

Abstract:

Below is a selection of text from a work of autofiction I submitted for my Final Major Project. In this piece, I explore how suburbia fosters toxic masculinity, apathy, racism, sexism, and placelessness and how that creates disillusioned — yet privileged — young men. I then explore the violence and societal harm that follows, doing so through the lens of a cliched teen drama focused around myself and a fictional group of friends known as The Good Squad.

Throughout the piece, I use each character to relay these harmful themes, and how their hatred affects other characters. I also touch on how this all relates to larger late-stage Neoliberal Capitalism, and how the suburbanisation and corporatisation of American cities have done a lot of harm to the people living in and outside them. I take a similar tone as to how my friends or I used to talk and tell stories as teenagers.

The events written throughout the piece are largely based on true events, although altered to better fit the narrative and my character's own internal analyses. The only people who are "real" throughout the piece are my parents, my younger sister, and myself. Much of the analysis in this piece comes from theorists and authors such as Jane Jacobs, Laura Bates, R.W. Connell, and the Strong Towns organization, and I explore the intersections between late-stage neoliberal capitalism, suburban design, incel and alt-right internet cultures, and toxic masculinity.

*Content warning: several characters use racial and other derogatory slurs throughout this piece. There is very strong and foul language used frequently throughout the text, and there are scenes of physical violence, mentions of sexual assault, and scenes of harassment. Those sensitive to this kind of language are discouraged from reading this piece.*

# Excerpts from: *Can we ever get away from the Sprawl?*

Written by Lars Stannard

## Chapter 1: pages 1 through 7

I trailed off. On, and on, and on the houses and the big-box stores and the parking lots went. How much had been paved over at this point? How many cul-de-sacs were there that looped in their maze-like fashion? How many of the same five or six house designs were there beyond the highways, tucked behind the hills, over the valley and the flatlands stretching until it became endless farms in what seemed to be the great beyond?

“So, what are we doing?” Martin asked, tossing down an empty can of Mountain Dew onto the pavement. The rest of the Goon Squad gawked at me. We had been milling about in the parking lot by what was formerly a Burger King going on two hours now.

“Too bad the BK shut down, I could go for a burger right now,” I said.

“Lars, can you drive me home, man?” Joel asked. “If we’re just going to stand around in the parking lot across the street from school, I’d rather just go home and play TF2 or something.”

“Didn’t your mom say you had to do your laundry?” Colton Gates asked, his Nike glasses that were taped up on one side permanently lopsided. He gestured at the hoodie Joel had to have been wearing for like three weeks straight.

“Ah shut the hell up man — you have like one outfit too. How did you even know my mom said that?”

“She mentioned it while I was bangin’ her last night, obviously.”

Martin let out a shrill, almost pre-pubescent giggle. Joel let out a *psssh* and did a little 360 on his heels. Gates popped open another Mountain Dew, the 12-pack was nearly on its last legs. I wasn’t sure I could convince them to go back to the SuperAmerica to get another pack.

“There’s gotta be *something* for us to do,” I said.

My mind started listing through any and every possible thing four nerdy teenage boys could do within ten miles:

1. *Nelson’s Ice cream? Nah too cold for fall and the line’s probably massive anyways.*
2. *Movies? Maybe. Marcus Cinema apparently got those super nice chairs that recline all the way back.*
3. *Drive into Minneapolis — and then what? Have mom worry about you?*
4. *The Thunderdome? I don’t even know if we all had our Magic the Gathering decks on us. Besides, if I wanted to smell sweaty nerds crammed like gross tiny fish into a gross tiny room, I’d fit myself into a cabinet and inhale deeply.*
5. *Drink? Who do we know who’s 21 and not a total dick? Gates’ brother, I guess, but I don’t want to talk to him. None of us really drank anyways.*
6. *Fuck it —*

“How about bowling and laser tag or something at Pinz? They do unlimited laser tag for like 15 bucks,” I said.

“I only have like 7 dollars right now,” said Martin.

“Yeah, we don’t have jobs like you, Lars,” said Joel

*I wouldn’t call washing dishes at a bar so much of a job, more of a shitty chore that pays me less than minimum wage.*

I felt bad for having more than \$30 in my bank account.

“I’m broke too,” Gates chimed in, slurping deeply from the aluminum Mountain Dew can. “Anything we can do for free though?”

I went through the options again:

1. *Continue to sit in the parking lot.*
2. *A walk in the Crack? Head into Downtown Asshole? Nice if you were on a date I suppose? Martin would probably whine the whole time though.*

3. *Drive to a different parking lot.*
4. *Fuck around at Walmart and see how much it takes for the staff to throw us out.*
5. *Hang out at the Boom Site and the Caves? We'd be doing the same thing we're doing now, just down with all the stoners there.*
6. *Do donuts in my car at the county fairgrounds? What am I on about? I can't do donuts in my fucking car, I'd flip it.*
7. *We could head back to like, I don't know, Joel's? Mom probably doesn't want anyone over right now so my place is out of the question.*

“Joel, do you think we could head over to yours or something? We could get snacks and hang out.”

Joel sort of milled about, he had to keep pulling up his baggy plus-sized jeans, repeatedly lifting his t-shirt with the skeleton graphic on it that some Boomer Biker would think is “badass” in order to do so. The rest of the Goon Squad was silent, fidgeting in place.

“I don't think we can,” Joel eventually said.

“Gates?” I asked. “Is your basement available?”

“I actually think my mom is cleaning it today,” he said, slurping more Mountain Dew.

“Ah, that's alright man. I guess we'd just be doing the same thing we'd be doing if we all went home,” I said.

The wind was picking up and the sun was starting to set. Martin shuddered. That's what he got for wearing cargo shorts. Gates slurped loudly on his Mountain Dew, slotting his tongue inside the aluminum can to lick up any last drops stuck to the inside. He then crushed the can, and tossed it at the old Burger King. It clattered and skidded on the pavement, barely making it to the massive windows that housed the dead playland inside.

“Well, it's a Friday — I heard Olivia Wilson was throwing a party since her parents are out of town. Should we go to that?” I asked.

The entire Goon Squad burst into laughter.

“What? I'm serious.”

“Seriously fucking retarded, maybe,” Gates said.

“I don’t know. It could be fun,” Martin said, shrugging. “No way we’d get anywhere close to getting in though.”

“Yeah, I know you’re into Olivia or whatever, but there’s not a chance in hell that you’d get into one of her parties. I’m pretty sure she’s just throwing it so she can get gangbanged by the entire hockey team. We’ll have an easier time trying to pass FST this year,” Gates said, taking a jab at how dogshit I was at math.

“Well, the *function* might be fun, but *statistically* there will probably be more dudes there than chicks, and... uh...” Martin struggled to think of a play on ‘trigonometry’, the last word in the FST acronym. “Fuck it, I don’t know. There’s no way they’d let us get within a three-mile radius of it.”

“I think her house is over in Oak Park Heights, so we’re already within the three-mile radius, dumbass,” I said. “I just think it’s worth a shot. It’s not like we’re doing anything anyway.”

“Dude, let’s just go home. I don’t want to go to a party, and we’re not getting in either way — we’re not popular enough. I’m getting cold. Can you please just drive us home? We can play TF2 or something then,” Joel said.

“Fine, I’ll bring you guys home,” I grumbled, digging my keys out of my baggy black jeans that I kept stepping on since I was in-between sizes.

We all piled into my new-to-me car, Gates sat up front, tossing his last Mountain Dew can on the floor, while Martin and Joel spread out in the back. I turned the key, and it struggled to start at first.

“Jeez, what’s this bastard made out of? Cast Iron?” Martin said.

“Shut up Martin,” I said back, turning the ignition once more.

“You’re going to flood it,” Gates chimed in.

“Move! You Cast Iron Bastard!” Martin said.

The engine gagged to life, and I revved it, holding my hands off the wheel and shrugging in a satisfactory manner.

“What can I say, boys?”

I plugged in my phone to the cassette-to-aux adapter to get the music going, as I fiddled with it, *Ratatat* cut in and out from the already blasted-out speakers. Once I finally got it balanced in the right position, we finally were able to go. I sped off out of the parking lot, coming to a stop before turning onto 58th Street to drop off Joel.

It took about a half an hour to get everyone dropped off. As I stepped inside through the garage and walked up through the kitchen, my mom was standing at the island, prepping for dinner.

“Hey! How was your day?”

“Hey, yeah, it was alright.”

I started to beeline for the stairs down to my basement bedroom:

“Hold on, Lars? Could you come help me make dinner? Papa should be getting home soon.”

“Do I have to?”

Mom shot me a glaringly disapproving look, raising one eyebrow as her face contorted to silently say ‘yes, you fucking have to, you little shit’.

I grumbled, muttering some bullshit as I set down my backpack at the top of the stairs, and slogged my way into the kitchen to chop veggies and herbs.

“Why can’t Lydia come down and do this?”

“Because she has a project due on Monday.”

“I have a project I need to work on too.”

“Well, maybe instead of playing on your laptop all night, you can get some work done after dinner,” Mom handed me a cutting board and an onion. “Also, bring your computer to dinner. We’re checking your grades tonight.”

*Fuuuuucccccckkkkkk.*

My panic-ometer bumped up a level.

“I don’t know if that’s necessary, my grades are pretty good at the moment.”

“*Pretty good?* And how good is that? Do you have any missing assignments?”

“Only like,” I trailed off, trying to think of a good-looking, yet believable number. “Like two?”

Mom did her signature leer: one eyebrow raised, her brown eyes staring as if they were about to unleash whatever planet-destroying laser the Death Star had built into it, her lips squashing together to become one disapproving line. If dirty looks could kill, Claudia Stannard’s leer would have committed massacres.

I stayed silent, pausing from dicing the onions. Mom hadn’t moved,

“Go get your computer and log into Skyward. We’re checking now.”

My panic-ometer spiked once more.

Skyward was the Stillwater Area School District’s online planner. Gates called it Skynet. Martin called it Skyrim — often joking that it was because *‘learning was an adventure’*. Besides from the software sucking total balls, Skyward also gave my parents a direct, real-time insight into how horribly I was doing in my classes. No use in stalling the inevitable — my weekend was about to be sacrificed to the cruel Gods of making up late assignments, many of which were likely stewing at the bottom of my locker back at school.

I slogged over to my backpack, pulled out my laptop, and logged into Skyward.

