mona is obviously over the moon. It all worked out just the way she wanted it.

“Okay, let’s get you off your feet, big mama!” she announces. “This bathroom is

tiny!”

When we reenter the dining room, the guys are apparently all sharing the news too. Carson flashes Mona a sweet, sincere smile. She lights up all over again like a bank of fireworks.

“It smells good. Are you making chili?”

“You know it... I have had such a craving for chili for the last month! I feel like I could eat it every day.”

“That’s because you’re having twins,” she offers sagely as she walks into the kitchen.

Immediately she grabs a spoon from the rack and starts tasting everything, smacking her lips together appreciatively. She doesn’t re-season every single dish, so I must have done a pretty good job this time.

“Oh my God, this is so good!” she exclaims happily.

“Wow, I am so glad to hear you say that! It didn’t seem like a lot of work when I was planning it out.”

Gratefully, I sink into the chair in the corner, happy to know that Mona can keep everything going. She’s not much of a cook from scratch, but she definitely knows what’s good.

“Honestly, I think this is all just about done. You want I should get the boys to bring everything to the table?”

Page 63

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

I glance at the clock over the refrigerator. Right on time.

“Could you? I don’t feel like yelling.”

Mona hustles out of the kitchen and returns with three strapping young men, all with their instructions. They emptied the kitchen in no time, whisking away the big pot, placing the salad into the serving bowl. With efficiency and enthusiasm, they all help out to dress the table.

The front door opens again, changing the air in the room. I hear the sudden silence, the respectful tension.

“Liberty Jane, look at you!”

“Hi, Daddy,” I smile, bending my arms to get leverage to heave myself out of the chair.

“Am I late?” he asks me gently as he takes my elbow to help me to standing.

“No, you’re right on time. You’re always right on time.”

He dips his head, kissing my forehead before helping me to the dining room. I start to go to my usual place, but he directs me gently to the head of the table. Usually one of the men sits here. Not for any particular reason, just out of habit.

“Doesn’t look like you’re going to fit in any of the side chairs. Why don’t you sit here?” my dad says affectionately.

Who am I to argue? At this point, I just go with the flow. In every way, if there is a flow... I am going with it. Swollen ankles? Okay. Swollen anything else from neck to knees? Okay. Constant trips to the bathroom? You bet. Can't sleep for more than an hour at a time? Okey-dokey.

I am easygoing, in the extreme.

It's the only way to keep my sanity.

"Well, dig in, everybody!" I announce.

I don't have to tell them twice. Everybody goes for it with gusto, ladling heaping servings onto their plates. Even Mona ends up with a generous helping of everything.

"This is delicious, Libby," Will smiles.

Ever thoughtful, he has been beyond doting. He's given me hundreds of foot rubs. Made several late-night trips to the grocery store for éclairs and olives, my guilty cravings.

"Thanks, Will."

"Amazing," Cass adds with his cheeks stuffed.

Cass has been busy planning for the future. He outfitted the nursery all by himself, painting the walls and hanging wallpaper. He even refinished the floors, scraping them by hand to keep the dust down.

As we eat, I keep my antenna up to sense changes in the room. We have never talked about it openly, but my father seems to have accepted whatever situation we three have. As in all things, there are some questions that don't need to be asked.

He is not terrifically warm to them, but it is better. Once in a while I even see him crack a smile. Like, almost. Okay, maybe not like a whole smile. But something in the smile family.

“This is really wonderful,” Mona grins. “Thank you for inviting us!”

“Thank you for coming!” I answer automatically. “When are you guys moving?”

Carson reaches across the table for another slab of crusty white bread before answering.

“Two weeks,” he nods as he butters the bread. “We will be all moved in before you go into labor.”

“Do you think you can hold off for two more weeks?” Mona adds, alarmed. “I did just tell them to hurry up...”

“Don’t even worry about it. If they listened to directions, they would’ve been out a month ago. Two weeks should be fine. That’s what they’re telling me, anyway.”

“Okay, well, I’m just glad I’m going to be here! It’s going to be so much fun living next door to each other again!”

