Pam and Jeremy

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Summary

Boy meets girl, except the girl is 25 years old and the boy is, well, a boy. This is their story.
The Beginning

Chapter Summary

Twenty-something Pam is babysitting Jeremy, a ten year old. She has an unexpected reaction when she realizes he's no longer a little boy who thinks girls are gross.

It was babysitting night. At twenty-five years of age, Pam felt a little old to be a babysitter. But then again, Jeremy, the boy she was baby-sitting, was ten years old and he himself was getting too old to need a babysitter. But Pam didn’t really mind. It was nice to have a little extra money in her pocket. Plus, she was recently single, having broken up with a boyfriend of two years, and found it best to stay occupied. There was only so much socializing with girlfriends she could handle, so babysitting Jeremy once a week was a welcome departure.

The Prater family was easy to get along with, which definitely helped. Pam had been babysitting for them since Jeremy was six and they had grown to know each other well. She had assumed that Jeremy would one day grow out of needing a babysitter but his parents evidently did not think that day had yet arrived. Until then, Pam was happy to oblige since their house was only a short ten minute drive from her apartment.

Pam carefully parked her car in the driveway to the Praters’ house. They lived in a moderately affluent neighborhood set in a quiet wooded area. Kate, Jeremy’s mom, was an obstetrician at a nearby hospital. Her husband William managed a successful home-remodeling construction company. Despite their high-paying professions, their house was a relatively modest two story home that contrasted sharply with the enormous mansions of their neighbors.

The moment she pulled the parking brake, however, Pam’s phone buzzed. It was a text from Jeremy that just said, “Hi!” Playing along, she texted a hello back to him. Unbuckling her seat belt, she slowly got out of the car. She had done something funny to her back during today’s yoga session. Even sitting still for the short car ride had caused it to tighten up. Her phone buzzed again.

“bet you can’t guess where I am”

“in the house?”

“nope”

Pam wondered what kind of game Jeremy was playing. Her phone buzzed again when she approached the front door.

“don’t ring the doorbell”

“why not?”

“just wait. i can see you”

Pam looked around. She was getting annoyed. The front porch on which she stood had no windows to the interior and the door was solid wood. The rules of the game slowly dawned on her. She texted him back, asking, “how many fingers am i holding up?” She held up three fingers.
The reply was immediate. “3”

There was no obvious hiding place that she could see. The front yard was empty and it was the only place anyone could see the porch. She got another text.

“yr shoe is untied”

He was right. Pam sighed and knelt down to tie it. “All right, Jeremy,” she muttered, running out of patience. “I’m going to ring the doorbell now.” To her surprise, her phone buzzed again.

“no!”

“I see,” Pam said aloud. “So not only can you see me, but you can hear me too?” She looked at her phone to wait for the reply.

“yes”

“I give up, Jeremy,” she said. “Where are you?”

“Surprise!” he yelled, leaping out of a dense, pine shrub next to the porch. He brushed his floppy, rust-colored hair out of his eyes. With little regard for the poor shrub, he extricated his skinny limbs from the evergreen. Several branches snapped, sounding like firecrackers. “Haha! Pretty neat, huh? I bet that was the last place you would have looked.”

“Yes,” Pam said with complete sincerity. She swept some pine needles from his shoulders. “I never would have thought you would cram yourself into your mom’s shrubbery.”

“Want to see how I did it?” Jeremy said. He showed her a Z-shaped black tube about eighteen inches long. “It’s a periscope! I just got it yesterday. Want to try it?” He handed it to her.

Pam looked through one end. The image was remarkably clear and made her feel as if she had grown taller. “Pretty cool,” she said, handing the periscope back to Jeremy.

“I can use it to look around corners too,” he told her, opening the front door. “No one even knows you’re there. Oh hey, I got the new Call of Duty game too! Want to see?” Without waiting for an answer, the boy grabbed her wrist and pulled her inside.

Pam hardly had time to kick her shoes off. She spotted two familiar figures in the kitchen. “Hi William, hi Kate,” Pam waved as Jeremy dragged her along the hallway.

“Hi Pam,” they both replied in unison. Kate was still putting in earrings and William was hunched over a newspaper on the kitchen counter.

“This new game is so great,” Jeremy told her enthusiastically as he led her into the living room. “You’re in the desert with an AK-16 and a bunch of grenades strapped around your chest. You have to find the terrorists and kill them.” He handed Pam the instruction manual.

Pam sat down in a comfortable armchair. “Hey,” she sniffed the air. “Does something smell like Coppertone in here?”

“Oh, um, that’s me,” Jeremy said.

“Why do you have Coppertone on? It’s only April and you’re not outside.”

“It helps my allergies,” he shrugged.
Pam raised a questioning eyebrow but didn’t say anything. Jeremy, after all, was a boy whose idea of a great meal was toast and horseradish sauce. She studied the game case. “Wait, what’s this game rated anyway?”

“Oh, it has an M rating,” Jeremy answered, not taking his eyes from the screen. “Don’t tell my parents, okay?”

Pam rolled her eyes. “My lips are sealed. How did you get your hands on this?”

“I’m borrowing it from Ashton. His older brother bought it for him.”

Checking to make sure his parents were still occupied in the kitchen, Jeremy turned the volume low and started the game. Pam found it hard to follow the action but she pretended to be interested as Jeremy’s character stalked from compound to compound. Ignoring the beanbag at his feet, Jeremy preferred to stand while playing the game, his jittery feet mirroring the action on the TV.

“Yes! Did you see that? I got the bonus rocket launcher pack,” Jeremy told her. “This is gonna be so cool. Just wait until you see what I can do… watch this.”

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. “I think that’s your dad,” Pam warned.

“What?” Jeremy said, concentrating on his game.

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“All right you two,” William said. “We’re about ready to leave. No, Pam, you don’t have to get up. Are you all right?” He frowned.

Pam slowly rose to her feet, holding her back. “No, it’s nothing,” she assured him. “I just came from my yoga class. Today’s session was a bit more intense than I was used to.”

“No, Jeremy, it wasn’t that,” Pam smiled wryly. “There’s more to yoga than downward dog, you know.” But the ten year old boy wasn’t listening. While she spoke, he had rearranged his slender frame onto the carpet and assumed the classic yoga position.

“Ta-dah!” he said triumphantly.

His mom entered the living room at that exact moment. “Are you doing downward dog, Jeremy?” Kate asked. “Good job!” He collapsed into a pile on the floor and grinned impishly. Pam tried not to laugh. She usually found Jeremy’s mischievous boldness to be irresistible.

“Well, if you’re sure,” Kate nodded. “In any case, you know where we keep the Advil if you need it.
Jeremy?” She turned her attention to her son who was still lying on the floor. “Pam isn't feeling well so I want you to be extra good tonight. Do you understand?”

“Sure,” Jeremy answered. He was wiggling on the floor as if he were doing the worm.

Kate paused to sniff the air. “Is that Coppertone? Jeremy, are your allergies bothering you again, honey?”

“Yup,” Jeremy said.

“I still don’t see how Coppertone helps,” his mom said, shaking her head. “If they get bad, you can always take some Benadryl before bed. Just ask Pam to get it for you. I don’t want you to stay up late, either.”

“We mean it,” William told him. “You can play video games for another half hour but then it’s time for homework.”

“I don’t have any,” said Jeremy. “I finished it before dinner since Pam was coming over.”

“All right, maybe another hour of video games,” conceded his dad. “But then it’s bath time after that and then bedtime.”

“Sure,” Jeremy said again. He lay on his stomach and reached back to grasp his ankles. “How about this Pam? Is this a yoga pose?”

“Have a good time at the play,” Pam told his parents, ignoring him.

“Thank you, Pam,” Kate said. She knelt to give Jeremy a hug but he was still in his yoga position. She patted his head instead.

William shook his head and sighed. “We should be home by 11:30 at the latest,” he told Pam. “Call us if something comes up.”

“I will,” she promised. Jeremy waited until they were out of sight before grabbing the controller to resume his game. Pam heard the front door open, then close, followed by the creak and groan of the garage door. Relaxed now, Jeremy flopped onto the beanbag and began playing.

“So are you playing video games all night?” Pam yawned. She wondered if she should have brought a book.

“You can have a turn,” offered Jeremy. He leaned back in the beanbag until his head was touching the ground. “You’re upside down, by the way.”

Pam began leafing through a magazine. “No thanks, I don’t need a turn,” she replied. “Maybe we can watch a movie later.”

It was obvious that Jeremy was deeply engrossed in his game based upon the delay of his responses. “Uh, yeah,” he said. “Maybe a movie.” She could already see his eyes starting to glaze over. At this rate, it would be a quiet evening indeed.

A silence settled over the room as Pam read her magazine and Jeremy played Call of Duty. She was in the middle of a fascinating article about lucid dreaming when Pam noticed Jeremy reaching to scratch his crotch as he waited for the game to load a new scene. After a moment, it became apparent that he wasn’t exactly scratching, but earnestly rubbing. Pam suppressed a smile and returned to her magazine. When she glanced again, Jeremy had stopped the touching, but she could now see a
distinct protrusion in his shorts. The beanbag had caused them to ride up so much that the fabric was stretched tight between his legs, leaving little to the imagination.

“Guess someone is growing up,” Pam thought to herself. She felt a little embarrassed because she had known him since he was six. As far as she knew, he was still at the age where he thought girls were gross. It made Pam uncomfortable to think of him as anything other than a little boy whose primary interests were video games and soccer. It wouldn’t be too much longer before he would be a sullen teenager, she supposed.

“Do you want to go swimming?” he asked, interrupting her train of thought. “The Fosters are out of town for the whole month. They gave my parents a set of keys and told us we could use their pool whenever we want.”

The Fosters lived next door. Their house was a towering structure of glass and marble that was every bit expensive on the inside as the outside. Not only did they have an indoor pool, but they also had a small home theater with stadium seating. There was a stark difference between the Praters’ modest home and the Fosters’ stately mansion.

“My back, remember?” she reminded him. “Sorry, Jeremy, but I don’t think I’m going to be much fun tonight.”

“What do you want?” he asked.

“You would do that?” Pam raised an eyebrow. He had done it all the time when he was younger. And lighter. She wondered how much he weighed these days. Probably not much, judging from his gangly limbs and compact frame.

“Sure,” he said agreeably.

Pam slowly rose from her armchair. Grabbing a pillow, she lay face down on the carpet. “But I want you to stop your game,” she told him. “If you’re too distracted, you’ll probably fall and smash your head against the coffee table.”

“I can be careful,” Jeremy insisted.

“I mean it,” Pam said. “Can we have a night where we don't need the first-aid kit? You have to pause your game first.”

“All right,” he sighed, setting down his controller. “Are you ready?”

“Are your feet clean?” Pam scrutinized his toes for a moment. Like any other ten year old boy, cleanliness was not Jeremy’s strongest suit. But before she could take a close look, he stepped onto her back. “Whoa! Gently!” she reprimanded him.

“I am being gentle,” Jeremy contradicted. He held his arms out to maintain his balance as he began taking baby steps on her back. “Is this okay?”

Pam winced. Was she in pain because her back was hurt worse than she thought? Or was it because Jeremy wasn’t as light as he used to be? “Maybe avoid my lower back,” she suggested. “Oh. Mmm, that helps.”

She briefly closed her eyes. There was a pleasant interlude as Jeremy’s feet pressed against the knotted muscles in her back. She almost wanted to close her eyes and go to sleep. Out of the corner of her eye, however, something caught Pam’s attention. She could clearly see Jeremy’s reflection in the window and he appeared to be balancing something on his head.
“Jeremy, what are you doing?” she asked sharply.

“I’m just trying to maintain my balance,” he told her. Whenever he spoke to her in that nonchalant tone, she knew something was up.

“What’s that on your head though?”

“It’s a glass of water,” he answered.

“Water?” Pam said, alarmed. “Take it off before you drop it!”

“I’m not going to drop it,” Jeremy tried to reassure her. “Besides, it’s a plastic cup so it’s not going to break or anything.”

“I don’t care!” Pam said with exasperation. She wanted to sit up but she knew she couldn’t disturb Jeremy lest he lose his balance. “Take the glass of water off your head and get off of me, please.”

“Just a minute…”

“Now, Jeremy.”

“All right, all right. I’m getting down.”

“No, take the glass of water off your head first, then get…” Pam began saying. But it was already too late. She heard a quiet curse from Jeremy, followed by his feet stumbling across her back. The plastic cup landed squarely on the small of her back, followed by a large splash of water and bouncing ice cubes.

“Eeek!” Pam squealed, rolling over. But it was too late. The entire back of her t-shirt was soaked, the wet cotton clinging to her cold skin. She sat up and glared at Jeremy. “I can’t believe you just did that!”

“Sorry,” Jeremy mumbled.

“What were you thinking? Balancing a glass of water on your head?”

He helplessly looked at the floor. “It was helping me stand up straight,” he said. Still not looking at her, he knelt to retrieve the ice cubes before they melted.

As he worked, she noticed how he kept glancing at her. She realized the bottom of her shirt had ridden upward, exposing her midsection, which was the exact area to which his eyes kept gravitating. Pam was taken aback. Was Jeremy checking her out?

Suddenly confused, she quickly rose to her feet and headed to the bathroom. Her puzzlement was replaced by annoyance as she surveyed her wet shirt in the mirror. “At least it was just water,” she told herself. “And he didn’t get my hair wet either…” Pam took off her shirt and wrung it out as best she could. Even then it was still unpleasantly wet. Hanging it to dry on the shower rod, Pam wrapped a large towel around her chest.

She returned to the living room where Jeremy sat on the couch, subdued. “Hey, did you take a shower or something?” he joked, gesturing to the towel. Instead of answering, Pam sat down in an armchair and opened another magazine.

Jeremy cleared his throat. “Want to play Super Mario? You can be Mario.”

“No, thank you.”
He fidgeted on the couch for several minutes. “Oh,” he said, remembering. “Want to play with Whiskers? I’ve been trying to teach her how to attack her stuffed mouse.” Whiskers was his cat.

“No, thanks.”

They sat in silence for a few more minutes. Pam turned the page of her magazine. Jeremy leaned in close to peer at the page she was reading, so close that his head blocked her view. Exasperated, Pam waited for him to finish looking at whatever had captured his attention. But instead of moving out of the way, Jeremy wiggled his way into the armchair, cramming himself into the tiny space between Pam and the armrest.

“What are you doing?” Pam inquired.

“I want to read too,” he told her. He held the left side of the magazine while she held the right.

“This armchair isn’t really made for two people,” Pam pointed out. Jeremy snuggled close to her though and rested his cheek against her bare arm. She was still annoyed about the spilled water, but it was difficult to be made when Jeremy was nestled against her like this. He was a cuddler.

The right thing to do, she supposed, would have been to act stern and make him apologize. Pam decided to let it go this time. It was just water, after all. She returned to reading the magazine.

Jeremy protested when she tried to turn the page. “Hey, wait, slow down. I’m not done reading this page yet.”

Pam sighed. After thirty seconds, Jeremy reached out to turn the page himself. “You know, Jeremy,” Pam began, “if you want to get your own book, or maybe go back to your game…” But instead of taking the hint, Jeremy took her closest arm and draped it around his shoulder, snuggling closer against her. Pam shivered. It was chilly being shirtless and bare-shouldered, but Jeremy felt quite warm against her side.

“Remember that one time we were reading like this,” Jeremy said, “and you looked over and I was asleep?”

She smiled at the memory. He knew exactly the fastest way to return to her good graces. “Yes, I remember that day,” Pam said.

“I think you were rubbing my back too,” Jeremy reminded her.

“Oh, no way, buster,” Pam laughed. “If anything, you're the one that should be rubbing my back. You spilled ice water all over me, remember?”

“Oh, okay, I can rub you back,” he agreed.

Pam blinked, not expecting him to agree. “Sure,” she said cautiously. They moved to the couch where Pam laid down. Jeremy sat with his legs off the couch's edge and began softly stroking her bare shoulders. It felt nice.

His hands moved a little lower, massaging her through the towel. This was nice too. Pam sighed again. “Is this okay?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes. Thank you, Jeremy.” She let him massage her for several minutes. She could still see his reflection in the window and Jeremy was boredly staring off into space. “But so what?” she thought to herself. “I deserve this.” Pam wondered when he would stop being so childish. Calculating dates in her head, Pam realized that the young boy was merely two months shy of his eleventh birthday.
He shifted on the couch, interrupting her thoughts. Pam thought he wanted to stop, but Jeremy only repositioned himself so that he was now kneeling on the couch, straddling her legs. “Is it okay if I go like this?” he asked.

“Of course.” She could feel his knuckles pressing against her sore back through the towel. It would feel much nicer if he could access her bare back. Pam considered it a moment. “Why not?” she thought to herself.

“Hang on a sec,” she told Jeremy. Lifting herself up the couch slightly, she undid the towel so that her back was bare. There wasn’t any harm here, she decided, since she was still wearing her bra. Jeremy had seen her in a swimsuit before and surely this was no different.

He resumed his half-rub / half-massage of her back. This time though, she could feel his fingers against her own skin. “Mmm, that’s nice,” she murmured. Pam felt very relaxed now. The stress of the day was melting away. She had even forgotten how annoyed she was with Jeremy.

After ten minutes, Pam felt positively narcoleptic. Her lids felt heavy enough to fall past a short nap into a deep sleep. “Thanks Jeremy,” she said drowsily. “You don’t have to keep going if you don’t want to.”

“Well, okay,” Jeremy said after a slight pause. “I actually don’t mind it up here.” He bounced up and down a bit.

Pam realized he was using her backside as a pillow. “Is it comfortable?” she asked.

“It really is super comfortable,” Jeremy affirmed. “It's nice and padded.” Pam laughed. He wasn't quite old enough to realize you don’t tell a girl her cushy ass makes for a comfy seat. “Can I sit here and play Call of Duty?” he asked.

“Uh, sure.”

He leaned over her to reach for the game controller which rested on the end table. “Mmm, you feel warm,” Pam said without thinking. The feel of his body against her back felt like a nice blanket.

“I bet I could play like this,” Jeremy declared, settling onto her form on the couch. Pam had been lying face down on the couch, but now Jeremy was lying face down on top of her. She could hear the sound of buttons being pressed. “Is this okay?”

“Sure,” Pam agreed. The light click-clack of the controller buttons was annoying, but the warmth of Jeremy’s body against hers felt awfully nice. She was resting her eyes again, but now something poked against her lower back. “Jeremy,” she began, “do you have something in your…”

Pam’s eyes snapped open.

“What?” Jeremy asked, distracted again.

“Um, nothing,” Pam answered. She glanced at the window again where she could still clearly see their reflection in the dark glass. A rising flush of embarrassment warmed her face as Pam’s eyes confirmed what was happening. There was something pressing against her bum. Jeremy’s midsection was directly aligned with her bum.

Jeremy had an erection and it was pressing against her bum.

Pam instantly felt a wave of impropriety. It was the same embarrassment she felt before when she saw him absent-mindedly touching his crotch while sitting in the beanbag. Or when he had checked
out her bare torso. This was a young boy. She taught him to swim. She helped him with his homework. And here he was now grinding against her body.

She wondered what to do. Get up? Yell at him to stop? But surely Jeremy had no idea of what he was doing. She could see his expression of concentration in the window as he played his game. He had no clue. As usual, he couldn’t sit still while playing a video game, so each time he dodged an enemy bullet or lobbed a grenade, his entire body squirmed and shimmied against hers. And each time she felt something hard digging into her.

Pam lay still for a few minutes, trying to decide what to do. Jeremy was not only completely engrossed in the game now, but he must have also reached a more difficult level as well because his movements were becoming more spastic. “Is he…” Pam wondered. Perhaps it was her imagination, but Pam thought she could feel him moving his hips as well. Like he was… humping her.

She studied Jeremy’s reflection in the mirror again. “Is it even possible?” Pam thought to herself. “Is he doing this because it feels… good?” The mere thought made her blush. “This is Jeremy!” she told herself. “He’s ten years old! He thinks music from the 90s is classic rock!” But despite these thoughts ringing in her head, Pam felt frozen. Part of her knew she should sit up and put an end to this. But a small part of her felt…

“Um, Jeremy, I think I have to… go to the bathroom,” Pam muttered, moving into a sitting position. He slid off her and onto the couch, not moving his eyes from the TV. “I… I’ll be right back. Okay?” Pam stood up.

Only now did he notice her. “Okay,” he agreed, glancing at her. Pam realized with a start that when he spoke, he glanced at her chest, not her face. She quickly raised the forgotten towel to her chest, covering her bra. Pam was blushing deep red now and she hoped Jeremy didn’t notice. She rapidly exited the room.

Once safely locked in the bathroom, Pam took several deep breaths. “What just happened?” she wondered. Feeling the need to pee, she pulled down her jeans. Pam stopped short when she noticed a darkened patch, no larger than a dime, in her panties.

Pam covered her face as she blushed furiously. What in the world was going on? She certainly hadn't felt aroused while Jeremy inadvertently poked her with his erection. Not the least bit. Surely there was some other explanation for this damp spot.

Since breaking up with her boyfriend, she had stopped taking birth control pills. Perhaps it was messing with her hormones. Didn't her doctor warn her about that possibility? It was the only logical explanation.

Pam quickly pulled up her jeans, not even daring to look at the wet spot in her underwear. Then she hung up the towel and retrieved her t-shirt. It was still wet. Opening the cabinet, she rummaged through the toiletries until she located a hair dryer. She plugged it in.

The roar of the hair dryer was comforting somehow, a reassuring white noise to the jumble of noise in her head. As she dried her t-shirt, Pam rationalized what happened as best she could. Although he was still very much a ten year old, emotionally speaking, Jeremy was inevitably growing up in a physical sense. It was merely a physiological reaction, she told herself. Completely natural.

Letting him grind against her though… That wasn’t natural. But if she had made a big deal out of it, Jeremy probably would have freaked out. “He started it himself,” Pam reasoned. “He probably didn’t even realize what he was doing.” If it happened again, Pam decided, she would stop him right away. But this incident was an aberration, she told herself. It was unlikely to happen again.
Truth or Dare

Chapter Summary

Though she still feels embarrassed about Jeremy's attention, Pam calls his bluff when they play Truth or Dare.

After a few days to think things over, Pam had done her best to put the incident with Jeremy behind her. In all the years she had known him, nothing even closely resembling this event had occurred. It was a harmless episode that was unlikely to be repeated, she told herself. Which was why she did not hesitate in the slightest the next time the Praters called to ask her to babysit again.

“Are you sure you’re available?” Kate asked over the phone. “I realize this is late notice. I really am sorry. William is out of town this week or otherwise I wouldn’t be bothering you.”

“It’s no bother. Of course it’s all right,” Pam replied. “I can be there in twenty minutes.”

“Thank you, Pam,” Kate said gratefully. “Oh, if it’s not too much trouble, Jeremy has been begging to go swimming in the Fosters' pool. They’re away for the summer but they told us to come over any time.”

“I can bring a swimsuit,” Pam said promptly. “I need to get some exercise anyway.”

“Wonderful!”

Twenty minutes later, Pam was carefully parking her rusted, hand-me-down BMW in the Praters' driveway. As she pulled up, she was amused to see Jeremy already waiting for her on the porch. He was wearing his kelly-green swim trunks which didn’t quite fit with his fitted, black polo shirt on top. In addition, he was sporting swim goggles with a snorkel in his mouth and a beach towel wrapped around his neck.

“Hi Pam!” he waved as she got out of the car. “You remembered your swimsuit, right?”

She could barely understand him since the snorkel muffled his words. “Yes, Jeremy,” she answered, retrieving a duffel bag from the car.

“Cool! I’m going to bring my periscope so I can swim underwater but see above water. Just like a submarine! My mom said we can go over right away once you arrive.”

“Well, hang on,” Pam said doubtfully. “I should probably let her know I’m here.”

Jeremy stuck his head in the house. “Hey mom!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Pam’s here! We’re heading to the Fosters to go swimming!”

Pam ducked her head in the doorway where Kate was putting on her jacket. “Hi!” she said cheerfully as Jeremy dragged her across the yard in the direction of the
Fosters house. “Hey, why are your eyes red?” she asked Jeremy.

“My allergies are bugging me today,” he told her.

“Did you try putting on Coppertone?” Pam laughed, remembering the other day. Instead of answering though, he just have her a dirty look. Jeremy was a merciless teaser but hated to be teased himself.

They climbed the marble steps leading to the Fosters’ front door. Pam felt like she was entering a museum. She collected the day’s mail as Jeremy unlocked the door. Once inside the house, she deposited it in a basket next to the door before taking a moment to survey her surroundings.

The Fosters lived an opulent life, that much was certain. A grand staircase lined with plush maroon carpet graced the foyer, the dark wooden steps naturally leading the eye to the magnificent crystal chandelier that hung imposingly from the tall ceiling. To her left was a gleaming kitchen, tastefully appointed with dark blue and white tiles, completely spotless like an image from a catalog. To her right was a dining room with tall oak chairs, eight places in all, arranged around a stately dinner table.

The house had an eerie quiet, the kind that signaled no one had occupied it for some time. Pam stood still for a moment, trying to overcome what she knew was an irrational disquiet. Jeremy must have felt it too. His hand, previously clasped around her wrist, was now gripping her own like a small child. Pam reached for a bank of light switches.

“I think this will help,” she said, flipping a few switches. A flood of light illuminated the rooms, alleviating the dark shadows in the corners. The tension immediately drained from the house.

Jeremy’s hand loosened. “Come on,” he said, his earlier enthusiasm returning. “The pool is this way.”

Pam had visited the Fosters' house many times before, but she let Jeremy lead her downstairs. With its pool table and TV area, the basement looked like any other modest basement at first but she knew better. They followed an unassuming hallway past a room piled high with forgotten junk. The faint scent of chlorine was prickling her nostrils now.

At the end of the hallway was a door. Pam slipped through as Jeremy held it open for her. They were in a darkened area but the strong scent of chlorine was unmistakable now. Jeremy found some more light switches. The sudden brightness made Pam blink in surprise.

The sight of a half-size Olympic pool greeted her eyes, the water glimmering in barely perceptible waves. The walls were lined with light blue tiles that contrasted against the clean white tiles of the floor. On the far side of the room, a series of pristine wooden Adirondack chairs were meticulously arranged next to the pool’s edge. A diving board hovered invitingly over the still water at one end of the pool. In the opposite corner of the room waited an empty jacuzzi.

“I hope the water is nice and warm,” Jeremy said, choosing a bright yellow floatation noodle from a pile of pool toys near the pool. He dipped a toe in the water. He recoiled with a loud yelp, his voice echoing in the cavernous room. “Gah, it's freezing! It's like ice water!”

Pam cautiously put a finger in the water. Jeremy was being a bit melodramatic, but the water definitely had an edge to it. “You're right, that's quite chilly,” she agreed.

“That doesn't make sense,” Jeremy said. “Ashton and I were swimming in here last week. It was way warmer than this. Do you think we'll be able to swim anyway?”
“Maybe,” Pam said, although she wasn’t really listening to him. Her eyes settled on a discreet control box in the corner of the room. Following a hunch, she walked over and examined the bank of flickering lights behind the enclosed panel. “I think the Fosters turned off the heat to the pool when they left,” Pam said after a moment. “Yup, it’s definitely set to off.”

“Well, turn it on!” Jeremy hollered at her from across the room.

Pam tried to open the clear plastic door. “I can’t,” she reported. “It’s locked.”

“Oh…” Jeremy made a disappointed noise. Frowning, he kicked at the air. “That’s stupid.” He halfheartedly whacked the noodle against the wall a few times before tossing it back onto the pile.

Pam settled into one of the Adirondack chairs. “Well, we could sit in these chairs and pretend it’s summer,” she suggested.

Jeremy scoffed at the idea. “That sounds so boring.” He picked up a bag of brightly colored plastic balls and began to prowl the edge of the poolside. Pam knew she should have known better than to take her eye off of him. Before she realized it, he was throwing the balls into the pool where they floated lazily in the water.

“Jeremy, don’t do that,” she admonished.

“Why not?” he said defiantly. “That’s what they’re for.”

“You’ll have to retrieve them,” Pam warned.

“The water is too cold for that.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t be tossing them in the pool,” Pam said, exasperated. “Look, maybe your mom will know where the Fosters keep the key to that control box. We’ll ask her when she gets home tonight and go swimming another time.”

Jeremy, of course, stopped paying attention long ago and had wandered over to the jacuzzi. “Hey, the water in here isn’t cold!” he said triumphantly. “Let’s just swim in there!”

Pam sighed and got out of her chair to join him at the jacuzzi. “How about that?” she said, testing the water. It was pleasantly hot. “It really is the right temperature.” A few feet away from the jacuzzi was a different control panel, one that was smaller and simpler looking than the pool’s control panel. They both went to study it.

“I’ve seen Ashton do this before,” Jeremy said, pressing a few buttons and flipping switches.

“Jeremy, wait…”

“It’s easy. See this turns on the jets,” he said, pressing a large button. The jacuzzi roared to life behind them. “And this dial controls how strong the jets are. And I think this lever is the temperature control.”

“Okay, okay. Stop fiddling with it,” Pam said, not trusting him. Jeremy had a tendency to overestimate his abilities.

“Can we at least get in the jacuzzi?” Jeremy asked hopefully.

“All right,” agreed Pam. “It’s not big enough to swim in, obviously, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“Sweet!” Jeremy crowed. When he wasn’t looking, Pam took the opportunity to examine the
controls one last time to make sure they weren’t going to be boiled alive. Once she was satisfied, she went to retrieve her duffel bag.

“I’m going to go change into my swimsuit,” she told Jeremy. “I don’t want you to get in the water until I come back. All right?”

“I promise,” Jeremy said earnestly, making a cross on his heart.

There was a small changing room on the opposite end of the pool. Pam briskly hurried to it. Not because she was eager to get in the jacuzzi, but because she didn’t really trust Jeremy to be alone near open water. For a ten year old, he showed remarkably little impulse control. Undressing quickly, Pam pulled on her familiar black halter top and bikini bottom.

She was relieved to find Jeremy dutifully waiting for her when she exited the changing room. He had taken off his shirt and was bouncing impatiently on his heels. “Are you ready? Can I get in now?” Pam nodded. “Oh, it’s really hot now,” Jeremy reported, wading in until the water reached his waist. He lowered himself until only his head was visible above the churning water. “Ahh, this is great,” he sighed.

Pam followed suit. The hot water was just the right temperature. Grateful, she sank into the luxuriously inviting water and took a place on the built-in benches under the water, sitting directly opposite of Jeremy. “Mmm!” Pam murmured approvingly. She, too, sank in until the water went up to her chin. “This feels really nice.”

Jeremy put on his goggles and snorkel. “I’m going underwater,” he announced. “And I’m going to use my periscope at the same time.” Pam watched as he slid beneath the surface of the water. The black tube of the periscope poked up next. Pam waved at it.

He returned to the surface. “How was it?” Pam asked, stifling a yawn.

“It didn’t really work,” Jeremy answered with disappointment. “The jacuzzi water is too bubbly so everything looks all hazy. It would be way better in the pool.” He turned his gaze longingly in its direction.

“You can go ahead and swim in there if you want,” Pam told him. “Although I’m pretty sure you’ll die of hypothermia. Your parents might get annoyed. So much that they'll refuse to let me to babysit your corpse.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy said dejectedly, not even hearing her joke. He removed his goggles and tossed it on the floor with the snorkel and periscope. “Want to have a contest to see who can hold their breath underwater?” Jeremy suggested.

“Oh, not really,” Pam said, leaning her head back. The jacuzzi’s designer had thoughtfully included a padded headrest at strategic points along the tiled edge.

“Want me to get some of those swim noodles?” he asked hopefully. “We could have a swordfight.”

“I’d rather not,” Pam breezily told him. “Can’t we just sit here and enjoy the hot water?”

Jeremy sat silently for a moment. She could tell he was pouting. “How about Truth or Dare?” he said finally. “Want to play Truth or Dare?”

“Yes, I’ll play Truth or Dare,” Pam agreed without much enthusiasm. Better this than to risk the wrath of a cranky ten year old, she decided. “Why don’t you go first?”
“Truth or dare?” he said eagerly.

“Truth.”

“Umm.” He had to think for a moment. “Do you ever… pick your nose?”

“Yes,” Pam answered without hesitating. “All the time.”

Jeremy squawked with laughter. “Ha! Okay, your turn.”

“Truth or dare?”

“Truth!”

“How about… what’s the name of the girl you have a crush on?” Pam asked.

Jeremy blanched. “I don’t like any girls!” he objected.

But Pam could tell by the look on his face that he wasn’t telling the truth. “You know the rules,” she warned. “You have to tell the truth. Or the game’s over, right?”

He was blushing a little now. “Fine,” he muttered. “I like… Kristin.”

“Ooh, Kristin!” Pam teased him. “Is she pretty?”

“I don’t know.”

She could tell he was embarrassed from the way he avoided looking at her. “Maybe you can show me her picture in the yearbook later,” suggested Pam.

“Shut up!” Jeremy said, splashing her with water. He windmilled his arms, creating a rushing torrent of water.

Pam covered her face and giggled. “All right! All right! It’s your turn again!”

He sat down in the water again, clearly annoyed with her. “Truth or dare?” he said

“Truth.”

“Ummm…” He thought for a few seconds. “Have you ever farted in public?”

“Yes,” Pam said again, without hesitating.

“Where?”

“At the mall.”

“Ha ha,” he mocked her. “Did it smell really bad? Did anyone notice?”

“I don’t know,” Pam shrugged. “I just did it and then walked away really fast.” She could tell Jeremy was disappointed by the fact that she wasn’t embarrassed at it.

“Okay, your turn again,” he said, frowning.

“Truth or dare?”

“Dare.”
“All right,” Pam pondered. “I dare you to… go to the diving board and do a cannonball into the water.”

“No way!” he exclaimed. “That water is freezing!”

“You know the rules right?” Pam smirked. “If you deny any truth or dare, then you automatically have to do whatever the person says next. Are you sure you still want a dare?”

“Fine, truth,” Jeremy grumbled.

Pam pursed her lips in thought. “What was the last big lie you told your mom?” she asked.

“Uh… I told her I brushed my teeth this morning but I really didn’t,” Jeremy said lamely.

Pam rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on. I said a BIG lie. Not brushing your teeth doesn't count. It has to be something that would have gotten you into a lot of trouble.”

“Oh,” Jeremy said, knitting his brow. He looked at her fearfully. “But I don’t want to tell you that!”

“Well, that’s why they call it Truth or Dare, silly!”

“Do you promise not to tell anyone?” Jeremy demanded. Pam made a zipping motion across her lips. “Well,” he began. “I, um… Ashton and I were snooping in my dad’s closet once and we found a bunch of dirty magazines.”

“Really.”

“So we looked at a few and put them away just as we found them,” Jeremy continued. “But I guess my dad was able to tell someone had been in the closet. Because the next day my mom asked me if we had been in their bedroom.”

“And what did you say?” Pam inquired.

“I told her we didn’t go in there, but she didn’t really believe me,” Jeremy said, staring at the water. “So I told her Ashton might have been in there but I wasn’t sure because I was playing video games the whole time.”

“Jeremy!” Pam was shocked. “You ratted out your best friend?”

“I didn’t know what else to say,” Jeremy said helplessly.

“Did he get in trouble?”

“I don’t think so,” he shook his head. “At least he never told me if my mom called his mom or anything. But she told me we’re not allowed in their room anymore.”

“Huh.” Pam imagined the two boys sneaking into the bedroom and rifling through William’s closet. The thought of him owning any pornography was somewhat amusing since he was so prim and proper. “Did you like looking at those magazines?” Pam asked.

Instead of answering, Jeremy blushed. Unexpectedly, Pam suddenly recalled the events of the other night when she felt Jeremy’s erection pressing against her. There was obviously a whole other side to him she didn’t know about, she realized. Although still a boy, he clearly wasn’t an innocent as she thought he was. The memories of that night came flooding back, along with the accompanying guilt and embarrassment she had felt. Wanting to move on, Pam cleared her throat. “Hey, it’s your turn now,” she reminded him.
“Truth or dare?” he asked her.

“Dare.”

“I dare you to do a cannonball in the pool!” Jeremy said gleefully.

“No way, Jeremy,” she answered.

“Well, now you have to do whatever I say!” he said triumphantly. “It’s the rules!”

“Fine, but I’m changing my choice to truth,” Pam informed him.

“Okay…” Jeremy said, thinking. “Have you ever… shoplifted anything?”

“Sure did,” Pam nodded. “I had a college friend and we used to go to Target to steal little things.”

“This isn’t fair,” Jeremy pouted. “You’re not even embarrassed at all by this! I hate playing Truth or Dare with you.”

Pam could see he had been pushed to the brink of frustration. She was facing a complete meltdown if she didn’t reel him back. “Okay, okay,” she soothed. “Let’s just calm down a minute. Do you want an extra turn?”

“Yes!” he said angrily.

“I’ll take dare,” she told him calmly.

“I dare you to…” Jeremy looked around the room, trying to think of something. “I dare you to go that shower over there and stand under the cold water.”

“What?” she looked to where he was pointing. Behind the row of Adirondack chairs was a shower attachment that she hadn’t noticed. “You want me to take a cold shower?”

“Yup.”

“For how long?”

He considered her question. “You have to stand under the water for thirty seconds.”

Pam sighed. She knew a tantrum was imminent if she refused. “Five seconds,” she negotiated.

“All right, five seconds,” Jeremy agreed.

Pam stood up. “I hate you so much,” she grumbled as she got out of the hot water. Still dripping, she walked over the shower area. It was merely a nozzle sticking out of the wall. The shower wasn’t meant for privacy but merely for rinsing off. She glanced back at Jeremy who was impatiently standing in the jacuzzi so he could watch the action.

“Do it!” he yelled at her.

“I’m going to get you for this!” she shouted back. Pam closed her eyes and turned on the shower. The water from the nozzle felt like fiery droplets on her skin. “Eeek!” she screamed as her spine clenched from the icy water.

“One one-thousand, two one-thousand…” she heard Jeremy chanting in the background. It took him an eternity to reach five one-thousand. She shut off the water and scampered back to the jacuzzi,
shivering with cold. Jeremy was laughing at her, but she noticed his eyes weren’t looking at her face. They were fixed on her chest.

The significance dimly registered in her mind, but Pam was too chilled to care. She plunged into the hot water of the jacuzzi, moaning in appreciation at the feel of hot water on the goosebumps of her skin. Jeremy wouldn’t stop laughing though.

“You’re such a brat,” she said, splashing an armful of water at him. “Truth or dare, Jeremy?”

“Uh, truth,” he said, knowing what her likely dare would be.

“Is it true your parents would kill you if they found out you were playing that Call of Duty video game?” Pam asked. “You know, the one that’s rated M for Mature, meaning you’re not supposed to play it until you’re seventeen?” She pretended to look at a watch on her wrist. “Which is seven years from now.”

“Well, I guess they’d be mad,” Jeremy began, “but I don’t know if… Hey!” His eyes were wide as saucers. “Are you going to tell on me?”

“I don’t know,” Pam said. She tried to be smug, but it was hard because she was still shivering from the cold shower.

“Don’t tell them,” Jeremy begged. “It’s so fun! I don’t want them to take it away. I’ll do a dare instead! How about that? I’ll take a dare!”

“I dare you to… go dip your head in the pool.” Pam crossed her arms and submerged herself under the water, desperately trying to warm up. When she came back up, she was treated to a deliciously sour expression on Jeremy’s face. “What’s it going to be?” she taunted him. “Would you rather get your head cold for a little bit? Or never play Call of Duty again?”

Wordlessly, Jeremy got out of the jacuzzi. Glaring at her one last time, he laid down at the edge of the pool with just his head hanging over the side. Pam saw him hesitate a moment before dunking his head. She laughed at the sight of his limbs wincing. His hair and face dripping cold water, Jeremy scrambled to his feet and ran back to the jacuzzi.

“Gah! Blah!” he shouted. He plunged back into his place across from her. “That was so cold! I’m dying!” Like Pam, he submerged himself underwater in an attempt to warm up.

“How about a cold water truce?” Pam suggested when he resurfaced.


“Isn’t that the whole point of truth or dare though?” Pam asked. “To get the other person to say or do something they normally wouldn’t?”

“I guess so,” Jeremy answered. Their eyes met for a moment. “Um, truth or dare, Pam?”

“I’m going to trust you,” Pam said, against her better judgment. “Dare.”

“Uh… I dare you to…” his voice was so inaudible that Pam couldn’t even hear him.

“What?”

“I-dare-you-to-take-your-top-off,” he blurted.

Jeremy spoke so rapidly that it took her a moment to process it. Once she did, Pam was stunned, then
ashamed. Stunned because this ten year old boy was basically propositioning her. And ashamed because part of her wanted to do it. She instantly recalled the forbidden thrill that gripped her when she felt his hardness poking her that night.

“Take my top off…” Pam repeated slowly. The only sound in the cavernous room was the dull roar of the jacuzzi motor. What was the harm really, a small voice reasoned in Pam’s head. Jeremy had probably seen much worse in his dad’s magazine collection. Plus, the swirling water of the jacuzzi would obscure his view anyway.

“You promise not to tell anyone, right?” Pam asked him. Her voice was a little shaky. Jeremy nodded solemnly. Pam scooted lower until the roiling water came past her chin, just below her nose. She criss-crossed her arms until her fingers found the elastic spandex of her black halter top.

“This why they call it Truth or Dare…” she thought to herself. Throwing caution to the wind, Pam pulled off her top, all the while being careful to keep her shoulders underwater. She carefully pulled the swim top past her head. Freeing it from her entangled hair, Pam set her halter on the white tile floor. Then she settled back, looking across the jacuzzi to where Jeremy was quietly sitting.

His gaze had been locked on her but he looked away when she made eye contact. She could tell from his expression that he hadn’t really expected her to take the dare. “Well, that was easy,” she told him lightly. Pam was doing her best to remain calm but the truth was she could feel her knees quaking underwater. This was crazy! She felt like she was in middle school again, nervously crushing on a boy and doing anything to get his attention.

“Um, so it’s your turn I guess,” Jeremy said nonchalantly. She saw him peeking at her blurry, underwater form.

“Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” he said confidently.

“Jeremy, I dare you to…” Pam hesitated a moment. Was this going too far? “I dare you to take your swim bottoms off.”

He blushed deeply. “No way!” he protested.

“Why not?” Pam asked. “I had to take my top off. It’s only fair, isn’t it?” He looked at her for a moment, his eyes flicking from her face to her indistinct chest under the water. He was too young, Pam realized, to be discreet about checking out a girl.

“You can’t see anything underwater since the jacuzzi jets are running,” Pam pointed out. She saw him mentally wrestle with her comment. Finally giving in, Jeremy blushed a little redder and began pulling at his trunks. Since most of his body was submerged, it seemed like he was merely pantomiming the act of undressing but his bright kelly green swim trunks soon joined her black halter at the jacuzzi’s edge.

“See, that wasn’t so hard. Was it?” Pam said, trying to keep the mood light. As if right on cue, the jacuzzi jets turned off the minute the words left her mouth. The room was plunged into a loud silence. More importantly, however, the jacuzzi water instantly calmed and became… transparent.

Jeremy was openly staring at her breasts. “Oops!” Pam said. An instinctive modesty compelled her to cover herself with her hands. In his shock of seeing her exposed, Jeremy had apparently forgotten that he himself was naked. Through the shimmering water, Pam could clearly see what was between Jeremy’s legs.
Perhaps he felt the weight of her gaze. “Oh!” he said with embarrassment, cupping a hand to his crotch. Had he caught her peeking? Or had he been so mesmerized by the sight of her breasts that he didn’t notice her own furtive glances? Pam thought it was the latter but she wasn’t sure.

“This is quite the pickle we find ourselves in,” Pam remarked, the breezy comment at odds with her shaky anxiety. Still holding her breasts, she glanced over at the jacuzzi control panel. “I guess the jets were on a timer.” They sat in an awkward silence for a bit. Clearly, Pam thought ruefully, she hadn’t really been thinking ahead when she took off her top. Across from her, she saw Jeremy shifting in his seat, nervous but also with a silly grin on his face. Aside from his hand covering himself, she could see everything from his smooth, boyish chest to his gangly limbs.

“Are you laughing at me?” Pam asked him.

“Truth or dare, Pam?”

“We’re still playing? Fine. Dare.”

“Um, I dare you to sit up and stretch,” Jeremy chuckled.

“Jeremy…” she said reproachfully.

“You’re just chicken!” he mocked her.

For whatever reason, Pam became chagrined at these fighting words. “Oh, you mean you want me to sit up like this?” So saying, Pam sat up from the water and casually stretched her hands alongside the jacuzzi edge, making a T with her arms. The water lapped at her waistline. She could feel her nipples getting hard from the cool air. Her breasts dripping water, Pam looked at Jeremy with a stubborn defiance.

He wasn’t grinning anymore.

Pam could hardly believe she was doing this, exposing herself to a ten year old boy. But… what the hell, she thought. “Truth or dare, Jeremy?” she asked softly.

“Huh?” he said. He was torn between looking at her face when she talked and looking somewhere else. “I don’t know…. Um, dare, I guess.”

“I dare you to go turn on the jacuzzi jets,” Pam told him, her heart racing as she said it. Would he really do it?

Jeremy’s eyes flicked to her breasts again. “Well… okay,” he said slowly. He carefully stood up, still keeping his hands at his crotch. He moved sideways, doing his best not to moon her, as he tried to get out of the jacuzzi. Realizing it was impossible without his hands, Jeremy quickly grasped the tiled edge and pulled himself out.

He glanced at Pam to see if she was watching. His ears got a little redder when he saw she was. Jeremy hurried to the control panel, giving her a view of his cheeky bum. His hips were perfectly straight, perfectly boyish. Guiltily, Pam found herself intrigued. She knew it was wrong, but she couldn’t stop looking.

Jeremy fiddled with the dials for a moment. The starter button for the jacuzzi motor was a large, spring-loaded button and she saw him straining against it with one hand since his other still hid his crotch. Realizing he didn’t have enough strength with one hand, Jeremy reluctantly gave in and used both to press the button. Pam could cleanly see his profile now, including the small erection that was protruding unmistakably from his midsection.
The jacuzzi roared back to life. Returning both hands to his crotch, Jeremy darted back to the jacuzzi where he awkwardly hopped into the water. He settled into his usual spot across from Pam, giving her another view of his graceful swimmer’s body. Even though the translucent water now effectively obscured his lower body, Jeremy still kept his hands between his legs to hide himself.

“Thank you, Jeremy,” Pam told him. She hadn’t moved an inch. Her upper torso was still well above the roiling water and her hands rested informally on the tiled edge of the jacuzzi. She could feel her nipples stiffen from exposure to the cool air. Deep down, Pam knew she should move back under the water or, ideally, put her top back on. But part of her enjoyed the attention from Jeremy. She wondered what he was thinking.

“Are you getting hungry?” Pam asked. “We should go back to your house for dinner soon. I suppose.” She let the last two words hang in the air to see if Jeremy would pick up on it.

“Can I have one last turn?” Jeremy requested hopefully.

“Of course.”

“Truth or dare?”

“Dare.” Pam’s heart skipped a beat.

“I dare you to…” Jeremy’s eyes flicked from her breast to her face, then to her breasts again. She could see him screwing up the courage.

“Yes, Jeremy?”

“I dare you to… let me touch your boobs,” Jeremy said, looking at his hands.

Pam swallowed hard. “All right,” she said softly. Jeremy stood up and slowly moved through the water. He hadn’t even come close yet but Pam found her heart racing wildly. Despite the noise of the jacuzzi jets, she could hear the pounding rush of blood through her veins.

Jeremy was tall enough that his midsection was just barely concealed by the bubbling water when he stood in the jacuzzi. As such, he kept his hands over his crotch until he was standing directly in front of her. Pam held her breath as they both remained motionless for a moment. With an embarrassed uncertainty, Jeremy reached out with one hand.

His touch was so electric that Pam flinched. It was just one hand at first, tentatively caressing the gentle curve of one breast before moving on to the next. She felt a rush of blood between her legs as the young boy clumsily fondled her. “You… you can use both hands,” Pam ventured. “If you want.”

An expression of consternation crossed his face. His other hand still protectively cupped his crotch in a desperate attempt at modesty. But the conflicted appeal of using both hands was clear. Another tingle of excitement ran up her spine as Jeremy began touching her with both hands. He was shy at first, merely cupping her breasts, experimentally feeling their weight in his small hands. He soon grew bolder, however, and began tracing his fingers across her darkened nipples, taking the time to squeeze the hardened points of flesh between his thumb and forefinger.

Pam was overwhelmed. On the one hand she had never felt so incredibly aroused. On the other hand, she felt a niggling sense of conscience over letting a ten year old boy touch her like this. Now that his hands were occupied, there was nothing he could do to be modest. The bubbling water of the jacuzzi wasn’t high enough to obscure him now. His scrotum, just barely breaking the water’s surface, was nothing more than a hairless globe of wrinkled skin crowned by a penis that was a lovely shade of pink and no larger than her pinkie. But undeniably erect.
She suddenly remembered the other night when she felt it pressing against her backside. The memory triggered another cascade of excitement. Pam was both enchanted and ashamed by how her body was responding as Jeremy continued to explore her breasts. Even though the lower half of her body was submerged, she could tell it wasn’t just the jacuzzi water that made her wet now.

Feeling dizzy, Pam groped for words. “Um, okay Jeremy…” she said, trailing off. She actually had no idea what to say next, but Jeremy apparently took her words as a request to stop. He stopped touching her, although he made no move to cover himself up now. They gazed at each other for a long beat. Pam realized he was looking to her for direction.

“I guess… I guess we should get dressed,” Pam said with uncertainty. “Right?”

“Okay,” Jeremy nodded. He hoisted himself out of the water, giving her another view of his backside. Pam observed him out of the corner of her eye as he retrieved his swim trunks and pulled them on. With shaky hands, she found her black halter and got dressed herself. Even though she was partially facing away from Jeremy, she could feel him staring at her.

The same question from the other night entered her mind. Did that really just happen?
After the Truth or Dare incident, they left the Fosters’ house in silence. The guilt over what she had done was starting to dawn on Pam. But each time she felt a remorseful twinge, she couldn’t help but remember it was Jeremy who started it. He had propositioned her first after all. Would he really have dared her to take off her top if he was truly going to be disturbed by it? Even now as they were packing up to go home, Jeremy was acting as if nothing strange had happened.

Pam fiddled with the lock to the front door as Jeremy extinguished the lights. After double-checking that the door was securely closed, they crossed the yard to go home. The wind outside had begun blowing mightily while they were in the pool. The air moved at near gale proportions, which made walking the few feet into the late spring breeze a Herculean task. They let themselves into Jeremy’s house, slamming the door shut in relief. Jeremy sneezed twice. Pam noticed that his eyes had gotten red again in the short time it took to get to cross the yard.

“Hey, are you feeling okay?” she asked, her concern for his well-being overriding the awkwardness of what had just transpired.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Jeremy answered. “Can I go play Call of Duty before dinner?”

“Go ahead,” she told him. “I’ll let you know when it’s ready.” Pam’s search through the fridge proved fruitless, so dinner turned out to be frozen pizza. While waiting for it to bake, she couldn’t stop thinking about the pool incident. Since Jeremy was the one who started it all, she decided it best to follow his lead. “If he never mentions it again, then that’s where we’ll leave it,” she thought, slipping on a pair of oven mitts. “But I’m putting my foot down if something like that happens again.” After removing the pizza from the oven, Pam left it on the counter to cool while she went to find Jeremy.

She headed to the den where she expected him to be playing video games. To her surprise, the room was quiet. The television was dark and there was no sign of Jeremy anywhere. Frowning, Pam went to his room.

The door was partially closed. Pam only meant to pop her head in to announce that dinner was ready, but what she saw almost made her heart leap out of her throat. Jeremy was laying on his bed. Though fully clothed, one hand was inside his pants while the other turned the pages of a magazine. Pam was speechless.

Jeremy’s head jerked up, surprised. With one fluid motion, he yanked his hand out of his pants while simultaneously shoving the magazine under his pillow. In that instant, Pam could read the guilty and embarrassed look on his face as if she were reading a book. She did her best to remain calm.

“Hey there,” she said, her voice croaking a bit. “Um, dinner’s ready. Hope you want pizza!” With that, she turned and marched back to the kitchen. She heard him jumping out of bed to follow her. “Don’t forget to wash your hands,” she reminded him over her shoulder.
“Okay,” Jeremy said, heading for the bathroom. “I have to pee too so I’ll be right there.” He shut the door.

Pam took a deep breath. Her heart was still racing so she tried to relax. “Had he really been masturbating?” she wondered to herself. “He’s only ten years old! Surely he’s too young to be doing that.” Gripped by an insatiable curiosity, Pam spun on her heel. The bathroom door was still closed when she tiptoed by it.

Feeling like an intruder, she re-entered Jeremy’s room, not bothering to turn on the light. Piles of dirty laundry were strewn about the room and a poster of a Ferrari hung crooked on the wall, one corner having come undone and drooping slightly. She hadn’t noticed before, but the smell of suntan lotion hung heavily in the air. Pam quickly approached his bed and peeked under his pillow.

Victoria’s Secret. He had been paging through a Victoria’s Secret catalog.

From the bathroom, she heard the sound of the toilet flushing. Pam quickly dashed out of the room toward the kitchen, keeping her footsteps as quiet as possible. Even though her head was now spinning, she willed herself to think straight. She got some plates out of the cupboard and served the pizza. She was pouring milk when Jeremy sat down at the dinner table.

“I couldn’t find anything in the refrigerator,” she apologized. “I hope you wanted frozen pizza.”

Jeremy shrugged. “It’s okay. I’m actually not that hungry.”

She glanced at him. His eyes were even redder than before, something she hadn’t noticed when she saw him in the bedroom. Jeremy reached for a Kleenex on the table to blow his nose. “Not feeling well?” Pam asked.

“No really,” he admitted.

She put a hand up to his forehead. “You don’t have a fever,” she noted. Without thinking, she said, “Boy, you really smell like Coppertone though.”

A funny look crossed Jeremy’s face. He stared at the table “It really helps with my allergies,” he said, not looking at her.

But Pam saw the embarrassed look on his face. She was blushing too now, suddenly understanding what Jeremy was using the Coppertone for. She was surprised since any drugstore carried an entire aisle’s worth of lubricant. But those were meant for adults, she realized, and a boy Jeremy’s age would have to make do with whatever was… slippery. Her heart began pounding again. “Well, sure, of course,” she said, trying to gloss over it. “You’re right, it must be allergies. You felt fine at the Fosters, though.”

“My mom says their house has a super-fancy air conditioning system,” he told her. “That’s why my allergies never bug me over there.”

“Do you want to take something for it?” Pam asked.

“Sometimes my mom gives me Benadryl,” Jeremy said. “Do we have any of that?”

Pam found some in the medicine cabinet. “How many do you usually take?” she asked, scratching the foil from the blister pack that held the pills.

“Two.” She poured him a glass of water and handed him two blue pills. Jeremy scrutinized them for a moment. “They look different than usual,” he told her.
Pam inspected the box of pills. “Well, it says Benadryl for sure,” she said. Jeremy shrugged and took the pills. “Are you sure you want to skip dinner?” she asked him.

“I’m not hungry.”

“All right,” Pam granted. “Maybe you should get ready for bed though. The box says the Benadryl will make you sleepy.” He shuffled off without a complaint. Pam helped herself to a slice of lukewarm pizza.

“Poor kid,” she thought. There was usually at least minor resistance to teeth brushing. “He really must not be feeling well.” She was putting the Benadryl away in the medicine cabinet when something caught her eye. Tucked away in the corner of the shelf behind other prescription bottles was a box of Benadryl Kids.

“Oh crap…” Pam said aloud to herself. She went to the bathroom where he was listlessly brushing his teeth.

“Say, Jeremy?” She held up the blister pack of the kids’ version. “Is this what your Benadryl usually looks like?” He stopped and squinted at the pills she showed him.

“Oh huh,” he nodded. “What did I just take?”

“Oh, just some regular Benadryl,” Pam told him. “It’s not a big deal, it’s the same active ingredient after all.” He nodded and resumed brushing his teeth. But Pam hurried back to the kitchen to examine the boxes of medicine. The ingredients were indeed the same. But the regular version had three times the dosage of the kids’ version.

A small alarm of panic rang in her head. “Surely it wouldn’t be dangerous though?” She retrieved her phone and began searching the internet. From the other side of the house, she heard Jeremy finishing up in the bathroom. Still searching on her phone, she went to his bedroom.

“Hey there!” she said perhaps too perkily. He was already in bed and pulling the covers on. “Feeling okay?”

“Not really,” Jeremy muttered, blowing his nose again. He had changed into his Fruit Ninja pajamas.

“Well, I mean, it’s allergies right? Like you don’t feel funny in any other way?”

“I don’t know,” answered Jeremy. He wadded up the Kleenex and added it to the growing pile on the floor.

“Yes, but…” Pam searched her mind for a way to ask if he was okay without letting him realize what happened. “Um, I think I’ll just sit over here,” Pam told him, pointing to an armchair covered with laundry and toys. She shoved the detritus off the chair and onto the floor.

“You’re going to sit there while I sleep?” Jeremy asked.

“Well, sure,” said Pam. “I just want to make sure you’re okay. I’ll be quiet. You don’t mind, right?” Instead of answering, he closed his eyes. Pam continued researching on her phone. To her relief, she could find no incidences of dangerous side effects from overdosing with Benadryl. There were even reports of people who shunned Benadryl Kids altogether and just gave their kids half-pills of regular Benadryl.

“He’ll probably be fine,” Pam tried to reassure herself. “He just needs to sleep it off.” Indeed, he had already appeared to fall asleep. Pam listened to his breathing, raspy from his stuffed nose, and
decided to stay in the room for a bit longer to ensure he suffered no ill effects from the Benadryl dosage.

It wasn’t exactly exciting to watch someone sleep. Pam studied Jeremy’s room. Call of Duty advertisements, clipped from magazines, were taped to his wall. On his desk lay several Lego Star Wars game cases, a partially finished model airplane, stacks of loose school paperwork, and three empty glasses that apparently once contained soda. Under the bed, she could see a forlorn iPod nano lying on the floor. Next to it was an overturned container of Coppertone.

Coppertone. Moving on tiptoes, she picked up the bottle to find it practically empty. Pam remembered earlier when she walked in on Jeremy with his hand inside his pants. Along with the Victoria’s Secret under his pillow, it was clear proof that he was masturbating, aided by some slippery Coppertone sun lotion. Perhaps bemusement or shock would have been appropriate reactions but Pam was confused to find herself feeling guilty.

It was the same way she felt after letting Jeremy touch her breasts. The mere thought of the memory made her flush: the two of them, alone in the jacuzzi, while Jeremy roughly touched her. With a start, Pam realized the reason why she felt guilty about Jeremy’s masturbating habits. It was because the thought of him touching himself excited her.

“I have got to stop,” Pam shook her head. Why on earth was she suddenly feeling this way about a ten year old boy? Considering their past history, Pam had always enjoyed his company, had always felt comfortable around him. The feeling was obviously mutual which was why they had developed a close rapport. But this?

Jeremy stirred in bed, then coughed. Pam sat up straight, alert and concerned. Was it the Benadryl? Jeremy slowly rose to a sitting position. “Hey, are you all right?” she asked him worriedly.

“Mmmph,” he mumbled, swinging his legs onto the floor. He shuffled across the room so awkwardly that Pam wondered if he was sleepwalking. She was about to follow him when she saw him enter the bathroom. The sound of tinkling made her breathe with relief. He hadn’t closed the door so she could clearly hear everything. Once he was done, he returned to the room without washing his hands.

“Hey, Jeremy?” she began. “Where did the rest of your pajamas go?” When he left he had been fully clad in his pajamas, but now he was only wearing the pajama top and his white underpants.

“Too hot,” he mumbled.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” Pam asked again. To her surprise, instead of getting back into bed, Jeremy climbed into her lap and curled up into a ball. She put her arms around him. “You’re not feeling sick to your stomach or anything?” He shook his head. Pam held him like that for a few minutes until it became clear he wasn’t getting back into bed.

“Hey,” she prodded him. “Wouldn’t you be more comfortable in bed?”

“Nnrgh,” groaned Jeremy, half-conscious. “Sleep here.” He shifted until his head was resting on her shoulder. Moving in the slow motion of a half-awake person, he reached under the armchair’s seat cushion, fumbling for something. An electric whirring sound startled Pam. She realized that the armchair was in fact a recliner. Jeremy moved it into a full reclining position which rendered them nearly horizontal. Now able to stretch out, he yawned and arranged himself practically on top of her since the armchair was so narrow.

His head now nestled in the crook of her arm, his legs intertwined with hers, Jeremy sighed softly.
He was quite apparently comfortable because she soon heard him snoring lightly. The Benadryl must have kicked in because his breathing was now clear and even. Pam was gratified that not only were his allergies better, but that she also hadn’t given him an overdose.

Pam checked her watch. It was only 9 pm. Kate wouldn’t be back for at least an hour. She could stay with him like this for that long, she supposed. It was quite pleasant after all. Racking her memory, Pam tried to remember the last time Jeremy had snuggled with her like this. It had been a while.

She was about to doze off herself when Jeremy shifted in his sleep. He fussed for a moment until his head was fully resting on her left breast. Pam absolutely froze. Wondering if he was faking, she put an arm on Jeremy’s shoulder but he seemed to be fully asleep.

The weight of his head against her immediately made her thoughts return to the jacuzzi. Truth or Dare! It must have been at least a decade since she played that. And look where it led... Shamefully, Pam remembered how aroused she felt while he was touching her. It was similar to how she felt now with his head resting on her chest, the sweet burden of him heavy against her. Wild thoughts began populating her mind. She imagined Jeremy waking up to nuzzle her breast. She imagined him running his hands over them again. She imagined…

“Snap out of it,” Pam told herself sharply. She tried to figure out how to get out of the armchair without waking him up. She experimentally lifted one of his arms. But the movement disturbed him just enough that Jeremy made a whiny sound in his sleep. Jeremy turned his head to face the other way, brushing hard against her breast in the process. He was apparently having trouble finding a comfortable spot because he then turned his face back to its original position, once again burying his face in her chest. The accidental content made Pam blush.

Nothing could prepare her for what happened next though. Jeremy shifted one last time, his body trying to find the perfect spot on top of hers on the recliner. Pam remained perfectly still until he settled into a position where his crotch was pressed tightly against her thigh. Only her jeans and his underwear separated their bodies from each other and Pam could feel...

History was repeating itself. "Or is it my imagination?" Pam thought as she stared at the ceiling. "No… it's definitely not my imagination." Something hard and alive was pressing deep against her leg. Not just something, a little voice inside her head said. It was Jeremy's p-...

Disgusted with herself, Pam sat up in the armchair and extricated herself from the sleeping boy. It wasn’t easy because of the recliner’s position, but she was eventually able to awkwardly roll off the recliner. To her horror, Jeremy's head bonked violently against the sidearm but he did not stir. She thought for sure he would wake up again, but instead he peacefully snored away.

It was the Benadryl, she reminded herself. She briefly debated carrying Jeremy to his bed but decided against it. He seemed comfortable enough at the moment. Plus, she didn’t want to throw out her back. She pulled the blanket off his bed, intending to tuck him in while he slept on the armchair.

Just before she did so, however, something caught Pam’s attention. His Fruit Ninja pajama top had ridden up. It occurred to Pam that she shouldn’t be looking, but she couldn’t help it. His belly, perfectly flat, irresistibly lured her gaze downward to his white underwear where Pam could easily see a bulge. The shape of his erection was evident, even if hidden by his underwear. Her heart pulsing in excitement, Pam couldn’t help but remember how she watched Jeremy getting hard while he felt her up in the jacuzzi. And now here it was again.

Pam wondered what he was dreaming about. Maybe… Perhaps… A small part of her mind whispered: “Maybe he’s dreaming about me.” To her embarrassment, Pam could feel the slightest hint of wetness between her legs. Getting wet over a ten year old boy! He was wearing plain Fruit of
the Loom briefs, the kind worn only by young boys and old men. It had never occurred to Pam how appealing they looked on boys.

Unable to resist, Pam moved into a kneeling position next to the recliner. Moving of its own volition, she saw her trembling hand reaching out. “Just a little touch,” she told herself. “It’s not going to hurt anybody.” Gently, ever so gently, Pam caressed the little tent in Jeremy’s white underwear. The cotton felt smooth beneath her fingers as she traced the rising and falling outline of the swelling. She carefully kept one eye on Jeremy but he did not stir.

“I wish… I wish his underwear wasn’t in the way,” Pam thought fiercely. “I wish…” Pam swallowed hard. Would she dare do it?

She glanced at Jeremy again to confirm he was still asleep. Her knees were shaking. Even her fingers trembled, which made it difficult to carefully pry open the fly of the white underwear. Her mind was screaming danger at her. But Pam pressed on until she had successfully fished out his penis.

It was so small, yet so perfect. She hadn’t been able to get a good look in the jacuzzi but now Pam was free to gaze in wonder. In her memory, it was nothing more than a miniature penis. In reality, however, it was nothing of the sort, no more than a boy resembles a miniature man.

The first thing she noticed was the delicate creamy shade of his skin, completely unblemished in its pure smoothness. Though erect, it didn’t stick straight up from his body but instead lay flat, pointing at his head. He was uncircumcised, she noted, something she hadn’t noticed until now when she had an unencumbered view. His foreskin hid the familiar ridged shape of his penis head, although its outline was clearly visible underneath the tightly stretched skin. A small pucker of excess foreskin capped off the whole thing. Sitting very still in the dimly lit room, she could see his penis pulsing ever-so-slightly as the blood flowed through it.

It was a transfixing sight. Pam felt as if she were a little girl herself, discovering the male body for the first time. Wanting to see everything, she carefully tugged the underwear’s fly a bit wider until she revealed his scrotum. The color of his skin here matched that of his tiny shaft, except the surface was intricately adorned with hundreds of small wrinkles. A jagged line, almost resembling a scar, neatly bisected his scrotum in two.

Wanting to touch him, Pam reached out a hand, but then paused. “Do it,” a small voice told her. “You’ve already come this far. And besides, didn’t he get to feel you up in the jacuzzi? It’s only fair that you get to touch him. Isn’t it?”

Her entire body prickled with anticipation. Pam ran her hand so softly against his shaft that the touch felt barely perceptible, like the gentlest breeze on a summer day. She did it again, feeling a shiver run up her spine. Throwing caution to the wind, Pam extended a finger and let it caress him, starting from the base of his hairless scrotum to the very tip of his small penis.

She knew it was wrong. But Pam couldn’t help herself. Over and over she touched, exploring every inch, savoring the smoothness of his skin and the heat from his body. Her entire hand easily covered both his penis and scrotum so she cupped him like that for a long moment. He wasn’t even semi-erect, but Pam wondered if he would get hard if she touched him enough. But what would happen if he suddenly woke up and found her cupping him like this? Would he tell her to stop? Or would he ask her to continue?

Despite her misgivings, Pam had never felt so turned on in all her life. Her mouth felt dry so she licked her lips. Another wild thought escaped as she imagined him in her mouth, a thought that ignited both her hormones and her conscience. She shamefully took her hand away.
“Stopping, stopping, stopping,” Pam repeated. She briskly closed up his fly, feeling the slightest ping of regret as she did so. His hair was artfully flung across his face, blissfully unaware and completely at peace. Pam stared at him, caught between a longing tenderness in her heart and an illicit fire somewhere deeper. Picking up the forgotten blanket on the ground, Pam covered up Jeremy’s slumbering form before quickly exiting the room.

Locking herself in the bathroom, Pam sat down on the toilet and stared at her feet. A jumble of thoughts rolled in her head, each one full of guilt and contradiction. How could she feel so regretful, yet also so energized, for what she did? Remaining completely immobile, Pam wrestled with that question until she heard Jeremy’s mom come home.
Pam is trying to define the boundaries of an appropriate relationship, but Jeremy has other ideas.

After the Benadryl incident, Pam swore that she was done. Taking advantage of a knocked-out ten year old boy? Pam couldn’t believe herself. The best solution, she decided, was to tell the Praters that she couldn’t babysit anymore. Perhaps she could tell them that her job as an insurance agent was demanding more travel. Or maybe she was getting more hours for her part-time job as yoga instructor.

Whatever the case, she was done. Pam repeated this to herself throughout the following week. It became her mantra the minute she woke up. She would repeat it to herself when stuck in traffic or waiting in a checkout lane. Her phone might ring and her first thought would be “I’m done babysitting.”

She was just finishing up a grueling 90 minute session at the gym when her cell phone rang. It was William’s phone number. Jeremy’s dad was calling her. “You’re done,” Pam reminded herself before answering.

“Hi William.”

“Hi Pam!” he greeted her. “How are you?”

“Not bad,” she responded. “Just working out at the gym.”

“Listen Pam, I know this is really short notice but do you think you could babysit Jeremy tonight?”

“Gosh, William,” Pam began. “I don’t know if I can tonight… I haven’t had dinner yet tonight and I still need to shower too.”

“I understand,” William told her. “Do you think you could stop by for just an hour later tonight? I apologize, but the hospital called to ask Kate to come in at the last minute. I thought I would be able to get home in time but I’m wrapping up a new contract at the office.”

“I see,” Pam said, wondering how to politely say no.

“Kate was due for a night off,” William continued, “But I guess one of her patients just went into labor twenty minutes ago and the nurses are expecting this one to be tricky.”

“Well…” Pam hesitated. She suddenly remembered the old saying about there being a special place in hell for women who didn’t help other women. “Well, all right,” she agreed reluctantly. “I suppose it would be best for me to get there sooner? Rather than later?”

“Thank you so much, Pam,” William said gratefully. “Yes, sooner would be better.”

“I could probably be there in twenty minutes if I don’t shower,” Pam calculated.
“You’re more than welcome to shower here, of course,” William told her. “And as soon as I hang up, I’m going to order a pizza to be delivered. What would you like on it?”

“Oh, whatever is fine,” Pam responded vaguely. “Has Jeremy eaten yet? He can choose.”

“I’ll ask him,” William promised. “Kate will be waiting once you get there. Thanks again, Pam.” He hung up. She headed for the locker room to retrieve her belongings.

“I’ll just get there and take a quick shower,” Pam told herself. “I’ll have some pizza. I’ll just read the newspaper in the kitchen or something. It shouldn’t take too long for William to get home.” Despite her pep talk, Pam felt an icy pit forming in her nervous stomach as she rang the doorbell. When Kate answered the door, Pam was surprised to see her dressed up in a fancy jacket, black skirt and heels.

“Hi there!” she greeted her. She let Pam in but didn’t close the door. “Pizza and salad are waiting in the kitchen. Jeremy is in his room, I think. Thanks again for doing this on such short notice.”

“It’s no problem,” Pam nodded. “How come you’re all dressed up?”

“Dressed up?” Kate said, puzzled.

“When I spoke with William he said you were headed for the hospital for an emergency.”

A strange look crossed Kate’s face. “Oh, is that what he told you?” she asked. Pam couldn’t quite read the expression on Kate’s face. It was annoyed but somehow pleased at the same time. “Never mind,” she told Pam. “I’m actually not going in to work tonight. But we did need a babysitter. Thanks for coming over.”

“Sure,” Pam said. She wondered what was going on.

“Jeremy?” Kate called. “I’m heading out for a bit. Your dad will be home in a few hours. Be good for Pam, all right?”

“Okay,” Jeremy’s disembodied voice called back from nowhere. Kate smiled at Pam again and left, shutting the door behind her. Pam set her duffel bag down. She had a glass of water in the kitchen before heading out in search of Jeremy. She found him in his room drawing in a notebook. He was sprawled in the recliner, much like the other night when she had given him the wrong kind of Benadryl.

“Hey,” Pam said. The memory of him, hair tousled and asleep in the recliner, filled her mind. She banished the thought.

“Hey,” he answered, not taking his eyes off his drawing.

“Did you eat already?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“There’s pizza.”

“I know.” Jeremy finally looked at her, but only briefly. An awkward silence ensued.

“Are your allergies better?” she asked him. “You were out cold the last time I saw you.”

“They’re okay,” Jeremy told her.

Pam could tell he was out of sorts. But she couldn’t tell if it was because he was weirded out over
what happened in the Fosters’ hot tub or if it was something else. “You sure you’re okay?” she asked. “You seem… I don’t know. You seem bummed out.”

“It’s nothing,” Jeremy said, doodling on his paper. After a long pause, he finally said, “They had a big fight tonight.”

It took her a moment to understand what "they" meant. “A fight?” she repeated. “You mean your parents?” He nodded, a frown forming on his face. “What were they fighting about?”

“I don’t know,” Jeremy said, still not looking at her. “I could hear my mom arguing on the phone though.”

“Well…” Pam wasn’t sure what to say. “I’m sure it wasn’t any big deal. Sometimes people have arguments and get into fights that seem silly later.” Jeremy nodded thoughtfully at this. “I remember my parents having some crazy arguments when I was growing up.”

“Are they still together?” Jeremy asked. “I mean, did they get divorced?”

“No, they’re still together all right,” she reassured him. “Getting close to fifty years now. Although they did split up for a while.”

"Oh." His finger picked at the eraser on his pencil. "Sometimes I get worried about my parents. Because they fight so much."

She saw his lower lip tremble a little. Pam was a little surprised. She had never imagined Jeremy worrying about such things. He had never confided in her like this before. "I used to think the same thing," she told him. "I used to lie awake at night and think about it."

"Me too," Jeremy nodded.

"But honestly Jeremy? I don't think there's much you can do about it. That's what I realized when I was older. They would have been fighting either way. There wasn't anything I, or anyone, could have done to change their minds." Jeremy nodded again. He still looked a little sad, but Pam was glad to see he wasn't blinking back tears anymore.

“Are you going to take a shower?” he asked, noticing her workout outfit. “My mom made me get the guest bathroom ready for you. There’s a towel and stuff in there.”

“Thank you,” Pam told him. “You’re just going to draw all night tonight?”

"No. Want to play Call of Duty with me later?"

"Absolutely," Pam lied, not wanting to hurt his feelings. She had encountered him in gloomy moods before. His parents’ argument clearly had some effect on him, but she couldn’t help but wonder if he was also bothered by other things. Had she pushed things too far in the hot tub? She was about to head for the shower when her stomach growled loudly. “Jeremy?” she called. “I’m going to have a quick slice of pizza before my shower. You sure you don’t want one too?”

“No, thanks,” he called back.

Pam shrugged. She helped herself to a slice of pepperoni and green olives. Once finished, she got her toiletry bag and headed for the guest bathroom. She wasn’t sure why the Praters referred to it as the guest bathroom since Jeremy often used it himself. A fresh towel was indeed waiting for her, thanks to Jeremy. Shutting the door, she was surprised to find a clean terrycloth robe waiting on a hanger. Pam gratefully peeled off her gym clothes and hopped in the shower.
It was a very old bathroom with peeling wallpaper and aging tiles, but the Praters did remodel it to include a modern shower stall with clear glass door and a rainforest-style attachment. The hot water felt wonderful on her sore muscles, but Pam couldn’t shake a funny feeling as she showered. Her instincts were telling her something, but Pam couldn’t place it. It was an odd feeling of… a presence. Like she was being watched.

Which was ridiculous of course. Through the clear shower door, Pam could see the room was empty. There was a toilet. A sink. A wicker laundry hamper. Her bag of toiletries. Her discarded clothing hanging on a hook.

But still… Pam stared through the shower door for a moment. Had something just moved? Or was it her imagination? She studied the wicker laundry hamper for a moment. It was then that she noticed a small black tube sticking out of it. It didn’t look like anything out of the ordinary. Just a narrow tube with a circular opening where a glint of something was shimmering at her. If anything it looked like…

Jeremy’s periscope. The same one he used while hiding in the bushes outside the house. The same one he tried to use in the Fosters’ hot tub. Could she be certain though? Pam turned her back to the shower door for a moment. When she looked at the laundry hamper again, the difference was unmistakable. The black tube was sticking higher up now by several inches.

Pam turned her back to the transparent shower door again, stifling an embarrassed smile. The wicker hamper was definitely large enough to hide a ten year old boy. Jeremy must have snuck into the guest bathroom while she was eating pizza, concealed himself in the hamper, and then waited for her to shower. All in the name of getting a sneak peek.

The thought of him watching her didn’t make her feel uncomfortable. Quite the opposite. Pam had spent the week building up her inhibitions but they were now melting away. The mantra of “I’m done babysitting” was replaced by the realization “Jeremy is spying on me.” She wondered if he was enjoying himself in the hamper. Was he getting an erection? Touching himself, perhaps? The same way he did when looking at the Victoria’s Secret under his pillow?

Knowing she had an audience, Pam turned to face the shower door as she took great care in soaping up her breasts. She made sure to stretch several times, raising her arms high and turning to let him see her profile. Each time she saw the black tube sticking out of the hamper, Pam felt a blossom of sexual desire between her legs.

When she was finished showering, Pam made a big show of stepping out of the stall to towel off, making sure to face the hamper as she did so. Feeling wicked, she turned away from the hamper and bent over low to examine her toenails. If he wanted a peek, she might as well give him an eyeful, she thought. Besides, what she was doing wasn’t necessarily bad. What if she hadn’t realized Jeremy was hiding in the hamper? He would have seen her naked either way.

Pam dressed slowly, partly to continue the show and partly to consider what to do next. She took great care in slipping her panties on. Next came her bra. Pam took some time to fiddle with it: slipping it on and fussily arranging herself in the cups before taking it off and redoing the whole process.

When she was finally done putting on her underwear, she decided to tease him a little. Pulling on the terry Cloth robe, she opened the bathroom door. “Hey Jeremy,” she called in the direction of his room. “I’m almost done. I’m going to have another quick slice of pizza, okay?”

There was no response from his room, of course. Pam giggled silently. She had wondered if he would be foolish enough to try to answer her from the hamper. Like a ventriloquist. In the kitchen,
she thoughtfully devoured another slice of pizza. Boys were incorrigible.

Still chewing, Pam returned to the bathroom to retrieve her toiletry bag. Glancing at the wicker hamper, she wasn’t surprised to see the black tube no longer sticking out of it. She peeked inside. Empty. “Even I could have fit in there,” Pam thought to herself.

She returned to her room to get dressed. But when she pulled out some neatly folded jeans and a shirt from her duffel bag, Pam realized she didn’t want to get dressed. A robe offered more than enough coverage, didn’t it? Nevertheless, she tightened the cinch before heading to Jeremy’s room where she found him nonchalantly sketching in the recliner. Whiskers lay purring on his lap. “Hey,” she said, leaning against the door and eating her pizza.

“Hey,” he responded.

“What’s been doing?” she inquired.

“Oh, just reading,” Jeremy answered. He avoided her gaze, choosing instead to concentrate on his drawing. So that’s the face he makes when he lying, she thought to herself. Then she noticed a familiar object on his desk. Stuffing the rest of the pizza in her mouth, she picked up the periscope.

“Hey, I forgot you have this,” she said, looking through it. “Do you still play with it? I never see you using it anymore.”

“Um, not really,” Jeremy answered. Pam was amused to see his ears getting red.

“I bet you could use it to spy on people,” Pam told him, putting the periscope back where she found it.

“Yeah… haha,” Jeremy said mirthlessly. The cat on his lap yawned and arched her back.

“Aww, Whiskers is so cute,” Pam said, coming over to pet her. The cat purred appreciatively in response. “I remember when you were just a little kitty…” The cat’s plush fur felt like velvet beneath her fingers. “Has she still been waking you up in the middle of the night?”

“Yeah. Sometimes.” He was acting somewhat peculiar, she realized. The young boy was looking at her, but not at her face. Pam realized that her robe was open just enough for him to see quite a bit of cleavage. Particularly since she wasn’t wearing a bra.

Pam felt the rush of an insatiable thirst. Jeremy apparently couldn’t get enough of her tonight. Enjoying the attention, Pam continued petting Whiskers to give him a good, long look. Each time she looked at him, it was clear he was mesmerized by the curves peeking from under her robe.

A devious thought sprung in her mind.

“Want to come sit with me on the floor, Whiskers?” she asked, picking the cat off his lap. Pam sat down on the floor, cross-legged, and settling Whiskers into her lap. Another quick glance confirmed her suspicions. The cat had been resting comfortably on Jeremy’s lap, hiding his crotch. But now she could see a very obvious bulge straining his shorts.

An older, more sophisticated male would have realized right away what was happening. But Jeremy was apparently too young to recognize the faux pas. Pam cleared her throat. She and Jeremy locked gazes for a moment before Pam let her eyes flicker briefly between his legs. He got the hint. Pam tried not to smile as she saw Jeremy’s ears turn red. Fumbling with his notebook, the ten year old boy self-consciously arranged it on his lap to hide his burgeoning erection.
“It’s nothing to be shy about you know,” Pam told him softly. He knitted his fingers together and stared at them. “I don’t get embarrassed when you’re looking at me.”

Jeremy blushed some more. “No, I wasn’t…” he stammered, a nervous grin breaking out on his face.

“Boys and girls look at each other all the time, don’t they?” Pam asked.

“I guess so,” Jeremy said. He tried to change the subject. “Ashton told me his older brother got in trouble for playing strip poker with some girls once.”

“Did he?” said Pam. She continued petting Whiskers but her attention occasionally strayed to the notebook on Jeremy’s lap, thinking about what was hiding underneath it.

“Yup,” Jeremy said, relieved to have something else to talk about. “His parents got really mad and grounded him for a whole month.”

“What exactly was Ashton’s brother doing?” Pam asked innocently.

“I guess it’s just like regular poker, except you have to take your clothes off.”

“I bet you’d like to play it,” she teased.

“No!” he exclaimed. “I wouldn’t want to take my clothes off in front of a girl.”

“Well, what about…” Pam wondered how wise it was to bring it up. “What about that one time we played Truth or Dare? In the jacuzzi?”

Jeremy seemed uncomfortable again. “That was different,” he muttered.

“But…” Pam was suddenly nervous too. “But didn’t you like it? When I took off my top?”

Jeremy fiddled with the eraser on his pencil, letting his silence answer her question.

Forging ahead, Pam told him, “Strip Poker might be embarrassing for you because you have to take off your clothes. But on the other hand… you get to see a girl taking off her clothes too.”

She could see the wheels in his head turning. “I guess so… Well, I’ve never played strip poker anyway,” Jeremy admitted.

“Would you like to?” Pam asked craftily.

“You mean with you?” clarified Jeremy.

“Yes.”

“Okay… But I don’t really know how to play poker.”

“Me neither. We could play Go Fish instead.”

“Strip Go Fish?”

“Sure. Find a deck of cards.”

From the way he scrambled out of the recliner, Pam could tell that Jeremy was quite intrigued by the idea, despite his initial reluctance. He returned carrying a deck of cards, which he handed to her before sitting down on the carpet across from where she sat. Pam began shuffling. The look of
nervous anticipation on Jeremy’s face told her all she needed to know.

“So, um, how does this work, anyway?” Jeremy asked.

“I think when you play strip poker, you bet articles of clothing instead of money,” said as she dealt the cards. “But since we’re playing Go Fish instead, I think the rule should be you have to take something off whenever the other person completes a book. Sound fair?”

Jeremy nodded and picked up his cards. “Should I go first?”

“Sure.”

“Um… do you have any queens?”

“Go fish,” she told him. It occurred to Pam that she really was only wearing the robe and her panties, a definite handicap since Jeremy was dressed in a t-shirt, shorts, and socks. But then she remembered that strategy games, even those as rudimentary as Go Fish, were not Jeremy’s strongest suit. Especially if the game involved memory since his attention span was like a sieve.

“Any sevens?” she inquired. Making a face, he handed her a card. Within a few turns, Pam was able to complete a book of threes. Her hand trembling a bit, she laid down the cards for Jeremy to see.

His face had a pinched expression. “So I have to take something off?” he asked.

“Them's the rules,” Pam smiled brightly, trying to ease not only his nerves but her own as well.

He took a sock off. “Does that count?”

“I suppose so. It’s an article of clothing after all.”

“What should I do with it?”

“Put it over there,” Pam pointed. “And we’ll make a clothes pile. So… any twos?”

“Go Fish!” Jeremy said smugly. “Do you have any sixes?” He crowed when he handed her two cards. “I have a complete set! You have to take something off!” He laid out his sixes on the carpet.

“No problem,” Pam said, remembering something. She took off her earrings and put them next to Jeremy’s sock.

He glared at her. “Hey, that’s not fair!”

“Why not? I was wearing them, wasn’t I?” He pouted for a moment before the game continued. On her next turn, Pam completed a set of tens. Jeremy took off his other sock. Then when it was her turn to Go Fish, she got lucky and drew an eight to complete another set, forcing Jeremy to take off his shirt.

As they played, she studied him out of the corner of her eye. His frame, albeit scrawny, was somehow endearing. She had never noticed before how delicately defined his collarbone was. His chest had a lean yet well-built look. It was somewhere between skinny and muscular, but definitely leaning toward skinny. Pam was so distracted that she didn’t even notice that she held a completed book in her hands.

“Oh,” she said, plucking the cards out. “I have a set of fives.” She set them down.

“Aw geez!” Jeremy groaned. He threw himself back until he was lying on the carpet, stamping his
legs in frustration. Pam didn’t mind the minor tantrum because it gave her an excellent view of his flat stomach.

“You still have to take something off,” Pam reminded him, rearranging her cards. Standing up, Jeremy reluctantly took off his shorts. She tried not to stare but in her peripheral vision she could see his familiar white Fruit of the Loom underwear. It was the same kind he was wearing the night of the Benadryl incident.

She could tell Jeremy’s frustration was threatening to derail the game so she did her best to let him catch up. But Pam was astounded by how poor Jeremy’s memory was. He continually asked for cards that he already requested. It took several turns until he finally completed a set of twos.

“Yes!” he exulted, waving the cards in her face. “Now it’s your turn to take something off!” He stood up to do a joyful dance. As before, Pam didn’t mind the gloating since it meant he was prancing in front of her wearing nothing but his underwear.

She waited until he finally sat down again. “Are you done?” she asked, pretending to be annoyed. He nodded. Pam began untying the cinch that held her robe shut. She could tell all his attention was focused on her. Slipping the robe from her shoulders, Pam added it to the clothes pile before picking up her cards. Her nipples perked up, either from the cool air or from the excitement of being ogled. Jeremy’s eyes were firmly glued on her chest.

“You know it’s not polite to stare, Jeremy,” she chided. She used one arm to shield both her breasts from his view. He looked at her bashfully and returned his attention to his cards. Each time Pam had to take away her arm to draw a card, Jeremy’s eyes instantly zeroed in on her breasts. After a few rounds of this, she spotted a familiar bulge jutting from his white underwear.

Jeremy cleared his throat nervously. “Um, I have a completed book,’ he said, setting down four kings. There was no celebrating this time. Instead, he just watched as Pam stood up and wiggled out of her panties. She silently deposited them on the clothing pile, hoping Jeremy wouldn’t notice the wet spot that had formed in the crotch of the panties.

“Well, isn’t this embarrassing?” Pam commented, sitting down again. Wanting to be coy, she kept her knees folded and sat with her legs primly closed, even though what she really wanted was to be spread eagle for the ten year old boy. The periscope incident was nice, but it was adding a whole new dimension to see Jeremy’s facial reaction to her naked body. His eyebrows rose just a bit higher whenever he looked at her, plus she detected the merest hint of a discomposed quaver whenever he spoke.

Pam began arranging the cards she held, a task that required both hands. Each time she flicked her eyes from her cards to his face, she found him unabashedly staring at her naked body. She shielded her breasts with one arm and cleared her throat. He looked at her, startled, a dopey grin on his face. “Your turn,” she reminded him.

“Um, do you have any queens?” he asked.

Pam made a face and handed him three queens. “Well, I don’t have any clothes left to take off,” she pointed out.

“I know,” said Jeremy. “Since you don't have any clothes, why don't you go get me a glass of water?”

“What?”
“That'll be the new rule. If a person doesn't have any clothes left, then they have to do whatever the other person asks.”

Pam made a face, pretending to be annoyed. “Fine,” she sighed. “Little brat.” She slowly got to her feet and sauntered out of the room. She could practically feel his eyes drilling a hole into her. When she returned, Jeremy pretended to examine the copious dirt under his fingernails.

“Thanks,” he said, when she handed him his glass of water. He was looking directly between her legs when he said it. Unlike most women she encountered in the gym locker room, Pam kept a modestly trimmed amount of hair down there. She had spent most of her early twenties in a clean-shaven state, but later decided that pubic hair lent a woman a sense of gravitas. She wondered if Jeremy liked it. Judging from the tent poking out of his shorts, the answer was yes. Pam sat back down, this time not bothering to cover her breasts as she held her cards.

"Shall we continue?" she inquired.

"Your turn." Sitting up straight with her shoulders back, she pushed her breasts forward until they were like a shelf.

"Oh yeah," Jeremy said, fumbling through his cards. '"Do you have any queens?" he asked, forgetting that he just asked her for those.

The poor boy was obviously too distracted to play Go Fish. “Let's see, my turn,” Pam said, lazily scratching her neck. It was exciting to receive such attention from a ten year old. Unable to resist, she briefly rubbed her nipple for a moment, trying to disguise it as an absent-minded scratching. A tingle of pleasure was her reward. Jeremy was so transfixed by the sight of her touching herself that he didn't even hear her speak.

"Huh?" he asked.

"I said, do you have any aces?"

He handed her the cards. Not saying a word, Pam laid the four aces on the carpet and looked at Jeremy. Hesitating just a little bit, the young boy stood up and pulled off his underwear. He tossed them onto the clothing pile where they landed right on top of her panties, something that did not escape Pam's notice. She had just enough time for a quick peek before he sat down again and cupped a hand to his privates.

"Oh Jeremy, you're so bashful," teased Pam, as she rifled through her cards. "You don't see me being shy, do you?"

"I'm not being shy," he insisted. "I just have my hand here because it's... you know. It's, um, cold."

"This, coming from the boy who wears shorts and t-shirts in January," Pam scoffed. "From the boy who practically throws a tantrum when his mom tells him to put on a sweater."

"I'm not shy!" Jeremy argued. "See, look." So saying, he took his hand away. He casually tried to hold his cards but now his knees were pulled up to his chest, his crossed ankles obstructing her view.

"You're still trying to hide," Pam pointed out. With great effort, Jeremy resumed his previous cross-legged position. His penis, though small, was undeniably erect, pointing straight up at his chin. Pam
welcomed the sight of it like an old friend. Someday, she thought, he would grow up. And it would too. That was an exciting thought, but for now Pam decided she liked Jeremy just the way he was.

“See? I can do it.”

“Do you remember when you were six? It was a battle every day for your mom to get you dressed.”

“You mean I would only wear underwear?”

“If we were lucky. I babysat you once and, the minute your parents left the house, you stripped down to your underwear.”

“I don’t remember that,” Jeremy said, blushing.

“It wasn’t too bad,” Pam said. “Although it wasn't as funny as that time you were naked the whole time I babysat you.”

“That's didn't happen! You're making stuff up to tease me now.”