“*Ten missing assignments? How?!*”

“It’s better than my friends,” I said.

“You’re not your friends! How are you getting a D+ in english? I thought you liked the reading?”

“I do like the reading, I just don’t really like Ms. Stein, and I don’t think she really likes me either.”

“She doesn’t like you because you don’t *try*.”

“I *do try*, mom,” we were starting to raise our voices.

“It certainly doesn’t look like it! You’re lucky Papa isn’t seeing this right now, he’d be furious!”

*How is that supposed to sound better?*

“After dinner, you’re doing your work up at the dining room table,” Mom said.

“Mommm, it’s a Friday night, I’ve been working and at school all week.”

“Have you?” Mom motioned to the screen shamefully displaying my grades. “By the looks of it, you clearly haven’t. You’re bringing your assignments up and doing them at the table after dinner so we know you’re actually doing them.”

“I don’t even have half of those with me though.”

“Well, then where are they?”

“At school, I think. I don’t really know — I get like seven worksheets and assignments every day; it’s hard to keep track of them all.”

“You’re going to have to find them then. You’re not going to hang out with your friends or be playing on your computer until you’ve finished these missing assignments.”

I grumbled, throwing my arms up a bit.

“And knock off the attitude.”

At dinner, I sat at the table with my family, Mom and my younger sister Lydia sitting across from me and Dad. Mark, my father, kept prodding my elbow.

“Do you have to eat like a bird?” he asked.

“It might be the lunchroom,” I said, mouth full of squiggly pasta. “Keeps people out of your space.”

“Yeah, but does that mean you have to be in *my* space then?” Dad asked, inching his chair further and further away from me.

“Lars, where are your manners? This isn’t the cafeteria,” Mom said.

I looked to Lydia to see if she’d back me up. She sort of shrugged, dropping some pasta back onto their plate, notioning that they had no horse in this race and didn’t want to get into it.



## Chapter 2: pages 22 through 31

“Have you ever noticed that there’s never anyone our age out?” I asked.

Joel kind of shrugged. He scratched his short brown bowl cut that permanently looked like someone had just dragged a stick of butter through it. I don’t think he was ever expecting me to ask something like that. We were driving the Cast Iron Bastard through the winding un-sidewalked streets of Croixwood to pick up Martin.

“I mean, where is everyone?” I asked. “It’s not like it’s gross out.”

It was sunny, but the only person we had seen outside was an old man shuffling along the side of the road with some blue plastic bags from the Holiday Superstore on the corner of Croixwood and Stillwater boulevards.

“What are we even doing, man?” Joel asked. He kept picking at something on the back of his head.

I didn’t say anything, mainly because I didn’t know — I just knew we were hanging out, not what we were going to *do* while hanging out.

“I guess we could go bum around the Valley Ridge Mall?” I said.

A text from Martin buzzed my phone from within the little alcove on the dashboard where I’d balance it.

bitch where r you

*Fuck you, Martin.*

“I don’t want to go back there. Bryson has been getting shitter with us than usual.”

“The guy who works at Valley Access?” I asked. The Valley Access Channels — the public broadcasting for the St. Croix River Valley was the crappy local TV network you could watch when cable or satellite was out. “He’s harmless, I think. Even if he is a cunt.”

“Either way, I’m sick of going home smelling like the Mongolian barbeque buffet. Sitting there smelling it just makes me hungry and angry that none of us has the money to go eat there.”

The radio was blaring the whiny guitars of Muse, like the only thing they played on 93X rock FM. We passed the same brown split-level houses over and over until I turned into Nightingale Court — Martin's cul-de-sac.

It was a really beautiful day out, maybe a bit cold for the fall, but if you were in the sun, the beams hit just perfectly to fill you with a gentle warmth. We had the windows cracked because I was boiling, but I was also the one wearing a jacket. Joel was wearing an Avenge Sevenfold t-shirt, and I could see the goosebumps on his bare arms.

"It's weird. In driver's ed they taught me to always be extremely careful driving through neighborhoods because kids would be playing in the street," I said.

"I guess you can drive faster then," Joel said.

"I don't see the harm in that."

I whipped around Nightingale court a few times, speeding up more and more with each rotation. Martin popped out of his front door instinctively and jogged across the cracking pavement to the cul-de-sac where I was whipping my car around in circles, but not doing donuts per se. I slammed my brakes, and the Cast Iron Bastard skidded to a halt. Martin hopped into the backseat, putting his nasty-ass shoes up against the back of the passenger seat. Joel moved the seat back further and further:

"Ow! OW! You're crushing my legs you faggot!"

My forehead muscles tensed to form a light scowl. I rolled my windows up, despite nobody being around to hear us.

"Yeah, like you don't like being crushed, you manlet," Joel said, moving his seat back forward.

"So, what are we doing?" Martin asked.

"Man, I don't know," I said. "What do you *want* to do?"

"Man, I don't know," Martin said. "Play TF2?"

"I don't have my laptop," Joel said.

"I suppose we could head over to Gates'; I brought my magic deck and laptop."

“Ah, dude, let me run inside real quick and grab mine then,” Martin said, scuttling back out of the car and running back into his house.

“Aw, what? This is *bullshit*,” Joel whined. “What the fuck am I supposed to do while we’re there?”

“We’ll drive back and pick up your shit, you big baby. Besides, I want to stop for some snacks on our way.”

“If you get a massive bag of combos again I am going to be pissed. You’re the only person who likes them.”

“Hey, *I’m* the one buying.”

“Yeah but dude it’s like *dog food*. How do you even like that stuff?”

Martin clambered back into the backseat with his backpack:

“Yeah, why do you like combos, dude? They’re nasty.”

“They’re good, you cretins. You just lack taste,” I said.

“Or maybe you lack it. You’ve *tasted them*, right?” Joel asked.

“Whatever. Shut up, dickhead,” I said. “If you’re gonna whine about it, how about you two pick up the snacks then.”

“Aw, fuck off,” Martin said.

“Shut up, Martin,” Joel and I both said.

“Can we just drive already? Jesus.”

I shifted into drive, but didn’t step on the accelerator. I cleared my throat, turning around to look back at Martin.

“What?” he said.

“Seatbelts, douchebag. I’m not driving until you put it on.”

“Ah what the hell man, why does it even matter?” Martin said.

“Just drive, Lars,” Joel said.

“I ain’t driving until your damn seatbelt is on — otherwise, you can walk.”

Martin let out the world’s tinniest ‘uuuuugggh’, and clipped his seatbelt in.

“Was that so hard?”

I started driving off, passing the same five or six same split-level or ranch-style homes over and over as I sped through the winding roads of Croixwood.

“Would someone text Gates that we’re coming over?” I said.

“Why don’t you do it?” Joel asked.

“I’m not about to text and drive, *Joel*. Do you want us to get killed?” I motioned to the empty streets, keeping my eyes on the road. Not mentioning the fact that I am pretty much incapable of concentrating on two tasks at once.

Joel conceded a shrug:

“Martin, text Gates we’re coming over.”

“Why can’t *you* do it?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Shut up Joel, just fucking do it,” I said.

Joel rolled his eyes, mouthing what I said in a mimicking way. I swerved a hard right, knocking Joel off his balance so his head smacked into the side window.

“Ow, fine. *Dickhead*.”

I eased off the accelerator, continuing down the poorly-maintained winding streets to get out of Croixwood. We were heading up Interlachen Drive toward Gates’ place across from the county highway that separated the Eagle Ridge and Croixwood developments. The houses were materially uniform: either some shade of brown or grey vinyl siding that coated a split-level or one-level home, with the basement foundation just barely poking above each lot’s short-trimmed, and often dying, lawn. The further I drove up Interlachen, trees appeared less and less, and the newer houses that were built appeared to be a lot nicer than the home Martin lived in. There was even a sidewalk on one side of the road — albeit stopping abruptly at a retaining wall before it could go further than the block.

I took a sharp left, whipping around to jerk Martin and Joel again, turning onto Interlachen Way — they always had such poetics naming these streets — and a kid on his bike came straight towards my front bumper.

I swerved again, harder this time, just barely missing the young boy as he went careening into someone's lawn. At least he was wearing a helmet. Joel smacked his head again on the window, and rolled it down.

"Get out of the way you fucking retard!" Joel screamed outside. Martin shrilly laughed and jeered at the boy, following Joel's insults with even less thought-out dribble.

The boy's mom came sprinting down the street seconds later. I pressed the accelerator down a bit more, speeding down the straight-away to get out of there.

I swung another left to get us back towards Joel's so we could grab his shit, and after we were delayed a half an hour after his mother tried to figure out what we would be going to do, we were finally able to head over to Gates', who was happy to have us again for like the fourth time that week. Making our way back, we pulled into Gates' driveway after driving much more carefully through the much more well-maintained neighborhood of Eagle Ridge. We were welcomed into Colton Gates' unfinished basement from around back and made ourselves at home — you know, the usual.

"Dude that doesn't untap your lands," Joel said.

"Oh yeah? Look it up then you asshole," Gates replied, he turned his swamp card around, ready to be used again. He looked at the cards in his hands, deciding what to cast next.

We were playing a game of *Magic: the Gathering*, around the folding card table that was set up permanently in the unfinished concrete basement of the Gates family home. Other than the TV idling on the Xbox home screen, or the cracks of light that made it through the edges of heavy blankets Gates had tacked up over the one window in the basement, one lightbulb hanging bare from the ceiling was the only source of light. We were barely illuminated, but we could still read the cards on the table. The nearby futons where plenty of sleepovers and LAN parties happened were bathed in the blaring light of the TV. Gates had

put on some classic rock on his phone speakers, and snagged some pop from the fridge in his family's garage.

"No, dude, I think Joel's right — that doesn't mean you can untap your lands," I said.

Gates groaned:

"Then why would it say 'untap a card' if that didn't also include lands?"

"I think it needs to *specify* that it can be a land card, dude," Joel said.

"*Look it up, then.* In the meantime, I'm playing *Ob Nixilis of the Bla—*"

"Like *HELL* you are!" I said, raising my voice now.

"Then *LOOK IT UP!*"

"*I am!*" Joel said, pulling up the MTG Wiki on his phone.

"Dude, I fuckin' hate *Magic*," Martin whined.

"Shut up, Martin. You just hate it because you have the worst deck," Joel said.

"Yeah? Well how am I supposed to compete when Lars has that shitty Planeswalker that puts out three fuckin' soldier tokens *every turn?*"

"Hey, I paid twenty bucks for that — you'd best believe I'm going to use it," I said.