“I’m going to miss you in the neighborhood,” my dad adds.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Mona flinches back, surprised. That's the most direct thing he has ever said to her. And it was nice. Go figure.

Dinner moves along at a slow pace. I eat small bites now, since there is not enough room in my body for eating and breathing at the same time anymore. But it is okay. I am enjoying myself anyway. I love having everyone around, all talking and smiling, laughing. This is good. I never got a chance to really appreciate family gatherings when I was little, but I appreciate it now. And I'm determined to appreciate it going forward.

Mona talks with her hands, sort of ostentatiously flashing that ring every chance she gets. I can't blame her, I know, but it does kind of dig at my soul a little bit. She went the traditional route. One man, one engagement, one marriage, and birth control up until the time they feel like getting knocked up.

The boys and I picked a different route. No way to marry, a secret romance that is maybe not entirely secret, and babies out of wedlock.

We are just unconventional people, is all.

After dinner, I don't have to do anything. Everybody jumps up to do the dishes, clear away plates, put away stuff. I already did my part, and everyone else is eager to help.

"I hope we can do this every Sunday," Mona smiles as she hugs me goodbye late in the afternoon.

"I would really like that," I agree.

“Okay, you call me if anything happens with the little guys, all right?”

“I will, I promise.”

My dad ties his scarf around his neck, smiling wistfully as he says goodbye. There is probably more that he wants to say, than there is time to say it. It will be all right.

“How’s the promotion?” he asks gruffly before he leaves.

“Oh! It’s good,” I shrug. “You know, I didn’t think I would like it, but I do. Management is fun. It’s like yelling without yelling. You know how it is.”

He cracks a smile, a real one. The one he saves just for me.

“Yeah, it’s nice to be in charge, right?”

“It’s the best,” I answer as he kisses me on the cheek, and heads out into the snowy night.

Will comes down to help me back up the stairs to the living room, and maneuvers me to the sofa. He picks my feet up and lays them on the foot rest. Cass comes over to join me and the three of us sit there, as the snow silently continues to fall outside.

“That was wonderful,” Will observes, smiling. “Kind of a Hallmark moment.”

“I was going to say Norman Rockwell,” Cass interrupts.

The babies tumble over each other in my belly, making strange shapes on the outside of my blouse. It seems surreal. There are people in there! People we made. People we are bound to love forever.

“Are you really up for doing this every Sunday?” Will asks.

I think about it for a minute. It’s work, but I can see it unfolding in front of me. Friends in the house. Babies, then toddlers. Then maybe more. All of it stretching out in front of us, just waiting for us there.

“Yes, absolutely. I can’t think of anything better.”

Excerpt of TWIN TEASE

Chelsea

Adjusting the brim of my hat to shield my eyes better, I nudge my shoulders against the cushions of the lounge chair, careful to leave my ankles a safe distance apart. I want a nice, even suntan. That means lying here like a scarecrow with careful distances between my thighs and my arms. I even remembered to raise my chin a little bit so that my neck is not ghostly white.

My best friend, Yoyo, doesn’t have this problem. She just lies on the lounge chair next to me with a certain casual pose, like she was dropped there from a hot air balloon or something. The cord of her earbuds trails across her shimmering bosom and I bet she isn’t even worried about a line from that. She just always has the best skin. Glimmering, evenly toned, a perfect shade of caramel.

I can get there, I think. If I set a timer for twenty minutes and remember to flip over onto my stomach as soon as the timer goes off, then repeat that ritual four times, I can get a pretty nice glow as well. I have my grandma to thank for that. She was one of those dark-skinned Italian ladies who passed on both her curly hair and her pasta recipes. Maybe one day I’ll get to pass on one or the other. At least the hair, I hope, though I’m blonde now.

It's hot. Uncomfortably hot. I can feel little trails of sweat trickling between my boobs as the sun beats down on us. I just have to remember that this is all in the name of summer strapless dresses. It will all be worth it.