“No, really,” Pam told him. “You got out of your bath and informed me that your mom didn't have any clean clothes for you. Your ran around naked that entire night. We had hot dogs for dinner and you weren't wearing a thing while you ate it.” For once, Jeremy was at a loss for words. A scowl formed on his face as his brow knitted in anger. Pam patted his bare knee. “Don't worry, it was cute. I get it. You got older and you gained a sense of modesty.”

“So, are we going to keep playing or what?” he asked. “We both already lost our clothes.”

“Well, hold on, here,” Pam said. “How about sevens?”

Making a sour face, he handed her his cards. “Oh great,” he muttered. “I bet you're going to make me get you a glass of water now.”

“Oh, I have something better than that,” Pam said. She leaned forward in anticipation. “I want you to do twenty jumping jacks for me.”

Jeremy groaned. “Do I have to?”

“It's the rules that you made up. You have to do whatever I ask.”

He reluctantly got to his feet, blushing beet red even though he hadn't started yet. His eyes avoiding hers, Jeremy began doing his jumping jacks.

“One, two, three, four…” Pam counted aloud to keep track for him. With each repetition, his erection was flopping up and down in the most satisfying way. It would lightly slap against his lower tummy before bowing down low against his pristine and hairless scrotum. Then it would snap back up like a rubber band.

But it was over much too soon. “Eighteen... nineteen... twenty!” Pam said, disappointed. She should have told him to do forty.

Jeremy sat back down. “I'm going to get you for this,” he informed her. “Hurry up and do your next turn.”

“Um, kings?” Pam said. Now it was her turn to be distracted. Too late, she realized they had already played kings.
“Go fish,” Jeremy told her. She took the last card in the pile. Jeremy studied his hand.

“Give me your fours.” She handed them over.

“Your turn!” Jeremy said. “I want you to do twenty jumping jacks.”

“I can't,” Pam told him. “My back has still been bothering me so I can't jump around.”

“You're just making excuses!”

“Really, Jeremy,” she said earnestly. “I would do naked jumping jacks for you if I could. Just think of something else to ask me.” Once again, Jeremy's eyes zeroed in on her bare breasts. Anything, Pam thought, anything at all. She felt herself getting wet from imagining what he would ask.

“Forget it,” Jeremy said, pouting. “I wanted to see jumping jacks.”

“I'll do a dance for you instead,” Pam offered. “How about that?”

“What kind of dance?”

“I don't know. I guess it won't be a funny one. Should I just do it for you?” Without waiting for an answer, Pam got to her feet. She wanted to give him something to really ogle. Something to blow his mind. He had already gotten to see her shower. How could she take it to the next level?

Pam began bobbing her head to an imaginary beat. Closing her eyes, she pictured herself on a dance floor. The rest of her body slowly joined in as Pam rhythmically swayed her hips and arms. She turned, pushing out her ass from side to side to match the silent song in her mind. Her arms were now raised above her head, her fingers touching and her head leaned back slightly, letting her long hair brush against her back. It felt as if she really was on the dance floor now. Pam moved her shoulders in sharp strokes and was rewarded by the feel of her breasts gently jiggling against her body.

She lost track of time, but when she opened her eyes again, she was certain that at least a few minutes had passed. Pam had lost herself so well in the dancing that it was jarring to find herself back in Jeremy's bedroom. The thick shag carpeting tickled her bare feet. His untidy drawers with clothes spilling out. And Jeremy was gazing at her with a look of almost religious awe.

“Was that okay?” Pam asked, her hands were still raised in a half circle atop her head.

“Um, yeah,” he said. “It was... cool.” His eyes moved from her toes to her head, then back again. Pam returned the favor by admiring his delicate collarbone and gawky arms, not to mention his erection which she swore she could see throbbing in time with his pulse.

“I guess we're out of cards,” Jeremy said. “Now what?” She realized he was once again looking to her for direction. Pam glanced at the clock on his wall. It was half an hour before his mom said she would come home.

“We better get dressed,” Pam said reluctantly. Jeremy's face fell. It clearly wasn't what he wanted to hear, a realization that made her blush. What if? What if they had more time? The possibilities were endless. Masking her disappointment, Pam changed the subject. “Have you even eaten anything for dinner yet? I had a slice, but I'm still starving.”

She knelt at the pile of clothes and began sorting them, handing him his clothes as she found them. As he pulled on his shorts and shirt, Jeremy paid special attention as she got dressed, particularly when she put on her bra. “Of course he's curious,” Pam thought to herself. “He's never seen a girl get
into her underwear before.

She dressed slowly to let him see the mechanics of it. Pam remembered the first few times she had to put on a bra as a young girl. It really was an intricate dance of arms going here and straps going there. I'm teaching him about the female body, she thought to herself.

“Jeremy,” she asked, turning around. “Do you think you could clasp my bra for me?”

“Huh? Oh sure.” She gathered up her hair, exposing her back to him. Pam couldn't explain why, but this felt every bit as erotic as the day she let him touch her breasts in the hot tub. Maybe even more. Her bra straps had been hanging loose at her back, but she felt them tighten as Jeremy tugged them together. His movement made the bra cup close against her body, gently lifting up her breasts. The incidental contact of his fingers against her back made Pam shiver. It took a moment of fumbling before he was able to successfully work the clasp.

“Thanks,” she told him. Pam was glad she wasn't facing him. She felt certain her warm face was awash in sensual pleasure.

“You're welcome.” He paused. “Um, hey. Would… Are we going to get in trouble if my parents find out about us playing Go Fish and, um… stuff?”

“Well, yes,” Pam said. It was the truth after all. “But I’m not going to tell them. Or anybody.”

“I won’t either,” Jeremy promised.

Pam felt an unexpected twinge of guilt. Not only had she taken advantage of him, but now she was telling him to keep secrets from his parents. “Do you wish we hadn’t done this?” she asked him. Why did it always happen this way? Why were the moments of high-flying arousal always followed by soul-crushing guilt? “I… Are you mad at me? I’m sorry.”

He was startled by her apology. “I’m not mad!” he said, shaking his head. To her surprise, Jeremy gave her a quick hug. Astonished, Pam hugged him back, but not before a split-second moment of hesitation, partially because his forehead was grazing her breasts. “I’m hungry though. There’s still pizza left, isn’t there?”

“Go ahead,” Pam told him. “I’m going to finish getting dressed.” He left the room.

“Why the guilt?” Pam mused. Wasn’t it Jeremy who spied on her in the shower? It was his own curiosity at work. Perhaps she was feeding his fixation, but it wasn’t as if she were actively preying on him. Pam sighed. He was a boy, she was a woman, and fifteen years separated them. That should have been simple enough, but the situation had somehow gained a great deal of complexity beyond that.

Pam turned off the light in the guest bedroom and headed for the kitchen where Jeremy was perched on a stool next to the kitchen counter. He had a slice of pizza in one hand and a pencil in the other. “Did you want some pizza?” he offered, looking up from his drawing. “I got you a plate.” He pointed at the stool next to his where a plate and napkin waited.

“Thanks, Jeremy,” Pam said, sliding onto the seat. She helped herself to some pizza. Jeremy was engrossed in his sketchbook, so there wasn’t much in the way of conversation. Peeking at the page, she saw an excellent rendition of some tulips in a vase.

“Oh, I get it,” Pam said. “You’re drawing this vase of tulips on the kitchen counter. That looks pretty good.”
“Thanks,” he answered absent-mindedly. He reached across the countertop to adjust a budding pink tulip that was drooping ever so slightly. The movement made his knee brush hers. But when he settled back in his seat, Jeremy didn’t move, instead letting his knee touch hers as they sat next to each other in the otherwise empty house.
Pam and Jeremy are camping in his backyard. She learns some interesting things about him, including the mystery of his Coppertone obsession.

“So who’s your favorite Star Wars character, Pam?” Jeremy asked. They were walking back from a trip to the convenience store several blocks from the Praters’ house. Or, more accurately, Pam was strolling and Jeremy was zipping around on his Ripstick. They were both grateful that the weather had finally turned warm enough to wear tank tops. Jeremy’s hair fluttered in the wind as he sped up and down the street.

It had been precisely two weeks since they had played Go Fish. Neither of them brought it up the last time she babysat him and the same was true for today. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement to move on from what had transpired. Pam was relieved. Mostly.

“Are you talking about the original trilogy or the prequel?” Pam asked. “Because that makes a difference.”

He cruised past her on his Ripstick, wagging his hips in a spastic manner. Pam couldn’t figure out the mechanics behind the device but kids seemed to love it. “Um, both,” he answered. “Who’s your favorite from the original?”

“I’m going with Han Solo,” Pam told him.

“I like Luke best,” Jeremy said. They had gone to the convenience store to buy some candy. Jeremy was eating Starbursts as he navigated the empty suburban street. Every so often, he would stop to unwrap one, pop it in his mouth, and then hand the wrapper to Pam. It only took three blocks until her pocket was overflowing with wrappers. She could have told him to take care of his own trash, but Pam figured she should just be happy that he wasn’t littering.

“What about the prequel?” Jeremy inquired. “Who’s your favorite character from that?”

“Anakin was probably the coolest,” said Pam. She herself was working on a small bag of peanut M&Ms. Had she known Jeremy would repeatedly poke her and hold out his hand, she would have bought a bigger bag. “But not until Revenge of the Sith. He was just a dork before that.”

“My parents won’t let me see that one,” Jeremy grumbled. “They think I’m not old enou- whoa!” He had been skating straight toward a curb at full speed. Hopping nimbly off the Ripstick, Jeremy tumbled onto the grass in a pile of limbs.

Pam winced. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine!”

“You probably should be wearing your helmet.”

“Only losers wear helmets,” Jeremy declared. He got up and dusted himself off. A moment later, he was careening down the street again. “Oh yeah,” he remembered. “My parents don’t think I’m old
enough to watch Revenge of the Sith. My dad went on this long talk about how I ‘wouldn’t be able to handle it responsibly,’ or something like that.” Jeremy rolled his eyes.

“Um, yeah,” Pam said. A pang of guilt nagged at the back of her mind. Jeremy’s parents wouldn’t let him see a PG-13 movie, but little did they know that their ten year old son had played Strip Go Fish with his babysitter. “Hey, are you happy that summer vacation is almost here?” she asked, changing the subject. “Only a few more weeks of school.”

“Yeah.” Jeremy leap-frogged a pothole in the street. He sailed over it, but the Ripstick got caught in a scrape of plastic on asphalt. Undeterred, Jeremy retrieved the board and began rolling again. “I’m getting so sick of school.”

“How did your science project at school go?” she asked. He had spent the last few weeks nurturing some seedlings under a grow light in the basement.

“Oh, it was fine,” Jeremy said ambiguously. “I guess. I didn’t get first prize or anything.”

“Who did?”

“Kristin did. Her project was so stupid. She made some sort of antique telephone talking thing. Everyone could tell her mom helped her with it.”

“Wait,” Pam said, remembering. “Isn’t Kristin the girl that you…” But before she could finish, Jeremy rolled up to her and punched her in the arm.

“Shut up!” he threatened.

“Ow! Jeremy, that really hurt!” They stopped in the middle of the street. Pam rolled up the short sleeve of her t-shirt to examine her arm. “Ow. I bet there will be a bruise tomorrow.”

“Sorry,” he said, suddenly contrite. He peered closely at her arm, rubbing the spot with a finger. “I don’t see a bruise yet at least. I didn’t mean to hit you that hard.”

“Next time, could you just not hit me at all?”

“Sorry,” he said again. He fished in his bag of Starbursts. “Here’s a red one. Do you want it?” Pam accepted his peace offering.

They turned into the cul-de-sac where Jeremy’s house was. To Pam’s surprise, the Praters' car was in the driveway. She hadn’t expected them home for at least another hour. “Looks like your parents got home early,” she observed. Someone emerged from the garage. It was Kate. She spotted them immediately and waved.

“How was dinner?” Pam called.

“Oh, it wasn’t so great.” Kate laughed dryly. “William got a migraine before we even got to the entrees. So we came home early.”

“Hey, what’s that?” Jeremy said, pointing to a package waiting on the porch.

“Hmm? Oh, just a second, Jeremy…” his mom said. But he had already rushed to inspect the package before she could stop him.

“Hey!” Jeremy crowed. “It’s a package from grandma! And it’s addressed to me!”

“Jeremy,” Kate said in a warning tone. “Could you come back here?”
But he wasn’t listening. “It’s from the Dick’s Sporting Goods,” he reported, reading the packaging. “It says… it’s a tent? Grandma got me a tent? Sweet!”

The front door opened. William appeared, massaging his temples. His wife gave him an icy look. “Will, you were supposed to hide that in the basement,” she said crossly. “Not just leave it on the porch for Jeremy to find.”

“I had a bad headache,” William said, frowning. “I’ll do it now.”

“Well, it’s too late,” Kate fumed. “He already saw it!”

William sighed. “I don’t see why your mom insists on sending birthday presents a month early anyway,” he complained. “Couldn’t she just have waited?”

“Birthday present!” Jeremy said eagerly. “Can I open it now?”

“No, you may not,” his mom said firmly. “Your birthday is five weeks away. You have to wait.”

“Oh, just let him open it,” his dad said. “What’s the big deal? He’s already seen it. No need to torture the boy.”

Kate narrowed her eyes at her husband. “Fine. You can go set it up for him right now. Headache and all.”

“Fine,” he said, calling her bluff. He picked up the package. “Come on, Jeremy. Grab that end. We’ll set it up in the backyard.”

“Cool!” Jeremy did a short victory dance before helping his dad pick up the large box. With tentative steps, they disappeared around the corner of the house. Pam, an outsider to the family, had remained tactfully quiet during the entire exchange. Kate slammed the car door in frustration.

“Sorry about that, Pam,” she said tightly. “Thanks for babysitting tonight.” She opened her purse to find her wallet.

“It was no problem at all,” Pam assured her.

Kate handed her three twenties. “Sorry again that you had to see that,” she sighed. “I wish I could say you’d never have to see it again but we all know that’s a lie.” A bitter smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Pam. The tone in Kate’s voice troubled her. Perhaps Jeremy was right to worry about the state of his parents’ relationship. Pam headed for her car. “Just call me if you need me,” she said. Kate waved and went into the house.

When she told Kate to call if needed, Pam had not expected her to call her the very next afternoon. She saw right away that it was the Praters’ number when the phone rang, which was odd since it was a Friday. Neither Kate nor William liked to go out on Friday nights due to the excessive crowds. Weekend nights were usually reserved for family movie night.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Hi Pam!” It was Jeremy.

“Oh. Uh, hi Jeremy,” Pam said, surprised. They had never spoken on the phone before. “What’s up?”
“Will you come over tonight and camp with me in my tent?” Jeremy asked. “My mom said she’ll pay you the regular babysitting rate.”

Pam could clearly hear his mom in the background. “Jeremy, no,” she said, the exasperation clearly evident in her voice. “I didn’t mean you should ask Pam tonight. Give me the phone.”

“What? Why?” Jeremy said defensively. “What’s the big-” he was cut off as there was a brief struggle for the phone.

“Hi there, Pam,” Kate said.

“Hi Kate.”

“Don’t worry, you don’t have to come over tonight,” Kate reassured her. “It’s just that Jeremy has his tent set up in the backyard and he won’t stop pestering us to sleep out there with him. William and I aren’t really up to spending a night in a tent so Jeremy wanted to ask you.”

“Oh, that sounds fun,” Pam said. “It’s been a while since I camped. Are you sure you don’t want me to come over tonight?”

“Oh, not tonight, Pam,” said Kate. “You were just here yesterday. You should have a night off.” Pam could hear Jeremy in the background, unintelligible, but the disappointed tone of his voice was clear enough.

“No, really,” Pam said. “I didn’t have any plans this weekend anyway. This is probably a better option than me sitting around and eating ice cream.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Kate said. “I guess I wouldn’t mind a quiet night myself away from my hyperactive child.”

There was a loud whine from Jeremy in the background. Pam laughed. “I’ll be over in about an hour. Will that work?”

“That’s perfect. Thank you, Pam.”

She hung up. Pam opened a closet and began searching for her long-since forgotten camping gear. Her sleeping bag, wedged into the corner at the very back of her closet, was a bit dusty but it smelled clean. An inflatable sleeping pad was resurrected from another closet. Finally, she packed an overnight bag with some toiletries, a sweatshirt, and a flashlight. As she loaded the car, Pam tried to think of anything she might have forgotten.

During the drive over to the Praters’ house, Pam tried to focus on the present. But the past kept rearing its head. Despite the fact that she had two “normal” babysitting sessions, Pam often thought about what had transpired between her and Jeremy. During private moments, certain scenes replayed over and over in her mind. These memories had been initially accompanied by great feelings of self-doubt and guilt, but lately Pam found herself feeling more neutral toward everything that had happened. Perhaps this was a good sign. Perhaps it meant she was moving on.

William answered when she rang the doorbell. “Hi there!” he greeted her. He gestured at the sleeping bag slung over her shoulder. “All ready for camping, I see. Let me take that for you.”

“Oh, it’s not heavy,” Pam reassured him. She followed him into the house.

“I think Jeremy is already out back,” he said, glancing in the direction of the quiet den. “I guess I should just be grateful that he’s not playing video games all day.” They went to the kitchen where
Kate was chopping up vegetables.

“Hi Pam,” she smiled. “Thanks again for playing along with this. I would have gone crazy if Jeremy asked me to hang out in the tent with him again.”

“Is he already out there?” Pam asked, peering through a window to the backyard.

“Where else?” Kate sighed. “We practically had to drag him into the house last night. And then this morning he took his breakfast out there to eat. He only comes back to ask for snacks and and the bathroom. At least he’s obsessing about something other than his damn video games.”

“Poor kid probably just needs someone to spend time with him,” William commented. Pam saw Kate’s eyes narrow at this remark.

“Maybe you could take a few nights off of work,” Kate suggested. She didn’t take her eyes from the cutting board but Pam heard an edge to her voice. “Jeremy would love to spend more time with you.”

Instead of taking the bait, William just shrugged. “Too bad Ashton is out of town. We’d all be off the hook then.”

“It’s great that you think spending time with your son means you’re ‘on the hook,’” Kate shot back.

William glanced at Pam but she pretended to be studying the headline from a newspaper lying on the counter. He opened the door to the backyard. “Ready to head out into the wild, Pam?”

“Ready!” she answered, grateful for the diversion.

“I’m making some beef stew for dinner,” Kate called after them. “Although Jeremy wanted to roast some hot dogs on a fire too. You’re more than welcome to have whatever you’d like, Pam.”

“Hot dogs will be fine,” Pam called back. “Thanks!”

The Praters’ backyard was an oversized suburban lot shaded by several tall trees. She hurried to catch up with William. “The thing is,” he said, “if I’m not working late, then she is. I guess we should both be making an effort to be around Jeremy more. But it really bugs me when she makes it sound like it’s all my fault.”

They walked in silence for a bit. Pam wasn’t sure what to say. “Well, I’m always around if you ever need me,” she offered. “I don’t mind hanging out with Jeremy.”

“I know,” William told her. “I think he might have a crush on you, by the way.”

“Oh really?” Pam said. She felt herself blush.

“For sure. When we were setting up the tent, he wouldn’t stop talking about you. Like how he really wanted you to see the tent. And how fun it would be to play cowboys and indians with you back here.”

“Ha,” Pam said with great effort. She was desperate to talk about something else. “I never knew how big your backyard is. Where’s the tent anyhow?”

“Over there,” he said, pointing. The maroon tent was barely visible at the back of the property line, nestled in a grove of pines. “He wanted it as far from the house as possible,” William explained. “And he wanted to roast marshmallows too so I had to dig up the firepit from the shed.”
The telltale scent of a campfire greeted Pam’s nostrils. As they came closer, Pam could see the remains of a smoldering campfire in a rock-lined pit. Two blue camping chairs were positioned around it. The branches snapping under their feet must have announced their arrival because there was a whooshing noise as the tent flap unzipped and a head poked out.

“Hi Pam!” Jeremy’s face lit up into a smile as soon as he saw her. His eyes settled on the sleeping bag in her hand. “Are you really going to camp with me? This is so cool!” He put on a coonskin cap before getting out of the tent. The sight of the bushy-tailed monstrosity on his head was amusing, but not as funny as the too-small Boy Scout uniform that he was wearing.

“Since when were you a Boy Scout?” she asked, trying not to laugh.

“That’s mine,” William told her.

“It’s my dad’s,” Jeremy said at the same time. “He used to be a Boy Scout. Look at how old this is! It’s, like, from the 60s.” Made of a heavy canvas-like material, the faded-green uniform was composed of a collared button-down shirt and battered trousers. Colorful merit badges lined the breast.

“Oh thanks,” William said. “Just make fun of your ancient dad.”

“It’s a little small on me,” Jeremy said, ignoring him. “But I got it to work.” His arms stuck out awkwardly from the too-small sleeves that were rolled up to his elbows. The pants, several inches too short, left a gap between the trouser cuffs and his red Converse shoes.

“Oh huh,” Pam nodded. “Can you even bend your legs in those pants?”

“Well, sure,” Jeremy said, demonstrating. He appeared to have limited mobility though, Pam noticed. Even his arms moved stiffly as he walked.

“As long as you’re comfortable, I guess,” Pam said, exchanging a glance with William, who sighed and made a “what can you do?” gesture with his arms.

“Come on, want to see the inside of the tent?” Jeremy asked, taking her hand.

William began heading back to the house. “Dinner will be ready in about an hour,” he told them.

“Yeah, but we’re eating out here,” Jeremy pointed out.

“I was talking to Pam,” his informed him. “Just in case she wanted a civilized meal inside a house with real tableware.”

“I’ll be fine,” Pam waved to him. She followed Jeremy into the maroon tent. “Should I take off my shoes?” she asked.


“Never mind,” Pam told him. She looked around. His grandma had gifted him with a family-sized tent that almost had a new car smell. Spacious enough for six people, the tent was just high enough for her to stand in at the center. A large mesh window provided a nice view of the wooded forest beyond the house. A few milk crates served as makeshift tables. In one corner, Jeremy had set up his brown sleeping bag on which Whiskers was curled into a ball and napping. Pam set down her sleeping bag next to his.

Though roomy compared to most tents, the space was still quite compact. Pam suddenly felt funny
about being with Jeremy in such a small, enclosed space. Despite the mesh windows, the tent interior exuded a sensation of extreme privacy. When he smiled at her, she couldn’t help but think of how his father said Jeremy had a crush on her. She cleared her throat nervously. “Nice pad,” she told him.

“Thanks,” answered Jeremy, very pleased that she liked the tent. Playing the part of a polite host, he cleared some books and his sketchbook off a milk crate so she could sit down. Pam watched with bemusement as he did his best to clean up. “Uh, hold on,” Jeremy said, retrieving a browned banana peel and apple core from the tent floor. He unzipped the tent flap and tossed them outside.

He sat down on the milk crate next to her. “Want some beef jerky?” he asked, rummaging in a knapsack. “Or trail mix? I asked my mom to bake some cornbread but she wouldn’t do it.”

“I’m not hungry now,” Pam declined. “Thanks though.” Her hands were fidgety. It was as if she were alone with a boy in his room for the first time. Their eyes met, lingering for a moment. Pam felt as if she should say something, but she didn’t know what. She picked up his open sketchbook which had a partially completed drawing of a wood thrush and cardinal. “This is pretty good,” she complimented him.

“Thanks. My dad found his old scouting manual and it has a section about bird watching. It was kind of cool. I drew that without tracing at all.”

“You should draw something for me,” Pam suggested. She handed the sketchbook back to him. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. Anything.”

“Hmm,” Jeremy thought, picking up his pencil. He spied the necklace that she was wearing. “That’s a cool necklace. Want me to draw a picture of it?”

“Sure,” Pam agreed, though it wasn’t quite what she had in mind. The necklace, a gift from a friend, was a shiny red apple on a simple silver chain.

“I need to move closer so I can see it,” Jeremy said, scooting his milk crate closer to hers. They were facing each other now, their legs touching. Jeremy reached forward to hold her necklace but it still wasn’t close enough for his liking. He moved his face closer to examine the necklace until his forehead was mere inches from her chin.

Pam felt her pulse quickening from his close proximity. Had Jeremy been older, he would have perhaps better understood the complexity of the sexes. Perhaps he would have known that it was odd to be sitting this close to a girl, so close that her knees almost touched his crotch. The fuzzy coonskin cap on his head was terribly distracting, but she could smell the faint scent of shampoo on the hair that tumbled out from under it.

He began drawing in his sketchbook, his attention completely focused on her necklace. Pam did her best to sit still. He looked remarkably endearing in his undersized Boy Scout uniform. He had deliberately left the top buttons undone in order to make shirt fit and now Pam found herself staring at the untanned skin of his chest. With a flash of guilt, Pam thought of Jeremy sitting in the Fosters’ jacuzzi, his hands covering his crotch. She felt her face getting hot. Jeremy continued innocently drawing, completely oblivious to her conundrum.

“Um, Jeremy?” she began. “I’m starting to get a crick in my neck from sitting like this. Maybe you could draw my necklace some other time?”

“Oh,” he said, disappointed. “Why don’t you take it off? Then I can just draw it while you do
something else."

“I don’t know… This necklace is really hard to take off,” Pam told him. “I usually need a mirror to see what I’m doing if I want to take it off.”

“I bet I could get it off,” Jeremy said confidently. He moved to stand behind her. With just the tiniest hint of misgiving, Pam coiled her hair in her hands and lifted it so he could access the necklace clasp. Jeremy’s fingers touched the nape of her neck. The feeling was so electric that it made her shiver.

“Oh, sorry,” Jeremy apologized. “Are my fingers cold?”

“Um, no,” Pam said. “It’s fine.” He touched her neck again. This time she felt a very warm feeling flow from her lower spine all the way to the back of her head. Pam’s heart was beating very quickly now. His mere presence so close behind her was making her lightheaded. His fingers fumbled with the clasp. The warm sensation was now flowing from her neck all the way down her chest.

Briefly, Pam wondered if her hormone levels were out of check. A few weeks ago, Jeremy had helped her clasp her bra and the episode sent her to the moon. Him removing her necklace was tame compared to that, but yet here she was floating near Saturn. Every inch of her skin felt hypersensitive. Pam felt that she could be pushed over the edge if the ten year old boy so much as brushed her collarbone.

“Got it!” he said triumphantly. Pam felt the silver chain slip from her neck. Jeremy returned to his milk crate, holding the pendant in one hand while sketching with the other. Pam was glad he didn’t notice how red her face was. She picked up the Boy Scout manual and pretended to read.

“Why do I feel this way?” Pam wondered miserably. “This never used to happen before.” She used to go down slides at the playground with Jeremy practically in her lap. But now, every bit of incidental contact was sending shivers up her spine. Pam squeezed her knees together.

“So your parents said you’ve been spending a lot of time out here,” Pam said conversationally.

“Uh huh,” he said, still drawing. “It’s kind of nice to have a place away from the house. Especially since they’ve been fighting so much.”

Pam remembered the other night when she came to babysit at the last minute. “Really? Still?”

“Yeah,” Jeremy shrugged. “Sometimes they wait until I’m in bed. But I can still hear them.”

“Does it bother you that they’re fighting?”

He didn’t answer though. “I’m almost done,” Jeremy told her, not taking his eyes off the page. The coonskin tail on his cap must have been bothering him because he constantly pushed it away from his neck as he drew. “… I’m done!” He thrust the sketchbook into Pam’s lap.

“Wow, that’s really nice,” Pam said sincerely. Having little artistic skills herself, she nonetheless admired the delicate shading he had given the apple as well as the jaunty flourish of the unfurling silver chain.

“I can put your necklace back on for you,” Jeremy offered.

“Um, sure,” Pam said, lifting her hair out of the way again. She sat primly as he stood behind her again.

Jeremy swept at the nape of her neck. “There’s still some hair in the way,” he told her.
“Okay,” was all Pam could say. The feel of his hand brushing against her was heavenly. His hand looped beneath her chin, pulling the silver chain around her neck. The pendant, still warm from his hand, rested against the small hollow of her throat. Once again, she felt his fingers fumbling with the clasp.

“Hmm, this is a lot harder to put on,” Jeremy observed. He leaned closer until she could feel his breath on the back of her neck. Pam closed her eyes, not wanting the moment to end. This was completely harmless. Completely innocent. Was it so wrong to wish it could go on forever? She imagined how it would feel if he threw her arms around her shoulders, holding her tight as he stood behind her.

"Got it,” Jeremy said, dashing her hopes. Pam reluctantly let her hair down. “Hey, are you all right?” he asked her. “Your face seems really pink.”

“Oh, is it?” Pam said. “I’m just a little warm is all.”

“I can open these ventilation windows to let some air in,” Jeremy said. He unzipped a panel on the side of the tent. He picked up a pillow and used it to fan her. “Does that help?”

“Much better, thank you,” Pam said gratefully. The fresh pine air was truly refreshing. She could feel her heart slowly returning to normal. Tired of sitting on the hard milk crate, Pam unrolled her sleeping bag and laid down on it. Copying her, Jeremy stretched out on his sleeping bag as well. They laid side-by-side for a quiet moment. The dappled evening light was streaming through the trees, throwing interesting shadows across the roof of the tent, but all Pam could think of was how Jeremy was laying mere inches from her.

The sound of twigs snapping underfoot snapped her out of her reverie. Someone was approaching outside the tent. They both turned their heads in unison toward the source of the noise. “Hey you two,” a voice called out. It was Jeremy’s dad. “Are you ready for dinner yet?”

Sitting up, Jeremy hurried to unzip the tent flap. “What are we having?” he asked, poking his head out.

An acute sense of disappointment washed over Pam as she ruefully sat up. “We’re having hot dogs,” she heard William say. Jeremy gave a small cheer and bounded out of the tent. She slowly followed him, her mind reeling with “what if” scenarios. What if William hadn’t come for another twenty minutes? What if she had scooted closer until their shoulders were touching?

Pam sighed inwardly. “I’ve got to be good,” she reminded herself. “I’ve got to stop playing with fire.” Outside the tent, William was arranging some extra camp chairs around the fire. In the distance, she could see Kate carrying a sturdy yellow dutch oven with oven mitts.

“Can we make a big bonfire?” Jeremy asked.

“Okay,” his father answered. “But you’ll have to help me fetch some firewood first. Come on.” They both headed off in the direction of the woodpile.

“I talked William into having a camp meal,” Kate said to Pam. “He’s usually so prim and proper so I figured it was good to make him eat outside with his hands.”

They both laughed. “Do you need any help?” Pam asked Kate.

“Did he bring out a picnic basket?” she replied. “There should be some bowls and spoons in it, I think.” She set down the heavy pot on a tree stump. Pam found the bowls and they began ladling steaming spoonfuls of beef stew into them. William and Jeremy returned, both carrying armfuls of
“Yum for beef stew,” William said, adding several logs to the firepit. Pam sat down in a chair and gratefully took the bowl of stew that Kate handed to her. Before taking his bowl, Jeremy moved his chair so that he was sitting next to her.

“Oh Jeremy,” his mom said. “Can’t you give Pam a break for just a minute?”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind,” Pam said, blushing a little.

Jeremy began digging into this stew. “Huh? What’s the big deal?” he asked, his mouth full. “What did I do?”

“Never mind. Are you sure you want to sleep out here tonight?” his dad asked. “I know we’ve had an unseasonably warm May so far but the forecast says it will get as low as 55 degrees tonight.”

“Well, sure,” Jeremy said. “It’s an all-weather tent. The manual says it’s rated to 10 degrees.”

“If you get cold, you should come into the house,” Kate told Pam.

“I’ll be fine,” she answered. “I’ve camped in much colder weather than this.” A tidy fire was roaring pleasantly by the time they finished eating the stew. William unwrapped a package of real all-beef hot dogs while Kate located the bag of buns in the wicker basket. Pam passed out the long metal skewers meant for roasting hot dogs.

“Maybe you shouldn’t hold yours too close to the fire,” she told Jeremy. His hot dog was rapidly turning black.

“That’s the way I like it,” he insisted. When he deemed it ready, Pam held open a bun for him as Jeremy tried to maneuver the hot dog into it. It wasn’t exactly wise to entrust Jeremy with a red-hot, sharp skewer so close to her face, but they managed to successfully get his hot dog into the bun.

“You’re dripping mustard onto your shirt,” Jeremy pointed out as they began eating.

“What?” Pam asked. She looked at her shirt but didn’t see anything. “Where?”

“Right here,” Jeremy said, taking his napkin and swiping at her chest. He was brushing directly against her breast, scrubbing away with the napkin as if it were perfectly normal. Pam nervously glanced at William and Kate but they didn’t seem to notice.

“Okay, okay, I got it, thanks,” she said, taking the napkin from him. She dabbed at the mustard stain on her shirt. It was hard to see in the fading light. She saw Jeremy watching her out of the corner of his eye. He was interested in a lot more than the mustard, she realized.

Once everyone finished their hot dogs, a bag of marshmallows was produced from the basket. Predictably, Jeremy set fire to his marshmallow, greatly amused by the flaming puff on his metal skewer. Pam enjoyed several browned marshmallows herself, resulting in that familiar sticky feeling on her fingers from the melted sugar. It was starting to get dark out by the time the fire reduced to embers.

“All right, you two,” William said. He stood up and stretched, yawning as he did so. “It’s getting close enough to bedtime. Decision time: are you really sleeping out here?”

“Yes!” Jeremy shouted, pumping his fist. The motion made his chair tip backwards but Pam caught him in time.
“Then you better get ready for bed now,” his mom advised. “Brush your teeth and wash your face. I don’t want to wash any dried marshmallow bits off your pillowcase.”

“Hooray! We’re camping!” Jeremy dashed off to the house to get ready, the tail of his coonskin camp flopping in the waning light. It reminded Pam of how his erection had bobbed that one day they played Strip Go Fish when she persuaded him to do naked jumping jacks.

“Sure you can handle him?” Kate remarked.

“Hmm?” Pam was startled from the memory. “Oh. Sure. I bet he’s so tired that he’ll fall right asleep.” She was glad the orange light of the fire hid her reddened ears. Had Jeremy’s parents possessed the power to read minds, they would have instantly called the cops on her.

William yawned again. “As long as he doesn’t burn down the woods in the middle of the night, we’ll be happy,” he told her, smiling. “Matter of fact, I’m going to go check on Jeremy right now to make sure he hasn’t somehow flooded the basement.” He shuffled off to the house.

“I guess I better go get ready for bed too,” Pam said. “Do you need any help with this stuff, Kate?” They began gathering the bowls and spoons.

“So nice of the men to help us clean up,” Kate grumbled. She appeared to be smiling but Pam could tell she was only half-joking.

Pam deposited a bunch of hot dog roasting sticks in the picnic basket. “Well, at least you and William will have a nice and quiet Friday night,” she commented. “You should do something fun.”

Kate gave a short laugh. “William is going bowling with some friends from work,” she said shortly. “I’m not sure what I’m doing yet. Maybe I’ll call up some friends and go out for a drink.”

Pam thought about how Jeremy was worried that his parents were fighting so much. She had assumed it was just little disagreements, but perhaps there was something more beneath the surface. Pam silently carried the dutch oven back to the house while Kate followed with the wicker picnic basket. By the time they got to the house, Jeremy was already putting his shoes back on to return to the tent.

“I’m ready!” he announced. “I brushed my teeth and everything.”

“That was fast,” his mom remarked. She began unloading the dishes in the sink.

“Let’s go,” Jeremy said, taking Pam’s hand.

“Wait a minute,” she protested. “I have to get ready too.”

“Well, hurry!” Jeremy said impatiently.

“Jeremy,” his mom said. There was a tone of warning in her voice. “Why don’t you help me with the dishes while Pam gets ready?” Jeremy groaned. Kate winked at Pam. She headed for the guest bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, Pam returned to the kitchen. She had changed into a sweatshirt and a comfortable pair of shorts that she could sleep in. Kate was making some tea and Jeremy was waiting by the backdoor, still in his Boy Scout uniform. “Wait, you’re not really going to sleep in that, are you?” Pam asked him.

“Of course,” he answered, as if it were obvious. “Scouts always sleep in their uniform.”
“Was that in the manual or something?”

“Come on, let’s go,” he said, ignoring her question. He grabbed her hand and began pulling her in the direction of the backyard. They were almost out the door when he stopped, remembering something. He hurried back to the kitchen table to retrieve his coonskin cap. Kate and Pam exchanged a look as he put it on.

“What?” Jeremy asked, noticing the look on their faces.

“I didn’t say anything,” Pam told him. He took her hand again. “Good night, Kate,” Pam said over her shoulder.

“Good night, Pam. Good night, Jeremy. Have fun out there,” Kate called after them. “The door will be unlocked if you decide the ground is too hard or if it gets too cold.”

Pam turned on her flashlight to guide them back to the tent. Jeremy unzipped the flap to let them in, but Pam could tell something was strange the moment she entered the tent. An odd smell lingered faintly in the air. “Whew, what’s that?” Pam said, sniffing.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jeremy said. “It smells like… oh no.” He was touching his sleeping bag. “It’s cat pee! Whiskers peed on my sleeping bag!”

“Oh boy,” Pam said. “Did you let that cat out at all today?”

“No.”

She opened the tent flap. Whiskers darted out of the tent. Pam hoped she could find her way back to the house in the dark. “Well, I don’t think you’re going to want to use that sleeping bag,” Pam said. “Let’s just put it outside the tent for now.” She loosely rolled it up and set it just outside the tent door. The smell immediately subsided, letting her breathe normally again.

“What will I do?” Jeremy wailed. “I don’t have another sleeping bag.”

“Maybe we could sleep inside tonight?” Pam suggested hopefully. “Your mom can wash the sleeping bag tomorrow and we’ll camp out some other time.”

“Some other time?” Jeremy was crushed.

“Or… well, let’s see,” Pam said, thinking quickly. She rooted through her duffel bag. “I brought an old blanket just in case my sleeping bag wasn’t warm enough. Do you think you can sleep in that?”

“Yeah!” Jeremy said, his face brightening. “I read that Indians just slept in old buffalo hides. I’ll just pretend it’s a buffalo hide.” Pam settled into her sleeping bag while Jeremy wrapped himself up in her blanket. Whiskers had spared his pillow at least, so he was able to curl up with it.

“This is exciting,” Jeremy said.

“Uh huh,” Pam said, trying to muster her enthusiasm. “Are you ready? Can I turn off the light?”

“Yup.”

She switched off her flashlight, plunging the tent into darkness. “Good night, Jeremy,” she said.

“Good night, Pam.”

Her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness until Pam could make out the nylon ceiling of the tent. A
few crickets began chirping outside the tent. She tried to remember the last time she went camping. It must have been with college friends and that years ago.

Though tired, Pam found it difficult to fall asleep. Perhaps it was because she was sleeping outside in a tent. Or maybe it was the bright light of the waning full moon. Or it could be because she knew Jeremy was lying within arm’s reach of her. She tried not to think about it. He shifted position, moving from lying on his back to his side.

Pam was just about to fall asleep when Jeremy tossed and turned, rearranging himself noisily. A few minutes later, it happened again. She was drifting off when Jeremy sat up, fussed with the blanket, and laid down again. “Are you not comfortable?” Pam asked, trying to hide her exasperation.

“No, I’m fine,” Jeremy said. The tent remained still for a few minutes before he shifted positions again.

“Um, are you sure you’re not tossing and turning so much because of your Boy Scout uniform?” Pam asked as tactfully as possible.

“Well, maybe,” he admitted.

“Maybe you should take it off,” she suggested.

“But I don’t have my pajamas or anything,” he pointed out. “Will you come back with me to the house so I can get them?”

“No, I will not,” Pam said wearily. “Can you just sleep in your underwear?”

“My underwear?” he repeated.

“It’s way too dark out here if you’re worried that I’ll see you in your underwear,” Pam told him. Although it’s not like I haven’t seen a whole lot more, she thought to herself. After a moment, she heard him rustling about under the blanket. The Boy Scout uniform was unceremoniously tossed into the corner of the tent.

“Better?” Pam asked.

“A little,” Jeremy responded. He adjusted his coonskin cap on his head.

“You’re not taking that off, huh?”

“It’ll help keep me warm.”

“Right.” Pam yawned loudly. “Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

She dozed off in a light sleep, the kind that always seemed to accompany any attempt at sleep when camping. Pam soon woke up, feeling far too warm in her sleeping bag. A thin film of sweat covered her. She glanced at Jeremy. It was too dark to see his face but he appeared to be asleep. “Finally,” she thought to herself. Pam sat up and took off her sweatshirt. Underneath, she was wearing a loose cami. The lightweight fabric helped a little, but Pam still unzipped her sleeping bag and folded it back to her waist.

The cool, night air felt invigorating on her skin. Comforted, Pam closed her eyes again. She wasn’t sure if she fell asleep this time, but something stirred her mind back to consciousness. She sighed and
shifted in her sleeping bag. Through her half-open eyes, she saw Jeremy sitting up on his elbows. The instant she turned to face him, however, he immediately laid back down.

“What was that about?” Pam wondered, lazily scratching her neck, half-awake. She was just about to fall asleep again when a light wind rustled the leaves in the trees. Pam felt the breeze filter through the tent’s windows, rushing across her skin. She realized with a start that her loose cami had shifted in her sleep until one of her breasts was fully uncovered.

Exposed. Pam’s mind leapt back to full consciousness. “So that’s what Jeremy was looking at,” she thought. A half-smile formed on her face even though her eyes remained closed. “Sneaky guy.” Keeping her eyes closed, Pam wriggled her shoulders in a sleepy stretch. The cami she was wearing was an old one that had gotten stretched out in the wash over its lifetime. She only wore it to bed because it was otherwise too revealing. In this situation, its looseness was an advantage though. She felt her other breast pop free through the arm sleeve.

Neither moving nor opening her eyes, Pam simply lay waiting. Her nipples prickled from the night air, stiffening. She heard Jeremy slowly sit up once again, the sound of rustling fabric giving him away. Pam wondered if there was enough moonlight for him to see. She hoped so. Still feigning sleep, she very casually stretched, pushing her arms and shoulders close to make her breasts squeeze together. There was no sound of movement so Jeremy was surely still watching her.

Being the center of attention for a ten year old boy made her feel very tingly inside. It wasn't easy to keep her eyes closed though. Remembering how much he liked it when they played Go Fish, Pam shifted and, still pretending to be asleep, let her fingers graze her hard nipple. She let her hand remain there, cupping her breast, in what was hopefully a slumbering gesture.

She lay like that for a long time. Unfortunately, feigning sleep gave way to real sleep as Pam drifted off again. When she awoke, she wasn't sure how long it had been but it must have been a substantial amount of time because the moonlight had shifted considerably inside the tent. Glancing at herself, Pam could see a bright shaft of it now illuminating her own body. Her breasts, she noted with approval, were flatteringly lit by a soft lunar glow, her nipples prominent atop her sensuous curves.

Beside her, Jeremy was huddled into a fetal position with his back to her and the blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He appeared to be sleeping, though his lower legs were uncovered. The blanket just wasn't big enough. His coonskin cap remained firmly pulled around his ears at least.

Thirsty, Pam reached into her duffel bag for her water bottle. She was taking a drink when she heard him ask, “Can I have some?”

“Sure.” She handed him the water bottle. “I didn't know you were awake.”

“I've been up this whole time,” he confessed.

“You haven't slept at all yet?”

“No, it's kind of cold.” He re-wrapped the blanket around himself.

“You poor thing,” murmured Pam. She could see him shivering in the moonlight. Pam heard herself saying, “Why don’t you get in my sleeping bag? It’s nice and warm in here.” Her heart began pounding fast before the words left her mouth.

“In there?” Jeremy said. He was embarrassed again. “Um, it’s okay. I mean, I only have my underwear on so…” He trailed off.

“It’s okay,” Pam whispered. “I don't mind.” She unzipped her sleeping bag and held it open. With
only a moment of hesitation, Jeremy climbed in with her. The zipper made a tidy sound as she closed it up again, sealing them together. Though there was only inches of space between them, Jeremy was keeping to the far side of the sleeping bag. They lay on their sides, shyly facing each other. “Um, let’s take this off, okay?” Pam said, gently pulling the coonskin cap from his head. An unruly shock of hair fell across his forehead, but she could still see his eyes glittering in the moonlight.

“Thanks for sharing your sleeping bag, Pam,” he said.

He must have been colder than he let on. “You’re welcome,” Pam said. Her hand grazed his bare arm. “Geez, your skin is freezing...” she observed. Her maternal instincts were suddenly competing with her hormones. But why choose one over the other? “Want to snuggle a little?” she offered. “To warm up?”

Jeremy scooted closer, positioning himself so she could spoon him. She could sense his hesitation as he tried not to lean into her chest. “It’s okay,” she said again. “It doesn’t bother me.” Timidly, he pressed a little closer until she could feel her hard nipples brushing his back through her thin cami. The feeling was electric. Pam put an arm around him, holding tight until her breasts were pressing fully against his back.

They laid like that for a long moment. With her arm crossed over his chest, she could feel his heart beating. “You feel really warm,” Jeremy whispered.

His words only made her hold him even tighter. Her face was buried in the back of his head, his hair fragrant in her nostrils. It was the scent of a boy who hadn’t showered in a few days. Not that he was smelly. Far from it. Rather, it was so intoxicating that she felt completely relaxed.

Still holding him, Pam dozed off but soon stirred awake. It was a rustling sound that gently tugged her from sleep. Scrape, scrape, scrape. As if a tree branch was brushing against the nylon tent. Pam tried to ignore it, but the noise became so irksome that she eventually became fully conscious. Jeremy was still cuddled against her in the same spooning position. She must not have been asleep for too long. But where was that rustling sound coming from?

She wanted to ask Jeremy but she couldn’t see his face. He was perfectly still though, so she assumed he was asleep. In the air, she could smell an oddly familiar scent; its cloying sweetness reminded her of the beach. She sniffed the air several times. What was it? The rustling noise abruptly ceased so Pam returned her head to the pillow. She had no sooner closed her eyes when the scraping began again.

This time she sensed the slightest movement in the sleeping bag. In her half-awake state, Pam realized Jeremy was moving his arm. He must have been scratching something. It must have been quite an itch, she thought, if he had been scratching for so long...

Her eyes snapped open. It all fell into place. The sweet scent in the air was Coppertone suntan lotion. The rustling noise was Jeremy's hand against the sleeping bag. And he wasn't scratching himself.

Pam couldn't believe his boldness. They were nestled together in her sleeping bag like two peas in a pod. She remembered how he had been watching her earlier while she slept, how her breasts had been exposed to his view by her loose cami. Those same breasts were now pressed so tightly against his back that Pam was worried he could feel her nipples hardening. Evidently, she had pushed the young boy into action.

The rustling continued. Pam lay perfectly still as she imagined Jeremy's hand rubbing against the sleeping bag while he pleasured himself. She was cuddled so close to him that she could have nibbled on his ear. Yet here he was masturbating as if he were in the privacy of his own room.
The rhythm of the scraping sound suddenly increased in tempo. Jeremy stiffened almost imperceptibly, his spine compacting into an arch as his shoulders pulled back. Pam felt a sweet ache between her legs that demanded her attention but she dared not move. Instead, she remained motionless, her breathing deep and even to give the illusion of sleep.

Jeremy's head tilted backward, pushing his hair against her face. She heard him inhale sharply and suddenly he quivered in her arms for one... two... three seconds. His legs went taut, pressing against her own limbs. Pam was beyond aroused now, the wetness soaking her panties as the ten year old boy climaxed in her arms.

She didn't want the moment to end, but his body soon went limp as a noodle. It was as if someone let the air out of the balloon. She could still hear him breathing heavily, but in less than a minute this transitioned into slow measured breaths. Then, just like that, Jeremy fell asleep in her arms.

Though her body demanded release, Pam remained motionless since she didn't want to disturb the sleeping boy. The aching between her legs felt like a sweet burden now, an anticipatory longing that was sharpened by what she had just experienced, but also blunted by her knowing that he was so satisfied. She was so close to him that her lips were grazing his ear. Allowing herself one small pleasure, she brushed her lips against his warm skin before giving his ear a little kiss. She wanted more, of course, but this would have to do for now.

Not the least bit tired anymore, Pam continued holding him as if her life depended on it. Occassionally, he would startle her with a twitch, his entire body spasming against hers. Pam imagined him dreaming vivid adventures as she held him protectively in her arms. Outside the tent, the gentle sound of nighttime suburbia soothed her ears: chirping crickets, the whoosh of a passing car, the occasional hoot of an owl. This pleasant cacophony was soon joined by the faint sound of Jeremy’s snoring.

The sound of his even breathing was positively narcoleptic to her ears. Her heavy eyelids blinked sleepily until she could no longer keep her eyes open. A steady breeze was rippling through the tent, causing the rain fly to rustle over their heads and whisking away the scent of Coppertone that hung in the air. It was replaced with the boyish-yet-masculine scent of Jeremy’s sleeping form in her arms. Inching her neck forward, Pam buried her nose in his tangled hair and inhaled deeply.

She sighed. A feeling of satisfaction and confidence that she had not felt for a long time settled over Pam’s entire consciousness like a comfortable blanket. For the past several weeks, she had been mentally berating herself for thinking of a moment like this: cuddling Jeremy, feeling his warm skin against hers, listening to his breathing. But now that it was actually real, Pam found herself completely at peace. After so much self-doubt and guilt, Pam was now unexpectedly bathed in the forgotten sensation of utter contentedness. She slowly slipped into the most luxurious sleep she had ever known.

She dreamt. It was a hot summer day in which she was wearing an airy dress and idly walking through a grassy meadow. Her hands held a butterfly net. The tall grass tickled her bare legs as she followed a brilliantly colored butterfly. Its burnt and rusty red hues reminded her of something she couldn't quite place. Walking for what seemed to be miles, she patiently followed it. Despite the long distance over the hilly, treeless landscape, Pam never felt weary or fatigued, though the grass eventually grew so tall that it nearly reached her shoulders.

Cutting through the thick swath of tall grass was easy, although it felt funny brushing against her body. Pam suddenly realized that her summer dress had inexplicably disappeared and she was now walking naked through the grass, though her hands still carried the net. She readied it as the butterfly alighted on a blade of grass. As she stood poised, a light breeze caused the tall grass to casually brush
against her breasts, causing her nipples to respond to their fleeting teases.

Pam awoke with a start. The dream slipped away like sand through her fingers as she heard a familiar voice calling. “Hey, you two. Rise and shine! Breakfast is ready so come inside.”

It was Jeremy's mom. Pam opened her eyes, disoriented. Where was she? Her back was sore, feeling as if she had been sleeping on stones. Blearily, her eyes focused on the peaked roof of a tent.

Camping. She suddenly became aware of a warm body next to hers. Surely she had she dreamt that as well?

Far from it. A rust colored shock of hair tickled her chin. Sometime in the night, her loose cami had slipped off again. Not only that, but Jeremy had turned over in his sleep so he was now facing her, the result being that the young boy's face was softly nestled between her bare breasts. His mom's voice must have awoken him as well, because Jeremy's eyes snapped open a split second after Pam's did. They now were staring at each other in surprise as Kate called out again.

“Come on, sleepyheads! Don't make me get out the garden hose!”

“We'll... we'll be right out!” Pam called, stammering in nervous anxiety. If Kate had unzipped the tent door, she would have found her son nuzzling his babysitter's breasts, his lips so close that Pam could feel his breathing on her nipple. Jeremy was clearly shocked as well because his face had a deer-in-the-headlights look.

“Hurry up! Bacon is waiting!” They heard the sound of receding footsteps as Kate returned to the house.

Pam abruptly became aware of something hard pressing against her thigh. She realized what it was at the same moment as Jeremy, who swiftly pulled his hips backwards so he was no longer mashed up against her. Silently, they untangled their arms from each other. Pam unzipped the sleeping bag so they could both sit up. Her arm modestly covered her exposed breasts as she tugged her errant cami into place.

“Hey...” she said. Why did this feel like the morning after a one night stand? “Did you, um, sleep okay?” she asked him.

“Yeah, I did,” Jeremy said. He was getting dressed in his too-small scout uniform. Pam could easily discern the tent in his underwear, the same hardness that had been pressing against her leg just a few moments ago.

Trying not to think about it, she handed him his coonskin cap. “Don't forget this,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, I did,” Jeremy said. He was getting dressed in his too-small scout uniform. Pam could easily discern the tent in his underwear, the same hardness that had been pressing against her leg just a few moments ago.

Trying not to think about it, she handed him his coonskin cap. “Don't forget this,” she reminded him.

Jeremy's eyes lit up at the sight of it. He immediately put it on his head. “I'm starving,” he declared. “I have to go the bathroom too. Are you ready?”

“You go ahead,” Pam told him. “I'll be there in a minute.” He unzipped the tent door and ran off, leaving the flap dangling in the morning sunshine.

Pam sighed. She was opening her sleeping bag to air it out when she remembered with startling clarity how Jeremy masturbated last night. The smell of his hair, the feel of his slim body pressed against hers, and, yes, the way he trembled in her arms when he finally came. Did he leave any trace of his furtive touching?

Guiltily, Pam's carefully examined the interior of her sleeping bag. Was this being creepy? Possibly. But she needed to know. Her hand brushed against the soft lining of the sleeping bag but found
nothing. No stains. No discoloration. No crusty dry spots.

It was possible, she supposed, that Jeremy had masturbated with his hand inside his underwear. In which case, he would likely need a new pair now. Pam blushed. Why was it so alluring to picture him in his room now, changing his underwear and tossing the soiled pair into the hamper?

Then an even wilder thought followed: was Jeremy even old enough to ejaculate yet? It made her blush, pairing the words “Jeremy” and “ejaculate” in the same sentence, yet Pam felt her own body responding in a very non-embarrassed manner. Her mind raced. He was only ten years old after all. When did boys start being... what was the word?

Pam's lips parted in a small smile as she thought of the word. Then she sighed.

“Oh my god... stop it,” Pam muttered to herself. She got to her feet and began briskly walking to the house. Even as she tried to stop thinking about Jeremy, it was obvious that their level of physical intimacy was ratcheting up with each passing week. Pam had a feeling that, sooner or later, she would find out if Jeremy was indeed “productive”.
Pam and Jeremy go for a hike in the woods behind the house. His backpack contains everything a person needs for hiking: beef jerky, trail mix, water, and... a pair of handcuffs?

After the episode in the camping tent, Pam was expecting the usual carousel of emotions that happened every time she pushed the boundaries with Jeremy. But the feelings never came. Or, rather, the negative emotions never came. Instead, she spent long and pleasant hours thinking of what happened: how he trembled in her arms, how he woke up snuggled against her breasts, how he bashfully moved away when he realized his erection was pressing against her leg... The memories made Pam swoon like a young girl at her first boy-band concert.

Either her conscience had gone rogue or Pam had made peace with everything that had happened. It was incredibly freeing. Let the pieces fall where they may, she decided. After all, Jeremy would have mentioned it by now if he had any misgivings about what had transpired between them. He certainly wouldn't be cajoling his parents into letting Pam take him on a five-mile hike, which was what she was doing today.

“Pam, really, be honest,” Jeremy's dad told her. “There's still time to back out. Are you sure you want to do this hike with him?”

“It'll be a breeze,” she assured him. They were standing at a trailhead shaded by tall oaks and maples. “It should only take a few hours, plus I could use the exercise. We just need to follow the trail and it will lead back to your house, right?”

“That's right,” he answered. “It gets a little hilly at the end but nothing too strenuous. This all started with that tent from his grandma. I wonder how long this outdoor living phase will last.”

They glanced at Jeremy who was strapping on a knapsack next to his dad's parked car. “I'm almost ready!” he called. “I just have to put on my pack belt!”

“I'm surprised he's not wearing your old boy scout uniform,” Pam observed.

“Yeah, but...” William trailed off when he saw Jeremy fitting the coonskin cap to his head.

“Ah yes,” Pam nodded. “Can't forget that.”

“His grandma gave him some birthday money too,” William sighed. “He wanted to spend it all at that expensive sporting goods store. You know, the one based in Washington state?”

“All right, let's go!” Jeremy said, trotting up to them, his knapsack bouncing on his back.

“Jeremy, you listen to Pam,” his dad instructed him. “If you come home with a broken bone, I'm going to strap you to your bed for the rest of the year. Got it?”

“Got it,” Jeremy replied cheerfully. Pam stifled a laugh as his dad shook his head and got back into the car.
“See you guys at home,” he waved as he drove off. “Have fun!”


“Whoa, hey,” she said, trying to catch up. “Let's remember to pace ourselves. This is a long hike, Jeremy.”

“So what?” he called over his shoulder. He picked up a thick branch and began using it to swat at the foliage along the path. “Don't worry, I brought supplies for both of us.”

Supplies? “Jeremy, your dad said to listen to me,” Pam reminded him. “You're going to trip if you hike too fast. You know what's going to happen if you break your arm?” They entered the canopy of a willow tree that towered over a meandering stream. Its dangling branches enclosed the two of them like an umbrella.

“Oh, my dad was just joking around,” Jeremy said dismissively. “He's not really going to strap me to the bed. That's child abuse.” Using his tree branch, Jeremy neatly sliced off several willow boughs that dangled from the tree.

“Would you stop that?” Pam asked, trying to contain her exasperation. “You almost hit me. Why do you always have to be so destructive?”

“Sorry,” he said, tossing aside the branch. Now deprived, Jeremy dropped to his knees to examine the pebbles that lay scattered near the stream.

“Anyway,” she continued, “if you trip and break your arm, your parents aren't going to be mad at you. They'll be mad at me.”

“No, they won't. They really like you!” he insisted. Having gathered a handful of pebbles, he began slingling them at a stack of wooden logs in the stream. The stones made a sharp sound as they whizzed through the air before plinking against the weathered tree bark. “They always talk about what a good influence you are on me. Hey, do you think these logs in the stream are part of a beaver dam?”

“I have no idea,” Pam said. “But if it is a beaver dam, maybe you should stop throwing rocks at it.” He surprised her by putting down the rest of the pebbles in his hand. They began hiking again, this time walking side-by-side at a much more reasonable pace. Jeremy could be unpredictable like that. Holy terror one minute and then meek kitten the next. She could never figure it out.

“That's a really sharp outfit you're wearing,” Pam commented. Besides new hiking boots, Jeremy was also wearing a pair of army green cargo shorts and a metallic blue and silver button-down shirt. The coonskin cap didn't quite fit the rest of his modern-day outfit though.

“Isn't it great?” he enthused. He stopped to show her all the pockets in his shorts. “There's more than I know what to do with! Plus, feel my shirt. It's a breathable cotton blend that wicks away moisture but also contains a special polyester for 100% UVA and UVB blocking.”

An illicit tingle raced up the back of her neck when he took her hand and placed it on his chest. “Um, that's really high-tech,” said Pam. “I see you've been reading lots of sporting goods' catalogs.”

“Yeah. How did you know?” he asked with disbelief. “Anyway, I got all this other neat stuff too. Check this out.” He lifted his shirt to reveal a belt with numerous accessories strapped onto it. “See? I've got a compass, pocket knife, first aid kit, waterproof matches, and a safety whistle right where I need them.”
Pam pretended to be interested in his new toys, but in truth she was admiring his flat stomach and belly button. “Wow,” she said approvingly. “It's like you're Batman.”

“Yeah, it's awesome,” Jeremy said, shrugging out of his knapsack. “Are you ready for a break?”

“Um, haven't we only been walking like five minutes?”

Jeremy ignored her as he dug through his knapsack. “I have beef jerky and trail mix,” he said, stuffing a handful in his mouth. “You want some?”

“No thanks, I'm not hungry.”

He produced a water canteen, the old-fashioned kind that looked like a tambourine. “You should at least have some water,” he said, still chewing. “Did you know eighty percent of wilderness deaths happen from dehydration? I think it was eighty percent.”

“I'm good.” Pam watched to make sure he didn't start choking on the enormous handful of trail mix he had stuffed into his mouth. That was exactly the sort of thing that would happen to him. She was relieved when he swallowed several gulps of water.

“Okay, we can keep going now,” he said. The trail began winding up a small hill covered in ferns. The forest was completely silent except for the occasional sound of a stray bird chirp. Pam realized how relaxing it was to be away from the hustle and bustle of the city. She was just beginning to enjoy herself when she discovered Jeremy lagging several feet behind her.

“You okay back there?” she said, pausing for him to catch up.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” he answered, using the tone she recognized as being anything but fine. “Um, Pam? Do you think you could carry my backpack for a while?”

“Sure,” she said, taking it from him. Her arm immediately sagged under the weight of the back. “Oof! Did you pack bricks in here?”

“It's just supplies,” he said innocently. “You never know what you'll need. I brought snacks, water, my slingshot, a firestarter kit, my dad's hatchet, maps and a rain poncho.”

“A rain poncho,” Pam repeated, looking up at the clear blue sky.

“It's for emergencies!” He looked her up and down. Pam had worn a t-shirt and shorts, plus her old and beat-up pair of running shoes. “What did you bring?”

“My phone?”

“Oh,” Jeremy said. She could tell she had disappointed him.

“You're right,” she told him. “Better be safe than sorry. Can I have some beef jerky?” They sat on a log for a few minutes. The meat was over-salted and leathery but Pam didn't say anything. She accepted when Jeremy offered a drink from his canteen.

“I feel better now,” she told him. “Shall we continue?” Jeremy's pace picked up considerably once he was free of his backpack. The tail of his coonskin cap waved jauntily with each step he took. Pam, on the other hand, definitely felt the burden. She was relieved when Jeremy called for a water break, despite the fact that it had been only fifteen minutes since the last one. After the short pause, they resumed hiking until they reached a heavily pined section of forest. The refreshing scent gave her a boost of energy.
“Hey, want to see a magic trick?” Jeremy asked as they walked. He began digging in his cargo pockets. Pam raised an eyebrow when he pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

“If you think I'm putting those on...” she began.

“No, no,” he reassured her. “It's a trick where I put them on like this.” He placed his hands behind his back and cuffed the links into place. “See, I'm locked up right? Go ahead and check.”

Pam humored him. “Yes, you're handcuffed all right. Let's stop for a second though.” She had a vision of him somehow crashing down the path and tumbling off a cliff. “All right, let's see your magic trick.”

Jeremy began wriggling his hands behind his back, biting his lip in concentration. Pam waited patiently. A minute passed. Jeremy grinned at her, although some of his bravado was gone. Another minute.

“Uh, do you need a hand?” Pam asked.

“No, it's just...” Jeremy trailed off. Embarrassed, he said, “Could you check my back pocket? There should be a key in it.”

Pam tried not to laugh since she knew it would make him mad. She reached into his back pocket but found it empty, although she it was not unpleasant to feel the curve of his bum. “Nothing in your back pocket,” she reported.

“Try the other one.”

She did. It was empty too, save for the curve of his backside. “Nope.”

“That's weird,” said Jeremy. “Could you try my front pockets?”

Sighing, Pam complied. His hip pockets were empty, although her hands got dangerously close to his crotch. In his cargo pockets, all she found was a stick of gum and two rusty nails. “There aren't any keys in here either, Jeremy,” she told him.

“Um, uh oh,” he said. His face had been red from embarrassment, but Pam could recognize the worried look on his face. It made her apprehensive as well because Jeremy never worried about anything.

“All right, Jeremy, the joke is over,” she said. “Where are the keys?”

“I don't know!” He smiled sheepishly. “If they're not in my pockets, I think I...”

“Yes?”

“I guess I forgot them at home.”

Pam counted to ten, making sure to breathe deeply the whole time. “At home.”

“Oh huh,” he nodded.

“But these are toy handcuffs, right?” she persisted. “Isn't there a safety latch or something?”

“Um, no. These are real. My dad ordered them online for my Halloween costume last year. Remember that? It was when I dressed as a cop and Ashton was wearing that hippie...” Pam held up her hand to cut him off. “They're authentic police handcuffs,” he added brightly.
“That's really not what I wanted to hear, Jeremy.” She moved behind him and knelt to examine the handcuffs. They looked authentic all right. Luckily, he had not applied them so tightly as to cut off his circulation. “Well, at least one of us is prepared,” Pam said, pulling out her phone.

“What's that?” Jeremy asked over his shoulder. “Did you bring a blowtorch or something?”

“No, Jeremy, I'm calling your dad,” she told him. “We've only been hiking thirty minutes. At this point, the easiest thing to do is return to the trailhead and have him pick us up.”

“But then we won't get to hike,” he complained.

“You can't hike with your hands cuffed behind your back!” Pam exploded, unable to hide her exasperation. “And besides... oh shit.”

Jeremy's eyes widened. “Did you just swear?” he chuckled. “You just said a bad word!”


“What?”

“I don't have any cell phone service.” Pam stared at her phone as if it were a dead rodent.

“Oh,” Jeremy said, finally serious. “What are we going to do?”

“Looks like you got your wish,” Pam shrugged. “We keep hiking. Come on.” She took him by the arm.

“But how am I going to get my hands free?” Jeremy asked, not quite catching on.

“We'll unlock you once we get home and find the keys.”

“What if I need to use my hands?”

“You should have thought of that before you put on the handcuffs.” Pam held his arm as they walked to make sure he didn't stumble. She felt like a sheriff escorting an outlaw. At this pace, she calculated that it would take them another two hours to reach his house. Her jaw tightening, Pam couldn't keep the scowl off her face but at least it kept Jeremy quiet. She was loudly broadcasting her displeasure at this turn of events and, amazingly, he was picking up the signal.

They walked in silence for fifteen minutes. “Maybe this isn't too bad,” Pam thought. “We're making better pace than I would have expected. Maybe it will only take ninety minutes?” The thought brightened her mood, but she soon sensed that Jeremy was slowing down. At first she thought it was her imagination, but it soon became apparent that she was leading a balky kid.

“Um, Pam?” Jeremy asked.

Pam instantly recognized his tone of voice. “Oh god, what is it now?” she asked. It was the “please don't kill me” voice he used when he knew he had done something wrong. She last heard it when he spilled White-Out all over the back seat of her car. She stopped and turned to face him.

“I, um...” Jeremy was looking at the ground.

“What is it, Jeremy?” she said patiently. “I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm not mad. What's up?”

“I, uh, have to pee,” Jeremy said, avoiding her gaze.
“Oh-kay,” Pam said. This was the last thing she had been expecting. “Um, what do you want me to do?”

“Well, I guess you have to...” Jeremy's ears were burning red now. “Can you, um, take it out for me?”

Pam glanced up and down the path. They hadn't seen another soul yet, but it would be just her luck to have someone happen by at this moment. She unzipped his fly, sending an abashed wave of giddiness to her knees. Wanting to hide her feelings, Pam muttered, “I really can't believe I'm doing this.”

“You're not going to tell anyone, right?” he said nervously.

“Trust me,” she told him, “I would definitely prefer if this stays between the two of us.”

“Wait,” he said, just as she was about to reach inside his unzipped fly. “I don't... Can you stand behind me when you do it? I don't want you to see me, you know, down there.”

Pam did as he asked. She was now standing directly behind him, her arms reaching around his sides, stretching to meet between his legs. “This must be what it feels like to be a guy,” she thought. It was more difficult than she imagined since she was flying blind. She had to feel around until her fingers met the rough edge of his zipper.

“This would be easier,” she said, “if I could see what the heck I'm doing.”

“Well... I don't want you to see my thing,” Jeremy said.

Pam's heart skipped a beat as her fingers reached inside his fly. “It's not like I haven't seen it before, Truth-or-Dare boy,” she retorted. The moment she said 'Truth or Dare,' Pam felt something lurch against her fingers through his cotton underwear. Something alive.

“Well, I saw you when we played Go Fish,” he returned.

“Please be quiet,” requested Pam. Her fingers were running along his cotton underpants, trying to find the seam of the fly. Though she was certainly enjoying herself, Pam was beginning to feel a bit light-headed. Best to get this over with as quickly as possible, she thought to herself. There it is... Using both hands, Pam was successfully able to fish out his penis. It felt warm in her hand, but she didn't dare hold it for too long.

“Okay, she said, taking a few steps back to give him some privacy. “You pee and, um, let me know when you're done.”

Jeremy looked at her over his shoulder. “Don't stand so close.” Pam retreated a few more steps and pretended to study the lichen growing on a tree. Even so, she could hear the hesitant sound of tinkling. It lasted barely a second though.

“You made me do all that and you're already done?” she asked. “That was nothing! I've seen tiny infants that can pee more than you.”

“You're listening to me?” he said accusingly. “Don't listen!”

“Sorry, I couldn't help it,” Pam mumbled. “Are you done?”

“Um...” Jeremy was blushing red again. “I'm, um, peeing on my new boots because I can't, uh, aim.”
“I don't understand,” Pam said.

“You know,” Jeremy said shamefully. “I need my hands to aim it. And I can't, so...” He trailed off again.

“Oh.” It finally dawned on her what he was trying to say. He was blushing so much that Pam knew what he wanted her to do, but was too embarrassed to ask. She stepped behind him again. “Don't worry, I'm not going to look,” she said as she blindly reached to his midsection. Her hand searched until it found that familiar and warm knob of flesh. Gingerly, she pointed it upward and waited.

And waited. He wasn't peeing. “Uh, go ahead,” she said, uncertain.

“I'm trying,” Jeremy said softly. “This is... I've never had to pee like this before so it's... hard.” His face got even redder as he realized what a poor choice of words he had made. Perhaps it was just coincidence, but Pam could feel him becoming erect in her fingers. Her breasts were lightly pressing against his back as she stood behind him. She wondered if he could feel her heart pounding.

“Uh, it's okay,” Pam encouraged. “Take your time.” She could see that Jeremy had closed his eyes. Apparently it was taking all his concentration to pee. He was fully erect now, his penis throbbing in her hand from time to time. Pam hoped he couldn't feel how sweaty her palm was getting. His hair tickled against the underside of her chin as she stood behind him. Trying to ignore it, Pam instead found herself inhaling the alluring combination of faint shampoo, bright sunshine, and a sweaty young boy.

“Ah...” Jeremy sighed. The sound of tinkling resumed. Pam held him, fascinated. She could feel the buzzy sensation of pee flowing through his penis, as if she were touching a water pipe in her basement. For the first time since she was a little girl, Pam had a genuine pang of penis envy.

“Um, could you aim it a little higher?” requested Jeremy.

“Like this?” Pam asked.

“Yeah... that's good.” He continued peeing for what was, Pam thought, an inordinately long amount of time. She finally heard (and felt) the stream slowing. Unable to resist, she peeked over his shoulder and saw the last drops trickling from him. Jeremy grunted quietly, the sound coinciding with a throb of his penis as he pushed out the final straggling drops. Pam was enthralled.

“Uhhh,” he murmured again. His penis moved again in her fingers, twitching upward as a few more golden drops were expelled. Pam felt an ache between her legs, as if someone had just landed an arrow directly on her bullseye.

“All done?” she asked brightly.

“Yes,” he said. “Um, can you give it a little shake?” Breathlessly, Pam did as he asked, wiggling her fingers to shake his penis. Wickedly, she wondered if this could be her full-time job. Maybe she could volunteer for a boys' soccer team with broken arms? “Okay, okay, that's good,” he told her. “You don't need to shake it anymore.”

“Oh, right,” Pam said, blushing. “Let's get you squared away...”

Getting a penis out of the fly had been difficult enough, but Pam had no idea the reverse would be an even tougher assignment. Obviously, it was her first time putting away a penis so it took her a moment to master holding open his fly while using her other to shove him back inside. The fact that he was erect made the mechanics much more difficult. “Okay, let's see here...” she puzzled. The fly of his underwear simply refused to stretch far enough. Pam redoubled her efforts.
“Ouch!” Jeremy said.

“Sorry!” Pam said with alarm. “Did I get you?”

“Watch the zipper!” Jeremy said, making a face.

“Sorry,” she repeated. “I’ve never done this before, so…”

“Ow! Stop it!”

“Um, okay,” Pam said, taking her hands away. “It's obviously too hard to put it away when it's, um... hard. Maybe we should give it a minute?” Tapping her foot, Pam resisted the urge to hum the Jeopardy! theme song. Jeremy faced away from her, his arms straight at his side, but she could tell he was embarrassed.

Surely that was a minute, Pam thought. She peered over his shoulder. His silver shirt partially obstructed the view, but his erection still pointed as straight out as a stick from his body. Pam poked it with a disbelieving finger.

“Oh rats,” Pam said. “Jeremy, do you think... I think I would be able to do a better job of putting it away if I could see what I was doing. Is it all right if I... come around in front of you?” He nodded. Pam moved to his front and knelt down. Her face was now level with his erection. A wild temptation filled her mind as she imagined taking him in her mouth.

“Stop staring at me!” ordered Jeremy, his face blushing some more. Busted.

“Oh, oops,” Pam excused herself. Now it was her turn to blush. “I was just thinking about how to... solve this. All right, let's see…” She tried to maneuver his penis back between his fly. It was somewhat easier now that she could see, but the conundrum remained the same. His penis had simply gained too much volume to be stuffed back into his underwear. After a few fruitless (yet tantalizing) minutes, Pam gave up and sat back on her heels.

It was a strange situation to say the least. Here was a ten year old boy standing before her, his hands cuffed behind his back and his erection poking through his unzipped fly. Jeremy was looking at her with a helpless expression. She could tell he was deferring to her adult expertise, so she tried to project an air of confidence.

“Well, it will eventually go away,” Pam said, remembering not to stare at him down there. “When it does, I'll help you put it away. Until then, let's do this…” Pam untucked his shirt, smoothing it across his lower waist. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite long enough to completely cover his crotch. Pam tugged his shirt to straighten it but, despite her best efforts, his penis still poked out and up from beneath the hemline.

“Well, it's better than nothing, right?” she asked cheerfully.

“This is so embarrassing,” Jeremy mumbled.

“That's the spirit!” Pam said, taking him by the arm and leading him down the trail. They walked in silence for several minutes. Every so often, Pam would casually glance down at Jeremy's midsection to monitor his progress. She kept expecting it to go down, but each time she looked, his erection was as prominent as ever. She didn't know preteen boys could stay like this for so long. The tagline from the male health commercial filled her head: “Seek medical attention if you have an erection lasting longer than four hours…”

Hopefully it wouldn't come to that.
“Fresh air feels good, doesn't it?” Pam asked, breaking the silence.

“Whatever.”

Pam tried not to sigh. It was going to be a long walk. She couldn't tell if he was grumpy or embarrassed so she lamely patted his shoulder. If only this had happened in his backyard tent, she pondered. All they needed was a little privacy...

They were making their way through a twisted portion of the hiking trail when it happened. Pam heard a twig snapping up ahead, but thought she had imagined it. A frantic squirrel darted toward them, stopping short and then fleeing the trail once it discovered its path was blocked by the two humans. Pam's amusement at the woodland creature disappeared when she heard human voices filtering through the woods.

“Someone's coming!” Jeremy said fearfully. His frantic eyes darted around the path. “We have to hide!”

“We can't hide,” Pam said. It was impossible. To their right was a hilly slope that stretched upward at too steep a rate to be climbed. To their left was the stream. The voices kept approaching. Pam saw the bright blue flash of someone's t-shirt up ahead. Thinking quickly, she plucked Jeremy's coonskin cap off his head and artfully hung it on his erection.

“Pam!” Jeremy exploded.

“Quiet!” She dug in the backpack and pulled out one of the maps. The map unfolded like a broken accordion just in time.

“Oh, hi there!” a voice said. Pam turned to see an older woman with two girls in tow.

“Oh, hi!” Pam replied, letting the open map dangle in front of Jeremy like a partition. It wasn't much but, combined with the coonskin cap, it was all the protection she could muster. “Out for a hike?”

“Oh yes,” the woman said, gesturing at the girls. “My grand-daughters asked me to go on a nature walk. They're Girl Scouts, you see. I decided the exercise would do me good.”

“Oh, me too,” Pam said agreeably. The two girls appeared a bit younger than Jeremy, but she could swear she could see one of them staring with confusion at the coonskin cap that magically clung to Jeremy's midsection.

“Is this your son?” the woman asked.

“Ha ha, not at all,” Pam laughed nervously. “I'm just his, um, babysitter.”

“Well, he's quite handsome,” the woman complimented.

“Yes, he sure is,” Pam agreed once more. The older woman seemed like the especially chatty type. Not a good sign.

“Are you lost?” she asked, pointing at the map.

“Not lost,” Pam reassured her. “I was just getting a snack out of my backpack but this got all tangled.” She was desperately trying to think of a way to end the conversation when one of the girls saved her.

“Grandma!” she called. She had wandered over to the stream. “There's a turtle over here!”
“Really?” the woman hurried over.

“Have a nice day!” Pam called, grabbing Jeremy by the shoulder. In her haste to hide Jeremy's erection, Pam had completely forgotten that he was wearing handcuffs. She glanced behind her and saw one of the girls scrutinizing them with a perplexed expression as she saw Jeremy's hands bound behind his back. Pam grinned weakly, shrugging her shoulders and holding her hands out. “Boys...” she mouthed, rolling her eyes. With a breath of relief, she saw the girl laugh knowingly before she turned to rejoin her grandma.

“Well, that was close,” Pam said after they put some distance between themselves and the three hikers.

“One of those girls was staring at me,” Jeremy said gloomily.

“Cheer up. She probably just thought you were cute.”

“I mean she was staring at my coonskin cap.”

“Oh yeah,” Pam said. “You probably want to put it back on your head, am I right?” She unhooked it from his erection and arranged it on his head. Sneaking a peek, she was dismayed to see he was still hard as ever. Once again, Jeremy caught her looking but he didn't say a word.

“We're almost home,” she said encouragingly. “Plus, it's got to go away sooner or later, right?”

“No,” Jeremy muttered crossly. “The only way to make it go away is to...” He caught himself and stopped.

Pam felt her heart flutter. “How, Jeremy? How do you make it go down?”

“Nothing,” he said gruffly. “We should keep going.”

He was about to resume walking, but Pam stopped him. Holding him by the shoulders, she asked softly, “Jeremy, I want to help you. How do you make it go down?”

Jeremy wouldn't look her in the eye. He stared at a moss-covered boulder as he spoke. “Sometimes I touch it... and... I don't know...” Jeremy was fumbling with his words, blushing. “I get this... really feeling,” he confided. “And it makes it go down.”

“Otherwise it just stays hard?” Pam asked, playing along. It was exciting her to speak so frankly with Jeremy.

He nodded.

“Do you want me to help... make it not hard?” She swallowed, her mouth suddenly very dry. “I don't mind.”

“I don't know,” Jeremy said. “It's really embarrassing.”

“Why?”

Again, he blushed. “I just feel... I always feel like such a pervert when I do it. I know I'm not supposed to.”

They stood in the forest, silent. Pam felt as if they were the only two people on earth. “Want to know a secret, Jeremy?” she whispered. “Everyone does it. Touches themselves, I mean.”

“Everyone.”

“Are you making this up?”

“I'm not making anything up,” Pam told him steadily. “You and your friends probably talk about it all the time, right? Jacking off? Jerking? Yanking the crank?” Jeremy chuckled nervously as she listed out as many euphemisms as she could think of. “Choking the bishop?”

“Yeah, we joke all the time about doing that.”

“Well, your friends aren't joking. They're actually doing it too. They just won't admit it.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I told you. Everyone does it.”

“Even you?” For the first time, he looked her in the eye.

Pam blushed a little. “All the time,” she admitted conspiratorially.

“I didn't know girls did it.”

“Trust me, they do.” Pam glanced down at his midsection. Perhaps it was just her imagination, but his penis had seemingly gotten harder, if anything. It was sticking straight up, pointing proudly at his chin. “Do you want me to do... it? I won't tell anyone. I promise. Just tell me what to do.”

She saw Jeremy swallow, then lick his lips in a nervous gesture. “There's... um.. There's a bottle of Coppertone in the backpack,” he told her.

Pam shrugged off the knapsack. Setting it on the ground, she rummaged through the bag and produced the familiar bottle of suntan lotion. “What do you do with it?” she asked, playing dumb. Her pulse was racing.

“Um, I... put some on my hand so it's slippery,” Jeremy directed. Pam felt a small twinge of sympathy. The ten year old boy was clearly feeling guilty over his masturbation habits. She remembered feeling the same way at his age.

“Like this?” Pam asked.

“Uh huh.”

His penis felt delightful against her hand. She could feel the young boy pressing back against her palm as she waved. Waving off. Had they just invented a new euphemism together? Pam could feel a growing wetness in her panties. It was exciting enough to be helping Jeremy masturbate, but the fact that he was still otherwise fully clothed lent an unexpected thrill to the proceedings.

“Ah!” Jeremy gasped, taking a step backward. He abruptly bumped into the thick trunk of an oak
tree. He remained leaning against it as Pam continued waving.

“Jeremy? Are you okay?” she asked. She kept forgetting that his hands were cuffed behind his back. It occurred to her that he couldn't make her stop. The realization only made the sweet aching between her legs grown more unbearable. Pam desperately wanted to touch her clit, but she resisted.

“It's... okay,” Jeremy stammered. His eyes were closed now as he leaned against the tree trunk. “It's okay, Pam.... It's okay... Pam! IT'S OKAY!”

Pam stared with wonder as Jeremy began shivering uncontrollably. A strong convulsion shook his body as she felt his penis press against her palm, as hard as ever. Having witnessed the male orgasm before, Pam was surprised at how different Jeremy's climax was. Instead of repeatedly pulsing under her hand, she only felt his erection powerfully throb once. And instead of the expected warm wetness from his penis, she felt... nothing.

“Still too young for that,” Pam realized. It never occurred to her that a male orgasm would be different depending on his age. To this point, all of her partners had been at least teenagers. Not so for Jeremy, obviously, who was now the youngest notch on her belt. His orgasm had been so innocent and pure that Pam almost felt like crying. It was the same way she felt when she saw the first tulip shoots pushing through the frozen ground in springtime.

Jeremy's eyes were still closed. She could see the exertion in his breathing as he slumped against the tree trunk. “Are you all right?” she asked with concern.

“I just want to sit down for a bit,” he mumbled. Pam carefully guided him to a tree stump. She sat down first. He then surprised her by sitting down on her lap. Bemused, Pam cradled the heavy-lidded boy. One minute he was laying his head on her shoulder. The next thing Pam knew he was snoring lightly in her arms. The telltale scent of Coppertone tickled her nostrils. The sweet smell of success, Pam thought to herself.

They sat like that for ten delicious minutes until Jeremy stirred on her lap. “Oh... hey,” he said, blinking sleepily at her.

“Hey.”

He smiled at her, a sweet grin that was somewhere between embarrassment and pride. Pam glanced at his fly. His erection had, of course, subsided, although even the sight of his penis in this state warmed Pam's heart.

“We did it!” Pam said. She felt like a girl who finally got to see the inside of the boys' treehouse. Jeremy nodded, resting his head on her shoulder again. “Hang on there, buddy,” Pam said, prodding him. “Come on, we need to get home.”

“Sorry,” Jeremy mumbled. “I always get sleepy afterward....”

Pam couldn't believe how cute the young boy was right now. “I know,” she said. Taking him by the shoulders, she guided him into a standing position. “Come on. You can do this.” When she was certain he wouldn't topple over, Pam carefully took his soft penis in her hand. She had an overwhelming urge to kiss it (just a little kiss, her clit pleaded), but resisted. With deft fingers, she quickly slipped it back inside his underwear and zipped him. Throughout all this, Jeremy stood perfectly still like a docile lamb.

Pam got to her feet, sweeping the forest dust from the bottom of her shorts and strapping the knapsack onto her back. Jeremy watched with a pleased yet tired expression on his face as she got
ready to resume their hike. They had another mutual secret to keep now. She could tell from the way Jeremy was looking at her that he liked what they had done. Before they started walking again, Pam brushed aside the hair under his coonskin cap and gave him a quick kiss on the forehead. He was short enough that she had to bend down to do it, but it was still a tender moment.

“What was that for?” Jeremy asked, startled out of his dreamy state. They resumed their hike along the well-worn forest path. But instead of answering, Pam just smiled and took his arm, making sure he wouldn't trip as they began the last leg toward home.
Pam rang the doorbell to the Prater's house. Today was Jeremy's birthday. Though it was early Sunday afternoon, the house seemed empty inside. She wondered if she had missed them somehow. Last night, she knew, Jeremy's parents had allowed him to host a sleepover for his friends. Kate had informed her that the get-together would be over by brunch, so Pam figured the afternoon would be a good time to drop off Jeremy's present.

Her finger was just about to press the doorbell again when door swung open. Two boys that she didn't recognize peered at her. “Uh, hi,” Pam said, a bit thrown off. Not only had she been expecting one of the Praters to answer the door, but both boys were dressed only in t-shirts and underwear. Though they were clearly unbothered to be in a state of undress, Pam glanced behind her to make sure no one was walking by the house.

“I stopped by to drop off a present for Jeremy. Is he home?” By way of explanation, she held up a box wrapped in festive blue and gold paper that was complemented by a lime green ribbon.

“Oh... yeah, sure,” one of the boys said. “Come in.”

As Pam stepped inside, she heard Kate calling from the basement. “Boys, did you check the door? I could have sworn I heard...” Kate emerged from the stairs, holding a toolbox and a handful of screwdrivers. “Oh, hi Pam! I wasn't expecting you today.”

“I just have something to drop off for Jeremy,” she said, holding up the present again. “Is everything okay? You look a bit frazzled.”

“Oh, everything's fine,” Kate sighed. “I thought the sleepover would be over after breakfast but they're still going strong down there. I don't think any of them actually slept last night.”

“What's with the toolbox?” Pam inquired.

Kate set the tools down on the coffee table and wearily rubbed the bridge of her nose. “They spilled some soda on a rug last night, so they thought they would do me a favor,” she made air quotes with her fingers, “by throwing it in the washing machine.”

“Uh oh.”

“Not realizing, of course, that the washer wasn't meant to handle a large rug,” Kate continued. “They crammed the rug in there anyway and dumped in half a bottle of detergent. Luckily, the motor gave out before the suds overflowed.”

“Were you able to fix it?”

“William gave it a shot, but we'll have to call a repairman. And just now there was a semi-emergency when William and I discovered they were trying to smash each other in the folding ping-pong table.”

“That sounds painful,” Pam said sympathetically.

“Doesn't it? Now William is still trying to fix that. As for me, I need to find something for this headache.” She headed for the kitchen. “Emmett, Paul? Can you escort Pam downstairs? And tell everyone to get dressed. It's the afternoon, for goodness' sake.”

Pam followed the two boys as they meekly led her to the basement. As her feet navigated the steps,
Pam became aware of several loud voices in the direction of the family room. Emmett and Paul may have been subdued in front of Jeremy's mom, but now they raced ahead. Just before she entered the room, Pam heard one of them shout, “Hey Jeremy! Your girlfriend is here!”

Right on cue, Pam's cheeks flushed red. The timing couldn't have been worse. Upon entering the family room, she was greeted by five sets of eyes staring at her. It didn't help that, like Emmett and Paul, most of the boys were in various states of undress. Two boys didn't have shirts on. All of them were in their underwear.

“Shut up!” This was Jeremy, shouting at his friends. “I told you, she's my babysitter!”

“Jeremy.” His dad's voice sounded from under the ping-pong table. “No more yelling. I mean it. Understand?”

“Sorry dad.”

William's head popped up from under the table. “Good morning, Pam.” He wearily stood up, immediately grabbing his shoulder and massaging it.


“Is it really?” He began rotating his arm at the shoulder. “That makes sense. It feels like I've been under that table for hours.”

“Sorry to hear about the washing machine,” Pam told him.

William scoffed. “Jeremy said he would pay for it with his birthday money. Right, Jeremy?”

“I didn't say that!”

“Then I guess you'll be doing our laundry by hand from now on,” William retorted.

One of Jeremy's friends piped up. “Yeah! Jeremy knows how to do a small load by hand.” The rest of his friends broke into muffled laughter as Jeremy glared around the room. Even Pam fought a giggle that threatened her straight face.

William apparently didn't catch the joke or was too tired to care. “I don't want to have to come down here again,” he warned the room of boys. “Stay away from that ping-pong table, understand?” The room murmured in assent. Still working his shoulder, William trudged up the stairs.

Now it was just Pam and a roomful of six boys. Feeling like she was intruding, Pam shifted her weight from one leg to another. The boys were scattered across the family room, alternately sprawled on the sofa or lounging in bean bags. If any of them were shy about being in their underwear, they did not show it. She had a difficult time knowing where to look since there was so much skin everywhere. One of the boys wore a loose pair of boxers that allowed the slightest peek between his legs...

“I didn't know you were coming for my party,” Jeremy said, interrupting her train of thought. He was straddling the arm of the couch and bouncing impatiently.

“I, uh, have a present for you,” Pam offered, taking it out from behind her back.

“Really? Can I open it now?”

“Sure.”
Jeremy shot across the room, eagerly taking the box from her hands. It had taken her ten minutes to wrap the present, but he only needed four seconds to open it. In a flurry of torn paper, Jeremy tossed aside the lid of the box. “Whoa, cool...” he said, lifting up a camouflage vest. Digging in the box, he produced a pair of cargo pants, a turtleneck, and a stocking cap, all in matching black.

“What is it?” one of his friends asked.

“It’s an army outfit!” declared Jeremy.

“Actually, it's a Call of Duty outfit,” Pam clarified. “The stocking cap doubles as a face mask. There are dog tags and goggles too.” A hushed awe filled the room. Pam was pleased to not only earn Jeremy’s approval but to have impressed his friends as well.

“Neat!” Jeremy crowed, pulling on the facemask. He had already put the vest over his white t-shirt, an odd combination since he was still in his underwear. Pam kept a straight face. She knew he would never forgive her for laughing at him in front of his friends.

“Glad you like it,” she said. “Looks like I got the sizing right.” She was completely unprepared when Jeremy, facemask and all, stood up and hugged her. Blushing again, Pam glanced at his friends, expecting mockery. Instead, they remained silent. Still, it felt strange to be expressing this kind of affection with so many eyes watching. Pam couldn’t help but wonder if Jeremy had told them about the things they did together.

“Pam?” It was William calling from the top of the stairs. “Want to have some cake before you leave?”

“Sure!” Pam called back, grateful for the diversion. She backed out of the room. “Um, see you guys later.” As she was walking up the stairs, she heard a faux whisper from the room that made her freeze in mid-step.

“Man, Jeremy, your babysitter is hot!”

“Shut up!” Pam heard Jeremy say, followed by the sound of a smacking. The room erupted in muted laughter.

“Ow, don’t punch me! What did you do that for?”

“Because you won’t shut up!”

“I just said your babysitter was hot, what's the big- OUCH! QUIT IT!”

“Paul isn't making fun of you,” another voice said. “Did you see how tight her shorts were when she left the roo-“

Beet red now, Pam dashed up the stairs. Behind her, a scuffle had broken out in the room. Jeremy was simultaneously swearing at his friends and yelping in pain. She closed the door to the stairs, relieved to have a physical barrier in place, and joined Jeremy’s parents in the kitchen. Kate was seated on a counter stool while William stood behind the kitchen island.

“What's going on down there?” William inquired. “Do I need to go break it up?”

“Oh, it's nothing,” Pam said, trying to smile. “You know. Boys being boys.” She wondered if her face had returned to a normal color.