"Yeah, especially since it's like your only good card," Joel said.

"Sorry we all can't blow a hundred bucks every week on *Magic* booster packs,"

Martin said.

"Okay ladies — if we're done arguing about who's hair is prettiest, we can get back to me kicking all of your asses—" Gates said. Joel slapped his cards down, face-up:

"*No, no, no,* I haven't looked up if that's a legal move yet—"

"Colton? What're y'all boys doin' down here?"

Gates' dad, Austin Gates, or just Mr. Gates, stood on the bare wooden stairs leading up to the rest of his home. He stood nearly a silhouette, save for his massive moustache, in the cascading light coming from above-ground finished bits of the home. The basement was the black spot on the Gates' house: where they stored everything that needed to be kept out

of sight. Mr. Gates had always said about how one day he was going to finally finish the basement — something I had repeatedly heard since I had met Colton Gates in first grade.

“Hey dad,” Gates said. “We’re just playing *Magic* down here.”

“Why don’t you boys go outside? It’s a beautiful day out,” Mr. Gates said.

*And go where? Do what, exactly?*

“When I was your kids’ age, I was gettin’ into all kinds of trouble with my friends,” Mr. Gates continued. “I don’t want you boys becoming soft, sun-hating basement dwellers.”

*Did he just call us C.H.U.D.s?*

My parents had given me a similar spiel before: *go outside, get off your computer, why don’t you go on a bike ride with your friends? Why not go play some sports in the park?*

“C’mon, why don’t you guys go throw around a football or something in the backyard? Or we could all head down to Brown’s Creek Park and play a little pick-up game?”

*I literally could not imagine anything worse than playing football with Mr. Gates.*

It made sense why he wanted us to do that though, he was one of those dads who peaked in high school: captain of the Stillwater football team, went to state even — he probably didn’t win though — otherwise, he would still be bragging about it. He claimed he was even prom king, but my mom was in the same class as him and said that wasn’t true. After high school, Austin Gates got an office job at the Best Buy headquarters in Richfield, married his highschool sweetheart, didn’t leave town, bought a house in the Eagle Ridge development, never finished the basement, and was now some middle manager with a beer gut in the Best Buy corporate structure. A thrilling midwestern life, nonetheless.

I’m sure Mr. Gates wasn’t exactly pleased that he had a beanpole of a first son.

“Joel, I mean, look at you, you’re so pale you probably would sparkle in the sunlight like those, uh...”

*Vampires? From Twilight?* Mr. Gates was never going to admit he watched those movies, even if he did do it to see why Mrs. Gates kept sitting on the dryer.

“I mean, no wonder y’all don’t have girlfriends,” Mr. Gates continued. “Y’all just hole up somewhere and do... whatever this is,” he motioned at our *Magic* decks spewed out across the card table.

None of us said anything:

“Y’all gotta go outside and build some *muscle* — you know what I mean?” his smile was blocked by his massive ‘stache as he lightly pinched his son’s bicep. Mr. Gates’ beer paunch jiggled as he chuckled.

“Martin, you go hunting with your dad, right?”

“Not really anymore. He works nights now,” Martin said.

“What? Oh man, I gotta take you boys up north to go hunting! We’ve got an extra week at the timeshare now so we could all pack the tents and bag us some bucks!”

*Well, now I could imagine anything worse than playing football with Mr. Gates.*

“Me and Barb can hear you boys hollering, and we’re worried sick that you boys are just down here throwing your lives away.”

*Takes one to know one, eh?*

“What if you all joined like the football or hockey team? Or at least go to the gym or something together. Guys your age should be out there getting some exercise, you know?”

“Maybe you guys could join me on the ski team this winter,” I said. “It’s honestly a ton of fun. We go to state almost every year, and you get to skip a ton of days off school for it.”

“Oh, that’s not a *real* sport,” Mr. Gates chuckled.

“I mean, it’s in the Olympics. Seems like a ‘real sport’ to me.”

“Yeah, well so’s ping pong — I bet I could talk to Ted and get you boys all on the JV football team, we go way back. Think of it as a favor.”

Nobody said anything. Joel was fiddling with his *Magic* cards, and Martin’s eyes kept darting to the illuminated TV screen. Gates just sort of sat there — he had obviously been through this before.

“Don’t you boys want to *be men*?”



Gates didn't look at his dad, he focused on the middle of the mess of cards. His skinny arms were crossed and his back curled forward to the point where his shoulders were over the table.

"Are you boys even listening to me?" Mr. Gates asked, then groaned. "Whatever, this isn't worth my time. Colton, we'll talk about this later. Y'all can't, and *won't*, stay down here forever."

Mr. Gates plodded back up the stairs, heaving as he made each step. He got to the top before poking his head back down to say:

"I almost forgot, I'm grilling burgers for dinner: how do you boys want yours?"

"Medium well, please," Joel said.

"Medium," Gates said, coldly.

"What?" Martin asked.

"Medium rare, please. Thanks, Mr. Gates," I said.

Mr. Gates grinned, looking back at us sitting around the table.

"Maybe you are more of a man than you let on, Lars," he chuckled.

*How the hell does that make me 'more of a man'?*

Mr. Gates shut the door behind him as he disappeared upstairs. The music from Gates' phone was still playing. Martin slurped on a cherry Pepsi.

"So are we finishing this game, or not?" Joel asked, finally pulling up the MTG wiki.

"No. I'm not in the mood to play anymore," Gates said.

"Anyone want to play Halo?" Martin asked.

"Sure, why not?" I said.

We parked ourselves on the futons, not cleaning up our *Magic* decks. Gates pulled out his laptop and went straight onto 4chan's /b/ — the 'random' board. He'd smirk and chuckle as he scrolled each page. Joel joined him in looking at various threads — webm's,

meme threads, greentext threads, metric shitloads of porn; eventually, while Martin and I were playing a 1v1 match of Halo ODST, Joel whooped a bit:

“Damn! She is *good-looking*. I wish I could get a girl like that.”

Gates grunted in agreement, continuing to scroll down whatever thread they were looking at.

“Martin, Lars, come check this out,” Joel said.

I paused the game, Martin and I dragged ourselves over to Gates’ laptop. On the screen were several images of women — many with social media links and details attached. Some of the women were even identified by name. Replies to each image in the thread were usually followed by dudes saying how attractive each woman was, or various sexual comments.

“Holy shit,” Martin said. “Wait, stop scrolling, I want to check out that one.”

“Is this what watching porno movies with your friends is like?” I asked.

“Shut up Lars,” Joel said. “Wait! Stop! I want to check her out. Are her socials in the thread?”

“And what are you going to do? Follow her? Poke her on Facebook? We don’t know her. It’s pretty fucking weird that this is even posted online.”

“Whatever. She’d probably just like the extra attention and probably only cares about her follower count going up. She probably has loads of random followers already.”

My brows furrowed. I tried to shake the comments off as Gates kept scrolling.

## Chapter 5: pages 55 through 70

“Dude, you’re really going to hang out with that skank?” Gates said.

Today was the day that I was finally going to hang out with Olivia outside of class. It was all I could think about all day. I couldn’t believe it was actually going to happen. This could finally be my shot.

“You’re not going to get any,” Joel said.

“I don’t care. She’s actually really cool, man,” I said. We were standing by our usual spot outside the boy’s bathroom outside our guidance counsellor’s office on the ground floor of the high school. Several kids with oversized backpacks would pass us by, and a few of the bigger ones would try to smack the back of either Joel or Martin’s head.

“Ow, *bitch*,” Martin said after Dean Coleman from the hockey team smacked him upside the head.

“Whatever man, don’t come crying to me once that slut breaks your heart,” Joel said.

“Dude, my sole purpose in life isn’t to get laid,” I said.

“It’s like, literally our biological *purpose*.”

“What? I’m not going to hang out with her just so I can bone. I’m going because I think she’s cool and I want to hang out with her.”

“Whatever you say, douchebag,” Gates said. “Once she blue-balls you, come crying back to us — we’ll have a gift for you then.”

“Again, I’m not necessarily trying to have sex with her.”

“Oh, you’ll want this gift anyway.”

“What is it?”

Joel and Gates grinned, eying each other and snickering a bit.

“We can’t tell you... yet,” Joel said, winking.

“Joel finally got ahold of some of Olivia’s nudes,” Martin said. “We all already have copies of them.”

“God *dammit Martin*,” Gates said. “Why must you spoil every surprise?”

*How the fuck did these dipshits get Olivia Wilson's nudes?*

*Oh God, what are they going to do with them?*

Gates and Martin were now yelling at each other, Gates, a full head taller than Martin shoved him around a bit. I looked at the clock above the bathroom door: 2:15pm. I was supposed to meet Olivia and her friends at 2:30, so I left without a word. As I walked down the hallway, I could still hear Gates and Martin shouting at each other.

As I was sitting in my car waiting to get out of the parking lot jam that happened every day as school ended, a busted-up grey minivan pulled up next to me and the CIB. Olivia rolled down her window, waving to me as I rolled down mine and turned down my music. Inside the van were a few of her friends, all whispering things to each other as they gawked at me like I was behind the glass at an exhibit at the zoo.

Olivia shouted over the hummings, gentle roarings, or in my case — rattlings of engines:

“Meet us at Noodles and Company!”

“What?”

One of her friends, an Indian girl who I had seen a few times in the cafeteria, rolled down the back window, and stuck her head out:

*“NOODLES AND COMPANY!”*

The wind blew her dark hair right into her mouth, she spat it out only to have it blow right back in again. The other friend was laughing. Olivia waved and turned right onto north 58th Street. I started to sink into the driver's seat of my car, pulling up my music on my phone to desperately get something to pump me up for the slew of embarrassments I was about to put myself through.

*LCD Soundsystem will have to do — This is Happening.*

I waited to turn left at the stoplight at the intersection for almost the entirety of the 3-minute intro to *Dance Yrself Clean*, and floored it the second the synths kicked in. My tires skidded as I swept right onto Stillwater Boulevard, putting the accelerator down as I barreled

down the on-ramp to Highway 36 before swinging a 180 at the intersection of the stroad Walmart was on to get to the frontage road to the unnamed strip mall where Noodles and Company was. *JESUS, I drove fast.* I pulled into a parking spot in the lot outside, waiting a minute, swaying to the 4/4 beat in my car and getting mentally ready for whatever was about to happen inside the restaurant that stood in front of me.