A slight breeze swirls over the patio, breathing coolness across my belly. With longing, I gaze out over the rippling surface of the swimming pool water. I'd love to just jump in there and cool off, but I still have a bunch of time left on the timer.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

Yoyo turns her head when she hears the patio door open. I don't even have to look at her to know that she is arching her back, flexing her toes. Probably smirking. Definitely watching my stepbrothers, Chance and Jack, as they circle the far end of the swimming pool.

"Mmmm-hmmm," she sighs to herself, shifting on the cushions.

"Why don't you just keep your eyeballs in your head?" I remark, mostly because

I think she can't hear me.

"Why don't you be a good friend and set me up with one of your big brothers?" she shoots back, casting a sidelong smirk in my direction.

I wince, embarrassed that she heard my snarky comment. But she is over it already, I can tell. Her toes open a little and I see the tendons behind her knees flex. Shit. This girl is totally transfixed.

I mean, I get it. Chance and Jack are ridiculously perfect specimens of manhood. Twenty-three and gorgeous, despite the fact that they live with their parents... Well, with their dad and my mom. We are one of those blended families, I guess. Blended like a bag of candy. Blended like a tropical drink.

My mom raised me by herself, assisted by the practically anonymous donations of my birth father, some rich dude who never troubled himself to turn back up again. That's how we got this kick-ass house in Evanston with the inground pool and a nice new car every year. But please don't feel bad for me. I never missed him. I never knew

him, so how could I miss what I never knew?

Their dad met my mom at a real estate seminar in California wine country. Somewhere between the Chardonnay and the guest speakers painting convincing pictures of attainable real estate fortunes, they decided it would be cool to hitch our families together. Nobody asked me, and nobody asked my brand-new big brothers either.

But that was five years ago already. Mom and “Newdad” are actually happy together. Chance and Jack seem happy too. And I guess having them around made me a much more popular lady during high school. Suddenly everybody wanted to be my friend, especially if they could drop by and run into my brothers.

“I don’t even know how you can stand it,” Yoyo mutters, barely under her breath. “Under the same roof? How do you even control yourself? You must have nerves of steel!”

They are not looking at us, but I know they can see us. They might even be able to hear what Yoyo is saying about them. I bet they can. It looks like Jack is almost smirking. They sure do seem to show up without shirts on every time I have friends over.

“You get used to it,” I mutter back.

“Nerves of steel!” she says again, grinding her hips just a little.

Her voice is just barely in the audible range, and I see Jack shoot her a look, his steely gray eyes ricocheting off the mound of her bright pink bikini bottoms. I know it was meant to attract his attention, and it looks like it did the job.

But he twists around immediately, picking a foam football off the nearest table and

chucking it toward his brother across the pool. Chance catches it in one hand, cupping it automatically to his chest. The sun and sweat glisten off his silky, chiseled torso as he flexes. He raises his other hand to push a disheveled lock of hair off his forehead.

Chance twists lithely to launch a side-armed return of the ball to Jack. Yoyo and I watch in silent concentration as they begin a vigorous game of catch across the expanse of the water.

I didn't always feel this way, but I have to admit that this is hard to watch without... squirming. Those muscles that ripple under their skin, the strength in their hands as they throw and catch that stupid little ball... It all sends vibrations through me like someone snapping a rubber band over and over again against my belly button. I feel a kind of emptiness, a hunger deep in the pit of my gut.

"Come on, you can tell me," Yoyo continues. "You think they're hot, right? I mean, you've got eyes!"

"I don't know. What does hot even mean?"

Yoyo rolls suddenly onto her side so she can stare right at me. Her eyes are wide with excitement and thirst.

"Hot is... shit, girl! Hot is HOT. Hot is those muscles. Hot is those squinty eyes. Hot is that lickable stubble. Hot is that—"

"Okay!" I interrupt. "Keep your voice down!"

She flares her nostrils and purses her lips at me. "Yeah, you know what hot is," she purrs suggestively. "I bet you're thinking about it right now, aren't you? I bet your sweet spot is all nice and tingly, ain't it?"

I roll my eyes, but my knees instinctively clamp together and I can kinda tell that she's right. There's definitely something going on in my nethers. It might be wrong, but looking at them lately just seems to activate something in me. Something I am finding it harder and harder to turn off.