“Haha,” said William. He was arranging dishes in the washer but Pam suddenly noticed how
distracted he seemed. Kate, meanwhile, was staring out the window and hadn't said a word.

“Say Pam, since you're here...” William began. Pam realized he was nervous. He would set something into the dishwasher and then immediately shift it to a different spot.

“Would you like some coffee?” offered Kate.

“Yes, please.” Pam accepted. She was taken aback, however, by the tone of forced politeness in Kate's voice. She had never heard it before.

“I'll get some for everyone,” volunteered William. “Why don't we all have a seat at the dinner table?”

There was definitely something strange going on. Pam could feel it now, an odd tension in the air. She followed Kate to the table. William joined them, carrying three steaming mugs of coffee. There was an awkward silence for a moment as they sat down.

“Is... everything all right?” Pam asked.

Kate looked out the window again. William cleared his throat. “Pam, we've been meaning to talk to you about... something. For a long time.” He paused. “I hope you understand that this is a very difficult conversation for us. It's just... I guess we wouldn't be here if you and Jeremy didn't have such a... special... relationship.”

All color drained from Pam's face as her heart froze. They knew.

“I... um... I'm not sure what you...” Pam stammered, searching for words. Her palms had instantly become sweaty.

“We feel really embarrassed about this,” Kate said, finally speaking up. “Well, speaking for myself, I am very embarrassed. I knew exactly what was happening all along. I just didn't want to believe it.”

“None of us did,” affirmed William. He shared a gaze with his wife. “Collectively, I think we believed we could just make it... you know, disappear. Through sheer willpower.”

“I had blinders on.” Kate looked out the window again. “I thought everything was fine until one day when Jeremy told me...” She trailed off, wiping a tear from her eye.

Pam sat perfectly still. She had feared this dreadful day for the past two months. Somehow she had convinced herself that it would never come. But now she was about to pay the full price for playing with fire. Truth or Dare. Jeremy's periscope. Go Fish. The camping tent. Their hike through the woods. It all seemed so far away now. “Kate... William... I'm so sorry,” Pam whispered.

“Everything was f-fine,” Kate said, struggling to compose herself. “Until one day when Jeremy told me, one morning, why he hadn't slept well. Why he had been having so many bad dreams.” Unable to contain her emotions any longer, Kate began sobbing.

A constricted sensation formed in Pam's throat. “How much did he... what did he tell you?” she asked.

“Everything.” William said grimly. “We sat down as a family that day, and he told us everything. It had been tearing him up to keep it a secret. He said he thought he would get in trouble. He thought we would be mad at him.”

“What are you... going to do now?” Pam cocked her ear, listening for the police sirens. Or maybe there was already an officer in the next room, ready to take her away in handcuffs? “I just want to
say... I'm so sorry. I never wanted this to happen. I honestly don't know why I didn't... listen to common sense.”

“We knew you were torn about it,” Kate said. “How could you not be?”

Pam knit her hands together and stared at her lap. The three mugs of coffee sat forgotten on the table. In the living room, she could hear the ticking sound of the grandfather clock. The normally soothing sound only served to accentuate the silence. “I'm sorry,” she said again.

William fiddled with his coffee mug. “I do want to reassure you, Pam, that we won't be getting any lawyers involved.”

A wave of relief. The knotted tension in her belly loosened, just a bit, but enough to let her breathe normally again. “That's... good,” Pam told him. She paused. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” William said. “After all, we only want what's best for Jeremy. We know you want the same thing.”

“I do,” affirmed Pam. “I never meant to hurt... Is he going to be okay? Is he... mad at me?” She thought back to a few moments ago in the basement. Jeremy had seemed perfectly fine. Had he just been faking it for his friends?

“If anything, he's mad at us,” Kate said. Pam cringed at the sorrow in her voice. “He's mad at us for not being there. To protect him.”

Pam opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. A terrible guilt consumed her. She was supposed to protect Jeremy too, but look what happened. Not only had she hurt him, but she had even damaged his relationship with his parents.

“We're going to protect him now,” William stated. “We're going to do everything in our power to make sure he's all right.”

“That's true,” agreed Kate. “If Jeremy's happy, then that's all that matters. We should be able to work this out as adults.”

William nodded vigorously. “We will. And that's where you come into the picture, Pam. You see, we'd like to ask you a special favor.”

“Anything,” Pam said. There was a glint of light at the end of the tunnel now. No lawyers meant no police. No jail. Leave town and never see Jeremy again? She knew his absence would be heartbreaking, but the alternate option was far less palatable.

“You're free to decline, Pam...” Kate began.

“No, please, I'll do anything.”

“First of all, it's quite clear that Jeremy has taken a very strong liking to you,” Kate said. Pam blushed. They know, she thought again. Jeremy told them about touching her chest. How she gave him a sexy dance in his own bedroom. The way he woke up, nuzzled against her breasts in the tent. Pam was mortified.

“We've been through a lot of babysitters,” William added, “and none have had such a deep rapport with Jeremy as you.” He paused, but Pam couldn't look him in the face anymore. He continued, “So that's why we'd like to ask if you would be interested in being a nanny.”
Previously, the color had drained out of Pam's face. Now she could feel it rushing back as her confusion swarmed. “Excuse me?”

“It would only be a temporary arrangement,” William said. “I understand we're asking a lot. After all, we're essentially asking you to put your career on hold…”

“We would pay you, though,” Kate interjected. “William and I have already discussed what we could afford. Is $5000 per month enough? We wouldn't charge you anything for room and board, of course.”

Pam blinked. “You're going to pay me to be a nanny? For who?”

William and Kate exchanged a glance. “For Jeremy, of course,” William said. “I suppose we could give it a more modernized title. I personally think ‘personal assistant’ would be more accurate. Assistant to us, that is. We're essentially asking you to be a third parent.”

“You want me to be a live-in nanny?” Pam clarified. She still wasn't sure she had heard them right, but they both nodded. “Why?”

“I'll be moving out,” William stated. He wasn't looking at Pam when he said this, but at Kate. “It's for the best.”

“Moving out,” Pam repeated dumbly. “You're... separating?”

“Exactly,” William said. He reached out to place his hand atop of Kate's. “I know it's tough, but a trial separation for now. And then one day…”

Stupefied, Pam stared at them. Her mind raced, trying to follow the conversation. It was as if a veil had suddenly been lifted, allowing her to see clearly. “So... no divorce lawyers,” she ventured.

“Good god, no.” William took his hand away since his wife was nor returning his gaze. “Like I said, we don't want to get those leeches involved.”

“Do you know where you'll be living?” Pam asked. It was starting to make more sense. She recalled all the times she had noticed them bickering in the last few months. Even Jeremy had been worried about them.

“Well, the thinking was to move in with...” William trailed off when Kate fixed an icy gaze on him. “Like I said, we don't want to get those leeches involved.”

“Wouldn't that be nice?” Kate said icily. “Or maybe you can move in with her. Be together all the time. That way, your son won't have to take messages from his father's mistress.”

William massaged his temples. “Kate, please... We already talked about this.”

“You just can't own up to what you've done, can you? Can she? Does she know she made your son cry? Does she know how crushed your son was when he found out that his father has a ladyfriend on the side?”

“Please,” William said again. “Let's not do this in front of Pam. We've dragged her far enough into this.” Kate turned away. Though she was silent, it was clear she was crying again.

Pam's head was swimming. It was as if she had been in a terrible car accident and then woke up on
an emergency room operating table, where the doctors informed her that, not only was she unharmed, but she also had a lottery ticket with winning numbers. Her, a nanny? For Jeremy? She wondered if she were dreaming.

“Does Jeremy already know about... all this?” she asked.

“He knows about me and...” William cleared his throat. “Me and Marla. That's all. We haven't told him about my plans to move out. Maybe in the next few days.”

“It's his birthday,” Kate sniffled, blowing her nose. “What an awful thing to learn. That his parents are divorcing.”

“What's happening?”

The three of them had been so engrossed in the conversation that no one had noticed Jeremy in the doorway. He was dressed from head to toe in the black Call of Duty outfit. Lifting the googles from his eyes, he perched them on his forehead and stared at his parents with wide eyes.

Kate quickly wiped her face. “Jeremy, how long have you been there?” she asked.

“The guys wanted more soda, so I came to get some from the kitchen.” Jeremy indicated the cans of Coke nestled in his arm. “But then I overheard you say... Are you getting divorced?”

Kate stood up. “It's not what you think, Jeremy.” She moved to put an arm around him but he backed away.

“But I heard what you said.” His voice was rising.

“Jeremy, calm dow-...” William began.

“Just tell me!” Jeremy insisted. “Are you getting a divorce?”

Kate and William glanced at each other but said nothing. A dreadful silence filled the room. Pam couldn't bear to see the look on Jeremy's face. The soda cans in his arm fell to the floor, causing a tremendous racket before rolling every which way.

“I knew it,” he whispered, his face crumpling as tears began rolling down his cheeks. His breathing sounded ragged. Turning, he dashed from the room, leaving the cans of soda on the floor.

“Wait, Jeremy, please...” Kate ran after him, followed closely by William. Based on the sound of Jeremy's pounding feet, Pam suspected that he was headed for his bedroom. Her hunch was confirmed when she heard his door slam. She tried not to listen as his parents pleaded with the young boy through the closed door but it was hard not to hear. What else could she do? Leaving was an option, but it seemed rude to quietly slip out the door. So instead she sipped her cold coffee and waited.

Kate and William soon returned to the room. Both were ashen-faced. “He won't let either of us into the room,” William explained. “He even barricaded the door.”

Kate's eyes were red, though she was no longer crying. “I wish he didn't have to find out like that.”

The room fell into an awkward silence. Finally, William cleared his throat. “I'll take his friends home,” he said, picking up his car keys.

Kate began picking up the soda cans that had rolled everywhere. She had only picked up two when
she stopped. “Pam, could you try talking to Jeremy?” she asked. “Maybe he'll let you in. I can’t stand thinking of him all by himself in there.”

Pam nodded and got up from the table. At the end of the hallway, Jeremy's closed door stood defiant. She felt like a mountain climber staring at the summit. Tentatively, she knocked on his door.

“Jeremy? It's me.”

Silence.

She knocked again. “Can I come in for a little bit? Please?” Still, there was no answer. Pam glanced behind her. At the other end of the hallway, Kate was watching anxiously with her hands clasped.

“All right, I understand if you want to be alone,” Pam said, trying a different tack. “I'm going home now. So I guess I'll see you around.” There was no response so Pam started walking away. She had barely gone two steps when she heard a scraping sound from the other side of Jeremy's door. It sounded like he was dragging something across the hardwood floor. The door opened an inch. More scraping. Then a few more inches.

It wasn't much, but Pam managed to squeeze through the cracked door. “Ouch,” she grumbled as her breasts pressed painfully against the door frame.

“Are you okay?” she heard him ask.

“I'm fine,” she said, dusting herself off. He was still wearing his black Call of Duty outfit, but his eyes were puffy. Glancing at the floor, Pam saw the source of the scraping noise: Jeremy had pulled his dresser across the room and used it to barricade the door. The scrapes in the wooden floor marked the trail he had inadvertently created.

He noticed her examining the marks on the floor. “I don't care if they get mad at me,” Jeremy said. He closed his door again. “Can you help me move the dresser back against the door? It's kind of heavy.”

Pam had misgivings about blocking the door, but she played along anyway. Together they huffed and puffed to move the dresser. “How on earth did you move this by yourself?” Pam wheezed. It took all her effort to move it the twelve inches required to block the door.

“I don't know, I just did,” Jeremy shrugged.

“Is that good enough?”

“Yeah, that's good.”

“Whew,” Pam sat down in a heap on his armchair. “I guess you should get a lock for your door, huh? That would be a lot easier.”

“Yeah.” She meant it as a joke, but he didn't smile. Jeremy sat down on his bed. Whiskers emerged from the closet and darted into his lap. She was waiting to be petted but Jeremy was just blankly gazing at the wall. Her heart wrenched in her chest. Try as she might, Pam couldn't recall a time when Jeremy looked as inconsolable as this.

Not wanting to invade his space, she gingerly sat down next to him on the bed. Jeremy responded by leaning against her, so she put her arm around him. The goggles on his head were uncomfortably poking her, so Pam removed them, along with his stocking cap. Jeremy didn't react in the least, but he seemed gratified when she pulled his head back to her shoulder. His forehead felt hot against her
neck, his cheek soft as it pressed her collarbone. Pam couldn’t see his face so she didn’t realize he was silently crying until she felt the wetness from his tears spreading across her cotton shirt. Not knowing what to do, she just held the young boy tighter.

“Pam?” His voice was barely a whisper.

“Yes, Jeremy?” Pam’s free hand began stroking Whiskers as she lay in Jeremy’s lap. Mirroring her actions, he began petting the cat too.

“Do you... do you think they might change their minds?”

“I don’t know.” she admitted. Pam touched Whiskers’ velvety ears. The cat’s tail whipped back and forth in pleasure. Her first instinct had been to reassure Jeremy. But was it better to be realistic?

“I don’t want them to get a divorce.”

“I know, Jeremy.”

“Don’t they love each other anymore?”

Pam hesitated. “Sometimes... when two people care for one another, I mean really, truly care... they have to let each other go. Sometimes being apart is the best way to show that you care for someone else.”

“I don’t get it. If they love each other, why can’t they stay together?” He still spoke in a whisper, as if he were afraid someone might hear. But the door was safely barricaded and the only other living being in the room was Whiskers, who was now purring contentedly. Occasionally, Pam felt Jeremy’s hand brushing hers as they petted the cat together.

“They do love each other, but part of that is wanting the other person to be happy. And I guess they’ve decided that they would be unhappy if they were together.” It was circular logic, Pam knew, and she was struggling to explain it in a way that Jeremy could understand. She wasn’t sure if she succeeded, until she felt him trembling in her arms again. Fresh tears drenched his face, rolling off his chin and dripping onto her shirt. Pam could see (and feel) as his teardrops formed a dark spot on the fabric directly atop her nipple.

His raw emotions were contagious. It broke her heart to see Jeremy so completely shattered. Pam’s eyes dampened in sympathy. Biting her lip, she struggled to keep her emotions in check.

Jeremy must have sensed it, because he immediately sat up and looked at her. “Why are you sad?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Pam said, embarrassedly clearing her throat. “I just... I wish you were happy.” Suddenly remembering, she said, “Hey, guess what?”

“What?” He wiped his face with his shirtsleeve. The gesture was so sweet that Pam couldn’t help using her own sleeve to dry off a spot he missed on his chin.

She suddenly felt embarrassed again, for reasons she couldn’t explain. Pam returned to petting Whiskers. Jeremy followed suit. Not looking at him, she said, “Your parents asked me to... be a nanny.”

“What does that mean?” His hand grazed hers again as they both tried to pet Whiskers in the same spot.
“I'll start living here. Probably in the guest bedroom.”

“So we'll be, like, roommates?”

“I guess you can look at it that way.”

“Why are you doing that?” asked Jeremy. Their hands touched again, but this time Pam rested her palm atop his.

“Because... I love you.” The words escaped her mouth like a caged bird taking flight. Pam certainly hadn't meant to say it, but now that she had done so, the words were reinforced by a fierce conviction deep inside her. It was true. It was truth. She knew, then and there, that she would do anything for Jeremy.

He gazed at her with an expression of curiosity, his eyes puffy and red but no longer crying. Pam leaned in close, unsure of what she was doing. Her lips kissed his ear, hot from being pressed against her shoulder. A burst of emotion filled her as she felt his small hand squeezing her own.

There was the faintest hint of pink on his face, but Pam could also see the smallest of smiles tugging at his lips. She kissed him again, on the cheek this time, causing his face to turn another shade. “I think you should lie down and rest,” she said, patting his head. “Your parents said you didn't sleep all night.”

“But I'm not tired,” he protested. Pam pressed a finger to his lips. She hadn't expected it to work, but Jeremy was immediately shushed. Encouraged, Pam stood up and fetched his pajamas from the dresser that still blocked the door. Jeremy remained sitting in the same position, watching her. She returned with a pajama set decorated with red rocket ships. He still hadn't moved.

“Come on,” she said gently, pulling up his black turtleneck. Whiskers darted from his lap. Jeremy obediently held his hands above his head as she yanked the sweater off. Pam giggled upon seeing his tousled hair that resembled a ginger mop.

His t-shirt was next. Now shirtless, Jeremy sat waiting as she pulled off his socks. Her hand touched his bare shoulder, urging him to lie down on his bed. Pam unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his pants. Jeremy compliantly lifted his hips as she tugged at his waistband. There was little resistance as she pulled his pants down to his knees.

“Um, oops,” Pam blushed. She hadn't meant to pull down his underwear, but it had gotten caught with his pants. His penis and scrotum were as pink and hairless as she remembered. Jeremy lay on the bed, completely naked, yet not the least bit uncomfortable. He was looking at her, but made no move to cover himself. She quickly removed his feet from the pant legs and untangled his underwear. Pam was just about to slip his feet back into his underwear when she noticed his erection.

It certainly wasn't there when she pulled his pants off. Pam couldn't help but admire it, but she must have stared for too long because Jeremy shifted position on the bed. He was blushing from all the attention, but his hands remained at his sides as he lay in bed.

Pam knew what she wanted to do. The bottle of Coppertone on his nightstand had not escaped her notice. Wordlessly, Pam picked it up and knelt next to the bed. Jeremy didn't say a word as she uncapped the top and squirted a dollop of suntan lotion into her palm. She saw him pursing his lips as her greasy fingers made contact with his waiting erection.

It felt wonderful to touch him. Pam patiently spread Coppertone along his small shaft, paying special attention to the wrinkled globe of his scrotum and the two modest jewels within. His foreskin was
stretched so tight that Pam could easily see the outline of his penis head. Remembering what he liked, Pam moved her hand in a circular waving motion, letting his hardness press against her open palm. Jeremy sighed, the most lovely sound she had ever heard. With her free hand, Pam ran her fingers through his hair, twirling her finger through his irresistible rusted ginger locks.

Jeremy closed his eyes. He had lay perfectly still at first, but the young boy began to squirm beneath her relentless touch, his limbs mussing the bedsheets. Occasionally, he would throw his head back, his neck straining as his chin pointed toward the ceiling. Each time he did this, Pam could feel his erection throb insistently against her palm.

“Oh...” he moaned softly. Pam cast an eye to his door. Were his parents standing outside, listening? She hoped not. But the dresser still blocked the door, affording them a certain degree of privacy.

Besides, it was too late to stop now. Jeremy's back was arching slightly, thrusting his penis upward against her hand. He suddenly opened his eyes, his gaze locking with hers. His eyes were questioning, uncertain. Pam realized he was asking for permission.

“Are you going to...” she trailed off, not knowing how to word it.

Jeremy nodded.

“It's okay,” she assured him. “I want you to.” Squeezing his penis with her slippery fingers, she redoubled the efforts of her waving palm. That proved to be the tipping point. The young boy began trembling in his bed as his body locked up in orgasmic pleasure. Pam was enraptured. This was the first time she was able to completely observe him in his most private moment. She watched Jeremy's stomach muscles undulating beneath his creamy skin, his delicate arms clenching in release, his bare toes curling with abandon.

She felt him pulse in her hand, just once, yet so powerfully that she was momentarily taken aback. Once again, Pam found herself anticipating a wetness that never came. A ten year old boy, she remembered. “Eleven years old,” she corrected herself. She ramped down her touch as Jeremy came back to earth, but didn't want to let go of him. Rubbing his chest with her other hand, she found his skin to be warm yet damp with his perspiration.

“Did that feel nice?” she whispered.

Jeremy looked at her, his dreamy expression her reward. He nodded, shy again.

“Are you ready to go to sleep now?” He nodded again, closing his eyes. She planted a kiss on the spent boy's forehead. He smelled of inexpensive shampoo, an oddly alluring scent. “Happy birthday, Jeremy,” she told him. Her thanked her with a tired smile.

Pam went to his hamper, hoping to find something she could use to clean the Coppertone from her hand. At the very bottom of his laundry pile was a towel. Better than nothing. She returned to the bed, towel in hand, to clean up the evidence but was gratified to find him already snoring softly. Working gently, Pam dabbed away the excess Coppertone from Jeremy's now soft penis. She felt like a museum curator handling a precious work of art. Using her finger, she adjusted him this way and that, making sure to wipe up every last bit of suntan lotion. Then she pulled his underwear back on, one leg at a time, gently easing the elastic under his bum.

Jeremy did not stir even once throughout all this. While she rearranged his covers, Whiskers crept from the hiding spot under the bed, his tail whipping back and forth for a second before he soundlessly leapt into the bed and curled up next his master's sleeping form. It was such a perfect moment that Pam took out her phone and snapped a picture.
Smiling, she couldn't help but admire Jeremy's sweetness when asleep. His face was perfectly peaceful with no sign of the sadness or anxiety that had plagued him earlier. She delighted in his perfectly symmetrical lips, just faintly parted from his breathing. Lovingly, she brushed the hair from his forehead, luxuriating in the thick lushness of his locks.

What she wanted most at that moment, more than anything, was to slip into bed with Jeremy and hold him while he slept. But she knew Kate was waiting for her, so Pam reluctantly shelved the idea. But when she stood to leave the room, she experienced a brief moment of confusion. The door to the room had disappeared!

“Oh, right,” Pam murmured to herself, staring at the massive dresser that blocked the exit. “How am I going to get out of this?”
The Opposite of a Honeymoon

Chapter Summary

Pam discovers that living with a young boy is much different than babysitting him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Jeremy. Wake up.”

Not expecting a response, Pam strode into his darkened room and pulled open the curtains. A bright shaft of sunlight instantly illuminated the room. The sound of Jeremy's persistent alarm clock filled the air, but the eleven year old lay still beneath his tangle of sheets. His face was hidden under a pillow, but the lower half of his body was visible, particularly his leg that was dangling off the side of the bed.

“I really don't understand how you can sleep like that,” Pam commented, yanking away the pillow. The sunlight now landed squarely on his face, making Jeremy groan as he squinched his eyes shut from the sudden brightness. He feebly tried to pull his sheets up to cover his face, but she pulled that away as well.

“I'm really not going to be late for school,” announced Pam. The sound of his alarm clock was driving her crazy so she randomly punched some buttons until it stopped.

“Don't wanna go school today,” Jeremy mumbled.

“That's not up to you,” Pam sighed. “Look, I am not driving you to school if you miss the bus again this morning. You're going to be in big trouble. And not just with me because your mom is going to be super mad too. You better be at the breakfast table in fifteen minutes. Understand? Washed, dressed, and at the table in fifteen.”

Jeremy moaned and pulled the sheets over his face. In doing so, his midsection slipped into view as the bedsheets rose up, revealing his underwear and an unmistakable bulge. Pam let herself stare for a moment before guiltily placing Jeremy's pillow on top of his boyhood, effectively erasing it from her view.

Pam cleared her throat. “Don't make me come back again to wake you up,” she warned. “Fifteen minutes.” As she left his room, Pam was relieved to see him groggily sit up in bed. Jeremy, she had discovered, was not at all a morning person. Every weekday was a battle to get him out of bed.

Since his mom often worked the overnight shift at the hospital, it was Pam's responsibility to get Jeremy ready for school each morning. She had thought nothing of it when Kate asked her to take care of it. Pam had made a fatal error, however, in overestimating the maturity of eleven year old boys.

She was setting the table (a bowl of Cheerios for him and an English muffin for herself) when Jeremy stumbled into the kitchen. His bare feet slapped against the kitchen tile. Though he was wearing the light blue polo shirt of his school uniform, Jeremy was still in his underwear.
Pam resisted the urge to raise her voice. “Where are your pants?” she asked patiently.

“I don’t know,” Jeremy said. “I couldn’t find them. Do you know where they are?”

“What did you do with them yesterday when you got home from school?”

Jeremy shrugged and sat down in front of his Cheerios. “I don’t know.”

Pam sighed as she handed him the carton of orange juice. (Jeremy inexplicably refused to eat his Cheerios with milk in the morning. Pam had been appropriately horrified the first time she saw him drown his cereal in orange juice, but this no longer fazed her.) “All right, I'll look for them,” she conceded. “Just eat your breakfast. Please?”

Returning to his room, Pam began the hunt. She started with his dresser drawers, opening each one. The clothes she had neatly put away yesterday were untouched, so she knew the pants weren't there. His closet was next. Upon opening its door, Pam immediately leapt backward to avoid an avalanche consisting of comic books, a pair of battered shin guards, four boxes of matches, a trumpet, and an unboxed roll of aluminum foil which immediately unfurled across the floor.

“Pam?” Jeremy called from the dining room. “Don’t look in my closet, okay? I already checked there. Plus it's kind of messy in there.”

“Okay!” Pam gritted her teeth. Here was another mess to clean up later. She checked his still-mussed sheets. No pants. Under the cushions of his armchair? No pants. Pam was about to climb onto the chair and check the top of his bookcase when she spied a familiar shade of gray that peeked from underneath the bed's mattress. Triumphantly, she tugged free the pair of schoolpants.

She shook them out as she returned to the dining room. They were terribly wrinkled, but that couldn’t be helped. “I found them under your mattress,” Pam began. “Honestly, Jeremy, how on earth did they get down th-” Her voice trailed off when she saw Jeremy using his mom's iPad as a calculator and frantically scribbling numbers into a notebook. His bowl of Cheerios was untouched. He looked up guiltily when she entered but didn't put down his pencil.

Pam felt her blood pressure rising. “Are you doing your homework?” she asked.

“Um, it's just a few math problems that I didn't finish last night,” he answered, not looking at her.

“Okay, first of all: you know you're not allowed to use a calculator for math homework,” Pam said, closing the iPad. “And, secondly, you're not supposed to use your mom's iPad without asking first.”

“But these math problems are really hard,” Jeremy protested. “Could you help? What's 156 divided by 12?”

“Thirteen,” she answered. “Why didn't you finish your homework last night?”

“Wow, really? Thirteen?” Jeremy eagerly wrote down the answer. “How did you do that so fast in your head? Are you secretly a robot?”

“Answer the question, Jeremy. Why didn't you finish last night?”

“Well...” he nervously chewed the eraser on his pencil. “You know... Ashton texted me last night and told me to get online because a bunch of guys were having a Call of Duty tournament, and I think there were some high school boys playing because they sounded older and they were real jerks to us and...”
“You can stop now.” Pam massaged her temples. “Why were you playing video games all night? I specifically said you could only play video games if you had finished your homework and you told me that, yes, in fact, you had completed your homework.”

“Well, yeah,” Jeremy shrugged. “I figured I could finish at breakfast. Plus I knew you wouldn't let me play if I said I wasn't done.”

The urge to strangle him was overwhelming. “Jeremy, this is a big deal. You can't just lie to me and...”

“Oh no!” Jeremy's eyes went wide. “The bus is here!”

Out of the corner of her eye, Pam caught a glimpse through the living room window of something yellow streaking down the street. “Shi-” Pam exclaimed, catching herself just in time. She threw his school pants in his lap. “Get dressed. Hurry!”

As Jeremy fumbled with his pants, Pam hurried to the refrigerator and grabbed the lunchbag she had prepared for him last night. “Where's your backpack?” she demanded. Before he could answer, she found it under the table. She stuffed the lunchbag inside his backpack, then thrust it at Jeremy. “Pack your school stuff,” she commanded. “I'll get your shoes.”

Jeremy began frantically cramming his textbooks in his backpack. In his haste to grab his math notebook, he accidentally overturned a coffee mug, sending a torrent of fragrant black liquid onto the pages of his homework.

“Oh man!” Jeremy gasped. “Mrs. Tillman is gonna kill me!” He snatched the dripping pages and shook them a moment before dropping them back on the table. “Ouch, that's hot! Hot!” When blowing on his fingers didn't alleviate the pain, Jeremy took to waving his hands in the air... and knocked over the carton of juice. A flood of orange gushed across the table, thoroughly soaking the iPad before flowing over the edge of table and onto the floor.

“Oh man!” Jeremy repeated. “My mom is gonna kill me!”

Pam stared at the mess of spilled coffee and orange juice. A mere ten minutes ago, this space had been immaculate. “Never mind. I'll clean this up later,” she said to him through clenched teeth. Gingerly, she picked up the iPad and shook the orange juice off it. “Your homework will dry off if you let it hang in your locker.” She helped him put on his backpack while he crammed his feet into a pair of beat-up dress shoes. Pam noticed with dismay that his hair still stuck out in all directions. “Couldn't you at least have combed your hair?” she asked, licking her fingers and trying to fix his bedhead. “Forget it. Go, go! The bus is waiting at the corner!”

“Wait,” Jeremy said. “Have you seen my iPod? I need it becau-”

“Go!” Pam thundered, opening the front door. She watched as Jeremy began running for the bus stop. They had forgotten to zip his backpack so it flopped pitifully with each step. He was barely twenty feet from the door when she noticed he wasn't wearing socks.

“Fuck shit fuck!” Pam whirled and hurried to his bedroom. The school had a very strict dress code, and it was not uncommon for them to send home improperly attired students. Having forgotten about the mess in his room, Pam nearly broke her neck as she slipped on the aluminum foil that had unrolled across the room. She caught herself just in time to avoid a faceplant into the hardwood floor. Grabbing a pair of white socks from his dresser drawer, Pam dashed down the hallway toward the front door.
As she passed the breakfast table, she noticed his untouched bowl of Cheerios. “Aw, Christ...” she muttered. She opened a kitchen cupboard and grabbed the first thing she saw: a strawberry Pop-Tart. They were meant as a weekend treat (Kate frowned upon too much sugar), but surely this qualified as an emergency.

Barreling out the front door, Pam’s bare feet slapped painfully on the hard sidewalk as she sprinted to the bus stop. It was a spectacularly hot day for late August. The air, heavy with humidity, felt like jelly in her lungs. In the distance, she could see Jeremy about to climb aboard the waiting bus. “Jeremy, wait!” she shouted.

He turned around, surprised to see her. “Did you find my iPod?” he asked excitedly.

Pam, panting too hard to answer, instead held up the pair of socks. Along with the Pop Tart, she crammed them into his backpack and properly zipped it shut. “Put... on... socks... before... get... to... school...” she wheezed. “Eat too... kay?”

“Thanks Pam!” Jeremy said, climbing onto the bus. “Good remembering! My mom would be pretty mad if I got sent home with another principal's note.”

Pam was bent over, standing with her hands on her knees, but she managed a weak wave. “Oh crap...” A sudden realization hit her. “I didn’t change into regular clothes this morning.”

Embarrassed, she wondered how many people had seen the crazed woman, clutching socks and a Pop-Tart, sprinting after the school bus in her sleepwear. Not only that, but her reward for the twenty second sidewalk dash was a thin sheen of perspiration that made her form-fitting tank top cling to her body.

“Oh crap! I’m not wearing a bra either!”

Glancing up, Pam saw a row of curious faces watching her from the bus windows. There was a group of boys about Jeremy’s age who were ogling her, each one with barely suppressed grins. With as much dignity as she could muster, Pam brushed aside the matted hair that clung to her sweaty face and folded her arms across her front. It really didn't help that her chest was still heaving from being so out of breath. She was about to start walking back to the house when the bus driver called out to her.

“Have a good day!” he waved through the school bus door. Pam recognized the smirk on his face as the same one sported by the young boys. All she could do was nod in acknowledgment and fake the slightest smile. She was never so grateful to hear the engine squeal as the bus slowly pulled away.

Once she was safely ensconced behind the Praters’ front door in the air conditioned house, Pam could feel the sweat magically evaporate from her skin. It was as if she had just surfaced from a deep underwater dive. Her lungs savored the refreshing cool air. She took a moment to recover, then changed into her regular clothes.

Once she was properly attired in a pair of shorts and t-shirt, Pam turned her attention to the aftermath at the breakfast table. The situation was grim. The spilled coffee formed small puddles among the dishes while a slow trickle of orange juice dripped from the table to the floor. The sticky iPad appeared to be a lost cause, not even responding when she pressed the home button. Shaking her head, Pam set it aside and focused her attention on the rest of the mess. Soon there was a lurid collection of brown and orange napkins littering the table. Pam had just mopped up the last of the coffee when a stray teardrop fell on the table.

While this morning had been unusually hectic, the truth was that it wasn't too far off from any other day. After eight weeks of officially signing on as the nanny, Pam couldn't recall a single morning that
was calm and civilized. Every day started with drama and, if she were unlucky, ended with it too. Her hopes had been pinned on the start of the school year as a turning point but, if anything, things were even more difficult now.

Pam wiped her wet cheek with her wrist. “Buck up,” she told herself. Her to-do list was a long one today. Vacuuming. Meal prepping. More laundry. Dishes. Through the kitchen window, she could practically see the hazy heat rising from the ground. Pam made a mental note to water the garden and lawn as well.

She trudged downstairs to the laundry room, feeling in the dark for the light switch. The overflowing hamper of clothes seemed to mock her. In a way, she had brought these chores upon herself. Kate originally had subscribed to an extensive housekeeping service that Pam persuaded her to cancel. After all, didn't it make more sense for Pam to help out instead of sitting around all day? While part of her volunteered for altruistic reasons, Pam was ashamed to admit that she had an ulterior motive: she could be assured of more privacy with Jeremy if a housekeeping crew was not present.

And therein lay the greatest irony. In the eight weeks since she had moved in, there had been a long and frustrating dry spell. Absolutely nothing had happened between the two of them since the day of his birthday. It was as though a higher power had decided to downgrade their R-rated relationship to a family friendly G.

Babysitting Jeremy had been one thing. Living with him, she discovered, was an altogether different affair. As his babysitter, Pam had been the epitome of fun. His parents, feeling guilty about not spending enough time with their son, afforded him a great deal of leeway during babysitting time. Meals generally consisted of pizza while Jeremy was free to watch horror movies and stay up as late as he wanted.

But now that she was with him 24/7, the formula was completely reversed. All too often, Pam found herself in the role of the bad cop. She had to make him clean his room. She had to put her foot down when he wanted brownies for dinner. She had to remind him to hang up his towel after showering. She had to insist that he not wear the same pair of underwear. Day after day after day.

You learn a lot by living with someone. But none of this really should have come as a surprise. Pam had seen glimpses of Jeremy's stubbornness when she babysat him, but now she was experiencing it in its full force. Things went well when he applied himself, but that required a combination of motivation and authority that Pam hadn't figured out yet.

She turned on the washing machine and measured out a cupful of detergent. The reassuring white noise of running water filled the room. Pam tossed light colors aside for a separate load, then she carefully went through all the pockets before throwing the clothes in the machine. No matter how often she reminded him, Jeremy invariably forgot to empty his pockets before discarding his clothes in the laundry chute. Today, she found a pocket knife, four Jolly Ranchers (all watermelon flavored, his favorite), a crumpled $5 bill, his missing iPod, a dozen packets of pepper, and an inexplicable stack of Post-It notes with a different girl's name on each one.

Pam recognized the names as some of his classmates. There were at least a dozen names, each one scrawled in Jeremy's distinctive handwriting. Unable to contain her curiosity, Pam flipped through the stack of Post-Its, wondering if her name would be included. Nelly... Katie... Julie... Amanda... Kristin...

It was not. Ruefully, Pam closed the lid of the washing machine with a dull thud. Perhaps she was being a little silly with this jealousy and possessiveness of an eleven year old boy. “Who knows?” she thought to herself. “For all I know, this is a list of girls he hates.”
She returned to the kitchen to load up the dishwasher. Once she was done with that, Pam wondered what to serve for dinner that night. The fridge held an assortment of salad greens, a loaf of sandwich bread, homemade hummus, leftover grilled chicken, and a collection of fresh vegetables from the farmer's market. Tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers... Pam wondered if Jeremy would eat gazpacho.

After forty-five minutes of chopping, blending, and straining, Pam was carefully sliding an oversized bowl of rosy pink hued soup into the refrigerator. "There's one less thing to worry about," she thought gratefully. "And if he doesn't like it then he can eat my fist for dinner."

That was the image in her mind as she returned to Jeremy's bedroom to clean up the mess that had spilled from his closet. Perhaps this was the first sign, she thought, that things were never going to be the same. Before moving in, she never would have imagined smacking the kid. The mere thought would have filled her with revulsion. But now...

Pam began absentmindedly re-stacking his comic books into a tower in his closet. The covers invariably fell into two categories: "explosions and guns" or "muscles and cleavage". Sometimes all four. Dialogue seemed limited to either threats or promises. As she organized, she wondered if Jeremy had these arranged in any particular order. Avengers... Wolverine... Batman... X-Men... Playboy...

Pam stopped short. Playboy?

Though she couldn't help rolling her eyes, Pam felt a familiar twinge of affection. “That boy...” she thought, shaking her head. She dimly recalled Jeremy telling her a tale of finding his dad's secret stash of magazines. He must have swiped a few before William moved out. It had been years since she had looked at a Playboy. Picking one at random, she began thumbing through it. Nothing had changed really. Slim blonds. Perfect hair. Oversized breasts.

Pam imagined Jeremy surveying the hallway for her presence or his mom's before carefully closing the bedroom door. Then he would retrieve the Playboy from its hiding spot, maybe lie down on his bed and eagerly turn the pages with trembling fingers. Did it make him excited, looking at these naked women? Would he get an erection? Start touching himself?

Her eyes scanned the room before landing on his dresser where an innocent bottle of Coppertone stood, half-hidden behind his piggybank and a model airplane. Smiling, she returned the Playboy to the stack, making sure to properly hide it under a pile of comic books. Far from being jealous, the discovery reminded her of why things had blossomed between them in the first place. Wasn't that where it began? That day he peeked at her exposed midriff and she glimpsed the sexual curiosity in his eyes?

Pam was just finishing the closet cleanup when she glimpsed a thin black object wedged in the rear of the closet. Curious, she fished out an oversized photo frame covered in dust. Turning it over, Pam was surprised to see a familiar finger paint drawing in bright, bold colors. There were two stick figures, male and female, with the latter drawn a bit taller. In the corner was a happy sun face. And on either side of the figures were two palm prints, one labeled J and the other P.

Pam held her hand up to the larger palm print. She vividly remembered the day Jeremy painted this picture. He was six, and it was only the second time she had baby-sat him. She had giggled when she held out her hand and let him apply the necessary paint to make the palm print. She wondered whose idea it was frame the painting. This was the first time she had seen it since that day.

The familiar sound of the front door interrupted her thoughts. Pam thought it was Kate coming home early from the hospital, but then she heard two loud thumping noises followed by a sigh.
“Jeremy, how many times do I have to ask you? Please don't kick off your shoes and fling them at the wall. Look at this. You leave scuff marks every time you do that.”

“Sorry, mom.”

Surprised, Pam returned the framed painting to the closet and closed the door. Following the sound of their voices, Pam peered into the kitchen. Jeremy was digging in the refrigerator while Kate thumbed through the mail.

“Hi there, Pam,” greeted Kate. “Bet you didn’t expect us to be coming home right now.”

“I did not. Is everything okay?” Pam had a brief vision of Jeremy getting sent home for his non-compliant school uniform.

“They had to shut down the school!” Jeremy announced. “The AC was busted and they didn’t want us to sweat our brains out. What's for lunch?”

“They tried all morning to fix the school's air conditioning,” Kate explained. “This heat wave was too much for it and the system went down sometime last night.”

“Hey, how about this?” Jeremy asked, producing a box of frozen waffle fries.

“Put it back, Jeremy,” Pam and Kate said simultaneously. He pouted but did as he was told.

“So anyway,” Kate continued, “the principal decided the heat and humidity would be too much, especially for anyone on the second floor. The temperature is going to top 95 by the afternoon, so I suppose it was the right decision.”

“I don't mind the company. Care for some lunch?” Pam offered.

“I would like some lunch,” Jeremy volunteered.

They ignored him. “I'd love to, but I really should get back to the hospital,” said Kate. She reached for her iPad. “I wonder what the traffic is like right now...” Kate frowned as she repeatedly pressed the home button. “That's funny. Is this out of battery already? I thought I just charged it last night.”

While all this was happening, Pam observed Jeremy out of the corner of her eye. His hands had begun fidgeting when his mom picked up the iPad, followed by a guilty expression. Staring at the floor, Jeremy nervously cleared his throat.

“Um, mom?” he began. “Uh, so this morning...”

Pam cut in. “I was waiting for the right time to tell you, Kate. I had a little mishap this morning and spilled my orange juice on your iPad. I don't think it's working anymore. I'm sorry. I'll buy you a new one.” Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Jeremy’s surprised face.

“Oh no, Pam, don't worry about that,” Kate reassured her. “Accidents do happen.”

“Are you sure?” Pam asked. “I feel terrible about it.”

Kate waved her off. “Nonsense. This was an old model anyway and needed to be replaced. Quite frankly, I'm amazed the iPad made it this long without Jeremy breaking it.” She gave her son a sly elbow. “Right?”

“Ha, yeah,” Jeremy said. His laugh sounded completely forced but Kate didn't seem to notice.
“I better head out,” Kate said, picking up her purse. She gave Jeremy a hug. “Can you be a good boy for Pam? Remember, this is the time that she normally gets her peace and quiet.” She winked at Pam. “I’ll see the two of you tonight. Bye!”

Once she left, there was an uncomfortable silence in the house. Jeremy was leaning with his elbows on the counter, studying his hands. His face was inscrutable. For the first time, Pam couldn't tell what he was thinking.

“Do you mind waiting a bit for lunch?” Pam asked. “I need to take the clothes out of the dryer before they get wrinkled.”

“Sure,” he answered.

The clothes were still warm to the touch when she opened the dryer door. Pam folded as she retrieved them from the dryer. The cloying scent of clean laundry felt artificial yet comforting. Once she was done folding, Pam headed upstairs with the basketful of clothes.

When she entered Jeremy's room, he was sitting on his bed and looking out the window. Though he acknowledged her presence, his face still had the same expression as before. Unreadable. Pam said nothing and began putting away the folded clothes.

“Why did you tell my mom that you spilled the orange juice?” Jeremy asked finally.

Pam shrugged. She opened a drawer and deposited a stack of white t-shirts. “I don't know. I guess I didn't want you to get in trouble.”

There was a long pause. Pam began putting away socks rolled into misshapen balls. “Sorry I'm always, um, making a mess,” Jeremy said. “And thanks for, you know...” He blushed and avoided her gaze. “.... taking care of me all the time and stuff.”

Pam regarded him with surprise. Even though he was clearly embarrassed to say it, there was real sincerity behind his words. She couldn't recall Jeremy ever expressing any such sentiment before. “You're welcome,” she told him.

“You're not mad at me?” he asked, still not looking at her.

Instead of answering, Pam went to his closet. She saw a brief look of alarm on his face when she opened it, but his anxiety faded to relief when he saw her pull out the framed picture. “Remember this? I noticed it when I was looking for your school pants.” She sat down next to him on the bed. Wordlessly, Pam placed her hand over the larger palm print. Jeremy did the same over the smaller one. Whereas her hand still matched perfectly, Jeremy's own fingers extended far beyond the original hand print.

“Gosh. Look at how small my hand was.”

“I guess that's one way of looking at it. Or, you might say, look at how much your hand has grown up.” She looked at him and saw understanding flash behind his eyes. Together, they studied the drawing for a long moment. “I remember the day we made this,” Pam said, “but I didn't know it got placed in this fancy frame.”

“Yeah, my mom thought it was really cute so she framed it.”

“I never saw it hanging on the wall though.”

A sheepish look crossed his face. “I had it up for one day. But then Ashton and the other guys saw it.
and made fun of me for being friends with a girl. So I took it down and put it in the closet.”

“Right. Because you wouldn't want girl cooties or anything.” She meant it as a joke, but he didn't laugh. Instead, Jeremy rose to his feet and climbed onto his mattress. Carefully, he removed the framed Lamborghini poster that had hung over his bed. He then held out his hand to Pam. She handed him the framed drawing.

“There.” Once he hung it on the wall, Jeremy clambered down from his bed to look at his handiwork. “What do you think?”

“I like it,” Pam approved.

“Me too.”

Pam placed her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. “Hey,” she said, remembering a chore. “Want to help me set up the sprinklers? I think everything is wilting out there.” They stopped at the kitchen for some ice water before locating their flip-flops. A wall of heat greeted them the moment they crossed the threshold of the back door.

“Gosh, it feels like a sauna out here,” Pam commented. She was still carrying her water glass which had immediately formed a misty sheen of condensation on its surface. Inspecting the backyard weather vane, her jaw dropped. “Look at that. It's already 92 degrees, and it's not even noon yet. I feel like I'm melting.”

“Same,” Jeremy said. “It's too hot. Can I go back inside?”

“You said you would help,” she reminded. “This will only take a minute.”

“But it's so hot and gross out!”

“So take off your shirt.”

His face lit up as if she had handed him twenty dollars. He pulled his shirt off and tossed it onto a lawn chair. It hadn't even landed before he began fanning himself with his hands. Jeremy opened his mouth to speak, but instead checked himself.

Was this part of the new Jeremy, Pam wondered? One who wouldn't complain? One who would selflessly help out? Wanting to test it out, she picked up the coiled garden hose and handed it to him. “Come on,” she said. “We'll set up the sprinklers out front first.” She headed for the front yard leaving Jeremy in tow with the heavy garden hose.

The truth was that it would have been difficult even for her to carry it. Every so often, she would glance back at Jeremy to find him struggling with effort. He tried carrying it in his arms at first, but the hose proved too heavy. Then he switched to dragging it behind him, but then the hose interfered with his feet, causing him to trot along in baby steps. Meanwhile, Pam merely clinked the ice cubes in her glass and gratefully took sips of her cold water.

Even once Pam reached the front outdoor faucet, Jeremy was a good thirty seconds behind her. His face was red with exertion and his body covered in a shimmering sweat. “Thanks buddy,” Pam told him. “I would have helped with the hose but my shoulder kind of hurts today. I think it was from carrying all that laundry.” Jeremy's lips were pursed in a grumpy scowl, but he just nodded.

Pam was enjoying herself. Wondering how far she could take it, she supervised the watering effort, asking Jeremy several times to adjust the sprinkler and then turn on the water. Each iteration forced him to trot the length of the yard as he had to turn off the water each time before adjusting the
sprinkler. To his credit, Jeremy still did not complain.

Perhaps it was this new, responsible Jeremy that created the need for her to compensate in a juvenile fashion. Feeling mischievous, Pam set down her glass of water and fished out a handful of ice cubes. “Hey Jeremy, come here a second...” He turned to face her. With a deft motion of her free hand, she yanked at the waistband of his shorts and deposited the icy handful inside his underwear.

He didn't realize what was happening at first. “Hey! What are you-- AHHH!” Jeremy's eyes went wide as the ice cubes made contact with his boy area. Pam smiled smugly, partly from his yelping surprise and partly from the glimpse she had seen inside his underwear.

“Cold, cold, cold!” Jeremy chanted, his feet dancing in a frantic pattern. His frenetic movements only made it more difficult to extract the ice cubes. It took him several tries. At first he merely tossed them into the grass but the last ice cubes were unceremoniously flung at Pam.

“Be quiet!” he ordered as she laughed uncontrollably. He became even angrier when the flying ice cubes missed her completely. Pam had already moved a safe distance away after depositing her payload.

“Oh gross!” she said, pretending to inspect an ice cube lying in the grass. “That was touching your penis!” The look of chagrin on Jeremy's face only made her laugh harder. She stopped though when she him grab a water gun lying beneath the picnic table.

“I'm going to get you!” he announced. Pam shrieked and ran off as he began chasing her around the yard. She initially did a fine job evading him, but Jeremy eventually cornered her near the rose bushes and let her have it.

“Agh! Quit it, brat!” She shielded herself with her hands, but Jeremy had already landed several shots on her neck and shirt. “Gross. The water in your gun is all warm from sitting out in the sun.”

“Ha, good!” Jeremy exclaimed. He fired again, landing several shots directly on her face. The sensation of the warm water landing on her face reminded her of something else entirely.

“How come your face is all red?” Jeremy asked.

“Because it's so hot out,” Pam lied. “Quit screwing around, will you?”

“You started it.”

“Fine, now we're even. Here, take the hose out to the flower bed. I'll unwind it as you go.” She handed him the end of the hose that had the sprinkler attached. Dutifully, Jeremy jammed the water gun into his pocket and did as she requested.

“Okay,” he called, setting the sprinkler down near the flowers. He moved a safe distance from the sprinkler. “Go ahead.”

Pam turned on the water. There was a whoosh of pressure as the water began flowing through the hose. Sputtering in protest, the sprinkler gave out a spray of fine droplets before it began rotating. “Do I need to turn it up more?” she asked.

“Maybe a little bit,” answered Jeremy.

She turned the faucet some more, allowing a stronger flow of water through the hose. Pam rested her hand on the shutoff valve. The cold water had chilled the metal spigot until it felt icy. The cool sensation against her skin planted a brilliant idea in her mind. She quickly turned off the water,
causing the sprinkler to abruptly stop. Jeremy had been intently watching the hypnotizing spray pattern but now he turned to her in surprise.

“Hey!” he said. “What happened?”

“I don't know,” Pam shrugged. She pretended to inspect the faucet. “The water is still on. Is there something wrong with the sprinkler?”

“I'll check,” Jeremy called.

Pam waited until he was kneeling next to the sprinkler, inspecting it so carefully that his face was only a few inches away. She quickly calculated how long it would take the water pressure to build up again. She turned the valve and asked him, “Hey Jeremy! Are you hot?”

“Yeah, are you kidding? I'm totally...” She timed it just right. Jeremy's next words were cut short as the sprinkler gushed back to life, soaking his face and bare chest. Jeremy yelped, leaping to his feet and stumbling while the sprinkler strafed ice-cold water across his shorts. Pam's laugh rang across the yard.

“You're so dead!” Jeremy shouted, dashing toward her as he drew his water gun.

But Pam was prepared for this contingency. “Oh, you think I'm worried about these baby squirts of warm water from your gun?” she mocked. She waited until he was less than ten feet away before pulling her hand from behind her back, producing a second hose with a watering nozzle attached.

Jeremy had been running at her full speed but he now skidded to a halt. “Wait, don't you dare-” He didn't get to complete his sentence as Pam let him have it. By the time she was done, Jeremy was dripping wet from head to toe. And mad as a bull.

“Give me that hose!” he demanded. They wrestled over it for a moment, their fumbling causing the water to randomly turn on.

“Ah!” Pam winced as a spray of cold water doused her midsection. Jeremy gripped her wrist with one hand while the other pried at her fingers. She often forgot how surprisingly strong he could be for an eleven year old. Clearly losing the battle, Pam decided to retreat. As she dashed away, Jeremy managed to spray a fleeting shot at her backside that soaked her shorts. Taking refuge around the corner of the house, Pam caught her breath. The water was cold at first, but she had to admit it was refreshing given the hot sun and sticky air.

Cautiously, she peeked around the corner of the house. Jeremy was waiting though. She ducked away just in time as a spray of water landed right where her face had been. “Um, okay,” she called around the corner. “How about a cease-fire?”

“No way!” Jeremy shouted. “I'm soaked through and you're still completely dry!”

“That's not true! You got my legs wet. And the front of my shirt.”

“You're going to be dripping wet by the time I'm done with you,” Jeremy declared. Pam giggled. The double entendre was lost Jeremy but not on her. Her amusement only served to annoy him though. “You're not going to be laughing once I get you,” he threatened.

“Well, I don't see how you're going to do that. I'm not coming around this corner.” She paused as she recognized another pun. "And I know you don't have enough hose to get me.”

“Stop laughing!” he ordered.
“Come on, Jeremy,” she reasoned. “You don’t want to stay out here all day, do you? Let’s go have lunch.” He didn’t respond. “Jeremy? Are you still there?” Pam waited a moment before peeking around the corner again. To her surprise, she saw the hose lying on the grass. In the distance, the sprinkler still cheerfully puttered away. Jeremy was nowhere to be seen.

“Uh, hello?” she said, taking a guarded step forward. There weren’t any other outdoor faucets in the yard, so Pam knew she was relatively safe. He probably still had his water gun, but she wasn’t terribly concerned about that. She crept to the sun porch and peeked inside. Nothing. Pam was about to give up when she noticed a telltale trail of spilled water leading up the stairs to the deck above her.

“Oh no...” Now it was Pam’s turn to realize too late what was happening. Looking upward, she caught a glimpse of Jeremy on the deck just before he dumped a bucket of water on her.

“Ha ha! I can’t believe you fell for that!” Jeremy cackled in glee. He hurried down the stairs to rejoin her at ground level. “Did you really not know I was up there? You weren’t just playing along, right?”

Pam used her fingers to push her dripping hair off her forehead. “I was not playing along,” she told him. “Are we even yet?”

“I guess so,” said Jeremy. “This is fun though. Want to keep going with the water fight?”

“Let’s not and say we did,” Pam said. They were both soaked now. Jeremy’s shorts clung translucent to his body, affording her a view of his skinny frame.

Pam felt an unpleasant trickle descending the small of her back.

“I’m starving,” Jeremy said. “Let’s have lunch.”

“Whoa there,” Pam stopped him. “You’re dripping wet.”

“I’ll get towels for both of us,” Jeremy offered.

“But you’ll still get water all over the clean floor. Plus?” She pointed at his bare feet covered in mud and grass clippings. “You’re not going in the house like that. I just mopped yesterday.”

“Maybe I should get my skateboard from the garage,” Jeremy said thoughtfully, “and then I’ll just roll to the hall closet. I could use a broom to propel myself. My feet won’t even touch...”

“I do not approve of that plan,” Pam interrupted. “Look, with this kind of heat, it should only take maybe twenty minutes for us to dry off.”

“Twenty minutes? But I’m hungry now!”

“All right, all right, don’t lose your cool,” Pam conceded. “Maybe we could wring the water out of our clothes too. That should speed up the process.”

“That’s your plan?” Jeremy asked doubtfully. “I like my skateboard idea better.”

“Forget the skateboard,” Pam rolled her eyes. The feel of wet clothes against her skin was driving her crazy. As she began stripping off her soaked clothing, it occurred to Pam that there was a time when she would have thought twice before undressing in front of Jeremy.

Though that day was long past, Pam still felt a forbidden shiver the moment she tossed aside her wet t-shirt. It was the same feeling she had when she was buying condoms at age seventeen, even though she was no longer a virgin. In no time at all, she was standing in her bra and panties in the backyard.
Jeremy, however, was reluctantly standing idle. “What's the holdup?” she asked as she wrung out her clothes.

“What if someone sees us?”

Pam looked around. The Prater's backyard was enclosed by a fence on one side and tall hedges on the other, so they had a reasonable semblance of privacy. “No one is going to see you. Trust me.”

Despite her assurance, Jeremy hesitated. He kept glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. Pam realized her nipples were visible through the wet cotton of her bra, as was the dark outline of pubic hair in her panties. She pretended not to notice his attention.

“Um, are you going to take off your underwear too?” Jeremy asked.

“Why? Do you want me to?” Her question made him blush. Pam pretended to frown as she unraveled her t-shirt that was now mangled from being wrung so hard. “No, Jeremy, I'm not taking off my underwear,” she told him, concealing the disappointment in her voice.

Jeremy reluctantly hooked his thumbs into his waistband. He turned away so his back was facing her and even then she saw him look over his shoulder to make sure she wasn't looking at him. Only then did he slowly slide out of his wet shorts. “Can you squeeze the water out of mine?” he asked.

“Sure, bring them here,” Pam said.

Instead he just held out his arm, his back still facing her. “Can you just take them?”

They were separated by a good ten feet. Pam was mystified by his behavior but she humored him anyway. But even once she was standing next to him and wringing out his shorts, Jeremy still took great care to be facing away from her. Once she was done with the clothes, Pam arranged them on the sunny picnic table to dry.

“Come on, let's get into the shade before you get sunburned,” she said, tapping his shoulder since she couldn't see his face. “We can sit under the porch.”

“Okay.”

Pam started walking. After a few steps, she turned to say something only to find him several paces behind her. The moment he saw her turn to face him, Jeremy shamefully cupped his hands to his crotch. He was so embarrassed that it even made Pam uncomfortable. Saying nothing, she entered the screened-in porch that overlooked the backyard.

Though it was a relief to be sheltered from the blazing sun, Pam could still feel the sweat unpleasantly dripping from her every pore. She seated herself on a cushioned lounge chair. Jeremy waited for her to sit down first before deliberately choosing a seat that was slightly behind her. “You don't even want to sit next to me, I see,” Pam commented.

“I'd just rather sit back here is all,” he said.

She couldn't figure out what was going on. “Are you okay, Jeremy?” she asked, turning in her chair so she could see him. He hands still cupped his crotch, although his eyes zeroed in on her wet bra.

“I'm fine,” he insisted.

Pam studied her nails. She could feel his eyes lingering. “Jeremy, if there's something bothering you, you can always tell me you know.”
He was silent for a long moment. “You promise you won't make fun of me?”

“Promise.”

“Okay.” He paused again. “Um, do you think you could face away from me?”

Pam decided to humor him. She settled into the lounge chair in her original position. Now she was looking out the window and he was behind her. “Like this?” she asked.

“Yeah.” His disembodied voice sounded strange in the echoey porch. “I guess it... is it, um, normal for me to... I mean for it... For it to... you know... get, uh, hard all the time?”

He stumbled over his words so much that Pam felt a great burst of pity for him. “Jeremy... of course that's normal.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Pam couldn't resist a follow-up question. “Did it happen again? Just now?”

Jeremy hesitated before answering quietly. “Yeah.”

“It's nothing to be ashamed of. It happens to all guys.” It was strange having conversation where she couldn't see him. Pam felt like a psychologist.

“But why does it happen even when I don't want it to?”

It dawned on her that Jeremy's sexual inexperience was greater than she had imagined. She had known for a long time that he masturbated. (Quite frequently, too, judging by all the times she sniffed the telltale scent of Coppertone on him.) Combined with the Victoria's Secret catalogs under his mattress and the Playboys in his closet, she assumed he was well-versed in the realm of sex. Guilt crept into the back of her mind as Pam realized she had perhaps been pushing him too far, too fast.

“It happens because your body is responding naturally to, um, you know... the things it finds exciting.” Now it was Pam's turn to stammer over her words. The last thing she had been expecting was to give Jeremy the sex talk. “Guys even joke about it. Getting hard when they see a pretty girl.”

“Oh.” He processed that thought for a moment. “But sometimes it happens when I'm, like, I don't know... doing homework. Or playing a video game. Or when I wake up.”

Unable to help herself, Pam kept blushing as he mentioned each instance of getting an erection. Suddenly, she was glad that he couldn't see her either. “That's normal too. It just happens sometimes. Again, nothing to be embarrassed about. It's perfectly natural.”

“I don't know. It's really embarrassing when it happens at school. What if someone sees?”

“That's true. I suppose it's different if you're in public.” Pam pondered her next words carefully. “But you know... if it's just me, you really shouldn't be embarrassed. You don't have to cover it up.”

“How come...” Jeremy trailed off. “But, um, how come you always stare at it?”

“I'm sorry,” she apologized. “I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. It's just...” She struggled to explain herself. “Sometimes... sometimes you stare at me too. Don't you?” His silence answered the question.

“And that's fine if you do,” Pam continued. “I don't mind. But I think you like it, right? Looking at me, I mean.”
“Yeah, I guess so.”

“It's the same thing. I like looking at you too,” Pam confided.

“Does it make you feel guilty though?”

Only because you're less than half my age, Pam thought to herself. Instead, she said. “Not really. You feel guilty about looking at me?”

“Well, I guess it's the same feeling I get when... You know that one time Ashton and I found my dad's magazines? It's like I’m looking at something I shouldn't be looking at. Or like... Do you believe in God?”

Pam was speechless. That was the last thing she expected him to say. “Um, I'm not sure,” Pam answered lamely. “Why do you ask?” It was unfathomable where he was going with this line of questioning. As far as she knew, Kate and William did not regularly attend any church services, except for the dutiful pilgrimage on Christmas Day. And despite the dress code, Jeremy's private school was strictly non-denominational.

“Do you ever wonder if, like, God makes bad things happen? I mean, if we're not being good?”

“You mean like earthquakes and tornadoes and floods?”

“Well, sort of,” Jeremy said. “I just sometimes wonder if my parents, you know... getting divorced was God letting something bad happen because of, um, me. And the, uh, stuff I do.”

The puzzle pieces fell into place in Pam's head. It was clear where the young boy was trying to steer the conversation. “Stuff you do,” she repeated. “Like when you look at those magazines?”

“Yeah.”

Pam paused to gather her thoughts. Jeremy was understandably confused and insecure about sex. After all, he was only eleven years old. Pam recalled the same turbulent questions tumbling in her head at that age. It was a difficult time for her. Sensing an opening, Pam ventured, “I've never told anyone this before... but when I was your age, I remember thinking the same thing. I would be, you know, alone in my room. Doing things. And wondering if God was watching.”

“What kind of things were you doing?” Jeremy asked.

“You know... girl stuff. Things that no one else knew I was doing. Does that make sense?”

“Yes.” He was silent. Pam could only imagine what was going through his head as he thought of her as a young girl, alone in her bedroom. Jeremy cleared his throat. “So you think it's true?” he asked. “Did bad things happen to you? You think God really does punish people?”

“Not at all, Jeremy,” she said. “First of all, I don't think that's the way God works. It took me a long time to figure that out.” She paused to let that thought sink in. “Second of all, that stuff I was doing alone in my room? There wasn't anything wrong with doing that at all. I wasn't being bad or sick or evil. I wish someone had told me that. Because that's a message I really could have taken to heart.”

Jeremy didn't say anything. Pam knew from experience that this was a good sign; he was quietly digesting what she said. If he hadn't been listening, he would have changed the subject by now.

“So I shouldn't feel guilty about anything?” he asked.
“Exactly. Not about your parents' divorce. Not about what you do in your room.”

“Not about looking at you…” Jeremy volunteered.

“And not about getting hard from it,” Pam finished for him. Her comment made him audibly fidget in his chair behind her.

“Um, okay,” he said. “Are you sure it doesn't bother you? Whenever we joke about, um, boners at school, the girls always get annoyed and grossed out.”

“That's just because they're too young to understand,” Pam said. “It probably doesn't help that you guys are being complete dorks about it. But no, it doesn't bother me at all when you get hard. And besides…” Pam's heart fluttered a bit. “Okay, I'm going to be perfectly honest with you. I like it when you stare at me. And get hard. I think it's a compliment.”

“Really?”

“Sure. It means you think I'm a pretty girl.”

“Oh.”

Pam's eyes narrowed. Though she couldn't see him, she could hear the hesitation in his voice. “You do think I'm pretty, don't you?”

“Sure.”

She was annoyed by the lack of conviction in his voice. “Say it like you mean it,” Pam ordered.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” She tapped her fingers impatiently.

She heard him fidgeting again. “Yes, I think you're, um, pretty.”

“Why, thank you, Jeremy. That's very nice of you to say.”

“Uh, you're welcome.”

Pam sat up in her chair and stretched. Glancing at Jeremy, she found him curled up in his chair in a half-fetal position with his arms loosely wrapped around his bare legs. “Well, I'm just about dried off,” she said. “Want to go back inside the house and get cleaned off?”

“Actually,” Jeremy began. “I kind of had one more question. I mean, if you don't mind.”

“What's up?”

“Um, you know when you were talking about being my age and being alone in your room?”

“Yes?”

“Did you mean…” Jeremy shyly avoided her eyes and looked out the window. “Did you mean you were, like, uh… touching yourself?”

She couldn't keep a small smile from forming. Pam nodded.

Laughing nervously, Jeremy said, “Oh, okay. I guess I didn't know girls... you know. Touched
themselves too.”

Pam gave him a knowing look. “Oh, come on, Jeremy. Don’t you remember that day we went on a hike? And you locked yourselves in those handcuffs?” She certainly remembered every vivid detail of that day. “I told you. Everyone does it. Even me.”

“Oh yeah,” Jeremy said. His fingers anxiously pawed at a grass stain on his knee. Still not looking at her, he added, “Um, I guess I always wondered how girls did it.”

She had unwittingly walked straight into his trap. Clever boy, Pam thought to herself. “Oh!” she said, playing along. “I suppose I could show you, but... I don't know if I should.”

“You said it was nothing to be guilty about,” Jeremy pointed out.

When on earth did Jeremy become this Machiavellian genius? She almost wondered if he had been playing her all along. Still pretending to waffle, Pam put on her best fake pout. “I know what I said. It's just that... I've never done it in front of anyone before. It would be embarrassing.”

“I promise I won't laugh or anything.” Jeremy was now sitting up straight with his hands in his lap, doing his best impression of a well-behaved schoolboy.

“You promise not to tell anyone?” Pam asked. He answered by zipping his lips shut. Pam stood and reached behind her back. “My bra hasn't totally dried off yet,” she explained, “and it's driving me crazy. You don't mind if I take it off, do you?” Jeremy shook his head as she unclasped her bra. The wet fabric had encased her breasts in an unpleasant dampness but now there was the liberating sensation of air moving over her skin. Unpeeling her panties from her hips produced an equally luxurious feel.

Jeremy's eyes were glued to her naked body. “That's much better,” she said, stretching her arms over her head in an unabashed display of skin. She had gotten a crick in her neck from the chair so she tilted her head to and fro. “Are you getting hard again, Jeremy?”

His embarrassment snapped him out of his reverie. Blushing, Jeremy instinctively moved his hands to cover his crotch, earning himself a stern glance from Pam. Sheepishly, he stared at the floor for a moment. It took a visible effort, but he eventually managed to sit back with his hands at his sides.

“Good boy,” Pam said as she appraised the bold protrusion jutting from his underpants. Idly continuing the show, she brushed her hair with her fingers before gathering it into a ponytail. Then Pam bent over to wipe away some dried grass and flecks of mud on her legs. It felt wonderful to be freed of her clothes, especially with the humid air.

Pam noticed a funny expression crossing Jeremy's face. Without realizing it, her fingers had wandered to her nipples and begun lightly massaging them, which caught the young boy's attention. Feeling self-conscious but not stopping, Pam explained, “It feels good when I touch them like this.”

“Oh,” Jeremy nodded. “I didn't know it feels good when you touch your... um, boobs.” Pam smiled. Sometimes he said the cutest things.

Plotting her next move, she rearranged her lounge chair until it was directly facing Jeremy. She sat down primly, keeping her knees together. The rough weave of the linen cushions offered just the right amount of traction to her bare bum as Pam settled into the seat, stretching out her legs but keeping her knees together. She was now so comfortably reclined that her chin almost touched her chest. From this vantage point, the rounded globes of her breasts fell to either side of her chest, rising and falling with her breath.
Throughout all this, Jeremy's gaze had remained intently fixed on her. Pam had almost forgotten what it was like to command his undivided attention. Reminding herself to breathe, she continued the lesson. “Girls like it when you touch like this.” She demonstrated for him, twirling a finger around her pink areola and then kneading her breast. Though he didn't say a word, Pam could practically see the cogs turning in the eleven year old boy's head as he watched. The thought of being his teacher made her feel delightfully warm inside.

“Want me to show you how else girls like to be touched?”

Jeremy nodded.

Her heart was racing again. Should she really show him? In spite of everything they had done together so far, this was taking things to a whole new level. Casually resting her elbows on the armrest, Pam slowly, ever so slowly, parted her knees. Inch by inch. Jeremy leaned forward. She let him stare for a long minute. Pam reached between her legs, not at all surprised to find a copious amount of moisture. Holding her breath, she dragged a lazy finger across her lips, savoring the feel of friction against her inflamed clit. She wanted to keep touching, but reminded herself that this was supposed to be educational. Using two hands, Pam spread herself open. She had never done that before for anyone, let alone a boy who decidedly fell into the minor leagues.

Pam cleared her throat. For the first time since she undressed, Jeremy's attention returned to her face. “See, this right here?” she asked, tapping with a finger. “That's my...” Pam hesitated before continuing. “That's my clit, Jeremy,” she said. The mere act of vocalizing the sentence made her ache with longing. “Do you see it?”

“Um, yeah,” he said. “I see it.”

“When a girl touches herself, that's what she likes to touch.” She dipped a finger to take advantage of the wetness seeping from her pink flower. Now properly armed, Pam began tracing little circles around her swollen clit. “See? Just like this.” After a few seconds, Pam stopped touching herself and moved her hands to her knees. She pretended to scratch an itch, but the truth was that she could already feel herself on the verge of an orgasm.

“So that's, um...” he paused, evidently having trouble forming words. Even though she had stopped touching, Pam still kept her feet flat on the floor and her knees far apart, as if she were offering herself up to him. “So if you keep on touching like that, will you...” He couldn't continue.

Pam nodded, unable to keep the sly grin from her face. “Did you want me to show you that too?”

“Yes, please,” he said, remembering his manners.

"All right. I'll do it, but only because you asked so nicely.” Very deliberately, Pam began masturbating in front of the eleven year old boy. They were arranged so close together that Pam could have straightened her knee and poked his shin with her toes. A mood of illicit activity now shrouded the sun porch.

Pam had never felt so aroused in all her life. A powerful swell rippled across her body, making her back arch. Her clit felt like a hard pearl rolling between her fingers. Jeremy’s watchful gaze was a powerful aphrodisiac. It was amazing to be watching him as he watched her. The erection in his underwear was never more obvious as Jeremy obediently sat with his hands at his sides.

Pam's breathing grew uneven as hints of a powerful orgasm tugged insistently at her core. Knowing it wouldn't be much longer, Pam squeezed her breast, tweaking her nipple so hard that it made her
gasp. Jeremy looked at her in surprise, but she didn't stop what she was doing. Pam spread her legs as wide as possible. She wanted to be facing him when she came. She wanted him to see her leg muscles throbbing in anticipation. She wanted him to see her breasts, to see her touching her nipples. She wanted him to see her fingers dancing furiously between her legs. She wanted him to see the look on her face when…

“Oh… Ohhh goddd…” Pam moaned. All the pent-up frustration over the last few weeks burst forth in a magnificent explosion of pleasure. It was so intense that she felt the need to close her eyes. But she resisted, eager to see Jeremy's reaction to his first female orgasm. Pam was not disappointed. His face displayed pure expressions of curiosity, wonderment, and... desire.

Desire. The clear arousal on Jeremy's face made the moment even sweeter. Her hips jerked uncontrollably. Her breath came in heavy gasps. “Oh god,” Pam repeated, expertly milking every last remaining drop of pleasure from the orgasm. Overwhelmed by the need for a physical connection, Pam extended her leg until her foot rested atop his.

“Um, are you okay?” Jeremy asked with genuine concern.

She laughed, curling her toes so that they massaged his foot. “I'm fine. It just felt really nice.” She smiled at him. “Did I satisfy your curiosity? What did you think?”

Jeremy nodded vigorously. “Yeah, it was really, um, neat,” he said, clearly unsure of how to describe what he had just seen. “I guess I didn't expect it to be... Um, it was all like, 'Arrrrgh!' and stuff.” He spastically waved his hands and arms in an effort to explain.

“Is that what I looked like?” Pam asked, half-amused and half-offended.

“Well, no. I just mean... I guess mine aren't like that. I almost thought you were having a seizure.”

“I see,” Pam said thoughtfully. “You know, it's been so long that I forgot what yours are like.”

It took him a moment to understand what she was hinting at. “Oh, you mean you want me to, like, show you?”

“It's only fair. After all, I just showed you.”

“Well, I guess I could. If you really want me to,” he dithered. “But I don't have any Coppertone.”

“I'll get it for you. I'm mostly dried off now.” Once inside the house, Pam quickly dashed to his room and grabbed the Coppertone from his dresser. It felt strange being completely naked in the common areas of the Prater house. Before returning to the sun porch, however, she lapsed back to a casual stroll.

“That was fast,” Jeremy commented.

“You're welcome,” she answered, handing him the bottle. Pam sat down, crossed her legs and waited. But Jeremy didn't move. “It might be easier if you took off your underwear,” she offered.

“Oh right,” Jeremy said. He stood up but hesitated as he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his underwear. Pam nodded with encouragement. Pulling off his underwear, Jeremy's eyes remained glued to the floor. The sight of Jeremy wiggling out of his underwear made Pam light-headed. His penis, finally free, sprung up and down like a horizontal flagpole.

Sitting back down, Jeremy retrieved the bottle of Coppertone and self-consciously squirted some into the palm of his hand. Pam tried to play it cool, but she found it difficult not to ogle. Though Jeremy
had furtively masturbated next to her that night in the backyard camp-out, this was the first time she
would get to see up close what the eleven year old boy normally did in private. Despite the pleasant
masturbation session that she had just performed for Jeremy, Pam could feel her excitement rising
once again.

But her growing arousal was not matched by Jeremy. To her surprise, she noticed his erection
seemed to be fading. Pam had been so focused on the rest of his body that she didn't notice the
embarrassed blush that had tinted his cheeks and ears. “Are you okay Jeremy?”

“I'm fine,” he said unconvincingly. “I just feel a little, um... I don't know. You really want to watch
me do this?” The puddle of Coppertone waited forlornly in his cupped hand.

Too fast, she realized. She was pushing him too fast. “It's all right,” she reassured him. “You don’t
have to if you don't want to. I'm sorry I... Sorry.” An overwhelming guilt made her feel very small
inside.

“It's just that, you know, I've never done it in front of anyone before.”

“I know. I understand.” Pam knew it was time to stop. Get dressed and maybe have some lunch. But
she couldn't let it go. “Do you want me to do it for you?” she asked hopefully.

“Okay,” he agreed. “If you don't mind.”

“It would be an honor.” Pam knelt next to his chair. The hard floorboards of the sun porch bit into
her knees, but she didn't care. Taking his wrist, Pam carefully transferred the Coppertone from his
hand into hers. “We don't want to waste this, right?” she asked. Jeremy obediently held out his
overturned hand as she scraped clean every last bit of Coppertone. His eyes briefly met hers. Pam
fought the urge to kiss him. This simple, harmless act was somehow imbued with a great deal of
intimacy.

Her hand now armed with the fragrant and slippery liquid, Pam gently laid her palm atop his crotch.
His penis was soft and wriggly at first but it required only a minute of insistent movement before
Pam felt a familiar hardness pressing back against her hand. “Is this okay?” she asked him.

Jeremy nodded. Pam let her thumb run alongside the length of his erection, causing Jeremy to flinch.
She paused her ministrations. “It's all right,” he told her. “It's just been a while and it feels, like, I
don't know. Different.”

Pam began touching him again, taking care to use a lighter touch. “Been a while?” she repeated.
“How long of a while do you mean?”

“Um...” Jeremy seemed embarrassed. “I guess since my birthday.”

Pam was shocked. “You mean when I did it for you? That was months ago.”

He nodded. “I would start doing it. I would, you know, get the Coppertone out. But then I always
stopped because of the guilt.”

She felt a great pity for him, followed by compassion. Pam had no idea he had been wrestling so
much with this guilt over masturbation. His mood swings over the past several weeks suddenly made
sense. “Does this feel okay?” Pam asked him.

“Yeah.”

Pam's open palm was barely making any contact, but she could feel Jeremy's erection pressing
eagerly against her hand. Over two months had passed since his birthday, and Pam wanted to make up for all the lost time he had spent stewing in his preteen guilt and confusion. Her hand waved left and right, left and right, left and right, determined to give him the sexual release he had been craving.

She didn't have to wait long. Barely thirty seconds had passed when Jeremy took a deep breath. "Pam?" he began.

He didn't have to say more. With that single word, his voice had palpably quivered with excitement and uncertainty. "It's okay," she assured him. "It's all right. Take my hand. I want you to." His hand clenched down hard on hers as she waved him off. "I want you to, I want you to...."

Jeremy's body seemed to crumple. A series of tremors undulated across his abdomen, causing him to clutch at the chair's armrest with a gangly arm. His other hand squeezed Pam so tight that she would have yelped in pain had she not been swimming in arousal. Nothing separated her skin from his except a thin layer of Coppertone. "Good boy..." she breathed. "That's my good boy." His erection pulsed powerfully against her palm, giving her a tantalizing hint of the male strength he had yet to grow into.

Pam knew she could never tire of watching him come. His head turned to the side, burying his chin against his twitching shoulder. The sound of Jeremy's rapid breaths punctuated the silence of the sun porch. Even though he wasn't yet finished, Pam found herself immediately thinking of the next orgasm she would be giving him. They had both gotten lost in the past couple weeks, but Pam felt a great deal of hope now. Patience and perseverance, she reminded herself, would pay off in the end.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sending the good vibes, everyone. I just sorta need the affirmation that I'm not (too) crazy.
Pam lounged comfortably in the reclining armchair. It was a quiet Wednesday night, made all the more cozy as Whiskers purred in her lap while she read a magazine. She had spent the last twenty minutes engrossed in an article about BASE jumping. Who wouldn't want to don a flimsy wing-suit, jump from a great height, and have a friend film the ensuing aftermath? Granted, most jumpers landed intact, but there was also a man whose girlfriend captured still photos of his last moments before he crashed landed. A shiver ran down her spine.

Gentle wisps of steam wafted from her mug of cinnamon tea, reminding her to drink it before it got cold. The ceramic cup felt pleasingly warm in her hands, especially in contrast to the wind that rattled the bare tree branches outside the window. As much as she enjoyed autumn, Pam always had a hard time adjusting to the fading sunlight and early darkness. After reading the article, however, she took a moment to be grateful of the Prater's warm living room instead of BASE jumping from a sheer cliff.

Behind her, there was the sound of a door opening. “Hello! I'm home,” a voice called.

“Hi Kate,” Pam answered.

“I was hoping to get home in time for dinner,” she said. “Did I make it?” Kate entered the living room, still wearing her blue scrubs.

“Sorry, not tonight,” Pam said. “Jeremy was hungry so I told him we could have an early dinner if he finished his homework first.”

Kate flopped into an armchair. “Oh, that feels good,” she sighed. “Did he go to Ashton's house? It's so quiet in here.”

“No, he's here.” Pam cocked her ear. “I think I just heard him get out of the shower.”

Kate propped her head on a fist. “Honestly, Pam... I have to ask. How do you do it?”

Pam set aside her magazine. “Do what?”

“This,” Kate said, gesturing about the room. “I come home and not only have you already eaten dinner, but the kitchen looks spotless. My kid already did his homework. He took his shower at...” Kate consulted her watch. “At eight o'clock? That's got to be a new record.”

Pam looked at her blankly. “I still don't understand.”

“Let me ask you this: what did you have for dinner?”

“Let's see,” Pam scratched her head, trying to recall something that happened less than two hours ago. “Um... Oh right, we finished the curried chickpea from yesterday. And then we topped it off with some udon noodles with chicken and shiitake.”
Kate laughed. “See? That's exactly what I mean. Let me describe how things would be if it were me in your shoes.” She began ticking off a list on her fingers. “One, Jeremy would be pleading for peanut butter sandwiches and Gatorade for dinner. Two, he would be, I don't know, lighting his carpet on fire instead of doing his homework. Three, it would be exactly two minutes before 10 P.M. until he agreed to get ready for bed.”

“Oh, it wouldn't be that bad,” Pam smiled.

“And four,” Kate continued, “the house would look like a hurricane just hit. Instead it looks like you just had Martha Stewart over for a visit.”

“It's not that clean if you look carefully,” Pam reassured her. “I made Jeremy vacuum in here and I'll probably have to do it again myself.”

Kate chuckled ruefully. “I know you're trying to make me feel better, but it's not working. I could wave a $50 dollar bill in his face but Jeremy still wouldn't help with housework. How do you get him to be so good?”

The cup of tea in her hands trembled, just a tiny bit. Pam quickly set it down. “Well, you know, Jeremy is growing up,” she pointed out. “He's not a little kid anymore.”

Right on cue, Jeremy strolled into the living room. His hair, still wet from his shower, was slicked back and he had changed into his pajamas. “Are you guys talking about me?” he asked.

“Actually yes,” his mom told him. “We were just discussing how you had blossomed into such a responsible young man.” She frowned. “Jeremy, your pajama pants are inside out.”

“Huh?” He looked down at himself. “Oh, I was wondering why they looked so weird.” He pulled off his pajama bottoms and stood in his underwear as he tried to sort it out.

“Hey, look at those girls walking by out front,” Pam said, sipping her tea. “Oh wait... don't they go to your school, Jeremy?”

“What?” he said. Alarmed, he used his pajama bottoms as a shield to hide his white underwear. Peering at the blackness beyond the living windows, he said, “I don't see anyone.”

“Are you ever going to not fall for that?” Pam asked.

Jeremy gave her a look. “Ha ha. Very funny.”

“Jeremy,” his mom began, “how come you're always so much better behaved for Pam than you are for me?”

“Probably because Pam lets me do whatever I want,” Jeremy shrugged. He successfully turned his pajamas right side out and pulled them on.

“Really? Kate said, yawning into her hand. “Like what?”

“Uh, hey, Jeremy, did you remember to brush your teeth?” Pam asked, changing the subject.

“Of course I did,” he said, offended. He leaned in close and began blowing his breath on her face. The warm puffs of air made her cringe. “See? Smells like toothpaste, right?”

“Okay, okay!” Pam shoved him away as Kate laughed. “I believe you.” Now properly dressed, Jeremy bent near the base of Pam's recliner. Realizing what he was doing, she set down her cup of
tea just in time as he yanked the lever that returned the reclining armchair to its normal position.

“Whoa!” Pam exclaimed as her body snapped back into a sitting position. Whiskers yowled angrily and leapt from her lap, which was just as well since Jeremy was now wedging himself into the armchair.

“Quit hogging the blanket,” he complained, tugging at the throw she had arranged on her legs. Once he was settled in, Jeremy pulled the lever to return them to a semi-reclining position.

“Oh Jeremy,” his mom said. “Don't you think Pam needs a break?”

“A break?” he repeated. “A break from what?” He gave his mom a blank look as she shook her head. Returning his attention to Pam, he sniffed at her neck. “You smell like cinnamon.”

Pam knew her ears were turning pink. His lithe body was pressing against her delicate spots as he squirmed in the armchair. Trying to downplay his affection, she gave Kate a weak grin and shrugged. “It's my tea,” she told him.

“Can I try some?”

“Go make your own cup,” Pam told him. “You know how to boil water.” Anything to get him off her lap. She felt like she was in high school, watching a movie with a boyfriend while his parents were in the room. The sound of a buzzing cell phone from the next room saved her.

“Is that mine?” Kate asked. She sighed. “I'm too tired to get up.”

“Go get your mom's cell phone for her,” Pam nudged Jeremy. She felt a wave of relief when he rolled off the recliner and trotted to the kitchen.

“Thank you, Jeremy,” Kate said, taking the phone from his outstretched hand. The moment she looked at the screen, Kate rose to her feet. “I'll take this in the other room so as not to disturb you two. Jeremy, you're not going to stay up late, right?”

“Pam said I could play Call of Duty.”

“You and your videogames. Not for too long, all right?” Kate tousled his hair before answering her phone. “Hello?” The sound of her voice trailed off as she went to her room. They heard the door close behind her.

Pam fumbled for the recliner's lever and returned herself to a sitting position. Retrieving her tea from the end table, she mused, “Is there anything cozier than the smell of cinnamon on a chilly autumn night?”

Jeremy stood in front of her armchair, bouncing a bit on the balls of his feet. “I don't know. So are we going to play Call of Duty?”

“Go ahead.”

“No, I meant are we going to play CALL OF DUTY,” he emphasized. Jeremy looked at her with hopeful eyes.

“Oh, that Call of Duty,” Pam said, playfully eyeing him from behind her mug. She considered for a moment. “Can't you just do it yourself?”

“But I like it better when you do it for me.”
“I don't know...”

“Please? You said we could do it any time I wanted.”

Pam frowned. Did she really say that? “That was just pillow talk,” she informed him.

“What's pillow talk?”

“Never mind,” she told him. “I don't know if this is a good idea, Jeremy. After all, your mom is home.”

“Yeah, but it's that one doctor calling. You know, the one who lives in Springfield? Whenever he calls, she always spends at least an hour on the phone.”

Pam mulled the issue at hand. She found it awfully hard to say no to him, especially after a shower when his skin had a delightfully clean, soapy smell and his wet hair rendered him unusually angelic.

“All right,” she conceded, finishing her tea. “You twisted my arm. And then straight to bed afterwards, right? We should make it a quickie.”

“I can be quick,” he said earnestly.

“Right, right.” She let him take her hand and pull her off the armchair. A thin shaft of light emanated from under Kate's door. There was the indistinct sound of muffled conversation, but Pam tiptoed by the door anyway. Once they were safely ensconced in Jeremy's room, Pam sighed in relief. Despite having lost count of the number of times they had fooled around together, Pam still felt a conspiratorial sense of anticipation each time.

She was just about to close the door when Jeremy spoke. “Um, I think the Coppertone is in the basement, by the way.”

“The basement? What's it doing there?”

“I don't know. I guess that's where we last used it.”

“I'll get it. When was the last time you played Call of Duty by yourself, anyway?”

He thought for a second. “I can't remember.” Jeremy shrugged. “I told you, I like it better when you do it for me.”

Pam stifled a giggle of affection as she headed for the basement. Outwardly, she was feigning exasperation, but the truth was she found it charming that he had grown so dependent on her. With great power comes great responsibility, she thought to herself. Her feet silently padded through the hallway, her eyes once again checking Kate’s closed door. So far, so good.

When she returned with the bottle of Coppertone in hand, she found Jeremy already in bed with his sheets pulled up to his chin. Pam closed his bedroom door. “How are we supposed to play Call of Duty,” she said, squirting some Coppertone into her hand, “when you're all tucked into bed?”

“I took off my pajamas already,” he noted, pointing at a pile of crumpled clothing on the floor.

Pam knelt at his bedside, reaching under the blanket. “We're not going back to that shy boy phase, are we?” she teased. Her hand gingerly hunted under the blanket, taking care not to get the Coppertone on his sheets.

“I'm not shy. It's just that you said I should go to bed afterward.”
The only illumination in the room came from a small lamp on his nightstand. To an unknowing bystander, it may have appeared as if Pam was merely praying next to Jeremy as he lay in bed. It occurred to her that it was a good thing for Jeremy to be hidden under the sheets, particularly with his mom being home. It lent an air of excitement to the proceedings as her hand hunted for its unseen target. One last time, Pam glanced over her shoulder at the closed door before finally finding what she was looking for. He was already hard.

Pam was busy making herself a second cup of tea in the kitchen when Kate entered. “That was quite the phone call,” Pam commented as she set the kettle on the stove.

“Oh, I've been chatting with this doctor at St Stephen's about streamlining some of our hospital paperwork,” Kate said. “You know, work stuff.”

Pam nodded. “I'm making some more tea. Would you like some too?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Kate said. She opened the refrigerator and studied its contents. “I suppose I should have dinner too. Is Jeremy still playing his video game?”

“Uh, no,” Pam answered. She set two mugs on the counter and placed a teabag in each. “He's already asleep. Out like a light.”

Kate shook her head in wonderment. “Some day you'll have to show me how you do it.”

“Okay you know. Sometimes he'll go to bed early if he's tired.” Pam changed the subject. “Before I forget to tell you, tomorrow will be his team's last soccer game of the season. They had to cancel the remaining games due to the cold weather. Did you want to come?”

Kate was about to answer when they were interrupted by Jeremy toddling into the kitchen. “Just need some water,” he mumbled, clearly half-asleep. Without even bothering to identify if it was his own water, he took a swig from a half-full glass on the countertop. Then, wiping his lips with his sleeve, he shuffled back to his room like a zombie.

“Good night, sweetie,” Kate called after him. Jeremy didn't turn around but he did manage a half-hearted wave at her. “Poor kid. He did look really tired. I hope he's not coming down with something.”

“I'm sure he'll bounce right back tomorrow morning.” Pam said.

Kate frowned as she watched Jeremy's sleepwalk back to his room. “I swear... are his pajamas inside out again? How on earth did that happen? Didn't he just fix them in the living room?”

“Haha. I suppose that's boys at that age,” Pam agreed. Kate was digging in the refrigerator, not paying any attention to her. Casually, Pam pretended to scratch her upper lip. She had washed her hands already but the sweet scent of suntan lotion was still detectable on her fingers. Alarmed, she began washing her
hands once again at the kitchen sink.

The next day, Pam dropped Jeremy off at the soccer field before running some errands. She was supposed to be back in time for the start of this game, but had gotten ensnared in rush-hour traffic. She arrived at the soccer field just as Kate was leaving. “How’s the game going?” she asked.

“How’s the game going?” Kate replied. “They were down 2-0 but now they’re tied at 3. Jeremy is annoyed because the coach took him out of the game when he landed funny on his arm.”

Her stomach wrenched. “Jeremy got hurt? Is he okay?”

“I checked him out,” said Kate. “I think it’s just a mild sprain. Amazingly enough, he’s still playing fine without his left arm. The other team scored all their goals when Jeremy was out. Now that he’s back as goalie, they’re getting shut out again.”

“Attaboy Jeremy,” Pam approved.

“That reminds me,” Kate said. “You remember his soccer nickname, don’t you?”

“Wait, don’t tell me.” She thought a moment. “Tiger J?” she ventured.

“I’m impressed! Don’t forget to call him Tiger J when he’s on the field. I got the stinkeye from him because I clapped and shouted ‘Yay Jeremy!’ after he blocked a shot.”

“Noted.”

“I have to get back to the hospital,” Kate said. “Can you tell him I’m sorry I couldn’t stay the whole game? He’ll be glad that you made it through.”

“I’ll let him know,” Pam nodded. “See you tonight.” The grass was soggy from a morning downpour, but the fields were in better condition than she expected. Several soccer games were taking place so she had to hunt for the field where Jeremy's team was playing. His team was named the Dragons and they wore appropriately colored dark green and white uniforms. The problem was that every other team seemed to have minute variations of the same hues. The search became easier when she narrowed the criteria to goalies with floppy red hair.

Jeremy was adjusting his gloves when she finally located him. He wore a fitted long-sleeve shirt under his usual dark green jersey, though his legs were bare except for shin guards that were caked with mud. Pam compared him with the other boys dashing about the field. He was, by a large margin, the most handsome though she had to admit some boys looked a little cute. Especially in their soccer uniforms.

Pam waited for a break in the action before waving to him. “Let’s get it done, Tiger J!” she called. Jeremy turned in surprise as he sought to locate the voice. He bounced on his heels when he spotted her on the sideline. Once the action resumed, Pam did her best to follow along, tuning in whenever the action neared Jeremy's goalpost. Otherwise, she passed the time by observing the other players, assigning naughty or nice tags to each one as she saw fit.

The game remained tied at 3 for a long time. After twenty minutes of play, a timeout was called as the coaches conferred with the referee. The players were then gathered for an announcement that Pam didn’t catch.
“What's happening?” she asked a nearby parent on the sideline.

“I think the coaches decided the game was going on for too long,” the woman said. She wore a puffy down coat that hung to her knees, which Pam thought was overkill. There was a damp chill in the air, but it really wasn't that cold yet. The woman continued, “So they're calling a penalty shootout to end the game.”

“This shouldn't take too long,” a man said, overhearing their conversation. “Did you see that little runt of the litter playing goalie over there? That kid doesn't have a chance in a shootout.”

Pam's eyes narrowed at the remark. The man was wearing a black and gold sweatshirt for the opposing team. The thick cotton material did nothing to mask his oversized beer belly. “I see you're a Hornets fan,” she said.