*Maybe I should ask her out if this goes well. Unless this already is a date? Who brings friends to a date? I wouldn't ever want Martin or Joel near any date I was on.*

My phone buzzed: y are you still sitting in your car? get in here already

It wasn't Olivia's number. I looked up, staring right into the restaurant windows to see the girl who had yelled at me from Olivia's van waving to me, wearing an absolutely definitive shit-eating grin.

I stepped out of the car and into the restaurant. My beaten-up Adidas Sambas squeaked on the floor, seemingly louder and louder after each step as I approached the table Olivia and her friends were sitting at. My BPM was skyrocketing with each step.

"I wish Jane would just quit the team, honestly," said one of Olivia's friends — a mouse-like girl with freckles and the brightest blonde hair I had ever seen. She stopped her conversation with Olivia and the girl who texted me as they all noticed me walking up to the table.

"Hey Lars," Olivia said, smiling. I waved, smiling, and slumped down into the seat across from her. I kept trying to find something to do with my hand.

"God, your shoes are like a cat bell," said Olivia's friend who texted me, grinning somehow even more widely than before. "Didn't you wipe your feet? I bet we could hear the squeaking from a mile away."

"Of course I wiped my feet, I'm not a barbarian," I said.

"Well, we'll see about that," the mouse-like girl said.

"Did you order any food?" Olivia asked.

"Nope, I don't think I've ever actually been here before. What do they have?"

All three women gawked at me.

“What?”

“Dude,” the friend who texted me said. “You kidding me?”

“*What?*”

“I mean, it’s literally in the name,” Olivia said, laughing a bit.

“They only have noodles,” the friend who texted me said.

“Yeah, but like, which kinds?” I asked.

“*All* of them,” the mouse-like girl said.

After getting up to look at the menu boards above the tills, I couldn’t pick between the several types of noodles on offer. I would’ve opted for the Mac and Cheese —

*Fifteen fucking dollars?! For mac and cheese? It doesn’t even come with any meat!*

Between that, and Mom probably not wanting me filling up before dinner, I opted for a cup for soda. I filled it with 3-quarters Coke, 1-quarter Mellow Yellow, my go-to sugary citric acids in a cup. As I returned to the table, Olivia had left, leaving me with the two friends. The girl who texted me stared me up and down: her eyelids shifting her dark eyeliner under the fluorescent restaurant lights.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting a read on you,” she replied, not stopping.

“And what exactly are you ‘reading’?”

She paused for a second, raising her right hand to her chin.

“Well, for one, you’re not that cool.”

“Ah, another mystery solved. Well done, Mr. Holmes.”

“I fear that there’s more, my dear Watson.”

I chuckled: “Like what?”

“That you’re probably a ‘nice guy’.”

“I mean, I sure hope that I’m nice.” I started sipping my drink.

“No — I mean that you’re being nice to try and score some poon, my guy. You look like the walking stereotype of a virgin, except with bigger hair.”

I snorted, fizzy syrupy drink shooting up my nose.

“Dude, I could see you having what looked like a full-blown panic in your car because you were about to come hang out with us.”

“But how could you know I’m just doing this just to try and get laid?” I asked.

“Because every guy we’ve hung out with only does so because they’re trying to bone one of us. This isn’t new to us.”

*They must know that The Goon Squad has Olivia’s nudes. Should I say something?*

I said nothing.

A sad-looking server who wasn’t much older than us came over and set down plates on trays stacked with pasta for each of the women. The two friends started digging in.

“Did you order anything?” the mouse-like friend asked me.

“Nah, I don’t really have the cash to spend for it right now.”

“What, did you blow it all on porn or something?” the friend who texted me asked, her mouth full of meatball.

“Why would I ever spend money on porn?”

“Eh, isn’t that a guy thing?”

“Not really, no.”

I kept sipping my drink as Olivia walked back to the table.

“I hope that Ira and Ally weren’t giving you too much shit while I was gone.”

“Eh, nothing I couldn’t handle,” I jokingly said back, smiling at the two friends.

“Although, I haven’t been introduced quite yet.”

“Oh! *Duh*,” Olivia said. She pointed to the mouse-like friend: “That’s Ally, we used to run track together in junior high.”

“Oh yeah, I was on the team too. I knew I recognized you from somewhere other than school,” I said to Ally. “You used to have glasses, right?”

“Wait, *you* used to run track?” she asked, Olivia agreed.

“Yeah, the one and two hundred meter races, and the triple jump. I used to mostly hang out with Christine Swartz and Jackie Freddricks though.”

“Ah, okay, with the nerds then,” Olivia joked.

“Weren’t they more popular than you?” I grinned.

They laughed, and the friend who texted me, I assume Ira, rolled her eyes a bit.

“Anyway,” Olivia said. “This is Ira. We’ve been friends since grade school.”

“We were in Mr. Hepman’s government class together in 8th grade,” Ira said.

“Oh man, Hepatitis N. I’m so glad I never have to have him again — why did we call him that?” I asked.

“I started that; His first name was Neil.”

“No way, that’s hilarious.”

Ira shrugged, smirking. She picked her fork back up and started shoveling more spaghetti into her mouth. Ally was eating a beef stroganoff, and Olivia was eating a bunch of the spirally pasta I didn’t know the real name of. She stopped eating for a moment, but didn’t set her fork down:

“Lars, have you done the reading for english yet?”

“The reading assigned today? Why yes, I did. While I was driving here from the school parking lot,” I said. “Saves a lot of time, really.”

“Shut up,” Olivia said, chuckling. Ira rolled her eyes again, but I saw her grinning, even if ever so slightly.

“I did read ahead though a few assignments ago. I am actually loving the books,” I said. “Even if I do hate Ms. Stein.”

“It’s the opposite for me. I love Ms. Stein, but I’m hating *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.”

“What? I love both of them so much. I might even read the unabridged version of *The Count*.”

“oh my god you are such a dork,” Ira whispered. I shot her a non-serious look of disapproval, trying to copy Mom’s famous leer.



"I don't know," Olivia said. "I am just sick of only reading classic literature."

"*The Poisonwood Bible* isn't classic literature!" I said.

"It *will* be though. It's not that I don't read, I just don't love the 'classic' literature we're forced to read, and it's honestly making me hate the other reading I do."

*She reads in her spare time? I don't even do that very much.*

"What would we read otherwise?" I asked.

Ally and Ira started talking about something unrelated. I tuned them out, watching Olivia's every move with her fork. A piece of her gorgeous hair draped in front of her mouth right as she was eating a piece of twisty pasta. She sputtered, spitting out the pasta as I laughed loudly. Her cheeks flushed redder than the Coca-Cola logo on my cardboard soda cup. After my laughter died down, she finally swallowed the bite.

"I'm reading the Mortal Instruments series, and just finally finished up the Hunger Games. Honestly, I wish we could be talking about those instead. I feel like I can relate more to those than to Edmond fucking Dantès."

"But Dantès is so *coooooo!*," I said. "I wish I could be rich and take revenge on all the dipshits who wronged me."

"Yeah, but it's easier for you to relate to Dantès. I bet you probably even picture yourself as him while you're reading it," she said, totally calling me out. "Just probably with less crappy... uhhh..." she motioned to my beard.

"Hey! It'll fill in — I think. How can't you relate to wanting and then getting revenge?"

"Dude, it's easier for you to relate to the stuff we read. Me? I've got tits, man. Everything we read is about men written by stuffy old guys who probably didn't mean to write about half of the themes we cover."

"Yeah, but it's not like you can do that with young adult fiction though."

"*Excuse me?* Have you read these books?" Olivia asked, leaning in, eyes widening with each syllable.

"No, just that, you know, it's not as critically acclaimed or whatever."

“We could totally go in-depth about the themes of *The Hunger Games*, or the *Maya Dyer* series, or Neil Gaiman’s books.”

“Yeah but that doesn’t have like, I don’t know, the *classicalness* to be taught I guess.”

“But what *makes* something classical even?”

*I don’t know.*

Olivia continued:

“All these books have been picked apart by scholars and English majors or whoever already — that’s why it’s taught. Because then we can’t actually debate it or truly discuss it.”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I like some YA, but it just feels like ‘junk’ reading to me — which isn’t bad, just not something I would consider literature or whatever.”

“What are you, the library in elementary school? ‘You have to take one chapter book, and then you can take one ‘junk’ book: a picture book, a graphic novel, or a Star Wars book,’” she joked. “God, I hope that you aren’t like this with music too.” She grinned, before shovelling another forkful of pasta into her mouth.

“Nah, I am really into music though. I honestly don’t trust people who say that they don’t like music,” I said.

“Lucky for you, I like music,” Olivia said. “I think I have excellent taste.”

“I hope it’s better than your taste in books,” I teased. “What kind of music are you into?”

“I really like this band called Imagine Dragons. Have you heard of them?”

“Only about a million times on the radio.”

“Shut up. I listen to other music too.”

“Like *what*?”

“Ed Sheeran, Taylor Swift, Maroon 5 — oh, I actually love One Direction too.”

“Oh my God, of course you do.”

“What? Why’s that bad?”

“Eh, it’s not bad; that’s what you like — just... basic I guess.”

“And what music do *you* listen to, oh ‘oracle of taste’?”

“I really like LCD Soundsystem, Outkast, Stars, Arcade Fire, Beck, Of Montreal, Violent Femmes, Modest Mouse, Gorillaz—”

“Stop. Of that super long list I only know Beck.”

“You totally know Outkast too: ‘*my baby don’t mess around, because she loves me so and this I know for sure*’ — UH,” I said, slightly shouting the grunt and startling Ira and Ally.

“Oh yeah. I do know that one,” she paused. “You’re totally the kind of person who would be into those bands.”

“And what does that mean?”

“Ring, ring — hello? Portland called: it wants its thick-framed hipster glasses back.”

“I am *not* a hipster. They’re like a hivemind of douchebaggery — I *hate them*.”

“Whatever man, the glasses, the button-up shirt, and the taste in music certainly aren’t doing you any favors there. Are your glasses even real?”

“Yes, *they’re real*,” I said, getting defensive. “They’re a low prescription, but I still can’t legally drive without them. Just because I don’t want to look like every other guy at school in khakis, hockey hoodie, and a baseball hat doesn’t make me a hipster.”