"You know it's not wrong," she sighs.

"I need to flip over, Yoyo. Can you move your cell?"

"I mean you're not even really related. Not by blood or anything."

"That's nice," I answer automatically, propping myself up on my elbows.

"So you can admit it. That you're hot for one of them. Or even both?"

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:49 am

The best thing is just to ignore her, I remind myself.

“I mean everybody does it. I would totally do it if I were you.”

“Does what?” I ask, despite my best intentions.

She leans forward, her eyes bright with mischief. “Don’t tell me you haven’t heard about Belinda and Blaine!”

“What about Bel— wait. What are you saying?”

She raises her eyebrows and leans back, cheeks sucked in, oozing mystery.

“You’re not telling me that they are...”

She nods once.

“Ew! Gross!”

Shrugging one shoulder, she assumes a more-mature-than-thou expression, as though I just wouldn’t understand.

“It’s just nature, Chelsea,” she sighs as though she’s already bored. “You can’t fight nature.”

Nature, huh? What does she know?

Chance throws the football a little wide and though Jack lunges for it like some kind of jungle cat, it bounces off his fingertips and jolts over the concrete to land between my chair and Yoyo's. When he comes after it, Jack picks it up and glances at each of us. To my surprise, he drops between our lounge chairs and sits on the patio, grinning with his elbows on his bent knees.

"Hot out today, isn't it?" he grins, letting his eyes skate shamelessly over Yoyo's perfect skin.

"Just got a little hotter," she answers with a mischievous pout.

His eyebrows rise in delighted surprise as his grin twists a little sideways.

"Oh really?" he answers, clearly intrigued. "Are you a fan of hot days?"

Yoyo shrugs one shoulder, slowly raising her arms over her head and crossing her ankles so that she can move her knees. I watch his eyes track every shifting plane of her body, the way he is mesmerized like a cat. Like if she were a mouse, he might jump right on her.

I have to bite my cheeks not to say anything. I don't know why, but I want to jump in the middle of this. I don't want his eyes on her. Well... what do I want? I'm not sure, but before long I realize I want his eyes on me. If I could slip myself like a piece of paper between them and intercept that hungry gaze, I think I actually might.

"What are we talking about?" Chance asks, trotting around to our side of the pool.

"Yoyo likes it hot," Jack nods, wetting his lips with his tongue.

"Is that a fact?" Chance chuckles.

To my surprise, he directs his smile at me. To my greater surprise, he sits down on the end of my chair, nudging my ankles aside with his hips. I freeze in place, sure it must be some kind of mistake as my heartbeat instantly doubles.

“That is definitely a fact,” Yoyo continues smoothly. “The hotter the better, I always say!”

Chance leans back slightly, resting his weight on the heel of his hand which is on the other side of my ankles. Basically, he’s got me caged in. I try to catch his eyes to figure out if he knows he’s doing it, but he is looking at my best friend right now.

When I look up, I see Jack give me a look, kind of a playful jerking of his chin.

“It can get really hot around here,” he says, to her and... to me also? I guess?

Is this really happening?

“Oh trust me,” she giggles as she arches her back. “I could take it.”

“That’s what people always say, but you really shouldn’t

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:50 am

"It make promises you can't keep," Chance sighs.

"Yeah, people underestimate just how hot things can really get," Jack adds.

I notice that it actually is pretty hot where I'm sitting, so hot that I have the almost unbearable urge to move. I can feel sweat sliding under my thighs, and a burning heat lances through my sex. It makes me gasp a little, and I realize Chance heard me when he looks me dead in the eyes and takes my ankle in his hand.

"It can be downright dangerous," Jack continues, shooting me a quick look before catching Yoyo's eye again.

The way his body is angled, I can tell that Yoyo can't see what Chance is doing. She can't see that he's wrapped my ankle bones in his fingers and is pulling gently, forcing my legs apart just a little. My breath hitches in my throat as he moves me the tiniest bit, just enough so I know it's really happening. Right here in broad daylight, right in front of my best friend.