“Darn right,” he nodded proudly.

He was now standing next to Pam. Wanting to distance herself, she turned to the woman in the down coat. “What happens in a penalty shootout?” Pam asked.

“Each team will get three shots,” she explained. “Whoever scores the most will win the game. If they tie kicks, the process starts over.”

The Dragons were the first to kick. After a brief conference, three players were selected from the team. The first boy's kick was successful, causing a great deal of cheering and clapping from the team. But the second boy's kick was too high and the third was blocked. The mood turned grim as the players headed for the opposite goal. Since the Dragons managed only one goal, the opposing team had three chances to make two goals.

To her surprise, Pam found herself getting nervous as the other team chose its kickers. Jeremy, however, calmly manned the goal as he waited for the referee to put the ball in play. Wearing an expression that was serene yet focused, he did some stretches to stay loose. When the referee set down the soccer ball and blew his whistle, Jeremy spat on the ground and adjusted his shin guards.

“Do you think they can pull this off?” she overheard one of the men in the crowd.

“I don't know,” someone else answered. “The Hornets led the region in penalty kicks this year.” Pam's heart sank a little.

The first boy approached the ball, stopping about ten feet from it. Pam hadn't noticed before but all the boys on the other team appeared much older than the Dragons. All three of the chosen kickers seemed to be at least a head taller than Jeremy. Her palms were sweaty when she heard the familiar thud as the ball caromed off the kicker's foot. With the gracefulness of a swan, Jeremy leapt off his feet to catch the ball in mid-air.

Pam could clearly see him wince from extending his injured elbow, but he successfully defended the first attempt. There was muted clapping and cheering, but she was too focused on the next kicker lining up. She saw Jeremy brush himself off and reset at the goal. The second kick was a low one, barely floating off the ground but kicked at a great velocity. Jeremy was forced to dive sharply to the left. His body went completely horizontal, his outstretched form managing to punch the soccer ball out of harm's way with his one good arm.

“Can't believe he got that,” someone in the crowd muttered. “Come on, Hornets!”

“No, no. Go Dragons!”
“Hornets!”

The crowd on the sideline continued the friendly banter, but both teams were silent after the attempt. The opposing team knew they had only once last chance to tie it up and re-start the process. The Dragons knew that victory was in their grasp. Pam almost couldn't watch, but then she saw Jeremy scanning the sidelines. Finding her among the crowd, he gave her a confident smile. Pam laughed. He was completely fearless, while she had been reduced to a bundle of anxiety.

She held her breath as the last boy started his approach. His footwork was taken in precise, obviously practiced steps. There was a ripple of anticipation from the crowd as he planted his foot and swung his leg. The kick sailed high to the right corner of the goal.

“That's the side of his bad arm!” Pam wailed internally. Once again, Jeremy leapt off the ground, this time twisting his body in mid-air so that he could use his good arm to defend the goal. The kick was so high that Pam wasn't sure if he could reach it. But he did. The ball's trajectory suddenly altered, causing it to clang loudly against the top of the goalpost. The ball rebounded powerfully, but harmlessly away from the goal. It hadn't even landed yet when the Dragons took to the field, cheering at the top of their lungs.

“Tiger J! Tiger J!” the boys shouted. Jeremy was soon mobbed in a sea of green and white jerseys. A mixture of groans and cheers came from the crowd of adults on the sideline. Pam herself was jumping up and down, punching her fist in the air, until she realized the other parents were merely clapping in a polite manner.

“Is that your son?” the woman in the coat asked.

“Uh no,” Pam said, checking herself. “Just a friend of the family.”

“Well, congratulations anyway!” They both laughed.

The fat man in the Hornets sweatshirt leaned in from the other side. “Did you say that's your son?” he asked, apparently missing part of the exchange. “For being so small, he's an okay goalie.” Smiling broadly, he hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his jeans, a move which only served to draw attention to his paunch.

“Oh, thanks,” Pam said, not bothering to correct him on either count.

“You know, I don't think I've seen you at these league games before,” he said. Pam saw him trying to peer at her left hand. “My name's Steve.”

“Pam,” she said, ignoring his outstretched hand. “Excuse me, I just need to, you know, go over there...” she pointed at the group of boys cheering on the field and scurried away.

The Dragons were in a state of uncontrolled mayhem. Some boys were rolling on the ground, forming a hog pile. Others had removed their shin guards to fling them in the air. Another group was manically jumping and hollering with Jeremy at the center of the scrum. The coach stood off to the side of it all, looking dazed and exasperated.

“How long do you think it will be before they calm down?” Pam asked her.

She shrugged in reply. The coach appeared close to her own age, perhaps just a few years out of college. “You know, honestly? I'll just be happy if we can get out of here without any broken bones.”

“Let me know if you want me to dial 911,” Pam volunteered.
The coach laughed. “I saw you talking with Kate Prater,” she said. “Are you the Pam we keep hearing about?”

“Um, yes,” Pam felt her ears turn red. “Do I want to know?”

“Oh, it's all good,” she assured Pam. “Jeremy talks about you a lot, though. The other boys always make fun of him for having a girlfriend.”

“Ha, well, it's not like that. At all. Really.”

“Oh, no one is accusing you of breaking any laws,” Amanda assured her. “It's actually kind of cute.” She held out her hand. “I'm Amanda, by the way.”

Pam shook her hand. “Um, sorry about my sweaty hands. I was kind of nervous during those last few minutes.”

“Not me,” Amanda said. “You're never nervous with Tiger J back there. Even with the season on the line.”

Pam laughed but she was inexplicably embarrassed by all the praise for Jeremy.

“So anyway... What does he say about me to his friends?” she pressed.

“Let me think,” pondered Amanda. “Like how you're always taking him out to Dairy Queen. Or buying him stuff at Target. You know... stuff that would impress boys.” Pam nodded, but inwardly she was praying that she wasn't somehow throwing off suspicious vibes. Amanda continued, “I think they're at that in-between age where they're still pretending to be grossed out by girls, but secretly think about girls all the time.”

“How interesting. I never thought of that,” Pam said, lying through her teeth. “Makes sense.”

The throng of boys had dissipated somewhat as other parents wandered through the field and retrieved their offspring. Jeremy suddenly zig-zagged through the crowd and greeted Pam with a big hug. “Pam! Did you see me? I did it! I did it!”

“Of course I saw you,” she said. “Those were some smooth moves, Jer-- uh, Tiger J.” Now that she could see him up close, Pam noticed the dirt streaking his face and the grass stains that covered his uniform. His unkempt appearance was too cute. She suddenly wished she could give him more than just a hug.

“Jeremy, I've been your coach for two years,” Amanda said. “How come you've never hugged me? Is it because I'm not your girlfriend?” She winked at Pam.

“Aw, be quiet,” Jeremy muttered gruffly as he let go of Pam.

“I'm just kidding,” Amanda said. She put an arm around his shoulder and gave him a half-hug. “Good job out there. You saved your best for last.” Her attention diverted to some boys scurrying on the far side of the field. “Excuse me, duty calls. Tiger J, I'll see you at the end-of-season pizza party next week. Don't forget to bring home your soccer balls over there.”

“Nice to meet you, coach!” Pam called. Amanda waved as she hurried to break up the group of rowdy boys. Jeremy went to retrieve his water bottle next to the goal as well as a large mesh bag filled with soccer balls. He was clearly favoring his right arm.

“Why don't you let me take that?” Pam offered, taking the mesh bag. She slung it over her shoulder.
“Thanks, Pam.” They began walking toward the car. The fields were still busy with several different soccer games, forcing them to navigate crowds along the sidelines. Some parents sat in lawn chairs, sipping from thermoses, while others sprawled on blankets. Small children, presumably the younger siblings of the soccer players, darted in and out of the crowd. At one point, a group of Dragons caught up with them, tackling Jeremy.

“Tiger J!” they shouted. A brief melee broke out but Pam kept walking. The boys eventually began following her again as they chatted about their victory. She didn’t pay much attention to them, instead wondering what she might serve for dinner that night. Pam was so lost in her thoughts that she only vaguely heard the shout, “Heads up!” followed by a nearly simultaneous, “Look out, lady!”

Pam turned her head just in time to see a soccer ball flying right at her face. Then there was a blur of motion from behind her, followed by the punchy sound of a deflected soccer ball. It all happened so fast that Pam wasn’t sure what had occurred until she saw Jeremy sprawled on the ground in front of her.

“Hey, nice save, kid!” someone shouted.

“Are you okay?” she asked, helping him to his feet. Behind her, she could see the group of Dragons with a stunned look on their faces. They looked at each other for a moment before breaking out into a fresh chant.

“Tiger J! Tiger J!”

Jeremy had to raise his voice to be heard above the din. “I'm okay. Did the ball hit you?”

“No. Not even close.”

“Whew.”

“You saved me,” Pam said. Touched by his heroics, she placed a hand on his shoulder. Then, unable to resist, she followed it up with a kiss. A perfectly harmless one, on the only mud-free spot on of his face, which ended up being near his ear. But the moment she did it, Pam realized his friends were intently watching. Sure enough, the boys broke out in whoops and jeers. Jeremy turned bright red.

“Um, sorry,” she whispered. They resumed walking. The mesh bag of soccer balls had grown heavy on her shoulder, so Pam began dragging it on the ground.

“Hey, Jeremy... do you always let your girlfriend pull your balls?” The group of boys broke out in guffaws.

“Shut up, Conor.” Jeremy retorted.

“Do you think she could pull my balls too?” That comment sent them into gales of laughter. Jeremy used his good arm to give Conor a healthy shove.

Pam’s eyes narrowed. “Hey Conor,” she began. “How many goals did you score today?”

The boys looked at each other, then at Conor. “Uh, none,” he admitted.

“And Jeremy, how many saves did you have today?”

“I don't know, I lost count. Probably seven or eight. Coach would know for sure.”

“Tell you what, Conor,” Pam said. She stopped walking and turned to face the group of boys. “The next time you single-handedly win a game for the team, I promise I will pull your balls. But until
then, I'm sticking with Tiger J.” Surprised by her interjection, Conor withered under her steely gaze. Pam was rewarded with a silent group of chastened boys for the rest of the walk.

Upon reaching the car, Pam pressed the button to unlock the trunk. Jeremy was reaching for the rear door when she stopped him. “Why don't you sit in the front seat?” she said, well-aware that his teammates were still watching. She tossed the mesh bag into the trunk.

“How about I’ll sit in the back seat?”

“Why not?”

“I mean, I'm not even twelve yet. Aren't you supposed to be at least thirteen to ride in front?”

“Since when did you start caring about the rules?” she asked.

He got in the front seat.

Pam slipped behind the wheel but paused before starting the car. “Sorry about kissing you back there. Are you mad at me?”

Jeremy shook his head. “Why would I be mad?”

“I thought maybe you were embarrassed by me.”

“I'm not embarrassed.”

Pam recalled her conversation with Kate yesterday in the living room. Perhaps it was true after all that he was growing up. She squeezed his knee. It was the one bare spot of accessible skin, discolored with grass stains, between his soccer shorts and shin guards. “Let's get going. Got your seat belt on?”

“Uh huh.”

The parking lot was a congested mess that took several minutes to navigate. They finally reached the exit but had to wait some more when Pam missed the green arrow to turn left. Another car pulled up alongside them at the red light. “Hey, that's Conor's car,” Jeremy noticed. He rolled down his window. “Hey Conor! How's the view from the back seat?”

“Shut up, Jeremy!” Conor shouted back.

“Don't be that way,” Jeremy admonished him. “One day you'll be big enough to ride in the front seat. One day.” Right on cue, the light turned green. Pam sped away as Jeremy chuckled to himself. “That was awesome.”

“Good job, Jeremy,” she approved.

“Tiger J,” he reminded her. He turned on the radio and fiddled with the knobs.

“Good job, Tiger J,” she said dutifully. “Want to get some drive-thru for dinner?”

“Really? You mean it?”

“But of course. We need to celebrate, right?” She knew Kate wouldn't approve, but at least they were going to a locally owned fast-food restaurant. They pulled into Atomic Age, a restaurant that befit its name with old-fashioned signs and vintage uniforms for the staff. Circling the lot, Pam was relieved to see there wasn't a line at the drive-thru. She opened her car window. Instead of talk box,
Atomic Age had a vintage rotary phone that customers used to place orders.

Pam lowered the volume of the car radio. “What do you want?” she asked, reaching for the phone.

“An Atomic Cheeseburger and Radioactive Fries,” he requested, referring to the restaurant’s special sauce. “Can I have root beer too?”

Pam hesitated at first. “Okay, sure. Don’t tell your mom about the root beer, okay?” After placing his order, she requested a grilled chicken sandwich and side salad for herself, knowing she would be able to pilfer some of his fries. She pulled up to the next window to pay and pick up their food. Once the soda was safely in the cup holder and the bag secured on his lap, she headed for the restaurant exit.

Jeremy looked out his window in alarm. “Wait! Where are we going?”

“We’re going home,” Pam told him.

“Why? We should eat here.”

“In the parking lot?” Pam said, baffled. “Wouldn’t you rather eat at home? At a table?”

“What’s the point of getting drive-thru if you don’t eat it in the car?” Jeremy insisted.

Giving in, she maneuvered the car into a parking spot outside the restaurant and turned off the engine. “I guess this might be the last warm night in a while,” she excused. “Plus those French smell pretty good.”

Jeremy opened the bag and inhaled deeply. “I love the smell of fast food. Don’t you?”

“I like it too,” Pam said. “But nevertheless…” She opened the rest of the car windows. “This car might be six years old, but I’m trying to preserve the remnants of that new car smell,” she joked.

“Oh yeah,” Jeremy agreed. “New car smell is a good smell too.” He paused to unwrap his burger. “What else is there?”

“I like the smell of rain,” Pam volunteered. “Like that smell of wet dirt that hasn't turned to mud yet.”

“I like the smell of gasoline.” He took a bite of his burger and looked at her, waiting for her to take a turn.

“I like the smell of…” Pam trailed off. A few weeks ago, the two of them had returned home from soccer practice and played Call of Duty while Jeremy wore nothing but his shin guards. ‘I like the smell of an eleven year old boy after soccer practice,’ Pam wanted to say.

Of course she couldn't say that out loud. At least not without blushing. “I like the smell of grapefruit,” she offered.

Jeremy nodded as he chewed, waiting until he swallowed before talking. “I like the smell of a new can of tennis balls.” Now it was her turn again. Try as she might, her mind was stuck on the image of Jeremy in his shin guards. She was saved when he turned up the radio.

“Hey! This is our song!” Jeremy began emphatically rapping along with the radio. Pam eyed his soda cup. One of the drawbacks of Kate’s healthy diet was that it made Jeremy very susceptible to sugar overload. Judging from his hyperactive rapping, he had already arrived.

“Your part is coming up,” he quickly reminded her in between a streaming chatter of words. Pam
self-consciously cleared her throat and sang about the off-black Cadillac and bright city sky. Jeremy beamed with approval.

They finished eating. After tossing the trash in a nearby bin, Pam asked him if it was okay to go home yet. Jeremy, frantically playing air guitar to the radio, paused just long enough to give her a thumbs up. “I knew that root beer was a bad idea,” Pam thought to herself.

She turned down the volume of the radio so he could hear her. “When we get home, do you want to shower first and then do homework? Or homework then shower?”

“Neither! Can we go out for ice cream?”

“I think you've had enough sugar, Jeremy.”

“Tiger J wants sugar!” He turned the radio back up.

Exasperated, Pam turned the radio off. “Tiger J needs to get his homework done,” she said firmly.

Easier said than done. When they got home, Pam parked him at the dinner table with his homework but he wasted twenty minutes sulking before even getting started. Soccer hero + drive-thru sugar had created something of a monster. Pam had to threaten his videogame time to get him to finish, something she hadn't need to resort to in a long time. In a final act of defiance, Jeremy pouted and dilly-dallied when it was time to get ready for bed. She had to physically march him into the bathroom and then waited outside until she heard the shower running.

“I'm never letting him have soda again,” Pam muttered to herself. After tidying the kitchen, it was time for her own shower. She was enjoying the hot water when she heard a knock on the door. “Yes?” she called.

The door cracked open an inch. “Pam? It's me.”

“Yes, Jeremy, I know. What's up?”

“I'm out of toothpaste. Can I just skip brushing my teeth tonight?”

Pam shook her empty shampoo bottle in an attempt to get the last drops out. “Ha ha, nice try,” she told him. “Go to your mom's bathroom and use hers.”

“I can't. She has that weird toothpaste that leaves a rash on my lips.”

“All right, fine,” Pam sighed. “Just use mine.”

“Okay. Can I play video games until you're done in here?”

“No, just go ahead and take the toothpaste. Come in.”

“Um, you mean, like, right now?”

“Yes.”

The bathroom door opened fully. Jeremy entered, cautiously, as if he were sneaking into a forbidden zone. Pam was busy working her hair into a healthy lather but she still caught him sneaking a peek through the clear glass door of the shower. She pretended not to notice.

“Um, which drawer do you keep the toothpaste in?” he asked.
“The middle drawer, top row.”

“This one?” he pointed. Jeremy glanced at her again, but not at her face.

“Uh huh.” She closed her eyes and began rinsing the shampoo from her hair. Pam wasn’t surprised to see him still in the bathroom when she opened her eyes again. “You really don't want to brush your teeth tonight, do you?”

“Huh? Oh right.” He meekly exited the bathroom.

But less than a minute later, Jeremy was knocking on the door again. He poked his head into the bathroom before she answered. “Pam? I brought back the toothpaste for you.”

“Thanks, Jeremy. You can just leave it on the counter.” She noticed he had brought along his toothbrush, from which an oversize blob of toothpaste was precipitously dangling. “Geez, did you really need that much toothpaste? Hold it over the sink. It’s about to fall off.”

Jeremy moved the toothbrush over the sink just in time. The toothpaste dripped from his toothbrush and plopped into the sink. “Oops,” he said. “I’ll just get some more.”

“Use a little less this time,” Pam advised. “Think pea-sized.”

“Like this much?” he asked. He held up his toothbrush for her to see. “They use way more in the commercials.”

“That’s plenty, trust me.”

He jammed the toothbrush in his mouth (“Finally,” she thought) and began brushing. He stole one last glance at her as he strolled out of the bathroom. “Hold up there,” she called after him. “I don't want you dripping toothpaste all over the hallway. Just finish brushing your teeth in here.”

“Okah,” Jeremy said, his voice muffled from the toothbrush. He came back into the bathroom. His back faced her now, but she saw his eyes wandering across her naked reflection in the mirror over the sink.

“Was this your plan all along?” she inquired.

“Wha oo you mean?” he asked innocently.

“Never mind. Brush gently, Jeremy. Or else you'll wear out your gums.”

He sighed and took his toothbrush out of his mouth. “You're always criticizing everything I do.”

“That's not true. Everything?”

“Maybe not everything. But a lot of things.” His eyes kept flicking back to her figure in the mirror. “I won a soccer game today, you know.”

“I remember. I let you sit in the front seat.”

He removed the toothbrush from his mouth for his retort. “Yeah, and then you made me do my homework.”

“But before that I also took you out for some drive-thru. You love getting drive-thru.”

“And now you're making me get ready for bed,” he said gloomily. “Remember when I saved you
from that soccer ball?” Jeremy spit a mouthful of toothpaste into the sink and began rinsing.

Sometimes, Pam just couldn't understand his mood swings. How to cheer up an eleven year old boy? “Hey, do you think you could help me out in here?” she asked.

“Help what?” he said. He dried his face with her towel. Pam bit her lip and let it go.

“I need some help, um, soaping my back.” She slid open the glass door of the shower, sending out a billow of steam.

Jeremy hesitated. “Should I take off my clothes?”

“Yes? Unless you want to go to bed in wet pajamas.”

Jeremy undressed. Now it was Pam's turn to spy on him. She noted with satisfaction that there was barely any hesitation on his part before pulling down his underwear. In no time at all, Pam was joined in the shower by the naked young boy. Wafts of steam from the hot water hung in the air, encircling both of them in a fine mist before condensing in fat droplets on the tile. “What should I do?” Jeremy asked.

Pam handed him a container of shower gel. “Could you do my back?” she requested.

“Okay,” he said. “How come you use this and not a regular bar of soap?”

“I like this stuff better. It makes my skin really soft.”

He uncapped the bottle and squeezed out a handful of purple liquid. “It smells like strawberries,” he said, sniffing cautiously.

“Why do you think I always smell so nice?” She turned away, presenting him with her backside. Jeremy began dutifully scrubbing. His hands felt small and slippery against her skin. He traveled from her shoulders, down her spine, and all the way to her lower back before stopping a modest distance from the curve of her bum.

“Lower,” Pam asked. His hands moved downward, perhaps a half-inch.

“More.”

“More.”

“Keep going.”

With her encouragement, Jeremy applied the creamy shower gel to her rounded cheeks. Pam enjoyed the sensation of his small hands on her feminine curves. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that his eyes were mesmerized in his work. Another part of his body was keenly interested too, she noticed.

“Mmm, that feels nice,” Pam said. She turned to face him. “Could you do my front too?”

“Um, no problem,” he nodded. Pam placed both hands behind her neck, waiting while he fumbled with the bottle of shower gel. He started on her lower ribcage first, then her stomach. His fingers glided along her collarbone as he skipped the middle portion of her chest. Great gobs of sudsy lather were gliding down Pam's body now.

“Should I do, uh, everything?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes, please.”
He began soaping her breasts. Tentatively at first, his fingertips barely making any contact, though Pam shivered as he glided over her nipples. Jeremy gradually grew bolder until his palms fully touched her as he worked. She smiled when she realized her breasts still dwarfed his small, cupped hands. A warm glow enveloped her senses.

“Is that good?” Jeremy asked.

It took Pam a second to realize he meant if that was enough. She decided to enjoy a moment of selfishness. “Could you do a little more right here?” she asked, pointing to her nipples. “I want them to be extra clean.” He obliged, eliciting another shiver from her. A deeper one this time.

Jeremy stopped. “Are you okay?”

“It's all right. You made me shiver is all.”

“Sorry.”

“No, it was a good shiver.” She smiled at him, letting that sink in. Jeremy smiled back, with a hint of pride in his eyes. They were suddenly conspirators.

Jeremy glanced at her crotch. “Um, do you shampoo the hair down there too?” he asked.

Pam had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. “No, silly.” She detached the showerhead and handed it to him. “Help me rinse off?”

It took several passes until her chest was free of the shower gel that he has so lovingly applied. The water ran in rivulets across her skin and around her curves. Pam turned to let him do her backside. When she looked over her shoulder, she almost melted when she saw his expression. He was reverent. He was intoxicated.

“Did you get it all?” she asked.

“Maybe I should do your front again,” he ventured.

It clearly wasn't necessary, but Pam humored him. Holding her arms straight up, she let him enjoy an extra session with the showerhead, even when it became obvious that he was rinsing off parts that didn't need it. She could tell he was disappointed when it was finally time to turn off the water.

“Thank you, Jeremy,” she said, returning the showerhead to its proper place. They stepped out of the shower. Pam began drying herself off with the lone towel in the bathroom. “Did you need a towel too?” she asked him.

“I guess so,” he said looking at himself. “I'm not as wet as you though.”

“No, probably not,” Pam agreed. Though he had caught random sprays of water, Jeremy was more damp than anything else. His rusty hair had drooped a bit from the steam until it matted against his wet forehead. Another part of him, however, was not drooping at all. His erection stuck out like a hitchhiker's thumb as he watched her dry off.

“Did I do a good job?” he asked shyly.

Pam smiled. “See for yourself,” she said, turning to present her bum. Taking his wrist, Pam guided his hand over her skin. “Pretty soft, isn't it?”

“Yeah. Really soft.” Jeremy ran his fingers across her backside. In the mirror, Pam could see their
reflection. What she saw sent a frisson of energy along her spine. Her body was slightly bent over at the waist, thrusting her perky cheeks in an undeniably sexual pose at a boy who was clearly younger than her. The curve of her full breasts and the darkened triangle of her pubic hair stood in stark relief to his gawky hairlessness.

Pam turned around again, this time taking him by the shoulders so they stood face to face. “Take a sniff here,” she said, moving her breast so close to his face that her nipple could feel the breath from his nostrils. “What do you smell?”

“Strawberries.”

“Do you like it?” Her fingers intertwined in his damp hair as she held him close. Unable to resist, she glanced in the mirror again. He was a full two heads shorter than she was, but that just meant he stood perfectly at breast level.

“It smells really good,” he nodded.

Pam wrapped her towel around him. “Let me help dry you off,” she said, rubbing it across his shoulders and back. Jeremy stood patiently with his arms at his sides. Pam dropped to one knee to dry off his legs. Saving the best for last, she used the corner of the towel to gently dab at his jutting penis and globed scrotum. His perfectly hairless skin had turned the slightest shade of pink from the hot shower.

“Can I give it a kiss?” Pam asked, still crouching. “It's just so... cute.”


His penis felt delightfully hot against her lips. It was just a peck, but Pam's head pounded so hard she thought she might pass out. She looked at Jeremy but he didn't say anything so she leaned in for another kiss. A lingering one. His skin was so soft that her lips glided effortlessly across its silky texture. Jeremy's hand gripped her shoulder as she knelt. Unable to help herself, Pam let his erection slip past her parted lips, her tongue wriggling against him. He tasted like a clean boy.

“Oh!” Jeremy said, jerking his hips away. Pam had never been so disappointed in her life as when his penis popped from her mouth.

“Sorry!” she apologized. “I couldn't help it.”

“It's okay.”

“Too ticklish?”

“A little bit.”

Pam reluctantly rose to her feet. She wrapped the towel around him before pulling on her robe. “Hey, I was thinking... maybe you're right. I criticize all the time and don't let you have enough fun. So to prove it, we can do anything you want until bedtime.” Pam tied her bathrobe in place. “But let me remind you, bedtime is in thirty minutes. No exceptions.”

“Really? Anything?”

“Anything. Within reason, of course.”

Jeremy thought a moment. “Hmm, what about ordering a pizza and rice crispies from Tommy's Piece 'o Pies?”
“We can do that.”

“Um, what about… playing dodge ball in the backyard?”

“We can do that.”

“What about… going to Walmart and buying me a BB gun?”

“Yes to the first part, no to the second.”

“What about…”

Pam leaned against the bathroom counter and looked at her bare wrist. “Look at that, twenty-eight minutes until bedtime. Are you just going to spend the time asking me hypothetical questions?”

Jeremy’s eyes lit up. “Oh, I've got a good one! What about going to the drugstore and buying me a dirty magazine?”

“Oh, sure, I would do that. So what's your final decision?”

“Umm, I don't know.” Jeremy tapped his feet in unison. He did the same thing at the ice cream shop when he was trying to pick a flavor. “This is really hard to decide.”

“We could play Call of Duty,” Pam suggested.

Jeremy shrugged. “Yeah, but I know you would do that. It has to be something you wouldn't normally let me do.” Pam blushed as he saw straight through her ruse. “How about we…” The wheels turned in his head. “Can we watch a movie on your computer? And snuggle? In your room?”

Pam ticked off her responses on her fingers. “Yes, yes, no. You know my room is off limits. We can watch in the living room.”

“But you said anything I wanted,” Jeremy complained.

“Within reason.”

“Your room is within reason,” Jeremy argued. “I think your room being off limits is completely arbitrary.”

Pam held up her hands. “Whoa, stop the bus. Did you just the word ‘arbitrary’ in a sentence? Correctly, no less?”

“It was in last week's vocabulary test for my English class.”

“Aren't you the smart one.” Perhaps it was crazy, but Pam realized she liked it better when Jeremy questioned her authority by whining instead of employing logic. It was much easier to shut him down when it was the former. As it was, she found herself wavering. Kate's night shifts at the hospital were fairly predictable. She sometimes came home early. But never before midnight. And it was only nine o'clock besides. A small voice spoke inside her head. What was the harm?

“Come on, please?” Jeremy took her hand and squeezed.

That did it. “All right, if that's really what you want,” Pam caved in, well aware that her raging hormones were playing a significant part in the decision. She led him to her room. “But thirty minutes is not long enough to finish a movie, you know.”
“I know.”

She closed her bedroom door. Her heart skipped a beat at the sound of its soft click. Despite the fact that it was still the Prater's home, her bedroom was very much her sanctuary. She considered it her private space and Kate respected that. She had never invited Jeremy inside before this moment. It suddenly occurred to her how charming it was that, granted an open-ended wish, the eleven year old has asked for this.

Pam pulled open a dresser drawer to find some pajamas. But then she remembered how much fun Jeremy had soaping her up in the shower. Wanting to take things further, Pam undid her bathrobe. Hesitating only for a split second, she slipped it from her shoulders and hung it on a hook behind the door. Then she grabbed her laptop from the desk and slithered into bed, naked as a jaybird.

“Come on, are you getting in?” she said, throwing aside the covers to invite him in. She felt her nipples hardening as the cool air met her bare breasts.

Jeremy looked unsure. “Um, should I just keep wearing this?” He gestured at the damp towel around his shoulders.

“Just hang it up on my chair,” Pam said nonchalantly. She pretended to be engrossed in typing her password.

He did as she directed. Now naked as well, Jeremy gingerly got into her bed. “Brrr!” he said. “These sheets are cold!”

“I know, I haven't had the chance to switch to flannel yet,” Pam apologized. “I bet we'll warm up if we go like this…” Laying down, she pulled the covers over both of them before placing the laptop on her blanket-clad stomach. After that, it was only a matter of getting Jeremy situated as he nestled into the crook of her arm.

“Can you see the screen?” she asked. His head rested against her shoulder, his cheek against her collarbone.

“Um, yeah,” Jeremy said.

“You can scoot a little closer. It'll be warmer that way.” Jeremy shyly inched closer until Pam could feel his erection poking her thigh. Her breast was mashed against his skinny chest but it was not at all unpleasant. “Snuggling and watching a movie in my room. That's what you asked for, right?” She planted a kiss his forehead. “What do you want to watch?”

“Can we watch the first Iron Man movie?”

“Sure. Let me pull it up.” Her arm, cradling the young boy, wasn't able to reach the laptop so Pam had to make do with one-handed typing. After a few tries, the movie finally started playing.

“Are you comfy?” Pam asked.

“Uh huh.” His toes tickled her shins under the covers.

Despite having seen the movie countless times, he was thoroughly engrossed. Pam herself was not terribly interested in the movie. She was, however, greatly interested in the hard knob of flesh that had not stopped poking her ever since they began cuddling. Her one hand held the laptop steady on her stomach, but the other was free to stroke the soft skin of Jeremy's hips as he rested in the crook of her arm. His pelvic bone jutted out so much from his skinny frame that it was easy for her to trace its contours. But as nice as that was, she wanted to touch more.
It was frustrating. Try as she might, her arm simply would not bend enough to reach between his legs. Having no choice, Pam gently eased his hips downward, twisting him at the torso so his chest remained pressed at her side but his lower body lay flat on the bed.

Pam softly ran her fingers across his body, luxuriating in the contrast between his hard penis and squishy sack. It was a deeply enjoyable moment, the kind where Pam couldn't believe her luck. Here she was fondling her favorite young boy while he calmly snuggled at her side, absorbed in the movie and occasionally scratching his chin that rested right above her breast. She could even feel his exhalation, warm and teasing, on her bare chest.

Long minutes passed. Pam let her fingers roam across his soft skin, idly, as if she were in twiddling with her hair in a classroom. Other times she took a break and simply let her palm rest against his boy parts. The only thing that remained constant was Jeremy's erection which never once flagged. If that wasn't proof enough that he was enjoying the attention, he would occasionally pulse against her resting hand, urging her back into action.

They were at the thirty minute mark of the movie when something unexpected happened.

Jeremy let out a long breath. Pam thought he was sighing at first, but it was followed by another burst of warm air that swept against her skin like a warm summer breeze. “You all right?” she asked, worried about his heavy breathing. Was he sick? Jeremy's hand suddenly dug into her hip. Hard. It wasn't until then that she noticed his eyes were closed.

“Sorry!” he whispered, his voice shaky. His whole body shuddered once, then twice. “I couldn't help it!”

Pam had no idea that her casual touching had pushed him beyond the edge. “Oh, sweetie, it's okay,” she consoled. “Don't be sorry!” Her fingers curled around his penis, fondling it with firm but (she hoped) gentle strokes. She had never before brought Jeremy to orgasm without the aid of Coppertone and without the waving off motion. Deprived of both, she was amazed at how different the tactile experience could be. Pam felt every pulse, every contraction, every spasm beneath her fingers. It was wonderful to be so intimately aware of his most intimate moment.

The movie continued on her laptop, though now completely ignored. A seemingly endless series of shivers wracked Jeremy's body, each one transmitted to Pam as he tightly clutched her. His cheek nuzzled her chest in time with the waves of his orgasm, his barely parted lips making a quiet “uhhh, uhhh...” sound. Pam had never heard him make these noises, vocalizations that fell somewhere between moans and whimpers. She mentally filed away the noises, knowing she would breathlessly recall them the next time she was alone with a free moment.

At last, Jeremy emitted a deep and satisfied sigh before going limp in her arms. An explosion and gunfire sounded from the laptop speakers, but he did not stir. Pam quickly paused the movie and slid the computer off her stomach. Jeremy took advantage of the extra real estate to clasp an arm around her torso. His face burrowed a little deeper into her chest.

The reality of the situation unfortunately tugged Pam back from the hazy depths of her arousal. “Hey,” she whispered, nudging him. “Jeremy, don't fall asleep in here. You have to go back to your room. Okay?”

“Yuh,” Jeremy mumbled unintelligibly, his eyes closed. He yawned and did a face plant into the crook of her arm.

“What was that?” she shook him again. “Stay awake, please, just for a little bit? Come on, just sit up. I'll help you to your own comfy bed and...”
Jeremy interrupted her by clapping his hand over her mouth. Pam couldn't tell if he was being playful, but there was just enough force behind it to silence her next words. It would have been easy to pull his hand away, but Pam found this turn of events to be amazingly arousing. Surges of electricity crackled between her legs as she sniffed the boyish scent of his hand clamping her mouth shut.

The moment didn't last long, but it was enough to send Pam's hormones through the stratosphere. When it became clear that she would remain quiet, Jeremy pulled his hand away from her face. That disappointed Pam until he sleepily moved his hand onto her breast. Her nipple hardened under his fingers but she was fairly certain Jeremy didn't notice. Based on his breathing, it was obvious he had gone from half asleep to fully unconscious.

Pam kissed his forehead. “This is why I didn't want to do this in my room, little brat,” she whispered affectionately. Logically, she knew it would be best to haul the sleeping boy to his own room. But it felt so nice, having him attached to her like a barnacle.

“Just a few minutes,” Pam promised herself. “I just want to savor this moment.” She brushed aside the coppery-brown hair that covered his face. Was there anything better in life than a warm body on a chilly night? Pam wiggled her toes contentedly. It was one of those rare moments when everything in the world seemed utterly perfect.

Her eyelids, heavy with fatigue, swung shut. Blinking, Pam willed them back open. “I should really get up,” she thought. “Just... one... more.. minute...”

Pam awoke with a start. Why on earth was her bedside lamp still turned on? Groggily, she strained to reach the switch to extinguish the light. Her eyes immediately thanked her once the room plunged into darkness. There was also some cold and metallic pressing against her shoulder. Fumbling in the dark, Pam realized it was her computer. She closed it, placed it on the floor, and prayed that she would remember it was there in the morning when her feet swung off the bed.

Pulling the covers back on, Pam was just about to fall back asleep when she something moved on the bed. Had she let Whiskers into her room last night? There was the comforting feel of being spooned. By something with warm skin. Something that exhaled a ticklish breath on the back of her neck. Something that gently prodded her spine. Something...

“Jeremy!” Pam exclaimed, luckily remembering to modulate her voice to a whisper. Surely that had been a dream? She rolled over to face him. Upset by her movement, Jeremy murmured something she couldn't understand before cuddling closer. The contact of his skin against hers confirmed that they were both naked. He sighed quietly before resuming his muted snores.

Panicking, Pam blindly fumbled for her phone on the nightstand. It was 4:30 in the morning. Her heart clenched in fear. Had Kate come home last night? As if to answer, she heard the unmistakable sound of a kitchen cupboard closing.

“Oh shit.” Pam didn't bother whispering now. “Shit shit shit.”

She turned the bedside lamp back on. Squinting from the sudden light, Pam lurched out of bed and promptly stepped on her laptop. “Christ,” she groaned. Jeremy, unaware of the predicament, rolled onto his side to shield himself from the lamp's light and promptly fell back asleep. “Jeremy, wake up,” she whispered. “Your mom's home.” A woozy nausea descended as her body protested being snatched from its deep sleep. Pam skittered to her closet to find some clothes, her fingers trembling as she struggled to pull a t-shirt over her head.

But he remained motionless. What now? “Think,” Pam willed herself. The events of the previous
evening whirred through her mind like a deck of shuffled cards. Had she left behind any incriminating evidence, save the naked eleven year old boy snoozing in her bed? As quietly as possible, she opened her bedroom door, looked left and right, and then crept to the bathroom once she confirmed the coast was clear. Jeremy's pajamas still lay in a crumpled pile on the bathroom floor. She plucked out his underwear and dumped the rest in the laundry chute before breathlessly tiptoeing back to her own room.

“Jeremy, wake up,” she commanded. “Put your underwear on. Please?” She shook his shoulder once, then twice. Nothing. Groaning inwardly, Pam pulled the covers off of him. She maneuvered his limp legs until each foot was planted in the leg holes of the underpants. After that, the only option was brute force to yank them up to his waist. Through it all, Jeremy mumbled a few incoherent protests but otherwise never opened his eyes.

“Oh, hi Kate!” she said brightly. Too bright? Pam cleared her throat. “I didn't realize you were home.”

“I actually just got off my shift,” Kate said. She was carrying a mug of tea. “It was a crazy one for Thursday night. But now I'm finally home and off to bed.”

“Is Jeremy at Ashton's house or something?” Kate asked, dashing her hopes. “I noticed he's not in his bed.”

Pam was tempted to say yes. A sleepover at Ashton's was the perfect excuse! But that would raise further questions of why she allowed a sleepover on a school night. “No,” Pam answered. Her mind groped for an explanation. “Jeremy... had a bad dream. So he came to my room in the middle of the night.”

As if right on cue, the door behind her opened and Jeremy disapprovingly peered at them in all his shirtless and bare-legged glory. “Why are you guys having a conversation in the middle of the night?” he demanded, rubbing his eyes.

“Sorry kiddo, didn't mean to wake you up,” Kate said. “Heard you had a bad dream last night and had to sleep with Pam. Aren't you getting kind of old for that? And what happened to your pajamas?”

“Huh?” His confusion was evident.

“It's still really early, Jeremy,” Pam intervened. “Why don't you go back to sleep?”

“Maybe in your own bed,” added Kate, “since you're a big boy and...” She trailed off. Pam saw a funny expression crossing her face. Kate covered her mouth, hiding a smile. Pam was puzzled until Kate discreetly pointed at Jeremy's midsection.
Morning wood.

His underwear tented so much that the cotton seemed in danger of bursting at the seams. Pam looked away as quickly as possible, then pretended to study her cuticles. No longer able to contain herself, Kate broke into a restrained giggle. “What’s so funny?” Jeremy asked.

“Nothing,” Kate said. “Pam is right though. It's way too early for you to be awake.”

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Go ahead,” Kate stepped aside and ushered him down the hallway. “And then back to bed. Your OWN bed, please.” Jeremy mumbled an affirmative reply as he closed the bathroom door.

They both began chuckling the moment he was out of sight, although Pam's was more of a nervous laugh. Kate ran a weary hand through her hair. “Never a dull moment with him...” she sipped her tea. “I hope he didn't keep you up last night.”

“Not at all. I didn't even realize he was in my bed when I woke up,” she said truthfully.

“I'm glad you didn't wake up to THAT,” she said, gesturing toward the closed bathroom door. “Quite the ladies’ man, isn't he?” Kate glanced at Pam, then laughed at her obvious discomfort.

“I wouldn't know,” Pam said, blushing.
The Opposite of Jailbait

Chapter Summary

Jeremy convinces Pam to dress up for Halloween.

It all started because of a moment of weakness. That was the first thought that crossed her mind when Jeremy showed her the photo on the iPad.

“You want me to dress like that tonight? For Halloween?” Pam asked him. “No. Absolutely not.”

Her firm words were punctuated by a rattling of the kitchen window. Outside, a bitter wind stripped the trees of their last tenacious leaves, but the bright rays of the setting sun lent warmth to the landscape. Pam congratulated herself for having the foresight to make a big pot of chicken noodle for dinner. It was undoubtedly soup weather.

Jeremy joined her at the dinner table where two steaming bowls waited. He shoved the iPad closer to her face, as if that would change her mind. “But you promised,” he protested.

“Out of the question. Eat your soup.”

He picked up his spoon but propped up the iPad so it remained facing her. “But you made a promise,” Jeremy repeated. “You’re always telling me friends need to keep their promises to each other. Remember?”

Pam stared at the picture on the iPad. Yes, she remembered that day all right...

It was a very ordinary Tuesday afternoon. The school had an early dismissal day due to parent-teacher conferences so Jeremy had come home early. Kate had promised them pizza if Jeremy received good marks from his teachers so Pam had been relieved of dinner duty. She took advantage of the free time by catching up on kitchen chores. Jeremy kept her company, studiously doing his homework at the counter. Strains of classical music, Pam’s choice, played quietly in the background.

He had chosen blaring rap music but Pam had lasted only ten minutes before it became too much for her nerves. “This will make it easier for you to finish your homework,” she told him as she switched over to classical. He rolled his eyes but she pretended not to notice.

Leaning bumward against the cabinet, Pam half-heartedly began drying some dishes. The housework seemed especially boring today. While she worked, she studied Jeremy in his position across the kitchen. He hadn’t changed out of his school uniform, which didn’t bother Pam at all since she found him particularly handsome in it. The school had switched to the winter dress code which meant charcoal gray slacks and a Prussian blue sweater over a white button-down shirt. The unkempt curls of his rust colored hair were a pleasing contrast to the proper uniform. His bare feet fidgeted while he worked, his toes curling on the rungs of the counter stool.

Pam realized she had been drying the same dish for over a minute. She turned to put it away, picked...
up another, and immediately resumed her original position. Why was he so cute? She smiled when
he used his pencil to scratch an itch above his ear. When he glanced at her, Pam turned away and
pretended to be busy with the dishes. After a moment he appeared to be engrossed in his homework
again so Pam returned to her perch across the kitchen. He looked her way again and put down his
pencil.

“What are you looking at?”

“Pardon?” Pam said, innocently drying a plate.

“You're staring at me.”

“Was I staring? I'm sorry. I was just zoning out.”

Jeremy picked up his pencil to resume working. No more than thirty seconds had gone by when he
gave her a quick look. “Quit it!” he ordered.

“Okay! Okay!” Pam said, caught in the act. “Look. I'm turning around. I've got my back to you,
right?”

Jeremy muttered something unintelligible. Pam worked for several minutes without paying any
attention to him. “Too bad he has homework,” she thought to himself. “Maybe we can have a
quickie before bedtime...” She spent a few more perfunctory minutes on the dishes before deciding
she couldn't wait that long.

“I'll be right back, okay?” she told him. “I need to make a phone call.”

“Mmmhmm,” Jeremy nodded without looking at her.

Once in her bedroom, Pam locked the door. Not bothering to take off her clothes, she lay down on
her bed and slipped a hand inside her underwear. In a matter of minutes, Pam masturbated to a very
pleasant orgasm. Not an earth-shattering one, but sufficient to take the edge off. She lay on the bed
for brief moment, catching her breath, before returning to the kitchen.

“I'm back!” she announced.

“Mmmhmm.”

Pam rolled her eyes and began washing her hands at the sink. “Did you miss me?” she asked.

“Not really.”

“Charmer.”

“Mmmhmm.”

Hopeless, she thought ruefully. Pam retrieved the dish towel and resumed her chore. She hadn't
realized where her mind had wandered until she caught herself once again drying the same dish far
longer than necessary. She couldn't stop staring at Jeremy. “Uh oh,” she thought. Sometimes her
hormones did this to her. Instead of alleviating her sexual tension, the orgasm only revved her
engine.

She turned away. “He needs to get his homework done,” she reasoned with herself. “I shouldn't
distract him.” But she couldn't help sneak one last peek out of the corner of her eye. At that exact
moment, Jeremy pursed his lips and puffed a breath upward from his mouth, causing his bangs to
momentarily flutter.

Pam's hand stopped moving in the salad bowl that she was drying. That was his subconscious gesture of concentration. She often witnessed it when he was playing a tricky video game, but once he had done it when fondling her breasts, thereby sending Pam nearly to the moon. Seeing him do it now gave Pam the zero-G feeling of rocketing off the earth.

The earlier thought about letting him finish his homework went straight out the window. Her hormones roared from (not quite) zero to sixty, all because she happened to glimpse his hair puff. “What the hell,” she thought. It was only two o'clock. They had several hours before Kate would return from the parent-teacher meetings. Tossing aside the dish towel, she sidled up next to the young boy. “Looks like you're working hard,” she said, lightly rubbing the back of his neck. “Need a break?”

There was a halting pause before he answered. “No, I'm almost done,” Jeremy said.

“How about some help?” Pam leaned in to look over his shoulder, letting her breast brush his arm. Her hand moved from his neck to his ear, tracing its contours.

“No thanks.”

“Are you sure?” Pam persisted. “These math problems look really tough.”

He finally looked at her. “This is my English homework.”

“Oh.” Pam peered more closely at his textbook. “They looked like those word problems your teacher likes so much.”

“I already finished my math anyway.”

“Oh.” Pam remained by his side. “How about a little couch break? I could rub your feet.”

Jeremy shrugged. “No, I'm good.” He scribbled some sentences.

Pam tapped her foot. He could be startlingly clueless. “Well, how about a Call of Duty break?” she suggested. Just in case he didn't get it, she teasingly ran a finger along his thigh. He put his pencil down. Finally.

“Oh,” Jeremy said. “Um, don't you want me to finish my homework first?”

“Finish it afterward,” she urged. Her fingers danced to his crotch and rubbed him through his school pants.

“What if I'm too sleepy?”

“I'll help you with your homework after dinner.” Pam smiled at him. Her fingers detected the faintest hint of stiffness beneath the material of his slacks.

“Oh,” Jeremy agreed at last. “I guess I could use a break.”

Pam continued fondling him as she spoke, “Listen, do you think you could do that thing I like?”

“Um, you mean that tower thing?”

Pam rewarded him with a squeeze through his pants. “Yes, the tower thing.”
“I don't know,” Jeremy said. “It always feels so...” he trailed off, searching for the word, “…embarrassing when I do that.”

“Please?”

Jeremy hesitated.

“Pretty please?”

“Well...” he considered. “I'll do it if you promise to do one thing for me.”

“Anything,” Pam pledged. She took his arm and pulled him off his stool. “Let's go.”

“But I haven't even told you what it is yet!” Jeremy protested.

“Let me guess. Chocolate cake?”

“No.”

“Chocolate ice cream?”

“No.”

“Chocolate sauce drizzled all over my chest?”

“What?”

“Never mind. Just tell me what you want.”

“Well, you know that haunted house you're taking me and my friends to? On Halloween?”

“How could I forget? You've been talking about your Joker costume for like two months now.” This year, Jeremy had decided he was too old for trick or treating so he and his friends planned an outing to a haunted house instead. Pam had somehow gotten roped into the role of chaperone.

“Yeah, we're going as the Suicide Squad and I want you to wear a Harley Quinn costume becau-”


Pam spent a few precious seconds tidying his unmade bed before declaring it a lost cause. The sheets felt lumpy against her back but she didn't care. Waiting, she glanced at the dawdling Jeremy. “Um, is it okay if I leave my shirt on?” he asked.

“Off please.”

“Can't I just unbutton it?” he negotiated.

“No sale. Everything comes off.”

He heaved a deep sigh, the same sigh as when she asked him to rake leaves or turn down the volume on his headphones. The manipulative sigh that made her feel as if she were asking him to do something unreasonable. As he undressed, he asked, “Are you going to take your clothes off too? You didn't the last time I towered you.”
“Didn’t I?”

“No. You kept your underwear on.” Jeremy stepped out of his gray dress pants and then took an
inordinate amount of time pulling off his sweater. Why oh why was he taking so long, Pam moaned
inwardly. She wondered what he would do if she literally jumped on him, pinned him down, and...

“I think it would be more fair if you took your clothes off too,” Jeremy said, interrupting her train of
thought.

“You want to see me naked, huh?”

“Well, yeah.”

Sitting up from the bed, Pam whipped off her clothes in record time. Her panties had barely hit the
floor before she was once again reclining in Jeremy’s bed. “Beat you,” she taunted. Still wearing his
white dress shirt and underwear, Jeremy scowled. He unbuttoned his shirt and wordlessly tossed it
on Pam’s foot. His underpants came off next and were likewise flung at her.

He was, Pam supposed, attempting to voice his displeasure but she found it rather arousing when his
underwear landed on her bare tummy. It had always excited her to be naked in his room, but this
pushed things to a whole new level. Jeremy seemed surprised when she didn’t remove it. “Are you
going to leave it there?” he asked.

“Yes. Are you going to tower me now?”

Jeremy climbed onto the bed and straddled her midsection. Glancing at his crotch, Pam noted with
satisfaction that he was ready for her, which was perfect because she was ready for him fifteen
minutes ago. Lifting her arms up so that her hands rested atop her head, she gave Jeremy a knowing
look. He began inching forward on his knees. When he first straddled her, he had been positioned
directly over her belly button. Now he was gliding past her ribcage. Only when he was perched
directly over her chest did he finally come to rest.

“Is this good?” Jeremy asked.

Pam gazed up at him. His tantalizing erection jutted mere inches away from her chin. Though she
was enjoying the sensation of his inner thighs brushing against her nipples, Pam shook her head. “A
little closer please.” Jeremy self-consciously scooted forward, perhaps a half-inch at most.

“Don’t be shy,” Pam encouraged. “Keep going. Come on.” She coaxed him further and further,
stopping only to reposition her arms by her sides. By the time Pam was satisfied, Jeremy’s knees
were almost touching her ears and his shins were lightly pinning down her upper arms. He was so far
forward now that his thighs no longer touched her breasts, disappointingly. The tradeoff, however,
was that his boy parts were now aligned directly above her face. She was so close to him that Pam
could have planted a kiss on his wrinkled ballsack by merely puckering her lips.

“I can feel your breathing,” Jeremy noted. He had to crane his neck to look down at her. Pam liked
how his erection bisected her field of vision.

“Really?” Experimentally, she blew a breath of air from her mouth against his scrotum. Jeremy’s
penis visibly throbbed in response. Pam stifled a pleased giggle. She knew Jeremy already felt
overexposed and embarrassed in this position, so there was no need to further aggravate him. “Could
you feel that?”

“Yes...”
Pam tried again, more lightly this time. “How about that?”

“Yup.”

She aimed a breath at the underside of his penis.

“I could feel that one too,” he told her.

“Want to practice Morse code?” Pam asked. As part of a history presentation at school last month, Jeremy had to learn Morse code, which pretty much meant Pam had to learn it too. She exhaled a slow breath against him. “That's a dash and...” She blew a quick puff. “That's a dot. Got it?”

“Okay,” Jeremy said. She saw him knit his brow in concentration. “Um. P, right? Okay... let's see... L?”

Pam wished she could blow him for real, but she knew better. Each time she attempted, Jeremy would start to squirm before bursting into a fit of chuckles. Her mouth was inexplicably ticklish on him, which was unfortunate. Sometimes Pam would wistfully think of the fun they could have together if things were different. She had to admit, however, that this current game was rather enjoyable.

“O... V...” Jeremy continued. “E... that's an easy one... S... J...”

“What's the message?” Pam challenged.

Jeremy paused to remember the letters. “Plovesj? That's not even a word. Unless it's Polish or something. Were you doing English or Polish? I don't know any Polish.”

“Yes, I am aware of that,” Pam said. “It's technically three words in English.”

Jeremy considered the letters again. “Plo ves j? I don't know where you learned English but that's not English.”

Pam sighed. “Think initials, Jeremy.”

“P...”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I get it,” he said. “P Loves J, right?”

“Aww, you got it!” Pam gave the underside of his penis a kiss. There was a pleasant scent of unshowered preteen boy, perhaps one that had worked through a sweaty gym class followed by running around during recess. Pam decided she had delayed her gratification for long enough. “Okay, we can quit playing around now. Do you have the Coppertone?”

Jeremy reached into his secret hiding spot between the mattress and bed frame, producing a bottle of Coppertone. Pam licked her lips in anticipation as he squirted some into his palm. Slowly, gently, he began masturbating. He employed his usual method of an open palm mashed against the underside of his penis, waving to and fro.

Pam was in heaven. She loved seeing him in this position, towering over her like she was an ant on the ground. She had a wonderful view of his slender shoulders and wiry arms. The smooth skin of his stomach would occasionally ripple as he tensed. After a minute of warming up, Jeremy was waving off so earnestly that his erection moved like a wiper blade across the expanse of hairless skin.
between his penis and belly button.

“Does that feel nice, sweetie?” she asked.

Jeremy nodded. “I think I need a little more though...” He stopped to add a measured squirt of Coppertone to his hand. Pam liked how serious the young boy became when doing anything sexual. Whether touching her or touching himself, his actions were always accompanied by a sense of purpose, as if he were a scientist performing an experiment in a lab.

His brief pause allowed her a moment to admire every inch of him. Though swathed in stray bits of Coppertone, she could easily discern the unblemished skin of his shaft. It was neither small nor large, yet Jeremy's penis proportionally fit his body in the most perfect manner. She especially liked how, when erect, his foreskin stretched so tight that she could see the telltale outline of the head under the creamy skin. At his current age, the eleven year old boy's physical innocence was the exact opposite of rugged. Pam didn't want it any other way.

He resumed waving off. His free hand had been resting on his hip, but Pam slipped her fingers under it so they were holding hands. Then, unable to resist any further, Pam snaked her other hand between her legs. She was greeted by his forgotten underpants draped across her midsection. The thought of lying in Jeremy's bed, among the mussed-up sheets and covered in his discarded clothing, made her so horny that Pam thought she might explode. Feeling a little naughty, she moved his underwear so that it lay in between her bare breasts. Then, holding her breath, Pam finally dipped a finger into the waiting wetness between her legs.

“Ahhh...” Pam sighed. Her clit, so hungry for attention, felt like a hard pearl. She was a little embarrassed to realize she was already close to coming. “I haven't come this fast since I was, like, fourteen,” Pam thought to herself. Summoning all her willpower, she attempted to stave off her impending orgasm. After all, she wanted the pleasure of seeing Jeremy go first. His half-closed eyes told her he couldn't be that far off. Imagining a mystical transference of sexual energy between them, she squeezed his hand.

“Just... a little bit more,” Pam breathed to herself. At that moment, however, something wet dripped on her cheek. Logically, Pam knew it was merely the excess Coppertone that Jeremy had applied. But the suntan lotion, having adopted his body temperature, was deliciously warm when it landed on her face. He certainly wasn't ejaculating but the mere suggestion of it pushed Pam over the edge.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god....” Pam moaned. The feeling of her warm breath against his scrotum made Jeremy’s eyes snap open. She gazed into his eyes as the blissful waves wracked her body. Her fingers squeezed his hand so tight that it occurred to her that she might hurt him. But it felt too good to let go of his hand.

To her delight, Pam felt Jeremy's fingers squeezing her right back. “Me too...” Jeremy breathed. “Oh!”

Pam was floored. In all of her twenty-five years, she had never once simultaneously had an orgasm with any partner. And here she was, coming at the same time as an eleven year old boy. She felt as if they were both being swept to a higher plane of existence. It was so amazing that she never wanted the moment to en-

“Hey. Pam.” Jeremy snapped his fingers in her face. “Did you hear anything I just said?”
“Huh?” Pam mumbled. Her soup spoon hovered over her forgotten bowl with glazed-over eyes and a dreamy expression on her face. “I zoned out for a second there. What were you saying?”

“Don't you remember that night? You wanted me to tower you. So I said I would do it if you dressed up as Harley Quinn. And you promised you would do it.”

“Yes, I remember that night,” Pam sighed. She blew on a spoonful of soup. “Yes, I promised. Let me see that picture again... So that's Harley Whoever? From whatever movie that was?”

“Harley Quinn from Suicide Squad,” Jeremy said, through a mouthful of soup. “She's really cool. She carries a baseball bat and smashes stuff.”

“Don't talk with your mouth full. That's gross.” Pam took ladylike sips as he loudly slurped up his dinner. “So you just want me to carry a baseball bat?” she asked. “I can totally do that.”

“Not just a baseball bat! You have to dress up too.” He scrolled though some more pictures on the iPad. Harley Quinn wore a tight crop top that showed off her belly button, paired with what was either a bikini bottom or a pair of panties. Pam couldn't figure out which. The whole look was topped off with blond pigtails, an excessive amount of makeup, fishnet stockings and lace-up boots with high heels.

“I don't have any clothes like that,” Pam informed him.

“Maybe we can make some?” Jeremy suggested.

“Make those clothes? How are we going to do that?”

“Like you could wear jean shorts instead. Don't you have old jeans we could cut up?”

“I don't know. Maybe.”

“Can we go look?”

“Now?”

Jeremy consulted his watch. “Our tickets for the haunted house are for 8 o'clock. That's only two hours away.”

Pam wearily tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Let me just finish my dinner,” she sighed. “And drink the rest of your milk, will you?” He chugged his milk and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

It wasn't easy to eat with him watching her like a hawk. Pam only managed a few spoonfuls before pushing aside her bowl. “All right, let's go,” she said, giving in. Jeremy crowed in triumph as they headed for her bedroom.

“Oh wait,” he stopped. “I should get the scissors.” He ran off but Pam continued to her room. She was already digging through her closet when he returned.

“These are the sharpest pair of scissors in the house,” he announced. “My mom bought them for sewing but never used them.”

“Hurrah,” Pam grumbled. She tugged a pair of faded jeans from her dresser. “I think these might work,” she said.

“Want me to cut them?” Jeremy eagerly snipped the air with the scissors.
“Let me do it,” Pam said, holding out her hand. She had to guess at the length of the cut. Pam had never been the type to wear Daisy Dukes so this was her first time making them. Two legs of denim material soon lay on the floor. Without bothering to shoo Jeremy from the room, Pam slid out of the jeans she was wearing and reluctantly tried on the freshly minted cutoff shorts.

“I don't think this looks right,” she said, casting a critical eye in the mirror.

“Yeah, I'll say,” Jeremy agreed. He held up the iPad and squinted as he compared the picture on the screen to Pam's figure. “They need to be way shorter. Harley Quinn's shorts are, like, half that size.”

“That's not what I meant,” Pam said. Had she lost weight? These jeans were baggy in all the wrong places. “These don't fit at all.” She returned to her dresser to search for another old pair.

“Make sure you cut it shorter this time,” Jeremy advised when she pulled out a second pair. She ignored him and used her best judgment. Trying them on, Pam was dismayed to see that the shorts were unflatteringly loose.

“No, no, no…” Jeremy shook his head. “Not short enough.”

“It's not that,” Pam contradicted. “I don't think I have the right figure to wear Daisy Dukes.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I would have had to starve myself for the past six months to look like Harley Quinn. I don't have this unrealistic body that reduces teenage boys to panting dogs.”


Pam made a face as she looked in the mirror again. “I'm just saying these look terrible on me.”

“That's just because they're too big. Don't you have a smaller pair of jeans?” He picked up the pair that she had originally been wearing. “How about these?”

“Those are my favorite pair of jeans,” Pam told him. “I am not cutting them up so I can be your wet dream.” Jeremy stared at her blankly.

“Or dry dream, as it is,” she hastily amended.

Another blank look.

“Anyway…” Pam continued, “this Harley Quinn idea isn't going to work. Don't you have something else I could dress up as?”

Jeremy's shoulders slumped. “You promised…” he said. “Can't we just try cutting these up? Maybe they'll look great.”

“Jeremy. These are my best jeans. I've never had a pair fit this well. Possibly ever.”

“What's the big deal?” he asked. “Why can't you just go to the store and buy another pair in the same size?”

“Oh my God, you are such a guy. I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer.”

Dejected, Jeremy sat on her bed with his chin in his hands. The disappointment palpably radiating from him dredged up terrible guilt from Pam. “Don't pout,” she conceded. What options did she have? None, really. “For you, I will sacrifice my favorite pair of jeans.” She lovingly laid them on
the bed and smoothed out the legs. A lump formed in her throat as she positioned the scissors against
the denim material. Cringing, she sliced off one leg from the jeans, then the other. She tried them on.

“Hey, that's not bad,” Pam said, looking over her shoulder into the mirror.

“I guess,” Jeremy said. “But...”

“... You think they should be shorter,” Pam finished for him.

“Yes.”

Pam glanced in the mirror again. “We don't want to mess up and cut it too short. We only have one
chance at this.” She had an inspiration. “Do you have any chalk?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Go get it. We'll use it to make some guidelines for cutting.”

Jeremy dashed off and returned with a stick of chalk. He handed it to her, but Pam declined. “You
have way better artistic skills than me. Go ahead and mark off how short you think they should be.”
Jeremy consulted the iPad before kneeling down in front of her. With a confident motion, he marked
a chalk slash that ran started at her hip and terminated at the crotch of the jeans. His fingers teased her
inner thigh in a manner that made Pam shiver. She held her breath while he did the other side.

“Okay, turn around,” Jeremy directed.

Pam complied, presenting him with her bum. She bent over slightly, pushing it out at him. It was
exciting, she had to admit, letting him play tailor. Ruefully, she recalled it was her hormones that got
her into this very situation. Her mind once again conjured up the blissful details of their simultaneous
orgasm.

“Screw it,” she thought to herself. “It was totally worth it to sacrifice these jeans.” In the mirror, she
could see Jeremy studying her bum like a painter assessing his model. There was a slight tickle as he
drew once, then twice.

He stepped back to look at her. “I think that's perfect,” Jeremy said.

“Help me out of these, will you?” She held her arms out to the sides. She relished his attention and it
was too much fun to stop now. Jeremy gave her a quizzical look, but unbuttoned and unzipped her
jeans before helping her wiggle out of them. Pam secretly hoped he would pull her panties down.
Was Jeremy getting turned on too? Instead, he busied himself with the scissors on her once favorite
pair of jeans.

Snip, snip, snip. “Done,” he proclaimed handing them back to her. After dutifully donning the pair of
short shorts, Pam studied the mirror while Jeremy studied her.

“Uh, these are really short,” Pam said.

Jeremy had pulled out the iPad again to compare her with a picture. “They’re exactly the right
length,” he told her.

“But look,” Pam turned to show him, “they're so short that you can see my underwear.”

“So take them off,” Jeremy shrugged.

Slyly, Pam turned to him and held her arms out again. Jeremy dropped to one knee to undo her jeans.
They landed in a pile around her ankles. The young boy looked at her panties, then glanced at Pam for direction. She responded with an “I'm waiting...” expression. With tentative fingers, Jeremy slipped her panties off her hips, rewarding her with a warm and fuzzy glow that made her heart race. Pam made a mental note to always have him undress her from now on.

He was clearly trying to play it cool, but Pam caught him peeking at her state of undress. Like a gentleman, he helped her step out of the panties before tugging up the jean shorts. “Hey, that looks really good!” Jeremy approved.

Pam studied herself in the mirror. The Daisy Dukes were so short that she was now sporting some major butt cleavage. “Um, you don't suppose my ass is hanging out too much?” Pam inquired.

Jeremy walked around her in a slow circle. “Nope.”

She sighed. “So now you expect me to go commando tonight.”

“What's go commando?” Jeremy asked.

“That's the term for when a person goes out without wearing underwear. Particularly girls.”

“I won't tell anyone you're not wearing underwear,” Jeremy promised.

“Yeah, you better not,” Pam grumbled. “So we have the bottom of the costume. What am I wearing on top?”

“I already have that figured out,” Jeremy said. “Wait here, I'll be right back.” When he returned, he triumphantly held up a white shirt with a red baseball-tee styling around the neck and shoulders. “See? It's perfect?”

“Hold on, isn't that your shirt?”

“Yeah, but I don't wear it anymore.”

Pam held up the shirt to her body. “There's no way this is going to fit me.”

“Just try it on,” Jeremy urged, sitting down on her bed.

Humoring him, Pam took off her sweater. But when she tried to pull on his shirt, the cotton material felt like it was going to rip apart. “This isn't going to work,” she informed Jeremy.

“Let me help.” He took the shirt and stood on her bed. “Lift your arms up,” he directed. He slipped the shirt over her arms and began pulling it onto her torso. The shirt was only halfway on when he stopped.

“What's going on?” Pam asked. She couldn't see anything but the inside of the shirt.

“I can't get the neck opening around your head.” He kept tugging. “Sheesh. Your head is, like, huge.”

She gave him a dirty look, even though he couldn't see her face. “Thanks, Jeremy.”

“Wait, here it goes...” He yanked hard, forcing her head through by sheer force.

The cotton shirt felt like sandpaper scraping across her ears. “Owww!” Pam howled. She tenderly touched the sides of her head to ensure her ears were still there. “Why is it so difficult for you to be gentle with me?”
“Sorry!” Jeremy said. “Is it bleeding?” Still standing on the bed, he held onto her shoulders to keep balance as he examined her ear. “Looks okay. Just a little red.”

“Well, it still hurts,” Pam said. Taking her completely by surprise, Jeremy leaned in and kissed her ear.

“Does that help?” he asked.

Instead of answering, Pam turned her head. “Do the other one too,” she requested. His chapped lips were rough but warm.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked. “Or is it more annoyed?”

“I guess annoyed...”

“Whew.” Jeremy jumped down from her bed.

“You think you know me so well,” she groused. Pam frowned as she tried to move her arms in the t-shirt. “I don't know, Jeremy. This is awfully tigh-” Her jaw almost hit the ground when she looked in the mirror. The skintight shirt not only bequeathed upon her an hourglass figure, it also somehow pushed her breasts up like a shelf. She didn't recognize the person in the mirror.

“Huh.” That was all Pam could say. She had never been the type to dress in this fashion.

Jeremy picked up the scissors. “Can I cut off some of the shirt bottom? It's a little too long.”

Pam held her breath as he began slicing into the shirt. The metal scissors were ice cold against her skin but she did her best to hold still. As the excess cloth fell to the floor, the cool air prickled against the bare skin of her midsection.

“Oh wait! Wait!” Jeremy said. He pulled a black Sharpie out of his pocket. “We need to personalize the shirt too!”

Pam raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Do you always carry a Sharpie on your person?” she asked.

He didn't answer, instead sizing up her chest in a way that made Pam feel uncomfortable yet flattered. “Hold still, okay?” Uncapping the marker with his mouth, he began writing on the shirt. Pam couldn't see what he was writing so she was again relegated to holding still. Jeremy placed a hand on her ribcage to steady himself as he wrote. His close proximity, combined with the Sharpie tickling her chest, sent an unbidden tingle between her legs.

“Done!” Jeremy announced. “What do you think?”

Pam gazed at the mirror. Since it was backwards, it took her a second to decipher what Jeremy had scrawled on her chest. “Daddy's... Lil... Monster...?” she questioned. “Jeremy. Did you just write 'Daddy's Lil Monster' on my chest?”

“That's what Harley Quinn's shirt says in the movie!” Jeremy proclaimed. “Awesome, right?”

“Awesome isn't the word I was looking for...” Pam said. The short Daisy Dukes made her legs seem longer than usual and the crop top showed off her belly button. Her breasts, meanwhile, were so perky that they might as well have had an arrow pointed at them. Which they sort of did, given the flamboyant 'Daddy's Lil Monster' that Jeremy had added.

“People will ask me, 'So Pam, what did you do for Halloween?' and I'll say, 'Oh, you know, I
dressed up as a slut then took Jeremy and his friends to a haunted house..."

“I don't think you're a slut,” Jeremy offered.

“Oh please. You don't even know what a slut is.”

“I do so. It's like Ashley Philips. Everyone at school is always saying she's a slut.”

“Whatever. That's just you and your friends being mean.”

“No, she's really slutty,” Jeremy insisted. “She's always, like, smiling at the guy teachers. Only the
guy teachers too, not the female teachers. And Ashton said she went to the math teacher for help this
one time and ended up sitting on his lap. And she was wearing a skirt when she did it.”

“Hmm, okay,” Pam changed her mind. “So maybe that is a little slutty.”

“Anyway, you don't look slutty. You look cool!”

“If you say so,” Pam said. She turned in the mirror again. “I'll just pray to God I don't run into
someone I know.”

“I'm going to get dressed in my Joker costume and do my makeup,” Jeremy decided. “Do you need
any makeup? I bought a kit so you can borrow some.”

“What kind of makeup do you want me to wear?”

Jeremy studied the picture on the iPad again. “Well, Harley has a sort of pale face so maybe some
white makeup. And red lipstick.”

“I have red lipstick,” Pam said. “But sure, I'll borrow your makeup kit.”

Pam went to the kitchen for a glass of water. When she returned, Jeremy was gone but a makeup kit
waited on her desk. She went to work. Recalling Harley's picture, she pulled her hair into two
unbraided pigtails first. The white makeup was easy enough to apply, since this was a punk look and
not Cosmo magazine. For the lipstick, Pam rifled through her drawer in search of the loudest shade
of red. She rarely wore lipstick so the best she could find was a dark ruby. Good enough.

The iPad still lay on her bed. Pam opened it to see how well she did. Her dark brown pigtails didn't
measure up to the bleached blond hair of the actress, but she was otherwise a very reasonable
facsimile. Pam suddenly remembered the fun of dressing up for Halloween, something she hadn't
done in years. Studying the iPad, she pondered other possibilities to accent her costume. Her eyes
zeroed in on Harley's cropped red jacket and fishnet tights.

Cropped red jacket. Cropped red jacket. Pam knew she had something similar in her closet, it was
just a matter of finding it. The fishnet tights were probably out of the question, but surely she had
some patterned pantyhose that could be a acceptable substitute. She began digging through her
closet. Her eyes alighted on an old studded belt that she had worn in her college days. Perfect. In a
shoebox she found several unopened pairs of pantyhose. To her surprise, there was a multipack of
tights with different patterns. One of them was fishnet.

Jackpot. All that was left was to find her old red jacket. “It has to be in here somewhere,” Pam
thought. “I know I didn't throw it out.” She finally found it nestled between some dress shirts from
her brief foray into office life. Its color was a muted wine red, darker than she remembered, but it
seemed to perfectly match her lipstick.
Excited now, Pam quickly assembled her costume. Fishnet tights under the jean shorts. Studded belt over that. She was worried that her wine colored jacket wouldn't fit, but it slipped over her shoulders perfectly. The jacket wasn't as cropped as Harley's but its hem was a solid inch above her belly button. Having forgotten shoes, Pam returned to her closet. Triumphantly, she pulled out a pair of white wedges, worn only once because they were terribly uncomfortable. Hopefully the haunted house would be a small one.

“Hey Pam, I need my makeup kit ba-” Jeremy stopped in his tracks when she turned to face him.

Pam raised a questioning eyebrow. “What?”

“You look so cool!” Jeremy breathed in awe.

Pam was pleased with his reaction. “But then, you've always thought I look cool, right?”

“Yeah but... I didn't know you had all this stuff. You should wear it all the time.”

Pam laughed. “I suppose you want me to wear this every day. Like you'd be having your breakfast and I'd be prancing around the kitchen in this outfit.”

“Really? You'd do that?”

“No, Jeremy. I would probably get cold in the winter.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He studied her with admiration. He ran a finger across her studded belt. “You know, I've got some bracelets just like this.” He paused, then got an excited look. “I'll be right back!”

He dashed off once again and returned with two studded bracelets. The bracelets had only a double row of studs whereas Pam's belt had three, but they were otherwise identical. She held out her wrists for him to put them on but Jeremy shook his head.

“I have a better idea,” he said. He linked the two bracelets together so they formed a much longer unit. “We should put this around your neck.”

“Like a choker?” Pam clarified. She bent over and held her hair out of the way as Jeremy carefully clasped it in place.

“Is that too tight?”

“Nope.”

Jeremy stood next to her as they looked at the mirror. He had changed into a white tuxedo shirt with black dress pants and a spangly purple jacket. His shirt was unbuttoned at the collar with an undone purple bow tie slung around it. “We look so cool!” Jeremy declared. He retrieved the kit from her desk. “I need to go finish my makeup. Be right back!”

“Take your time,” she called after him. Every time she looked in the mirror, Pam was surprised by the reflection. It was exciting to be someone new for a change. The studded choker had a decidedly S&M feel to it, but she liked it. It made her feel a bit wicked.

“Uh oh...” Pam thought. “Horny.” All of Jeremy's incidental touching had added up. Making chalk marks on her jeans. Kissing her ears. Writing on her chest. Pam checked her watch. They had to leave in less than an hour. She wondered if Jeremy would mind being sleepy and groggy at the haunted house.
Pam decided, reluctantly, that she couldn't do that to him. She went to close her bedroom door. “Jeremy?” she called. “I have to make a phone call, okay?”

“Oh,” he called back.

Satisfied, she locked the door.

It didn't take too long. After a minute of masturbating, Pam was already on the verge. Wanting to make it last, she teased herself with a lighter touch. She fantasized about Jeremy returning in his Joker outfit. Maybe he would take one look at her and get instantly hard. He would unbuckle his pants and demand that she take care of him. He wouldn't take no for an answer.

“Oh!” Pam moaned, taking care to keep her voice down. Try as she might, she could no longer contain her orgasm. “Mmm... Oh... Oh...” She felt like a kite floating high in the sunshine. When it was over, she lay unmoving on the bed, her hand still inside the fishnet tights.

There was a knock on her door. “Pam?” The doorknob rattled. “I'm done with my makeup. You gotta check it out!”

Pam yanked her hand out of her shorts. “Um, be right there!” Stumbling to her feet, she hastily buttoned up. She was about to straighten her hair and smooth over her clothes but, after consulting the mirror, she decided that the slightly disheveled look worked well for Harley Quinn.

Jeremy immediately came bounding into the room the moment she opened the door. His hair, greasily slicked back, was now a lurid shade of green. Otherwise, his makeup job was remarkably similar to hers with bright crimson lipstick on top of a ghostly white foundation. He thrust a pack of Bubblicious bubble gum into her hand.

“What's this for?” Pam asked.

“Harley Quinn is always chewing gum and blowing bubbles,” Jeremy told her. “Do you know how to blow bubbles?”

“What do you take me for?” Pam scoffed. She unwrapped a piece of gum. “Of course I can.” After a few minutes of chewing, she produced a decent sized bubble. “See?” Despite her bravado, Pam had never before blown bubblegum bubbles while wearing lipstick. It was messy work.

“That was pretty good,” he approved. “Be sure to do it when my friends are watching.”

“The things I do for you...” she sighed.

The doorbell rang. “I'll get it,” Jeremy volunteered.

“It's probably your friends,” Pam said, checking the clock. The plan had been for everyone to meet at the Prater house and then Pam would deliver them home after the haunted house. “Can you guys wait outside? I don't want you raising hell in here.”

“No problem. I'll find a baseball bat for you to carry too.” He disappeared out the front door.

Pam began tidying the kitchen. After wiping down a counter that was already clean, she realized she was nervous. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the dinner table, Pam stopped to study herself. What was the opposite of jailbait? That was precisely how she felt. This outfit had transformed her into her deepest desire: to be the fantasy object of a young boy. Her fantasy world and the real world were starting to mesh, perhaps too closely for comfort.
Suddenly anxious, Pam wished they could stay home. Her hopes were dashed, though, when Jeremy called to her from the garage. “Pam! Everyone's here!”

“I'm on my way!” Shunting away her anxiety, Pam did a final flight check. Phone? Cash? Keys? She swapped out her own keys for the minivan's. Then she checked a mirror one last time. Teasing Jeremy in the privacy of their home was one thing, but could she really leave the house like this? She zipped up her wine red jacket in a fit of modesty.

The boys were already waiting for her in the minivan. Upon climbing in, Pam sensed the preteen hormones hanging in the air like the cloying scent of a candy store. She dimly recalled some of their faces from Jeremy's birthday party last summer but the names escaped her. No matter, since they were engrossed in a Pokemon discussion that went over her head. As a matter of fact, they didn't acknowledge her presence at all, even once the minivan was moving.

“And I was worried about being stared at,” Pam thought ruefully. They chattered away, not even pausing for air during the entire trip to the haunted house, with topics ranging from garden slugs to football to an upcoming science assignment. Pam couldn't find any logic to the meandering conversation and eventually gave up trying to follow along. The only intelligible snippet was when they began discussing a television show called Stranger Things and the attractiveness of Nancy Wheeler. There was a unanimous vote for yes. She wondered what Nancy looked like.

When Pam pulled up to the haunted house, the boys were too busy pelting each other with gummy bears to notice. When she parked the minivan, they continued a heated argument about something called a 'switch double backflip 1440 truck driver.' When she stepped out of the car, no one followed. More cars kept arriving and the line to enter the haunted house spilled outside, yet there was no sign of anyone disembarking the minivan. “Whatever,” Pam thought. “I don't care if they want to stay in there all night.”

Her patience proved to be short-lived. After less than thirty seconds, she changed her mind and slid open the minivan door. “All right, everybody out,” she commanded. They came tumbling forth like cats out of a shopping bag. Except Jeremy, who asked, “Wait, has anyone seen my holster?” He began searching for it while everyone waited. Pam drummed her fingers on the minivan. Only Jeremy could misplace something during a ten minute drive.

She was so annoyed with him that it took her a moment to notice his four friends staring at her. It had been dark in the garage when she got in the minivan, but the haunted house's parking lot was exceptionally well-lit. Sensing the weight of their stares, Pam uncomfortably shifted her weight from foot to foot. Each time she glanced at Jeremy's friends, they would quickly look somewhere else. A group of teenage girls passed by, but the boys' attention remained riveted on Pam.

“Here's your baseball bat, Pam,” Jeremy said, handing it to her. He still hadn't located his holster yet. Pam slung the bat over her shoulder, doing her best to be nonchalant even though her heart was racing. Was she being too transparent? Did anyone else in the crowded parking lot notice her effortless command of this group of young boys? Two of Jeremy's friends exchanged a look while a third's eyes got noticeably bigger.

“Found it!” Jeremy triumphantly emerged from the minivan with his holster. “What's up with you guys?” he asked, referring to his uncharacteristically quiet friends. He gave them a puzzled look, glanced at Pam (who shrugged), then swiveled his head back to his friends.

“Oh hey, you guys haven't seen how cool Pam's costume is,” Jeremy said. “Pam, open your jacket and show them your shirt!”

Self-consciously, Pam slowly unzipped her jacket. Could she get arrested for this? Possibly. Jeremy
beamed proudly but his friends appeared to be shell-shocked as they stared at her shirt. Were they staring at her chest or just trying to read the words? Maybe both. Remembering Jeremy's instructions, she blew a bubble with her bubblegum. She managed an especially big one before it deflated with a distinct pop. His friends might have been ogling her before, but now their minds were completely blown.

A chilly October breeze made her jacket flutter. Glancing down, Pam realized her nipples were poking through the thin shirt. In the haste to fit Jeremy's shirt over her apparently too-large head, Pam had forgotten to ensure she was wearing a padded bra. It was far too late to rectify the problem, so Pam herded the boys toward the entrance to the haunted house. The raucous noise of the minivan was replaced with a muted silence as they followed her. Pam felt herself blushing underneath all the makeup. She was well aware of how the Daisy Dukes looked from behind.

Once they got in line, the boys broke the silence, opining on the plethora of costumes around them. A group of vampires waited in front of them. Behind them, a collection of zombie football players and cheerleaders joined the line. Pam quietly eavesdropped on the mingling conversations. The vampires were definitely older than Jeremy's group since their voices were noticeably deeper. Their average height seemed a few inches taller as well.

Pam caught one of the vampires staring at her. She pretended not to notice when he elbowed his friend. “Damn...” he murmured. That friend elbowed another friend. Like a ripple in a lake, the other vampires were alerted to her presence. One of them, apparently too excited, did nothing to hide his admiration. “That is one hot bitch!” he proclaimed. His friends glanced nervously at each other. Pam wasn't sure what to do other than give him a dirty look.

As it turned out, she didn't have to do anything. Jeremy, having overheard the comment, spun around. “Hey, don't talk about my girlfriend that way!” His hand reached for the holster under his jacket. Before anyone knew what was happening, Jeremy fired a watergun at the offending vampire who sputtered in protest.

“Hey! What the hell!” he exclaimed, holding up his hands. The vampire's friends had been stunned at first, but began laughing at their friend.

“Say you're sorry!” Jeremy threatened, still brandishing his watergun.


Satisfied, Jeremy tucked the watergun away under his jacket. Pam quietly cleared her throat. “Um, girlfriend?” She whispered so his friends wouldn't hear.

Jeremy nodded. “Well, yeah. Harley Quinn is the Joker's girlfriend.”

“You didn't tell me that.”

“Everyone knows that,” Jeremy shrugged. He rejoined his friends.

The vampires were now huddled amongst themselves, pointedly not looking her way, but the episode had drawn the attention of the zombies behind them. Three of them approached Pam. They were the zombie football players, appropriately decked out with melting skin and bloodstained uniforms. They were older, probably late high school, she guessed. “Hey, your costume is totally awesome,” one of them said. He had a thin soul patch on his chin that did him no favors. “Can we get a picture with you?” His two friends nodded eagerly.

Pam noticed the chilly expressions on their companions, the zombie cheerleaders. She couldn't help
but feel a little proud for having elicited such palpable jealousy from teenage girls. Meanwhile, Jeremy has somehow gravitated back to her side. “Sorry, sugar,” Pam told the disappointed teenager. She put an arm around Jeremy. “My boyfriend doesn’t like it when I talk to other guys.” It felt daring to be so open about the object of her affection. The rebuffed boys slunk back to the annoyed cheerleaders. Halloween was the greatest, Pam decided.

The line inched forward until they were finally admitted. The haunted house was a self-guided tour, although groups entered at ten minute intervals to avoid overcrowding. When their turn finally came, the boys joyfully rushed in as Pam followed them. The first room was dimly lit with mirrors on each wall. Pam was unimpressed until fake spiders unexpectedly rained down from the ceiling.

Pam screamed first, which made the rest of the group scream too. She was embarrassed but the boys were having too much fun to notice. They kicked the spiders around for a moment before gleefully moving on to the next door. As they went from room to room, Pam lost count of all the skulls and cobwebs that greeted them. She also learned to look at the ceiling in each room to see what surprises might greet them. They wended their way through the house until finally arriving at the basement where a witch greeted them.

“This is the last room,” the witch informed them. “But be forewarned, this room is not meant for mortal souls.” She then pointed at the sign on the door that listed three ominous warnings. One, there would be zero illumination. Two, do not let go of the guide rope. Three, it was highly advised to go barefoot so as to not lose one's footing.

Excited, the boys began removing their shoes. Pam followed suit. Carrying their shoes, they entered the room. The door closed with a loud creak, plunging them into darkness. Remembering the instructions, Pam groped in the dark until she felt the rope. The sound of indistinct whispers and moans filled the room. They presumably came from well-placed speakers, yet Pam felt nervous nonetheless. A cool draft tickled her face.

The bright flash of a strobe light momentarily blinded them. Pam had just enough time to see a row of skeletons chained to the wall. “Auuugh!” Jeremy stopped to scream, causing her to bump into him. The whispers and moans became louder.

“This is so cool!” someone said. Another flash of light lit up a giant face, leering, that was painted on the wall. Pam was jostled about as unknown bodies bumped against her.

“Holy shit!”

“What are you doing? Don't let go of the rope!”

“Oh no! I can't find it!”

“Quit pushing!”

The piped-in whispers and moans were so loud that they had to raise their voices to be heard. The strobes kept firing, illuminating things like a pair of twin girls in one corner and a headless horseman in another. It was mayhem. The boys were yelling so much that Pam couldn't tell if they were just excited or truly scared. In the darkness, someone grabbed her hand.

“Jeremy? Is that you?” she asked. He responded by running a hand across her front. Before she could say anything, a crackle of thunder sounded. A hand brushed her breasts once, then twice. “Will you quit fooling around?” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the sound effects.

But her words were cut off by a new howl. “You guys! I'm walking on something wet and slimy!” It
sounded like Jeremy's voice, but she couldn't be sure with all the noise in the room. Sure enough, Pam felt something squishing beneath her toes. Clutching the rope for dear life, she hobbled forward, once again bumping into someone.

The strobe lights began mimicking lightning flashes. “We're walking on snakes!” someone proclaimed.

“Eww!”

“Hurry up! Keep going!”

Pam had entered the room last but, judging from the voices behind her, she had somehow become the leader. Taking care not to trip over the snakes, she clutched the rope and dashed for a dim shaft of light in the distance. She thankfully tumbled through a thick velvet curtain into a normally lit room. The boys came clambering out behind her.

“We made it!” The boys whooped loudly at the experience. There was a bench and several rolls of paper towels for everyone to clean off their feet. It took her less than a minute to get her shoes back on, but the boys took their time. An employee, dressed as a scarecrow, winked knowingly at Pam as she began shepherding the overstimulated boys toward the exit and into the parking lot.

During the car ride home, the boys excitedly recounted each event from the haunted house. Remember the room with blood dripping from the walls? Or what about the claustrophobic hallway with the ghostly bride? Pam herself was nursing a minor headache from all the strobe lights.

The minivan grew progressively quieter as she dropped off each boy at his respective home. At last it was just her and Jeremy. “Want to ride in the passenger seat?” she asked him. “I feel like a chauffeur when you're sitting all the way back there.”

He joined her up front. “Did you have a good time?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was great! Did you like it?”

“It was okay. I think the scariest was when we were in the basement and it was pitch black.”

“That room was nuts!” Jeremy said. “Do you think we were walking on real snakes in there?”

“Probably not real,” Pam mused. “They would get sued if someone got bitten. I'm sure they were fake snakes.”

“They sure felt slimy,” Jeremy commented. “There was stuff oozing between my toes. I guess I was more grossed out than scared.”

Pam laughed. “If you weren't scared, why did you try to hold my hand down there?”

“Huh? I didn't do that.”

“Weren't you right in front of me?” Pam asked.

“I was in front of you when we went into the room,” Jeremy said. “But I was the last one out.”

Pam suddenly blushed. “You're sure? You didn't grab my hand? Um, or anything else?”

“No.”

One of Jeremy’s friends apparently had very busy hands. The touching had been furtive and
purposeful. Certainly not an accident. Pam wondered which one of them it was. Ogling her was one thing, groping, however, was quite different. When she pulled into the Prater driveway, Pam was still brainstorming a way to sniff out the rat.

“Hey, mom got home early tonight,” Jeremy said, noticing her car. He unbuckled his seat belt. “I want to show her my costume!” He bounded out of the car before she could stop him. Pam definitely didn't want Kate to see her when she was all hookered up. Thinking fast, she retrieved a black blanket from the backseat of the minivan and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Inside, Jeremy stood at the entrance to the living room. “… It was so cool, mom! The first room was completely empty except for a clown surrounded by toy dolls. And then…” Pam didn't see Kate, but she assumed she was in the living room, listening as Jeremy recapped the evening. Quietly, she crept up behind him. Perhaps she could even sneak past Kate and make a run for the safety of her bedroom? But Jeremy dashed her hopes by sensing her presence.

“Oh, and guess what?” he said. “Pam dressed up too! She was... ow!”

Pam swiftly interrupted him with a kick to the shin. “Sorry, I was trying to get my shoe off,” she apologized. Peeking into the living room, she smiled at Kate. “I dressed up as a witch,” she said, holding the black blanket tight around her body. Jeremy, rubbing his shin, glared at her with both accusation and confusion. She clamped an iron hand on his shoulder to silence him.

“How nice,” Kate said. “Now Jeremy, you're not going to bed with all that dye in your hair, are you?”

“Good point,” Pam said, steering him away from the living room. “Time to hit the showers, kiddo.”

Instead of going to his room, Jeremy followed Pam into hers. “Why did you kick me?” he demanded. “That really hurt.”

“I told you earlier. I don't want your mom to see me in this Harley Quinn getup,” Pam explained, tossing the blanket aside. “She would think it was... weird.”

“Maybe she would think it was cool.”

“She wouldn't. Trust me.”

“You could have just asked me not to say anything,” Jeremy sulked. “I can keep a secret.”

Pam straightened his hair and immediately wished she hadn't. Her fingers came away smeared green. “I know you can,” she said, reaching for a tissue to clean her hand. “I’m sorry I kicked you. I didn't mean to do it that hard.” After wiping off as much of the green dye from her fingers as she could, Pam attempted to remove her jacket. The tight shirt limited her mobility to such an extent that it was impossible.

“Help me out of this, please?” she requested. With Jeremy's assistance, she was able to shrug her way out of the jacket. She regarded the cropped shirt with a look of dismay. “I have a feeling that taking this off is going to hurt.”

“We could cut it off,” Jeremy suggested. He picked up the scissors.

“Just a second,” Pam peeked out her door. There was no sign of Kate. “All right, let's make it fast though.”

Jeremy started at the sleeve, cutting toward the neck hole. “Be careful with my bra strap,” Pam
warned him. Once again, the cold scissors felt icy against her skin. And once again, she enjoyed a small thrill of excitement as he worked. Why did this turn her on so much? Once he was done cutting both sleeves, Jeremy carefully worked the scissors up from her lower ribcage, between her breasts, and terminating at her neck. Pam instinctively raised her chin to distance herself from the steel blades.

“There...” Jeremy said. The shirt fluttered to the ground, leaving Pam in her bra. He gave her a brief look up and down, drinking in the sight of her wearing Daisy Dukes with fishnet tights and a bra that did nothing to hide her hard nipples.

Pam wished Kate hadn't come home early.

“Thank you, Jeremy,” she said, reaching for her bathrobe. “You should probably take a shower and get ready for bed. Be sure to use extra shampoo to get that stuff out of your hair.”

“I will. Can we watch a movie when I'm done? It's Saturday night.”

“Yes, we can.” She ushered him out of her room. “Run along and get ready for bed. I need to make a quick phone call, okay?” Once he was gone, Pam locked her bedroom door. Slipping out of her robe, Pam enjoyed one last look at Harley Quinn in the mirror before unbuttoning her shorts.
Chapter Summary

Pam is summoned to Florida where Jeremy is vacationing with his dad. Things go awry when they discover a crucial missing ingredient.

“So we go into his house,” Suzy said, “and the place is immaculate. Like walking into a Ikea catalog. Sparkling floors, spotless kitchen, no clutter anywhere. And I'm thinking Brian is either secretly gay or drops big bucks on a cleaning service.”

It was the week before Christmas and seemingly the entire city had departed on an early holiday start. Jeremy had accompanied his father on a winter vacation to sunny Florida. Kate, meanwhile, had traveled out of town to spend a few days with her boyfriend, the doctor from Springfield. Since no one was due back in town until the day before Christmas Eve, Pam made the pilgrimage to visit her parents but, really, who can spend more than 48 consecutive hours in parental company without going crazy? So she returned to the empty Prater house to decompress. The peace had been nice initially, but then it started feeling too quiet. She ended up inviting over her friend Suzy to bake cookies.