“So you just look like every twenty-something living in a city instead?” she grinned, finishing the last bite of her pasta. Ira and Ally were already done, still chatting about school and their lives while Olivia and I talked.

“Ah shut up, hipsters are such dicks. I don’t want to be lumped in with them.”

“Yeah, I totally get you. I hate being lumped in with groups I don’t want to be a part of too. It happens to me all the time.”

I thought back to what Joel and Gates had always said about women like Olivia.

“Yeah, I can easily imagine that,” I said, slurping up the rest of my pop. “I’m gonna go grab some more, you want anything while I’m up?”

“I mean, what would you even grab for me?” Olivia asked.

“Man, I don’t know. Water, a napkin — some salt for your empty plate, maybe? I’m just trying to be nice for chrissake.”

“I’m just giving you shit, you idiot. Go refill whatever evil concoction you were drinking.”

I threw out a few ‘yeah yeah yeah’s’ and sauntered over to the soda fountain, mixing another Coke and Mellow Yellow, before returning to the table to see Oliva, Ira, and Ally all getting up to bus their trays.

“Leaving so soon? I’m not scaring you guys off now, am I?” I said.

“You’re absolutely revolting,” Ira said, her lips curling into the same shit-eating grin that greeted me when I first arrived. “We need to leave before one of us barfs.”

I scoffed, waving my hand before taking another sip of my pop.

“Ally’s mom wants her home. I’ve also got homework to go do,” Olivia said.

“That’s fair — what time is it?” I said.

“Almost seven,” Ally said.

“Ah, yeah, I should probably get home too,” I said, checking my phone to see several messages from the Goon Squad group chat interspersed with texts from Mom asking where I was and when I was getting home for dinner. “I gotta go too, actually.”

Olivia, Ira, and Ally all bussed their trays, and we walked out to the parking lot. The girls all piled into Olivia’s minivan, and as Olivia started the engine, she rolled down the window:

“You doing anything this weekend? I had fun hanging out with you today — we should do it again soon.”

“Yeah, I had a really nice time!” I said. “I don’t think I’m up to much, so I’ll text you.”

“Perfect, have a good night! Thanks for coming out,” Olivia said, backing up the minivan.

“Bye!” Ira shouted from the backseat, waving to me, genuinely looking friendly for once. “Nice to meet you!”

“See you soon!” Ally said from the passenger seat.

“See you guys!” I said, waving as they drove away, the headlights illuminating me, then leaving me in the encroaching darkness of the late October evening. I walked back to

my car, my hands in my jacket pockets. Climbing into the driver's seat, I started my car, and drove onto MN-36 towards home. The towering lights bathed parking lots, streets, and big box stores in a blinding white light, as if to defy the earlier and earlier evenings of the winter.

My phone buzzed, and it buzzed again.

*Probably just the Goons spamming dumb shit.*

I turned up the car stereo playing one of my playlists that I was sure Olivia would've teased me for being 'too hipster'. I turned off the highway onto Manning Avenue, and drove through the winding suburban roads back to my house. As I pulled past each perfectly maintained house into our driveway, I could see Mom preparing dinner from the kitchen window. The inside looked incredibly inviting as I stepped back out into the cold night air, slipping into the garage.

"Hey!" Mom said. "How are you?"

"Hey, I'm alright," I said.

"Only alright?"

"That's just what I say when I'm good, Mom — I'm good."

"Whatever you say, I'm just checking. Where were you this afternoon?"

"I went to Noodles and Company with a few friends after school," I said.

"I didn't think that the Goon Squad was open enough to try anything other than cheeseburgers or chicken nuggets," Mom said, 'hmp-hing' as she stirred a massive pot over the stovetop.

"I wasn't hanging out with them, some different friends actually."

"Oh, really? Who?"

"A girl from my English class — Olivia Wilson, and a few of her friends."

Mom seemed pleasantly surprised:

"So have you eaten yet?"

"Nope," I said. "Was a bit too steep for me, and I didn't want to piss you off for not eating with you guys."

“Well, you’d better get used to prices like that. Not everything can be on the McDonald’s dollar menu,” Mom said, smiling. “I’m glad you didn’t eat — we’re having potato leek soup tonight for dinner—”

“Oh *fuck yeah*—”

“*Language*, Lars,” she said.

I muttered an apology, sitting myself at the kitchen island, pulling out my phone to check my messages:

heyyy

It was from Ira. There was more:

i had fun hanging out with you today you seem like fun :)

I texted back:

**Hey, thanks! I had fun too! I’ve got one question for you though, how did you get my number earlier?**

She texted back almost instantly:

i snagged it from olivias contacts while i was checking out your texts to her

I waited a few moments between each text: I guess I wanted to play it cool.

**Why were you reading the texts I sent her?**

to make sure you weren’t a dick

**Well, what’s the verdict?**

eh, you’re alright ;p

**Thanks I guess lol**

I set my phone down, Mom took off the lid to the massive pot on the stovetop and the smells of a lovely soup filled the entire level of the house. I would’ve grabbed a straw to drink the stuff straight out of the pot, but it was too thick to do that. My phone buzzed again:

can i be honest with you? Another message from Ira.

**Sure, what’s up?**

i think youre pretty cool! id really like to get to know you better

*What does she mean by that?*

**I'd like to get to know you better too!**

:)

*How was I supposed to respond? Is she fucking with me?*

“Lars, would you please set the table for dinner?” Mom asked.

I nodded, getting up to collect bowls, plates, and silverware from various cupboards and drawers. I started to think about how I could possibly get back to Ira.

*Is she just fucking with me? Why would she want to talk to me?*

*Why would Olivia want to talk to me?*

My phone vibrated in the right pocket of my jeans, buzzing against the table as I leaned over it to set Lydia's spot at the dining table.

have you ever played 21 questions? Ira again.

**I don't think so?**

how??? lmao

i'll start! 1. what kind of stuff are you into?

**Like, just generally?**

sure

**I like video games and music mostly! I**

**also like going out to do stuff too**

what kind of stuff?

**Ah ah ah, that's two questions! Let me ask  
one! What kind of stuff are you interested in?**

that's just recycling my question you jackass ;p

**Reduce, reuse, recycle I suppose lol**

*Are we flirting? I feel like a sim.*

i like hiking and movies, im into sports

and im on the soccer team but i also really like art

**Oh cool, I'm on the ski team! What kind of art?**

ah, my turn for a question now!

2. whats the worst thing youve ever done?

*Christ, right for the fucking throat. What was the worst thing I've ever done?*

*Cheating off of Sven on our math tests? Drawing stupid offensive shit over people's Facebook photos in MS Paint and sharing it with my friends? Posting horrible shit on a fake Facebook account? That super awkward time when I asked Suzie Monroe out to the 9th-grade boat dance? Joining in while Joel and Gates called people the N-word over and over on Gmod servers? Standing by while they screamed at feminine-sounding people over voice chat? Calling people retarded? Not saying anything while Joel and Gates were probably passing around Olivia's nudes like fucking Pokémon cards?*

*It can't be too serious Lars: it's supposed to be a funny question, right?*

I stood typing out messages over the table in the dining room, deleting them, and rewriting them over and over.

**Once in elementary school I stole a bunch of books from the charity book fair because I wanted to read them so badly**

HAHAHAHAHAHA oh my god thats hilarious

youre such a nerd

**Yeah, and? You've known that from the start ;)**

true true :p

**Alright, here's my second question! If you could get out of Stillwater right**



**now, where would you go and what  
would you do?**

ohhhh man, the hardhitters

id move away for sure, i hate it here lol

ive always wanted to move out west

move away from this shitty place

**I feel you, man. I want to get out of here too**

man? im not your bro, bro ;p

**Surprise third question: what would you  
rather have me call you? M'lady?? hahaha**

shut up ;p that doesnt count towards your questions lol

question 3. would you consider yourself a bad boy?

**HAHAHA! Are you getting these from a list? I  
think you know the answer to that one already**

It went on like this until dinner was ready. I found out Ira hated Instagram, but couldn't get off of it, that she liked Daft Punk, that she would try to throw a huge party if she only had one day left to live — I said that I'd try to make it, although I am a busy person — she said she'd go back in time to make women's rights happen earlier, and that she also had a crush on Milo from the Disney *Atlantis* movie as a kid. I told her all sorts of stuff: some of my favorite books, that I was afraid of tornadoes and the bubonic plague as a kid, that I danced in the mirror all the time (she did too), that I didn't know where or what I wanted to do after high school, and how I have two middle names and that is a full name inside of another full name — Lars Peter Schubert Stannard.

After gobbling up my potato leek soup, I bussed the dishes and scurried off downstairs to my room to keep texting Ira. We ended up playing four rounds of 21 questions,

talking about school, how we both want to leave Stillwater, gossiping, and staying up until 2am before finally heading to bed.

In the morning, I woke up to a good morning text from Ira, several messages from Martin asking where I was last night and if I had done the biology homework, and several fairly unfunny Pepe the frogs from Gates. As I showered, I got a text from Olivia:

I hear you and Ira really hit it off last night :)

You doing anything after school today?

## Chapter 7: pages 85 through 97

I was sitting on my bed, my laptop burning hot on my crotch. Shooting sounds of cartoony Team Fortress 2 violence blared through my earbuds. In another window, Joel, Gates, Martin, and I were sitting in a Skype call.

“There’s a spy back by the point — he just killed me,” I said.

I heard an echo on Skype as Gates said something to our team through the TF2 in-game voice chat:

“You fucking braindead n\*\*\*\*s, get on the *fucking point*.”

“Seriously,” Joel said to our Skype call. “These people are so fucking retarded.”

“It probably doesn’t help that you guys keep saying nasty shit to the team,” I said. “I certainly am not playing any better because of it.”

“Oh shut up you baby,” Gates said. “I don’t actually mean it: take a joke.”

Gates groaned as he got headshotted by an enemy sniper sitting across the map.

“Son of a n\*\*\*\*r bitch!” he said, holding down his push-to-talk key to yell more at our team. “*Come on* you fucking porch monkey n\*\*\*\*r faggots! There’s only ten seconds left!”

Another player on our team, Bada55Jay, piped up. He was someone with a deeper, masculine voice — clearly older than us:

“Hey man, don’t say shit like that to black guys.”

“I’ll say *whatever I want to who I want* you fucking n\*\*\*\*r,” Gates said.

“Dude. It’s not okay for you to be calling me that,” Bada55Jay said back.