"Not as dangerous as me," she simpers, but suddenly her words sound a little silly to me. She's doing her best, but I get the feeling it's not going to be enough.

"Oh, come on," Jack chuckles. "How dangerous can a Yoyo be? Isn't that like a toy?"

"Definitely something that likes to be played with," she answers.

"Oh yeah?" he smiles. "Something that likes to go up and down?"

She shrugs. “Well, I know I’d like to go down, that’s for sure.”

Chance feigns surprise, but when he leans back, he pushes my legs open even further. I try to catch his eye to figure out what he’s really doing, but he stubbornly evades me.

“I can hardly believe my ears!” he stage whispers. “Such language, Yoyo! From ladies who aren’t even legal yet! I’m shocked.”

Yoyo scoffs. “Give me a break, Chance. You know age is just a number. And besides, Chelsea and I are both more than legal, as if that even means anything.”

Suddenly Chance twists toward me, locking his eyes with mine in a startling connection that practically pops.

“Really? Is that a fact?”

I nod dumbly, confirming what I know he already knows. He was at my birthday party a month ago. In fact, he was at my graduation ceremony last year when I graduated high school a year early. He has even helped me with some of my college classes. Weirdly, he knows almost everything about me. And yet, he’s never touched me like this. He’s never handled me the way he is handling me now. His strong palm makes it clear that I can’t escape. That he can do anything he wants to me.

Yoyo sits up fully, twisting suggestively as she half-crawls toward Jack, smirking.

“How about you? Are you all good with... The heat?”

Jack shrugs, pushing back. He reaches for the football and crushes it between his palms as he looks back over his shoulder at the pool and then at Chance.

“Honestly? I think this whole conversation is getting me a little overheated. How about you, brother?”

Chance nods, filling his chest with breath. He twists slightly, taking my ankle with him.

“Hot as hell out here,” he agrees as he suddenly leans toward me, sliding his other arm under my back. I gasp as he reaches all the way around me and picks me up off my lounge chair, his grip too strong to struggle away from.

Before I know it, he’s carrying me toward the pool. Yoyo yelps and leaps from her chair, dashing toward the deep end with her hair streaming up behind her.

At the last moment, I fling my arms over his shoulders, holding on for dear life as he leaps over the edge, sending both of us skyward. We hang in midair for what seems like forever—me hanging on and holding my breath, him forcing my body into a shape that curls around his.

With a crash, we split the surface of the water, rocked by the impact as we slowly sink. I expect him to let go of me immediately, but he doesn’t. Instead his hands drift over my body, concealed by the churning bubbles and the blue depth. I feel his palms against my thighs, my back, sliding over my breasts, swiping quickly between my legs.

Thoroughly confused, I don’t know which way is up. Everything is happening all at once. All I know is I have to hang onto him, to this slippery sensation of a secret hunger finally being fed.

Too soon, we break the surface. I didn’t even know we were headed that way. Chance shakes the water from his hair in a magnificent, leonine gesture and grins, breathless as he gently carries me back toward air.

“That was fun,” he grins. “We should do that again sometime.”

“Hey, I like fun too!” Jack announces, appearing next to us.

For just the briefest of moments, I’m pinned between them. Their bodies slide against mine under the water, the sensation almost too quick to be real. I can see the impish gleam in their eyes though they separate from me just as quickly, that instant retreat to innocence.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:50 am

“Me too!” Yoyo grins from the side of the pool. She didn’t jump in, but she dangles her long legs over the side. I’m glad that she can’t see me clearly from where she is. I can’t even imagine what she would say if she knew that Jack’s fingers slid right under my bikini bottoms, splitting me effortlessly as though he’d done it before. As though he knew exactly where to go.

“Some other time,” Jack shrugs, looking over my shoulder at Chance.

I can see their silent communication going back and forth like telegraph pulses flying over my head. They do this all the time. One of the cool things about being a twin, I guess.

“Definitely,” Chance agrees.

“Bring it on,” I shrug, standing up on my tiptoes and waving my arms under the water to stay upright.