Suzy continued describing her last date. “It's just unnerving, right? I've ended dates because the guy's apartment was absolutely filthy, but this is the other end of the spectrum. I've always believed that perfection on the surface must be hiding something.”

Pam retrieved a sheet of perfectly golden cookies from the oven, holding it with an oven-mitted hand while the other slid in the next sheet of raw cookie dough. “So what did you do?” she asked. “Did you leave?”

“No, no.” Suzy closed the oven door for her. A timer was set for eleven minutes. “We sat on his couch and drank some wine. A leather couch, by the way. Real leather. Not some crappy futon.”

“Didn't you say he was a graphic designer? How does a twenty-four year old graphic designer afford a leather couch?”

Using a spatula, Suzy began transferring the chocolate chip cookies to a cooling rack. “Wow, these smell incredible,” she said. “But yeah, that's exactly what I was thinking! A meticulously clean apartment AND a leather couch? It just didn't add up. But then we started making out. He was a decent kisser. Not too aggressive, not too boring. So I decide to overlook the little red flags and I start feeling him up through his jeans. I mean, come on. Brian is 6' 4". How could I not?”

Pam remembered that Suzy had a thing for tall guys. “Um, yeah. Tall guys are totally hot,” she nodded earnestly.

“I know, right? I'm getting horny and I decide what the heck, this is our second date. He deserves a blowjob. So I pull down Brian's pants...” Suzy paused for dramatic effect.

“And?”

“He was totally clean shaven!” Suzy whispered, even though no one else was in the house. “Like no
stubble. At all. I mean, I was having flashbacks to playing doctor with my neighbor when I was six.”

“Oh, that's not such a big deal,” Pam said. She poured them two glasses of milk. “Lots of guys do manscaping down there.”

They sat down on the bar stools next to the kitchen counter. Suzy took a bite of a cookie. “Manscaping is one thing. This was as smooth as a baby's butt. It was weird. Like really weird. I felt like cops were going to break down the door and arrest me for statutory rape of a minor.”

“Ha ha.” Pam hoped her laugh didn't sound too forced.

“I mean, what would you have done? Could you mess around with a guy if he was completely hairless? Don't you think it would be totally weird?”

“I don't know. It depends on the guy.” She busied herself by prepping the next baking sheet. “Can you get the cookie dough out of the fridge? So what happened? Did you make up an excuse and leave?”

“No. Like I said, I was really turned on at that point so I sucked it anyway. Brian must have been pretty horny too because it didn't take long. Two minutes, tops.”

“Did you let him come in your mouth?”

“Of course,” Suzy said. “I always do. And I swallowed too. I think it's rude not to. I mean, spitting is the equivalent of a guy going down on you and then rushing off to wash his face afterward. If a guy did that to me, I would totally kick his ass out.”

“So what next? Is a third date on the schedule?”

“Maybe,” answered Suzy. She swirled the milk in her glass. “I would feel better if he had some hair down there. Do you think there's a way I could ask him to let it grow back?”

“Maybe tell him you have daddy issues?” Pam suggested. “Tell him you're into older guys. Like salt and pepper types. With bifocals.”

“Very funny.” Suzy rolled her eyes. “I'm open-minded. You know that, right? But this degree of manscaping is too much for me.”

“There are degrees of manscaping?” Pam asked.

“Well, sure. Think about it. You've got Brian on this end,” she held out her right hand. “Looks like he hasn't even entered puberty yet. Then you've got the buzz cut guys. You know, where it feels prickly. Then it's the guys with curly hair where it's kind of poodle-like. And finally you've got the guys with a complete jungle down there.” She held out her left hand to indicate the other end of the scale. “Like they came from old school 70s porn.”

“I see you've given this issue a lot of thought.”

Suzy shrugged. “It's actually one of my favorite fantasies. Like I'm in a lab coat and there is a line of guys wearing bathrobes. All kinds of guys. College guys. Dads. Construction workers. Lawyers. I'm holding a clipboard and each guy has to open his robe and show me his cock. Some guys already have a hard-on, some don't. Cut and uncut. Different hair down there and, of course, different sizes. I get to walk down the line, taking notes on my clipboard. Doesn't that sound hot?”

Pam tried to picture the scene. The fantasy did little for her until she mentally adjusted the ages in the

Suzy helped herself to another cookie. “Enough about me. How's your love life?”

“Non-existent,” Pam said.

“Nothing?”

Pam spread her hands, indicating the Prater house. “This place keeps me busy. It's a full-time job keeping this household up and running.”

“You really need a vacation,” Suzy advised. “When was the last time you were even on a date?”

“I took Jeremy downtown to see 'A Christmas Carol' last week,” Pam said. “Does that count?”

Suzy shook her head with great pity. “Pam. The kid is like ten years old.”

“He's eleven,” Pam corrected. She thought a moment before adding, “Eleven and a half.”

“Whatever. The point is,” she mimicked Pam's earlier gesture, holding out her hands at the house, “all this? I'm pretty sure it's stunting you as a person.”

“It is not.”

“It is too. All you do is take care of this house, take care of this kid, and you have no significant adult relationships. You're like the butler guy who takes care of Batman.”

“Alfred Pennyworth?”

“You're such a nerd. How did you know that?”

“Jeremy is a big Batman fan.”

“I see.” Suzy examined her nails for a moment.

Pam gave her a sharp look. “Don't give me that. I know your gesture of casual judgment. What now? What did I do?”

“Forget it,” Suzy answered. “Okay, Batman's butler is Alfred Pennyworth. Haven't you ever thought about how odd it must be for him? He leads this secret double life that no one can know about. He has no life outside of Batman. No one knows the real him.”

“There's Robin,” Pam pointed out.

“Okay, so Alfred's other significant relationship is with a teenage boy,” Suzy said with exasperation. “That makes it more creepy, not less. If you're not careful? You are going to turn into Alfred. You'll wake up one day and realize that being single is your Kryptonite.”

“See, now you're just getting mixed up,” Pam objected. “Kryptonite is Superman's weakness. Not Batman.”

Suzy gave her a pained look of exhaustion but Pam continued nonetheless. “Everyone knows that,” Pam insisted. “Kryptonite comes from Krypton. Like Superman. That's why those meteorites are his weakness.”

“Just forget about this stupid Batman and Superman shit, okay?”
“You're the one that brought it up. I mean, Batman is just a regular human from Earth. He could stand next to Kryptonite all day long.”

“Will you stop saying Kryptonite?” Suzy began stacking the cookies inside a large jar. “Isn't your birthday coming up? How old are you going to be? Twenty-six? I'm just worried that you're going to one day regret this period of your life. Your freewheeling twenties are supposed to be spent, well, freewheeling.”

“I will not regret this period of my life,” Pam stated. “I'm perfectly happy being single. I honestly don't feel like I'm missing out on anything.”

“It's not just that,” Suzy said. “When I got here you were having a snack. Do you remember what it was?”

“No idea. Please enlighten me.”

“Ants on a log. As in celery, peanut butter, and raisins.”

“So what?”

“I haven't eaten that since I was, like, twelve. You're twenty-five. And you're eating ants on a log.”

“What's wrong with that? It doesn't have any added sugar and it's high in protein.”

“Forget about the nutrition, that's not what I'm talking about.” Suzy sighed. “It's just that your life seems, I don't know, weirdly skewed right now. You're eating kids' snacks. You know all this weird superhero shit. I guess I wouldn't be so worried about it if you were something other than an infrequent dater...”

“I date sometimes,” Pam interjected.

“... who's completely vanilla,” Suzy finished.

Pam flicked cookie crumbs at her. “I am not vanilla!”

Suzy retaliated by dipping her fingers into a bowl of flour and smearing it on Pam's black sweater. She tried to swat away her friend's hand, but the damage was done. “Not vanilla?” Suzy scoffed. “Aren't you the same lady who dated a guy for six months and never did anything other than missionary?”

“Oh, shut up.” Pam wet a paper towel and tried to dab the flour stains from her sweater.

“What's the kinkiest thing you've ever done?” Suzy challenged.

“Ohm...” Pam thought hard. “Okay. I got it. This one time? Me and this guy had a contest to see who could masturbate fastest. First person who came was the winner.”

Suzy looked at her with newfound respect. “Huh. That's pretty hot. When was this? You never told me about it.”

“It was a long time ago,” Pam said. That was a lie, of course. She and Jeremy had done this two weeks ago.

“Who won?”

“I did,” Pam gloated. “He was kind of mad at me because he hates losing. But then I, um, took care
of him. And then he stopped being mad.”

“Gosh.” Suzy zoned out for a moment. Pam knew how much she enjoyed hearing about the sexual escapades of friends. “Who was this guy?” she said, snapping out of it. “I still can't believe you never said anything to me.”

Before Pam could answer, her phone burst into a melody. Normally, she would have ignored it but she recognized it as the ringtone she had set for Jeremy. “Just a second,” Pam said, hopping off her bar stool and grabbing her purse from the table.

“Is that the Star Wars song?” Suzy asked, referring to her ringtone.

“Yes, it's the Imperial March,” Pam informed her friend. Judging from Suzy's questioning eyebrow, Pam realized she had failed another test of some kind. Ignoring her, Pam pulled out her phone. It was a video call, not a regular voice call. She swiped right to answer. The screen took a moment to load before Jeremy's face appeared. Unable to help it, Pam broke into a broad smile.

“Hi Pam!” his voice sounded a bit tinny through the phone speakers.

“Hi Jeremy,” she answered. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Suzy wave coquettishly while silently mouthing the words 'Hi Jeremy' in a mocking manner.

Pam gave her the finger, making sure to hold her hand in a place where Jeremy wouldn't see it. “How's vacation?” she inquired.

“Pretty boring. It's been almost a week and I still haven't seen a crocodile yet. I thought Florida was supposed to be full of them. But I guess not.”

“That's too bad,” she said. He wasn't wearing a shirt so she could see the birdlike bone structure of his shoulders. “Is it warm down there?”

“Yeah. We've been going to the beach every day but the wind blows sand into everyone's eyes.”

“Don't forget to put on sunscreen,” she reminded him.

“I won't.”

Suzy crept up behind her and peered over Pam's shoulder. “Hi Jeremy!” she said.

“Uh, hi,” Jeremy said politely, even though it was clear he had no idea who she was.

“Jeremy, this is my friend Suzy,” Pam told him.

“You have friends?” Jeremy was genuinely amazed. “I didn't know you had friends.”

“See?” Suzy whispered in her ear. “Even he thinks you're Alfred the butler.”

Pam blessed her with a hard elbow to the ribs. “I do have friends, thank you very much,” she clarified to Jeremy.

Suzy's head popped back into view over her shoulder. “We're in your room and reading your comic books,” she chimed in.

“What?” Jeremy said, alarmed.

Pam shooed her away again. “Just ignore her,” she said. “Suzy is just teasing. We're not in your
“Pam is always talking about how cute you are!” Suzy announced. She burst into giggles as Pam shoved her away. Even on her small phone screen, Pam could see Jeremy blushing.

“Why are you calling anyway?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Oh, my dad wanted to talk to you,” Jeremy told her. He turned and yelled over his shoulder, “Dad? Pam's here. Hey dad!”

His voice was so loud that Pam had to turn down the volume on her phone. The video on the screen went herky-jerky as the phone was passed over to Jeremy's dad. “Hi Pam,” he said.

“Hi William. Is everything all right?”

“Oh everything’s fine. Just fine.” He ran a hand through his hair, a weary gesture that indicated otherwise. “Listen Pam, I know this is supposed to be your vacation time too, so feel free to say no. But... would you like to fly down and join us?”

“Join you in the Florida Keys?”

“I'll pay for airfare, of course,” William said. “Again, please feel free to decline. It's just that...” He paused, trying to collect his thoughts. “Marla's daughter and boyfriend came with us on vacation too. I thought the three of them could entertain each other but, well... There's too much of an age gap since they're in high school and Jeremy...” He trailed off.

“They're not getting along?” Pam asked. She hadn't met William's girlfriend Marla yet, let alone her daughter. While Jeremy was a generally easygoing person, she could easily envision his freewheeling style clashing with the wrong personality.

“No, they get along fine,” William admitted. “But Jeremy's kind of bored down here. And you know how he gets when he's bored.”

Jeremy wasn't visible in the video but she heard his voice. “What are you talking about? What did I do?”

William looked offscreen. “Jeremy, can you go to the other room please? Thank you.” He shook his head. Pam could see his barely concealed frustration.

“Of course I can come down,” Pam said. “A warm getaway sounds inviting.”

“Are you sure?” William asked. “I hate springing this on you.” He lowered his voice. “I just want our last half of vacation to go better than the first half. Jeremy always seems so much calmer when you're around.”

Pam was aware that Suzy had crept back to her side and was peering at her phone. She suddenly wished this was a private conversation. Too late for that though. “That's what kids at this age are like,” she said. “When should I fly down?”

“Up to you,” William told her. “You know where the family credit card is so book whichever flight you'd like. Feel free to book a rental car too. Otherwise we can pick you up at the airport.”

“I don't have anything going on,” Pam said. “I'll see what flights are like tomorrow.”

William turned his attention to something offscreen. She heard Jeremy’s voice again. “So what did
she say? Did she say yes?”

“Jeremy, can you give us a second?” his father asked. “Yes. She said yes.”

“Oh cool!” Jeremy's face popped back into the video. “When are you coming?” he asked.

“Please, Jeremy...” William rubbed his temples. He pointed the camera away from his son but Pam could still hear him.

“Ask her to bring some Coppertone,” Jeremy told his father.

His father glowered at him. “We have plenty of sunscreen here.”

“Yes. She said yes.”

“Jeremy, can you give us a second?” his father asked. “Yes. She said yes.”

“Oh cool!” Jeremy's face popped back into the video. “When are you coming?” he asked.

“Please, Jeremy...” William rubbed his temples. He pointed the camera away from his son but Pam could still hear him.

“Ask her to bring some Coppertone,” Jeremy told his father.

His father glowered at him. “We have plenty of sunscreen here.”

“Yeah, but...”

William cut him off and returned his attention to the video call. “Let me know your flight info when you have it. Thank you, Pam.”

“You're welcome. It's no problem at all. Bye!”

“Bye Pam!” Jeremy called from offscreen. He crammed in a plea,”BringCoppertonethanks!” Despite the distance of the video call, Pam could see William's eyes shooting daggers at his son. The call abruptly ended.

“Jeremy's dad is kind of hot,” Suzy mused. “Don't you think?”

Pam dipped a cookie in her glass of milk. “That thought has literally never crossed my mind,” she told her. “Looks like someone has daddy issues after all.” She expected Suzy to protest, but instead a coy smile crossed her friend's face. Disgusted, Pam made a gagging sound. “He's really not my type.”

Suzy broke a cookie in half. “What is your type anyway?”

Pam didn't answer. She was already mentally compiling her packing list. Her shorts and tank tops were already in storage for the winter, but they would be easy to locate. Swimsuit, sunglasses, sun hat. And Jeremy's all-important Coppertone, of course.

Pam opened the windows of her rented car, letting in a blast of warm Florida air. On either side of the highway were vast expanses of perfectly blue ocean. It was her first visit to the Florida Keys. She had experienced a brief panic attack upon embarking on the first long bridge, so she tried to keep her focus on the fifty feet of pavement in front of the car. The patches of uneven asphalt and rusted bridge standards did little to calm her nerves. Hadn't she recently read something about the crumbling infrastructure of America?

When she finally pulled up to the house, Pam had never been so glad to get out of the car and step onto solid ground. Having grown accustomed to the northern winter weather, the warm sunshine on her bare arms felt strange but she welcomed it nonetheless. She surveyed the house, which belonged to William's girlfriend Marla. It was a stately two story home surrounded by a tidy picket fence. The house might have been described as plain with its white paint and blue shutters, but it nevertheless exuded an undeniable elegance with its tall peaked roof and ornamental gables. A large porch with baroque columns and black metal railing ran the length of the front. The south side was shaded by a
thicket of palm trees that swayed with the breeze.

Retrieving her luggage from the trunk, Pam hauled herself up the steps and rang the doorbell. No one answered. Double-checking the street signs, she wondered if she had the wrong address. After buzzing the doorbell a second time, Pam tried the doorknob. The door was unlocked so she cracked it open.

“Hello?” she called out. There was still no answer. Just inside the entryway, she spotted a familiar pair of cherry red Chuck Taylor high-tops. The left shoe sported a skull and crossbones drawn on the toe cap in permanent black marker. The right one had “JP” scrawled on it.

“This must be the place,” she murmured. Pam let herself in. The floorboards squeaked dreadfully as she made her way across the foyer. A black cat darted from under a bench and eyed her suspiciously. She was about to pet it when a figure appeared at the end of the hallway.

It was sullen teenage boy. “Can I help you?” he frowned. His stringy hair was dyed in a color that could only be described as metallic pumpkin. A row of metal piercings glimmered at her above his expressive eyebrows.

“Uh, gosh, I'm sorry,” Pam stammered. In lieu of clothing, the teenager wore nothing but a pair of tight boxer briefs that emphasized his sinewy frame and chiseled chest. She didn't know where to look while talking to him. “I must have the wrong house. I rang the doorbell but no one answered.” She pointed at the red Converse shoes and continued, “I thought I recognized these and figured this had to be the place so I let myself in and, well...” Pam stopped when she realized she was babbling.

The cat had remained frozen during this exchange, still eyeing her with wariness. Judging from the skepticism on the boy's face, Pam may as well have been a door-to-door salesman hawking used vacuum cleaners. The boy scratched his neck, drawing attention to the ½ inch gauge ear plug that stretched his lobe. Pam had already backed her way out of the house when a girl appeared behind him.

“Wait. Are you Pam?” she asked. The cat immediately scurried to the girl's side and leapt into her arms.

“Um, yes?” Pam answered. The girl was the polar opposite of the teenage boy, though they appeared to be the same age. Whereas he sported a modern punk look, she was a classic 50s girl that could have stepped out of a vintage soda fountain ad. Her blond hair was cut in a long bob and held in place by a scarlet headband. Pam wanted to ask where she got her cute black dress with its oversized polka dots and jaunty white belt.

The girl slapped the boy's arm. “Don't you remember? My mom said she would be coming today. This is the lady Jeremy keeps talking about.” She strode forward, one hand cradling the cat as she extended her free hand to Pam. “It's nice to meet you. I'm Apple.”

“Oh,” Pam said, shaking her hand. “Hi, Apple.”

“Let me get that,” she said, taking Pam's backpack. She gestured to the teenage boy, who took her luggage. “Looks like you already met Athena.” She held up the cat. “And this is my boyfriend Zep.”

He gave her a curt nod. “Hey.”

“Um, hey. Zep.” They were such an odd pair that Pam still wondered if she had the right house. Perhaps those red shoes were just a coincidence?

From the fridge, Apple extracted a large pitcher of water that had slices of orange and lemon floating
in it. She handed it to Zep and then placed three tall tumblers on a tray. “Would you like to sit on the porch?” she offered. “It's so nice outside.” Pam followed her out the front door. An oversized hammock hung at one end of the porch, along with a pair of wooden rocking chairs with tall backs. Apple carefully arranged herself in the hammock with Athena.

“Have a seat,” Apple said, gesturing to a chair. She began pouring water into the glasses. Pam took one chair while Zep took the other. “William and my mom went to run an errand or something. I think they'll be back soon.”

“Sure,” Pam nodded. She gratefully took a sip of the citrus flavored water. “Did Jeremy go with them?”

“I'm not sure,” Apple answered. She looked at Zep. “Did Jeremy go with them?”

“I dunno,” he shrugged.

“He probably did,” Apple told Pam. “I like your shirt, by the way.”

Pam was wearing a simple t-shirt that bore the graphic of a local coffee roaster back home. She actually felt quite plain compared to Apple's 1950s stylings. “Thank you. I like your dress more though. Where did you get it?”

“I made it all by myself,” Apple smiled. “It's actually patterned after an old dress my grandma used to wear.”

“Wow. It looks amazing.” Pam, having never so much as threaded a needle, felt wholly inadequate. An uncomfortable silence ensued. Zep looked so bored that he seemed to be on the verge of falling asleep. “So... is your name short for something, Zep?” Pam asked, trying to fill the pause in conversation. “Were your parents big Led Zeppelin fans?”

“No.”

“It's short for Zephyr,” Apple interjected. “I think that sounds cool but he doesn't like it when people call him that.”

“Zephyr is a great name,” Pam agreed.

Zep picked a piece of lint off his shoulder. “Yeah. Whatever.”

Another awkward silence followed. Pam was grasping for something to say when she heard a car coming up the drive. Apple shot a murderous look at Zep and shooed him off the porch. He hurried inside the house. Pam was unable to decipher their silent communication. The sound of William's voice drifted over.

“... don't want to hear any more about it, Jeremy,” he was saying. “Next time we go somewhere? Anywhere? Put on your shoes, okay? You can't just walk around barefoot and...”

Jeremy interrupted him. “Look! Hey, Apple!” he called. “Is Pam here? Did she get here while we were gone?”

Pam realized he couldn't see her because the tall rocking chair shielded her completely. Apple held a finger to her lip and smiled at Pam. “No, she isn't here yet,” Apple answered. “She actually called and said she wouldn't get here until tomorrow.”

“Whatever, liar,” Jeremy said. “I know she's here. Where is she?” Stomping toward Apple, he
grabbed a seat cushion from the other chair. He was just about to whack her with it when he noticed Pam out of the corner of his eye. She giggled when she saw the way his face lit up.

“Pam!” She stood up to greet him but he barreled in for a hug, almost knocking her back down into the rocking chair.

“Oof... um, hi!” His arms were wrapped so tight around her waist that he squeezed the breath out of her. Moreover, his chin burrowed straight between her breasts. Pam was thankful she wasn't wearing a low-cut shirt.

William entered the porch. “Hi Pam, glad you made it here safely.” He must have noticed his son's overly long hug because he made a strange face. “Uh, hey there, champ,” William said. “I'm pretty sure Pam needs to breathe.” He grabbed Jeremy by the shoulders to pull him away. “C'mon, lighten up, huh?”

“Want to know how I knew you were here?” Jeremy asked her. “I recognized your sandals at the door!”

Pam straightened her hair with her fingers. “Very smart,” she told him.

Apple had a bemused look on her face. “Pam said the same thing about your shoes. That's so cute that you guys can recognize each other by footwear!”

Embarrassed, Pam didn't know what to say but she was rescued when a woman came up the porch stairs, taking slow and deliberate steps in high heels. She was short yet slender, with inquisitive eyes and pale ivory skin that belied the Florida sun. A clatter of gold bangles hung from her wrist. She noticed Pam and stepped forward.

“Hi there,” she said. “You must be Pam. I'm Marla. I've heard so much about you.”

“Hello,” Pam said, shaking her hand. She had never been the type to judge a person by her handshake, but Marla's was an exceptionally limp one. She was about to say something when she was interrupted by Zep strolling back onto the porch. His piercings had disappeared and he was now dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans.

“Good morning, Zephyr,” Marla said. “Did you just wake up? You look so nice and neat in your clean shirt and jeans.”

Zep, clearly flustered, retreated behind Apple. “Um, thanks,” he answered.

If she noticed, Marla didn't acknowledge his discomfort. “You know, Pam, I'm really glad you're here,” she said. “It's so nice to have an extra pair of hands to help out. William and I are shopping for a new grill. Hey, who's excited to grill out tonight?” She looked to Apple and Zep for a response, any response, but was instead greeted with teenaged dead air. Barreling on, she continued, “So Pam, we'll need something to grill so I put together this list of groceries for you to pick up. Oh, and if you could help us catch up on laundry too. And I'm sure you've noticed the kitchen is a disaster area.”

Pam opened her mouth to speak, but shut it without saying anything. Marla handed her a grocery list. “Sure, I can take care of this,” Pam said slowly.

“Thank you, dear. That's quite nice of you,” Marla answered. She was already scanning her phone and tapping away at the screen.

“Pam, glad you made it here safely,” William said. “Jeremy, I'm going to assume you want to stay here now.” He shook his head in annoyance. “We drove all the way to the store only to realize
Jeremy wasn't wearing shoes,” he explained.

“That sounds about right,” Pam sympathized.

“So we're off again to find a new grill,” William announced. Jingling his keys, he took Marla's hand as they returned to the car.

“Come on, Zep,” Apple said, extricating herself from the hammock. “I need something sweet. Time to raid the jelly jar.” They went inside the house, leaving Pam and Jeremy alone on the porch.

“You should try the hammock,” he said, taking her hand. “It's really comfy.” He sprawled at one end while Pam lay at the other. They rocked back and forth. “Pretty nice, isn't it?”

“Very nice.”

Clearing his throat, Jeremy gave her a shy half-smile. “I missed you.”

“Aw, really?” Though the hammock was made for two, his foot was still jammed against her elbow. She playfully wiggled his toes one by one. “I missed you too.”

Jeremy paused a beat. “Um, want to play Call of Duty?”

“Did you miss me? Or did you miss Call of Duty?”

“Both?”

“Good answer.”

“So can we?” he persisted.

“I don't know, Jeremy. You know how I feel about playing Call of Duty when we're not home alone.” Especially in a new house where Pam was unfamiliar with the configuration. How thin were the walls? Did the doors have locks? Marla's house, while beautiful, was also quite old which meant sound probably traveled easily from end of the house to the other.

Jeremy groaned. “Please?”

Pam smiled at him. Unable to resist, she rested her foot on the crotch of his shorts, her toes searching for its target. It wasn't difficult to find, especially once he started getting hard. With barely any effort, Pam coaxed an erection from him, creating an exceptionally prominent tent jutted from his shorts. She took a moment to admire her handiwork.

“You must have really missed me,” she remarked.

“It didn't help that I forgot to pack my Coppertone,” Jeremy admitted.

The moment he mentioned Coppertone, Pam felt a twinge of guilt. “Yeah, about that...” she began. But she was interrupted by Apple returning to the porch, startling them both. A look of alarm crossed Jeremy's face as he fumbled for a pillow to hide his crotch. Since Apple was approaching fast, Pam casually draped her leg across his lap, effectively erasing any sign of his arousal.

“Hey you two!” Apple said. “I just had an idea. How about the four of us head out for the beach?”

“Oh. Sure! That sounds like fun,” Pam said. It was difficult to speak normally when she could feel Jeremy’s hardness pressing against the underside of her calf. “Did you want to go right now?”
“Whenever.”

“I should probably clean the kitchen first,” Pam pondered. “Your mom will probably be annoyed if she comes home and it's still a mess.”

“Oh, don't worry about that,” Apple said with a wave of her hand. “Zep and I already took care of it so we could all go to the beach.”

Pam was taken aback. “Oh. That was nice of you to do.”

“Well... maybe you and Zep should go to the beach,” Jeremy piped up. “And Pam and I could stay home and... you know.” Pam fixed a caustic look on him, her eyes bulging as she gave the slightest shake of her head. “Um, or we could go the beach too,” Jeremy finished.

“Jeremy,” Apple scolded. “You don't want to go to the beach? Who's going to help me put sunscreen on those hard-to-reach places?” He blushed. Pam was shocked to feel his erection throb momentarily against her leg. Unamused, she glared at him but he didn't seem to notice. Instead he straightened his hair as Apple patted his shoulder.

“Let's plan to leave in twenty minutes,” Pam suggested. “I just need to get settled in. Find my swimsuit. You know.”

“Sounds perfect!” Apple said. She strolled back into the house. “I'll let Zep know.”

Once she was gone, Pam swung her feet off the hammock and stood up. “Hey, Captain Obvious. Try not to be so obvious next time,” she said.

He stood up, smoothing his long shirt over his crotch to hide the unflagging bulge in his shorts. “But you said we could play Call of Duty if we were home alone so I thought...”

“I know, I know,” Pam interrupted. It was hard to keep the edge out of her voice. “So what's this about putting sunscreen on Apple?”

“She needed sunscreen on her back. So I helped her.”

“Shouldn't that be Zep's job?”

“He was in the bathroom. And Apple said she doesn't like it when he does it because she's usually ticklish. But she said I did a great job because my hands are so gentle and-”

“Okay, I get it!” Pam interrupted him again. Suddenly grumpy, she headed back inside the house. “Come on. Can you show me which room is mine?” They stopped in the foyer to retrieve her forgotten luggage. Athena, watchful as ever, poked her head around the corner.

Wanting to make sure her arms were still attached, Pam paused a moment to rest before continuing. As she rubbed her upper arms, Jeremy said, “If you're tired, we could stay home for a little bit before going to the beach.”

“Will you drop it? We're not staying behind while they go to the beach.”
“I still don't understand why you're annoyed with me,” Jeremy grumbled. “I only suggested they go to the beach alone because I thought it was what you would say.”

Pam sighed. “Don't you think Apple would get suspicious if we stayed home alone?”

“Why would she be suspicious?”

It took all her patience to suppress a second sigh. Sometimes she forgot that he was only eleven years old. “It's a boundary issue,” she explained. “Like remember that time at home when I was taking a bath and you walked right in?”

“I just had to get some toilet paper. What's the big deal? I see you in the shower all the time.”

“But your mom was home! How many times do we have to go over this?” Pam shook her head in exasperation. Gathering her thoughts, Pam went into full lecture mode as Jeremy followed her. “There’s a time and place for... certain things. You need to understand boundaries better than that. You need to learn to respect people's privacy.” Still lecturing, she turned to look at him as she fumbled for the door knob. “You can't just go around opening closed doors and-”

Pam stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of Apple and Zep on the bed. Had Jeremy pointed to the wrong room? This bedroom was most certainly not unoccupied. Indeed, Zep was quite busy occupying Apple. There was a sheet covering the lower half of their intertwined bodies but it was obvious what they were doing as Zep rhythmically moved his body over hers. Behind her, Jeremy bumped squarely into her back since he was not expecting her to stop.

“What's the holdup?” he began. But before he could even finish his sentence, Pam forcefully backed out of the room and closed the door. She prayed that Apple and Zep didn't notice their presence. In her haste to retreat, however, she barreled clumsily over Jeremy. He tripped. Doing her best not to step on him, Pam stumbled over his legs herself, somehow landing in a sitting position on her tipped-over luggage.

She tried to play it cool. “I think I'll just sit down now,” Pam remarked, leaning against the wall. She patted her suitcase. “Good thing this was here to break my fall.”

Jeremy was still sprawled on the floor. “Why did you freak out like that?”

“Um, Apple and Zep were... sleeping.”

“Oh.” Neither of them spoke for a moment, which was unfortunate because a series of quiet gasps and moans emanated from under the closed door. “What's that?” he asked, cocking his ear.

“Uh, they must be watching a movie. Horror movie, probably.”

“I thought you said they were sleeping.”

“Maybe they left the TV on?” Pam suggested, hoping that would end his questions. “Let's not bother them.”

“Want to see my room?” Jeremy offered.

“I thought you'd never ask. Let's go.” She followed him, leaving her luggage outside the closed bedroom door. He led them back down the hallway and up another set of stairs. At the top was a converted attic space with angled ceiling walls and a set of dormer windows. A railing stood at on end. Pam realized the space was a mezzanine that overlooked the common hallway of the second floor. It probably was never meant to be a bedroom, but was nevertheless furnished with a bunk bed,
Jeremy explained, “Zep has the bottom bunk, but he and Apple usually stay up late.”

“Uh, I'm sure they do,” Pam nodded. She had a pretty good idea why the two teenagers were staying up so late. “I didn't know you had to share a room with Zep.”

“You're sharing a room with Apple,” he told her in an offhand tone.

“What?”

“Didn't my dad tell you? There are only three bedrooms in the house so we all have to share.”

Pam frowned. This wasn't quite what she had in mind when she agreed to fly down to Florida. The house was gigantic. Surely there was another room on the first floor.

“I'm sure this a cool room though?” Jeremy asked. Pam wasn't sure if that was how to describe it. Various articles of clothing and comic books were strewn across the floor. She also counted seven half-empty water glasses scattered throughout the room. The sole orderly object was a bookshelf that was neatly arranged with a small army of nutcrackers dressed in various outfits.

“What's with these?” Pam asked. She picked up a nutcracker that was dressed as an English guard from Buckingham Palace.

“It's Apple's nutcracker collection. She used to collect them when she was little. This one's my favorite.” He pointed to a nutcracker dressed as an astronaut. Pam had no idea nutcrackers came in so many different variations. She stopped counting after reaching thirty and returned her attention to the cluttered room.

“Hard to believe you've only been here four days,” Pam observed. Unable to absorb the mess, she picked up a towel and hung it up in the small bathroom that barely had enough space for a sink, toilet, and shower. “Seems more like weeks.” She noticed a clear glass door near the bunk bed. “What's that?” she asked.

Jeremy opened the door for her. They stepped out onto a small deck that was no bigger than eight by eight feet. It was enclosed on all sides by a fence so tall that Pam could barely see over it, even on her tiptoes. In the distance, she spotted some lazy palm trees and a tantalizingly cobalt strip of ocean.

“Too bad this fence is so tall,” she commented.

“Yeah,” Jeremy agreed. “If it was lower, we could throw water balloons over the side.”

“I meant too bad because we could otherwise have a nice view of the ocean.”

“Oh right,” Jeremy said. “That would be cool too.” They stepped back inside the house.

“Hey, want to see how I get into the top bunk?” Jeremy asked. It took him two tries and a running start, but Jeremy managed to vault himself onto the top bunk without using the ladder. Athena, napping on his bed, darted out of the way just in time.

“Very impressive,” Pam nodded.

Jeremy swung his legs off the edge but remained seated on the bunk bed. “Um, could we play Call of Duty now? Since Apple and Zep are asleep?”

“You know I would love to,” Pam began, “but there's something I should tell you.” The open floor
plan made her feel overexposed. Was it her imagination or was Athena regarding her with suspicion? Pam moved closer to the bunk bed so she could lower her voice. “The Coppertone got confiscated at airport security,” she confessed.

“What?” Jeremy matched her whisper. “What do you mean confiscated?”

“They took it from me at the airport,” Pam murmured. “It was more than three ounces. I should have put it in my checked bag. But don't worry. I'll find you some Coppertone when I go grocery shopping.”

Jeremy glared at her. “You had one job!” he accused.

“Shhh!” Pam said. “Keep your voice down, will you? You're the one that forgot it in the first place. Besides, what's the big deal? I told you I'll pick some up.”

“There isn't any!” Jeremy groaned. He flopped backward onto the bed, his arms splayed out. “Don't you think I checked? All the stores out here are tiny. No one sells it.”

“Surely someone sells Coppertone,” Pam contradicted.

“I already checked!” he repeated. “You never trust me to do anything.”

“Let's all calm down,” Pam urged. “Look, there's only... what, three more nights of vacation? When we get home, we can play Call of Duty until you bleed. Well, figuratively, of course.”

“I don't want Call of Duty when we get home. I want it now.”

“You'll have to be patient. It's not like you're going to wither away and die without it.”

“It's been so hard to sleep,” Jeremy complained. “I just lay there for hours. Tossing and turning.”

Pam patted his knee sympathetically. “I'll rub your back tonight until you fall asleep.”

“Oh. Goody.”

“Jeremy. Don't be that way,” Pam admonished. “Go find your swimsuit. We're going to the beach, remember? It'll be fun.”

“I'm not going.”

“Jeremy...” she began.

“I said I'm not going!”

“All right then.” Pam retreated down the stairs. It wasn't the first time she had seen him in this mood. It seemed to be happening more often lately. There would be no use in trying to cheer him up, or even engage with him, until he got over it. At the opposite end of the hallway, she saw Apple exiting the bedroom. Recalling the accidental intrusion, Pam prayed that their momentary presence in the room had gone unnoticed.

“Hey there,” Apple said. “Are you ready to head to the beach? You guys can go ahead and we'll catch up with you. Zep is a little tired.”

“Oh, I don't think we'll go either,” Pam replied. “Jeremy just wants to stay home.” She paused, unsure how to broach the subject. “Um, so I heard we'll be sharing a room?”
“I was going to ask you about that...” Apple's eyes shifted furtively from side to side, as if she were making sure they were alone. “Pam, could I ask you a favor? Don't tell my mom this, but Zep has been sneaking into my room at night so we can sleep together. But now that you're here...”

Pam saw where she was going. “You want me to sleep with Jeremy?” She frowned. “Um, that came out wrong. You want me to sleep in Jeremy's room?”

“If you don't mind,” Apple answered. “I understand if you'd rather not. It's a bunk bed after all.”

If Jeremy had been in a better mood, Pam would have considered this favor to be a godsend. As it was, she found herself waffling. “I suppose I could do that,” she said.

“I don't think my mom is going to check on us or anything. And even if she did, I would be the one getting in the most trouble. Well, me and Zep.”

“I'm sure it will be fine,” Pam told her. “I'd be happy to take the bunk bed with Jeremy.”

“Thank you so much!” Apple said. “Can you let Jeremy know?”

“Will do.”

“Thanks again.” Excusing herself, Apple disappeared into the bathroom.

Pam rolled her luggage along the hallway, returning to the mezzanine stairs. But once she was confronted with all those steps, her arms ached in protest. She could bring up her luggage later. Remembering Marla's grocery list, she decided to head for the store.

Upstairs, she found Jeremy still sulkily staring at the ceiling as he lay in the bunk bed. “I have to pick up some groceries,” she told him. “Want to come along?”

“No.” Jeremy rolled away, turning his back to her. Athena peeked over his hip, her tail whipping back and forth.

“Please? I could really use your help.”

He began reading a comic book. “I'm staying here.”

Pam gave up. “Suit yourself.” Hopefully this bundle of pre-teen hormones would be in a better mood once she returned from the grocery store. She studied the list Marla had given her. The dinner menu consisted of a gluten-free, dairy-free lasagna with grilled vegetables on the side. “Gluten-free, dairy-free lasagna...” Pam had to say the words aloud to make sure she wasn't misreading. How was that even possible?

She remembered passing a grocery store on the way to the house.

Her phone's GPS successfully guided her to the grocery store, but there was a lineup to enter the parking lot. Her rental car was reduced to inching along as customers navigated the poorly designed space. Pam was appalled. She had never seen a traffic jam in a parking lot before. Everyone, it seemed, was obsessed with parking as close as possible to the entrance, even if it meant waiting for another customer to exit a parking space. Pam spent a frustrating twenty-five minutes waiting to park.

Things continued downhill after that. She had scarcely begun shopping when Pam remembered how much she hated adjusting to a new grocery store. What would have taken fifteen minutes at home stretched out to an hour in the Florida Keys. She crossed the entire store numerous times as she hunted for the items on Marla's grocery list. It didn't help that the list contained exotic items like shallots, fava beans and capers. (Sugar-free sorbet? What was the point of that?) Once she was done shopping, exiting the parking lot required a fifteen minute wait. A king-sized headache assaulted her
as she gripped the steering wheel with tight knuckles. Pam was ready to throttle someone after the sour shopping experience.

Which was why she was instantly furious when she came home to find Jeremy cavorting with Apple in the porch hammock.

She was carefully navigating the precariously steep steps to the house with two bags of groceries when her ears caught the sound of laughter. Pam didn't know it was coming from the porch until she spotted Jeremy and Apple in the hammock. He lay on one end, his feet pressing against her legs as she reclined in the opposite end. “... so Apple, who's your favorite Star Wars character?” she overheard him asking her.

Pam opened the door with her foot. The groceries landed on the kitchen counter with a dull thud. Her dark mood, unbelievably, plunged further into darkness. Had Jeremy purposely declined accompanying her to the grocery store? So he could spend time with Apple? Pam fumed for a few seconds before remembering the rest of the groceries in the car. “Like hell I'm rubbing his back tonight,” she thought to herself.

On the second trip from the car to the house, Pam hoped they would at least acknowledge her presence and offer to help. Instead she was treated to the sound of Apple's giggle while Jeremy told a knock-knock joke. It was the same joke he had been telling since he was eight. “Get some new material already,” Pam seethed.

On the third trip, the good news was that Jeremy was no longer in the hammock. The bad news was that he was now fanning Apple with a vintage copy of Life magazine while pushing the hammock. “He is so fucking dead,” Pam muttered.

It wasn't until she had unpacked all the groceries that the two of them strolled into the house. “Oh hi, Pam,” Apple said. “I didn't even realize you were home already. Did you need any help?”

“Nope, I just finished putting everything away.” Pam smiled acidly.

“Jeremy here was keeping me entertained with some funny stories,” Apple told her. “Did you know he had to finish a hike once with his hands handcuffed behind his back?”

“Oh really?” Pam said. “That must have been something. Good thing you didn't have to pee or anything, huh Jeremy?” He shifted uncomfortably on his feet but remained quiet.

Apple's eyes bugged out as she laughed. “You would have been in deep trouble then!” She patted Jeremy on the head. “I'm going to see if Zep is awake from his nap. Catch you guys later!”

The kitchen became uncomfortably quiet once Apple left. Gritting her teeth, Pam pulled Marla's dinner recipe from her pocket. After studying it a moment, she began retrieving ingredients from the refrigerator.

Jeremy cleared his throat. “Um, do you need any help making dinner?” he tentatively offered.

“You can help by staying out of the way for once,” Pam snapped at him. Jeremy recoiled as if she had hit him. With a deeply hurt expression, he scampered out of the kitchen. Pam imagined him searching out Apple for consolation. The thought only served to fuel her rage.

She grimly got to work, wondering why she had even come to the Florida Keys in the first place. There was a great clatter of metal on metal as she rooted through the cabinets in search of a large pot. While waiting for the water to boil for the gluten-free pasta, Pam opened some canned tomatoes to make the sauce. Hearing footsteps behind her, she steeled herself for Jeremy's return. Instead it was
“Hi there! Zep's still asleep,” she said. “Need any help?”

Her cheerfulness was grating, particularly given Pam's awful mood. It didn't help that she also wanted to claw out Apple's eyes. “I've got things totally under control,” Pam assured her.

Apple perused her mom's written recipe. “I could chop the vegetables for the grill,” she offered.

Pam paused a moment to sort out her feelings. The lasagna recipe had no fewer than twelve steps that required an inordinate amount of attention. There was no way she could prepare dinner all by herself. She wasn't sure if she should be trusted with a sharp knife around Apple, but Pam undoubtedly needed her help. “That would be great,” she accepted. “Thanks.”

Apple began washing the zucchini and eggplant. Pam allowed the stony silence to continue, not saying a word when Apple hunted for a cutting board and knife. Pam was almost disappointed when she finally found them. A precise 'snick-clack' sound filled the kitchen as Apple began chopping the vegetables. “Sorry my mom is so bossy,” she told Pam.

“How long have you and Zep been together?” Pam inquired.

Apple stopped to count on her fingers. “About six months now.”

“That's a long time. Especially if you're... sixteen?” Pam guessed. She checked her pot of water on the stove. There were a few bubbles but it was nowhere near boiling. The lid clanged as she clapped it back onto the pot.

“I'm sixteen but Zep doesn't turn sixteen until next month,” Apple said. “He keeps telling me I'm robbing the cradle.”

“Ha.” Pam began dicing some onions but then overheard Apple chuckling to herself. “What's funny?” she asked her.

Apple lowered her voice. “I hope you don't think this is weird, but you can totally tell Jeremy is going to be super hot.”

Pam's jaw clenched as checked the pot again. “Really? I guess I've never given it much thought.” The water had finally come to a roaring boil. Removing the lid, Pam added a pinch of salt and the lasagna noodles.

“Totally hot,” Apple affirmed. “Have you ever noticed how long his eyelashes are? He's always fluttering them at me. It's so cute. I'm probably a little biased though because...” She glanced around to confirm they were alone. Whispering now, Apple confided, “I think he has a crush on me.”

There was a clatter as Pam dropped the lid on the floor. Apple stopped chopping vegetables. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“I'm fine,” Pam said. “The lid was hotter than I expected.” She took a deep breath and counted to ten. “How do you know he has a crush on you?” she asked.
Apple resumed chopping vegetables. “I just know. From the way he looks at me sometimes. Or the way he follows me around. But don’t tell Jeremy I told you that. I can tell he’s the sensitive type.” After a moment, she added, “Don’t tell Zep either. He’ll be jelly. Even though Jeremy’s only, what, twelve?”

“Eleven,” Pam corrected.

“So let’s see... when he's my age, I'll be twenty-one. Twenty-one! That's so old! I guess we really are too far apart.”

“I suppose it's all a matter of perspective,” Pam said. “If you were twenty-nine and he was twenty-four? That wouldn't be a big deal.”

“Truth,” Apple nodded. She assembled her chopped vegetables in a bowl and drizzled olive oil over them. “I can get these started on the grill,” she volunteered. “Zep can help. He loves playing with matches so I'm sure he'll enjoy getting the grill started.”

“Thanks for helping,” Pam acknowledged. Despite her annoyance, she was finding it difficult to stay mad at Apple. The teenage girl was simply too well-mannered and sweet. “Thanks for cleaning up the kitchen too. I don't know where I would have found time for that.”

“Of course,” Apple smiled and left the kitchen.

By the time Pam slid the lasagna into the oven to bake, she had managed to burn herself twice and splatter tomato sauce all over her clean shirt. She went upstairs to change into something more presentable for dinner. Finding a new outfit meant lugging her suitcase from where she left it on the landing to the third floor, where she found Jeremy reclining in the rolling computer chair and racing from one side of the room to the other. He stopped what he was doing when she entered. She could still see the hurt in his face before he looked away.

There was an uncomfortable silence between them. Clearing her throat, Pam told him, “I'm sleeping up here.” When he didn't respond, she continued, “Apple asked me to switch with Zep. Don't tell your dad or Marla, okay?”

Still not speaking, Jeremy just shrugged. Propping his feet against the wall, he pushed off hard and zipped across the room in the computer chair.

“Jeremy, don’t do that,” Pam said, even more tired now. “You’re leaving marks all over the hardwood floor.” Defiantly, he launched himself one last time, thudding to a stop by jamming a foot into the wall. Pam shook her head and opened her suitcase. As she rooted through her packed clothes, he took a running start and launched himself into the upper bunk.

Once again, Pam mentally counted to ten before saying anything. “Why do you have to be so destructive?” she said, covering her eyes. “Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. Can you please go clean up?” Jeremy slid off the bed with a resentful thump and stalked out of the room.

Returning to her suitcase, Pam picked out a fresh pair of jeans and the least wrinkled shirt she could find. It felt good to shed her soiled clothes. After a quick stop in the bathroom to powder her nose and freshen up, she returned to the kitchen to check on the oven. Marla, however, had beaten her to it. The lasagna, bubbling under a beautifully browned top of crusted (and dairy-free) cheese, filled the kitchen with a tantalizing scent.

“Pam!” Marla greeted her. “Thank you so much for taking care of dinner. Why don't you have a seat? I'll take care of serving.”
William, Apple and Zep were already waiting at the dinner table. Zep had once again downshifted into less-threatening boyfriend mode by removing his piercings and donning a plain black t-shirt. Despite his best efforts, he still appeared out of place at the formal dinner table with its cloth napkins, crystal glasses and polished antique silverware.

“I didn't know dinner was going to be this fancy,” Pam commented, slipping into a chair.

“Marla was raised in the south,” William explained as Jeremy walked into the room. He hesitated a moment before choosing the spot next to Apple.

“Jeremy, that's Marla's chair,” his dad said. “Why don't you sit over here next to Pam?”

“I'd rather sit here,” Jeremy said. He gave Pam a defiant look. She responded with a steely gaze of her own. Knowing it was juvenile, Pam nevertheless felt a hint of satisfaction when he looked away first.

“Oh, suit yourself,” William sighed. He transferred Marla's wine glass to the last empty spot next to Pam.

Dinner was a tedious affair. Despite winning praise for the lasagna, Pam passed the hour by tamping down her annoyance with Marla's inane chit-chat and Jeremy's newfound admiration for Apple. He picked the tomatoes out of his salad and deposited them on Apple's plate. She returned the favor by spooning the ice cubes from her water glass and transferring them to his. The sound of Jeremy crunching on his ice cubes was like fingernails on a chalkboard, but no one else seemed to notice.

Half-heartedly, Pam pushed her food around on her plate, not really hungry enough to eat. She wondered what Apple could possibly see in Jeremy. His shirt sported an unidentifiable food stain that wasn't even from this meal. Every time Jeremy made eye contact with Apple, he would self-consciously straighten his hair. Pam attempted to keep track, but he did it so often that she soon lost count. Remembering Apple's remark about his eyelashes, she suddenly noticed how he often he batted them at her as they spoke.

Pam had never seen him act this way around a girl before.

Well, except around her. When they were back home, Pam was quite accustomed to being the center of his attention and affection.

Despite her distaste for the entire affair, Pam politely waited until after dessert to excuse herself. Heading upstairs, she took a long and hot shower which was, quite possibly, the first good thing to happen all day. After she was finished, Pam retired to the enclosed deck off the mezzanine to allow her hair to air dry. She could feel her daylong headache finally easing and didn't want to aggravate it with a hair dryer. The temperature dropped as dusk fell, but the Florida air remained pleasantly refreshing. Breathing deeply, Pam tried to remind herself that this was a vacation.

Above her, the pink-orange hues of sunset gave way to an obscuring blue in the east. The bare-limbed mahogany tree near the deck rustled with the ocean breeze. Even once darkness fell completely, Pam made no move to go inside. The solitude was a curative.

The ceiling light illuminated the room on the other side of the glass door. Pam watched as Jeremy came up the stairs. She was evidently invisible on the darkened deck because he made no move to acknowledge her presence. He undressed and, wearing only his underwear, began hunting for his pajamas. His lithe body was all skinny shoulders and straight lines. Pam supposed he would one day fill out, perhaps resembling Zep with his muscular arms and developed chest. She shuddered at the thought.
Apparently unsuccessful in his pajama search, Jeremy disappeared into the bathroom and emerged with a toothbrush in his mouth. He wandered aimlessly in his underwear as he brushed his teeth, eventually plopping into the computer chair to spin himself in circles. His toothbrushing was hopelessly intermittent as he paused, lips clenched around the toothbrush, to examine a rock on the desk or swat a moth on the wall. Pam had never before observed his bedtime routine. Now she knew why it took so long.

Several minutes passed. He was brushing his teeth in five second intervals when Pam saw him turn his head to greet someone. Leaning forward, she saw Apple on the stairs. The glass door to the deck prevented her from hearing anything, but Apple appeared to be saying good night. Jeremy waved to her, but then spilled a mouthful of toothpaste onto his bare chest when he tried to say something. The two of them burst into laughter. Pam grimaced.

After Apple left, Jeremy went to the bathroom to clean up. Pam waited until he was in bed, reading, before coming in from the deck. He looked up in surprise when she opened the door. Apparently he hadn't realized she was out there. They only briefly made eye contact before Jeremy returned to his reading. His floppy hair shielded his eyes as he hunched over his book.

Not having anything to say, Pam ignored him and got ready for bed herself. She used the privacy of the bathroom to change into her nightclothes, although the small space made her bang her elbow several times on the wall. As if the bathroom weren't diminutive enough, the cramped bunk bed was even worse. It required minor contorting, but she was able to stuff herself into the lower bunk without banging her head.

No one said anything. The awkward silence filled the room like air in a taut balloon. After a moment, Jeremy began climbing down from the top bunk. Pam thought he was coming down to speak face to face. Instead, he headed for the bathroom. She listened to the sound of the door's gentle click, followed by the sound of the flushing toilet a minute later. Jeremy was climbing back into the top bunk when he slipped. A loud thump shook the room as he landed on the floor.

“Ow!” she heard him say. “Ow-ow-ow...”

Normally, she would have immediately checked on him, made sure he was okay. Tonight though, Pam instead turned off her bedside lamp and pulled the sheets up. Trying again, Jeremy gingerly climbed into the top bunk without incident. She listened to him fuss with the covers before turning off his light, plunging the room into a darkness that seemed to punctuate their mutual silent treatment.

It wasn't complete sensory deprivation, but the thick darkness allowed the tension to seep from her body. Finally removed from the long day, she felt the tiniest bit guilty for snapping at him. Pam suddenly wished they weren't fighting. She wished she weren't mad. This was the last thing she expected this morning when she left for the airport. How did they arrive at this state?

She wished things could go back to normal.

The mature thing to do would have been to apologize, but Pam simply couldn't do it. The words sounded wrong each time she mentally composed something to say. Around them, the house grew quieter as everyone else turned in for the night. Lying in the uncomfortable bed in an unfamiliar room, Pam waited for the right words to come. She lay there a long time.
Chapter Summary

Vacation gets better when Pam figures out herself and figures out the Coppertone Conundrum.

It was a difficult night of sleeping. Being in the lower bunk was decidedly claustrophobic. Each time she drifted off to sleep, Pam was rudely awakened by the squeaky frame of the upper bunk that alerted her to Jeremy's every toss and turn. She recalled his earlier complaint about not being able to sleep. “This is probably the first time in his life that he's dealing with sexual frustration,” Pam thought.

She slept lightly, the kind where she wasn’t even sure she was conscious or asleep. Morning eventually arrived, announcing its presence with weak sunlight creeping around the edges of the curtains. She must have dozed off because she opened her eyes to bright sunshine, barely contained by the drapery, pouring into the room. Staring at the pattern of springs and steel wire that supported the upper bunk, she wondered if Jeremy was still asleep. As though answering her, the bed frame squeaked as he shifted up top.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Are you awake?” The squeaking bed springs answered her query. Pam continued, her voice shaking a little. “This is stupid. Not talking to each other.”

It felt surprisingly cathartic to say those words. Pam let her thoughts tumble out, unfiltered. “I'm sorry I yelled at you. In the kitchen. I didn't mean any of it. I was tired. And cranky.” He didn't answer so she didn't stop. “It wasn't a very nice thing to say. I guess sometimes I forget that I'm the older one. The one who is supposed to be the adult.” Pam paused again, searching her feelings. Tears welled up in her eyes. “I just really... love you. Is all.” Her pillowcase was getting wet as tears rolled down her cheeks. “Um, want to come down and snuggle? If you're not mad at me?”

He still didn't answer. Pam's heart throbbed, emptily, as she realized how much she must have hurt him. Wiping her face, she extricated herself from the bunk bed, taking care not to bump her head. When she peered into the top bunk, however, she found it empty except for Athena. The cat seemed surprised to see her. Pam ran her hand among the mussed sheets and pillow. They were cool to the touch.

He must have woken up early, which was very unlike Jeremy. He also somehow got out of bed and stealthily crept away without waking her. Which was doubly unlike Jeremy. Despite the bright morning, the house was quiet as a library. Pam decided it was time for coffee.

As she approached the kitchen, she could hear the rustle of newspaper and the tinkling of silverware. Jeremy, wearing only his underwear and a sleeveless shirt, was huddled in the breakfast nook, his back to her. Pam cleared her throat nervously. Say what you just said, she told herself.

“Hey, can we talk?” she asked. It was only after she rounded the corner to enter the kitchen that she noticed Apple sitting next to him. The two of them glanced up at her in surprise.

“Oh, good morning, Pam,” Apple greeted. She and Jeremy were cozily crammed into the breakfast nook, crouched over the comics section. “You're up early.”
“I’m usually an early riser,” Pam answered. Jeremy had pointedly returned his attention to the newspaper, not looking at her when she spoke.

“Us too,” Apple agreed. “Me and Jeremy have been the first ones up every day. This is usually our quiet time. Jeremy doesn't like to wait for the comics so we have to share it. And then we do the crossword together.”

“It isn't that cute,” Pam said, frowning. Her earlier feelings of apology and forgiveness were swiftly usurped by the same fury from yesterday. Apple was wearing a loose-fitting tank top and bright blue shorts, the same kind Pam recalled wearing to gym class twenty years ago. Did Apple own anything that wasn't vintage? She also couldn't help but notice how their bare arms touched as she and Jeremy sat next to each other.

Pam set a kettle on the stove. “Shouldn't you get dressed, Jeremy?” she suggested.

“Apple is still in her pajamas,” he said, still not looking at her.

“I wouldn't call those pajamas,” Pam thought to herself. Apple’s blond hair, pulled into a ponytail, accidentally smacked Jeremy as they pored over the comics page together. When he protested, Apple turned her head to purposely whip him with her mane of hair. As they laughed, Pam caught Jeremy stealing a glance at Apple's bra-free chest. Gritting her teeth, Pam turned off the stove even though the water was nowhere near boiling.

“You know, it's such a nice morning that I think I'll go for a quick walk,” she muttered.

“Enjoy!” Apple said. As she left, Pam overheard her saying to Jeremy, “Want to get started on the crossword? Let’s start with five down. ‘Revolutionary War figure / American breakfast.’ It’s fourteen letters. Ends in a D.”

“Easy,” he answered. His fingers pushed aside the rusty curls that covered his brow. “Benedict Arnold.”

“You are so smart! How do you know all this stuff?”

Pam rolled her eyes. Upstairs she pulled on a pair of jeans, skipped brushing her hair, and headed straight out the door. She began aimlessly walking. “It's just a crush,” she told herself. “Nothing to get angry about. He's just a normal eleven year old boy. Naturally curious about girls.” Her feet pounded the pavement despite the calming logic churned out by her brain. Pam wasn't at all threatened by the Playboys in his closet. So why this irrational jealousy of Apple?

It required several blocks of walking before she finally figured it out. It went beyond jealousy. It was envy. Apple was everything Pam wanted to be. She was talented. Kind. Pretty. And, above all, young. In spite of Apple's fear of being “too old” for him, Pam knew deep down that a Jeremy+Apple relationship was far more socially acceptable than Jeremy+Pam. It was utterly unfair.

She sulkily trudged while wrestling her conundrum. The warm Florida air and the salty ocean scent should have been paradise, particularly in December, but Pam unhappily wished she would have stayed home. If only she could be like her friend Suzy and have a 'thing' for older men. No one batted an eye at that. Wallowing in self-pity, she continued wandering the seemingly homogeneous residential district of Key West. Each tidy white house was equipped with palm trees, picket fences, two cars and presumably happy women in their twenties with completely hetero-normative desires.

Her foul mood so thoroughly roiled her senses that Pam walked into a Starbucks against all better judgment. She generally avoided it on account of all the hidden calories, but this was an emergency.
“I'll have a coconut milk macchiato,” she told the barista. “A venti. And a slice of raspberry swirl poundcake.”

The barista nodded, tapping away at her touchscreen. “Will that be all?”

“And two oatmeal cookies, please,” Pam added, knowing full well that this sugar wasn't the best way to start the day. She glanced at the clock on the wall. It wasn't even 8 am yet.

Fuck everything.

The barista topped off her coffee with a thick layer of foamy coconut milk, followed by an artful drizzle of caramel before passing it to Pam. She briefly scanned the room before flopping into a leather armchair. As she sipped the beige colored liquid, there was an instant rush of sugar and caffeine when the coffee hit her empty stomach. The scent of cinnamon and cloves from the oatmeal cookie lured her next, melting in her mouth with a satisfying crumble. She alternated bites of it with the raspberry poundcake streaked through with bright shades of magenta. Pam congratulated herself on her delicious choices.

She was munching away when she overheard a commotion. A few tables down, a man and woman were speaking with a couple waiting for their drinks. Pam had assumed it was a friendly conversation but her ears picked up a slight edge in the seated man's voice.

“I just think that sort of behavior isn't appropriate,” he told the couple. The man was older with gray, thinning hair and a paunchy belly. He was dressed from head to toe in khaki earth tones and had a scarf wrapped around his neck despite the Floridian warmth.

Pam saw his seatmate glance around nervously. It wasn't until then that she noticed that the couple he was addressing was two men. They appeared to be college-age. One wore a black leather jacket while the other wore a denim one. “What behavior are you referring to?” one of them asked politely.

“Oh, I think you know what I mean,” the older man replied. “Sauntering in here, kissing and all that. Can't you keep your hands to yourself?”

The gay couple exchanged an uncertain glance. “You're offended because we're holding hands?” the man in the leather jacket asked.

“Absolutely,” the older man answered. “It's not appropriate and a lot of people here are offended.” He looked to his companion for confirmation, but she was too embarrassed to answer.

“Howard, maybe we should go,” she urged.

The man in the denim jacket looked around the Starbucks. “Who's offended?” he asked. “Who are you talking about?” Aside from a woman on the phone in the corner and the two employees, it was empty except for the four of them.

And Pam. She cleared her throat. “I'm not offended,” she volunteered. Everyone turned to look at her. “Just for the record,” she clarified. Addressing the older man, she added, “It sounded like you wanted to speak for everyone, so I just wanted to let you know.”

The older man glared at her. “Why don't you mind your own business?”

“The same could be asked of you,” Pam coolly answered.

The man turned a remarkably angry shade of red. “Why don't you go back to stuffing your face?” he snarled. “Don't forget to go to the gym later and work off all those calories. Or maybe you prefer
being a cow.”

Pam's jaw dropped as the Starbucks went silent. The woman on the phone didn't notice, but the two young baristas behind the counter were looking at each other in panic at this turn of events. “Hey, that wasn't cool,” the man in the leather jacket said. “You really shouldn't talk to people like that.”

The older man stood up, gathering his things. “Let's go, Evelyn,” he grumbled. “We don't need to stay here and listen to this.”

Before they could leave, Pam caught the eye of the woman. “Is this your husband?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Speaking loudly to make sure the older man would hear, Pam said, “If this is the way he treats strangers in public, I'd hate to see the way he treats you in private.” The man's head whipped around to fix her with a withering gaze. Ignoring him, Pam sympathetically told his wife, “I'm so sorry.”

Huffing and puffing under his breath, the older man stormed out. His mortified wife offered a tepid defense: “He's not usually like this.” She quietly left.

“Um, your drinks are ready,” the barista informed the gay couple.

“Christ, what an asshole,” the man in the leather jacket commented to Pam. “It's awfully early in the day to be that mad.” His boyfriend handed him his drink. “Or ever, I suppose.”

Pam nodded. She was about to agree when she remembered her own terrible mood. What the older man said was inexcusable on all counts. But what about her own anger and bitterness? In the kitchen, she had definitely come close to telling Apple exactly what she thought of her.

“I'm Matt,” the man in the leather jacket said. “And this is Matt too,” he said, pointing to his boyfriend.

“Matt and Matt,” Pam approved. “That's easy to remember. “I'm Pam.” As they shook hands, she noticed that Matt (in denim) wore a button on his jacket. It originally read “Love Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry” in large block letters, but he had modified it to say “Love Means Always Having to Say Fuck You”.

Pam laughed. “I like your button,” she complimented.

Matt surprised her by unpinning it from his jacket and handing it to her. “It's all yours.”

“Are you sure?” Pam said. “Thank you.”

“No, thank you,” Matt said, winking at her. He took other Matt's hand and they strolled out the door together.

The surreal experience lasted less than two minutes. If she hadn't been holding the button, Pam would have wondered if it had actually happened at all. She studied the message again, both the original and the modified version. Both messages seemed to be speaking to her as though sent from a higher power. Love means never having to say you're sorry? That was the stupidest thing she had ever heard.

Love didn't come in Hollywood-approved soundbites. It couldn't be defined by a Hallmark greeting card. It had nothing to do with pink heart-shaped boxes on Valentines' Day. But could it come from a place of rebellion? Did love require not only patience and understanding, but also a certain spirit of
war? If it was us against them, wasn't that all the more romantic?

All that remained from her Starbucks binge were a few bites of raspberry poundcake and the dregs of the macchiato. She took one last sip before tossing it in the trash and heading out the door herself. Lost in her thoughts, Pam continued walking. She had spent all this time feeling sorry for herself, imagining a love that could exist in an idyllic vacuum. That was the furthest thing from the truth. You had to fight for love. Because otherwise it wouldn't be love.

By the time she passed a French bakery, Pam was feeling physically queasy from all the sweets but spiritually awakened from all the thinking. Digging in her pockets, she found a twenty dollar bill. She suddenly knew exactly what she had to do. Five minutes later, she was retracing her steps back to the house with a box of fresh pastries. Whatever her feelings were, or however unjust the world was, she knew that Jeremy was essentially an innocent bystander in all this. And though it pained her to admit it, Apple too.

As she neared the house, she detected activity on the porch. Someone was in the hammock again. Pam steeled her heart. “Be nice,” she mentally reminded herself. But once she climbed the steps, she only found Apple and Zep cuddling in the hammock.

“Oh, hi,” she said, opening the box. “I bought some treats for everyone.”

Zep’s eyes lit up as he peered into the box. “Whoa. Baked goods!” He was wearing a plain t-shirt with the declaration “corporate hashtags still suck” scrawled on it with a Sharpie.

“Thanks Pam!” Apple said. She picked out an apricot danish while Zep chose an almond croissant. “William and my mom just headed out for breakfast though.”

“Their loss, I suppose,” Pam said. “Did Jeremy go with them?”

“No, he's inside somewhere.”

Remembering Matt's button in her pocket, Pam fished it out and handed it to Zep. It seemed like a good fit for his style. “I found this button this morning. Do you want it? I like it, but I can't really wear it around.”


Apple's reaction was more muted. “You don't really believe that though, do you?

“It's maybe 50% true,” he acknowledged.

“Thanks a lot, Zep.”

Uh oh, Pam thought. Did she just inadvertently introduce a fissure into their relationship? Hopefully not. “I thought you would like it,” she said. “Maybe don't wear it around Jeremy though?”

“Done and done,” Zep said. “Thanks.”

Leaving the two teenagers with their breakfast treats, Pam went inside to find Jeremy. The living room was empty. The breakfast nook was empty. Placing a chocolate croissant on a plate, she headed upstairs. She finally found him in the mezzanine room, back in bed and drawing on a sketchpad. Athena lay nestled in a ball at his feet, purring.

“Hi,” she said.
He didn't answer right away. The short pause felt like an eternity. Pam's heart pounded in her chest. She wasn't sure if it was from nervousness or from all that sugar and caffeine. “Hi,” he answered. Athena's purring stopped as Pam approached the bed. Jeremy still wouldn't look at her.

“What are you drawing?” she inquired. Instead of responding, he wordlessly held up the page for her to see. It was a Floridian scene with palm trees, the ocean, surfers, and a crocodile. “Ha,” Pam said. “I guess you're going to get your crocs one way or another.”


“I'm not hungry.”

Pam set the plate atop the bookcase, the one that contained the ever-so-creepy nutcrackers. Each one seemed to be staring at her with accusation. “Come on. I'm trying to be nice. Will you at least look at me?” Grudgingly, Jeremy closed his sketchpad and set aside his pencil. His wary eyes reminded her of Athena.

The words she had been rehearsing came tumbling out. “I'm sorry for what I said yesterday in the kitchen,” Pam said. “I didn't mean it. I was tired and cranky so I took it out on you. I won't do that again.”

Jeremy picked at his nails. “I'm sorry too. For being such a pest all the time.”

Pam shook her head. “You're not a pest.”

“Well, sometimes you treat me like one.”

“I don't mean to. I just get... frustrated with you sometimes. I'm sorry I'm so impatient.”

Jeremy fiddled with his eraser. “So you're going to start being nice to me now?”

“Promise,” Pam nodded. Unable to help it, she defensively continued, “But, you have to admit, I'm usually very nice to you. Most of the time. Who else do you have to go camping with out in the backyard? Who takes you out for drive-thru? Or dresses up in the Halloween costume just like you want?”

She saw his expression soften, just a little bit. “Or plays Call of Duty with me,” Jeremy added.

Pam touched his hand. “I'm sorry I screwed up on the Coppertone.”

“It's okay,” he said gruffly. He cleared his throat. “I wish we were going home.”

“Me too.”

Jeremy shyly looked at her. “You're not mad at me anymore?”

“Of course not. Are you mad at me?”

“No.” An awkward silence followed. Finally, Jeremy held out his hand. “So we're friends again?” he asked as they shook hands.

“I hope so,” Pam told him. “It's kind of exhausting to be mad at you.”

“Same.”

Pam retrieved the croissant and handed it to him. “Will you eat this for me?” Her heart palpably
swelled as he obligingly took a large bite out of the croissant.

“Did you want some?” he offered through a full mouth.

Pam's stomach gurgled in protest at the thought. “Um, no thanks. I already had one. Or two. I got sweaty on my walk so I'm going to take a quick shower, okay?” He picked up his pencil and continued eating. Resisting the urge to warn him about crumbs in the bed, Pam headed for the bathroom. After she was done showering, however, she emerged to find an empty bedroom.

No matter. It was easier to get dressed in the spacious mezzanine rather than the cramped bathroom. The Florida weather had encouraged her to pack warm weather clothes so she picked out a fitted denim skirt and white button down shirt. Pam checked herself in the mirror. The ensemble was rather dressy for vacation but she liked it anyway.

Her hair had inadvertently gotten wet during the shower though. Pam wondered if Apple had a hair dryer she could borrow. She returned downstairs and opened the front door just in time to see Jeremy launching himself off the porch steps on a skateboard. She cringed, but he landed safely in the driveway. Apple and Zep clapped politely from the hammock.

“Oh, hi Pam!” Jeremy beamed. “Did you see me skateboard off the porch? Pretty good, right?”

“I did see,” Pam nodded. “Please don't skate off the steps anymore. You're going to hurt yourself. Or someone else.”

“Just one more,” Jeremy insisted. “I didn't stick that landing but I know I can do better.”

“Jeremy.” She was careful not to nag, but there was a quiet plea to her voice. To her surprise, it worked.

Still holding his skateboard, he looked at her with a glimmer of understanding. “I'll just skate around the driveway,” Jeremy offered.

“Thank you.” Small victories, Pam thought to herself. “Apple, do you have a hair dryer I could borrow?”

“Sure thing. It should be in the bathroom on the counter. Cute outfit by the way.”

“Thanks!” Pam replied. The upstairs bathroom, used only by Apple and Zep, was something of a mess. Every inch of the sink's porcelain counter was covered with countless containers in all shapes and sizes. There were bottles of moisturizing nighttime cream, rejuvenating facial scrubs, and daytime brighteners with SPF. Scattered throughout were a half dozen tubes of lipstick in indistinguishable shades of red. Hidden among the mess was a translucent bottle with a blue cap: K-Y lubricant.

Pam picked it up. “I am such an idiot,” she murmured to herself. She and Jeremy had gotten so accustomed to Coppertone that they never stopped to consider the alternatives. Or at least she hadn't. Jeremy probably didn't even knew something like K-Y existed.

Setting it aside, she carefully extricated the hair dryer from Apple's array of toiletries and plugged it in. As she dried her hair, Pam considered the options. Actively fooling around with Jeremy was out of the question, especially since they didn't have a bedroom with an actual door. But if the eleven year old boy needed release so badly, maybe she could persuade him to play Call of Duty by himself.

After she finished drying her hair, Pam pocketed the small bottle of K-Y. Downstairs, she opened the
front door to find Jeremy streaking down the driveway on his skateboard with, literally, a trail of flames behind him. A tablecloth wrapped around his shoulders served as a makeshift cape. Apple and Zep cheered as Jeremy skidded to a stop and turned to stare at the knee-height flames on the sidewalk. They only burned a few seconds before flickering out.

“Yes!” he shouted. “Zep, it worked! I can’t believe it! Pam! Did you see that? Did you see what I did?”

“Um, I saw the flames,” Pam said. “How did you do that?”

“I squirted some lighter fluid on the driveway,” Jeremy said. “Then I scraped the tail of my skateboard to make some sparks. Instant whoosh! Wasn't that cool?”

His hyperactivity is going to get us both killed, Pam thought to herself. She said aloud, “Very impressive. Can you come inside for a second?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Apple and Zep exchange a concerned look. Jeremy followed her inside and then up the stairs. “Am I in trouble?” he asked. “If you're mad, it was totally Zep's idea. I was just going with it.”

“No, I'm not mad. I just wanted to show you something.” Once they reached the mezzanine, Pam held her hands behind her back. “I have found the solution to all your troubles,” she told him, presenting the bottle of K-Y with a grand flourish. “Ta-dah!”

Dubiously, Jeremy took the plastic bottle. “What is it?”

“It's K-Y. Rub a bit between your fingers. Feels slippery right? This stuff is ten times better than Coppertone. It's unscented and washes off easily. What's not to love?”

“Better than Coppertone,” Jeremy repeated. “We're going to play Call of Duty with this stuff?”

“Well, not exactly we. If we had a real bedroom with a real door, then I would say yes in a heartbeat. You know that. But we're up here in this open space where anyone can walk in or overhear us. How about you play it by yourself this time?”

“What if someone walks in on me though?”

“Good point.” Pam considered the problem. “Can you do it in the bathroom?”

“The bathroom? I can't do it in there. Where am I supposed to lie down?” Jeremy, being an only child who always had his own room, was appalled. Pam, however, had viewed the bathroom as the last refuge of privacy when she was growing up. The notion was ghastly these days, but she had no compunction about masturbating on the bathroom rug when she was his age.

“Forget I said it,” Pam said. “How about the bunk bed then? I'll sit on the stairs and keep an eye out while you... you know. Take care of business.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Can we have a secret signal? How will I know if you see someone coming?”

“I'll cough. Like this...” Pam demonstrated for him.

“That sounds really fake.”

“I'll sneeze then. Ah-choo! How does that sound?”

Jeremy, ever the pragmatist, shook his head. “That sounds even more fake than your cough. How
about a coded sentence? Like you could say, 'Has anyone seen my belt? I can't find it anywhere...' and when I hear that, I'll know someone's coming.”

“I thought you wanted something that doesn't sound fake,” Pam countered. “We're getting sidetracked. Just keep your ears open and listen. If you hear me talking to someone, that's the alarm signal. Got it?” He nodded. Pam retreated down the stairs, even though what she really wanted to do was stay and watch. She seated herself on the bottom step to wait.

Though she was deprived of visual stimuli, Pam found her heart racing from all the little sounds coming from upstairs. She heard sheets rustling, followed by the snap of the elastic waistband of his shorts. Putting a hand to her ear, she detected the sound of the plastic bottle being uncapped. Dreamily, she closed her eyes and pictured Jeremy on the top bunk, tentatively masturbating with his special waving off motion. He was probably nervous, casting frequent glances at the stairs where she stood sentry.

The hallway was empty so Pam took advantage by rubbing a nipple. First just one, then both as she went further and further into her fantasy. Though encumbered by her shirt and bra, her nipples grew hard from her touch until her clothes did little to contain the swollen knobs of flesh. Pam was having a grand old time when she heard Jeremy clear his throat.

“Pam? Are you there?”

That was fast, she thought, standing up. She retraced her steps up the stairs. Still in the bunk bed, Jeremy had a sheet pulled up to his chin.

“It's not working,” he told her.

“What do you mean it's not working? How could it not be working?”

“It feels weird. It's not the same as Coppertone.” He noticed her perky nipples. “What's with you?”

“Um, nothing,” she replied, self-consciously crossing her arms. “It was chilly on the stairs. So you're just giving up? It's Coppertone or nothing?”

“Well, you try it then.” He thrust the bottle of K-Y at her. “This stuff isn't the same.”

Taking the K-Y, Pam was overcome by temptation. Maybe it was because of the thin sheet covering him, so translucent that she could see the pale peach of his bare tummy. Perhaps it was the way his hipbones jutted from underneath the draped sheet, not to mention the very obvious cupped hand over his crotch. Or, most likely, the fondling of her nipples on the stairs had activated her hormones and shut off her brain.

“Stay right there,” she commanded. Hurrying down the stairs to the first floor, Pam peeked out the window that looked onto the porch. She could see Apple and Zep still in the hammock. Both seemed engrossed with their phones. She dashed back upstairs.

“Okay, I'll help you, but I don't want someone to walk in on us,” she said, panting a little from all the stairwork. “Apple and Zep are still on the porch, but they might come in. How could we make sure no one comes up here?”

Jeremy tucked his chin under the sheets, thinking. “How about scattering rusty nails on the stairs?” he suggested.

“How about a solution that doesn't involve the emergency room?”
“Okay, how about...” She saw his eyes wander over to the bookcase. “How about putting all the nutcrackers on the stairs?”

“That's not a bad idea,” Pam pondered. A tidy row of nutcrackers on the stairs wouldn't be an impassable barrier, but it would certainly slow anyone coming up. If she heard one fall over, surely Pam would have enough time to dive into the safety of bathroom. She grabbed an armful of nutcrackers. Carefully, she arranged them shoulder-to-shoulder on the bottom stair. She then repeated the process on the next one. The nutcrackers were tall enough that it would be nearly impossible to step over them without knocking one over. Hopefully that would be enough of an alarm system.

As gracefully as possible, Pam climbed into the bunk bed. Her head almost bumped the ceiling but it was quite cozy up there. She seated herself at the opposite end of the bed from Jeremy. “Let's see what you've got,” she said, removing the bed sheet from him. His t-shirt was pulled up, exposing his stomach, while his shorts and underwear still clumped around his ankles. His hand protectively cupped his bare crotch. “Why didn't you take off all your clothes?” she asked.

“I didn't want to take everything off. In case, you know, we got caught or something.”

“Smart,” Pam approved. She waited, but Jeremy's hand continued covering the goods. “Come on, don't be bashful,” she told him. “Show me how you were touching yourself.”

“I thought you said you were going to help,” he frowned.

“I am helping,” Pam insisted. “I just want to see what you're doing so I can troubleshoot the problem.”

“You've already seen me do this before,” grumbled Jeremy. He could be maddeningly modest at times. His cupped hand became an open hand as he began reluctantly masturbating in his unique fashion, which Pam affectionately coined “waving off” because it appeared as if he were waving to someone as his palm rubbed against the underside of his penis that lay flattened on his body. Jeremy's demonstration lasted only a few seconds. Pam could have watched for hours.

“So it just doesn't feel good, huh?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“What if you tried a new technique?” she suggested. “Try forming a fist with your hand. Now, um, poke your penis into it... No, keep your fingers closed. Now move your fist up and down...” Pam felt herself getting wet as she instructed the eleven year old boy. “How does that feel?”

Jeremy shook his head. “I don't like it.”

“Can't you just do it for a little bit? Come on, you're supposed to try new things on vacation.”

He grudgingly began using his fist again. “Do you have to stare at me?” he complained.

“I'm not staring,” she lied. “I'm observing.” Pam couldn't help it. Spellbound at the sight of him masturbating, she hadn't expected it to be such a turn-on to watch him jacking off in the traditional manner. Eagerly, she committed every detail to memory. The stray drip of K-Y that trailed down his small, hairless sack... His glistening erection plunging in and out of his fist... The way his thumb stuck out, as if he were hitchhiking...

“I don't want to do this anymore,” Jeremy announced. “I give up.”

Disappointment crushed both Pam and her hormones when he stopped. “Are you sure? What if...”
Pam's mind groped for something, anything to keep him going. “What if I unbutton my shirt?” Throwing a nervous glance at the stairs, she undid a few buttons of her blouse. Jeremy immediately sat up a little straighter at the sight of her bra. Coyly, she fingered the clasp between the cups. “Want me to undo this?”

“Sure.”

“I'll unclasp my bra if you do ten strokes with your fist,” she negotiated. It was as if she were a drill sergeant demanding push-ups. Pam waited as Jeremy obediently gave her ten jacking off motions. “Good boy,” she approved, unhooking her bra clasp and letting the cups fall free. Her round breasts and hard nipples revealed themselves to the young boy. Upping the ante, Pam parted her knees just enough to give him a peek up her skirt.

She smiled as Jeremy's eyes wandered from exposed breasts to between her legs and then back again. “Is my underwear in the way? I could take it off... if you give me twenty strokes.” She counted in her head to ensure he wasn't cheating, but it was hardly necessary. As he jacked off, his determined gaze reminded her of a hunting dog stalking its prey.

He had only reached fifteen when Pam slipped her underwear off. The interminable wait was too much. She was dying to touch herself, especially since she could tell how wet she had become. Summoning an ungodly amount of willpower, she took a moment to arrange her legs in a ladylike manner with her knees primly closed. The combination of the cramped twin bed and her above-the-knee skirt afforded him several peeks as she settled herself.

It was only fair for Pam to enjoy the sight of him as well. Jeremy's hand remained clamped around his erection, his fist so much larger that it completely hid his boyhood. Pam wiggled her bum on his bed and rubbed her thighs together. “I'm really getting that itchy feeling,” she confided to him. “I don't know why. I wish there was something I could do about it...” She placed a hand over her skirt, and she teased both Jeremy and herself by gently prodding her crotch.

“Want me to show you where it itches?” Pam asked. “I'll do it if...” She was about to bargain more strokes from him, but Pam trailed off when he began jacking off without even being told. Suppressing a smile, Pam moved her legs apart and slowly lifted the hemline of her skirt. Once again, Jeremy's eyes darted furiously from her exposed chest down to her spread legs and back again. Letting him enjoy the view, Pam's fingers probed between her legs, feeling the soft and downy hair that was matted from her own copious moisture. Her heart pattering in excitement, she pulled her lips aside to let him gaze at the rosy pink glory between her legs.

“This is where it itches,” she said, running a finger across her engorged clit. She only meant to tease him, but it felt so good that she couldn't stop. “Oh, that feels nice.” Her finger moved in steady circles around the pink bud, each revolution pushing her higher and higher. Dropping the coy act, Pam bent her knees so that her feet were flat on the mattress and then spread her legs as wide as possible. Her free hand found its way to her breast. She squeezed it, enjoying the heavy fullness of her own ripe fruit.

Jeremy, no longer needing any encouragement, continued employing the new technique, even experimenting with his grip. The fact that they were both partially clothed lent an air of cautious excitement to the proceedings. His t-shirt continuously rode downward, forcing him to periodically yank it back up. Similarly, Pam's skirt constantly kept falling over her hand and she would impatiently pull it aside, not wanting Jeremy to miss a thing. She had unwittingly crossed a point of no return. If anything, the danger of getting caught now turned her on.

“Doesn't that feel nice? Using your hand like that?” Pam asked him. Jeremy nodded. “I told you it would be better.” He was now masturbating so furiously that his fist was beating like a jackhammer.
Aided by generous dollops of K-Y, the room was filled with the soft noise of his skin on skin action. Squick, squick, squick. Jeremy's previous waving off technique had been virtually silent, but this new jacking off sound added an exciting aural dimension.

Pam was so aroused that she could feel a white heat emanating from her skin as her fingers danced across her swollen clitoris. Encouraging him further, she said, “Now that you know how, you can do it any time you want, okay?” Squick, squick. “I'll stand watch and make sure no one interrupts you while you play Call of Duty.” Squick, squick, squick. She extended a leg, letting her toes caress the inside of his thigh. Getting carried away, Pam continued, “I'll let you do anything you want when we get home. I'll stop wearing underwear. Or a bra even. You can touch me whenever you want. I'll be vacuuming and you'll come by to lift up my skirt. Or you'll come home from school and I'll be waiting in your room. Wearing nothing.”

She heard his tempo quicken in response to her words, reaching a fever pitch. Squick, squick, squick, squick, squick.

Her toes, still pressed against his inner thigh, felt his leg muscles clench once, then twice. His eyelids fluttering, Jeremy's head rolled back onto his pillow as his shoulders seized up. He looked he was shivering but Pam knew better. Several days worth of pent-up sexual frustration burst from her young charge. Through it all, his hand persistently jacked away, not letting up for a moment.

“Nuhhh...” he groaned softly as the orgasm enveloped him. The sight of the young boy's obvious pleasure was too much for Pam. Nudging him with her foot, she said, “Jeremy. I'm getting close. Open your eyes... Don't you want to see? You love watching this part. You love watching me co-oh!” Hissing, Pam did her best to be quiet as she surrendered to the passion exploding inside her body. Fighting the urge to close her eyes, she instead locked her gaze with Jeremy's spent face. Despite his heavy eyelids, he still watched with clear interest as Pam's fingers frantically worked her burgeoning clit, extracting every last drop of pleasure.

The room went silent once she finished. The two of them seemed to be mirror images of each other as they lay on opposite sides of the twin bed. Jeremy's hand, still sticky with lube, rested on his hip. Similarly, Pam's own fingers were splayed across her damp patch of pubic hair. Both their chests were heaving with breath. Pam smiled wanly as she noted his wilting erection, a testament to his masturbatory prowess. She couldn't help feeling a surge of pride. Proud of being the one to teach him how to jack off and proud of Jeremy for successfully getting himself off.

Reluctantly, Pam pulled her shirt closed and slid off the bunk bed. Her skirt flopped back into place the moment her feet hit the ground. She toddled toward Jeremy and kissed his hot cheek.

“That was a really good one,” Jeremy confided. His voice sounded tired.

“It usually is a good one if you wait a long time in between,” Pam told him. Using her fingers, she tousled his hair and whispered, “Naptime.”

Pam retreated to the bathroom to wash her hand. She prepared a warm washcloth for Jeremy, but he was already sound asleep by the time she returned to the bunk bed. Taking care to be gentle she dabbed the wet washcloth at the peachy-pink skin of his penis, cleaning off the sticky K-Y until he felt completely smooth when she ran her finger alongside his boyhood. From time to time, Pam would glance at him as she worked but he was out cold. She moved on to the surrounding area of his crotch before swiping the washcloth against his wrinkled scrotum. It was an easy job since he was so thoroughly hairless.

Pam was pulling up the sheets when she remembered his hand. Taking it in hers, she softly unfolded his fingers before scrubbing his palm clean. Then she pulled his t-shirt down as far as possible and
tastefully draped a sheet over the sleeping boy to maintain his modesty. His shorts were still around his knees, but Pam decided she couldn't move those back into place without waking him.

She had just hung up the washcloth in the bathroom when she heard footsteps coming from downstairs. “Jeremy, are you up there?” It was his dad's voice. “Can you tell me why you put all these nutcrackers on the stairs?”

Pam hurried to the steps. Peering down the stairs, she saw William frowning with his hands on his hips as he surveyed the army of nutcrackers deployed before him. “Hi William,” she whispered. “Jeremy's taking a nap. But I'll tell him to put those away once he wakes up.”

“Oh.” William shook his head in annoyance. “Thanks Pam.” She saw his eyes flicker to her chest and suddenly remembered that she hadn't yet buttoned her shirt. She certainly wasn't flashing a nipple or anything, but her neckline was plunging far too low. As discreetly as possible, she pretended to scratch her neck and then tugged her shirt placket closed.

William continued, “Marla and I are thinking of heading back to the mainland for a show tonight. Think you'll be okay running the show around here? We'll probably get home really late.”

“Not a problem!” The fact that they were conversing on opposite ends of a staircase across three rows of nutcrackers was odd enough, but Pam was doubly disconcerted since she was going commando while speaking to Jeremy's dad. Why oh why hadn't she immediately put on her underwear at least? The air under her skirt suddenly felt cold and drafty. She tried to sound as cheery and normal as possible. “I can handle the kids. We'll order pizza or something. Have fun!”

William thanked her again. As he turned to leave, she saw him eyeing the nutcrackers on the stairs. Was there a look of suspicion on his face? She couldn't be certain. Pam crept up to the bunk bed and reached under the sheets, hunting for her forgotten panties. They were hopelessly bunched up under Jeremy's ankle, but she managed to extract them without waking him. After she got dressed, Pam tackled the task of putting away the nutcrackers. It required several trips. By the time the stairway was cleared, the allure of quick nap proved overpowering. She tucked herself into the lower bunk and dozed off to the sound of Jeremy's light snores.

Pam awoke to the sound of his snoring still fluttering about the room. She assumed it had been a short nap. After checking the time, however, she was alarmed to see that it almost noon. Her short nap had somehow stretched to ninety minutes. Oh well. She felt greatly refreshed. And quite powerful too. Wasn't that the whole point of a power nap?

Terribly thirsty, she made only the slightest attempt to check herself in the mirror before heading to the kitchen for a glass of water. Zep was there, slicing a watermelon while Apple gave direction. “No, no!” she told him. “You need to cut big slices crosswise first. Then you cut lengthwise. Here, give me the knife.”

“You really should have used a cutting board” Apple asked. “My mom is going to flip out if you mess up the wood counter.” Zep sighed and handed her the knife. Looking up, she saw Pam and smiled. “Hi, Pam. We were wondering where you were. Did you and Jeremy head out somewhere?”

“Oh, no,” Pam said, filling up a glass as the sink. “Jeremy took a nap and then I did the same. I guess neither of us slept well last night.”

“That's what vacation is all about,” Apple noted. “Want some watermelon?”
Fresh fruit sounded perfect after her Starbucks bender earlier that morning. “Sure,” Pam answered. “I didn’t know it was even in season.”

“Everything is always in season now,” Apple commented as she expertly sliced into the watermelon. “See?” she told Zep. “That’s how you do it.”

Pam recognized the frustrated annoyance on his face. She had seen Jeremy make a similar expression more times than she could count. “Is that what I sound like when I talk to him?” she wondered to herself.

“We should pack this up and take it to the beach,” Apple mused. “It’s such a nice day out.”

“That’s a good idea,” Pam agreed. “I’ll wake up Jeremy. He’ll never go to bed tonight if he sleeps all day.”

Waking up Jeremy was one thing. Getting him out of bed was quite another. Twenty minutes later, the four of them were walking to the beach. Jeremy’s hair was mussed, pillow creases marked his face, and Pam had to hold him upright while they strolled at a leisurely pace. They had gotten out of the house at least. She bought a pizza along the way, but even that wasn’t enough to wake Jeremy up. Apple and Zep went wading in the ocean while Pam slathered sunscreen on him as he grumpily lay on a towel with a shirt over his face. He remained comatose until she revived him with a root beer float purchased from a street vendor. After that, all it required was a few slices of cold pizza before Jeremy was eagerly exploring a rocky outcropping on the far end of the beach.

Pam was content to stay behind in the shade of a palm tree. As she stretched out on the sand, she was happy to finally have the vacation she had originally envisioned before coming to Florida. Her sole regret was packing only a one-piece swimsuit which seemed rather staid and conservative compared to Apple’s high-waisted bikini in a red gingham print. Jeremy periodically returned to show Pam some seashells or request money for a snack, but she otherwise passed the afternoon in a restful lull next to the hypnotizing blue ocean. By the time they packed up to return home, it was nearly six o’clock and the sun had already set.

“What’s for dinner?” Jeremy asked. He carried an empty pizza box full of seashells and wore a newly purchased t-shirt that pictured a crocodile chasing a surfer. “I’m starving.”

“My mom left us stuff for a cookout,” Apple offered. “We could have hot dogs.”

Once they got back to the house, Zep busied himself with the grill. Pam tried to help, but the only thing to do was open packages of hot dogs and buns. She settled into the porch love seat with a bag of potato chips and watched Zep dump a pile of charcoal briquettes into the grill. Apple hovered by his side. “I think that’s way too much charcoal,” she commented.

“Will you just let me work on my own?” he sighed.

Jeremy wandered onto the porch. Apple elbowed his arm. “Want to hang out on the hammock and tell jokes? I’ve got some new ones.”

“No, thanks,” Jeremy said. Instead he seated himself on the love seat and put his feet in Pam’s lap. He helped himself to a big handful of potato chips before pointedly wiggling his bare toes. “Can I have a foot rub?” he requested. Inspecting his feet, Pam found them (relatively) clean. Even so, she only used one hand to rub his foot, reserving the other for eating potato chips.