“Shut the fuck up you goddamn n\*\*\*\*r,” Joel said.

“Racist crackers, man. You guys can eat my shit.”

“Mmmmmkay, call me a racist and a slur in the same sentence, whatever f\*\*\*\*t,” Gates said.

Bada55Jay was on the point, but then left the match. We lost two seconds later.

Joel and Gates kept screaming at our team as the round ended. I exited to the main menu.

“That stupid fucking *FAGGOT*,” Gates said. “He was *on the point* and then *left*.”

*Because you were saying shitty things to him, man. I would’ve left too.*

It hadn’t been a good night for us, we had lost every round we had played.

“I think I’m gonna take a break for a bit dudes,” I said, exiting my game.

“Ugh, fine,” Gates said. “Joel, share your screen, and we can browse /b/ together or something.”

Joel grunted, turning on a direct view onto his desktop. He opened Firefox and went straight to 4Chan on his bookmark bar. It was around midnight on a Friday; I had gotten back from hanging out with Ira, Ally, and Olivia downtown about two hours earlier — the Goons had been playing games together since we got out of school in the early afternoon.

As Joel scrolled through /b/, several porn threads and roll threads passed by as Joel searched for meme threads or greentext threads. Every once in a while you’d see a slur-filled post adorned with Pepe-the-frogs.

“There isn’t shit here right now. Head over to /r9k/, you can get some funny stories over there,” Gates said.

Joel switched boards to the Robot9001 board, where several ‘tfw no gf’ threads filled the screen as anonymous people constantly posted threads of shit meant to provoke and incite negative reactions — be it sadness or anger. Joel clicked on a greentext thread about a guy from the UK being alone that night. Tons of other people were posting the same thing down the thread: how they were all miserable and lonely. There was almost a sense of solidarity between each poster until suddenly, after a few people posted about how ‘this never happens to girls’, the thread spiraled into anger — people raging on and on about women, minorities, ‘normies’, and then — finally — themselves.

“I wish I had a girlfriend, man,” Joel said, still scrolling.

“You’re telling me,” Martin said.

Gates grunted in agreement.

“It just fucking sucks, man. I’m so lonely,” Joel said.

“I get you, dude,” I said. “We’ll all find someone though.”

“How? How are we supposed to go and meet people though?” Martin said.

“I guess that’s a good point,” I said. “Where are we supposed to meet people other than at school?”

“Even then, there isn’t lots of time to talk or hang out with anyone,” Gates said.

“It’s because I don’t have a car,” Joel said. “I can’t go *anywhere*, man. I can’t walk anywhere, and I have fucking rely on Lars to drive me anywhere I want to go. Besides, it’s not like there’s anything even interesting to go to or do.”

“Yeah, I’m not, and *can’t be* your personal taxi. I should be charging you for gas money dude,” I said.

“Shut your fucking mouth. I’m not feeling good right now,” Joel said.

“Yeah, I’m not either man, sorry.”

“What do *you* have to be sad about? You actually hang out with females.”

‘*Females*’? I started talking:

“I mean, I get sad about lots of stuff. Just because I hang out with girls doesn’t mean I feel any less alone. When I first got my car I spent a lot of time just kind of aimlessly driving through the endless subdivisions and strip malls. Now, it’s kind of like what’s the point? Everything looks the same, everything *is* the same wherever I go, and no matter where I go it always feels like there’s nobody really there.”

“Sometimes I feel like we’re the only people who are actually real,” Gates said.

“And like as I go around, I sort of think *this is really what civilization has amounted to*? We’re expected to know exactly how we’re supposed to live and fit into society, and it just doesn’t seem *worth* it,” I said.

“Is this because we had to take those career paths tests today?” Martin said.

“Yeah, partly. I’m sick of how there’s the pressure to know exactly what we want to do already. It feels like I’m on a conveyor belt with no actual choice, just the illusion of one,” I paused. Thinking about the tests we did during fourth and fifth periods that day. “What did you guys get for your recommended careers?”

“I got recommended that I should go into dentistry,” Martin said.

“I got told to go into sales,” Joel said. “Just like my dad, I guess.”

“Border patrol agent, or IT management,” Gates said. “I know which one my dad would want me to go into.”

“Jesus, I matched highest with ‘floral designer’. I don’t even like flowers,” I said.

Gates laughed: “That’s so gay — what the fuck.”

“I get how you feel Lars,” Martin said. “I don’t want to be a fucking dentist. I don’t really know what I want to do, or how I fit in. I don’t even feel like a man a lot of the time.”

“Did you guys have to take the Myers-Briggs personality test too?” I asked.

“What’s your MBTI?” Joel asked.

“Is that what that stands for? I keep seeing dudes seethe over it online. I’m an INFP,” I said. “I don’t really like how it just sorts us into boxes to stick us towards a certain—”

“You’ll never get a girlfriend with that MBTI type. I’m INTP, it makes us social retards, so we’ll never get girlfriends,” Joel said. “We’re doomed to live alone forever.”

“What?”

“Yeah, and we can’t do much to change it. It’s just how it’s going to be until women get bored of fucking hot alphas and settle for one of us beta losers who can hold a well-paying job.”

“What makes you so sure we’ll even have well-paying jobs?”

“We have to: we all have high intelligence, except maybe for Martin.”

*Joel realized who he was talking with, right?*

“Shut the fuck up Joel,” Martin said.

“Intelligence or well-paying jobs don’t matter,” Gates said. “Black men are stealing up all the white women and pumping them full of babies. *They* want to breed people like us out. I don’t want to settle for and start a family with some coon bitch. They’re just trying to climb the ladder.”

*What the fuck are you talking about Colton Gates?*

“These dumb cunts fall for it too, rap is a fucking brainwashing tool for white women, and these n\*\*\*\*\*s are over-represented in everything,” Joel said. “I wish Elliot Rodgers took out a bunch of those dumb monkeys.”

“Oh dude, check the group chat,” Gates said to Joel.

There was a pause, until Joel giggled and sent something in return. I checked our Facebook chat: a picture of the Happy Merchant, an anti-semitic caricature, flooded my phone screen. The caricature stood dressed as a general, pointing to send several ‘sheeeit’/Tyrones, another racist caricature of black men, forth to ‘rape all white women’, only to be challenged by a drawing of Elliot Rodgers, a mass-murdering incel who went on a killing spree in California earlier this year, with a shotgun.

Several other memes of this caliber were exchanged by Joel and Gates in our chat as they shrieked with laughter.

“Dude, dude, dude, dude —” Gates said, gasping for air in between giggles. “You know what we should do?”

“Hahaha what?” Joel asked.

“Let’s post those pictures of Olivia Wison on /b/, we could pretend to be her — we can make her famous!”

*Woah no. What the fuck.*

“Holy shit dude, we could get back at that slut.”

“And what exactly did she *do* to you guys? I don’t even think she knows you,” I said.

“And the white knight mounts his horse,” Gates said. “Which windmills will you charge at today?”

“She’s done what every girl has done to us,” Joel said. “She fucks tons of dudes, and ignores and belittles guys like us. We’re nice guys — we’re *smart* guys. We deserve to be loved.”

“This doesn’t seem very nice, or very smart,” I said. “It seems really fucked up, and I don’t think I can let you guys—”

“Oh shut the fuck up Lars,” Gates said.

He booted me from the Skype call.

I tried to join back in. Connecting.... Connecting....

“Fuck off,” Gates said, booting me again.

I sat there for a moment, inches away from a full-blown freakout. I went straight to 4chan’s /b/ and started refreshing the page over and over — waiting for any picture of Olivia to pop up in a thread or a new thread so I could report it.

After about five minutes the Skype ringtone blared through my headphones, it always startled the shit out of me — why was it so fucking loud? It was Martin, and only Martin. I clicked accept: Connecting.... Connecting....

“Hey man, you alright?” Martin asked.

“Not really! What the fuck was that?” I asked.

“Yeah man, I don’t know. I’m starting to think that Gates and Joel are going too far with this shit.”

“You *think*?”

“Don’t be a sarcastic asshole dude. After they kicked you, I told them it was kind of fucked up what they were saying they’d do, and they told me it was all just a joke — to get a rise out of you, I guess.”

“It didn’t sound like they were ‘just joking’, nobody was laughing either.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same. Have you been feeling weird about the memes they’ve been sending lately?”

“Yes, *oh my God*, I feel like I’ve been going crazy,” I said, sighing.

“Okay, because you’ve sent a few in the past too and I was worried that’s what your sense of humor was evolving into.”

“I mean, so have you dude. I mostly did it because I wanted to be all ‘cool and edgy’ to fit in with Gates and Joel and not cause any drama or tension or anything. I guess this stuff is just making me really uncomfortable. Like, over half my life I’ve been friends with



them since we met in 2nd grade. I don't want to lose some of my best friends over something this fucking dumb."

"Same here man. I don't want to throw away the friendships either. I just don't find that stuff they keep saying really funny. It feels really wrong too."

"That's because it is, and there isn't any real punchline — it's just 'haha [insert minority group here] are bad' over and over again."

"I mean, it's just a joke though, right?" Martin asked.

"I don't know, man. A lot of the time it doesn't really feel like it. But then the second you bring it up Gates is the first person to yell at you to 'shut the fuck up and take a joke you pussy'," I said.

"Yeah man, I don't know. I can kinda see some of the points that they're making though."

"I mean, we're all lonely and horny and fucking miserable: but that isn't because of black people or women rejecting you. It's because we're like spouting out racist bullshit and being assholes," I said.

"But like, *why* are we miserable and lonely?"

"I don't know dude — society? Puberty? I don't think that fucking 4chan is going to make us feel any happier."

Martin paused for a moment, sighing deeply and clipping his microphone as he exhaled.

"Do you think we'll ever be happy?" Martin asked. His voice seemed like it was about to break.

"I don't know, dude," I said quietly, my voice breaking a bit too.

"I'm fucking sick of this, man. I hate feeling like this, and I never get to talk to anyone about it. I tried to ask my dad for advice, and all he told me was to 'buck up'. I hate feeling like I have to be this emotionless slab that just operates without question and knows immediately what to do."

I heard a raspy and foggy snuffle through Martin's microphone.