Jack cocks an eyebrow at me. “Okay... Of course, you gotta be careful what you wish for, Chelsea.”

His stare gives me pause, makes me wonder if maybe I do not know exactly what I want. But at this point, the urgent pulsing in my sex makes me think I definitely do.

“Hey, it’s four already,” Chance announces.

“Yeah, okay. Let’s hit it,” Jack answers.

Without another word, they both lunge toward the side of the pool and launch straight out of it, briefly dazzling me into blindness with the sight of sheets of water cascading off their matching, muscular shoulders and hips. I shudder involuntarily, forcing myself not to follow them. Instead I just wade back to Yoyo, pushing tendrils of sticky hair off my forehead and trying to look elegant and composed somehow.

“Hey, where are they going?” she pouts.

She kicks her ankles under the surface of the water, flexing those long, tawny thighs. I know it makes me petty and small, but I can’t help but notice this is the first time a boy—any boy—has elected to spend their attention on me over her.

“Some meeting,” I explain nonchalantly. “Some investor or something like that.”

“Oh, right,” she nods as she squints at them from across the pool, watching them walk away. “Their computer program or whatever. That thing.”

“That’s the thing,” I confirm. It’s an app, not a computer program, but I don’t think she’s really interested in the finer distinctions at this point.

She bites hard on her lower lip as they leave the patio, and I watch emotions flicker over her face. Disappointment, hunger, then resolution.

“What a waste of time,” she finally sighs, pushing herself up to standing and stalking off to the table where her cell phone lies.

Confused, I climb the ladder to leave the pool and walk over to her to grab a towel.

“What was a waste of time?” I ask, watching her drying her long limbs and then tying a flowered skirt over her hips, low enough to show off that blue gem that dangles from her belly button.

“I just don’t know why they would bother. Come on,” she finally huffs.

Hurt, I take my hat and jam it back on my head so she can’t see my eyes. “Bother... what? What are you even talking about?”

She scoffs, rolling her eyes. With a dismissive gesture, she wipes her fingers up and down in the air, apparently signifying my body from head to toe.

“Don’t get me wrong, Chelsea,” she starts imperiously, “you’re cute as a button, right? But it’s not like they can have you, you know what I mean? It’s not like you could really make it happen.”

I cross my arms defensively over my bare belly, vividly aware of the abnormally hot water trickling out of my bikini bottoms and down between my thighs.

“What are you talking about? Make what happen?”

She picks up her phone and scowls at the face of it, jabbing it with her thumb. “Boys are just so dumb.”

“They’re not dumb, actually,” I sniff. “They’re are about to be millionaires, Yoyo. Off that app they designed themselves.”

“Yeah, but my point is that you can never get a piece of that, Chelsea,” she drawls. “Just like you can never get a piece of them.”

“Well, I don’t know...”

The words die on my tongue. Wasn’t she just trying to convince me I wanted them? How did she change her tune so fast?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 1:50 am

“Ew!” she exclaims, recoiling dramatically. “Those are your brothers. That’s nasty.”

I stand there helplessly, trying to convince myself that she’s just jealous and disappointed that she threw herself at Jack in he didn’t bother to catch her. That’s probably all it is.

“They’re not really my brothers,” I remind her, but I don’t even know if she hears me. “Stepbrothers. I practically just met them, and you were the one who wanted to know if I thought they were hot, remember?”

She points at me, narrowing her eyes accusingly. “Yeah, but you were the one who admitted that they are!”

I open my mouth and then close it, because I don’t have anything to say. She’s got a point. But I have a point too! And it’s really hard to argue with her right now anyway, when my thighs are trembling and my pussy feels like it’s on fire.

She looks around, huffing and snarling, before finally calming down. “They totally are, but whatever,” she admits. “Anyway, I gotta get going.”

“Yeah, okay,” I mumble, gathering my accessories off the table and following her through the blindingly dark house. She offers me a little wave goodbye before getting into her Hyundai, and I stand there numbly in the dark house, feeling weirdly alone.

Get Twin Tease!