Apple emerged from the house with a platter of leftover watermelon from the fridge. As she ate a slice, Pam was surprised to see Zep come out with two bottles of wine and three glasses. Noticing
Pam's expression, he shrugged and said, “Apple said her mom wouldn't notice if a bottle or two went missing. She has, like, an entire cellar of wine.” He uncorked the bottle and poured her a glass.

“Can I have a taste?” Jeremy asked, sitting up.

“No, you may not,” Pam answered. Wine and watermelon were an unexpectedly winning combination. She wasn't sure how to handle Apple and Zep’s underage drinking, but who was she to judge? After only three sips, she was already starting to feel warm and fuzzy inside.

The four of them munched watermelon on the porch as they waited for the grill to heat up. Zep pulled a chair closer to the railing so he could spit the seeds over the side. One by one, they followed his lead. Puckering her lips, Pam curled her tongue and blew a precise puff of breath, jettisoning the seeds in a perfect arc over the porch railing.

“Wow, you're really good at spitting,” Jeremy remarked. He was genuinely impressed.

“Why, thank you,” Pam said, enjoying another sip of wine. Without really thinking, she added, “That's the first time a guy has ever told me that.” As soon as she said it, Pam realized that Apple and Zep were well within earshot. They both chuckled.

“What's so funny?” Jeremy asked.

“Nothing,” Pam said. Perhaps this wine was a bad idea. When Zep came by to refill her glass, Pam stopped him. “Thanks, but I shouldn't have too much.”

“But you've hardly had any,” Zep pointed out.

“I'm not a big drinker,” Pam said. “Plus, I don't handle altered states very well.”

“That's true,” Jeremy interjected. “We never get to go to 3D movies because she gets too motion-sick.”

Zep re-filled her glass anyway. “Well, you should have just a little more. We have to finish the bottle somehow.”

She couldn't beat that logic. It's vacation, Pam justified as she sipped more wine. You're supposed to do things you wouldn't normally do. Nevertheless, she was a bit unsteady on her feet once the hot dogs were ready. They lined up at the grill with their plates as Zep lifted the lid, sending out a billow of smoke.

Using a pair of tongs, he picked up a hot dog. Apple was first in line. “Hold your bun open,” Zep told her.

“Gosh Zep,” she giggled, parting her hot dog bun. “Get it in there real good, Zep.” He swatted her bottom with an oven mitt as she returned to her seat.

Pam held open her bun without being told. “Gosh Zep,” she said as he plopped a hot dog into the waiting bun. “You really are good at slamming that wiener in there.” He blushed but didn't say anything. Apple made strangled noise of mock chagrin and threw a wadded napkin at Pam.

Jeremy held up his bun. “My turn!”

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Zep handed Jeremy the tongs. “Uh, help yourself, lil bro,” he said.

Pam wasn't sure if it was the freshly grilled aspect or Zep's cooking abilities, but the hot dog was the
best she ever had. It was so pleasant to be eating outside on a porch in December. She wondered if William would invite her to the Florida Keys every year. Zep topped off her wine glass one last time before stashing the empty bottles in the neighbor's recycling bin.

Pam was peaceably admiring the nighttime stars when Jeremy nudged her. “What's for dessert?” he asked.

“Whazzat?” she said, slurring her words. “Dessert. I dunno.”

He gave her a funny look. Pam patted his head and took another swig of wine. She was dimly aware that she had probably drank enough, but she couldn't waste this perfectly good wine. Zep was right.

Zep. Good ol' Zep. Pam liked his punk-rock sensibilities. She turned to tell him as much, but found him in the midst of a heavy make-out session with Apple on the hammock. Stroking her thigh, his hand was firmly in PG-13 territory, but it was definitely inching toward an R rating. Pam smiled. Young love was such a beautiful thing.

“Um, Pam?” Jeremy whispered to her. “Do you think we should go to bed soon?”

“Oh, all right,” she said. “Just let me finish my wine...” She drained her glass and stood up. Or rather, she attempted to stand up. “Help me up, will you?”

Jeremy took her hand and pulled her to her feet. Pam swayed unsteadily for a few seconds, grabbing his shoulder for support. “Are you all right?” Jeremy asked.

“I'm fine,” Pam insisted. “Just don't let go of my hand, 'kay?” She followed him inside the house. Navigating the stairs to the mezzanine was difficult, but she managed to totter her way up the steps. Once they reached the bedroom, Pam awkwardly kicked off her shoes before crawling into the bottom bunk.

“Whew!” she said. “Maybe you're right about bedtime.” She curled up with a pillow and closed her eyes.

“Aren't you going to change clothes?” Jeremy questioned. “You're not even ready for bed.”

Not even bothering to get up, Pam undressed as she lay in bed. Her discarded clothes were tossed haphazardly onto the floor. Now only wearing her bra and panties, she stretched out on the twin bed. “I am ready for bed,” Pam playfully retorted. The sheets felt amazingly luxurious against her skin. So soft and cozy. “Want to cuddle?” she asked, suddenly inspired.

“Maybe after I finish brushing my teeth,” Jeremy said. “Aren't you going to brush your teeth too?”

Pam dismissively brushed aside his suggestion. “Who needs it?”

Jeremy peered at her with concern. “Are you sure you're feeling okay?” Instead of answering, Pam began playing with her hair, layering the brown locks across her face like a mask. Jeremy shrugged and changed into his pajamas.

As she lay in bed, Pam began to giggle. Silly Jeremy, getting ready for bed. She knew he was just being good to impress her. Too bad for him because she could see right through it. Nevertheless, she was rather astounded that he could walk straight when the room was spinning so much. He always had such good balance.

Still chuckling to herself, Pam closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, Jeremy had disappeared and the room was dark. Had he gone downstairs? The top bunk squeaked loudly,
signaling his location. Why on earth had he gone up there?

“Psst. Hey Jeremy.”

“Yeah?”

“What are you doing?”

“Going to sleep?”

“Can you come down here?”

“Why?”

Pam fumbled with the clasp of her bra. “I, um, have something to show you.” Up top, the sheets rustled as he pushed them aside. By the time he slid off the top bunk and landed with a soft thump, she was already kicking off her panties.

“Can you turn the light back on?” she asked. There was a gentle click as he switched the lamp on, flooding the room with light.

“Um...” was all he could say.

“Like what you see?” Pam smiled. She tossed her hair across the pillow, arching her back as she pretended to stretch.

“Yeah, it's... really nice,” Jeremy said. He glanced at the stairs. “What if Apple or Zep come up here? Shouldn't we at least-”

“Shush,” Pam interrupted. Pulling him closer to the bed, she took his hands and placed them on her breasts. “I have a job for you.”

“But Pam, we don't even have the nutcrackers on the stairs.”

“You worry too much,” Pam murmured. “You need to relax and- oh Jeremy. Mmm, that feels nice when you touch me like that. Don't stop.” She shivered from his delicate kneading and pinching. Unable to resist, her fingers searched for her clit.

“You like touching my breasts, don't you Jeremy?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Are you getting hard from touching them?”

His ears turned red. “Yeah,” he admitted.

Pam was now masturbating in earnest. She loved turning on the eleven year old boy. She loved the way he looked at her. She loved how each time he touched her, it seemed completely brand new for him. A rosy pleasure lapped at every inch of her skin. She suddenly wanted to come, badly. Gathering herself, she focused intently and ground her finger against her hard clit. A moan escaped her lips.

“Shh!” Jeremy cautioned. She instead responded with an even louder moan. Alarmed, Jeremy clapped a hand over her mouth.

She haughtily removed his hand from her mouth. “Jeremy! I said don't stop,” she scolded. Pam
returned his hands to her breasts. “Keep your hands on the wheel,” she ordered, giving him a stern look before resuming her attention on her clit.

“Pam-” he began.

She cut him off with a gasp as her body began convulsing in a furious orgasm. “Don't stop, Jeremy! Oh god, please don't stop... please, please...” She kept pleading, her words deteriorating into incoherence as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her body. Pam made it last as long as she could until the bliss slowly ebbed away. Laying perfect still, she caught her breath. The dizziness was now so overwhelming that she didn't dare open her eyes.

Jeremy stirred by her side. The mattress shifted as he stood up. Opening one eye, Pam saw him climbing back into the top bunk. “Where do you think you're going, cowboy?” she murmured.

He paused. “I thought you fell asleep,”

“Oh, I'm awake,” she assured him.

“Well, it's pretty late. We should probably go to bed.”

Pam reached out to caress his leg. From where she lay, she could easily touch him without even sitting up. It only took her a moment to locate the little bulge in his pajama bottoms. “You can't go to bed like this, silly.” She pulled down his pajamas, then his underwear. “Let's get rid of these pesky clothes,” she told him.

“I don't know,” he began. Pam silenced him by holding a finger to his lips. Then she helped him out of his pajama top. Indulgently, she ran a finger along his collarbone, enjoying the feel of his warm skin. Taking Jeremy's wrists, she had him lay down next to her in the bottom bunk. The bottle of K-Y from earlier that morning was exactly where they left it on the nightstand. Pam squirted some into her hand, but her poor aim resulted in several stray drops on the sheets. Most of it was in her palm though. For good measure, she added a healthy dollop onto Jeremy's pulsing erection.

Stretching out on her side next to him, Pam began teasing him with soft strokes. It was cute, how he lay obediently on the bed with his arms straight at his sides. From past experience, Pam knew that if she touched a certain spot on the underside of his penis, touched it just right, that Jeremy would shiver uncontrollably. Where was it? Pam slid a finger alongside his K-Y slickened shaft, searching. His foreskin frustratingly concealed his corona, depriving her of a landmark, so Pam had to guess. She gathered her fingertips in a cluster where she thought his sensitive spot might be.

Bingo. Jeremy shuddered on the bed. She smiled as she watched his shoulders clench involuntarily. As she lay next to him, her head propped up on a hand, Pam's breast swayed pendulously near his face. All she had to do was lean forward, just a little bit, for her nipple to graze his chin.

Jeremy's eyes were closed, but now they opened at this new sensation. Biting her lip, Pam gently rocked her torso, stimulating her nipple until it was poking stiffly against his cheek. Carefully, deliberately, she guided her breast until the nipple was poised against his soft lips.

Jeremy tentatively pursed his mouth around her hard nub of flesh. “Good boy,” Pam murmured. “Mmm, that's my good boy. That feels so nice, Jeremy. Kiss it. Now suck it like a good boy. Oh!” He lay on the bed straight as a board, craning his neck slightly to reach her breast. He was shy at first, but his nuzzling mouth soon grew bolder. Pam rewarded him with several strokes on his perfect little penis.

“Do the other one too,” she commanded, lifting her other breast to his face. “Oh Jeremy. Oh god.
Don't stop. Do it as hard as you can. Harder!” Pam groaned as he complied. She began jacking him faster, her hand engulfing his erection in a sure motion. “Don't stop!” she breathed. “I won't stop if you don't stop. Oh Jeremy. Jeremy!”

The pressure of his lips around her nipple felt like a vise. He was frantically suckling her now, just as she directed. The preteen boy tensed up for a split second before his legs suddenly went straight. “Is that good, Jeremy?” Pam cooed. “Are you going to be a good boy for me? Show me what a good boy you are. Please?” A heady sense of power filled her as Jeremy began to orgasm. She knew exactly how to touch him. She could make him lose all control. His toes curled in delight while his lips remained obediently locked on her nipple, sending delicious vibrations as he made indistinct sounds of pleasure.

After he was done he lay motionless except for the rise and fall of his ribcage. Jeremy turned his head to yawn, leaving behind a glossy sheen of saliva on her nipple. Sleepily, he sat up. “I should get into my own bed,” he mumbled.

“Oh no, you don't,” Pam said, taking him by the shoulder. She laid him back down on the bed and turned off the light. They were both sticky with K-Y but Pam didn't mind. He didn't protest at all when she spooned him and kissed his ear. “Good night, Jeremy.”

When she woke up, Pam was completely disoriented. She squinted at the bright light of the unfamiliar room. There were palm fronds silently rustling on the other side of the window. An odd scent tickled her nostrils, a strange combination of salty ocean air and... bacon?


Wine?

Groaning, Pam sat up in bed. The room spun for a brief moment before stabilizing. Stupid alcohol. She felt as if she were waking up in her college dorm room, back in the days when she was still testing her alcoholic limits. Gingerly tossing aside the sheets, Pam blinked as she looked down at herself. Why was she naked? She winced a bit as the sheets brushed against her nipples. They seemed somewhat redder than usual and were terribly sore. Probably from sleeping without a shirt, she thought.

Concentrating, she tried to remember the details of the previous night. Backyard cookout. Wine. She vaguely recalled stumbling up the stairs with Jeremy, but the rest was a drunken blur.

Never again, she vowed. Lurching to her feet, Pam smacked her head on the bunk bed, eliciting a mumbled curse. The top bunk was once again empty, just like yesterday. The bed was still partially made though, as though Jeremy hadn't even slept in it. Pam rubbed the bump on her head, trying to figure it out. It was only 7:30. Jeremy must have woken up early again to have breakfast with Apple. Did he partially make his bed before leaving? That was a first.

Her clothes from yesterday lay in piles on the ground. Pam frowned as she noticed how the clothing formed a trail that led from the stairs to the bed. She had apparently been so tired that she went straight to bed last night.

Half-heartedly, she brushed her hair and got dressed, knowing that Apple was probably wearing
some cute outfit downstairs and commanding Jeremy's complete attention. She would have likely been annoyed had it not been for the jackhammer-like hangover pounding her head. Her mouth felt so parched that Pam hunted for a glass or a mug, basically anything that could hold water, but, finding nothing suitable, she was reduced to slurping tap water from her cupped hands in the tiny bathroom. Feeling a little better, she brushed her teeth before heading downstairs.

The smell of bacon grew stronger as she approached the kitchen. Pam took a deep breath to steel herself, expecting to find Jeremy and Apple nestled together in the breakfast nook again. “Love means never having to say... fuck you,” she reminded herself.

That didn't sound right. She was still trying to remember the correct quote when turned the corner to find Apple reading the comics by herself at the table. Jeremy, wearing oven mitts and wielding a spatula, tended to a mess of cheerfully spattering bacon on the stove. He was still wearing his pajamas, but had thoughtfully tied an apron over it. Try as she might, Pam couldn't figure out why he wore a glass mixing bowl on his head.

“Hi Pam,” Jeremy said. “Um, happy birthday!” She could tell he was trying to distract her from the chaotic scene of the kitchen. A broken egg lay forgotten in one corner of the kitchen floor while a neglected teakettle whistled madly on the stove. The aroma of coffee and burnt toast filled the air.

“That's right!” Apple chimed in.

Pam blinked several times. “Thanks,” she said. “Uh, how did you know it was my birthday?”

Ignoring her question, Jeremy poured her a glass of orange juice. “Want some juice?” he offered. “It's fresh squeezed. From real Florida oranges! I did it myself.”

It was only then that she noticed the spent orange rinds scattered willy-nilly across the counter. Pam accepted the proffered glass. “Jeremy wanted to make you breakfast for your birthday,” Apple explained. “I offered to help but he wanted to do it by himself.”

“You should sit down,” Jeremy urged. “Breakfast is... oops.” He dropped several slices of bacon on the floor. “Breakfast will be ready in a sec.”

Pam sat down across from Apple. “You really didn't help him?” she asked her. Glancing at the messy kitchen again, Pam shook her head. “Don't answer. Um, what's with the mixing bowl, Jeremy?”

He removed the inverted bowl from his head. “I needed something to protect my face from the bacon grease. It was splattering all over me. It really hurt.”

“Oh. I should have known.”

He began setting the table. First was a small dish of almond butter and a slightly green banana. “I made sure the banana wasn't too yellow,” Jeremy pointed out. He explained to Apple, “Pam doesn't like it when bananas are too ripe. She says they make her throw up.”

“Thank you, Jeremy,” Pam said. “Very thoughtful of you.”

Trotting between the counter and table, he set out an enormous platter of bacon, a mug of coffee and, last but not least, a stack of toast. The last slice on top of the pile was jammed with birthday candles. “I wasn't sure how many candles since I didn't know how old you are,” he said. “So I just put eleven candles on the toast.”

“Close enough,” Pam told him. “Gosh, this is a lot of bacon for one person.”
“Maybe Zep can have some later,” Jeremy said.

“What's that?” Zep asked, shuffling into the kitchen. He yawned and sat down next to Apple.

“It's Pam's birthday today,” she informed him.

“Mmm. Happy birthday.” Zep put his head down on the table.

“Don't mind him,” Apple said. “He had a little too much wine last night.”

“Me too,” Pam admitted. “I remember having hot dogs but that's it. Did we go straight to bed after that, Jeremy?”

“Um, yeah,” he said. “Basically.”

He was omitting something, but Pam couldn't tell what. Jeremy kept looking at her, then looking away. “How about you guys?” he asked Apple and Zep.

Apple put an arm around Zep, who was still doing a face-plant on the table. “Yeah, we just went to bed too. Basically.”

Pam took a sip of coffee. It was so strong that her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. She chased it with some orange juice. There wasn't enough space for four at the breakfast nook so Jeremy took a seat in her lap. “How did you know it was my birthday, anyway?” she asked.

He was concentrating on lighting the candles in the toast. “Huh? Oh, I saw the date on your driver's license.”

“Ah.” She swirled her glass of orange juice. It was delightfully pulpy, just the way she liked it. “Wait, why were you looking at my driver's license?”

Still lighting candles, he answered absentmindedly. “Um, you know. Sometimes I need to borrow a dollar from your purse.”

“I see...”

“But I don't do it all the time! I mean, first I usually check that teacup on your dresser that's full of change.”

“Really.” Pam drummed her fingers on the table. “Please, continue.”

“I really only borrowed some money, like, once. Maybe twice. And I always share what I get with you. Remember the time I split that bag of peanut M&Ms with you? I bought that with your money.”

“Okay! You can stop talking now,” Pam sighed.

“I'm done lighting the candles,” Jeremy announced. He, Apple, and Zep began singing an off-key rendition of Happy Birthday. Once they finished the song, Pam blew out the candles and everyone clapped.

“So how old are you anyway?” Jeremy asked Pam. He helped himself to a piece of crunchy bacon.

“It's not polite to ask a girl that, you know,” Apple told him.

“Why?”
“Because I'm too old,” Pam answered. Across the table, Apple was trying to coax Zep into drinking some orange juice. He must have been the type who couldn't stand food when hung over. Pam was grateful she didn't have that problem.

“I don't think you're old,” Jeremy volunteered.

Pam couldn't help but feel flattered. “Aw, you're so sweet,” she said. “I'm twenty-six.”

“That's not that old,” he reasoned.

“No, I guess not.” He began fiddling with a piece of toast. “Don't play with your food,” she told him. His tailbone poked painfully against her leg, but Pam didn't want him to move from her lap. She liked the dusty smell of his hair.

Reaching for a knife, Jeremy began spreading his toast with a thick layer of butter and raspberry jam. “Um, if you were wondering... I didn't get you anything. Sorry.”

Pam laughed. “Was it because you couldn't find any cash in my wallet?”

“No! I even went to a store and looked around,” Jeremy said. His voice muffled by a mouthful of toast. “I couldn't find anything that you would like.”

Pam twirled a lock of his hair around her finger. “Don't worry about it. I got what I wanted.”
Pam cheers up Jeremy, who is uncharacteristically dejected on Christmas Eve.

The freshly fallen snow crinkled under the tires as Pam's car pulled into its usual parking spot in the Praters' driveway. She had spent the previous night at her parents' house, though it felt like she had been gone much longer than a single day. A question of etiquette presented itself as she approached the house. Should she ring the doorbell or walk right in? Pam decided to err on the side of manners.

It felt strange to ring the doorbell to the Prater house. Pam couldn't remember the last time she had to do that. But since it was Christmas Eve and since her return was unannounced, it was probably best to ring the doorbell instead of strolling right in as she normally would. She shivered while waiting on the porch. Instead of her usual winter hat, she wore a classic red Santa Claus hat with white faux-fur trim and a matching ball at the tip. Though festive in appearance, it was nowhere near as warm as her regular hat. Even though it was just past noon, the sun was much closer to the horizon as compared to six months ago.

The front door opened. “Why hello there, Pam!” Kate said. “Cute Santa hat! What are you doing back so soon? Come on in. You really didn't have to ring the doorbell.”

“Hi Kate,” she answered as she crossed the threshold. Pam wriggled out of her winter coat. “My parents had an early Christmas Eve lunch, but then they had plans to visit a friend's house for dinner. That seemed kind of exhausting, so I decided to come back here. Hope that's okay.”

“Of course it's okay,” Kate said, taking her coat. Normally, Pam would have hung it up herself but the mere act of ringing the doorbell had thrust them into host and guest mode. “Jeremy will be happy to see you. I think. He's been in a weird mood all day.”

“ Weird mood?”

“Just a bit listless. Especially for Christmas Eve. Maybe he's missing all that Florida sun from last week. I asked him to help me bake some cookies and he turned me down. Then I asked if he wanted to set up the Christmas tree but he didn't want to do that either. He's been in his room since breakfast.”

Pam peeked down the hall at Jeremy's closed door. “I'll spread some holiday cheer,” she said, adjusting her Santa hat.

“Maybe you two could run an errand,” Kate said thoughtfully. “I still need to wrap some presents and I know he'll come running when he hears me open the basement cabinet with all the wrapping paper.”

Pam stroked her chin. “We could pick up a real tree,” she offered. “I just drove by the lot. There was a big sign that said they're now half price. Heck, maybe they'll pay us to take one.”

“That's a wonderful idea!” Kate said. A timer sounded from the kitchen. She called over her shoulder, “I wanted to get a real tree this year but things have been so busy.”
Pam knocked on Jeremy's door. “Come in,” he called from the other side.

She opened the door just enough to stick her head inside. “Hi there, Tiger J,” she said in a deep voice. “You been a good boy this year?”

He was seated in bed, looking out the window at the snow covered yard, but now his face changed to surprise. “What are you doing here?” Whiskers, poking out her feline head from under a pile of laundry, seemed to ask her the same question.

“I told you,” Pam said in her Santa voice. “I've got a special present, but only for good boys.”

“No, really,” Jeremy said. “I thought you said you were going to your parents' house.”

He was clearly not amused, so Pam dropped the Santa voice. It hurt her throat to talk like that anyway. “I did go to my parents' house, but I came back because I'm your Christmas surprise.” She paused a beat. “Surprise! Do you like my hat?” Jeremy just shrugged his shoulders. She sat down next to him on the bed and gave him a playful shove. “Come on, we have a job to do. We're going to find the best Christmas tree ever. Get dressed.”

“Do I hafta go?”

“Yes, you hafta,” Pam told him. “I'll need your artist's eye to pick out a good tree.”

He dawdled and she cajoled, but fifteen minutes later they were in the car and headed for the tree lot. Jeremy was uncharacteristically quiet. Pam turned on the radio and tried to get him to sing along with her, but he would have none of it. “You okay, Jeremy?” she asked, switching off the radio.

He mournfully stared out the window, not looking at her. “Yeah. I'm fine.”

“Aren't you kind of young to be this moody?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Jeremy asked scornfully.

“Never mind.” She pulled into the Christmas tree lot. The piped-in sound of Christmas carols greeted them the moment they stepped out of the car. Despite the fact that it was December 24th, there were a surprising number of people shopping for trees. “I guess there's nothing like a 50% off sale to bring out the holiday spirit,” Pam observed.

Jeremy shuffled his feet in the snow. “Are you going to take off that hat?” he asked.

Pam realized what he really meant. “Is it embarrassing you that I'm wearing this Santa hat in public?”

“Yes,” he grumbled.

“Then no. I won't take it off.” She blew him a kiss. He responded by shaking his head and walking away.

“Hi there, folks!” saluted a bearded man in furry trapper hat. “If you see a tree you like, just let me know. And don't forget to have a complimentary hot drink and some refreshments!”

Pam was relieved to see Jeremy perk up as he beelined toward a table set with several large urns and a stack of styrofoam cups. In addition to the hot drinks, sugar cookies and candy canes were offered as well. They nibbled some cookies first, then chose their drinks. (Hot apple cider for her, hot cocoa for him.) Now properly fortified, they began wandering the tree lot, snow crunching underneath their feet. Hastily nailed two-by-fours served as stands for the forest of trees. They stopped to read a sign
denoting aisles for spruce trees, balsam trees and frasier fir trees. “What's the difference, anyway?” Pam asked Jeremy.

“Eh, I don't know.”

They kept looking. “What do you think of this one?” Pam inquired, pointing at a stately specimen of a tree. “I think it's perfect. Pyramid shaped. Strong boughs.” She sniffed it. “Smells fresh. Should we get it?”

“Eh, whatever.”

Pam took a deep breath. “If you say 'eh' one more time...” she warned.

“What?” Jeremy scowled. “What will you do?”

Pam serenely took a sip of apple cider, then set her styrofoam cup on the ground. He didn't notice her mittened hand scooping up the powdery snow until it was too late. Pam flung it at him, dusting him so completely in snow that even his eyebrows were tinged white. She burst into giggles.

“That does it!” Jeremy set down his cocoa and charged her. Shrieking, Pam dodged him by taking refuge behind a scrawny balsam. He chased her in a circle, pausing every so often to fling snow that burst into harmless clouds. It was far too cold and dry for real snowballs. Pam was successfully avoiding him until she slipped on an icy patch and landed on the ground. Seizing the moment, Jeremy leapt on top of her. Together, they rolled across the fluffy snow: him on top, then her, then finally him again.

Jeremy, straddling her midsection, threateningly gathered a large palmful of snow. Pam covered her face. Instead, he began tugging her coat open and she realized he meant to stuff snow down her shirt. There was a struggle as she frantically slapped at his hands. “Santa is watching!” she reminded him, laughing. He didn't believe in Santa anymore, but it was her only defense. “Jeremy, Santa is watching! Don't you dare!”

“Uh, you folks okay over here?” The man with the trapper hat peered at them through a wreath from the other aisle of trees.

Reluctantly, Jeremy tossed aside the snow and climbed off of Pam. Lurching to her feet, she dusted herself off with as much dignity as possible. In the tussle, her Santa hat had somehow gotten yanked past her eyebrows. “Ahem, yes,” she answered, fixing the hat so she could see properly. Pam pointed to the stately frasier fir. “We would like to purchase this tree, please.”

The skeptical expression on his face indicated that he had doubts about selling a tree to two people engaged in such horseplay. “Um, sure,” the man said. “I'll get it netted up and ready. Would you like a fresh cut on the tree?”

“Please,” Pam said. She retrieved her hot apple cider from its spot on the ground. Miraculously, it had not spilled a drop.

“You're such a brat,” Jeremy told her, taking a drink of his hot cocoa. He attempted to give her a dirty look, but Pam could tell he was trying not to smile.

“Oh, don't say that,” she said. Pam threw an arm around his shoulders. “I know you love me. Come on, let's go see if they have still have any sugar cookies.” There was only one left, so they had to share it. Jeremy compensated by pocketing a stash of candy canes. After paying for the tree, they watched as the man in the trapper hat tied it to the top of the car.
Once they were on the road, Pam kept nervously checking the twine that had been looped around the tree and then across the interior of the car. “Do you think he knew what he was doing? I wonder how often people lose trees on their way home. You know. Take a turn too fast and the tree will fly right off the car.”

“He looked very professional to me,” Jeremy said. He was eating a candy cane that filled the car with the delightful scent of peppermint.

“Hopefully we'll be able to untie this,” Pam said, running a finger along the twine as she drove.

“I have my Swiss Army knife right here,” Jeremy said, patting his pocket.

“I have an idea,” said Pam. “I'll get the car up to 55 miles per hour, even though it's a residential street, and aim the car straight at the living room window. When I say so, you cut the twine and then I'll slam on the brakes at the last second. The tree will fly off the roof and through the window. Then we don't have to carry it into the house. We just need to call your mom and tell her to open the window, or else there’ll be broken glass everywhere.” Keeping one hand on the wheel, Pam reached into her coat pocket to retrieve her phone.

“Gosh!” Jeremy's eyes lit up. “You really think that will work? Why didn't I think of that?”

Pam's hand emerged from her pocket, empty. She patted his knee. “You're so gullible.”

Jeremy frowned at her. “Santa is watching.” Though he was annoyed, she could tell he had snapped out of his blue funk. At least he was chipper enough to surf radio stations instead of moodily stare out the window. Perhaps it was all the sugar from the candy canes, but Pam preferred to believe she had been the one to cheer him up.

Once they arrived home, it was something of a production to untie the tree from the car and carry it inside. “Hi mom, we're back,” Jeremy announced as they maneuvered their way to the living room.

“Wow, that's a big tree!” Kate called from the kitchen. “I got the tree stand ready for you. Ornaments are still in the basement, though.” As they passed, Pam saw she had her stand mixer on the counter as she studied a cookbook.

Their boots tracked a wet mess of melting snow on the floor. Whiskers emerged from Jeremy's bedroom to investigate the commotion. With great effort, they managed to tip the tree upright and position the trunk inside the stand. Pam lay on the floor, tightening the screws to hold the base in place while Jeremy hugged the tree to keep it from falling over.

“Are you almost done?” he asked.

Pam huffed and puffed under the tree. The screws were L shaped and meant to be turned by hand, but they were proving to be rather stubborn. It didn't help that Whiskers's tail kept brushing her in the face as the cat tentatively sniffed the tree. “Almost there,” she said. “Okay. Try letting go of the tree.” The moment he stopped holding it upright, the tree began tipping precariously. “Hold it up!” she yelled, pine boughs smashing against her face. Whiskers scuttled away, yowling in anger.

“Got it!” called Jeremy, lifting the tree off her.

“Everybody all right in there?” Kate asked from the kitchen.

“Everything's fine!” Jeremy shouted back. He peered down at Pam on the floor. “You have pine needles in your hair,” he informed her.
“Yes, I know,” sighed Pam. She began tightening the screws again.

“I wish I had yelled 'Timber!' when the tree started falling,” commented Jeremy.

“Yes, very amusing,” said Pam. “Okay, let go again. Slowly.” She held her breath as Jeremy took his hands away from the tree. It remained thankfully vertical.

“We did it!” Jeremy said, amazed.

Pam sat up and gave him a high five. “Let's go get the ornaments.” Even with the two of them, it required four round trips to retrieve the boxes of decorations from the basement. They took a short break on the couch. “Trimming the tree always sounds lovely, but it's really a lot of work,” Pam observed.

“Yeah,” agreed Jeremy. “And my jeans are all wet from rolling around in the snow.”

“I'm going to change into some sweats,” Pam decided.

“Same,” said Jeremy.

“Then we can decorate the tree.”

“Same.”

“But I'm not taking off my Santa hat,” Pam told him. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“I didn't say anything!”

They regrouped in front of the tree. Kate was still occupied in the kitchen so they commenced with decorating. The string lights were balled into a useless clump and unfortunately required several minutes of untangling. Yards of crinkly tinsel were applied next. Pam began hanging ornaments, fussily taking a step back after each placement to make sure they didn't clash with each other. Jeremy, however, preferred sitting on the couch and haphazardly tossing ornaments on the tree. “It's better this way,” he insisted. “The tree will have a randomized decoration pattern. It'll look more natural.” Biting her tongue, Pam handed him the non-breakable ornaments.

The sun was setting by the time they were ready for the crowning touch: a star-shaped tree topper. Pam stood on a chair to affix it to the tallest bough while Jeremy held her in place by the waist of her sweatpants. “Now Jeremy... you're just securing me so I don't fall onto the tree,” Pam said as she strained to reach the prickly bough. “You're not actually supposed to pull my pants down.”

“Oh right.” He chuckled. “Ha. Your underwear has little snowmen on it. Is this a new pair? I've never seen them before.”

Pam cast a nervous glance in the direction of Kate in the kitchen. “Please, Jeremy.”

“Sorry,” he said, pulling her sweats up.

When they were finally done, Pam collapsed into an armchair and put her feet up. They were still surrounded by half-empty boxes and bags of unused decorations, but the Christmas tree shone like a glorious beacon among a sea of untidiness. Half-heartedly, Pam sifted through the remaining ornaments, making sure they didn't miss any good ones. At the bottom of one box, she found a photo album.

“What's this?” she asked, flipping it open.
“Um, wait, don't look at that...” Jeremy began.

But Pam was already paging through the album. There was a photo of an infant wearing holiday themed pajamas. Then a toddler. Then a pre-schooler. “Wait a minute. Is that you?” she asked, smiling. Jeremy tried to grab the photo album, but she placed a hand on his chest to hold him at arm's length. It wasn't until he was five years old that she could recognize the impish boy with unruly ginger hair.

Pam couldn't help from cooing. “Awww! Look how cute you were!” In each picture, Jeremy was wearing some version of holiday PJs: dancing reindeer, smiling snowmen, vintage ice skates. His expression changed too. He smiled when he was younger, but it disappeared by the time he was eight.

Last year's photo, when he was ten years old, was priceless. Jeremy grimaced at the camera, arms crossed in defiance, while wearing Little Drummer Boy pajamas. The bright red top had three horizontal white straps across the chest and a pair of fringed gold shoulder pads. The matching pajama bottoms were white at the thighs and then black from the knees down, creating the illusion of tall boots. A cylindrical top hat completed the look. Pam covered her mouth to hide her laughter.

“It's not funny!” Jeremy said, reaching for the album.

But Pam wouldn't let him take it. “Come on, I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing with you.”

“I'm not laughing.” He tried to grab the album, unsuccessfully.

“Hold on,” Pam said, extracting the Little Drummer Boy picture from the album. “I just want to take a picture of this one and put it on Facebook. It's too cute.”

“Don't!” Jeremy yelled, grabbing the album. But it was too late. She already had the photo.

Pam stood up and held the photo above her head, where he couldn't reach it. Jeremy jumped up to grab it, but he wasn't quite tall enough so he climbed onto an armchair. She scurried away, but not before he leapt onto her back. “Eek, what are you doing?” Pam screamed, laughing. His arm pulled tight against her neck as he dangled several inches off the ground, clinging to her. He was so heavy that Pam was unable to support his weight and flopped onto the living room floor.

“Geez, how many bricks do you have in your pockets?” she huffed.

“Give me the picture!” Jeremy ordered. He was lying on top of her now, trying to crawl toward her outstretched hand. Pam tried to stand, but only managed to raise herself up on her hands and knees. He must have put on some weight in the past year because she didn't remember him being this heavy.

“Give it!” Jeremy was still draped on her back, trying to keep balance. She felt his knees bumping against her thighs and realized they were basically in a doggy-style position, except Jeremy wasn't quite the right height and was subsequently dangling from her upraised bum. Hopefully Kate was busy in the kitchen, she thought. When she tried to shake him off, Jeremy panicked and looped his arms underneath her body, across her midsection and chest.

Pam squeaked in surprise as he inadvertently grabbed a handful of breast. “Whoa, hands! Watch the hands!” Again, she glanced in the direction of the kitchen but only saw Kate's back. Jeremy, apparently having sensed an opening, squeezed both her breasts, eliciting a surprised shriek from Pam. Futillely, she tried to crawl away but instead landed on the floor with a loud thump.

“What are you two doing in there?” Kate called from the kitchen.
“Mom, help!” Jeremy shouted. “Pam has my pajama picture and she's going to put it on Facebook!”

“Just don’t knock over the tree, okay? I haven’t even seen it yet.”

They began wrestling in earnest as he tried to obtain the photo. Pam managed to roll over, but Jeremy was now straddling her, just like in the Christmas tree lot. The hardwood floor pressed painfully against her back. Desperately, she held the photo as far away from him as possible. That meant extending her arm over her head while pushing Jeremy away with her free hand. With surprising strength, the young boy powered past her grip and lunged at the photo in her outstretched fingers. Thinking quickly, Pam grabbed him by the waist of his sweatpants and held tight, preventing him from reaching those last few inches.

“I got you!” Pam crowed. “You're not going anywhere.”

He began wiggling his hips. “Ha ha!” Jeremy said, triumphantly slithering like an eel out of his sweats. He snatched the photo from her fingers. In his haste, however, Jeremy had also wriggled out of his underwear and his exposed penis was mere inches from Pam's face. From the kitchen, she heard the whirring sound of the mixer. Surely Kate wasn't the type to leave the mixer running unattended? Pam threw caution to the wind and took his penis in her mouth. Already half erect from all the rough-housing, he tasted like heaven. A pungently boy-ish heaven. Pam let her tongue caress the underside of his warm penis.

“Wait, what are you-- tickles!” It took him a moment to realize what she was doing. “Pam! Don't! Do! That! Tickles!” He tried to squirm away from her eager mouth but Pam held him in place by clamping two hands firmly around his hips. Jeremy yelped in hysterical fits as she teased him to a full erection that nevertheless still easily fit inside her mouth.

“Stop!” Jeremy wheezed, out of breath. He reached for the closest thing, a basket of cinnamon scented pine cones on the coffee table, and dumped the entire thing on Pam's face.

“Ack!” She was suddenly drowning in nubby pine cones that scraped her face. Bits of artificially sweet pine cone went up her nose. Temporarily defeated, she stopped sucking and let go of his hips. Jeremy scrambled off her face, yanking up his sweatpants as he retreated to the safety of the couch. They were both breathing heavily from all the exertion.

Pam sat on the floor, brushing pine cones off her face. “Okay,” she panted. “Truce?”

Jeremy nodded. “Truce.” Not trusting her completely though, he protectively held the photo to his chest.

“Can I please just take a pic of it with my phone?” Pam pleaded. “I was just joking about Facebook. It'll just be for my personal use. I swear I won't show it to anyone.”

“Promise?” he asked. “If you want to show it to someone, then you need to get my express, written consent.”

“Got it,” Pam agreed. He warily handed her the photo. She took a picture with her phone and gave it back. “So what's with that album anyway?”

“Oh, it's my aunt,” Jeremy grumbled. “She sends a pajama set every year and my mom always makes me put it on for a picture.”

“Did she send pajamas this year too?” Pam asked hopefully.

“Probably,” he said gloomily. “I don't think she'll ever stop.”
Kate appeared in the doorway. Her apron was covered with flour, but she seemed jubilant. “Hey, that is one nice looking tree!” she proclaimed. “Nice work, you two. Just a heads up that dinner will be ready soon.”

“I guess we should change out of sweatpants, huh?” Pam said to Jeremy.

“Oh, don’t bother,” Kate said, waving a hand. “Christmas Eve dinner is always a low-key affair around here. Just soup, salad and cheese fondue tonight.”

“That sounds fancy to me,” Pam considered.

“The real feast comes tomorrow at brunch,” Kate assured her.

Despite Kate's promise of low-key, dinner was nevertheless delicious. It was Pam's first time having fondue. It was fun dipping bread and apple slices in the melted cheese. After dinner, the three of them retired to the living room to watch a movie. Jeremy chose “A Christmas Story”, which Pam hadn't seen since she was his age. When she took a seat on the couch, Pam had supposed that Jeremy would take the middle spot and Kate would sit on the other end. Instead, Jeremy stretched out on the couch, put his head in her lap, and unwrapped a candy cane.

Kate entered the living room with a tray of herbal tea. “Oh, I see how it is around here. Mom doesn't get love anymore.”

Pam started to get up. “You should take this spot,” she urged.

“I'm just joking,” Kate said. “I don't mind the armchair. It doesn't look like Jeremy is going to budge his head from your lap anyway.”

Pam self-consciously settled back onto the couch. As the movie began, Jeremy took her hand and guided it to his hair. It was his not-so-subtle request for a head rub. Pam felt a little embarrassed about doing it in front of Kate, particularly in light of her offhand joke, but she complied nonetheless. Pam was pleasantly surprised to find that “A Christmas Story” held up well over the years. When she watched it as a kid, she hadn't realized how the movie was crammed with wink-wink jokes for adults too. She and Kate chuckled at several parts whereas Jeremy lay wondering what was so funny.

When the movie ended, Kate yawned and began gathering the teacups. “It's nine-thirty, Jeremy. How late are you staying up?”

“Not too late,” he promised.

“Why don't you get ready for bed now?” Kate suggested. “Then you can just go to bed whenever you get tired.”

“I'm going to put on a record first,” Jeremy announced.

“Like a real record?” Pam asked. He disappeared into the basement and returned with an armful of vinyl records and what appeared to be a suitcase. He unsnapped the shiny metal latches. It was a vintage portable turntable in tweed, not one of those modern ones sold from Best Buy. Jeremy slid a black vinyl record from its sleeve.

“I'm surprised you know how to do this.” Pam watched him carefully drop the needle onto the spinning record.

“Of course I know how,” he said, annoyed. There was a pop as the needle landed, followed by the warm sound of crackling vinyl. A solemn drum beat filled the living room, followed by Johnny
Cash's sonorous bass.

“Oh, this is the best version of The Little Drummer Boy,” Kate remarked.

Pam had a wonderful idea. “Jeremy, why don't you put on your Little Drummer Boy pajamas?” she suggested.

He scoffed at the idea. “No way.”

“Come on, please? It was so cute.”

“Never.”

“I'll give you ten dollars if you wear the pajamas,” Pam offered.

Kate added, “I'll chip in another ten.”

Jeremy considered the offer. “Well, okay. I'll do it. But you can't laugh and you can't take any pictures.” Once they agreed to his terms, Jeremy ran off to fetch both their purses. It wasn't until Pam and Kate each peeled off a ten dollar bill into his hand that he left to change into the pajamas. Pam heard the sound of water splashing in the sink as he got ready for bed, followed by multiple drawers opening and closing.

When he came back in the pajamas, Pam broke into a broad smile but was careful not to laugh. The Little Drummer Boy outfit was even cuter in person. He was clearly too old to be wearing such a thing, but that only made it more endearing to her.

“I couldn't find the hat,” he announced. Jeremy scrutinized her face for any sign of mockery.

“You look very nice,” Pam said.

“I wish you still fit the old ones,” Kate added. “Remember the pajamas that had elephants pulling Santa's sleigh instead of reindeer? That one was cute too.”


“Oh, I don't know,” Pam yawned. “All that tree trimming wore me out. I'm already sleepy.”

“I'm not tired yet,” Kate mused. “We could stay up and—” She was interrupted by the sound of a ringing phone in her pocket. “Looks like David is calling to wish me a happy Christmas. Excuse me...” As she headed for her bedroom, Pam and Jeremy overheard the beginning of an animated conversation.

“That must be one handsome doctor if they talk that long on the phone,” Pam remarked. Kate seemed to hold calls with him every evening.

“Yeah.” Jeremy stopped the record player. “I guess I'll go to bed too.”

“Cheer up,” Pam told him as they walked down the hallway together. “It's Christmas Eve. You're not going to believe all the cool stuff I got you.”

"Like what?"

"Let me think... the crossbow. The backyard catapult. Oh, do you have flame-retardant clothes? Because you'll need them tomorrow once we load up the flamethrower."
Jeremy didn't laugh. “Well, good night,” he said when they arrived at her room.

“Good night.” Despite her best efforts, his moodiness had apparently returned. Maybe the joy of Christmas morning would cheer him up tomorrow. Pam began unpacking the overnight bag she had brought to her parents' house. It didn't take long so she decided to retrieve the already-wrapped presents from her closet and place them under the tree. Surely she could manage that chore before going to bed. Too lazy to make two trips, she carefully stacked the boxes into a tall tower that reached her nose as she carried it.

Pam crept into the darkened living room, her arms full and her pockets bulging with stocking stuffers. To her surprise, she found Jeremy stretched out on the couch, lit only by the lights of the Christmas tree. A scratchy Bing Crosby record spun quietly on the turntable, the music accompanied by the sound of Whiskers's purring. “Hey. What are you doing out here? I thought you went to bed.”

“I wasn't sleepy yet,” Jeremy said. He was eating another candy cane, even though he had already brushed his teeth. Since it was Christmas Eve, Pam let it go.

“I have a few things to put in the stockings,” she said, approaching the mantel where they hung. “Promise not to look?”

“I won't.”

As she emptied the contents of her pockets into the stockings, Pam noticed his sleeping bag unfurled on the floor. “Are you sleeping out here?”

“Maybe.”

There was that moodiness again. Pam frowned. He was only eleven. Surely that was too early for pubertal hormones? She would have to Google it later. Once she was done filling the stockings, Pam was about to return to her bedroom when she noticed Jeremy hastily wipe at his face. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“I'm fine.”

He wiped at his other cheek. This time, she clearly saw the tear before he could erase it with his sleeve. Concerned, Pam sat down next to him. “Jeremy, what's wrong?”

Instead of answering, he stared at his hands. Bing Crosby warbled away on the tinny turntable speakers. Beyond the darkened living room window panes, Pam saw fat snowflakes in the air. A swirling wind made it appear as if the snow was floating upward from the ground. It was beautiful, especially when combined with the reflected tree lights in the glass window. Jeremy finally cleared his throat. “It's just weird that, you know... it's Christmas and my dad isn't here.”

Pam consolingly wrapped an arm around him. “I'm sorry,” she murmured. “Have you been feeling this way all day?”

He nodded. “When we were in Florida, I asked him if he would come home for Christmas. But he said he would be too busy.” He glanced at his sleeping bag. “It was our tradition to sleep next to the tree on Christmas Eve.” He heaved a gusty sigh.

“I didn't know that.” His moodiness suddenly made sense. It wasn't because of impending hormonal changes. He hid his feelings so well that Pam sometimes forgot about the divorce. A nagging guilt tweaked her conscience. She had been living on cloud nine since moving in with the Praters, but had forgotten the painful circumstances that led to it in the first place.
“I could camp with you out here,” she offered.

“You would do that?”

“Sure. I'll need to borrow a sleeping bag though.” Jeremy went off in search for it while she got ready for bed. After brushing her teeth and changing into her pajamas, Pam returned to the living room. Jeremy was already tucked inside his blue sleeping bag. Hers lay waiting next to him.

Pam scooted into it and zipped it up. He had thoughtfully brought up the padded mats to cushion the sleeping bags from the hard wooden floor. The record player was now spinning a Nat King Cole record, filling the living room with his incandescent baritone. They lay side by side, silently listening, in the warm glow of the tree lights. Despite the music, the house felt especially still.

“Thanks for sleeping out here with me,” Jeremy said.

“You're welcome. It feels like a real sleepover now.”

“Did you notice it started snowing?”

“Yes. Isn't it pretty?” Pam glanced at him. His eyes were bright, innocent, and... sad. She scooted her sleeping bag a little closer to his.

“Yeah.”

They watched the falling snow. At first, it had been mere swirling flakes but now they coalesced into little white streaks as the snow intensified. Eventually, Pam said, “I know it's not the same, but this is my first Christmas without my parents too. It feels a little strange.”

Jeremy propped himself up on one elbow. “Why did you come back here?” he asked.

Pam smiled in the dim light. “Because I wanted to spend Christmas with you.” She reached out of her sleeping bag to touch his hand.

“Why?”

Parroting him, Pam propped herself up on an elbow as well. She could see the multi-colored Christmas lights twinkling in his eyes. “Because you're my guy.” Leaning in close, she meant to kiss him on the cheek but her lips somehow veered off course and instead planted one on his mouth. Her heart pounded loudly when she realized what she had done. He didn't kiss her back, but she could feel his lips twitch in surprise.

Drawing back, she saw Jeremy looking at her with an embarrassed expression. “What is it?” she asked.

“It's just... I've never kissed a girl before,” he admitted shyly.

Pam thought about everything else they had done together. “I guess we're doing things out of order,” she said. Now she was embarrassed too.

“Do you think—” he spoke in halting tones. “Can we... do it again?” Her fingers were still grazing his hand, a physical connection underscoring the deeper one that magnified tenfold the longer she looked into his eyes. Pam leaned in, slowly this time, telegraphing her movement so he wouldn't be surprised. Her warm lips met his in a second kiss, a lingering one. This time, he kissed her back.

When she opened her eyes, Pam was charmed to see Jeremy with his eyes still closed. The Little
Drummer Boy pajamas made him look so young that even Pam felt uneasy about what they were doing. He finally opened his eyes and they shared a conspiratorial smile. “Was that okay?” she asked.

“It was really, um, nice.” She could tell he wasn’t sure how to describe it. “You taste like toothpaste.”

Pam giggled. “You taste like candy canes.” He was gazing into her eyes again, causing her heart to flutter like a butterfly. Why were they making so much meaningful eye contact? Uncertain of what to do, she said, “I guess we shouldn't stay up too late, huh?” Pam reluctantly lay back down in her sleeping bag.

“I guess not.” He paused a moment before re-zipping himself into the sleeping bag. “Good night, Pam.”

“Good night, Jeremy.” Despite her pledge to not stay up late, Pam felt nothing but sheer exhilaration from kissing Jeremy. She took deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly to calm herself. The pleasantly astringent smell of the fresh Christmas tree made it feel as if they were really camping. Trying to forget what just happened, Pam admired the tree and the circle of warm light it cast on the living room ceiling. She managed to distract herself for about seventeen seconds before peeking at Jeremy. He was wide awake as well.

“Pam?”

“Yes, Jeremy?” Inside her sleeping bag, she crossed her fingers.

“Can we play Call of Duty?”

“Oh course.” Pam gave a silent cheer as the sound of unzipping sleeping bags filled the living room.

“I'll get the Coppertone,” Jeremy volunteered.

Pam stopped him. “Why don't you check my stocking? There's something for you in it.”

“Why is it in yours?”

“Um... well, I didn't want your mom to see it,” she confessed. “So I was going to hide it in mine and give it you when she wasn't looking.”

Jeremy eagerly reached into her stocking and pulled out a small bottle with a blue cap. “What is it?

“Don't you recognize it? It's that slippery stuff that you were using in Florida.”

He seemed less than enthused. “Oh right, that stuff. Does this mean we're playing Call of Duty the new way?”

Pam hid her disappointment. She had hoped using K-Y as a lubricant instead of Coppertone would open new doors. It had been breathlessly exciting for her to teach Jeremy how to masturbate with the traditional jacking off motion and she was dying to try it again. Nonetheless, his preferred open-palm technique would still do nicely. “I can do it the old-fashioned way,” she promised him.

“And can we snuggle together in your sleeping bag?” he pleaded.

Pam hesitated. “I don't know... that's probably a bad idea,” she said, hesitantly surrendering to common sense. The safest thing to do would have been to retreat to his bedroom, but the living room felt so cozy with the Christmas tree and the record player. “How about separate sleeping bags,” she
proposed, “but you can be naked in yours?”

“Okay.” Getting out of his Little Drummer Boy pajamas was a complicated affair as it had a multitude of buttons and zippers. He fiddled with it for several minutes before triumphantly tossing the top across the room.

Pam shook her head. “You just can't wait to get out of those, can you?”

He paused a moment. Pam liked the way his bare chest contrasted with the child-like pajama bottoms. “Did you want your money back?” he asked.

“Oh, keep it.”

He yanked off the pajama bottoms, followed by his underwear. His exposed skin glowed in the tree light, making her want to pepper him everywhere with kisses. In particular, his hips looked especially tempting and eminently nibble-worthy. Pam was only able to briefly admire the naked eleven year old before he dove into his sleeping bag. Still ensconced in her own sleeping bag, she wriggled as close to him as possible.

“Aren't you getting undressed too?” he asked.

“May I remind you that we're in the living room?” she asked. “Too risky.”

“Oh. Okay.”

His obvious disappointment made her relent, just a bit. “What if I undo a few buttons, like this?” she offered. She unbuttoned her pajama top, transforming it into a plunging (but not too plunging) v-neck.

“How about one more button?” Jeremy requested. She did as he asked. Had she been wearing a bra, there would have been ample cleavage to please him. Without it, there was merely the slightest hint of curves. His eyes flickered at her chest before he asked, “Well, maybe two more buttons?”

Males and their limitless obsession with breasts, Pam thought to herself. She unbuttoned two more buttons and parted her shirt some more. Jeremy watched her like an attentive schoolboy. “I hope this is enough,” she told him, “because it's all you're getting tonight.” It must have been sufficient because there was an erection waiting for her when she slid her hand under his sleeping bag. Pam took a moment to luxuriate in the feel of his penis, unencumbered by any added lubrication. She loved the interplay between the soft skin and the hardness underneath.

She folded back his sleeping bag, uncovering him because she wanted to see what she was touching. The Christmas tree and soft music made the moment seem like something out of an X-rated after-school special on TV. “Are you really going to use that stuff?” he asked. “Because I could still get the Coppertone.”

Pam shook her head. She squirted some K-Y into her palm and then dribbled some onto his erect penis that was currently pointed at his chin. “Aren't you getting tired of that Coppertone smell?” she asked. Forming a fist, she began masturbating the young boy using the jack-off technique she had taught him in Florida. “Let's try it this way for just a little bit,” she urged.

Jeremy shyly interrupted her after a minute of jacking. “Um, do you think you could switch to the other way now?” His hands were self-consciously knotted together under his chin as he lay in the sleeping bag.

She smiled ruefully, but did as he asked, opening her hand so that her palm pressed against the
underside of his penis, mashing it onto the expanse of hairless skin between the root of his shaft and belly button. “You like it the old-fashioned way, huh?”

He nodded. Despite the countless times that they played Call of Duty together, Jeremy would still become inexplicably bashful from time to time. His intertwined fingers still fidgeted on his chest. Propped up on one elbow, Pam leaned in to kiss him. The feel of her lips touching his was positively electric.

She continued waving him off as they exchanged little kisses. It occurred to Pam that she hadn’t kissed (or been kissed) like this since middle school. Which sort of made sense, she supposed, given Jeremy's age. His lips were delightfully warm and soft. She could tell he was enjoying it too because he would occasionally push his hips against her palm. They were in the middle of a prolonged kiss when Pam idly opened her mouth, letting her tongue caress the length of his lips. Following her lead, Jeremy opened his mouth too and they were suddenly French kissing.

It was amazing to feel his tongue darting tentatively against hers. Pam clenched her knees together to stem the warm surge from between her legs. It has been a long time since she became this aroused just from kissing. As she bent over the young boy in his sleeping bag, her breast slipped free from her unbuttoned shirt. Jeremy's hand gravitated to it like a bumblebee to a flower. She was still waving him off with her palm, but Pam temporarily lost her rhythm when his fingers closed on her nipple, kneading the hardened knob of flesh.

Sinking deeper into ecstasy, Pam was still kissing him when she suddenly realized he wasn't kissing her back anymore. Instead, she heard him murmur something unintelligible. It wasn't until he began quivering uncontrollably that she understood. Jeremy was having an orgasm. Pam was somewhat surprised; she hadn't made him come this fast in a long time.

“Mmm. Ahhh.” Jeremy’s small sounds of pleasure were music to her ears. Her lips greedily kissed the gasping young boy, relishing the heat of his labored breathing. Teasingly, she lightened her touch just a bit. Immediately, his hips lifted off the ground as if she had a magnet in her hand, causing his stiff penis to press forcefully against her palm.

Expertly, Pam brought the eleven year old boy down for a soft landing as his orgasm subsided. Though his eyes were closed, his hand still gently cupped her breast. “I need to wash my hand,” she whispered. “Are you going to still be awake by the time I get back?”

Jeremy sighed contentedly. “No,” he murmured, not opening his eyes.

Pam giggled and kissed his forehead. “Well, at least you're honest.” And it was true. By the time she washed her hand and returned with a damp washcloth, Jeremy’s breathing had become deep and even. Gently, she cleaned the sticky K-Y from his slumbering boy parts and then zipped up his sleeping bag. His discarded Little Drummer Boy pajamas lay in a pile so she neatly folded them.

After returning the washcloth to the bathroom, Pam retired to her own sleeping bag. Her earlier fatigue caught up to her and she fell asleep in no time at all.

For being on the floor, she slept quite soundly. When she woke again, the sky outside had turned a rosy shade of pink. The bare trees, dusted with a coating of snow, were like a picture from a fairy-tale book. Jeremy was still snuggled into his sleeping bag, visible only from the neck up as he lightly snored. Whiskers lay curled on his head like a fur hat.

Jeremy stirred in his sleeping bag. She heard him mutter something in his sleep. Most of the words were unintelligible until he softly exclaimed, “Pam!” and then chuckled. Intrigued, Pam propped herself up on her elbow and peered at the young boy. He must have been dreaming. Curious, she waited a full minute until he laughed once more and murmured something she couldn't catch. The
tone of his voice was clearly annoyed though. The only phrase she could comprehend was an emphatic, "I AM being gentle."

This was getting interesting, Pam thought to herself. Jeremy was quiet for a moment before chuckling, "Don't! It tickles." Unable to resist, Pam snuck a hand into his sleeping bag. The young boy was still naked from last night's activities and his skin was as warm as an incandescent bulb. Since he lay on his back, his penis was easy to locate and, as she expected, erect as a flagpole. Once her fingers made contact, Jeremy sleepily murmured, "Mmm!" as if she had presented him with a plate of chocolate chip cookies. She wondered what was happening in his dream now.

A devilish thought crossed her mind. Jeremy was usually a sound sleeper. Would he wake up if she gave him a little oral pleasure? Her mind recalled yesterday's wrestling match over the photo when she took him in her mouth for those glorious few seconds. Her mouth actually watered at the memory of his taste. Pam felt somewhat guilty for taking advantage of a sleeping boy. "This will be my Christmas present to myself," she justified.

Zzzzrrp. The sound of the sleeping bag unzipping made her heart skip a beat. Pam had scarcely lifted the sleeping bag when Jeremy took a deep breath and rolled over to face her. "Hey," he said, drowsily opening his eyes. "What's up?"

"Uh, hi," said Pam. "I was just... making sure you were warm enough." She made a show of tucking the sleeping bag around his body.

"Mmm, thanks." The edges of his mouth curled up in a half-smile, making her feel even guiltier. His eyes suddenly snapped open. "Is it Christmas morning?"

"Yes, it is."

"Oh sweet!" Jeremy rolled close to her, sleeping bag and all, disturbing Whiskers from her perch atop his head. She assumed Jeremy was coming in for a hug, but instead the young boy rolled straight over her, eagerly reaching for the Christmas presents on the other side of her sleeping bag.

"Hey!" Pam protested. "Did you just steamroll me to get to your presents?" He began tossing packages aside, sorting out which ones to open first. "You should really wait for your mom, you know." When he didn't respond, Pam took him by the shoulders and performed a reverse steamroller, pulling him atop her and then rolling away from the tree.

"You're crushing me!" Jeremy howled when he was briefly underneath her body. Pam rolled over one more time so that he was lying on top with his back against her. They playfully wrestled despite the sleeping bags separating them. "I need my presents," Jeremy insisted. "I've been so good for so long that it hurts."

Pam held him immobile in a bear hug. "Does it hurt?" she sympathized. "Want me to kiss it and make it better?" She slipped a hand inside his sleeping bag and rubbed his bare tummy. His squirming immediately stopped. Her fingers were inching past his belly button when she heard Kate's voice in the hallway.

"Hey, where is everyone?" she called. Pam hastily shoved Jeremy off. Perhaps too hastily because he let out a surprised, "Whoa!" as his sleeping bag slid off hers. The sound of Kate's footsteps approached the living room. "Good morning!" she said, surprised to find them on the floor next to the tree. "I didn't know you were planning to sleep out here."

"Morning!" Pam said. "It was a last minute decision to sleep out here. We figured the Christmas tree was too nice to leave." She spied the forgotten bottle of K-Y laying on the floor. Kate knelt down
next to Jeremy as Pam grabbed it just in time, stashing the illicit contraband in her sleeping bag.

“Merry Christmas,” Kate said, giving her son a hug. Frowning, she peeked inside his sleeping bag. “Jeremy, are you naked?”

“Oh. Yeah,” he said, glancing at Pam. She pretended to be engrossed with petting Whiskers. “It was really hot in my sleeping bag.”

“Ah. Of course.” Kate had spotted his neatly folded pajamas and was eyeing them with a healthy degree of skepticism. Pam breathed a sigh of relief when Kate shrugged. “Well, you better get dressed if you want to open presents. I'm going to put a few things in the oven for breakfast so I'll be right back.”

Jeremy and Whiskers both yawned simultaneously, then stretched. The cat arched its back as it lifted itself up by its paws; Jeremy spread his arms out in a V, all skinny chest and angular shoulders as the sleeping bag rode past his scrawny ribs. “Could you get me some different pajamas?” he requested. “I don't really want to wear those Little Drummer Boy PJs anymore.”

“Um, sure. But I'm only doing it because you're cute, you know.” Pam wondered how his skin stayed so supple and creamy in the dead of winter. She applied moisturizer by the bucketful yet remained stubbornly itchy and dry. In his room, she grabbed the first pajamas in his dresser drawer. Returning to the living room, she tossed them to Jeremy who was still sprawled on the floor. Pam sat down on the couch as he burrowed deep into his sleeping bag to put on the PJs.

“It would probably be easier if you got dressed out here,” she remarked.

His disembodied voice floated out from under the sleeping bag. “Are you kidding? It's freezing out there.” Moments later, he emerged fully dressed.

“Does that feel better?” Pam asked. He was now wearing a dark navy pajama set that featured an astronaut carrying a boombox and spinning the moon on his finger like a basketball.

“Yup.” He began rooting under the tree again. Pam was surprised when he placed a present on her lap. It was a small box, wrapped in translucent and sparkly white paper, tied with a fat bow of red ribbon.

“From you?” she asked.

“From me,” Jeremy confirmed. He wrapped himself in a throw blanket and sat down next to her. “Well, I guess my mom paid for it. But I picked it out by myself. Open it.”

He shivered, even though he was under the blanket. Pam took off her Santa hat and put it on him. “Shouldn't we wait for your mom though?” she suggested.

“Mom! Hey mom!” Jeremy shouted. “Come to the living room so Pam can open her present!”

Kate appeared, holding a bowl and a whisk. “All right, I'm here.”

“I can wait if you're busy,” Pam said.

“No, you can't,” Jeremy contradicted.

“Go ahead, Pam,” Kate smiled. “I think this is the first year that Jeremy wants someone else to open a present instead of pleading for his own.”
Pam delicately pulled at the red ribbon as Jeremy bounced impatiently next to her. Underneath the wrapping paper was a thin clamshell case. It was a jewelry box, she realized. Opening it slowly, she found a dainty pearl necklace inside the velvet lined box. “Oh gosh,” Pam said, stunned. “It’s beautiful.” And it must have cost a small fortune, she thought. She looked at Kate. “You shouldn’t have...”

“Of course we should have,” Kate said, whisking the bowl. “Merry Christmas!”

“I picked it out,” Jeremy reminded Pam.

“He did,” Kate confirmed. “I asked him what he wanted to get you for Christmas and he just said, ‘Something that will remind her of me.’ Then we walked around the mall for an hour until he decided on this.”

“Want me to help put it on for you?” Jeremy asked. Feeling self-conscious to be the center of attention, Pam gathered her hair into a ponytail while he sat behind her with the necklace. The creamy and iridescent pearls felt cold against her neck. A towering giddiness filled her when his fingers touched her skin. She ascribed it to the thrill of Christmas Day. But maybe it was something else.

“I think it’s beautiful,” Kate declared. A beeping timer sounded, summoning her back to the kitchen. “Excuse me.”

Pam fingered the smooth pearls. Unaccustomed to wearing such jewelry, the necklace felt completely foreign around her neck. She turned to face Jeremy and laughed when she saw how the Santa hat was too big for his head. Lifting her chin, she craned her neck to show off the necklace. “What do you think?” she asked him.

“It looks really pretty,” said Jeremy.

Pam blushed. That was high praise, coming from an eleven year old boy. She fussily straightened his hat before giving him a hug. “Thank you, Santa.”

“Merry Christmas, Pam.”
Miss Carpenter

Chapter Summary

Jeremy's mom unexpectedly comes home in the middle of the day. Nothing can possibly go wrong.

“Thanks for calling, Andrew,” Kate told her accountant. “I’ll get this paperwork to you next week. Bye!” Hanging up, she took a moment to gather herself before backing the car out of the parking space. She had finished picking up some groceries when Andrew called. Rather than talk and drive, Kate had decided to finish the conversation in the parking lot before continuing home.

She hummed cheerfully to herself, despite being stuck in traffic and despite her long morning at the hospital. Her wipers squeaked as they pushed away the thin layer of snow coating her windshield. It was a cold January day, the kind where the sun never seemed to come out and the grayness concealed the gently falling snowflakes. There was just enough accumulation to cover the existing layer of dirty snow on ground. Kate took a moment to appreciate the pristine, white scenery that lay beyond her car.

The holiday season had passed in a busy whirlwind. The thought of her first Christmas as a single mom had initially made her sad. But now that it was over, she realized that it hadn't been terrible after all. Jeremy seemed happy enough, which was the most important thing. His grades at school were unaffected. He maintained the same social chirpiness with his circle of friends. Certainly, there had been some moodiness during the summer, but Kate had been relieved to see him quickly stabilize into the new situation.

It helped, of course, that she had the best nanny in the world. Kate smiled to herself while waiting for a stoplight to change. Pam bristled when referred to as a nanny, understandably, since she was much more than that. She was a lifesaver. Kate couldn't imagine being a single mom on her own. Since she had moved in, Pam had effortlessly absorbed all the household duties that Kate knew she could never keep up with. Best of all, Pam was such a positive influence on Jeremy. Kate couldn't believe it when Jeremy started adhering to his bedtime on a nightly basis. He was, without fail, out like a light every night by 10 pm. How did Pam do it?

A car honked behind her, but Kate serenely ignored it. She carefully navigated the intersection, verifying that no one was slipping on the wet roads before proceeding herself. Her humming became an off-key medley of sorts as she gratefully relished the fact that she had left work early for once. It was exhausting to be on her feet all day at the hospital, but more so on the holiday weekends when she knew everyone else was off work. But a happy surprise awaited when she arrived at work this morning: due to a scheduling mix-up, her services were unneeded!

Unable to recall the last time she had a free Monday, Kate celebrated by stopping at a fancy delicatessen on her way home. The passenger seat was occupied by a carefully buckled grocery bag that contained a quart of tomato soup, a baguette, some assorted cheeses, thinly sliced prosciutto, and three big slices of chocolate cake. The freshly baked bread filled her car with its tantalizing scent.

Her phone rang again. She smiled when she saw who it was. “Hi David,” she said, patching the call through the car's hands-free phone mode.
“Hi sweetie,” he answered. “How's your day going?”

“Good! I got off work early and picked some stuff up for dinner. I'm surprising Pam and Jeremy. I'm driving so I really shouldn't be talking though.”

“Then why did you answer?”

“Maybe I just wanted to hear the sweet sound of my boyfriend's voice,” Kate smiled. “Hey, when are you coming over for dinner?”

“The next time our shifts align,” David promised. “It will be any day now. I should let you concentrate on driving. I just heard a nurse page me anyway. Call me later?”

“I'll call you tonight. Bye!” Kate resumed humming. A happy kid, an ultra-competent personal assistant and a doting boyfriend? Things were looking up for the new year.

Upon parking in the garage, Kate checked the grocery bag to ensure that the soup hadn't spilled in transit. It was 2 pm so she was most certainly too late for lunch, but tomato soup and panini would make a wonderful dinner. Monday dinner at home! She couldn't remember the last time that happened either. Juggling the grocery bag and her keys, she let herself into the house.

“Hello?” she called. “I'm home early! And I have treats!”

No one responded. She set down the grocery bag on the kitchen counter. Tossing her coat onto a chair, she rifled through the day's mail. The house seemed unusually quiet. “Hey, where is everybody?” she asked, opening the door to the basement. But it was completely dark down there. They weren't playing video games in the den either. The door to Pam's room was closed, as was Jeremy's door.

She knocked on his door. “Jeremy, I'm home!” Kate was startled to hear a loud thumping noise. Her hand instantly grabbed the doorknob, but she forced herself to wait. A few years ago, she would have immediately entered. But Jeremy was older now and entitled to a certain degree of privacy. “Can I come in?” she asked tentatively.

“Just a second!” Jeremy called. “Uh, come in.” Kate cautiously opened the door. He was sitting in his armchair with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

“Hey there, kiddo,” she said. “What are you up to?”

“Just reading,” he said, holding up the book in his lap.

“What was that noise?”

“Noise?” he repeated. “Oh. That was Whiskers. She got scared when you knocked on the door. She jumped off my lap.”

“I see,” Kate nodded. “Have you cut back on her servings like the vet told us to do? That cat must really be putting on the pounds to make such a loud noise.” Jeremy's face was tinged red and he was avoiding her gaze. Kate perched herself on the armrest of his chair. She spotted his dress shirt and tie under the blanket. “Why on earth are you wearing your school uniform?” she asked. “There wasn't school today.”

“Pam told me to put it on. She said I'm less of a troublemaker when I'm wearing it.”

Kate laughed. “Not a bad idea. Where is she, anyway?”
“I think she's taking a nap. She said she had a headache or something.”

Kate eyed him with suspicion. “I hope you weren't responsible. Have you been a good boy for her?”

“No, mom,” Jeremy said, shaking his head earnestly. “I was really good today.”

“Did you finish your homework for tomorrow?”

“No. Pam said I could do it later.”

“I see,” Kate said, unable to keep from smiling. Jeremy was a terrible liar. When he did something wrong, it was written as clear as day on his face. “We've talked about this before. Pam is very nice to you. And probably lets you get away with too much. You're not taking advantage of her kindness, right?”

“Nope.” Jeremy's eyes were glued to his book. It was obvious he wanted her to leave. Just as she stood up, however, there was a gray streak in the doorway as Whiskers darted into the room. Kate was momentarily perplexed by the sight. She suddenly remembered what Jeremy had told her about the loud thump before she entered his room.

“Jeremy, didn't you say that-” She was interrupted by a sneeze. “Bless you,” she said automatically.

“Um, thanks.”

“You're not coming down with something, are you?” She put a hand to his forehead. “You're burning up.”

“Mom, I'm fine,” insisted Jeremy. He squirmed away from her touch. “Really.”

“All right. I think I'll take a bath...” Kate trailed off when she spied something nestled among the sheets on Jeremy's bed. She fished it out. “What's this doing here?” she asked, holding up a black, lacy bra.

Jeremy looked at her blankly. “I don't know. Is it yours?”

Kate laughed. “Jeremy, a lady can always tell when a bra is hers and when it is not. This belongs to Pam.” She paused to let her words sink in. “Why is Pam's bra in your room?”

“I don't know,” he shrugged. “Pam was folding laundry this morning. I guess she forgot it here.”

He fidgeted in his seat. Kate recalled the loud thump when she knocked and Jeremy's ensuing discomfort. Now it was her turn to blush. She had a vision of Jeremy sneaking one of Pam's bras from the laundry basket. When he was nine, she had accidentally walked into his room while he was perusing a Victoria's Secret catalog with a hand roaming inside his underwear. Kate had done her best to forget it ever happened, but Jeremy's titillation for lingerie was clearly still going strong. Her little boy was... apparently not so little anymore. She tried not to think of what she may have interrupted when she knocked on his door. Thank goodness she hadn't charged into his room.

“All right then,” Kate said, setting the bra back on the bed. The sight of it on Jeremy's racecar-themed sheets looked rather scandalous, but what else could she do? “Uh, don't forget to give it back. Maybe just put it in her laundry hamper in the bathroom?”

“Of course,” Jeremy said. “Why would I keep it?”

His face was a picture of sheer bafflement, but Kate knew better. She tried not to smile. He was
pouring it on now. Pretending to be confused. “I have no idea,” she told him. “I had a long day so I'm going to take a bath. When you see Pam, can you let her know that I picked up something for dinner? She doesn't have to worry about that tonight.”

“Sure, mom.”

Kate closed his door as she left the room. Taking a moment, she exhaled deeply and put a hand to her mouth. She laughed silently, but more from embarrassment than amusement. Kate wondered if she should inform Pam that her son had poached her underwear for the purpose of... she blushed, unable to complete the thought. Trying her best to forget it, Kate went to run a hot bath for herself. It was probably best to keep this a secret between her and Jeremy, she reasoned. If she was this embarrassed, Kate couldn't imagine how Pam would feel about being the center of attention for her eleven year old son.

EARLIER THAT DAY

Pam peered out the living room window, anxiously scanning for any activity, but the residential street was quiet. Reluctantly, she returned to the couch, only to jump to her feet once again when she heard a car approaching. A lone plow truck, its red sides streaked a dirty gray, rumbled past. Disappointed, Pam checked herself but this time remained at the window though there was little to hold her interest. A layer of dirty ice covered the ground although more snow was predicted for later that day.

It was a drab Monday in January, her least favorite month. The excitement of the holidays had passed, the weather turned ferocious, and the pervasive darkness made her want to stay in bed all day. As if that wasn't excruciating enough, the last few weeks had been particularly dull because Jeremy had started spending weekends with his dad. After Christmas, William and his girlfriend Marla finally decided to move in together. Abandoning his cramped downtown apartment, Jeremy's dad moved into the spacious four-bedroom condo where Marla lived with her daughter Apple. The extra space meant Jeremy was now welcome to stay there, if he so pleased, and he had elected to visit his dad for the past three weekends. When Pam asked him what was so fun over there, he answered with a vague response about a community rec room “with a massive surround sound system and, like, four air hockey tables.”

The first few hours of his absence were a luxury. Pam could catch up on reading. Or she could take a nap whenever she wanted. Lunch could be a handful of cookies and leftovers unearthed from the fridge, in that order. But boredom would eventually set in and she would wonder what Jeremy was doing at that exact moment. Or she might daydream of their possible adventures together if he were home. Last weekend, she got so lonely that she pilfered a pillow from Jeremy's bed and snuggled with it on the couch. The pillow, imbued with his distinctive scent, immediately made Pam feel better though she embarrassedly wondered if this was a new low.

Now she was impatiently waiting for him to return home. It had been a three-day weekend, thanks to Martin Luther King Day, so William promised to drop Jeremy off on Monday afternoon. His father had a maddening habit of being imprecise with the time, so Pam had spent the last half-hour standing guard at the window like a dog warily watching for the mail. The sound of an engine caught her ear. Eagerly, she glanced out the window and was rewarded with the sight of William's familiar hunter-green SUV. Finally.

Pam unlocked the front door and then hurried to the dinner table which was covered with stacks of
paperwork. She sat down just in time, right when the door opened. There was the brief sound of stamping feet, followed by Jeremy's tentative, “Hello?”

She waited to answer, instead taking a sip of tea that had long since grown cold. “Oh, hi there,” Pam called back, feigning distraction. She began doodling on a piece of paper. “I wasn't expecting you home so early.”

Jeremy entered the dining room. His overnight bag thumped to the floor, followed by his hat, mittens, and then finally his winter coat, all of which left a tidy trail on the ground. He sat down next to Pam. “Whatcha doing?” he asked.

“Just some taxes,” Pam answered. She jotted down some random numbers and pretended to add them up.

Jeremy helped himself to a handful of almonds from a dish on the table. “Looks complicated,” he noted. He had barely sat down before he was up again, wandering toward the kitchen.

“It's not too bad,” Pam said. “Your mom said her accountant was more than willing to help, so I just have to get a few things ready. He's calling me later. How was your weekend at your dad's place?”

“It was fine,” he answered from the kitchen. “Apple taught me how to play chess.”

“How fun,” Pam observed dryly.

“Not really. Apple wouldn't let me win, even though I was a beginner.”

Pam couldn't resist taking a swipe. “She's not nice like me, is she?”

“Nope.” Through the serving window that separated the dinner table from the kitchen, she spotted him examining his mom's work schedule on the refrigerator. She bit her lip to keep from smiling.

Jeremy strolled back with a glass of water. Seating himself next to her again, he asked, “Are you going to be busy all afternoon?”

“Oh, not too much longer.”

He waited until she finished filling out a form. “My mom doesn't get home until after dinner today,” he stated.

“Really? That's too bad. I know she likes to have dinner with us but her schedule always wins.”

“Yeah.” He drained his water glass. “So... do you think we could play Call of Duty when you're done working?”

This time, Pam couldn't keep from breaking into a smile. Sometimes he would come home and immediately ask to play Call of Duty. Other times, he came home talking non-stop about his weekend antics with Apple. She was relieved this was not one of those times. Setting her pen down, she steeled herself before looking into his puppy dog eyes. “Did you finish your homework yet?”

“Aww, Pam,” he groaned. He placed a hand on her knee. “Please?”

“No.” She removed his hand and put it back on his own lap. His hand-on-her-knee tactic had worked flawlessly in the past, but Pam's resolution for the new year was to start sticking to her guns again. Initially, the rule had been, 'No Call of Duty on school nights' but that soon gave way to 'No Call of Duty until your homework is done' which itself petered out to 'No Call of Duty until you at
least open a notebook and sharpen your pencil'. The original rule was probably out of the question. Pam was fairly certain she wouldn't be able to resist Call of Duty's siren song on school nights, but surely she could revert to insisting on his homework being done.

It was important, she knew, to set realistic goals.

“Look, it's only 1 o'clock,” she pointed out. “How much homework do you have? One hour? Two, tops? Just get started and you'll be done before you know it. We'll play Call of Duty when you're done.”

Jeremy stood behind her chair and draped himself on her back, his arms wrapping around her shoulders. “Please?” he asked. “We can do it really fast. You know, like a... what do you call it?”

“A quickie?”

“Yeah, that!”

“No.”

Jeremy groaned again, his voice muffled because his face was buried in her hair. Pam could feel his warm breath against her neck, systematically chipping away at her resistance. “I'll tower you,” he offered. He was referring to her favorite position in which he would be on his knees, straddling her, as she lay in his bed.

“Nope.” Pam was proud of herself for hesitating only the merest second before answering. Picking up her pen, she pointed at his bedroom. “Go get your homework. This accountant is supposed to call me in a few minutes anyway.”

He shuffled away, hanging his head in dejection. Pam shook her head at his drama king routine. Returning to her paperwork, she was lost in tabulating last year's wages when Jeremy sat down across from her and opened his backpack. She paid no attention until he cleared his throat several times.

She distractedly glanced at him, then did a double take. While he had indeed retrieved his homework, Jeremy was now wearing his school uniform: gray dress pants, white shirt, and a clip-on tie. Suspicious, Pam tapped her pen on the table. “Okay, I give up. Why are you wearing your school clothes?”

“Oh, you know. I thought it would help me concentrate.” He arranged his books on the table, then borrowed one of her pens without asking. But instead of starting his homework, Jeremy gave her a bright smile.

Pam closed her eyes and put a hand to her forehead. “This better not be going where I think it's going.”

“Remember the last time we played Call of Duty?” Jeremy began.

“Yes. I remember. You don't have to-”

Jeremy interrupted her. “I came home from school and you kept saying how cute I was in my uniform. Then you said we should play Call of Duty but I wouldn't be allowed to take any clothes off. Even though you were in your bathrobe with nothing under-”

“I said I remember!” Pam sighed. Sheesh, she thought. Indulge in one, tiny schoolboy fantasy and it immediately catches up to you. On that particular day, she had taken a late shower and was trimming
her fingernails over the kitchen sink when Jeremy came home from school. It wasn't like she planned any of it. Pam just hadn't expected what a turn-on it would be to let Jeremy peek under her robe while he wore his school clothes. One thing led to another and she ended up plunging a knowing hand into his dress pants while they stood in the kitchen. The ensuing aftermath of K-Y inside his white underwear was a sticky mess. But totally worth it.

She set down her pen. “So you think that wearing your school clothes now will turn me into some horny maniac.” He looked at her in befuddlement. “Horny means someone who really wants to play Call of Duty,” she translated.

“Oh, is that what horny means?” Jeremy asked. She could practically see the gears turning in his head. “I always wondered what it meant. The older boys at school always call us horny losers.”

“I'm glad this has been a learning experience,” Pam told him. “Why don't you keep it up and get started on your homework? You're on a roll.” Jeremy made a face, but rolled up his sleeves to get to work. For some reason, the sight of his slender forearms made her sit up straight. So smooth and endearingly awkward. Temptation was insistently beckoning when her phone rang.

“Saved by the bell,” she thought. Leaving Jeremy to his homework, she quickly gathered the paperwork and retreated to her bedroom to answer the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi there, Miss Carpenter!” a cheerful voice greeted. “It's Andrew. You know, Kate Prater's accountant?”

“Hi Andrew. I have that paperwork that we talked about last time.”

“Great! Wonderful,” he answered. “Just a second... let me get the right forms up on the computer. How's your day going, Miss Carpenter?”

“You can call me Pam,” she assured him. “This day isn't too bad. I mean, I broke out the Jack Daniels after lunch instead of before lunch so that counts as a success for a dreary winter day, right?”

“Ha! I know what you mean,” Andrew laughed. “Personally, I swore I'd stay off the bottle today but that just means I've been chain smoking since breakfast. The guy in the next cube threatened to call HR until I reminded him that I know about that porn folder on his desktop.”

“That sounds about right for office life,” she agreed. “It's basically a contest to see who caves in first and whether they can successfully cover their tracks for murder.” Pam felt bad for Andrew. Based on their previous conversation, she knew that he was freshly graduated from college and terribly bored with life behind a desk.

“All too true,” Andrew sighed. “How do you know so much about office life?”

“Oh, I did a brief stint back in the day.”

“Do I detect a hint of regret?” Andrew asked. “You should come downtown and we'll have lunch sometime. I'll show you everything you're missing. You know, the stolen reams of paper... the lines of coke in the break room...”

“The muffled sobs from the adjoining bathroom stall?” Pam suggested.

“Exactly!”

“Sounds fun.”
Andrew laughed but then his voice became serious. “But really though... would you like to have lunch sometime, Pam? There are some great places downtown that just opened.”

Pam paused. “That’s nice of you to offer, Andrew,” she said sympathetically. “Things have been awfully busy over here, though. You know Kate. She’s kind of a slave driver.” Perhaps she would have taken up Andrew’s offer in a previous lifetime. Times being what they were, however, he may as well have invited her to watch paint dry.

“Right on. Well. Let me know if you change your mind.” There was an awkward pause. “So... you have the previous year’s W-2 forms?”

Pam was relieved to have the conversation shift back to business. Having misplaced last year's tax return during the move to the Prater household, she dutifully recited the numbers requested by Andrew. “One second,” he said. “My computer is frozen. Hold on...”

While she waited, Pam overheard the muffled sound of gunfire and explosions from the other side of her bedroom door. Frowning, she followed it to the den where she found Jeremy playing Call of Duty. The actual video game, that is. Apparently in it for the long haul, he was surrounded by an array of snacks to fortify his gaming: dried apple rings, graham crackers, a banana, and a glass of milk.

He was so engrossed that he didn’t even notice her presence. He finished a level and, while waiting for the next one to load, idly put a hand inside his pants. She assumed he had an itch, but his hand was in there far too long for that. On the phone, Andrew was still muttering unintelligibly at his computer so Pam kept waiting. It wasn't too bad though. The sight of Jeremy in his school uniform, tie askew and hand crammed into his dress pants, was an excellent way to pass the time.

Nonetheless, she was annoyed he wasn't doing his homework. Picking up the remote control, she turned down the volume on the TV. Jeremy, clearly startled, yanked his hand out of his pants. He pretended to scratch his leg but the guilt on his face was plain as day. Feigning nonchalance, he ate an apple ring, using the same hand that had been crammed inside his pants. Smiling innocently, Pam swept the couch free of graham cracker crumbs before parking herself next to him. He continued playing his game.

“Okay, I think my computer is working again. Sorry about that,” Andrew told her. “Still have those numbers? Hit me.”

She began reading numbers to him again. Her toes were cold so Pam swung her feet onto the couch and stuffed them under Jeremy's thigh. Had he been doing anything other than playing video games, he would have loudly protested Pam's ice-like feet. As it was, nothing short of a Category 5 hurricane could distract him now. While he played, he propped his feet onto the coffee table, slouching to the point where he was practically horizontal. Even though his eyes were glazed over in concentration, Pam had to admit he looked cute. His wrinkled shirt had come untucked from his scratching (or whatever) inside his pants, perfectly playing into Jeremy's artful balance between well-groomed tidiness and unkempt chaos. It was as if he had spent all day behaving at school before finally returning home to be himself.

On the phone, there was another lull as Andrew mumbled a curse at his computer. Muting the call, Pam nudged Jeremy with her foot. “Did you finish your homework?” she inquired.

“Umm...” That was all she needed to hear. Pam was about to turn off the TV when Andrew cleared his throat, reminding her of his presence.

“All right, Pam. I'm back in business. Were you able to find any previous year's tax returns?” he
asked her.

She unmuted the phone to return to the conversation. “I couldn't find them,” Pam admitted. “They're around here somewhere. Is that going to be a problem?” She kept poking Jeremy with her foot until he finally paused his game. She pointed at the dining room and mouthed the word 'homework' to him. He responded by scrunching his eyebrows in confusion. With her free hand, Pam mimed writing and emphatically mouthed 'HOMEWORK' once again. His expression of confusion changed to understanding as reached into his pocket and handed her a pen. Shaking her head in disgust, Pam waved him away.

“Not a problem if you can't find last year,” Andrew assured. “We can just ballpark it to make sure you're, well, in the right ballpark. Do you remember if you took a standard or itemized deduction?”

“Pretty sure it was standard,” Pam answered. Jeremy had returned to his game. Her feet were toasty now, thanks to being tucked under him. She extended a leg and put her foot on his lap. Once again absorbed in his game, he thoroughly ignored her. Slyly, Pam angled her foot so that her toes touched the crotch of his dress pants. She traced her big toe in a large arc, back and forth against the brushed wool.

“Sounds good,” Andrew told her. “Do you have total wages and tips from 2015?”

“Um, I have a couple W-2s,” Pam answered. Jeremy gave her a distracted side eye, but kept playing. She had finally gotten his attention at least. Something hard was pressing back against her toe. “Ready for the first one?”

“Go ahead,” Andrew said.

“First is... $42,088,” Pam said. It was surprisingly tricky to read numbers while teasing Jeremy. There was now a bulge in his pants where there had been none before. That made it much easier for her to playfully wriggle her toes on his boyhood. On the television screen, Pam was surprised to see Jeremy's character fall down under a hail of bullets.

“Quit it!” he hissed, shoving her foot away. “That was your fault!”

“Next?” Andrew asked on the phone.

“Uh, $5,254,” she said, returning her foot to his lap. “No wait. $5,524 actually.” Her toes curled against Jeremy's bulge, massaging him. He glanced at her again. “Go do your homework!” she blurted out.

“Excuse me?” Andrew said, baffled.

“Nothing,” Pam answered. “Sorry. I was talking to someone else.” Defiantly, Jeremy removed her leg from his lap and protectively placed a pillow over his lap. He resumed the video game.

“Ah ha,” Andrew chuckled. “Multi-tasking, are we?”

Pam smiled wryly as her foot snuck underneath the pillow. Her toe easily located his erection, drawing little circles on it. Jeremy tried to fight her off but his hands were occupied with the controller as he guided his character down a narrow corridor filled with enemy soldiers. Pam kicked the pillow off his lap. The bulge in his pants looked even bigger than before.

“Yes, multi-tasking,” Pam told Andrew. “Ready for the last one? It's, um, $2,786.” It was obvious that her game of footsy was affecting the young boy. Having watched him play countless hours of video games, Pam knew he normally didn't breathe this hard while playing. The screen went blood
red, then faded to black as the words GAME OVER appeared.

“You made me die again!” Jeremy accused, raising his voice in anger. He grumpily pushed her foot off his lap and moved further down the couch, away from her reach.

“Jeremy, please. I’m on the phone.” Despite her admonition, Pam scooted closer to him on the couch, one hand holding the phone to her ear while the other hand rested on his knee. Her forefinger and middle finger craftily tiptoed along his wool pants. What was that old advertising tagline? ‘Let your fingers do the walking,’ she recalled.

“Hey, is that the famous Jeremy Prater?” asked Andrew. “I remember him. Kate brought him by the office once when she was dropping off some forms. He spilled root beer all over my keyboard.”

“Ha ha! That sounds like Jeremy all right,” she said. He gave her another side eye when he heard his name. “Andrew says hi,” Pam told him by way of explanation. Jeremy quickly slapped her hand each time her two fingers walked too close to the crotch of his pants. Watching the action on the TV, she waited until he was busy driving a tank which required keeping both hands on the controller. Touching him with her foot had been fun, but her fingers offered a far better tactile experience. She began petting the bulge in his pants.

“Oh-kay...” Andrew said. He was obviously engrossed with something on his computer. Pam heard the faint clickety-clack of a keyboard over the line. “Just about squared away here. Got your 2016 numbers ready?”

“Sure do,” Pam said. “Just one this time. $25,722 for wages.” Jeremy was fully erect now, so much that she could plainly see the outline of his penis straining against the wool pants. That can't be good for it, she thought. Genuinely concerned for his well-being, Pam undid his belt.

“Check,” Andrew said. “How about federal taxes withheld? Should be box 2.”

“Um, just a second,” Pam said. His belt was easy to do one-handed, but the clasp to his pants proved more tricky. She finally popped it free with her thumb and forefinger. After that, it was a breeze to unzip his pants. “Got it,” she said into the phone. “It's $2,238.”

“Uh huh. State taxes?”

“$851,” she answered. With a practiced deftness, Pam's fingers burrowed into the fly of Jeremy's white underwear. His penis felt very warm and just the slightest bit sweaty. Wrapping her fingers around it, she guided him through his fly so that his erection was jutting freely from his underwear. She fanned his penis with her hand for a moment, as if it were a slice of pizza that was too hot to eat. Jeremy looked at her as if she were crazy. Pam responded by puckering her lips in an air kiss.

“I click here... I click there... and...” Andrew was talking to himself. “Now if I recall correctly, Kate and William said they were paying you $5000 a month, right?”

“Correct.” Pam ran a fingertip against the deliciously soft skin of Jeremy's penis. Any hint of sweat had evaporated. Satisfied, she began stroking the underside of his erection, starting at the base and then gliding upward until she reached the puckered tip.

“Okay, just a second again,” Andrew said. “I need to plug in some numbers to figure out what taxes you owe for that, and then I need to plug those numbers into Kate and William's return as well. Let's see. Marital status is divorced...” He was talking to himself again.

“Not a problem at all,” Pam assured him. “Take your time.” As she fondled Jeremy, Pam marveled at how versatile his penis could be. When he was soft, it was merely a dangling tube, but when he
became fully hard, like now, it grew several times over until she could see the outline of his corona under the tight foreskin. She idly wondered when he would be able to pull back his foreskin to reveal the hidden delights underneath. “Shouldn't he be able to do it by now?” she thought to herself. At age eleven?

Being a doctor, his mom would probably know. But it wasn't exactly something Pam could casually bring up in a passing conversation. “So, Kate, Jeremy's class is going on a field trip to the natural history museum so you'll need to sign this permission slip. Oh, and by the way, have you noticed that he isn't able to fully retract his foreskin yet?”

“This is interesting,” Andrew said.

“Hmm?” Pam said. She had almost forgotten he was on the phone.

“Technically, Kate and William could write your earnings off as child care. That could save them... well, quite a bit. And then... oh, this is very, very interesting.”

“What's interesting?” Pam asked. She wondered how much longer this would take. Jeremy's brow furrowed as he attempted to concentrate on his game, but she noticed his character was dying much more frequently. He wasn't complaining anymore, at least. Continuing her light strokes, Pam's fingers were rewarded with an involuntary throb as his penis demanded more attention.