“I feel the same way. I have no idea what I want to do, and I don’t want to keep doing...” I paused, muttering and motioning my hands — even though Martin couldn’t see it. “Whatever the hell *this* all even is. I don’t want to work a shitty dead-end job like Gates’ or Joel’s dads. It feels like there should be more to life than just *this*. We’re expected to go to college — why? To get a job — why? So we can buy a house — why? So we can have a kid — why? So we can send them off to college and give them a better life so they can stimulate the economy more or whatever. All these things that are supposed to make us happy or content just make me want to puke.”

“Yeah, it all just seems pointless, but what choice do we have otherwise? Die?”

I groaned, leaning over into my laptop screen as if to crawl through it — maybe I wouldn’t have to comply with societal expectations if I lived in computerland.

“I don’t ever want to die. I am terrified of death,” I said.

“I’m not, honestly,” Martin said. “I just want an adventure. I don’t care how dangerous it is. I just want for me to actually just do something meaningful with my life. I’m sick of being pushed around and yelled at by everyone all the time — I just want to be the hero for once.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know I can be a dick to you sometimes — I mean it in a friendly, just-teasing kind of way.”

“Oh, so suddenly *now it is* ‘just a joke’,” Martin said, teasing me.

“Ah shut up — at least there are *punchlines* to those,” I said, laughing. “Get it? Because sometimes people will punch you after they fuck with you?”

Martin chuckled, but followed it with a swift ‘shut-your-fucking-mouth’. I apologized, genuinely this time, and Martin promptly accepted it.

“I hate what’s expected of us as men,” I said after a short silence.

“What do you mean?”

“Like how we can’t talk like this openly, or cry, or how we can’t open up or act feminine in any way. We can’t really talk how we’re talking now. How we have to be ‘successful’ and if we’re not we might as well be dead.”

“Yeah, I get you. Sometimes I think I don’t actually belong as a man. I want to be strong, like, physically strong, but that’s it.”

“Men fucking suck,” I said.

“You sound like an SJW,” Martin said back.

“Yeah, maybe they’ve actually got good points though: it’s not like they want us to ‘be a real man’. Who even *wants* us to be real men if being a real man sucks so much ass?”

“I dunno, society?”

“Yeah, but, can’t we *change that?*”

“Maybe, I don’t know. I hope it changes.”

We sat in silence, I checked my phone to see what time it was: three in the morning.

“Hey man, can I tell you something?” I asked.

“What’s up?” Martin asked.

“I know that I give you a lot of shit, but I do want you to know that like, I love you. As like, one of my best friends, obviously.”

“Thanks man, ‘no homo’ would’ve worked. You’re one of my best friends, and I — I —”

Martin stammered:

“I suppose that I, in a way, love you too no homo.”

“Thanks, dude,” I said. Breathing heavily. We sat in silence a moment.

*I wish this wasn’t over a stupid Skype call.*

Martin piped up:

“I’m glad we talked. I’m gonna try and head to bed though. Want to hang out tomorrow?”

“I might have something going on with my mom, I’ll check. Either way, I’ll be on here tomorrow night. Goodnight dude, see you soon,” I said.

“Night, man,” he said, hanging up the Skype call.

I closed my laptop lid, turning out the christmas lights I had draped around my room. I curled up under my comforter, and tried to get some sleep.

I couldn't get to sleep. I laid face-up, staring at my ceiling. I kept thinking about whether or not Gates and Joel ended up posting Olivia's nudes. I checked /b/ again before trying to put my phone down, and didn't see anything there.

*I should've asked Martin to delete his copies of them.*

As I sat mulling it over, my phone buzzed:

Heyy, you up? It was Olivia.

**Yeah, can't sleep**

Me neither

**Everything okay?**

*Gates and Joel must've posted the nudes somewhere and Olivia must've found them — those fucking jackasses.*

Yeah, I was just up chatting with Ira

*Oh thank God.*

Can I ask you something?

**Sure, what's up?**

Do you like Ira?

**Like, 'like like' or just like as a person?**

Well I'd hope you'd just like someone if you like liked them.

*I mean, Ira is cute, and I like her like that I guess. But I think I might like you like that a lot more.*

**I mean, yeah, I like Ira a lot actually**

*Damnit, dude. Can't you just be honest for once in your life?*

She told me that she likes you a lot too

My heart started pumping faster.

**Like, like likes me?**

Oh my god. Yes. Ira has a crush on you.

Ask her out you dense moron, she'd totally say yes

You guys would be cute together

**Idk, what if I fuck it up?**

How would you fuck it up?

**We're talking about me, right?**

Yeah, you're a doofus but you're

really kind and you'd be great for her

She'd be great for you too

## Chapter 11: pages 140 through 151

“I just don’t get the big deal around Twilight. Stephenie Meyer doesn’t even write that well. I get that vampires are hot or whatever, but I don’t know, I think there are just people out there who could’ve written it better,” I said to Olivia.

She didn’t respond, I turned to look at her and she was staring at her phone. Her hazel eyes rapidly darting around the screen as she skimmed something. I sat underneath a poster of Harry Styles on one side of Olivia’s bed, while she sat next to me, wrapped in a blanket with her back against the wall and knees tucked up to her chest. She was now rapidly texting someone. Her short painted nails prodding at the glass. The sharp taps kept growing louder and faster.

“Hey, everything okay?” I asked.

“No,” Olivia replied.

“What’s up?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

She hadn’t looked up from her phone. She kept rapidly texting whoever she was talking with. I kept sitting, wiggling a bit to try and get more comfortable. The bedsprings wiggled with me, jostling the whole bed slightly.

“Are you sure you don’t—”

“Would you mind just stepping outside for a few moments please?” Olivia said, her tone taking the most serious I had ever heard.

“Sure, but did I say or do any—”

“No. I just need you to leave for a moment.”

“Okay, I’m sorry if I did anything wrong—”

“Lars, please just leave.”

“Alright, alright,” I said, shuffling across the bed and standing up. “Would you let me know what’s going on, or—”

“*Lars! Just get out — please!*” she was shouting now.

“Okay, okay okay okay! I’m leaving! Sorry!”

I stepped outside her door, quietly shutting it as I stepped out into the hallway of her family’s home. We were both there alone, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson were both still at work, and Olivia’s older sister still hadn’t come home from college yet. I plonked my ass down on the shag carpet floor just outside her door in the hallway. The carpeted floor was more comfortable than sitting on her bed. Overlooking the massive faux-foyer from the second floor, I had a commanding view of the Wilson’s McMansion. I sat there for a few minutes trying to figure out what was going on. I leaned towards the door, and could hear Olivia crying inside. I thought about going back inside, but figured I probably would’ve just made it worse. My phone buzzed and I pulled it out immediately:

**Dale McInnes has tagged you, Olivia Wilson, and 382 others in a post.**

*What the hell is this bullshit?*

I opened Facebook on my phone, going straight to the post Joel made:

The ultimate evil behind all sexuality is the human Female. They are the main instigators of sex, so they control which men get sex, and which men don’t. Females are flawed, beastly creatures and there is something twisted and wrong with how their brains are wired. I am not the first man to undergo their mistreatment, and it is this mistreatment that has made me realize this sad truth about women. They are evil, manipulative, shitty and weak. All Females are fucking sluts by default. Nature gave them social and sexual advantages to compensate for their lack of resources and strength. This is BIOLOGICAL FACT. Things like feminism and “women’s rights” have thrown society out of balance. Now, Females have all the resources and sex power and Females are artificially restricting the supply of available Females in their reproductive years. Societies have gone to war over a lack of Females and jobs. Females, and their “feminism” have become a threat to society and must be put back in their place. When the Females would rather go after Alpha

thug black men, that's how you know something has gone wrong with the world. When good men like myself are alone, but wicked black men get the loot like some vaginal pirate, it's not fair and I will not tolerate it any longer. This is the beginning of my revenge against Females and their degradation of society: for far too long I have been rejected, told I am creepy, or been told I am hideous by Females. I am fed up with it, and there are millions of guys out there just like me. I will never understand why you girls aren't attracted to nice guys like us, but I will punish you all for it. It is an injustice, a crime, because I don't know what you don't see in me, I am the perfect guy, and yet you throw yourselves at all these obnoxious, horrible men instead of me. I am a supreme gentleman, and I will not be denied any longer. You stuck-up, spoiled, skanky fucking BITCHES will pay for every time you have rejected me, looked down on me as inferior, or denied me the love and sex that I DESERVE. I am almost 16 now, still a virgin, and have never had a girlfriend. I have been rejected by society and I refuse to be a beta loser or a cuck any longer. I will ascend to be a god, punishing women and all of humanity for there sick depravity. The beta uprising will be in full swing in due time, and will be brought about by noble marters like me. THE INCEL REVOLUTION CANNOT BE STOPPED. THERE WILL COME A RECKONING. IT STARTED WITH ELLIOT RODGERS AND IT WILL START WITH ME TOO. I WILL FIGHT AND PUNISH ALL FEMALE SLUTS AND ALL ALPHAS STARTING HERE AND I IMPLORE ALL LOSERS AND VIRGINS TO JOIN ME IN MY RETRIBUTION. ARE THESE WHORES WORTH SAVING? THEY WILL ONLY REJECT YOU AND MAKE YOU LIVE A LIFE OF SUBSERVIENCE. JOIN ME IN MY GLORYFUL VENGEANCE AGAINST THESE HUMAN FEMALE SLUTS: YOU. WILL. PAY.



Fuck!

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck *fuck*.

At the bottom of Dale/Joel's post was a link to a Google Drive folder. Attached to the post itself were several naked pictures of Olivia; over the pictures were statements like 'whore', 'STD-ridden slut', 'cum dumpster', and 'boner garage' written over and over across her naked body in a sloppy handwriting done in what I could only assume was MS Paint. I clicked the link to the Google Drive folder, which brought me to a massive folder filled with nudes from several girls from school. Olivia made up the bulk of the photos, but there were also pictures of Liza Foster — the captain of the girl's lacrosse team, Maddie Evans — a girl I took algebra 2 with in 9th grade, Alice Kelly — a 'popular' girl who played violin, Jamie Weissman, Ashley Cooper, Meg Turner, and *ah what the fuck, dude?* Paige Wright from percussion ensemble? She's so kind — why would you do this to her?

Several people had already commented or liked the post — mainly guys from our school. People had already saved the folder to their personal Google Drive. Some women were commenting asking what the fuck was wrong with Joel/Dale, and John Sanchez was arguing back in the comments saying things like "based and redpilled. make Elliot proud you fellow autistic. normies and skanks cant handle the truth".