“If Kate and William pay you just a few extra hundred dollars, they'll fall into a lower bracket.” Andrew sounded very pleased, as if he had just discovered a cure for cancer. “So they'll technically save some money. And you'll make some money!”

“Everybody wins!” Pam agreed. She closed a fist around Jeremy's erection. Now it was her own palm that was sweaty, but that wasn't the worst thing that could happen. The moisture created just the right amount of friction between her hand and his skin.

“I'm going to patch them through in a conference call,” Andrew announced. “I've always wanted to do this. A four-way phone conversation!”

Pam sat up straight on the couch. “Wait, like right now?”

But it was too late. The familiar electronic tone of ringing sounded on the line, followed by a click. “Hello?”

“Hi William! Andrew Cuttlebaum here. I'm doing taxes with Pam and I needed your sign off. Let's see if I can get Kate too...”

“Hello?” At the exact moment Kate came on the line, Jeremy's erection just happened to twitch in Pam's hand. Flustered, her hand became even more sweaty.

“Kate! It's Andrew. Doing taxes with Pam and I needed to get everyone's verbal consent. We've got a little conference call action going on. William and Pam are on the line too.”

“Oh. Hi Pam,” Kate said.

“Hi Pam,” William chimed in.

“Um, hi there,” she answered. Guiltily, she stopped touching Jeremy. The moment she withdrew her hand, however, he paused his game. Taking her by the wrist, he returned her reluctant hand to his erection. Only then did he resume playing, leaving Pam to blush as she continued the phone call.
“So here’s the deal,” Andrew said. “Everyone paying attention? Kate and William, if you’re willing to pay Pam an extra, let’s see, $566? It will push you into a lower tax bracket for a savings of $721. I admit it’s a not a huge sum, but you’ll technically save $155. Would you like to do that?”

“I don’t see a problem with that,” William said.

“Same here,” Kate agreed. “Consider it your performance bonus, Pam. Very well deserved. Congrats!”

“Yeah. Um, thanks!” Pam found it easiest to be staring straight ahead and not looking at Jeremy. Once she did that, it was easy to pretend the warm hardness in her hand was merely his finger. (Well, judging from the girth, maybe one-and-a-half of his fingers.) But then Jeremy shattered the illusion by shivering, a full body quiver from his toes to his neck, his head rolling back as he took a deep breath. Pam was distressed to see that his eyes were now closed. He had completely abandoned his game. Was she pushing him too close to the edge? It had been one thing to playfully tease him while on the phone with Andrew, but the thought of giving the young boy an orgasm while his parents were on the line seemed a step too far.

“Oh Pam?” William said. “Before I forget, can you tell Jeremy he forgot his iPod over here?”

“Sure thing,” she answered. This was getting too weird. Now it was Pam's turn to move away from Jeremy. Sliding down the couch, she accidentally sat on his forgotten snacks. The baggie of dried apple rings were fine but the graham crackers were reduced to crumbs.

The physical distance between them proved insufficient as she could still see Jeremy's unflagging erection. She modestly placed the bag of apple rings on his lap to hide the view. Jeremy responded by tossing his game controller on the floor, crawling across the couch, and sprawling himself across her lap. His untucked dress shirt and unzipped pants neatly framed his ever-present erection. His school clothes, having previously sent her into a buzzy state of arousal, now seemed wildly inappropriate. In a fit of modesty, Pam straightened his tie and pulled his shirt down to hide his crotch, but Jeremy would have none of it. Instead, he wrapped both hands around her wrist, guiding her hand between his legs.

“What are you two up to this afternoon, Pam?” Kate asked.

“Oh... um, you know. Just hanging out.” Jeremy formed her fingers into a fist around his erection. Pam's ears burned red as he manually urged her hand into a jacking motion.

“Is he being a handful?”

“No!” Pam exclaimed, perhaps a bit too forcefully. “I mean, not at all. He needs to do his homework though.” She gave Jeremy a withering gaze, but he responded with his 'I know you think I'm cute' smile. His hands wrapped tightly around her fingers, preventing her from letting go of his penis, but Pam stubbornly refused to move her fist.

“That boy,” Kate said. “He always needs so much motivation. Tell him he's in big trouble if he doesn't get his homework done.”

“You're way too nice to him, Pam,” William interjected. “If you're wondering, I personally would not hold it against you if ever felt the need to spank him. You know, just toss him over your lap and give him a good smack to the bottom.”

“Um...” Pam was at a complete loss for words. Did William possess some sort of telepathic dad-radar that informed him Jeremy was currently splayed atop her legs? Her mouth was so dry that she took a
sip from Jeremy's glass of milk that was now room temperature.

“William! How could you say that about your son?” Kate objected. “He's very well-behaved.”

“Maybe when Pam is around. He's a holy terror otherwise.”

“That's not fair and you know it.”

Andrew cleared his throat. “So anyway,” he said, cutting in, “Pam, I'll mail you your final 1040 later this week. You just need to sign and return it. Kate and William, same thing for you. I'll send revised documents for you to sign and return. Sound good, everyone?”

“Sounds great to me,” Pam said. “Is that all for today?”

“Thanks Andrew,” William added.

“Andrew could you stay on the line for a bit?” Kate requested. “I have some questions about next year's tax strategy.”

“Of course.”

“Bye everyone!” Pam said. She had never been more grateful to end a call. Tossing her phone aside, Pam pried his fingers off hers to free her trapped hand. “You are being very difficult today,” she scolded.

“How come you were blushing so much on the phone?” he asked.

“Never mind that. How come you're playing video games when you haven't finished your homework?”

“I'll finish my homework after you play Call of Duty with me,” he promised. His exposed penis was still swaying in the breeze. He grasped her wrist in an attempt for further manual attention, but Pam instead returned his penis to its usual place inside his underwear. After buttoning his pants, she handed him the dried apples, the bag of crushed graham crackers and the untouched banana.

“Put these away, will you? I don't want to find another bruised banana under the couch cushions.” She pointed a finger at him. “You are doing your homework, Mr. Prater.”

“No,” Jeremy contradicted, an impish grin on his face. “You are playing Call of Duty with me, Miss Carpenter.” Using the banana, he rapped her wrist twice to emphasize the last two words.

Pam couldn't explain why, but the sensation of the cool banana on her skin and hearing him say the words 'Miss Carpenter' perked her hormones like a morning shot of espresso. It probably had something to do with his school uniform too. Already wet from the couch play, she swelled in an unexpected wide-on. “Um, say again?” she said, holding out her wrist.

“You are playing Call of Duty with me, Miss Carpenter,” he repeated, once again tapping her with the banana.

And, once again, her body responded in the same manner, causing Pam to squirm in aroused vexation. Oh well. There was plenty of time in February, she decided, to adhere to her New Year's resolutions. “How about we go to your room?” she proposed.

“Yes!” Jeremy rolled off her lap and onto his feet. “Wow, I can't believe that worked,” he remarked. “I need to add it to the list.”
“Yes, the 'list.' Very amusing,” Pam said without a trace of mirth. “You think you're so clever.”

“Why were you on the phone for so long anyway?” he asked.

“Because your mom's accountant has a crush on me,” Pam answered. She held out a hand and he helped her off the couch. Her leg had fallen asleep from the weight of him.

“Really? But he's never even met you.” Jeremy stuffed a handful of dried apple in his mouth.

“So what? That means he can't have a crush?” Her right leg was useless from the thigh down so Pam held Jeremy's shoulder for support as they retired to his room. “Let me get this straight,” she said, closing his bedroom door behind them. “You just don't understand how someone could think I'm cute even if he never met me?”

“It's a little weird, don't you think?” Jeremy said. “I mean, for all he knows, a crocodile might have bitten off your face.”

“There is more to a crush than just looks, you know,” Pam answered. “I might play Call of Duty, if you answer one question for me.” She sat down on his bed. “What do you think my best feature is?”

He pursed his lips in contemplation, but she caught him peeking at her chest. Pam sighed and crossed her arms. “Besides that, Jeremy.”

“Um.” He finished chewing and set aside the baggie of dried apples. “Your… eyes?” he said hopefully.

Pam laughed. “You sound like the teacher just called on you while you were goofing off in class. And you have no clue what the right answer is.”

“Definitely your eyes,” Jeremy said, nodding confidently.

“And what do you like about them?”

He peered into her face, then moved closer to get a better look, so close that their noses almost touched. So close that she could smell the apple and graham cracker on his breath. “They're pretty. I like that shade of blue. Not too dark, not too light. They remind me of…” he trailed off.

“A stormy summer sky?” Pam suggested.

“No…”

“The endless ocean, perhaps?”

“Not that either.” He snapped his fingers. “I know! My dad has an old shirt that color! It's the same shade of blue.”

Pam stood up. “That's it. No Call of Duty for you.”

Jeremy followed right on her heels as she left the room. “Wait, where are you going? Why are you mad?”

“Jeremy. You don't tell a girl her eyes remind you of your dad's blue shirt.”

“But listen,” he protested. He took her hand and pulled her back to his bed. Pam reluctantly let herself be led back. “You didn't even let me finish. My parents have this old picture where they're all
dressed up. You know how old pictures have those, well, old-fashioned colors? Like an Instagram filter, but even better. I like looking at those old pictures because colors don't look like that anymore. Plus, my parents always looked... happy. Back then.” He paused. “Your eyes remind me of all that.”

Pam was taken aback by his words. When did he start talking like an old soul? Relenting, she said, “Okay. I can live with that.”


“It's hard to choose just one,” Pam mused, regarding the eleven year old boy. Fussing over him, she tucked in the flap of his shirt that had come undone and zipped up his zipper. “Let's see... You have a pretty mouth.”

Jeremy was absolutely gobsmacked. She may as well have said she admired his fingernails. “My mouth?” he repeated, making a face.

“Oh yes,” Pam confirmed. “You have a yummy mouth. It makes me want to do this.” She leaned in close to give him a kiss. It was barely a peck on the lips, but Jeremy visibly shivered from the intimate contact. Placing a finger under his chin, she moved close until they were once again nose to nose.

“You really think my eyes are my best feature?” she asked. Her eyes locked onto the hazel-brown glossiness of his irises.

“Yes.”

Jeremy's eyes were so unflinchingly true that a vertiginous sensation swirled her mind. She kissed him again, savoring the tentative shyness in his lips. One day they would practice kissing but, until then, his beginner's kisses were still rather charming. She pulled herself away long enough to tell him, “Since you're such a sweetheart, I'm going to let you see my second best feature.”

Jeremy didn't understand what she meant until she pulled her shirt over her head. “Oh. You mean your boobs?”

Pam suppressed a sigh. “Yes, my boobs. As you so lovingly put it.”

“Um, I like your bra,” he ventured. “It's fancy looking.”

“Thank you!” Pam said, flattered that he noticed. She was wearing a new bra that was black and lacy.

“I've never seen a black bra before,” he commented. “I mean, in real life.”

Pam playfully ran a finger underneath his school tie. “Oh, I've got all sorts of things you haven't seen yet in real life,” she smiled.

“Like what?”

“Be patient. I'll show you one day. Besides, you seem fairly happy with the things I've shown you so far.” Turning her back to him, she pulled aside her mane of brown hair. “Help, please?” His fingers expertly undid the clasp to her bra. Shrugging her shoulders free of the straps, Pam delicately set the bra on his bed.

Still standing, Jeremy fidgeted shyly as she sat before him. It didn't matter that he had seen her breasts countless times before, but he was always endearingly awkward whenever she undressed for
him. He opened his mouth to say something, but then checked himself instead.

“Yes, you may touch,” Pam said, reading his mind. Cautiously, Jeremy stepped closer. He always started the same way: first, he would tentatively cup a breast in the palm of each hand, as if he were weighing them. Then his fingers would press against her flesh, kneading and squeezing. Pam suspected that the eleven year old boy was fascinated by their squishiness.

“You know, I'm probably going to regret asking this,” Pam began, “but why do you like my breasts so much anyway?”

“Um, because they're awesome?”

“I figured as much. Could you be more specific?” Pam shivered as he traced the outline of her areola. Her nipples had grown hard but, frustratingly, he was not paying enough attention to them.

“I don't know,” Jeremy said. He was at a complete loss to explain. Hesitantly, he cupped one of her breasts and ran a finger underneath where the curve of fruit met her flat ribcage. “I like how the skin feels here,” he said. “It's really soft. Like the softest thing I've ever felt.” He leaned in close to press his cheek against her breast. Pam inhaled slowly, basking in the sheer pleasure of his skin brushing hers.

“Always soft?”

“Well, the bottoms are. But this part isn't soft anymore,” Jeremy noted, rubbing a thumb across her stiffened nipple. “Why does that happen anyway?”

“They'll get hard if I'm cold,” she explained. Her heart thumped loudly. It was always exciting to teach him about female anatomy. “But they'll also get hard from being touched. You know. The same way a boy gets hard.”

“That makes sense,” he nodded. An involuntary tremor caused her shoulders to twitch as Jeremy focused on her nipples. He immediately froze. “Should I stop?” he asked. “Or should I keep going?”

Pam pretended to mull the decision. “Umm, keep going.” She liked that he always asked for permission like a gentleman. Nevertheless, she reminded him, “You'll be gentle, right? Especially with my nipples?”

“Okay.” He paused before adding, “But sometimes you like it when I pinch.”

“Very true,” Pam conceded. “But it's always a good idea to start out gently. I'll let you know if I want you to pinch.” True to his word, Jeremy was as careful as an archaeologist excavating an ancient ruin. Pam leaned back, placing her hands on his mattress to prop herself up straight, pushing her chest forward to encourage the young boy's explorations. When his fingers caressed the undersides of her breasts, she closely studied the pleased expression on his face when he located the softness that he loved so much.

Since he was wearing his school clothes, Pam decided to make the most of it. She pointed to the chair at his desk. “What don't you have a seat?” she said, recalling another schoolboy fantasy. Under his watchful eye, she wiggled out of her jeans and underwear. Now completely naked, she knelt next to his chair to undo his belt and dress pants. He remained seated as she eased his pants down to his ankles. His underwear, though, she left in place.

Licking her lips, Pam swung a leg over him and straddled Jeremy in the chair, lowering herself until she was sitting on his lap. “Hi, Mr. Prater,” she said. “I heard you were misbehaving in math class today.”
“I was?” She could tell he was distracted by her breasts, which were perfectly situated at eye-level for him.

“Oh yes,” Pam answered. All it took was the merest shift of her hips and she could instantly feel the bulge in his underwear pressing between her spread legs. “I don't like seeing you in detention, you know. Are you going to start being a good boy?”

“Um, yeah.”

“I believe you mean 'Yes, Miss Carpenter,’” she corrected.

“Yes, Miss Carpenter,” he dutifully repeated.

“I'm glad to hear that,” she told him. “I don't play Call of Duty with bad boys.” She reached for the dried apple rings on his desk. Choosing two, she hung an apple ring from each of her stiff nipples.

“Would you like a snack, Mr. Prater?”

The eleven year old boy stared at her in surprise. With a hand behind his head, Pam guided his mouth to her breast. His lips were timid, teasing her with incidental contact, as they nibbled an apple ring. His warm breath and soft lips were heavenly. Barely taking any time to chew, Jeremy swallowed the first apple ring whole and then eagerly moved onto the second one. This time, she felt his rough teeth scrape against the sensitive tissue as he nibbled. But it was not unpleasant at all.

“Can you make sure they're clean?” she asked. “I don't want any leftover apple on my breasts.” The sight of his tongue lapping against her pink nipple made Pam press her hips hard against his underwear. He moved on to her other nipple, this time sucking gently on the hardened knob of flesh. She swooned from his attention. The soft cotton of his underwear offered just the right amount of friction against her swollen clit. An unmistakable heat emanated from his stiff bulge, urging her onward like a candle in a window. Placing her hands on his shoulders, Pam rocked her hips to and fro as she blissfully rode the young boy's hidden erection.

The combined stimulation between her legs and on her chest culminated in a delightful shiver that made her gasp. “Should I pinch yet?” Jeremy asked. His ever-vigilant hands moved into position over her nipples.

“Not yet, Mr. Prater.” He began kneading her breasts instead, causing Pam's head to roll backward. The wooden chair creaked dangerously under their combined weight but she was too far gone to stop. His underwear, now slick with her own moisture, did little to contain the unyielding hardness that poked her in all the right places.

Using his school tie, Pam pulled Jeremy closer until his face was nicely mashed between her breasts. She ground forcefully against him, her hips now frantic in their rapid movements. “Ohhh,” Pam breathed. “Are you ready? Pinch now. Pinch now!” She felt his thumb and forefinger targeting her nipples, followed by two searing pinpoints that sent her into a careening orgasm. It would have been painful in any other circumstance, but her heightened state of arousal magically transformed the pain into a devilish pleasure.

“Uurghhmm!” Pam heard something between a moan and a sigh escape her lips. Though separated by his underwear, she could easily feel his erection throbbing against her ravenous clit. She wrapped her arms around his head, holding so tight that his face was buried in her cleavage. For the longest moment, the dizzying orgasm commanded all her senses, blocking out everything. Eventually, though, she became aware of Jeremy's warm breath on her chest. Not wanting to suffocate him, she released her iron grip on his head.
He smiled broadly, his chin tucked between the valley of her breasts. “Gosh,” Jeremy said.

“I'll say,” agreed Pam, sighing. She was playing with his hair when when she felt him stiffen in her arms.

“Do you hear something?” he asked. He cocked an ear. “What was that?”

His warm body felt exceptionally nice on such a cold winter day. “What was what?” Pam replied, wiggling lazily against him. “I didn't hear anything.”

“I thought I heard someone's voice,” he told her.

Pam impulsively licked his ear, savoring the taste of his skin. “All I hear is a boy who likes to play Call of Duty,” she giggled. He was still poking her in a very intimate spot. Had he not been wearing underwear, he surely would have slipped inside. She was lost in that thought when the sound of knocking on his door startled her back to reality. Their heads swiveled in unison at the closed door, unsure if they actually heard it.

“Jeremy, I'm home!” his mom's cheerful voice intoned.

Jeremy lurched to his feet, causing Pam to stumble backward until she landed on the bed. In his panic, he forgot about the pants around his ankles and tripped, landing on the floor with a loud thump. As he kicked free of his pants, Pam was dismayed to see a large teardrop-shaped wet spot adorning the bulge of his underwear. Though her arousal sometimes soaked her own panties, this was the first time she had gotten someone else's underwear wet.

But there was no time to worry about that now. Pam's chest constricted, her heart pounding so loud that it felt as if it might leap out of her throat. Paralyzed with fear, her mind went blank. On the other side of the door, Kate hesitantly asked, “Can I come in?”

“But there was no time to worry about that now. Pam's chest constricted, her heart pounding so loud that it felt as if it might leap out of her throat. Paralyzed with fear, her mind went blank. On the other side of the door, Kate hesitantly asked, “Can I come in?”

“Just a second!” Jeremy responded. He looked at Pam in desperation. She blinked, willing her brain to think. There was no time to get dressed, so she did the only thing she could do. Naked as a jaybird, Pam dropped to the ground and rolled under his bed, moving as far away as possible from the open edge. Her clothes unceremoniously joined her as Jeremy kicked them under the bed. He cleared his throat before saying, “Um, come in.”

Pam held her breath as the door opened. Jeremy appeared to be sitting in his armchair. She hoped he had the good sense to have book or something in his lap. She definitely didn't want Kate to see the mark of telltale wetness she had left on her son's underwear.

“Hey there, kiddo. What are you up to?” The only thing Pam could see were Kate's sneakers and the ankles of her blue hospital scrubs. Cautiously, she tried to breathe. It wasn't easy because of all the dust under Jeremy's bed. Around her was the usual detritus of a preteen boy: a hopelessly tangled pair of earbuds, an empty bottle of Coppertone, a crumpled paper airplane. She wished there were a blanket down there. Goosebumps formed on her body as a chilly draft found her exposed skin.

“Just reading,” she heard Jeremy reply.

“What was that noise?”

“Noise? Oh. That was Whiskers. She got scared when you knocked on the door. She jumped off my lap.” He spoke without hesitation, his voice perfectly natural. Pam supposed that was a good thing in this instance, but she was nonetheless perturbed that he was so effortlessly lying.

“I see. Have you cut back on her servings like the vet told us to do? That cat must really be putting...
on the pounds to make such a loud noise.” Kate paused a moment. “Why on earth are you wearing your school uniform? There wasn't school today.”

Her question made Pam's heart skip a beat but Jeremy apparently had ice-cold blood in his veins. “Pam told me to put it on. She said I'm less of a troublemaker when I'm wearing it.” Under the bed, Pam blinked several times in disbelief. Had Jeremy always been this duplicitous?

“No a bad idea,” Kate laughed. “Where is she, anyway?”

“I think she's taking a nap. She said she had a headache or something.”

“I hope you weren't responsible. Have you been a good boy for her?”

“No, mom. I was really good today.”

“Did you finish your homework for tomorrow?”

“No. Pam said I could do it later.”

Pam had to roll her eyes at that one. Kate must have sniffed out that one too because she said, “I see. We've talked about this before. Pam is very nice to you. And probably lets you get away with too much. You're not taking advantage of her kindness, right?”

“Nope.”

Beyond the open door, Pam saw Whiskers poking her head into Jeremy's room. The cat headed straight for her as she lay under the bed, kicking up a dusty cloud that tickled her nostrils. Scrunching up her nose, Pam desperately tried to contain the urge to sneeze.

She lost the battle. “Ah-choo!”

Fearing the worst, she clapped a hand over her wildly itchy nose. It was a full-fledged sneeze, the kind that could wake the dead. Surely his mom couldn't have missed it?

“Bless you,” she heard Kate say.

“Um, thanks,” Jeremy answered. Kate didn't notice that the sneeze came from under the bed? Utterly dumbfounded, Pam pinched her nose to keep from sneezing again. Whiskers's tail kept batting her in the face, causing her to lose track of what was happening up above. She dropped completely out of the conversation until she heard Kate say something about a woman being able to recognize her own bra.

Worriedly, Pam pawed at the pile of clothing that Jeremy had kicked under the bed. Her jeans and shirt were there. Her panties were there. Her bra was... not there. Kate's next words made her shiver in fear.

“Why is Pam's bra in your room?”

“Fuckfuckfuck,” Pam thought. She shut her eyes and prayed to every deity she could think of. “Just let us get out of this and I will never, ever lay my hands on Jeremy again.” Heck, she would take a lifelong vow of abstinence, move to the countryside and join an abbey. The other nuns would refer to her as Sister Pam. Her days would be spent cooking plain rice and sweeping the cold stone floors. Every Sunday she would cast yearning glances to the altar boys at mass, then immediately retire to her austere room to beg for forgiveness and recite one hundred Our Fathers.

Sister Pam was trying to envision herself in a nun's habit when, once again, Jeremy covered as best he could. “I don't know. Pam was folding laundry this morning. I guess she forgot it here.”
“All right then.” Pam could clearly hear the doubt in Kate's voice. “Uh, don't forget to give it back to her. Okay?” Kate's feet headed for the door. Pam quietly crossed herself. Did his mom actually buy the laundry story? They exchanged a few more words that Pam missed. All she cared about was the sight of the bedroom door as it swung closed. After it clicked shut, she held her breath. The patter of Kate's receding footsteps was like the triumphant sound of angels sounding their trumpets in jubilee.

“You can come out now,” Jeremy said. Pam rolled out from under the dusty bed. Standing up, she took a relieved breath of fresh air. “Was it cold down there?” he asked.

“It was freezing,” Pam began. Then she noticed he was looking at her breasts when he posed his question. Her nipples were hard again, though this time because of the cold air. Suddenly self-conscious, Pam retrieved her bra and got dressed.

“Why are you putting your clothes on?” Jeremy demanded.

“You're mom is home, duh,” Pam said, extricating her panties from the bunched up pile of clothes. “I've had enough close calls for one day. Could you Google ‘heart attack’ and monitor me for any symptoms?”

“But what about my turn?” Jeremy asked.

The panic from getting caught had effectively erased her earlier arousal. “Sorry, Jeremy. I really am.” It wasn't until she yanked on her shirt and jeans that Pam finally felt secure enough to breathe normally. “But there is no way we are ever playing Call of Duty again when your mom is home.”

“But didn't you hear her say she was taking a bath? Can't we just do it really quick?”

“Nope.” Pam steadfastly crossed her arms. It wasn't easy to argue with an eleven year old boy. Particularly when he was wearing school clothes on top and underwear on the bottom. After enduring his glare for several seconds, Pam thought she had won but Jeremy responded by moving a chair in front of the door.

“I'm not letting you leave this room until we play Call of Duty.” He sat down in the chair and leaned against the door.

“Oh, really?” Pam asked.

“Really.”

Pam sat down on his bed. “So I guess we'll just stay in here until we die of starvation.”

“Technically, we would die of dehydration first,” Jeremy informed her. “You can live for a month without food but only three days without water.”

“In that case, I would open the window and eat snow,” Pam said. “But I wouldn't let you have any. So, technically, you'll die of dehydration before I would.”

“Well, that snow is super dirty anyway,” Jeremy countered. “You'll probably get dysentery. And then have diarrhea so bad that you'll get even more dehydrated. So you'll die first after all.”

“Yes, but if you have to watch me battle a raging case of diarrhea in your bedroom, you'll get so disgusted that you'll start throwing up and...” Pam trailed off. Playing a game of ‘gross-out’ against a young boy was probably a losing strategy. “This is getting stupid,” she told him. “Fine. We can play Call of Duty.” She patted the bed. “Why don't you come over here?”
Jeremy eagerly rose from the chair blockading the door. As he settled onto the bed next to her, Pam fondly straightened the hair on his forehead and smiled. He beamed at her in return, which made her feel ever-so-slightly guilty about what she was planning to do. Placing a hand on his knee, she lingered just a second before quickly pushing herself off the bed, triumphantly making a beeline for the door. “Sucker!” she called over her shoulder.

“Hey!” Jeremy tried to tackle her but instead landed on the floor with a crash. Flailing wildly, he managed to wrap his arms around her ankle. Pam was halfway to the door but now she was anchored by the full weight of Jeremy's seventy-five pounds. She could hear his skin squeak against the hardwood floor as she dragged him along.

“I'm... almost... there!” Pam announced, gasping with each step. By the time she reached the door, however, she was so exhausted that she plopped onto the chair for a break.

Still laying on the floor, Jeremy clutched her ankle as if his life depended on it. “Please?” he asked, pressing his cheek against her leg.

Pam sighed. “You're never going to let go of my ankle, are you?”

“Have been thinking of playing Call of Duty with you all weekend,” he confided.

Her heart melted, just a little. “Aww... really?”

“I mean, it feels weird playing Call of Duty at my dad's. I keep worrying about getting caught. So I decided to wait. It's way more fun to play with you anyway.”

“Aww...” Pam said again. Though it was adorable the way he clung to her ankle, it was somewhat disconcerting to carry on a conversation with him lying on the floor. “C'mere, you,” she said, pulling him onto her lap. She cradled him in her arms. “You waited all weekend just for me?”

Jeremy nodded. As he sat side-saddle in her lap, Pam rested her hand against his bare thighs. He put a hand on hers and shyly admitted, “I kept, um, you know. Getting boners.”

Pam giggled. “Aw... you got a boner? When you thought about little ol' me?”

“Sure.”

Her fingers caressed the bulge in his underwear. If Kate was in the bath, she reasoned, then surely they had at least half an hour. And they didn't need half an hour. They only needed a few minutes. “You poor thing,” Pam soothed. “I think you have a boner right now too, don't you?”

“Oh huh.”

“Want me to help you take care of it?”

“Okay!” he agreed. “I mean, if you're offering...”

“I am. Go get the stuff,” she told him. Ever since she gave it to him for Christmas, Jeremy had referred to the lubricant as 'stuff' instead of K-Y. She ended up adopting the term as well.

He slid off her lap, then paused. “Wait. This isn't another trick is it?”

“No trick. I swear.”

“Well... just in case, then.” Jeremy pulled her to her feet and clamped a hand around her wrist. Having no choice, Pam followed docilely as he retrieved the bottle of K-Y from its hiding spot
behind the corner of his mattress. He handed it to her.

She gave the bottle an amazed shake. “How did we go through an entire bottle of stuff already?” she wondered. “That's a lot of Call of Duty for one boy.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot to tell you last time. We're almost out.”

“I'll pick up some more next time I go shopping,” Pam promised. She led him back to the door.

“Why are we doing it over here?”

“I'm a little on edge, okay?” she explained. She moved the chair aside. “Just lean your back against the door. You're going to be our security system. Just make sure that door stays closed.” He dubiously did as she asked. “Let's get you out of this underwear,” Pam said, eying the wet spot she had left on him. Since she was kneeling before him, she had an excellent view of his bouncing erection as she freed him of his underpants.

Without further ado, Pam squirted some K-Y into her palm and began waving him off. While Jeremy had finally moved on from using Coppertone as a lubricant, he still bitterly complained whenever she tried to coax him into the traditional jacking off motion she had taught him while vacationing in Florida. If Kate weren't home, Pam would have taken the opportunity to acclimate him to jacking off. As it was, she was still a bundle of nerves and there was no time to waste.

The motion of her hand against his penis had the same effect as a tranquilizer dart. Leaning against the door, Jeremy's shoulders drooped in relaxation and his eyes fluttered shut. Pam, however, kept her own eyes peeled. Her ears perked up at every sound from the other side of the door.

It was no fun playing Call of Duty when she was so anxious. In attempt to calm her nerves, Pam tried to return to the schoolboy fantasy. Here's Jeremy in his shirt and tie, she told herself. We're not in his bedroom. We're in a classroom. I made him stay inside for recess. He has his underwear around his ankles. She planted a kiss on his bare thigh to get his attention. “Does that feel nice?” she asked.

Opening his eyes, Jeremy nodded. “Yes.”

Pam cocked an eyebrow at him. “Yes, what?” she prompted, straightening his tie.

“Uh, yes, Miss Carpenter.”

“Good boy.” Still waving him off with her right hand, Pam used her left to fondle the baby-smooth surface of his hairless scrotum. She softly probed to locate the twin globes under his puckered pink skin. “Are you getting close?”

“Yes, Miss Carpenter.”

Between her legs, her insides throbbed each time he said those words, helping her forget that they weren't home alone. “Are you going to remember your manners and ask for permission this time?”

Jeremy opened his mouth to speak, but a shudder interrupted him. His eyes closed again. Pam felt his hips thrust forward against her palm. Subtly, her palm transitioned to a circular waving pattern that never failed to push him over the edge.

Jeremy took a deep breath. “Miss Carpenter? May I... um...”

Pam realized he didn't know how to word his request, which was terribly cute. And also terribly hot.
Taking pity on him, she said, “Yes, you may.”

“Uh... Uh!” The young boy grunted twice, each sound punctuated by an involuntary tremble of his hips. His orgasm was so powerful that he sagged against the door. His knees buckled, forcing him to clutch her shoulder for support. “Oh Pam!”

She was somewhat chagrined that he forgot to call her Miss Carpenter, but it was a forgivable offense, considering the circumstances. Pam didn't stop waving him off until she heard the soft thud of his head as it lolled back against the door. Jeremy sighed and sank to the floor in a crumpled heap.

“That good, huh?” Pam commented. Instead of answering, he curled into a ball, drawing his knees to his chest and closing his eyes. Pam looked around for something to wipe her hands clean. The last thing she wanted was to run into Kate with K-Y dripping from her hand. “Oh Jeremy. Quit playing around. If you're going to nap, at least get in your bed, will you?”

He still didn't answer. Pam prodded him with her toe. Nothing. While this was not the first time she witnessed his post-orgasmic narcolepsy, this was undoubtedly the strangest place he had ever succumbed to it. Covering him with a blanket, Pam inched open the door just enough to squeeze through. Knowing her son as well as she did, Kate probably wouldn't find it too weird to discover Jeremy sleeping on the floor.

Pam was washing her hands free of K-Y at the kitchen sink when Kate entered. “Oh, hi Kate,” she said, pretending to be surprised. “I didn't know you were home.”

“I got lucky with the schedule and came home early,” she explained. “How are you doing? Jeremy told me you had a headache.”

“I did, but it passed. Thankfully.” Pam dried her hands on the kitchen towel. “I took a nap, which helped. It's probably this dark winter weather that's getting to me.”

“Is Jeremy around?” Kate asked, peering into the den.

“Um, no. I just checked on him. He's taking a nap.”

“That boy sure does nap a lot lately,” Kate remarked. “I suppose it's a good thing. Growing boys need their rest.”

“Definitely,” Pam agreed.

“Speaking of growing boys...” Kate seated herself at the kitchen counter. “I realize this is coming from left field, Pam, so feel free to say no.”

Pam noticed the way Kate was nervously fiddling with a napkin. “What's up? Is everything okay?”

“This is a bit embarrassing,” Kate began. “But, you know, Jeremy is getting older and we, I mean William and I, neither of us have spoken to him yet about, um, the birds and the bees. Don't get me wrong. Jeremy knows where babies come from, but we never really explained the, uh, mechanics behind it. And now William and I separated, of course, which means I'll have to explain on my own. And I'm not exactly looking forward to it. Would you mind being present when I give Jeremy the, ahem...” Kate blushed a deep red before finishing, “the sex talk?”
Chapter Summary

Kate enlists Pam in talking to her son about the birds and the bees. Pam continues Jeremy's education once Kate leaves.

Today was the day. A half-dozen outfits were scattered across Pam's bed with more on the way as she discarded unlikely options. Inspired by the notion that it would be smart to dress professionally for the sex talk, Pam had spent the last hour rooting through her closet in search of the forgotten business attire that she wore in her office days. She had already gathered her brown hair into a bun (the most conservative style possible, she figured) but the accompanying clothes had vexed her. Stepping in front of the mirror, she examined her latest choice: a navy button-down shirt paired with a cream-colored pencil skirt. Pam frowned, even though she looked quite nice. The skirt flattered her hips while the fitted shirt emphasized her feminine curves and graceful arms.

“Ugh. I look like a sexy librarian,” Pam muttered. “Christ.” Sighing, she returned to her closet. Next up was a dark ocean-blue skirt with pleats and a glimmering metallic thread. This was one of her favorites back in the day. She pulled on a black cotton sweater and turned to the mirror. Frowning again, she checked her profile. Maybe it was her imagination, but every outfit so far had somehow magnified her bustline well beyond her modest 32B.

Perhaps dressing up was the wrong idea. If anything, she needed to dress down.

Back to the closet. A shapeless gray turtleneck and an ill-fitting pair of khakis. Undoing the hair bun, she used her fingers to untousle her brown locks, letting them untidily fall to her shoulders. She checked herself in the mirror and found, quite possibly, the world's most unstylish woman. Dowdy even. The high-waisted pants were reminiscent of mom jeans. Her bangs seemed windblown. Since she wore her usual minimal makeup, the lifeless gray sweater rendered her complexion sallow.

Perfect.

If she had to talk about sex with Jeremy and his mom, then she wanted to look as unattractive as possible. Kate wouldn't suspect a thing. “Who, me?” she rehearsed into the mirror. She tried to look surprised and innocent at the same time. “I wouldn't do that.” It was an awful performance, and one she hopefully wouldn't have to trot out. If only she had fallen in with drama crowd back in high school.

She peeked in the living room. Kate was nowhere to be found so she decided to make herself some tea. Pam rifled through the selection in the kitchen cupboard. Black tea was not an option. The caffeine would make her even more jittery. Chamomile might have helped, but it would also render her catatonic. That would not do. She needed to keep her wits about her. Passionflower? Supposedly relaxing, but she didn't trust the 'passion' part. Mother's milk? She wondered how long that had been sitting in the cupboard.

She finally narrowed her choices to two: Zen or Stress Relief. The former had both spearmint and green tea, a combination meant to create clarity and alertness. The latter claimed to 'promote a state of relaxed awareness without compromising mental functions.' Hemming and hawing, Pam chose the Zen. Unfurling the string from the teabag, she found a short message on the square of paper: “A
cherry blossom whispers to the damp earth in springtime.”

It was likely meant to be some sort of inspirational message. Pam pondered it for a moment before dipping the teabag into her waiting cup. Great brown plumes spread like tentacles inside the teacup as the leaves met the hot water. Maybe it was the power of suggestion, but she could already feel clarity from the mere scent of the tea. That had to be a good sign.

“All right, Pam,” Kate said, entering the kitchen. “I think I've got everything ready.” She carried a large packet of papers, a book, index cards and an assortment of pens. She glanced at Pam with concern. “Are you feeling all right? You look a bit peaked.”

“It's nothing. I didn't sleep well last night. I think it's catching up with me.”

Kate nodded sympathetically. “Hopefully tonight will be a quiet night.” She arranged her things on the table. “I guess it's now or never. Can you call him in?”

It was the moment Pam had been dreading. “This Zen tea better fucking work,” she thought grimly. The sex talk had weighed heavily over her like a dark cloud ever since Kate proposed it. She could have prepped Jeremy about the impending discussion, but she didn't trust him to play it cool with or without advanced warning. Either way, Pam felt certain they would somehow be outed once the talk began.

Kate settled herself at the dinner table while Pam opened the door to the backyard. The cold air made her shiver. Though the sun was setting later and later every day, a layer of snow still covered the ground. Based on the scattered footprints imprinted in the winter landscape, it was still at least two feet deep. Pam's eyes followed the pockmarks until she found Jeremy and his friend Ashton throwing snowballs on the far side of the yard.

“Fuck! You almost hit me right in the eye!” Jeremy hollered as he narrowly dodged a snowball. “Fucker!” His voice echoed across the barren winter landscape.

“Jeremy Prater!” Pam reprimanded haughtily from across the yard. “Language.”

“Sorry, Pam,” Jeremy said, not even turning to look at her. The two boys gave nary a pause before resuming their snowball fight. Jeremy ducked behind a tree to shield himself. “Pam, tell Ashton to stop throwing snowballs above the shoulders!” he yelled. “It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye.” Peeking out from the tree, he launched a volley of snowballs that went whump-whump-whump as they landed against the fence behind his friend.


“Don't be stupid. My aim is good, but even I can't hit a target that small.”

“All right, both of you be quiet,” Pam ordered, raising her voice to be heard above the din. She wondered how many neighbors were eavesdropping. “Jeremy, can you come inside? Ashton, can you go home?”


“No. Your mom and I want to... talk to you.”

“Ha ha!” Ashton gloated. “You're in trouble!”

“I am not!”
They began wrestling in the snow. Pam shivered again. “Two minutes, Jeremy!” she warned. “Will you be inside the house in two minutes?”

“Be there in a second!” He yanked Ashton's hat until it covered his eyes, then planted him face-first into the snow.

Pam retreated into the warm house. “He's on his way,” she told Kate. The sound of squawking boys (and more swears) leaked inside before she fully closed the door.

“Sounds like World War Three out there,” Kate said. “What is up with him lately? Is it just me or has he been ten times as destructive?”

Pam sat down at the table and warmed her hands on her still-steeping mug of tea. She knew exactly what was up. Ever since that day she asked Pam to attend the sex talk, Kate's maternal instincts had kicked into high gear and she had pledged to stop being an absentee parent. Paranoia set in as Pam wondered if his mom had somehow sniffed out what had been going on between her son and a woman more than twice his age.

But Kate's admission seemed far more plausible. “I feel like I'm really missing out,” she had told Pam. “Being a mom for Jeremy. Being a girlfriend for David. I haven't been doing a good job at either of those things. I'm spending half my life slaving away at the hospital. It's got to stop.” Not one to make an idle threat, Kate immediately cut back her hours. For the past two weeks, she had adopted a very flexible 9 to 5 schedule that let her send Jeremy off to school in the morning and have dinner with them each evening. Her constant presence had subsequently derailed any potential Call of Duty sessions.

There was nothing like sexual deprivation to bring out the hyperactivity in an eleven year old boy. He had been a nightmare to be around the past week, constantly pushing boundaries and trying her patience. Fed up with his boundless zeal, Pam had sent him outside two hours ago to play with Ashton. Based on the snowy fistfight, however, Jeremy had burned off very little energy.

Truthfully? There was really only one thing that could calm him down. And that thing was unfortunately off the table.

Of course, she couldn't say any of this to Kate. “I'm not sure what his deal is,” Pam said, pretending to take a thoughtful sip of her Zen tea. “Cabin fever, maybe? He's probably been cooped up inside for too long.”

The backdoor opened then slammed shut, followed by the sound of Jeremy shaking the snow off his boots with a series of trampling thumps on the doormat. He immediately began shedding his winter gear upon arriving in the dining room, revealing his sweaty red hair and a long-sleeved shirt adorned with a snowboarder's silhouette (flipping double birds) and the declaration 'Give the People What They Want!' When they saw it at the mall, Jeremy wouldn't stop begging for the shirt until Pam finally caved. Even though he wore it at least three times a week, Kate had not yet noticed the snowboarder's obscene gesture.

“Was it chilly out there?” Kate asked him. “Your cheeks are all rosy.”

“It wasn't too bad,” he answered. He stepped close to Pam, pressing his cold cheek against her face. She squeaked in surprise and pushed him away.

“Quit it! Your skin is like ice!” This was exactly what she had been dealing with all week.

Jeremy took a seat next to her. He took one glance at her, then did a double take, looking her up and
down. Befuddled by her clothing choices, he gave her an odd look. It was the same expression he made when he tasted okra for the first time. Pam ignored him. “Can we have hot cocoa?” Jeremy asked, punching her leg. “It'll help warm me up.”

“Not now,” Pam told him. She snatched his hand in mid-punch and placed it on his lap. “Hands to yourself, please. Put on a sweater if you're cold.”

Jeremy helped himself to her mug of tea. “Hey, this is pretty good,” he said, tentatively taking a slurp. “Needs sugar though.” After a few sips, he held the mug to his face to warm his cheeks. Once it became clear that she wasn't getting her tea back, Pam went to the kitchen to make herself a new cup.

“Why did you guys call me in, anyway?” Jeremy asked. “I had Ashton in this killer headlock. He was so desperate to get out that he said I could have his black light. And his disco ball.”

Kate nervously cleared her throat. “I've been meaning to talk to you about something. For a long time now. It's something every parent eventually has to do. Pam has graciously agreed to be here for... moral support.”

Pam returned with her fresh cup of tea. Rather than sit next to him, she took the spot across from Jeremy. Her jangled nerves would benefit from the decreased proximity, she reasoned. But since Kate sat at the head of the table, Pam now felt as if she were at a court hearing.

Jeremy stared questioningly at his mom. “Are you going to tell me I was adopted?” he asked, pulling his sleeves over his hands.

“No, Jeremy,” Kate said.

Jeremy shrugged. “That's a relief. I guess.” A worried look crossed his face. “Um... is this about the missing TV remote?” Jeremy set aside the tea and sat up straight. “Okay, I admit it. I accidentally dropped it in the toilet and it stopped working. So I just threw it in the trash and told you guys it was lost.”

“That's not what we were planning to discuss either,” Kate said, massaging her temples.

Pam scratched her head. “Well, that explains why you've been volunteering to change the channel every time I dig in the couch cushions for the remote.”

“Your'e welcome,” Jeremy answered graciously.

“Though I won't ask why you had the remote in the bathroom in the first place,” Pam added.

“Thanks!”

“So anyway,” Kate interrupted. “Jeremy, you're going to be twelve in a few months. So we wanted to talk to you about sex. And answer any questions you might have.”

“Sex?” Jeremy repeated. The moment he said it, he looked straight at Pam in alarm.

“As in where babies come from,” Pam said, wishing he would return to a neutral expression. “And how they're made. That kind of sex. Specifically for making babies.” Did she sound off-kilter? Pam gulped some tea to calm herself.

There was an awkward pause as they waited for him to respond. “I know all that already,” Jeremy attested.
“Then perhaps you'd like to explain it to me,” Kate said. The conversation had barely started but Pam already didn't like the direction it was moving.

“Right now?” Seeing his mom's resolute expression, Jeremy began a halting explanation. “Well, you know... a man puts his thing inside a woman.”

“His thing?” Kate asked.

“Uh, his penis,” Jeremy clarified. His ears turned beet red. Chuckling nervously, he continued, “He puts it inside the woman.”

“Where does he put it?”

“You know. In her vagina.” He glanced at Pam again.

“Take it from the top,” Kate suggested.

Jeremy took a deep breath. “A man puts his penis inside a woman's vagina. And then he, um, shoots his stuff. Inside her vagina. And if it's a good shot, then she'll have a baby a few months later. It'll come out of her vagina.”

Pam cringed, and not just because it was embarrassing to hear him talk about sex. Each time he said 'vagina,' Jeremy would pointedly look in her direction. Subtly was not his strongest suit. She restlessly tugged at the collar of her sweater. The turtleneck suddenly seemed terribly tight around her throat, almost as if it were choking her.

“How many months before the baby comes out?” Kate challenged.

Jeremy stroked his chin like a college professor. “Let's see, it's... nine months.”

Pam smiled brightly at Kate. “Welp. He knows everything. Looks like our work here is done!”

“Whew!” Jeremy stood up to leave but Kate stopped him.

“Not so fast.” She slid something across the table. “Do you know what this is?”

Jeremy peered at the wrapped condom. “Sure. It's a rubber.”

“What's it for?” Kate asked.

“It keeps a guy's stuff from, um, getting a girl pregnant.”

Kate raised an eyebrow at her son. “His stuff?”

“His... white stuff?” Jeremy attempted to clarify.

“His semen,” Kate corrected.

“Semen,” Jeremy dutifully repeated. He continued, “Oh, and it also prevents diseases that you can get from sex.” Pam chugged more tea, wishing she had chosen the stress relieving kind. Her stomach did flip-flops each time he recited these clinical sex terms.

“Right. Condoms prevent pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. So maybe you knew more about sex than I gave you credit for,” Kate said wonderingly. “Where did you pick all this up?”

Once again, Jeremy glanced at Pam. This time, it did not escape his mom. A small, suspicious smile formed on her lips. “Wait. Did you and Pam already talk about all this stuff?”
“No!” Pam denied. Closing her eyes in a long blink, the first thought that entered her mind was the Zen message on the teabag. “A cherry blossom whispers to the damp earth in springtime,” she thought.

“Dad told me this a few years ago,” Jeremy volunteered.

Kate was stunned. “Dad? Like... your dad?”

“Sure.”

Now embarrassed, Kate sat back in her chair. “He never told me that,” she admitted.

“And sometimes the guys at school talk about it,” Jeremy added. “I know a lot of stuff.”

“Our work here is done?” Pam repeated.

Jeremy turned to leave. “Hold up,” Kate said. She was apparently having difficulty believing her son was so well-versed in sex. “So you know everything about the sperm and the egg? All that?”

“Yup.”

“Do you know how they're really tiny?” Kate asked. “How a woman's body has several hundred thousands of eggs?”

Jeremy's curiosity was finally piqued. “Really? Several hundred thousands of eggs?” He paused, digesting the number. “Even you, Pam?”

Mortified, Pam studied the bottom of her teacup, swirling the liquid in a circle. She muttered, “Yes, Jeremy. Even me.”

Kate, however, seemed relieved at this turn of events. “Ah ha! So you don't know everything. I love it when our conversations have an educational purpose.” Jeremy groaned. Kate passed out index cards, then handed them each a pen. “Why don’t you write down some questions you have about sex?” she said, addressing Jeremy. “Pam and I will write some questions too. Like the kind of questions we had when we were your age.”

The room went silent as everyone picked up a pen. Pam stared at her two blank index cards. It was difficult to wind the clock back fifteen years and remember how she thought back then. Jeremy had no such trouble though. Having already completed his own two cards, he stacked them into a neat pile as he waited for them to finish.

“Are you really going to answer any questions I have?” Jeremy asked.

“Of course,” Kate promised.

“Can I have some more cards?” Kate passed him the deck of blank index cards. Pam nervously adjusted her turtleneck as he began writing more questions. What was he going to ask? Even after several minutes of wracking her brain, she had written nothing at all. Once he finished writing, Jeremy started building a house of cards using the blank index cards. Pam finally managed to write something down by the time he started construction on a second level. Setting down her pen, she gave up on the next index card after noticing that Kate only filled out a single one as well.

“Everybody done with their questions?” Kate inquired. “I'll go first.” Reading aloud from her card, she said, “Is it wrong to masturbate?”
“It's not wrong,” Jeremy stated. His house of cards was a sprawling structure, like a poorly planned suburban home. He began adding a third level.

“And how do you know that?” Kate inquired.

“Pam told me so.” The instant he said it, Jeremy clapped a hand to his mouth. His house of cards collapsed, fluttering to the table like the beating wings of a butterfly swarm. Pam's heart stopped. She knew it. She just knew Jeremy would somehow out them during this conversation. Even a million cherry blossoms whispering to the damp earth could not save her now.

“Pam?” Kate swiveled to look at her, but her expression was more amused than angry.

“It just came up one day,” Pam offered. “I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I figured that would be your answer too. That it wasn't wrong to masturbate.”

“It's okay! Totally understandable that he would come to you.” She added thoughtfully, “It just goes to show that I've been putting in too many hours at the hospital. Thank you for giving him a straight answer.”

“You're welcome,” Pam said. Jeremy remained silent during this exchange, though his lips were pursed in guilt.

“You two and your secrets,” Kate chuckled. “I knew you were keeping something from me.”

Pam groped for a way to change the subject. “Want to do my question next?” She handed Kate her index card.

“How does a condom work?” Kate read. It was the most innocuous question that Pam could think of.

“I already know that.” Jeremy proclaimed. Having abandoned his house of cards, he was now fiddling with the oversized rubber band that Kate used to keep her papers organized. “Everybody knows how they work.”

Kate grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl and handed it to her son. “Why don't you demonstrate for us?” She slid the wrapped condom across the table.

Not expecting this challenge, Jeremy nervously set aside the rubber band and picked up the condom. Unable to open the packet with his fingers, the young boy resorted to using his teeth to tear it open. It was an unabashedly bro move that made Pam blush. Glancing at Kate, she saw a distinctly nonplussed expression on his mom's face. Jeremy fished out the condom with delicate fingers, as if he were handling radioactive material.

His eyes darted between the condom and banana as he mentally figured out the mechanics. Pam and Kate watched as he tried to apply the condom to the tip of the banana. He would have been successful had he not applied the condom upside down. After a long minute of futile tinkering, he finally gave up. “I can't figure it out,” he confessed, holding out the condom to his mom. “Can you show me?”

“Don't ask me,” Kate shrugged. “You said everybody knows how they work, Mr. Know-It-All.”

Scowling at his mom, Jeremy turned to Pam. “Can you help me? Please?”

His cheeks were red with embarrassment. There was only so much needling he could take and Pam couldn't bear to see him this way. She held out her hand, expecting him to pass her both the banana
and condom. Instead, he only gave her the condom. Leaning across the dinner table, Jeremy held the banana in place for her, gripping it with both hands.

“Um, so you want to make sure it goes on this way,” she explained, positioning the condom on the banana. “You had it upside down before. When it’s right side up, you can just roll it on. Like this.”

As if it wasn't mortifying enough to roll a condom onto a banana, Pam was doubly flustered to do so under Kate's watchful eye.

“Oh. I get it now.” He eyed the condom-clad banana. “So that's all there is to it?”

“Yes, that's all. The banana is ready to...” She noticed Kate smirking at her. “Uh, whatever.”

“You're way too nice to him,” Kate told Pam. “I was planning to let him fumble around for a few more minutes before helping.”

Jeremy gave his mom the evil eye. Setting aside the banana, he retrieved the rubber band he was previously playing with. There was a dour silence, punctuated by the twanging sound as he stretched it across his fingers.

“For goodness' sake, I was just teasing,” Kate said. “Don't sulk. Want to do your questions now?”

He sullenly handed her his cards. Pam prayed he had written harmless questions about using deodorant or preventing acne. Her hopes were dashed when Kate read the first question: “When does a guy start making semen?” There was another pause while Kate pondered the question. Pam's thoughts returned to cherry blossoms and damp earth.

“Um, do you mean when does a guy start ejaculating?” Kate clarified. “That's the term for when a guy starts... Well, you know, making semen.”

“Yeah that,” Jeremy nodded. Still tinkering with the rubber band, he used a pen cap to strum it like a guitar. It was obvious absent-minded puttering. Pam wished he would just pay attention.

“Well, it completely varies from person to person,” Kate said. “I suppose it's the same as a girl wondering when she'll need her first bra. Everyone is different. You shouldn't worry if you're not ejaculating yet.”

The twanging rubber band rose in pitch. “I wasn't talking about me!” Jeremy objected. “Geez mom.” He glowered at his mother as only a preteen was capable.

“Sorry!” Kate visibly withered from Jeremy's glare. “Must you give me that look? You're making me feel bad.” She looked to Pam for assistance.

“It's like a girl wondering when she'll get her first period,” Pam said, careful to keep her words neutral. She had been hoping to stay on the sidelines for this one. “It'll happen when it happens. Probably when you... ahem, that is, when a boy least expec-” Pam was cut off mid-sentence when Jeremy, having fashioned a catapult from the rubber band, accidentally launched the pen cap into the air, striking her square between the eyes.

“Ow!” Pam exclaimed. The pen cap ricocheted off her head, bounced twice on the table, then fell onto the floor in a subdued clatter. She rubbed the spot on her forehead, checking her fingers for blood. Seeing none, she decided she was more surprised than hurt.

Jeremy froze, then smiled politely. “Oops! Sorry about that.” He innocently straightened in his chair, folding his fingers together in a belated show of diligence.
Kate, however, was having none of it. She took away the rubber band. “Quit it. You're going to blind someone.”

With nothing to keep them occupied, Jeremy's hands fidgeted. “So... theoretically... how will I know when I'm e-jaculating?” Pam and Kate exchanged a stifled look of amusement. He incorrectly emphasized the first syllable, pronouncing it the same way as ‘eBook.’ Jeremy continued, “Will the stuff just start coming out?”

“Well, no, it won't just start, um, coming out,” Kate began. “It will happen when... you know. You're...” Too uncomfortable to continue, she once again looked to Pam for help.

Pam bravely cleared her throat. No more sugarcoating, she decided. “Ejaculation happens you have an orgasm,” she stated. (Trust me, she wanted to say, you're not ejaculating yet.) “So, like, when a boy is masturbating. It will come out then.”

“Oh, I didn't know that.” Jeremy considered this new nugget of information. “I thought it would come out the same way pee does. Like you could just stand there and make it come out.”

“I knew your dad would miss some details,” Kate said smugly. “It's a good thing we're having this discussion.”

“Let's do another question,” Pam said, reaching for the next index card. “I'll read it.” Her heart sank when she saw what Jeremy had written in his inimitable sixth-grade cursive. “What is oral sex???” she read aloud, repeating the three question marks.

“At school we joke that oral sex is when you talk about sex,” Jeremy said. “But I know it's not that.”

“Ha ha, how funny!” Kate said with a forced laugh. “Oral sex is when a person... puts their mouth on another person's private parts.” Jeremy didn't seem to understand that, so she added, “For example, a person using their mouth on someone's penis.”

“Or a person using their mouth on a girl's... parts,” Pam chimed in.

But Jeremy was stuck on his mom's explanation. “Oh, sure,” he nodded. “Mouth on penis.” He looked at Pam with a hint of accusation.

“ Weird is relative,” Kate demurred. “Don't you remember a few years ago when you thought girls were full of cooties? You thought kissing a girl was the grossest thing ever. Now I bet you can't wait for your first kiss.”

Pam's hand twitched so hard that she set down her tea cup with a rattle, but no one noticed. “A cherry blossom whispers to the damp earth in springtime,” she thought. The mantra bounced around her head like a ping-pong ball. “A cherry blossom whispers-”

Jeremy interrupted her inner monologue with another question. “Does everyone do oral sex?” he asked.

“Probably not everyone,” Kate answered. “That's like asking if everyone eats pizza. I suppose it depends on if you like it or not.”

“That makes sense,” he nodded. Looking directly at Pam, he defensively said, “Everyone likes different things.”

“That's true,” she agreed. “But most people like pizza.” Pam wanted to point out that there was once a time when Jeremy only ate cheese pizza before branching out to other toppings. But perhaps it was
best to save that retort for later.

Besides, Kate had already moved on to the next index card. Ominously, Kate blushed then chuckled anxiously before reading the question. “What is a dildo for?”

Both Pam and Kate paused for so long that Jeremy began tapping his fingers on the table. “So, what is it? I mean, I know it has something to do with sex.”

“It's...” Kate couldn't continue.

“An object,” Pam interjected.

“Yes, an object. Used for... um...”

Pam could easily imagine describing it to Jeremy if they were alone. It was a different story with his mom in the room. She haltingly added, “A woman uses it. Or sometimes a man too.”

Kate nodded. “That's right. She puts it inside her body. Or he puts it in his.”

Jeremy was utterly lost. “So it's like one of those tampon things?”

“No, it's not like that,” Kate told him. She glanced at Pam. “Can you do it? You're so much better at ripping off the band-aid than I am.”

Draining her tea, Pam pictured a Zen garden. In Japan. With gently falling cherry blossoms. “A dildo is a penis-shaped object,” she said, not mincing words. “A woman puts it in her vagina when she's masturbating. Or sometimes another person might use it on her.” Despite her bravado, her ears flushed red as she spoke.

“Thank you, Pam,” Kate said. “Does that answer your question, Jeremy?”

He scratched his head, still processing this information. “But why would a woman want to use one in the first place?”

Pam and Kate exchanged another look. “Because it feels good,” Pam finally answered.

“You know that sex feels good for a woman, right?” Kate prodded.

“Of course I know that.” He blushed so red that his face matched his carrot colored hair, then he gave Pam a knowing look. It might have been classified as leering had he been older, but from Jeremy it was merely a shy smile.

Kate was thankfully too busy looking through her papers to notice. Nevertheless, his furtive glances had to stop. Pam reached for an index card. When Kate wasn't looking, Pam nonchalantly held up an index card in a spot only Jeremy could see. It read, in large block letters, 'STOP LOOKING AT ME!' Upon reading the message, Jeremy immediately glanced at her again with a questioning expression. Already anticipating this, Pam held up a second card reading 'I SAID STOP'.

He rolled his eyes in annoyance. She knew he hated being scolded, particularly when he didn't understand why she was mad. He turned to his mom, purposely angling his shoulders away from her. “Are we almost done, mom?”

“Not quite yet, dear. Darn it. I had a great print-out about this topic. But now I can't find it.” Kate disappointedly set aside the sheaf of papers. “Do you know what consent means, Jeremy?”

“Yeah. It's when you have someone's permission to do something.”
“Exactly,” Kate said. “So you know that women can enjoy sex, but that doesn't mean you can do whatever you want. You need to get their consent first. You need to ask.”

“How do I ask?”

“You know. You just ask. Like, 'May I kiss you?'”

“What if I'm asking for other, um, stuff?”

Pam excused herself from the table. “I need more tea,” she said quietly. “Anyone else want some?” Neither of them answered, but she saw Kate shift uncomfortably in her chair. Pam kept one ear on the conversation as she gratefully took refuge in the kitchen.

Kate said, “When that time comes, then you ask the same way. 'Do you want to... whatever.'”

“So I should ask, 'Do you want to do sex?'” Jeremy pressed.

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves,” Kate said. “All of this is a long ways off. I mean, I don't want you to get the idea that you'll leave this table and start having sex. But yes, when the time comes, you could ask a girl, ‘Do you want to have sex?’ And then respect what she says. If she says no, then you back off.”

“What if she says yes?”

“Then you still have to remember your manners,” Kate said.

Like a chess grandmaster, Pam could see the board several moves in advance. Too many times to count, she had sympathetically listened to Kate's venting about her son's rough-housing nature. Sensing where Kate was guiding the conversation, Pam quickly returned to dinner table with the electric kettle and an assortment of teabags.

Kate continued lecturing, “Then you can do whatever it is she agreed to. But you still have to be a gentleman.” Pam was surprised to see Jeremy listening intently. “That means not forcing her to do something she doesn't want to do. It means being gentle.”

“I can be gent-” Jeremy began. Having heard this declaration from him so many times already, Pam instantly recognized the knowing tone in his voice. She swooped in to interrupt him.

“Heads up, I'm coming in hot!” she announced, filling his teacup with water from the kettle. Pam removed his hand from the cup, ostensibly to protect him from the steaming water, but she squeezed his fingers in warning, followed by a hard look.

“Right, mom,” Jeremy said. “Be gentle. Got it.”

There was a break in the conversation as they chose their tea. Kate opted for a black tea with vanilla and almonds. Deciding that the Zen tea clearly wasn't working, Pam brought out the big guns and chose chamomile. Jeremy picked a licorice tea with a tantalizing scent that made the room smell like a candy store.

While they waited for their teas to steep, Pam peered at the remaining index cards. “Is there only one question left?” she prompted. She prayed it would be a softball.

Kate sang a brief fanfare. “Dum-da-dum!” She ceremoniously held up the card. “Are my friends having sex?” she read. Laying the card face down on the table, Kate smiled confidently at her son. “I can assure you, Jeremy, that they are not. I know they're probably talk a lot about 'doing it.'” She
made air quotes with her fingers. “But it's all talk. Trust me. Your friends are not having sex yet.”

“Why wouldn't they be ‘doing it’ though?” Jeremy asked. He parroted his mom by adding air quotes.

“One, boys love to brag, even if it means stretching the truth,” Kate said. “Two, your friends aren't ready for sex yet.” As an afterthought, she added, “And you're not ready for sex either.”

Pam nervously sipped her chamomile tea, even though it was nowhere near finished steeping. Surely he didn't believe each of his friends had a Pam-equivalent in their lives? It occurred to her that he thought their relationship was perfectly normal. A twinge of guilt nagged at the back of her mind.

“How do you know if you're ready?” he asked.

“Sex is something very special. It should be for someone you love. Someone you really care about. This is a huge generalization, but all your friends care about is... let's see. Skateboarding. Video games. Pokemon Go.”

“Lighting 'things' on fire,” Pam added helpfully. Now everyone was doing air quotes.

“We stopped playing Pokemon Go months ago,” Jeremy scoffed. “That's so 2016.”

“My point is,” Kate continued, “that your friends are not having sex yet. So you shouldn't feel the need to 'do it' either. All right?”

“Okay, mom,” Jeremy agreed. Miraculously, he did not look once in Pam's direction during this exchange. “Are we done? Can I go now?”

“One last thing,” Kate said. “I got you this book.” She handed it to Jeremy. Since it was upside down, Pam needed a second to read it:

*Everything Tweens Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask).*

“Thanks, mom.” Already browsing the book, Jeremy stood up from the table. As he turned to leave, a corner of the book knocked over his teacup, sending a gushing torrent of liquid across the table. All three of them gasped in dismay. Kate quickly moved her papers out of harm's way. Pam grabbed a handful of napkins. Jeremy helped by pressing his hips against the edge of the table to prevent the tea from spilling onto the floor.

“I got it!” he announced. “Sort of.” He sheepishly watched as his jeans soaked up the tea.

“Could be worse,” Pam said, mopping up the warm liquid. “At least it's just tea and not soda.” Her hand moved dangerously close to Jeremy's crotch as she cleaned the table. “I've got it under control,” she told him. “Why don't you go take off those wet jeans?” Jeremy trotted off to his bedroom, still carrying the open book.

Once he was gone, Kate slumped back into her chair and breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness that's over with. Let's never do that again,” she proposed.

“Agreed.” Pam placed the soggy napkins into an empty teacup. Considering all the messes in Jeremy's history, this one didn't even register on the Richter Scale.

Kate checked the time. “I have a date with David in one hour. I hope he's isn't expecting any romance tonight. Nothing kills the mood more than talking to your kid about sex.”

Pam laughed. “I feel exactly the same way.” She wasn't sure what to do with the condom-clad banana. It was technically still edible. She stripped off the condom and returned the banana to the
fruit bowl.

Kate helped her carry the dishes to the kitchen. “Pam, you help out so much around here. Are you sure we're not tying up too much of your life? Just let me know if you ever need to get out for a date.”

“I don't mind spending time with Jeremy,” Pam said.

“Does it help you keep in touch with your inner child?” Kate joked. “The spirit of youth and all that?”

“Ha ha,” Pam pretended to laugh, hoping it would conceal her blushing. “That's one way of looking at it.” She changed the subject. “So what are you and David doing for tonight's date?”

“Dinner, then maybe a movie,” Kate answered. She ducked her head into the hallway, glancing in the direction of Jeremy's room. Lowering her voice, she said, “David asked me to spend the night. I want to do it. But if Jeremy asks where I am tomorrow morning, can you just tell him I took a last-minute shift at the hospital?”

“Of course,” Pam promised. “He won't even notice. I'll distract him with waffles. Or something.”

“Thanks Pam,” Kate said. “I feel bad asking you to lie to my son for me.”

“I can shoulder that burden,” she assured. Kate left to get ready for her date, leaving Pam to wearily collapse into an armchair in the den. Jeremy was still ensconced in his bedroom, which was just as well because the quiet room felt like heaven. All the anxiety and tension from the past week slowly drained from her body. She must have dozed off because the next thing she heard was the front door closing, followed by the sight of Kate's car leaving the driveway.

Blearily, she lurched to her feet but then immediately sat down again. It was as if her limbs were moving underwater. Perhaps the chamomile tea had been a mistake after all. Trying again, she slowly stood up and stumbled her way to the bathroom. After using the toilet, she wandered into Jeremy's room where she found him lounging in his underwear and reading his sex book. His jeans, still wet from the tea, lay on the floor.

“When I told you to take off the wet jeans, I sort of assumed that you would follow it up with pants of some sort,” she mused. She hung the jeans across his hamper to dry.

“I'm more comfy like this,” Jeremy answered. Whiskers lay curled into a ball at his feet.

“ Aren't you cold?”

“Nope. I turned on my electric blanket,” he said. “It feels like summer because I'm in my underwear but I'm still warm. You should try it.”

Instead, Pam shooed Whiskers off the bed and pushed Jeremy until he rolled over to make room for her. “Remind me to never again drink chamomile tea in the afternoon,” she sighed. Squeezing in next to him, she relished the feel of the cool cotton pillowcase against her cheek. Jeremy wasn't kidding about the warmth of the electric blanket though. Inundated by a sensation of overheating, Pam decided to follow his example. Shimmying on the bed, she wiggled free of the khaki pants and turtleneck.

Now wearing only her bra and panties, she gratefully lounged in the feeling of fresh air against her skin. Perhaps the ill-fitting clothes were partially responsible for her malaise because she immediately felt unburdened upon taking them off. Not coincidentally, she saw Jeremy glancing at her out of the
corner of her eye. She had been practically invisible to him in her frumpy clothes, but now her underwear lured him like a moth to a flame.

The trouble was that the only thing Pam really wanted was a nap. She was just about to drift off when she heard Jeremy clear his throat. “Do you want to have sex?” he asked.

That woke her up. Rolling over, Pam raised an eyebrow at him. “I'm sorry?”

Jeremy sat up. “You know. That's how my mom said I should say it.”

“That's true,” Pam conceded. But hearing Jeremy say the word 'sex' was akin to nails on a chalkboard. “Since it's just the two of us, would you mind if we stick with Call of Duty?

“Sure thing.” He paused a beat. “Do you want to play Call of Duty?”

“Maybe in a little bit,” she hedged. “I feel kind of woozy.” It was unfortunate because this was their first time alone in quite a while. But the evening was young, especially since Kate was staying over at David's place. Pam took advantage of his sitting up by commandeering the entire bed. Now she had the space to really stretch out and relax. Since there was no room, Jeremy lay sideways across the bed, using her tummy as a pillow as his legs dangled off the bed. She successfully dozed off but was awakened by the sound of Jeremy sighing and clapping the book closed.

“Huh? Keep it down out there everybody,” Pam mumbled.

“This book is pointless!” he complained.

Pam buried her face in a pillow. “Why pointless?” she asked, her voice muffled.

“It doesn't say anything about what sex really is.” He still lay with his head propped against her stomach, though he now stared at the ceiling. Meditatively, Jeremy knitted his fingers together, resting his hands on his chest.

“You said you already knew,” Pam reminded him. She stifled a yawn. “As I recall, you even described it in no uncertain detail.”

Well, yeah. I know it's like this...” Jeremy made an O with his thumb and forefinger, then poked the index finger from his other hand into it. Pam hadn't seen anyone make that motion in years. He continued, “But I thought they would have actual pictures of how it happens.”

“How do you think it happens?”

When he turned his head to look at her, his soft cheek covered up her belly button. “So the man and woman just stand next to each other? And then they...” Jeremy continued the pokey-poke motion with his hands.

“I suppose they could do it that way. But most people do it lying down when they're in bed. You know. Like in the movies when they kiss and roll around.”

“THAT'S what they're doing?”

It was as if she had just informed him Santa Claus didn't exist. Jeremy was utterly surprised, but his reaction was mirrored by Pam's shock at his naivete. How could he know so much and so little about sex? “Of course. What did you think they were doing?”

“I don't know. I thought they were just cuddling. I didn't think they were doing this.” His hands re-
enacted the poking.

It was terribly distracting to watch him make that gesture with his fingers. Pam pulled his wrists apart. “All right, stop. Stop doing that. I get the picture.”

“I can't believe that's what they were doing,” he mumbled. “I feel so dumb.”

Pam patted his shoulder. “Don't feel bad. That's why we're having this talk.” She hid a grin in his pillow. He thought they were cuddling? It was comforting to know that he could still surprise her with his wide-eyed innocence. Jeremy zigging toward Sweet and Wholesome always resulted in her zagging toward Arousal and Even More Arousal.

Jeremy closed the book. “Can you show me how?”

“Show you?” Pam repeated. The sleepy chamomile cobwebs were finally starting to clear, but she wondered if she had misheard him.

But he mistook her confusion for reluctance. “We can keep our underwear on,” he bargained. “We're not actually going to...” His finger poked into the imaginary hole again. “This is just for educational purposes.”

“Oh, right,” Pam nodded. “I guess I'll do it. For educational purposes.”

“What do I do?”

Pam held out her hand. “Come over here so you're on top of me.” She lay on her back, waiting, as Jeremy climbed atop her and straddled her midsection.

“So it's like this?” he asked. A shiver went up Pam's spine. They had never been face to face in a horizontal position before. “Not quite,” Pam said. He was perched over her in all his skinny-limbed, gawky glory. She placed her hands on his hips, guiding him downward. “You're too far up.” They fumbled awkwardly for a moment. Even Pam had to admit it felt sinful when she spread her legs to allow the eleven year old boy to move into the proper position. Waving him off was one thing, but this was by far the most overtly sexual thing they had ever done together.

Propped up on his elbows, Jeremy's body hovered tentatively over hers. Due to their differences in height, he was now at neck level. Had he been taller, they could have remained face to face but Pam didn't mind. “Now what?” he demanded, craning his head upward to look at her.

Pam cupped a hand around the smooth curve of his bum, drawing him close. Butterflies of excitement fluttered in her stomach as his underwear grazed her own. “So, um, if we weren't wearing clothes,” she began. “It would go inside me. Get it?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he said without much certainty.

“You don't have to stay so far away. Come closer,” she urged. She bent his elbows until he was laying directly against her.

“I don't want to crush you,” Jeremy protested.

“You're not crushing me. It's okay. Come on.” Even though their bodies didn't quite fit, Pam was overtaken by an irrepressible surge of intimacy. It had been a long time since she had been in the missionary position. With anyone. Penetration or not, there was an undeniable coziness to Jeremy laying atop her like a cherry on a sundae. She was lost in all the feels: the sweet burden of his skinny chest against her breasts, the light tickle of breath against her neck, the sharp protrusion of his hip
against her inner thigh.

And there was something poking her underwear in a very delicate spot. That felt nice too.

Remembering his earlier question about his friends having sex, Pam said, “Jeremy? You don't think it's strange that we do this, do you?”

“Why would it be strange?”

“When we were talking with your mom, you were wondering if your friends were, uh, having sex.” Pam paused, choosing her next words carefully. “Do you feel weird doing this stuff? Especially since your friends aren't doing it either?”

“I don't feel weird,” Jeremy told her. Straightening his arms, he lifted himself up so he could see her face again.

Pam was relieved. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I love-,” he stopped to blush.

Pam's heart skipped a beat as she waited for him to continue. “Yes?”

“I like you,” he shyly amended.

“I like you too,” Pam smiled. Males of all ages, it seemed, had trouble with the L-word. She didn't have a problem with his timidity, because his embarrassed look told her all she needed to know about how he really felt inside. Somewhere during this exchange, he had scooted upward so they were once again at eye level. The conflict in the young boy's eyes burned a hole through her, a sensation only reinforced by his underwear-hidden erection that was cozily nestled in her belly button, poking her in a manner that was uncomfortable yet welcoming.

“Thanks for showing me how people do it,” Jeremy said, his voice hushed due to their closeness. “Does it make more sense now?”

“Yeah.” A pregnant pause followed before he asked, “What should we do now?”

Even though neither of them were naked, it felt like there was nothing separating them. His skin felt like warm sunshine against her inner thighs. Out of the blue, Pam wanted to have him inside her. More than anything, she longed to feel as close to him as possible. “Do you want to...” she trailed off. Say it, a voice in her head demanded. Do you want to have sex? Say it.

Her breathing had quickened so much that he gently rocked up and down as he lay pressed against her. Trying again, she said, “Do you want to...” Suddenly lost for words, she lamely stammered, “...get off of me? I have to pee.”

“Oh. Okay.” Did she see a look of disappointment in his eyes? Jeremy carefully dismounted her.

“I'll be right back,” she said, dashing to the bathroom. She technically did have to pee, thanks to all that tea. As she sat on the toilet, Pam held her head in her hands, berating herself. Was it the chamomile? The awkward sex talk? For whatever reason, she had somehow morphed into a tongue-tied preteen herself. Desperately wanting to pick up where they left off, she was disappointed to find Jeremy once again reading his book when she returned.
“Back to reading, huh?” She sat down next to him.

“Yeah. I still don't get the dildo thing,” he replied. “They don't even mention them in this book.”

“What don't you get about it?”

“It just seems, I don't know, strange.” He looked at her. “Do you have one?”

“Um, of course not.”

Jeremy's eyes narrowed. “You're lying. I know you are!”

Pam chuckled nervously. “Don't be silly.”

“You always say 'um' before you lie about something. Plus, your eyes move to the left, like this.” He demonstrated, shiftily moving his eyes like an actor in a bad spy movie.

Pam was annoyed. Perhaps they were spending too much time together for him to be able to read her so transparently. “Fine, whatever,” she said.

“So can I see it?” Jeremy asked. “Your dildo?”

Pam fidgeted uncomfortably. This was not what she had in mind after returning from the bathroom. “Okay, wait here,” she told him. “I'll be right back.” She went to her bedroom and opened the closet door. In the far corner was a pile of shoeboxes. Pam rattled each one experimentally until she found a shoebox that was much lighter than the others. When she returned to Jeremy's room, he eagerly set aside his book. Pam handed him the box. Jeremy slowly lifted the lid while peering inside, as if it contained a spirit waiting to be freed.

Inside the box were two cream colored dildos, one average sized and one bigger. They were both presents from her friend Suzy, who had jokingly gifted them a few years ago when Pam had complained about a boyfriend who was too well-endowed. “I'm breaking up with him,” she had bitterly declared to Suzy. “The sex is painful! He's like a bull in a china shop.” A week later, Suzy had shown up on her doorstep to drop off the sex toys along with an encouragement to 'practice.'

Jeremy, being a typical male, was magnetically drawn to the bigger one. “Wow, look how huge this one is!” he said, picking it up. There was a hushed tone of awe in his voice. “So you actually, um... These go inside you?”

“Technically, yes.”

He cast a furtive glance at her underwear, obviously picturing the dildo in action. “Do you use these a lot?” he asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

“I tried using the smaller one once,” Pam admitted. “But I didn't like how it felt.” Even the memory of it made her blanch. Perhaps other women enjoyed dildos, but she found them too cold, too hard and too impersonal. The supposed life-like material of the dildo was anything but. It felt as if she had inserted a clammy disembodied penis inside her body. Which was exactly what it was, she supposed.

“I bet it's really neat. Could we try it?”

“Maybe some other night,” Pam waffled. She held out the shoebox for him to return the dildos, then covered it with the lid. Setting it on the far side of the bed, Pam partially covered the box with some sheets in hopes that he would forget about it. Her thoughts returned to their experiment in the missionary position. “Are you planning to read that book all night?”
“Maybe. It's got lots of useful information. Like the book says most boys will start growing hair down there at age eleven. But I'm almost twelve and I don't have any.”

Pam winced at the thought of him with pubic hair. “I like you just the way you are,” she reassured. “Besides, it's not like you're altogether bare. You've got peach fuzz. I've seen it. It's cute.”

Jeremy was unconvinced. “Yeah, but look at this...” He scooted closer to her with the book. On the pages were a series of illustrated pictures called the Tanner stages of puberty. The drawings were lifelike but rather clinical in nature. Each illustration depicted the naked male midsection from belly-button to mid-thigh, with the first one being an obviously young boy, hairless, with an exceptionally modest penis and scrotum. The next illustration showed an ever-so-slightly older boy with the accompanying growth in size and a barely perceptible patch of darkened hair. By the third picture, the imaginary boy definitely had grown, considering his appreciably thicker penis and expanded scrotal pouch, but he was still straddling the line between child and adolescence. The fourth added even more size and more hair. There were five pictures total, the last one depicting a full-blown adult male with a sausage-like penis, a curly mat of hair, and meaty thighs.

“I'm supposed to be here,” he noted, pointing at the second picture. “But I don't look like that at all.”

“Your penis mostly looks like that,” she said, trying to be helpful. “And I think that's how much your boys are dangling.” Pam was riveted, letting her eyes wander among the five pictures. She decided that Stage Two was her favorite, though Stage Three was a close second. Stage Four though? Forget it.

“When do you think I'll look like this?” Jeremy pointed to the last picture.

“Who knows?” Pam said, preferring not to think about it. She wondered whose job it was to draw these pictures of naked boys. Did they get to draw from live models and how many applicants did they screen to decide who was representative of any particular stage?

“I wish I was old enough to ejaculate,” Jeremy complained. He still emphasized the first syllable instead of the second, but Pam found it adorable.

“Does the book say when it will start?” she asked.

“It should have started already. I know some of my friends already are. Ashton and Conor said they started last summer.”

“I see.” Pam did her best to remain neutral, though her ears perked up at this news. Neither Ashton nor Conor was her type. Nevertheless, she was as intrigued as a pirate hearing rumor of a long-lost booty. “Just give it some time. Be patient. I bet one day you'll be squirting like a water gun at a pool party in August.”

“So does it really squirt?” Jeremy asked, intrigued. “I thought that was just an expression when a guy said he was squirting. That's why I thought it just comes out like pee.”

“Ah, no. It definitely squirts. But you can't control it the same way you do with pee.”

Jeremy zoned out for a second, trying to imagine this. “I wish I didn't have to wait,” he said.

“Don't obsess about it too much,” Pam counseled. “After all, your friends might be lying about it. You can't be sure unless you've actually seen it happen. I mean, it's not like you guys get together in Ashton's basement and jerk off together in one big circle.” Jeremy remained suspiciously mute. She elbowed him. “Uh, you're not. Right?”
“No.” He gave her a look. “Why would we do something like that?”

“Forget I asked.”

Jeremy turned the page of the book. Immediately following the section on boys' development was, naturally, girls' development. One page illustrated the five stages of breast development while another showed a girl's midsection. It was similar to the boys’ Tanner Stages, except there wasn't much to see except widening hips and a black fuzz of pubic hair overtaking the crotch region.

Jeremy pointed at the last picture with its poodle-like burst of dark hair. “That's what you look like,” he said to Pam.

“Yeah, I know. Thanks, Jeremy.”

He turned the page again. Next up was an illustrated view of a woman with her legs open. Pam had seen similar pictures at the gynecologist's office, but Jeremy evidently had not. He leaned in for a closer look.

“This picture looks a bit different from your pussy,” Jeremy observed.

Pam made a face. “Could you not use that word around me?”

“What's wrong with it?”

“It's a long story. I didn't always have a problem with it, but these days it just makes my skin crawl.”

“So what am I supposed to call it instead?”

“Anything but the P-word.”

“Okay.” Jeremy examined the book again, then looked up. “This picture looks a bit different from your vagina,” he stated.

Pam frowned. Kate was right. There really was no greater libido killer than discussing sex in clinical terms with Jeremy. “That's not going to work either,” she told him.

He helplessly held out his hands. “Well, what am I supposed to call it?” he demanded.

Pulling out her phone, Pam did a search for “vagina slang terms”. Jeremy looked over her shoulder. It was a long list. 'Cunt, twat, cooter, beaver,' she read, trying to imagine Jeremy saying each one. Nope.

“See any good ones?” she inquired.

He peered at the screen. “Yoni?” he suggested.

“Too hippie.”

“Holy grail?”

“Too nerdy.”

They continued reading the list together. “Enchilada of love?” Jeremy nominated. “I like that one.”

“Yeah, you would like it,” Pam replied acidly. “No.”
“Boy in the canoe?” he proposed.

“Close, but no cigar.”

“Mommy parts?”

“Absolutely not,” Pam scoffed.

“Her asshole neighbor,” Jeremy intoned. “I don’t get it.”

“Me neither,” Pam lied. “This is exhausting. How long does this list go on?”

“Well, now there’s a breakfast theme. Bacon hole. Sausage wallet. Scrambled eggs between the legs. Those are all kind of weird.” Jeremy burst into laughter. “Arby's with fur! Ha!”

“Not funny, Jeremy,” Pam warned.

“Sorry.” He sobered up at once, though Pam saw him biting his lip. “Do you like any of these yet?”

“No, I do not,” Pam replied. “Although perusing this list really illustrates why this country is where it is. Hairy doughnut? For heaven’s sake.”

“I still don't understand what's wrong with the P-word,” he grumbled. “If you think about it, it's just another word for cat.”

“It's not. Trust me. You sound like a creepy old man when you say it.”


Pam considered this. 'Kitten' was indeed cute. And innocent. Unassuming, yet devilish. Kind of like Jeremy himself. “I like it,” she said finally.

“Now look up slang terms for guys,” he urged. “I want to find something cool for me!”

They huddled over her phone screen once more. “Cock, dick, prick, wiener,” Pam recited in a mechanical voice.

“I know all those already.” Impatiently brushing her hand aside, Jeremy began scrolling through the list. “Baloney pony, giggle stick, meat thermometer, pink tractor beam,” he read.

“There's nothing like the internet to reinforce the fact that people are basically stupid,” Pam observed.

“Skin flute,” he said, scratching his head. “Why would they call it a skin flute?”

“It's an oral sex joke,” Pam told him. She gave him a look of displeasure. “I never get to play the skin flute.”

Jeremy ignored her passive-aggressive jab. “Yogurt launcher! I like that one!”

Pam laughed. “Nice try. You're not even launching yogurt yet, cowboy.”

“So what? I'll grow into it, like a pair of jeans.”

“I know! How about Hollywood gun?” Pam proposed.

“That's not on the list.”
“I just made it up myself,” Pam said. “Hollywood gun. You know, since you're shooting blanks?”

Jeremy scowled. “I don't like it.”

“I personally don't have a problem with the word ‘penis,’” Pam said, putting away her phone. “Maybe we should just leave it at that.”

“It makes me sound like a little boy,” he complained.

Pam couldn't help plant a kiss on his cheek. “You ARE a little boy.”

Jeremy shoved her away in contempt. “Don't call me little.”

She wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Don't be cross with me,” Pam consoled, kissing him again. “I only meant you're my boy.”

“Fine,” Jeremy sighed. Pam had moved so close that his elbow brushed against her bra. Though he outwardly resisted her affection, she could clearly discern a twinge of movement in his underwear. Maybe now she finally had his attention. Jeremy instead re-opened the sex book, turning the pages until he found the section on girls’ development. Pam waited for him to turn the page, but Jeremy remained glued to the illustrated picture of a woman's spread legs. “Can't get enough of that picture, can you?” she teased.

“I'm trying to learn the terminology,” he said defensively.

Pam covered the illustration with her hand. “Let's see how much you've learned. Labia majora. Where is it?”

“It's... um...” Jeremy gestured ineffectually with his hands. “It's the thing on the sides.”

“The thing on the sides?” Pam mocked. “Someone hasn't done his homework.”

“It's too hard to explain,” Jeremy complained. He thought for a moment, then brightened. “You could quiz me and I'll point out where it is on you,” he suggested.

“On me?”

Jeremy nodded earnestly. “It's for educational purposes.” Placing his hands on her shoulders, he firmly pushed her down until she lay on the bed. “You want me to learn, don't you?”

“I suppose so,” Pam agreed. It wasn't as if she had much choice. Jeremy was already tugging her panties off. He then handed her the book which she propped open on her ribcage. Laying perpendicular to the edge of the bed, Pam self-consciously arranged herself. Jeremy stood by eagerly like an intern on the first day of the job. Realizing he was waiting on her, she inched her legs apart.

“You have to spread wider than that,” he objected. “I can barely see anything.”

“I'm getting there! Give me a second.” Why was she feeling so bashful? She had masturbated countless time in front of Jeremy. Spreading her legs some more, she realized it felt like she was at her gynecologist's office, which was not at all sexy. It didn't help that today's doctor was an eleven year old boy wearing a decidedly unprofessional snowboarding shirt.

Jeremy leaned in close, propping his elbows on the mattress. Though her legs were already spread as wide as she could, the young boy apparently felt the need to take matters into his own hands. Grasping each ankle, he re-positioned her to give himself more room. There was a certain
assertiveness in his nature that was throwing her off. It was a reversal from the past when she was always the one in charge. Posing her like a doll, he bent her knees and placed her feet flat on the bed, then openly stared at her down there. Feeling unnaturally exposed, Pam fought the urge to cross her legs.

Remembering the task at hand, Pam nervously cleared her throat. “Where is the labia majora?” she quizzed.

The touch of his tentative finger against her intimate area made Pam flinch. “Is it right here?” Jeremy asked.

“Good job.” Pam held the book aside so she could see him. Jeremy had his chin propped up in one hand while the other was poised between her legs. “How about the minora?” she asked.

“This part here,” he noted, running a finger down the length of one lip, then up the other. Pam tensed her muscles to keep her hips still. Gazing at the book's illustration, she embarrassedly realized Jeremy was looking at the same view between her legs.

“Vagina?” she asked, remembering too late their prearranged codeword. The clinical nature of the word effectively quashed any of her lingering hormones.

“Here?” Jeremy guessed.

“Close,” Pam said, “but it's actually a little lower.” She stared at the ceiling as he probed her vaginal entrance. Afterward, he paused to examine his fingers, rubbing his thumb and middle finger together.

“It's kind of wet down here,” Jeremy observed.

It didn't help to hear him say that. She felt even more self-conscious now. It had been a long time since she felt this way around him. “Is it?” Pam said, her heart racing. “I didn't know that- oh!” She inhaled sharply. Not even asking permission, the young boy plunged a finger inside her kitten. His finger wasn't very thick but she could feel it all the same.

A strange tide of emotion accompanied the physical feeling of him inside her. While Pam was overwhelmed by the sheer intimacy of the act, she could tell Jeremy was too young to understand the magnitude of what was happening. “Wow. This is weird!” he said, his eyes glued between her legs. Cautiously flexing his finger, he touched a sensitive spot that caused her to flinch and, inadvertently, clench her muscles. His eyes grew as big as dinner plates. “You just squeezed my finger!” he noted. “That's so weird!”

“Jeremy?”

“Yeah?” he said, not looking up.

“I know you're blown away because you've never done this before. But can you think of a different word other than 'weird' when you're touching me?”

He finally looked at her face. “This is so... cool?”

“Better. Thank you.” Her interior tug-of-war between unease and hormones had not abated, but Pam was flattered by his wonderment. Wanting to demonstrate her powers, she marshaled her resources to squeeze again. It wasn't easy because his finger was so narrow, but her muscles contracted as best they could. “Can you feel that?” she asked.

The eleven year old boy was suitably impressed. “Gosh,” was all he could say. Leaving his finger
embedded inside her body, he said, “So what's next?”

His eyes flickered at the book in her hands. She had forgotten about the quiz. “Last one. Clitoris?”

“That's an easy one,” he said confidently. His finger disappointingly vacated her but Pam was rewarded by the sensation of him fumbling with her clitoral hood. “It's up here,” he said, searching. His fingers were now so slippery that he had to use his other hand to part her lips. When that didn't work, he used his thumb to push her clitoral hood out of the way. Pam closed her eyes at the intimate sensation. Judging by her copious moisture, her clit was likely so swollen that it would not have been difficult to locate. “It's here. Right?” His lightly brushing finger was like a fairy dancing on the head of a pin.

“Right,” Pam managed to say. He kept accidentally brushing against her clit in his attempts to make it visible. Pam found herself enveloped in congealed waves of slow-flowing pleasure from the intimate contact. Though still inhibited, her arousal was starting to outweigh any discomfort. A syrupy sensation coated her senses, as if she were drowning in honey.

Jeremy continued exploring with an experimental touch. “Isn't this where you...”

“Where I what?” she prompted. He responded by rubbing her inflamed clitoris in slow but deliberate circles. “Yes, that,” she murmured. Unbidden, the Zen tea mantra popped into her head: A cherry blossom whispers to the damp earth in the springtime.

She instantly relaxed. Jeremy was the tree, towering over her, raining down cherry blossoms from his outstretched branches. Closing her eyes, she saw nothing but swirling colors that synchronized to the ever-expanding circle of pleasure emanating from between her legs. She never would have guessed it was his first time touching her down there. He seemed to know exactly what to do, his touch continuously varying from fast and light to slow and hard. Just the way she liked it.

The young boy's keen attention pushed her so close to the edge that she could no longer keep her eyes shut. Peeking out, she saw his head bent low between her legs, his face hidden by the rusty hair that fell across his forehead. The erection straining his underwear was more prominent than ever. She watched him adjust himself, a sight that made her leg unexpectedly spasm in excitement. Her foot slid against the smooth cotton sheet. Wanting to keep her legs spread wide, Jeremy firmly gripped her ankle to hold it in place.

That did it. She was his plaything. He was free to do whatever he pleased. The thought sent her tumbling into a deep orgasm. Urged by a series involuntary contractions, Pam's hips rose off the bed as she surrendered to the eleven year old boy's touch. She moaned, over and over, as Jeremy's finger danced expertly against her clit, never missing a beat.

Jeremy did not seem the least bit surprised by her orgasm. He didn't let up, even as she started descending from the apex of the pleasure. Unable to speak, Pam grabbed his wrist, then placed her fingers over his to get him to stop touching her now over-sensitive girl parts. No longer able to keep her legs open, she closed her knees in a fit of bashfulness. Pam rolled onto her side, pulling her legs into a protective fetal position. Once again, she felt very exposed.

Jeremy worriedly peered at her. “Uh, are you all right?”

Pam could only nod her head. She seemed to have temporarily lost her power of speech. With her arousal having expired, the embarrassment now came roaring back. It was as if she were twelve again, experiencing the post-orgasmic guilt from masturbating. “I'm fine,” she assured him. “I just... I don't know. You've never done that before.”
“I learned from watching you,” he answered. There was a tinge of pride in his voice. “Did I do it right?”