I could still hear Olivia crying from her room. I got up, lingering around the door. I could hear her sniffing, and tapping on her phone. I thought about texting her, but I was right there, I might as well—

I knocked softly on the hollow, plastic door.

"Hey," I said as gently as I could. "I saw what happened."

Olivia kept crying.

"I'm going to come in now," I said, twisting the doorknob open.

After I slipped inside her room, I slowly approached her bed. Olivia was wrapped in several blankets, as if that would protect her from all of this. I sat down on her bed, the springs contracting and shifting the bed as I sat.

"I'm so sorry that this has happened to you," I said.

Olivia kept quietly sobbing.

"Can I give you a hug? I feel like you need one."

She muttered out a raspy "no".

"That's okay. Is there anything I can do to help right now?"

She didn't say anything. I leaned back into the headboard, pulling out my phone as it buzzed again: Ira texted me.

hey, is olivia ok? shes been freaking out in our groupchat

**Someone posted her nudes to Facebook**

WHAT

**Yeah, it's fucked up.**

WHO?

My stomach took such a plunge that I thought I was about to shit it out.

WHO WAS IT? I WILL FUCKING KILL THEM

**I don't know. Some guy named Dale McInnes**

What was I supposed to say? "Ah yes, I know that it's Joel Rozanski, one of my closest friends since elementary school. The dipshit who just posted several nudes of underage women is someone I've been friends with for nearly a decade."

*Fuck, Joel. You are such a fucking idiot asshole.*

Olivia sat up, her eyes red and eyeliner stained down her face.

“He’s tagged my mom, my grandpa, my teachers, tons of people at school...” Olivia said, her eyes welling once more with tears. “I don’t even *KNOW* this fucking person! Why is he doing this to me? How did he get those pictures?”

“I don’t know, but it’s really fucked up.”

Her breathing picked up, the tears stopping as her eyes grew wide:

“He’s not a stalker, is he? Do you know who this guy is?”

“I don’t think he’s a stalker,” I said.

“*Do you know him?*” Olivia’s eyes kept getting wider.

“I have no idea who this guy is.”

I wished I hadn’t lied.

*What do I say?*

Olivia’s heavy breathing slowed, slipping back into the sniffing as more tears dripped out her eyes.

“I’m going to report this right now,” I said. “This is posting child porn online, what this Dale guy is doing is illegal. You could probably sue the shit out of him — he’d go to jail at the very least.”

*Was Joel going to go to jail for this?*

Olivia chuckled a bit.

“What?” I asked.

“Men don’t go to jail for shit like this. There isn’t much I can do about this other than try to get the post taken down.”

She groaned, shoving her face into the mess of blankets she had been curled up in.

“Men don’t ever have to deal with stuff like this,” Olivia said. “You don’t understand.”

“I mean, men don’t have it easy either though,” I said.

“I don’t think you understand. Women aren’t ever going to post your nudes to fucking Facebook because you won’t have sex with them. People aren’t going to spread rumors about how much of a slut you are because you turned down Joey Gordan after he asked you out to his senior prom when you were in 8th grade.”

“Did that actually happen?” I asked.

“Yes! I’ve only slept with three different people. Guys start these rumors about me being a skank because I’ve told them I’m not into them — it’s ruining my *fucking life*.”

Olivia started crying again.

“Men feel like they have free reign over *my* body because they think because ‘oooh —I must be a whore, I *must* like it!’ I don’t wear yoga pants to school anymore because dudes kept taking pictures of my ass when I’d walk down the hall. Everytime I wear a shirt that slips over my shoulder, a teacher pulls me aside to fucking scold me about what I’m wearing. Meanwhile, the rednecks from truck row wear shirts with the Confederate flag on it or wear stuff with other stupid shit on it, and nobody says a thing!” she said. “Even the boys I’ve dated treated me like I’m a sex object. Men lie about having sex with me all the time. They try to grab my tits while we’re sitting on a couch together and they have to reach over someone else because I’m not even sitting next to them. Or, they *pass around the fucking nudes I was pressured into sending to my ex in the first fucking place!*”

I stayed silent.

“Men like Dale, or pretty much every other guy I know feels like I owe them sex and my body, and *I don’t!* Men aren’t ever blamed for this kind of shit, and never get in trouble for it. Meanwhile, I’m being blamed from every angle for something I didn’t even want to do in the first place!”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You know my ex, Brandon?”

“Yup.”

“Well, he threatened to break up with me unless I sent him nudes. I didn’t really want to just lose him because I really, really liked him. I kept saying no, and he kept pushing me to send him some. When I finally caved and sent the pictures, he didn’t respond. So I sent a few more. He never responded until I finally called him. He broke up with me because I was ‘such a whore’ for sending him the nudes *he asked for*. Apparently, it was a test or

something. He then sent all the pictures to his friends on their groupchat, and obviously, it's been spreading from there. I've never sent nudes to anyone except Brandon."

"Jesus Christ," I said. "That's so terrible. I'm so sorry that he did that."

Olivia fell silent. She picked up her phone and kept rereading Joel/Dale's post. She moved onto the comments, took a look at who liked it, and tossed her phone down on the bed.

"Men are trash," she said. "They are such fucking trash."

I squirmed a bit, scowling somewhat.

"I mean, not *all* men are trash. I'm not trash, am I?" I asked.

Olivia sighed:

"You know that saying 'one bad apple ruins the bunch'? That applies here. I wouldn't be telling you all this if you were one of the 'bad apples' or whatever. But like, you're not *really* a man."

I scowled a bit more. She continued:

"I am very careful about the kind of guys I do hang out with because so many guys have tried to be my friend just so they can eventually make a move on me. That's why when we first hung out, Ira and Ally were also always there. I never hang out with guys alone unless I know I can trust them."

"You can trust me though, right?" I asked.

"I hope I can, but there are so many times where I worry that any day now you're going to turn out just like the rest of these fucking guys. That you're going to start being creepy or start trying to make a move on me and I don't want that from you."

"Ouch, stuck right in the friendzone," I half-joked.

"Shut up. The friendzone is just a thing guys made up because they couldn't just accept the fact that some women aren't willing to give them affection *just because*."

"I was joking."

"I can't ever truly know, and this is what I mean — I worry that you're going to turn out like these same men and pull the same shitty things that they've done."

“Yeah, I get you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s just,” she paused, exhaling deeply. “It’s just really hard sometimes.”

“I get you, men have it hard too I think though.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that they do.”

“I mean, I hate being expected to act like a ‘real man’, and I never feel like I really fit into what it means to be a man. It’s really hard sometimes.”

“Okay, being a man is hard, but women still have it worse! Who is expecting you to act like a ‘real man’?”

“I don’t really know — society?”

“And men have historically *controlled* society. Men are expected to act like ‘real men’ because *of men*. Because men feel like they need to constantly be in control and dominant in this self-created hierarchy. It’s *all bullshit*, and it hurts us *all*.”

“You sound like a feminist,” I said.

“That’s because I *am* a feminist, dude,” Olivia said. “Not everything needs to be about men. Especially not right now. What you’re doing isn’t very cool or helpful.”

I fell silent again. Olivia still had tears dripping down her face.

“I’m sorry. And I’m really sorry this is all happening to you, and I wish you didn’t have to deal with all this bullshit.”

“Thank you,” she said, sniffing still.

I got up from the bed, going for my coat which was strewn across the floor on the other side of the room.

“Can I get you a box of tissues or something? Is there anything you want to eat? I could run to the gas station and pick up snacks or something,” I said.

“That’s very kind,” Olivia said. “But...”

She paused, sinking deeper into her bed.

“But what?”

“Please don’t leave me here alone. I worry he could be outside.”

“Who?”

“Dale.”

“I don’t think that Dale is gon—”

Olivia’s phone buzzed with a text from Ally. Olivia picked it up and started panicking:

“Dale’s on the sex offender registry?! *Fuck! FUCK!*”

*Oh, God **dammit** Joel. You really had to pick the name of a guy who’s a registered sex offender?*

Olivia leapt across the room in nearly one step to her laptop, frantically trying to sign in but kept messing up her login password over and over. When she finally got in, she opened Safari immediately and Googled Dale McInnes; sure enough, the sex offender registry came up with a mugshot of a man in his late twenties. Joel had posted several photos of look-alikes to the fake Facebook page to keep up the facade. The real Dale McInnes had gone to jail for sexual assault and for rape — and lived over in Adren Hills, a town only about a half an hour away from us.

Olivia started cry-hyperventilating:

“Oh my god he’s going to kill me.”

My stomach was rolling and my guts were twisting.

Olivia opened her Facebook and went straight to Fake-Dale’s profile. She read through the disgusting dribble Joel would write on there. She covered her mouth with her hands, seeing pictures of guns Joel had posted with captions saying “those k\*\*\*es will hardly know what hit them >);”, or the avalanche of posts where he would scream into the internet void about having no girlfriend.

“Lars, I think that this man might come and hurt me.”

I wanted to scream. I should’ve said something.

Olivia started crying more and more.

“Hey, hey,” I said gently, placing a hand on her shoulder. She didn’t move it away. “I’ll stay here for as long as you want me to. Want me to call up Ira and Ally? We could go pick

them up, get some food, and come back here so we can all make sure you're feeling okay and safe."

More tears spilt out of Olivia's eyes. I stepped out of the room quickly, running down the hallway to the bathroom at the end of the hallway. I grabbed some toilet paper, one dry, another clump wetted. I ran back to Olivia's room, slid back onto the bed, and started to gently wipe the smeared eyeliner off her cheeks.

"Hey! Ah! That's so slimy and gross!" she said, shocked by the cold water.

I dried her cheeks, and tossed all the toilet paper into a trash can near her desk. I sat back down on the bed. Olivia sniffed, standing up and sitting next to me on the bed. I turned to her and looked her straight in the eyes.

"If I ever see Dale I'm going to punch his lights out. I mean, like, absolutely *rock* his shit," I said.

*Dude, you need to stop lying.*

She giggled, sniffing again: "What does that even mean?"

"It means I, or Ira, or Ally aren't ever going to let that fucker ever hurt you."

Olivia hugged me tightly for a moment, I wrapped my arms around her back and squeezed. We released, and she wiped her nose on the sleeve of the hoodie she was wearing.

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't be. I'm really sorry that this is happening to you. I'm also sorry I was a dickhead earlier," I said.

"Well, you're not a dickhead. That's why we're friends."