Pam couldn't contain a girlish giggle. He had apparently been taking mental notes all those times she had masturbated for him. “Oh yes,” she nodded. “That was wonderful. Thank you, Jeremy.”

“You're welcome, Pam.” He shyly dug his toe into the floor, but she could tell he was pleased with himself.

“If you lie down next to me, I could thank you in other ways,” she offered.

“Like how?”

“We can do whatever you want,” Pam said.

“Really? Whatever I want?” His eyes wandered to the forgotten shoebox half-covered in sheets on his bed.

I knew I should have put that box away, she thought ruefully. “All right,” she acquiesced. “We can try it.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before Jeremy made a beeline for the shoebox, yanking away the sheets and tossing aside the lid. It was like watching him open presents on Christmas morning. He picked up a dildo (thankfully the smaller one), wielding it like a sword. Pam eyed him cautiously as he settled himself between her legs once more. “I know I sound like a broken record, but you're going to-”

His voice overlapped hers. “Be gentle,” they said in unison. Jeremy gave her an exhausted look. “Why is everyone always saying that?”

“You tell me,” Pam retorted. “You're the one throwing snowballs at Ashton's nuts.”

“That was, like, one time,” Jeremy excused. “And it was a lucky throw. Mostly. Besides, I wouldn't do something like that to you.” He paused. “You don't even have nuts.”

Pam rolled her eyes. “Why am I not the least bit reassured?” She regarded the dildo in his hand with the enthusiasm usually reserved for a tetanus shot at the doctor's office. “Get the stuff, will you?”

Jeremy retrieved the bottle of K-Y from his dresser. “Why do we need the stuff for?”

“You're not just going to jam that thing inside me,” Pam informed him. “You need to make it slippery to... you know. Make it go in easier.” She watched as he carefully drizzled the K-Y onto the creamy silicone, then worked it in with a finger. Still doubtful, she got into the same position from before, laying on her back and moving her legs apart. Staring at the ceiling, she steeled herself for the clammy unpleasantness of the dildo. Instead, she felt something warm brushing her lips. After spending the last twenty minutes nestled in the electric blanket, the shoebox (and its contents) had unexpectedly warmed up to something resembling normal body temperature.

Pam did her best not to remain still as he experimentally probed, seeking his target. “A little lower,” she advised. “You're aiming too- oh!” It was a repeat of his surprise finger insertion, except the dildo was much, much thicker. Pam inhaled sharply as it sank into her body without warning.

“It went right in!” Jeremy reported breathlessly.

“Um, it sure did,” she confirmed. Pam hadn't expected the sex toy to penetrate her so effortlessly.
The K-Y had done its job, not to mention the fact that she was still wet from their earlier play. She couldn't see but it felt like more than half the dildo was inside her. Pam reminded herself to breathe. Despite the toy's modest size, there had been a definite dry spell for this level of girth.

“How far up does it go?” Jeremy wondered. He pushed the dildo further into her kitten, causing Pam to curl her toes against the mattress.

“It... d-doesn't go forever,” Pam stammered. A dull throb emanated from deep inside as the dildo made contact with her cervix. She had forgotten that feeling too. “Please stop trying to shove it in.”

“It's already in all the way anyway,” he pointed out. “What now?”

“Take it out. Slowly.” The young boy began withdrawing the dildo inch by inch. Pam didn't realize she was tightly clutching the sheets until the hard sex toy popped free of her tight ring of vaginal muscle. She let out a whoosh of breath. “And we're done.”

“Can I put it in again?” he pleaded. Still feeling ambivalent, Pam paused for a moment before reluctantly nodding. This time, she was ready for the intrusion as he slowly slid in the dildo. Perhaps it was the dry spell talking, but the toy seemed surprisingly close to a real penis. Warming it up with the electric blanket made all the difference.

“It went in a lot easier this time,” Jeremy commented. Pam was too busy processing her feelings to respond. Similar to the song, she was feeling like a virgin. No one had ever used a dildo on her before. The sense of sexual experimentation was only heightened by the fact that she was letting Jeremy do it. He slowly pulled the dildo out, causing her head to fall back into her fluffy stack of pillows. Without asking, he once again buried the dildo in a single, firm thrust.

“Ooh,” she breathed. Since her eyes were shut, Jeremy evidently felt he had free reign to do as he pleased. Over and over, he plunged the dildo into her accommodating kitten, then retreated just as suddenly, leaving her with an empty feeling. Absent any visual cues, Pam found herself tensing up each time he unexpectedly penetrated her with the toy. Her initial reluctance soon gave way to a soft anticipation. She hadn't realized how much she missed that feeling of fullness until now.

Her breathing had taken on a distinctly ragged edge by the time she opened her eyes. Self-conscious again, she fought to keep her breath under control. Nonetheless, it didn't escape Jeremy's notice. “Am I hurting you?”

“No, it's doesn't hurt,” Pam said, groping for words. “I'm just... not used to this feeling. It's been a while.”

“I can stop,” he volunteered.

“No, you don't have to stop. But... can you rub my clitoris while you do that? It'll help me, um, get used to the feeling.” Pam envisioned him simultaneously touching her clit and thrusting the dildo, but Jeremy had other ideas. Evidently having trouble doing both at once, the young boy settled into a rather clumsy but unique technique: first, he would gently ease the dildo inside Pam, then use his thumb to rub her clit while the sex toy remained stationery. Then he would stop and pull the dildo out. Thrust, fondle, withdraw, fondle. Each action was completely separate. Pam supposed it was like patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time. He just needed practice.

Jeremy's brow furrowed in concentration as he worked. She had seen him like this before. When he was drawing, he often got lost in the demanding yet rewarding realm of artistic expression. Her body adapted to his rhythm, anticipating the filling thrusts and the teasing stop/start on her clit. She was dreamily enjoying his ministrations through heavy-lidded eyes when Pam's senses snapped to
Though Jeremy wasn't doing anything different, she had become dimly aware of a growing excitement that had appeared like a distant ship on the horizon. Her arousal was embarrassing. Jeremy's actions were rooted in youthful curiosity rather than sexual desire. If anything, he was just playing. Yet here she was, wet kitten and all, fighting off the fast-approaching orgasm. It was a losing struggle and Pam knew it. Not straying from his rhythm, Jeremy propelled the dildo into her kitten, immediately followed with a confident stroke of her swollen clit, then-

“Fuck!” Pam moaned, completely unprepared as the orgasm slammed into her. “Oh fuck...” She frantically grabbed his wrist to prevent him from withdrawing. The forgotten pleasures of vaginal stimulation sent her into an orgasm so powerful that her hips lurched off the bed, as if she were offering herself to the young boy. Her legs quivered uncontrollably and a flush of pink spread across her chest. She hadn't come like this in a long time.

When it was over, she remained motionless for several minutes. A warm and oozy sensation spread across her body. Pam felt like a dish of butter melting in the sunshine. She finally recovered enough to release Jeremy's wrist. He pulled the dildo out as gently as possible, but she flinched as the hard silicone dragged against her delicate tissue. Even once it was out, he didn't move from his spot between her legs, letting the dildo rest lazily against her pink lips.

Despite his solemn regard, Jeremy's eyes were round with amusement. “You said the F-word,” he informed her.

“I know,” Pam admitted, blushing. “I didn't mean to say it.”

“Language,” Jeremy scolded, imitating her voice and adding a finger wag.

“Oh, stop it.” She slapped his hand.

Jeremy gave her a knowing look. “I know it's a good one if you touch your boobs,” he stated.

“I was not!”

Wordlessly, he pointed at her chest. It was only then that Pam noticed that a lone breast had worked free of its bra cup. When did that happen? “Ha... Oops,” she said. Blushing even more, Pam meekly adjusted her bra and slipped everything into its right place. She contentedly stretched on his bed, arms high and legs wide. Jeremy must have been waiting for an opening because she immediately felt the dildo prodding her again.

“Oh Jeremy... Give a girl a break, won't you?” she implored. Nonetheless, Pam accommodatingly parted her legs wide.

“But this is so fun,” Jeremy said, slipping it inside her once more. It was like he had a new favorite toy. “I want to make you swear again!”

She gave him her best stern look, but it was difficult with the dildo already slipping in and out. Accidentally, she made a noise somewhere between a moan and a meow, causing Jeremy to pause in concern.

“Do I need more stuff?” he asked, reaching for the K-Y.

“Um, no. It's fine.” Her kitten was practically dripping from her own excitement. Each thrust from Jeremy caused it to make embarrassingly sloppy and squishy sounds. Pam wished they had some music on to cover it up. Despite her self-consciousness, her clit was aching for attention so she
moved a hand between her legs.

“I'll take care of this,” she told him. “You have one job, all right?”

Jeremy nodded. Relieved of clit duty, he began rhythmically impaling her with the dildo. Letting go of her inhibitions, Pam requested, “Do it a little faster, please?”

Jeremy complied. It wasn't only the speed that changed, but the manner as well. There was now the merest hint of forcefulness as the young boy penetrated her with the toy. Even so, he was still treating her like a delicate crystal vase when what she really wanted was...

“Faster,” Pam murmured.

“What?” Jeremy asked, cocking an ear.

“Faster,” she bashfully repeated, raising her voice. “Harder.” It had been her singular pleasure to make Jeremy lose control of himself, but the tables were now turned. The sex toy pummeled her like a piston. Telling Jeremy to do something faster and harder was normally not the best idea, but she had finally found the perfect task for his reckless nature. Pam was getting close when Jeremy accidentally pulled out too far. The rhythm was lost as he misjudged re-entry and banged the dildo against her crotch.

“Put it back!” Pam begged. “Put it ba- Ohhh...” Her words were cut short as Jeremy obligingly rammed the dildo into her waiting kitten. Unable to resist any longer, Pam yanked her bra aside, squeezing her hard nipple as her other hand frantically ground her clit.

“Oh fu-” Pam bit her lip, but the utterance did not escape Jeremy's notice. Staring into his eyes, Pam willingly surrendered to another orgasm. The good news was that she refrained from swearing this time. The bad news was that she could not refrain from grunting in uncontrollable pleasure.

“Uh... uh... uh... uhh...” she groaned, the noises synchronized to each time he plunged into her body. She couldn't help it. His unyielding thrusts had awakened a base instinct that reduced her to an animal-like state. Pam's fingers clutched tightly at the sheets as soundless explosions burst in her mind.

As before, Pam had to clamp a wrist around his hand to curb Jeremy's enthusiasm once her orgasm waned. “Okay, ease up! Ease up.” His strokes slowed but he stopped with the dildo inside her, buried to the hilt. Wanting to remove the dildo herself, Pam unwrapped his fingers from it and began inching it out.

Jeremy stopped her. “Can I do that?” he asked.

I've created a monster, Pam thought. Taking over, Jeremy placed one hand on her abdomen while the other firmly grasped the protruding end of the dildo. Needing to hold on to something during the extraction process, Pam grabbed his warm hand on her tummy, covering it with a sweaty palm. Despite his prudence, she still involuntarily gasped when he finally pulled it free of her body.

“Um, are you going to let go of my hand?” Jeremy asked. Pam realized her fingers were still clamped tight around his hand on her belly. Releasing him, she was embarrassed to see him wiggle his fingers one by one, then shake his hand like a rattle.

“Sorry,” Pam apologized. “I didn't realize I was squeezing your hand that hard.”

“It's okay,” he answered, still continuing his finger calisthenics. He mentally tallied up the score. “You just did it three times. In a row.”
A series of aftershocks descended, causing Pam to shiver. “Yeah. I'm talented that way.”

“You mean you can do it over and over again?” he asked in disbelief. As he spoke, he waved the dildo around like it was a wand. “And there's no limit to how many times you can do it?”

“That's right.” Pam smiled wanly, brushing away the damp strands of hair sticking to her forehead.

“It's like you have a superpower,” he said reverently. Pam had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

When putting things into context, Jeremy sometimes lacked accuracy but he more than compensated in cuteness. He continued, “This one time, I was able to do it two times in a row. But it wasn't easy.”

“It's more difficult for guys.”

“How many times have you been able to do it in a row?”

“Umm... maybe four or five?”

“Wow.” He paused to imagine such a scene, then blinked several times to rouse himself from whatever mental image he had conjured. “Can we try the big one now?” he asked, glancing at the shoebox on the bed.

Pam tried to give him a reproachful look but she was too tired even for that. What was up with guys and big cocks? “Jeremy, look at that thing. It's the size of your forearm. It's not going to fit inside me.”

He gazed longingly into the box, as if it held the keys to a Ferrari. “Well, why do they even make them this big then?”

“I really don't know. I suppose some women might be able to handle it. But if you tried to use that thing on me, you would split me in two. Is that really what you want?”

“I guess not...”

“You guess not?”

He sighed. “I don't want you to be split in two,” Jeremy said dolefully. He held up the first dildo. “What should I do with this? It's getting sticky.”

“Just put it down somewhere,” she told him. “I'll wash it later.” The dildo had a flat base, allowing it to stand on its own. Jeremy placed it on his dresser, where it looked wildly out of place among his youth soccer trophies.

“It is my turn now?” he asked, removing his shirt.

His scrawny frame was tempting and the ever-present bulge in his underwear was pitiable, but she just couldn't do it. “You kind of wore me out,” Pam confessed. “Can I take a nap? A short one?”

He glanced at the clock on his bedside table. “I'm waking you up in ten minutes.”

Pam pulled the sheets over herself. “Don't be that way,” she chided. “Do you know how many times I've watched you fall asleep afterward?”

“No. How many?”

“I don't know. That was a rhetorical question. But the answer is a lot. Can't you just hold me while I sleep?”
“All right.” Gruffly giving in, Jeremy climbed into bed. Pam rolled onto her side to let him spoon her. His cotton underwear felt rough against her bare bum.

Turning her head, Pam demanded, “Give me a goodnight kiss too.” Too drowsy to open her eyes, she was surprised to feel his chapped lips on her mouth when she had been expecting a chaste kiss on the cheek. Grinning like a fool, Pam fell into a contented slumber with Jeremy cuddling her in a warm embrace. Something was poking her lower back, but she didn't mind. After all, it would remind her not to sleep too long.
“Of course it has a smell,” Suzy said. “How could it not?”

Pam had met her friend Suzy for a coffee date. Even though they hadn't finished their lattes, they had become so highly caffeinated that it was impossible to sit anymore. Now they were strolling through the neighborhood among the brickstone buildings and abbreviated boulevard gardens. The sidewalks were soaked from a morning downpour, but the sun had peeked out from behind the clouds by mid-afternoon. The scent of late springtime permeated the air: wet mud, fresh grass, blossoming flowers, and leafy green shrubs. The trouble had started when Suzy took a deep breath of the outdoors, then giggled craftily.

“Are you sure?” Pam said. “I've never noticed before. It has a smell?”

“Well, duh. You're serious? You've never noticed the smell of jizz?” She sighed. “This is what happens when all you do is penis-in-vagina sex that's...”

“Don't say it,” Pam warned.

“... strictly missionary,” Suzy finished. “Of course. Of course you wouldn't know that semen has a smell. The only time you've ever seen it is when it's floating in the toilet after you pee.”

“That's not true!”

But her denial fell on deaf ears as Suzy continued, “And even then, I bet you're too timid to lean over and take a good look. If you did? Then, yeah, you would have noticed that jizz has a very unique scent to it.”

Pam tried her best not to blush. She hated when Suzy was right. “Okay, fine, so jizz has a smell to it,” Pam conceded. “How it is possible that you just caught a whiff while we're walking the city streets? You think some guy jacked off into the bushes right before we rounded the corner?”

“It's a tree or something,” Suzy said patiently. “I'm telling you, I smell it every spring. It blossoms around this time each year. Whatever it is.”

“Well, what does it smell like then?” Pam wondered. She stopped to sniff the air. “All I smell are these peonies. Which smell amazing, I might add.” Pam bent low to inhale the fragrant perfume of a mass of creamy peonies demanding attention with their showy, crimson-flecked blooms.

“I'm not telling,” Suzy said. She smugly took a sip of coffee. “It'll be your homework to discover for yourself what jizz smells like.”

“I hate you,” Pam told her friend, but Suzy was momentarily distracted by a lone dad pushing a stroller. She watched as Suzy quickly sized him up. Though he sported several days of stubble, the man was slim and trim in his jogging outfit. As she expected, Suzy gave him a warm smile.
“Ladies,” he said, tipping his head and smiling back. Pam could tell he was about to initiate a conversation but the baby in his stroller began to wail. Shrugging apologetically, the man tended to the infant as Pam and Suzy continued walking.

“You can tell his boys are swimming,” Suzy said wistfully.

Pam raised an eyebrow. “Don't tell me you're ready to start cranking out babies.”

“Hell no.” Suzy turned to catch a fleeting glimpse of the man still bent over the stroller. “It's just that he is a very fuckable dad.”

“Right, right.” Pam hoped her friend had forgotten their earlier conversation.

“Anyway... Didn't I warn you?” Suzy asked, dashing her hopes. “Didn't I say there would be consequences if you held your breath every time a guy came in your mouth?” Suzy regarded her with great sympathy. “Are you still spitting?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I haven't spit in a long time.”

“Uh huh. And are you still doing mouthwash immediately after?”

“No! That was, like, one time that I used mouthwash afterward.” Pam groaned. “That was years ago! Why do I even tell you these things?”

“Don't be embarrassed.” Suzy patted her shoulder. “This is how a person learns. Now you know to take a sniff the next time you get the chance. You know, when you're messing around with a guy.” Suzy paused. “Or, rather, if there's a next time you're messing around with a guy.”

Pam shot her a look. “Hey! I have a...” she hesitated. “... special guy in my life.”

“Ah yes,” Suzy said with condescension. “Your secret boyfriend that you never tell me about and whom I never get to meet.”

“He's great,” Pam informed her friend. “He's sweet. He loves to cuddle. He makes me laugh.”

“Does he have a big cock?” Suzy's eyebrow arched expectantly. Pam hesitated again. Suzy laughed. “Say no more. I can see why he's your 'secret' boyfriend.”

“It's not about size!” Pam said stubbornly. “I'm having the best sex of my life.”

“Really.”


“How long have you been dating?”

Pam counted on her fingers. “Um, we've been messing around for about a year now.”

Suzy nodded. “And he's been giving you totally awesome orgasms that whole time?” Pam's eyes fell toward the pavement. “Ah ha!” Suzy exclaimed. “I knew it. When was the first time he made you come?”

“Last month,” Pam mumbled, temporarily defeated. “But it's not because there was something wrong with our relationship! He just... had a lot to learn.” She abruptly stopped walking when she noticed a worm squirming helplessly on the sidewalk. Using her foot, Pam gently shoved it back to the safety of the grass. After it rained, Jeremy often prowled the sidewalks in search of worms that needed
saving. Pam had somehow picked up his habit as well.

“Yeah, a lot to learn,” Suzy said skeptically. “If you guys are so hot and heavy, how come you had no idea that jizz has a signature scent to it? And don't tell me it's because he always comes inside you.” She tossed her coffee cup into a trashcan. “These days, it's impossible to find a guy who doesn't want to come on your face.”

This time Pam couldn't hide her blushing. Suzy immediately saw it and pounced. “Oh my god. You've got a boyfriend and you're not even doing it, are you? Is that it? Did you decide to be a born-again Christian and now you're waiting until marriage?”

“No!” If Jeremy were old enough to ejaculate, Pam would undoubtedly be drowning in the stuff. Times being what they were, though... “He's just not that kind of guy,” Pam stammered, searching for words. “He doesn't feel the need to spray jizz everywhere. It's actually kind of cute.”

Suzy scratched her head. “You know, it's supposed to be fun hearing friends talk about their sex lives. But with you, it just becomes this exercise in abject confusion.” She threw up her hands in disgust. “Fine. Whatever. You're having the best sex of your life, but it's somehow so chaste that you're clueless about the properties of jizz.”

“Don't judge,” Pam retorted. “What about you? What's so great about your sex life?”

“I hooked up with this guy last week,” Suzy confided, “and he stayed hard even after he came.”

“After?” Pam frowned. “How is that even possible?”

Suzy shrugged. “Beats me. All I know is that I could hardly sit down the next day. We did it for two hours straight. He came at least three times, but it just wouldn't go down.”

“Maybe he was faking it.”

“I don't think so,” Suzy laughed. “You should have seen my sheets the next morning. He was definitely leaving his mark.”

“I guess that's hot,” Pam said doubtfully. “But I kind of like it when a guy gets tired afterward. It's so sweet when he falls asleep in my arms.”

“If snuggling is all you want, then you could just get a dog,” Suzy suggested. “Or a kid.”

“Very funny.” Pam checked the time. “I have to go.”

“What are you up to tonight?” Suzy asked. She held up her hands. “Wait. I got it. You're taking Jeremy to his soccer game. Or Jeremy needs help with his math homework. Right? Or maybe Jeremy wants to see the latest superhero movie. Which is it?”

Pam regarded her friend without a trace of amusement. “If you must know, I'm taking Jeremy to a birthday party.”

“I knew it had to be something about Jeremy.”

“Leave me alone,” Pam muttered, fishing her keys out of her purse. “What about you? Another date with Mr. Everhard?”

Suzy nodded thoughtfully. “That's not a bad idea. Maybe I'll text him later.”

“Well, I hope he doesn't cause any internal hemorrhaging with his magic penis.” Pam began walking
in the direction of her car.

“What a way to go,” Suzy said. “Death by sex!” As Pam walked away, Suzy called to her. “Hey! Keep me in the loop if you and your secret boyfriend do something kinky. You know, like if he comes in your mouth or something. Hot!” Suzy mockingly fanned her face in reaction to imaginary flames. Rolling her eyes, Pam waved goodbye to Suzy with one hand while flipping her off with the other.

“Pam, hurry up! It's already 3:30. We're going to be late.”

This was the third time he rapped her bedroom door with a reminder of the time. She was truly running behind if Jeremy was the one worried about being late. “I'll be there in a second!” Pam called back. It was one of those days where eyeshadow and eyeliner had taken longer than expected. Picking up a brush, she applied a light layer of rose blush to her cheekbones. She double-checked her work in the mirror before grabbing her purse and cardigan.

When she opened her door, she nearly tripped over Jeremy's sprawling form that lay on the hardwood floor. Wearing a black sweatshirt and shorts, his gangly limbs were artfully spread in a death pose, the kind seen on television where chalk outlines were drawn around the body on the street. His eyes were closed and a lollipop stick dangled from his lips like a cigarette.

Pam nudged him with her foot. “Oh, get up. I didn't take that long.” When he didn't respond, Pam plucked the lollipop from his lips and popped it in her mouth. “Mmm,” she said, tasting it. “Root beer. My favorite.”

That got his attention. “Hey,” he said, sitting up. “Give that back.”

Pam handed him the lollipop. He jammed it back in his mouth and held out his hand. Grasping his wrist, Pam helped him to his feet. Then she turned, pulling aside her hair to reveal the nape of her neck. “Help zip me up, will you?”

He did as she requested. “Why are you all dressed up?” Jeremy asked. “It's just a birthday party for Apple.”

She was wearing a long dress, white with a black geometric pattern of flowers, that fell to her knees. The strapped top had a sweetheart neckline that exposed her shoulders so she had a cardigan ready in case she got cold. “I just wanted to look nice,” she replied. “That's all.”

That was half-true. She also knew Apple would be dressed to the nines, as usual, and Pam didn't want to be outdone. She spun in a circle. “What do you think?”

“It's pretty,” he approved.

“Look again,” Pam requested. “Be honest.” Whenever she asked him his opinion about an outfit, his eyes always started and ended at her breasts. This time, he thoughtfully added eye contact after sizing her up.

“You look really nice,” Jeremy said. “I'm not used to all this makeup though.”

Turning at the waist, she contorted herself to check her backside for any visible pantylines. The dress was fitted on top and flared at the bottom, but it was constructed of a thinner cotton. “You can't see my underwear, can you?”
“Nope.”

“Whew. I was worried I'd have to buy a thong just to wear this dress.”

“What's a thong?”

“You know. It's that kind of underwear where it's just a narrow strip on the back.”

Jeremy's eyes lit up like a pinball machine. “I didn't know you had underwear like that!”

“I don't have any thongs,” Pam said, causing his face to fall. “What kind of girl do you think I am?”

“How come you don't have any?” he persisted.

“I've never needed them,” she said. Pam peered at a mirror in the hallway to check her makeup. “Could you really picture me wearing one? I can't.” Glancing at Jeremy, she caught him staring at her backside with an entranced expression. Apparently, he had taken the suggestion to picture her in a thong. His lollipop dangled precipitously from his ever-so-slightly slackened lips.

A few more seconds and he would have been drooling, so Pam snapped her fingers to get his attention. “Hey. I need you to focus. Do you have everything you need for the weekend? Your dad said he's getting tired of buying you new clothes every visit.” While she was accompanying Jeremy to the party at William and Marla's condo, the plan was for him to spend the night while she returned home.

“I packed everything I need,” Jeremy assured her. He patted his duffel bag.

“Everything? Pajamas, socks, underwear? Allergy meds, toothbrush, stuff?”

“I didn't pack the stuff,” he informed her. “I told you, I never play Call of Duty over there.”

“That's what you're saying now,” Pam countered. “But what if it's an emergency?”

“Emergency?” he repeated. “What, you expect me to carry the stuff around all the time? That would be crazy.”

Ever since that fateful vacation to Florida when he had been deprived of his precious Coppertone, Pam had considered carrying a small bottle of lube in her purse. What if she picked him up from school and his report card was nothing but straight As? What if they were on a road trip and the car broke down in the middle of nowhere? She had to be prepared for these things. But the prospect of K-Y leaking inside her purse had ultimately deterred her from the idea.

“All right, don't pack the stuff. It's your funeral.” She slipped her feet into a pair of ballerina flats. “Can you finish your lollipop before we go? I don't want any more of your trash accumulating in my car.” Pam winced as his teeth crunched loudly on the lollipop. Seeking relief from the noise, she stepped outside.

The weather was now even nicer since her outing with Suzy a few hours ago. The damp chill had disappeared, replaced by an unusually warm day for April. Spring had truly sprung. Remembering the conversation with her friend, Pam sniffed the fresh air but detected nothing out of the ordinary. If anything, the springtime air possessed a damp and earthy quality that held promises of things yet to come. It was so nice that Pam rolled down the windows as they sped off. Jeremy manned the radio station in search of music that matched the pleasant weather.

“Does Apple's mom have any weird house rules I should know about?” Pam asked.
“She doesn’t like it when you accidentally put trash in the recycling bin,” he answered. “And if you see a jar of weird sludge in the fridge, it's just her chia seed drink. It's really gross so don't bother trying any.”

“What about shoes?” Pam said. “Off at the door?”

“Oh yeah. Even if your shoes are completely brand new.” Listening to the radio, Jeremy tapped out a rhythm on the gift-wrapped box on his lap. “Are you sure Apple is going to like this umbrella?” he asked. “I would be really mad if someone gave me an umbrella for my birthday.”

“She'll love it,” Pam said. She had personally chosen the gift: a summery umbrella decorated with dozens of rainbow-hued beach balls. “It's totally her style.”

“I think she would have liked that matching outfit I picked out.”

“The one that said ‘Juicy’ on the butt?” Pam clarified. When they were at the mall, Jeremy had tried to convince her that Apple would love a baby blue Juicy Couture hoodie and shorts combo.

“Yeah, that one,” he answered. The song on the radio finished so he began skipping stations again. “She already has the pink version. She wears it all the time.”

“I don't know,” Pam dithered.

“We could have bought a pair for you too,” Jeremy reasoned.

Pam tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. “Yeah, well, I'm not a slut like Apple,” she muttered under her breath.

Jeremy turned down the radio volume. “Sorry. What was that?”

“I said I'm not a hipster like Apple,” Pam told him.

“Sure you are,” Jeremy said. “I think you're cool.”

She gave him a quick glance, searching for sarcasm, but found none. “You're so sweet,” she smiled. Keeping a hand on the steering wheel, she kissed her fingertips then reached over to touch his forehead. “Mwah,” she said. For good measure, she kissed her fingertips once more and tapped the crotch of his shorts. Jeremy looked out the window, but she spotted his bashful smile.

They continued driving, the cityscape slowly giving way to a deceptively suburban area that pretended to be rural. The condo shared by William and Marla was located across town in a planned community called Arcadia Falls. Pam followed the directions from her phone as she drove along winding roads lined with manicured green lawns and unobtrusive playgrounds. The neighborhood was composed of dozens of clustered condominiums that bordered a golf course and a thicket of woods which contained the eponymous waterfall.

“That's it over there,” Jeremy said, pointing to a condo that looked exactly like the others. Pam pulled the car into a designated guest parking spot. The exterior of the condo was painted a dull brown that made the building disappear into the surrounding trees. Jeremy hopped out of the car and headed for the door. He walked right in without ringing the doorbell. Pam cautiously followed.

“Hey, we're here!” he called.

Pam remembered to take off her shoes. The interior of the condo was modern yet anonymous in an Ikea sort of way. Immediately to her left was a small kitchen and adjacent dining area. It was a split
level design where downstairs led to an open-floor living room while upstairs presumably led to the bedrooms. She hung back while Jeremy disappeared into the kitchen.

William came down the stairs. “Hi there, Pam,” he said. Sticking his head in the kitchen, he said, “Hi Jeremy.”

“Hi dad.”

Their relationship had grown even more impersonal since the divorce. William nodded politely at Pam. “Good to see you. How have you been?”

“Good,” Pam said. “How are you?”

“Doing well. We were just on our way out the door.”

“You're not staying for Apple's birthday party?” Pam asked, surprised.

The jangling sound of bracelets announced Marla's approach. “Hi Pam,” she said. “No, we had a little brunch celebration for Apple this morning. Tonight's birthday party is strictly for her friends.”

“Marla and I are jealous that you get to be at this party,” William told her. “I guess Apple didn't want any adults over 35.”

Marla glanced at the dinner table laden with various bowls of pretzels and chips. She seemed perplexed. “William? Did you see how much food she made for this party?”

“Yes, there's quite a spread in the kitchen too.”

Marla frowned. “She told me she was just going to have one or two friends over.”

“That's what she told me too,” William said. He glanced at his watch. “We better get going if we're going to make our dinner reservation in time.”

“Just a moment,” Marla said. “I want to have one last word with her.” As she disappeared up the stairs, Pam heard her say, “Gwen? Tell me again, how many friends did you invite for this party?”

Pam and William exchanged a bemused look. He helplessly held up his hands. “I'm so glad I only have one kid to worry about,” William said.

Pam found Jeremy in the kitchen. “Did Apple's mom just call her Gwen?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Jeremy said. “Apple isn't her real name. It's just a nickname that stuck. When she was three, she started telling everyone to call her Apple.”

“I see,” Pam said. “You sure know a lot about Apple. Anything else you'd like to tell me?”

She was just joking, but Jeremy absentmindedly said, “Well, her belly button is an outie.”

“Uh huh.” Her amusement fading, Pam continued, “Is she ticklish anywhere?”

“Bottom of her feet.”

“Who do you like more, me or her?”

Jeremy picked up a paper plate, then paused. “Hey, Dad! Can we start eating? Or should we wait?” he asked.
“Go ahead,” his dad called back.

Jeremy was clearly dodging the question, although there was a remote possibility it was his one-track mind at work. Pam decided to let it go for now. This probably wasn't the time or place to delve into that particular question anyway. She distracted herself by studying the banquet that Apple had prepared.

A built-in buffet, separating the kitchen from the dining area, was overflowing with an array of dishes labeled with a dainty hand-written etiquette. Shrimp cocktail. Meatballs in grape jelly. Deviled eggs. Lipton onion dip. A glimmering ruby Jell-o mold in the shape of a fish. Iceberg lettuce salad with blue cheese dressing on the side.

“This food seems kind of weird,” Jeremy noted. “I've never heard of any of this stuff. Dessert looks good though.” He bent over to study a platter of cupcakes with chocolate frosting and candied hearts.

“I think Apple is throwing a 1950s themed party,” Pam guessed. Though she was starving, she reluctantly passed over the high-calorie party food. In the end, her plate was composed only of carrot and celery sticks, a handful of almonds, some pretzels, and a few deviled eggs. The only concession was her beverage. She just couldn't resist the crystal punch bowl, filled with an effervescent pink liquid. Using a ladle, she nudged aside the decorative ice ring that floated on the surface and filled a matching crystal teacup. A nearby bowl held some atomic-colored maraschino cherries so she added one as a garnish. Taking a cautious sip, Pam was impressed by the flavor explosion on her tongue.

William and Marla reappeared. “We're leaving now!” his dad told them. “Pam, please don't let the kids burn the place down.” Pam laughed but Marla gave him a look. “I'm kidding! Apple's a very a responsible young...” His words were cut off by the closing door.

Pam seated herself on one of the stools lining the kitchen counter while Jeremy hovered near the food, preferring to sample small bites of everything. She was already close to cleaning her plate when Apple sashayed into the room. As Pam suspected, the teenage girl was impeccably dressed in a navy dress with white trim at the collars and sleeves. It was a housewife style dress with buttons down the front, its vintage feel accentuated by Apple's exuberantly blond hair and bright red lipstick.

“Hi Pam! Hi Jeremy!” she greeted.

“Hi Apple,” Pam said, glad that she herself had chosen to dress up too. “Happy birthday!”

“Happy birthday!” Jeremy chimed in, his mouth full of onion dip. “This food is really good.”

“Definitely,” Pam agreed. She held her empty plate in Jeremy's direction. “Can you get me some more veggies and almonds?”

He began filling the plate. “Want some blue cheese dressing for your celery?” he offered.

Pam was tempted but the dressing was clearly a calorie trap. “No, thank you.” The moment Jeremy handed her the plate, Apple approached and placed her hands on his shoulders.

“Can I borrow him for a second?” Apple asked. She sat on the stool next to Pam and wordlessly handed Jeremy a hair brush. Pam lost her appetite as he began brushing Apple's hair in careful strokes. Based on their mutual demeanor, this clearly was not the first time he had done this. Pam immediately thought of all the weekends he had chosen to spend with his dad at Marla's condo. She wondered what else he had done with Apple.

“So what's new with you, Pam?” Apple inquired. She munched on cucumber slices as Jeremy continued brushing her hair. “I haven't seen you since Florida.”
Florida. That seemed like a lifetime ago. Since then, she had given Jeremy his first kiss, let him eat apple rings off her chest, and taught him to use a sex toy on her. “Um, not much interesting has happened since Florida,” Pam answered.

“Me and Pam are doing a new jigsaw puzzle at home,” Jeremy interjected. “It has a thousand pieces.”

“That's cool,” Apple said. “That reminds me. We need to add to our marble raceway. I have like a ton of new rolls waiting.” Noticing Pam's confused look, she explained, “Jeremy and I have been building a race chute out of old paper towel and toilet paper rolls. When it's done, it's going to run from the third floor all the way down to the first floor.”

“Oh. Wow. Jeremy hadn't told me about it.” Their jigsaw puzzle suddenly paled in comparison. A marble raceway. Why hadn't she thought of that? That sounded much more fun than some old jigsaw puzzle. She wanted to one-up Apple, but couldn't think of anything. Last week, she and Jeremy had played ping-pong in their underwear while waiting for their clothes to come out of the dryer. Why couldn't she say that?

Apple grimaced as the hairbrush caught on a tangle of her blond hair. “Hey.” She turned to give Jeremy a reproachful look. “Why do I always have to remind you? Brush gently.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Pam's eyebrow twitched in a nervous tic. “How many people are coming to your party?” she inquired, changing the subject.

“Not too many, actually,” Apple said. “Just a few friends. And Zep!”

Zep strolled into the kitchen, one hand holding a present and the other behind his back. Apple slid off her stool to give him a kiss on the cheek. “Happy birthday,” he said, handing her the wrapped box first before presenting her with a bouquet of yellow daffodils and white lilies.

Apple sniffed the flowers and smiled. “Zep. You're the best!”

Jeremy, still brushing Apple's hair, paused long enough to give the teenage boy a high-five. “Hi Zep!”

“Hi Zep,” Pam said. They exchanged a fist bump. “I like your hair,” she told him. His hair had been a free-flowing orange the last time she saw him. Today it was jet black, buzzed short on the sides and back but long enough in front to nearly cover his eyes.

“Thanks. Apple doesn't really like it though.”

“Not true,” Apple protested. “I like it a lot.”

“I brought over a copy of Rogue One,” Zep told Jeremy. “Want to watch that Darth Vader scene at the end?”

Jeremy's face lit up the same way as when she explained thong underwear. “Can I go?” he asked Apple.

“I suppose so,” Apple answered, holding out her hand. Jeremy returned her hairbrush and rushed off with Zep. “They're been sort of inseparable,” she told Pam. “We like to joke that Zep is the big brother he never had.”
“That's so sweet,” Pam said. “Does that make you the big sister he never had?”

“Oh, no,” Apple laughed. “I'm much more than a big sister.”

A sour taste in her mouth made Pam blanch. Before she could politely inquire what the hell that meant, the doorbell rang. Leaving to answer it, Apple returned moments later with two friends.

“This is Pam,” she introduced. “And this is Rose and that's Becky.” Feeling somewhat out of place, Pam waved awkwardly at the two teenage girls. Like Apple, they were both wearing vintage-looking dresses that were fashionable decades ago. Rose was a mousy girl but she compensated with stylishly unkempt brown hair and blue eyeshadow. Becky's dark blond hair was pulled into a ponytail in back and bangs in front. She wore glasses with square frames that fit her angular face.

“I can't believe you guys showed up on time,” Apple remarked.

Becky rolled her eyes as she poured herself some punch. “Rose picked me up twenty minutes early,” she said. “You know her. She'll always be on time if Zep is going to be around.”

“That's not true!” Rose denied. “I told you. My hair dresser finished early and I got tired of hanging around the mall.”

“Sure,” Becky said. “You got a new outfit, then got your hair done. It's just a coincidence that you're seeing Zep today.” Rose sputtered for a response. Becky winked at her and said, “If you're not careful, Apple will kick you out.”

“I like to keep my friends close,” Apple intoned. “And my enemies closer.” She gave Rose a hug.

“I used to have a crush on Zep,” Rose admitted. “But that was in fifth grade! Give me a break.”

Zep returned to the kitchen with Jeremy in tow. “Who's getting a break?” Zep asked. The boys seated themselves at the kitchen counter.

“No one,” Apple said cheerfully.

Zep shrugged. “Hello ladies,” he nodded.

“Hi Zep,” Rose and Becky said in unison. Perhaps it was the power of suggestion, but Pam thought she saw a brief moment of meaningful eye contact as Zep greeted Rose. The two teenage girls glanced at Jeremy who was entertaining himself by spinning in circles on the kitchen stool.

“This is Jeremy,” Zep told them.

“He's my mom's boyfriend's son,” Apple added.

Jeremy waved politely. “Hi,” he said, followed by his trademark shy grin. He always reserved that smile for members of the opposite sex, Pam noticed.

Apple surveyed the small pile of presents that had accumulated on the table. “Can I open these now?” she asked.

“It's your birthday,” Zep said. “Go ahead.”

Apple opened Zep's present first. She carefully removed the lid of the flat and square box. Inside were dozens of beautiful origami cranes in midnight blue and creamy white. Nestled among the cranes were five individually wrapped brownies.
“Wow, Zep,” Apple breathed, holding a bird in her palm. “These are beautiful. Thank you.”

“Did you fold those yourself?” Pam was impressed.

“Sure did.”

“Can you teach me how?” Jeremy asked.

Zep nodded. Apple picked up one of the brownies. “Is this what I think it is?” she asked. Tapping his nose, Zep answered with a sly grin. Rose and Becky exchanged a knowing glance.

“I made some for everyone,” Zep proclaimed as Apple distributed the brownies.

Jeremy was crestfallen when Apple passed him over. Based on the way the teenagers giggled, Pam had hunch about what was going on. She examined the wrapped brownie. “I'm guessing these are not ordinary baked sweets?” she asked Zep.

“Old family recipe with a special secret ingredient,” Zep winked.

Pam tried to remember the last time she smoked pot. College, probably. No matter how often she tried it, the result was always the same: bone-rattling paranoia. “I'll save this for later,” she said, returning the brownie to the box of origami cranes.

“Can I have it?” Jeremy reached for the brownie.

Pam snatched his hand and yanked him toward the buffet. “Let's have some cupcakes instead,” she suggested. She personally didn't really want anything sugary at the moment but she had to distract him somehow. Jeremy unwrapped a cupcake as the teenagers dug into their brownies. Pam re-filled her cup of punch and added several maraschino cherries.

Apple began opening her next present in between bites of brownie. Pam watched as she unwrapped the gift from her and Jeremy. “Oh wow,” Apple said. “Check out this cool umbrella!” She popped it open, revealing the colorful beach balls that cascaded from the center. Twirling the umbrella created a swirling illusion of tumbling beach balls. Rose and Becky took turns with the umbrella. Even Zep seemed impressed with it.

Pam popped a cherry stem in her mouth. “See, I told you Apple would like it,” she said quietly to Jeremy.

“You don't always have to point out that you're right,” he complained. As a peace offering, she removed the cherry stem from her mouth and handed it to him. Jeremy examined it quizzically until he noticed the neatly tied knot in the middle of the stem. “Hey! How did you do that?”

“Watch this,” Pam said, holding up a fresh cherry stem. Placing it in her mouth, she carefully manipulated it with her teeth and tongue. Thirty seconds later, she triumphantly pulled out a knotted stem. She handed him that one too.

Jeremy waved urgently to get everyone's attention. “Hey, you guys. Look what Pam can do!”

Now entertaining an audience, Pam self-consciously popped another cherry stem into her mouth. There was a murmur of excitement when she held up the knotted stem. Rose, Becky and Zep started clapping, with Apple joining late.

Zep picked up the knotted cherry stem. “Wow. I've never known anyone who could do this.”
Pam was forced to conceal her delight when Apple gave him a dirty look. “Yeah, it's awesome,” the teenage girl said without much enthusiasm. “I'm going to open the rest of my presents now.”

Rose handed her a box. “This one is from me.”

Apple excitedly unwrapped the present. Pawing inside the box, she pulled out several brightly colored objects in the shape of daisies. “Ooh, bath bombs!” she reported. “They smell so nice.” These were followed by some chocolates and a necklace. Last in the box was a small bottle that caused Apple to frown at Rose. “You are such a jerk,” she said.

“What is it?” Zep asked.

Becky peered over Apple's shoulder to read the label. “It's lube,” she told the room. “Pina colada lube, to be exact.”

“Flavored lube? Is this supposed to be a present for me or for Zep?” Apple demanded.

Rose couldn't stop laughing. “It's for both of you. Win-win, right? Especially since you said you don't like giving...”

“Shush!” Apple silenced her friend. Zep was even more reticent than usual as he poked at his plate of food. Becky glanced nervously from Apple to Rose as they glared at each other. Pam was greatly amused by this turn of events but Jeremy was utterly lost.

“Here's my present,” Becky said, thrusting a festive gift bag into Apple's lap.

Apple cooed in delight as she unwrapped a container of shower jelly, pink and wobbly, as well as decorative soaps in the shape of ladybugs and pink flamingos. “These are so cute!” she told Becky. Apple stopped to glare at Rose before continuing, “It's so nice to receive thoughtful and appropriate gifts.”

“Um, actually,” Becky began, “there are two more presents in there.” Reaching eagerly into the gift bag, Apple's grin faded as she pulled out a pair of handcuffs and a pink blindfold.

Rose made a gurgling sound of approval. “Nice!” She elbowed Becky. “I should have thought of that.”

The metal cuffs clinked in Apple's hands. She delicately placed them on the counter. “What is with you guys?” she said, annoyed. “I didn't give you gag gifts for your birthdays.”

Jeremy headed back to the buffet for the third time. He stopped to eyeball the novelty handcuffs and blindfold. “What's this for? Are you guys going to play Cops and Robbers?” Apple's friends tittered, causing Jeremy to blush in consternation as he shoveled a gigantic spoonful of meatballs onto his plate.

“It's for, you know, bedtime fun,” Rose said. “Like in 50 Shades of Grey.”

Nodding blankly, Jeremy said, “Oh. I never saw that movie.” He returned to his stool next to Pam. “I've been meaning to ask you...”

Pam discreetly made a slashing motion across her throat. Jeremy trailed off, but everyone was looking at him now. Realizing he was on the spot, Jeremy groped for something to say. “Can you use less jelly in my lunch sandwiches?” he asked. “The bread keeps getting soaked through with grape jelly.”
Pam inwardly groaned, but no one else seemed to notice his non sequitur. Wanting to take a picture of her presents, Apple artfully arranged the umbrella with origami swans, bath bombs, and ladybug soaps. “Ugh, this kitchen lighting is awful,” she noted, frowning at her phone screen. “I'm going to try taking some pictures outside.” Apparently needing to stick together, the rest of the teens followed Apple out of the kitchen.

Jeremy waited until they were out of earshot. “So what's up with 50 Shades of Grey?” he inquired. “Ashton and I watched the trailer at his house. But it didn't make sense. What's so great about blindfolds and handcuffs?”

“Some people think it's sexy, I guess,” she said. Pam wanted a cupcake but she knew she would regret the calories after eating it. She half-heartedly nibbled some celery instead.

“That's weird. The guys at school said the lady in the movie gets spanked. In her underwear.”

“Yeah. It's a real barn-burner of a sex story.” Pam had tried to read the book, but the writing was laughably horrific. BDSM was an utter mystery as far as she was concerned, on par with speaking Mandarin or the popularity of lumbersexuals.

“Why would anyone want to be spanked?” Jeremy wondered. “Doesn't it hurt?”

“Some people like it,” Pam explained. “It's like their version of Call of Duty.”

“Huh.” Jeremy unwrapped his second cupcake. “Do you like being spanked?” he asked.

“I don't know,” Pam answered. She gazed at his cupcake with yearning eyes. “I've honestly never tried it with anyone. I suppose it depends on who's doing the spanking.”

Taking a huge bite of cupcake, Jeremy examined the bottle of flavored lube. Since it was pina colada, there were palm trees and coconuts decorating the label. Pam took advantage of his inattention by swiping a finger on the chocolate frosting. He gave her another puzzled look. “I don't get it. Why would someone want flavored stuff?” he asked.

Pam helped herself to more chocolate frosting. “Do the math, Jeremy.”

He began thinking out loud. “I mean, it's not a like a guy is going to lick it off his hand after he's done jerking off.”

“True,” she said. “What else could he do with it?”

Jeremy continued, “He could put some on his thing, then it would taste like coconut. But who cares about that?”

“Who indeed?” Pam said. Looking him in the eye, she suggestively sucked her finger clean of chocolate frosting.

“Ohhh,” he said, the light finally dawning. “You.”

“Yes,” Pam answered. “Me.” She opened the lube and took a sniff. “You know, I've always liked pina coladas. It's been so long since I've had one.”

He didn't pick up her hint though. “I've never had one,” he said.

Trying again, she continued, “But I wonder what this stuff tastes like. Do you think they got it right?”
“Who knows?”

This was going nowhere. Pam balanced the bottle of lube on the crotch of his shorts, then smiled brightly when Jeremy gave her a questioning look. “Please?” she asked.

Jeremy returned the bottle to the small pile of presents on the countertop. “But this belongs to Apple,” he said. “We can't just take it.”

Pam sighed. “You and your excuses.”

The teenagers returned to the kitchen in the middle of a conversation. “Remember our old birthday parties?” Becky was saying. “We would stay up late watching movies and playing games.”

“We should play Truth or Dare,” Rose proposed.

Apple nodded excitedly. “I haven't played that in so long!” Pam and Jeremy looked at each other, but neither of them said a word.

“We played Kiss and Guess once too,” Becky remembered. “Except it wasn't very exciting because there were only girls at the party.”

“Let's play that instead,” Rose said. She held up the pink blindfold from Apple's pile of presents. “Of course, it would be just Zep.” Rose and Zep exchanged another secret look that did not escape Pam's attention. She wondered what kind of history they had together.

Horrified, Apple held out an arm, separating Zep from her friends. “Hey! Stay away from my man!”

“Come on, it'll be fun,” Rose pleaded. She looked around the room for support. “Jeremy could play too!”

Sitting up straight, Pam fought the urge to mimic Apple and stick a protective arm in front of Jeremy. “Oh, I don't know,” she said. “I think Jeremy's too young for that.”

“What's Kiss and Guess?” Jeremy asked, not helping the cause.

“It's easy,” Rose told him. She sat Jeremy down in a chair. “We just put a blindfold around you, like this, then we'll take turns kissing you. And you'll have to guess who it is. Doesn't that sound fun?”

Pam frowned. She didn't think it sounded fun at all. The pink blindfold looked rather ridiculous on him as he sat quietly with his hands in his lap. “He shouldn't have to play if he doesn't want to,” Pam interjected.

“Do you have a girlfriend, Jeremy?” Becky asked.

There was the slightest hesitation before he answered. “Uh... I don't know,” he stammered.

The three teenage girls pounced on his answer with a series of hoots. “That's a yes if I ever heard one,” Becky declared.

“Who is she?” Rose demanded.

Jeremy squirmed in his chair. “It's a secret.”

“Well, better not tell her you played this game with us,” said Rose. “She might get mad. It's the bitchy and possessive girlfriends that you have to be careful with.” She pointedly looked in Apple's direction.
“Eff you,” Apple answered, giving her the finger.

Rose went first. She tiptoed over to Jeremy, bent over, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Pam saw him fidget nervously as his ears flushed pink. “Um, now I have to guess?” he asked.

“Right,” Becky said.

“That was Rose,” he said confidently.

Having been caught, Rose made a face. No one said anything though. If they told him right away, the game would have become too easy by sheer process of elimination.

Becky was next. She sidled up to Jeremy and kissed his forehead. “Becky,” he immediately stated. She shrugged and returned to her seat at the kitchen counter.

Apple winked deviously at her friends. She approached Jeremy with a determined look on her face. Pam watched helplessly as Apple planted a kiss directly on Jeremy's lips. Not expecting this, the young boy leaned back in surprise, but Apple moved a hand behind his head to prevent him from moving too far away. Her lips even lingered on his for a long moment. Pam felt like she was going to throw up.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Jeremy's stammered guess was even worse. “Uh... Pam?”

Rose and Becky covered their mouths in muted laughter. Apple triumphantly punched her fist in the air as she returned to her place at the counter. Motioning everyone to come close, Apple whispered to them, “He even kissed me back!” The three teenage girls broke into a fresh set of giggles. In the chair, Jeremy's ears turned bright red from the laughter. Zep was nonplussed. Pam was livid.

It was her turn. She walked up to Jeremy, knowing exactly where she was going to kiss him. She aimed for the spot just behind his ear, where her nose would be planted in his sweet-smelling boyish hair, where she could get away with running her tongue lightly against his earlobe. Pam had kissed him there so many times that his response was entirely predictable. As she expected, Jeremy shivered lightly, his shoulders clenching in an involuntary shudder of pleasure.

“Oh,” he said sheepishly behind his blindfold. “Um, that was Pam.”

“Great guess, Jeremy,” she answered. She removed the blindfold and glared at him. He gave her his best 'please don't kill me' look.

“I think Zep should go next,” Pam announced. He had been quietly eating cupcakes and drinking punch, but now all eyes were on him.

“No way!” Apple protested.

“Let's vote,” Pam suggested. “All in favor of Zep going next?” She raised her hand. Rose's hand shot up immediately. Becky hesitated only a moment before raising her own. Jeremy cautiously raised his hand after Pam elbowed him.

“Four to one!” Rose crowed. She said to Apple, “You're outvoted. Democracy wins again.”

Becky removed the blindfold from Jeremy and affixed it to Zep. “I can't believe you're doing this to me on my birthday,” Apple grumbled.

Feeling a little better, Pam leaned back to watch the damage she had wrought. Perhaps it was the pot brownie kicking in, but Zep did a terrible job with his guesses. Becky went first with a chaste kiss on
the cheek, but he guessed Rose. Then Apple parted the hair hiding his forehead for a kiss, but he
guessed Becky, much to her chagrin. Finally, Rose planted a lingering kiss on his cheek. He guessed
Apple, which only served to fuel his girlfriend's disgust.

Then it was Pam's turn. Licking the chocolate frosting from her fingers, she confidently strode over
to Zep, tilted his head back, and planted a wet kiss on his lips, going so far as to thrust her tongue in
his mouth and squeeze his leg with her fingers. Behind her, she could hear muffled gasps from the
three teenage girls.

"Whoa, pro kiss," Zep said. "That must have been Pam." He pulled off the blindfold to confirm his
guess.

Pam patted his knee. "Good job, Zep," she praised. Rose and Becky were smiling but knew better
than display any other signs of amusement. Jeremy regarded Pam with an accusatory expression.
Apple, meanwhile, had been shooting daggers at Pam, but her fury now enveloped Zep as well.

"Pro kiss?" Apple demanded. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Zep shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "You know... Pam can tie cherry stems into knots and all
that." Realizing too late that this was the wrong justification, Zep shrunk under Apple's withering
gaze. "Uh, happy birthday, Apple!" He pulled her onto his lap for a kiss. Though she pouted at first,
Apple eventually began kissing him back. Everyone in the kitchen tried to look elsewhere while the
two of them made up.

Rose cleared her throat to break them up. "So, who wants to play another game?"

Zep whispered something in Apple's ear. She giggled and slapped his hand. "We're not doing that
now," she said. She leaned against Zep as he wrapped his arms around her. "Truth or Dare sounds
like it would be a disaster," Apple said. "Let's watch a movie instead."

"I brought over a trippy French movie," Zep told them. "La Planete Sauvage. We could watch that."

"Good idea," Apple approved. "We can watch it on the big screen in the rec room."

Everyone loaded up on snacks before they headed to the community rec room located a short walk
across the neighborhood. Leading the way, Jeremy carried an enormous paper bag of popcorn while
Pam carried his drink. The four teenagers trailed behind them, stopping to admire the blossoming
trees or quacking ducks. They were a good twenty paces behind when Jeremy stopped to see what
was taking them so long.

"Why are they staring at that wall?" he wondered.

The four of them stood transfixed by a brick wall covered with ivy. They were too far away to be
heard, but Becky began brushing her hand along the green tendrils as though she were playing a
harp. The others followed suit. The marijuana in their brownies was clearly kicking in. "Beats me,"
Pam said, shrugging. "Come on, they'll catch up eventually."

The two of them entered the darkened rec room. Pam blinked as Jeremy turned on the lights.
Foosball and air hockey tables waited in one corner while an enormous projector screen and speakers
occupied an entire wall across the room. In front of the screen were three rows of chairs, the same
kind as at a real movie theater, with hinged seats and adjustable armrests with built-in cupholders.

"Pretty nice, isn't it?" Jeremy said. He used a remote to turn on the screen. "Wait until you hear the
sound system." Pam took a seat in the middle row as he began flipping through channels in search of
something loud to showcase the speakers. After surfing through one hundred channels, the most
interesting thing he found was a nature documentary about cats.

“Let's just watch this,” Pam said. She was starting to get a headache from the channel surfing.

“Ha, look at that.” Jeremy chuckled as a lovely tuxedo cat returned a wandering kitten to the nest by gently holding it in her jaws. The mama cat then proceeded to lick the tiny kitten, starting with its ears and face. The adorable kitten blinked several times as it enjoyed its mother's licking tongue.

“Aww...” Pam and Jeremy said simultaneously.

The four teenagers finally ambled into the rec room. Pam moved over to make room as everyone crowded into the middle row. “Look at the kitties!” Becky swooned. The stoned kids stared at the screen as more kittens tumbled into the frame, each one demanding attention from the mama cat who patiently began cleaning them one by one. While they waited, two kittens playfully batted each other with tiny paws while another chased its shadow.

It was undeniably cute, but Pam wondered how much longer the documentary would focus on the cat licking the kittens. Even Jeremy, sitting in the front row by himself, was starting to get bored. The older teens, however, were thoroughly enraptured, watching the TV with glazed eyes and slack jaws. Jeremy finally cleared his throat.

“Aren't we going to watch a movie?” he asked.

“Oh yeah,” Apple said, getting up. “I'll put it in.” There was an impromptu game of musical chairs as Zep went to turn off the lights while Rose searched for a napkin. Jeremy, seeing an open seat next to Pam, switched to the middle row. Everyone else drifted back into place after the lights dimmed, Apple being last. Having been occupied by the DVD projector, she regarded their seat choices with dismay.

“Hey!” she frowned. “Where's the birthday girl supposed to sit?” Since there were only five seats per row, Apple was left out in the cold.

“We could move to another row,” Rose said, nudging Becky and standing up.

But Apple stopped them. “I have a better idea,” she said, squeezing past her friends. Apple raised the armrest between Jeremy and Zep, then wedged herself in the small space. “I know my boys always love an Apple sandwich!” she announced.

Pam managed to suppress a sigh but she couldn't keep from gritting her teeth. At this rate, she predicted her enamel would be worn down to nubs by the time the evening ended. The movie started but it was difficult to pay attention when she kept glancing over to keep tabs on Apple. Though her head leaned against Zep's shoulder, Apple also rested a hand on Jeremy's bare knee. Pam didn't like the look of her red fingernails against the young boy's skin.

“Hic.” Though Pam tried her best to remain calm, her uneven breathing had given her the hiccups. She attempted deep, even breaths. Inhale. Exhale. That seemed to help, until Apple helped herself to a handful of Jeremy's popcorn. When he protested, she mollified him by feeding him some of the pilfered popcorn, one kernel at a time. Apple giggled when Jeremy accidentally licked her fingers. Pam's blood boiled.

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“Hic.” The hiccups had grown so intense that Pam's entire upper body was seizing up in involuntary contractions. This was getting painful, and not just the hiccups, though they had grown sufficiently loud that even Rose, at the other end of the row, was investigating where they were coming from.

“Are you okay?” Jeremy whispered.
“I'm (hic) fine,” Pam told him. She held a hand to her midsection in an attempt to support her aching diaphragm.

“Want a sip of my soda?” He offered her the cup. She took a grateful sip from the straw. Any hiccup alleviation was instantly negated when Apple held out her hand, took Jeremy’s drink, and slurped loudly from the same straw.

Hic. “Ow,” Pam said, wincing. She stood up. “Excuse me. (hic) I need to go back to the (hic) condo.”

Jeremy followed her. “I'll come too,” he said.

“No, you can (hic) stay here if you want,” Pam said. He followed her nevertheless. When they exited the community building, she was pleasantly surprised to find it was still quite warm outside even though dusk had fallen. Despite the street lamps illuminating the path, Pam was uncertain of the way back to the condo.

“Is this the (hic) right way, Jeremy?” she asked. There was no answer. Puzzled, she turned to find that he had vanished. “Jeremy?” She had just begun re-tracing her steps when he leapt from behind a bench along the walking path.

“Boo!” he shouted, waving his arms.

“Eek!” Pam let out a strangled scream.

“Did I get rid of your hiccups?” he asked eagerly.

Her heart rate had shot sky-high and she was too startled to breathe. “I... (hic)” she panted. “Does that (hic) answer your question?”

“Darn.”

“Why did you (hic) do that?” Pam complained, holding her side. “I think you just (hic) made them worse.”

“I was trying to help,” he said. He pinched her nose and put a hand over her mouth. “Try holding your breath.”

Pam pushed him away in annoyance. “Not now, Jeremy. Can we just (hic) go back to the condo?”

He led the way back. “Want to try a spoonful of sugar?” Jeremy suggested as he opened the front door. “That always helps me get rid of the hiccups.”

“That's not going to (hic) work,” Pam told him. “I just need to (hic) relax.” She toddled down the half-flight of stairs to the living room level and gingerly sat on the couch. It was covered in a slippery leather that forced her to sit up straight. Trying to concentrate, she focused on the ticking clock on the bookshelf.

Jeremy began prowling the buffet table again. “Can I have another cupcake?” he asked.

Wriggling her toes on the beige carpet, Pam tried to imagine a calm beach and ocean. “Have some (hic) veggies instead,” she said, not looking at him. “And wash your hands too.” She listened to his footsteps as he approached the kitchen sink and turned on the water. Satisfied that he was washing up, she focused on her breathing. Slow and calm. Her moment of zen didn't last as she immediately exhaled an exasperated breath. Turning, she fixed Jeremy with an accusatory glare. “Why are you in
love with Apple?"

He was pouring himself a cup of strawberry-colored punch, but filled it too high. Jeremy hastily slurped to keep it from spilling. "I'm not in love with Apple," he contradicted.

"Then why are you always (hic) doing everything she tells you?"

"I'm not!"

"You brush her hair for her," Pam groused. "You let her (hic) feed you popcorn and let her drink your soda..."

"That doesn't mean I'm in love with her," Jeremy protested as he assembled a plate with food. It was a lurid collection of deviled eggs, maraschino cherries and his leftover popcorn. Seating himself at the dinner table, he continued their conversation through the railing that separated the dining room from the living area down below. "I was just being nice. There's a difference between being nice and being in love with someone."

"Whatever. You can't even tell the difference when she kisses you and when I kiss you." Pam wanted an angry moment of silence to let that sink in, but she hiccuped instead.

"I was blindfolded!" he said defensively. The legs of his chair squeaked against the floor as he fidgeted. "Plus, I think Apple uses the same shampoo as you because sometimes she smells like you and that's why..."

"You are not helping!" Pam interrupted, glaring and hiccuping.

"Calm, calm," Jeremy urged, waving both hands in the air as if he were petting an invisible dog. It was the same gesture Pam used on him when he had too much sugar.

"Don't tell me (hic) what to do," Pam retorted.

"Why am I the only one in trouble? You kissed Zep. It was even an open mouth kiss."

"Did that make you (hic) jealous? Welcome to my world."

They quietly pouted, her in the living room and him in the dining room. After a moment, she heard him get up. Abandoning his paper plate of food, he carefully wiped his hands on a napkin then fished out Pam's hair brush from her purse on the kitchen counter. Joining her in the living room. He stood behind her on the couch and began gently brushing her hair. The slightest iota of tension seeped from her clenched shoulders. But it didn't last very long.

Hic hic. "I can't believe you do this for Apple," Pam complained. "You've never once offered to brush my hair."

"Shhh. You're supposed to be relaxing." Neither of them said a word as he brushed her hair for several minutes, although Pam's hiccups would occasionally break the stillness. Grudgingly, she let herself enjoy the doting touch of his fingers as they tuck her brown hair behind her ears. She began slowly sinking into the thickly upholstered couch. Jeremy surprised her by setting aside the hair brush and massaging her shoulders. Pam stiffened at his touch.

Jeremy's hands immediately stopped moving. "No, I don't do this for Apple," he stated.

He resumed her massage. The open design of her dress allowed him direct contact on her bare skin, but she kept sliding down the slippery couch. Suddenly embarrassed by her seething jealousy, she
was glad he couldn't see her face as he stood behind her. She realized their fights always revolved around his messiness or her jealousy. Irritating issues, certainly, but also thoroughly petty.

Leaning back, she let her head rest on the couch so she could see his upside-down face. “I (hic) forgive you,” she told him.

“I didn't apologize,” he objected.

“Just say you're sorry, Jeremy.”

He hesitated, then gruffly cleared his throat. “Sorry, Pam.”

“Me too. (hic) Sorry, Jeremy.” She gently took his hand. When they placed their palms together, her hand was still bigger than his, although not by much. Pam didn't know what to say, so she impulsively kissed his fingers. She hoped that would end the floundering silence, but they continued regarding each other in a state of mutual embarrassment. Jeremy finally broke the impasse by tracing lines on her exposed collarbone. His finger caressed the soft skin at the base of her neck, causing Pam to shiver. Slowly, his hand inched lower across her chest. She closed her eyes when he slipped a hand inside the neckline of her dress.

His hand cupped her breast for a delicious moment before gently squeezing. Though impeded by her bra, Pam's nipple stiffened at his touch. His other hand touched her face, running along her eyebrows, stroking her cheek. When his finger drew near her mouth, Pam kissed it first then nibbled it with her lips. Her bum kept sliding down the leather upholstery, so she arched her back and dug her toes into the plush carpet to keep herself from slipping completely off the couch. It was as if she were bobbing in the water and Jeremy was in a lifeboat, reaching to save her.

Pam wasn't exactly sure how she started sucking on his finger. One moment his fingernail was merely tapping her teeth and the next she had completely engulfed his finger. Leaning her head back, she could recognize the look of surprise on Jeremy's face, even though it was upside-down. The eleven year old boy's finger tasted of sweet maraschino cherry and salty popcorn.

It was a slice of paradise, letting her tongue swirl around his delectable finger. Sweetening the deal, Jeremy's fingers shifted across her chest to knead her other breast. It was times like this where she wished he had three hands. He was doing quite well with two, however, teasing her to the point where her cotton bra did little to contain her hard nipples. A very warm glow rose from between her legs.

Despite her best efforts, the slipping and sliding on the couch caused her dress to ride upward. She primly adjust the hemline of dress, pulling it back toward her knees. That motion must have inspired Jeremy because he extricated his hand from her neckline and reached between her legs.

“Wait,” Pam said, grabbing his wrist. “Stop.”

“But I was just getting to the good part!” Jeremy protested. His cheek was pressed against hers as he strained to reach.

“I know.” Pam reluctantly stood up and straightened her dress. “But I don't think it's a good idea to play Call of Duty right here in the living room.”

Jeremy, having draped himself across the back of the couch during their play, somersaulted over it and sprawled on the soft leather cushions. His shorts could barely contain the erection tenting out from his crotch. “Why not?” he demanded.

The sound of the front door opening caught their attention. “That's why,” Pam said, relieved that she
had listened to her instincts.

“Uh oh,” Jeremy said. He hid the bulge in his shorts with two cupped hands as the teenagers strolled into the living room.

“We're back!” Apple announced. Zep collapsed into an armchair across from the couch. Rose and Becky took the loveseat.

“How was the movie?” Pam inquired. She took a seat on the couch. Jeremy, deeply flustered, still lay across the it, but she was at least blocking his midsection from view.

“It was okay,” Apple said. “We didn't finish it because everyone started getting dizzy. I mean, except me. I think Zep's brownies had varying doses.”

Pam nodded sympathetically at the dazed teenagers. Zep stared at nothing on the ceiling while Becky rested her head on Rose's shoulder. Only Apple seemed her usual perky self. Wielding a feather duster, she began cleaning the bookshelf.

“Luck of the draw,” Zep mumbled. “Some brownies were sativa but others were indica.”

“What's the difference?” Rose asked.

“Sativa is more energetic,” Zep explained. “Indica is the classic stoned high.”

“I'm pretty sure I got a sativa brownie,” Apple said. She tidied a stack of magazines and then fixed the vase of drooping flowers on the end table. “Anyone want to play frisbee golf?”

Her friends made indistinct noises of dissent. Pam glanced at the red-faced Jeremy still hiding behind her. “Just run upstairs and walk it off,” she whispered.

He shook his head. “Someone will notice.” Apple was still alert, but Pam was certain that no one else would have batted an eyelash if Jeremy had sprouted wings and flown away.

Apple squeezed into the loveseat with her friends. “Did you get rid of your hiccups, Pam?”

Pam touched her side in surprise. She hadn't even noticed they were gone until Apple mentioned them. Forget about holding your breath or drinking water. Apparently, the trick was to suck on Jeremy's finger while he wandered around second base. “I did,” she confirmed.

“How did you do it?” Apple asked.

“Um, Jeremy helped me.”

“Really?” Apple said. Unable to see Jeremy because Pam was in the way, she had to lean over to peer at him. “You'll have to show me what you did. Sometimes it takes forever to get rid of my hiccups.”

“I don't think it will work on everybody,” Pam said, drumming her fingers on the couch in annoyance. Spotting Jeremy's duffel bag on the floor, she had an idea. “Why don't you go get ready for bed?” she said, handing it to him.

He stared at her in disbelief. “It's only 7:30!”

“Well, at least put this away before someone trips on it,” she said, moving the duffel bag over his lap.

“Oh,” he nodded. “Sure.” Carefully holding the bag in front of him, Jeremy dashed from the living
room.

Apple bounced up from the loveseat. “I have a great idea! Who wants to play Twister?” She frowned when no one answered.

“This is one mellow crowd, huh?” Pam commented. Thirsty from sucking Jeremy’s finger, she headed to the kitchen to find some water.

Following her, Apple sighed in agreement. “Just say no to drugs.” She stirred the punch bowl, disintegrating what was left of the melted ice ring. “At least I have you and Jeremy to keep me company.”

Pam sipped her water. “Actually, I should really get going. I’m meeting someone after this.” The second part was a lie since she had no other plans that night besides catching up on laundry. Truthfully, Pam wasn’t sure if she could stomach watching Apple flirt with Jeremy all night.

Apple seemed genuinely disappointed. “Okay. Thanks for coming! That was nice of you to stop by.” She surveyed the platters of food on the table. “Hey,” she called toward the living room. “Anyone hungry? There’s still plenty of food.”

Again, there was no answer but Zep eventually shuffled into the kitchen. He half-heartedly helped himself to a handful of potato chips. “There’s still a brownie left,” he observed, picking it up with eager hands.

“That’s Pam's brownie,” Apple objected.

“I’ll be fine without it,” Pam declined. “I’m not as big a partier as I used to be. It’s all yours, Zep.”

“I should probably save it for later,” he mused. He placed it back on the counter.

Jeremy reappeared, nonchalantly entering the kitchen with his hands in his pockets. Pam cast a quick glance at his shorts, relieved to see that they were back to normal. He gave her a grateful nod.

“There you are,” Pam said. “Hey, I’m going to head home okay?”

“Already?”

“I don’t want to stay too late,” Pam told him. They regarded each other awkwardly. She usually gave him an affectionate goodbye, but Apple and Zep were conspicuously watching. She ruffled his hair instead. “Stay out of trouble!” she said lamely.

“See you later,” Jeremy replied.

Apple and Zep waved at her. “Bye, Pam!”

“Bye!” Pam poked her head into the living room, but found Rose and Becky asleep in the loveseat. Deciding not to disturb them, she put on her shoes and crept out the door.

Pam was halfway home when her phone dinged twice. Carefully, she tried to glance at the screen while keeping her eyes on the road. Unknown caller. She let it go to voicemail. A minute later, however, her phone alerted her again. This time it was a text from a number she didn't recognize. Since she was slowing for a red light, Pam checked the message.

“pam, it's apple. please pick up.”

She had scarcely finished reading when the phone dinged with another phone call. Peering at the
stoplight, Pam decided that the light was not going to change anytime soon. She answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Pam? It's Apple.”

“Hi Apple. What's up?”

She heard Apple clear her throat. “Uh, do you think you could come back?”

“Why? Did I forget something?” The light turned green. Pam accelerated slowly through the intersection. She didn't like driving without both hands on the wheel.

“No. But I...” Apple paused. “This is an emergency. Remember that brownie you didn't want? The one with, you know, marijuana in it?”

“Yes...”

“Jeremy just ate it.”

Pam blinked once, then twice. Tossing the phone onto the passenger seat, she quickly swerved into a left turn lane, eliciting several honks of protest when she cut off another car. With squealing tires, her car slammed to an abrupt stop. “C’mon... c’mon... hurry up,” she muttered, eying the oncoming traffic. Spotting a sliver of an opening, she made a sharp u-turn then buried her foot on the gas, causing another loud screech as her car sped away in the opposite direction.
Chapter Summary

Jeremy falls ill at Apple's birthday party and Pam has to deal with the consequences.

“Where is he?” Pam demanded, barging into the Singer condo without knocking. Despite the guidance from her phone's GPS, she had still managed to get lost in the winding streets of the poorly-lit neighborhood. With each wrong turn, her grip tightened on the steering wheel as she tried to ignore the icy ball of anxiety in the pit of her stomach. Now she was spinning in panicked circles as she glanced around the condo in search of Jeremy.

Apple emerged from the kitchen, her fingers knit in apprehension. “He's in the living room with Zep,” she told her.

“How much of the brownie did he eat?” Pam asked.

“All of it.” Apple led her to the kitchen counter and pointed to a hastily torn plastic wrap scattered with crumbs.

Pam's stomach lurched at the sight. Her imagination conjured several worst-case scenarios. What if the marijuana's effects somehow lasted forever? What if he had to eat through a tube for the rest of his life? What if the marijuana was a gateway to harder drugs? She imagined a heavily tattooed Jeremy passed out on a filthy floor surrounded by needles and spoons. The rational part of her brain knew these were all unlikely scenarios, but rationality was losing out to her concern for his well-being.

Hurrying to the living room, Pam skipped down the stairs two steps at a time. Rose and Becky had fallen asleep in the loveseat, both of them leaning leftward like a pair of listing ships. Jeremy and Zep, meanwhile, were engrossed in a heated game of Madden football on the PlayStation. Their faces were completely hidden by the hoods of their sweatshirts, ostensibly to better concentrate. Pam took a seat next to Jeremy but he didn't even notice her until she gently pulled his hood aside.

“Oh. Hey.” His eyes flickered at her in a brief acknowledgment. “You're back.”

“Yeah, I forgot something.” Pam peered at his eyes. He seemed perfectly alert. Judging from the way he handled the game controller, his motor coordination wasn't impaired either.

“Nice,” Jeremy answered. Was he in his monosyllabic video game mode? Or was it the marijuana at work? Pam wished they could have a longer conversation so she could determine the effects of the brownie. Deprived of spoken communication, she studied his gameplay instead. After much pleading on his part, Pam had reluctantly begun playing video games with him a few months ago and was now well-versed in the intricacies.

“You missed Julio Jones on a deep route on that last play,” she told him.

“I did?”

“Yep. He was wide open.”
“Hey, no fair helping,” Zep protested.

As the game continued, Pam noticed that Jeremy was making uncharacteristic mistakes. The score had been tied when she was first arrived but Zep was steadily pulling ahead. While they played, Pam Googled “kids marijuana symptoms” on her phone. The first result was a news story in which a nine year old boy accidentally ingested some marijuana in candy form. His parents, not knowing what had happened, took him to a hospital where a doctor diagnosed it as a psychotic breakdown. No one thought to test the boy for marijuana.

She had a brief vision of calling William and Kate to the hospital. Nauseated, Pam continued reading. The article ended with a warning about marijuana’s deleterious effect on the developing brains of young children. By the time she returned the phone to her pocket, Pam’s face was pale with worry.


“I want a rematch,” Jeremy said “I'm thirsty though. Is there any punch left?” Standing up, he took three steps and promptly fell over, landing clumsily on a footstool.

“Jeremy!” Pam leapt from the couch. “Are you all right?”

Crouching next to him, she helped him untangle his limbs. Upon landing, his leg had banged the coffee table. Rubbing his shin, he stumbled to an upright position. “I'm fine. I just got dizzy for a second.” He took some tentative steps forward. Pam, not daring to let go, still held him by the shoulders but he brushed her away. “I got this,” he assured her.

He moved in baby steps, as if he were learning to walk. Pam watched as he began pacing back and forth in the living room. He would start near the front door, stride across the room to the staircase, then turn around. After four circuits, his pace had quickened to the point where he was nearly jogging. Pam exchanged a worried look with Apple and Zep.

“What are you doing?” she casually asked.

“I'm breaking through the space-time continuum,” Jeremy informed them. He was fluttering like a hummingbird now and showed no signs of stopping. “If I can move fast enough, time will lose its hold on me. And then I'll exist only in a spatial sense.”

“Oh-kay,” Pam said. A small part of her had hoped that Apple was wrong, that Jeremy had merely consumed a normal brownie. So much for that thought. “Let's slow down before you hurt yourself,” she advised.

Instead Jeremy dodged her grasp and performed a baseball slide, his momentum carrying him a solid ten feet across the carpet. Bouncing to his feet, Jeremy was ready to do it again when Pam finally managed to grab him. With Zep's assistance, she subdued him into a chair. His elbow was scraped a bright red from carpet burn. Pam winced as a trickle of blood sprung from the raw skin.

“I'll find a first-aid kit,” Apple said, dashing from the room.

“I don't need one,” Jeremy called after her. “I just need to manipulate time, go into the future when it's healed, then come back right as rain.” He tried to stand up but Pam stopped him.


“I feel like I'm going to throw up when I sit still,” he complained.
That was a mess she didn't need at the moment. Pam carefully took her hands away. “Just don't start running around again,” she warned.

“I won’t,” he promised. Pam remained wary as he rose to his feet. “I'll read a book. That's allowed, right?” Approaching the bookcase, he reached for a volume on the very top shelf. When he pulled it off the shelf, however, a bookend came tumbling down, landing on his head with an audible crack that made him stagger backward.

“Jeremy!” Pam caught him and they collapsed onto the couch together. She wrapped an arm around his chest to hold him still as she examined his head. Her fingers detected a light swelling where he had been bonked. The injury tally was now an unsightly purplish bruise on his shin, one scraped elbow, and an egg-like bump on his head. At this rate, a hospital trip seemed inevitable.

“Woo, now I feel a different kind of dizzy,” he mumbled.

Apple returned with a first-aid kit. Pam ripped open a packet of disinfecting alcoholic wipes. “This might sting a little bit,” she warned. But instead of howling in pain and generally making a scene (his usual response when she cleaned the slightest wound), Jeremy sat as quietly as a choirboy at church. That probably wasn't a good sign.

“I don't see why you're going to all this trouble,” Jeremy remarked as Apple applied a band-aid. “I'm due for a cybernetic arm upgrade anyway. They're practically paying you to get one these days.”

Ignoring him, Pam addressed Apple. “What time does your mom and his dad usually come home? Please tell me it's very late at night.”

“It depends,” Apple said. “Sometimes early, like around 9 o'clock. But sometimes later. I told them everyone is sleeping over tonight, so they might come home early.”

Jeremy placed two fingers to his temple. “Just a second. My dad and I have a telepathic link so I'll just read his mind. That is, if his tele-stasis receiver isn't turned off.”

He just wouldn't shut up. Pam knew there was no way he could be seen in this state by his dad. Taking him home was an option, but then they would have to answer to Kate. “I think you're ready for bed,” Pam said briskly. Grabbing him by the arms, she began hauling the reluctant boy in the general direction of the stairs. “Let's go.”

“I'm not tired,” he protested. “I want to stay down here with Apple and Zep. And Rose and Becky too.”

Rose and Becky were somehow sleeping through this entire racket. If Pam could just get him to bed, he would most certainly sleep off the marijuana. “Everyone is going to bed now,” Pam informed him. “Come on. You can lie down. Relax. The dizziness will go away. Doesn't that sound nice?”

“No.” Jeremy struggled to free himself from her grasp.

Thinking quickly, Pam said, “I have a present for you. But I can only give it you if you're in a dream-state. So let's go to bed.”

“Ooh, dream-state presents are the best.” Jeremy promptly brightened and began walking on his own power. They were halfway up the stairs when Jeremy turned to address Apple and Zep. “If I see you in my dreams,” he called, “be sure to save me some snacks. I want something orange. But just make sure it's not an orange.” Apple and Zep did their best not to laugh, but Pam could only think of what a long night it was going to be.
“I feel itchy all over,” Jeremy told her as they climbed the stairs.

“I'll scratch your back in bed,” Pam promised.

“No, I mean I'm itchy EVERYWHERE.” He began pulling off his sweatshirt in mid-stride. Pam had to steady him as he came close to losing his balance several times. He discarded his sweatshirt on the stairs and continued walking. What she hadn't expected was for him to continue undressing. By the time they reached the third floor, Jeremy was wearing only his underwear while Pam carried an armful of his clothes.

“That feels so much better,” he sighed, opening the bedroom door. The guestroom was the only chamber on the third floor. The room housed a matching furniture set of bed, desk, and night table, each item sharing the same intricate design of metal latticework. A plush armchair and several potted plants rounded out the furnishings.

Out of habit, Pam began folding his clothes while Jeremy opened a window. “Fresh air feels good too,” he told her. It wasn't until he stuck his head out the window that Pam realized there wasn't a screen.

“Hey!” She grabbed him by the waistband of his underwear. “Let's not lean out too far from this third story window.” Pam closed it.

“Can we go outside and race?” Jeremy asked. “I bet I could beat you.”

Pam knew he could win a footrace even if sober. Thanks to the energizing sativa, he probably would lap her twice without even breaking into a sweat. “Just lie down for a bit,” she urged, guiding him to the bed. “Relax. Deep breaths.” To her surprise, Jeremy did as she directed. She watched as he closed his eyes. His skinny chest rose and fell with even breaths.

“Whew,” Pam said. She had scarcely returned to folding his clothes when she heard a thumping noise. Turning, she found that, in the ten seconds out her attention, Jeremy had snuck from bed and was now doing pull-ups on the closet rod. His head thumped against the overhead shelf with each repetition.

Dashing across the room, she yanked him out of the closet and back toward the bed. He resisted every inch of the way. Forcing him to sit down, she checked the bump on his head. Previously egg-sized, it had now swelled to avocado proportions.

“But I have so much energy!” he pleaded. “Can I go see what Apple and Zep are doing? I bet they would want to race.”

Crossing her arms, she stared at him in consternation. Calming him down was clearly impossible. But she couldn't stand watch over him all night. Straitjackets were made for times like this. He was definitely going to hurt himself unless she could figure out a way to restrain him.

Pam held a finger to her lips. “Shhh!” she whispered. “Did you hear that?”

Jeremy froze in place. “Hear what?”

On the desk was a rock, about the size of a plum, that functioned as a paperweight. Pam picked it up and held it to her ear. “This rock is talking to me.”

“No way!”

“Quiet,” Pam told him. “I can't hear the rock.” She pretended to concentrate as she held it closer to
her ear.

“I want to try,” Jeremy insisted. Pam handed him the rock. He barely had it to his ear for a second before he looked at Pam in surprise. “Gosh. It really is talking!”

Pam began backing out of the room. “You listen to it and try to remember everything it's saying, okay? I'll be right back.” Jeremy nodded and gave her a thumbs up.

Knowing the rock was merely a temporary distraction, Pam trotted down the stairs toward the kitchen. In the living room, the lights were now turned low but she caught a glimpse of Zep and Apple making out on the couch. “Ahem, just getting a glass of water,” Pam announced. But instead of water, she swiped the handcuffs from Apple's stack of presents and tiptoed away. The subterfuge probably wasn't necessary. Neither of the teenagers acknowledged her presence anyway.

Running up the stairs in record time, she re-entered the room to find Jeremy once again opening the window. “There you are!” he said brightly. “I was going to leave you a note. The rock said there's treasure buried in the woods out back. First we have to find a big oak tree with a beagle under it. The dog will howl three times and then lead us straight to where the gold is hidden.” Wearing only his underwear, he actually swung a leg through the open window.

“Ah ah ah!” Pam cried, grabbing him by the shoulder. She hauled him back to bed, sat him down, and snapped a handcuff around his wrist. It wasn't until she secured the other handcuff to the railing of the headboard that Pam was able to breathe a sigh of relief.

“What's this for?” Jeremy asked, examining his cuffed wrist.

“We're playing a new game,” Pam announced. “Cops and Robbers. I'm the cop.” Remembering what happened last time he was handcuffed, she wondered how to safeguard the key. Her dress didn't have pockets so she searched his shorts instead. For whatever reason, he had one of her elastic ponytail holders in his pocket, along with a golf pencil and an empty tin of mints. She looped the key in the elastic band and slid the whole thing onto her wrist. Perfect.

“Okay, Cops and Robbers sounds fun,” Jeremy replied, suddenly agreeable. He lay down on the bed, one arm extended over his head to accommodate the restraint around his wrist. “It feels weird to be still though.”

“What do you mean?” Pam asked. Having Jeremy handcuffed to the bed while wearing only his underwear was reminiscent of the random daytime fantasies that entertained her while he was away at school. Unfortunately, Pam was so frazzled that Call of Duty was the last thing on her mind. Instead, she fussed with his sheets and adjusted the hair that clung to his damp skin.

“It feels like I'm... floating away,” Jeremy said through half-closed eyes.

Pam was alarmed to see a green pallor overtaking his usually fair face. Not sure what to do, she placed a hand to his forehead to check his temperature. “Do you need to throw up?” she asked worriedly.

“No. Just... really... dizzy...” His words were coming out slower and slower. Pam bent over and placed her ear against his chest, listening for his heartbeat. Possessing no medical training, all she could determine was that it sounded fast. Taking his free hand, she placed two fingers on his wrist to measure his pulse. All the while, Jeremy remained silent though his head would roll from side to side.

“Let me get you a glass of water,” Pam told him. Checking his pulse told her nothing, but she could
see a thin sheen of perspiration forming on his body. The moment she stood, however, Jeremy lurched into a sitting position.

“No, don't go!” he cried. He attempted to grab her but, having forgotten his handcuffed wrist, was rudely yanked toward the headboard.

The fearful desperation in his voice awakened a maternal instinct within Pam. “Oh sweetie, it's okay!” She hurried back to the bed. The moment she reclined next to his crumpled body, Jeremy nestled against her as if an invisible magnetic field had summoned him. His cuffed arm limited his range so Pam scooted closer.

“I'm right here,” she soothed. “I'm not going anywhere.”

Jeremy moaned pitifully. “I'm dying.”

“Shhh, don't say that,” she consoled. “You're fine. You're just... coming down with something.” Half-cradling him, Pam rocked him like a baby. His fast breathing worried her.


“Look, I'm here,” she told him. “Pam's right here. See?” He glanced at her briefly but his eyes seemed to see right through her. She continued caressing and shushing him. Without thinking, her fingers accidentally grazed a sensitive area near his ribs that, without fail, always made him chuckle. Tonight, however, touching his ticklish spot garnered absolutely no reaction from him. Her worrying multiplied exponentially with this discovery.

How could she get through to him? Working on instinct, Pam flipped over his hand so his palm faced up, then gently ran a finger along his forearm. It required several circuits between his wrist and elbow before Jeremy grew calm. Pam began breathing easier too.

“Does that feel better?” she asked. The underside of his forearm felt wonderfully soft as her fingers stroked his creamy skin.

“Yes, but...” he kicked away the sheets covering his lower body. “Too hot.” He wriggled on the mattress until his underwear began riding down his skinny hips. “Help me take these off,” he pleaded.

The bedroom door was still ajar by several inches. Jeremy still clung to her, afraid that she would leave, so Pam was forced to stretch her leg and poke the door closed with her toes. Now having at least a semblance of privacy, she began pulling off his underpants with a single hand. It wasn't exactly difficult, but it required several stages of yanking and tugging as she removed the underwear an inch at a time. Once he felt the slackened waistband around his ankles, Jeremy triumphantly kicked his underwear across the room.

“Ahh,” he sighed, relishing the feel of his bare skin against the sheets.

Gazing at his naked form, Pam resisted the urge to sigh as well. Though not erect, his penis flopped playfully against his smooth skin. His round scrotum, pinker than usual, was just begging to be touched. “Want a tummy rub?” Pam offered, reluctantly compromising. Stretching out next to him, she propped her head up with one hand while the other began drawing circles on his exposed belly.

“That feels nice,” Jeremy said, his eyes closed.

Pam kissed his forehead. “Just try to calm down, okay?” Nevertheless, she kept one eye on his midsection. If things were normal and they had been at home while she rubbed his tummy, naked,
Jeremy would undoubtedly have a hard-on by now. Here though, high as a kite, every part of him remained completely relaxed. Even his feet had stopped fidgeting and his handcuffed arm dangled limply. Pam cursed Zep's stupid brownie. Perhaps the war on drugs wasn't as pointless as she originally believed.

Oh well. Studying his face, Pam was pleased to see the sickly paleness had been replaced by his normal skin tone. He wasn't sweating anymore either. She must have done something right. Pam glanced hopefully at his crotch again. Wilted like a daisy on a hot summer day.

Sighing, Jeremy rolled as close to her as his handcuffed wrist would allow. She felt his nose against her collarbone as inhaled slowly. “Mmm,” he murmured. “You remind me of Pam.”

Raising an eyebrow, she peered at him. “Jeremy. I'm right here.”

He opened his eyes, looking at her in surprise. “You came back! I thought you went home.”

“Apple told me you weren't feeling well,” Pam said, “so I came back to check on you.”

“Oh. That was nice of you.” Jeremy blinked at her a few times before closing his eyes once more. She continued stroking his tummy, dipping a finger into his belly button before radiating outward in concentric circles. He breathed another contented sigh before burrowing his face once more against her neck.

“Mmm. You smell like Pam.”

Rolling her eyes, she stifled a giggle. Playing along, she asked, “Do you like the way Pam smells?”

“Yeah,” Jeremy answered, his voice muffled since his face was pressed against her skin. He inhaled so sharply that it tickled. “She always smells good. Especially her hair. It makes me want to…” He stopped to lick his lips.

“Want to what?”

Instead of answering, Jeremy sniffed at her again, a huge lungful of air that made his chest puff up. “Mmm.”

Pam's eyes drifted to his midsection where an erection had magically sprouted. “Do you think Pam is pretty?” she asked.

“Yeah. She's cute,” Jeremy said. His face remained buried against her neck as he surprised her by lapping at her skin with small flicks of his tongue. “We have this special game.”

Pam's heart skipped faster. “What kind of game?”

Jeremy stared at the ceiling in alarm. “Um, I'm actually not supposed to tell anyone about it.” Despite his denial, she saw his penis throb once, then twice. Now it was Pam's breathing that had grown uneven and shallow. Closing his eyes again, Jeremy said, “Can you go find Pam for me? Tell her I want to play Call of Duty.”

“Uh, sure, I'll tell her,” Pam replied. She suddenly remembered what he said about Apple using the same shampoo as her. “Wait, who do you think you're talking to right now?” If he said Apple, Pam was 99% certain that she would strangle him. And maybe Apple too.

Jeremy squinted at her through one eye. “You're Imaginary Pam. You're just in my head. Real Pam never actually comes with me to my dad's.”
“True,” Pam said, relieved.

Smacking his lips loudly, Jeremy closed his eyes once more. It apparently took an extraordinary amount of effort for him to talk. Pam hesitated as the good angel on her shoulder whispered in her ear. The young boy was clearly not in possession of his faculties. Just a moment ago, Pam had been in full-on mother mode to the disoriented boy. Was this really the time to play Call of Duty? Was she taking advantage of him?

But then the bad angel on her other shoulder piped up. “It'll help him fall asleep,” she reasoned. “Those handcuffs can come off. He'll feel much better tomorrow morning after sleeping off the brownie.”

Plus, that pulsing erection wasn't going to deflate on its own. He needed her help. Wasn't that the most motherly thing anyway, the bad angel reasoned, to comfort a boy in need?

The bad angel won, as usual. “Stay here, all right?” she told him. “I'll go find Pam for you.” In response, Jeremy mumbled several incoherent sentences. She was pretty sure she heard a 'thanks' in there somewhere as she left the room. Her feet quietly padded down the stairs. Cautiously, she peeked into the living room but it was empty except for Rose and Becky, partially hidden under several thick blankets.

The coast was clear. Pam boldly raided Apple's birthday presents for the second time that night, snatching the bottle of lube and slipping it in her pocket. Then she casually strolled back up the stairs. The perfect crime.

Upon re-entering the bedroom, the first order of business was to check the doorknob for a lock. Relieved to find one, she secured the door and tested it several times to ensure it was locked. Only then did Pam dare return to the bed where Jeremy still sprawled with his waiting erection and closed eyes. He opened them when she sat down next to him. “Hi there,” she said. “I heard you were looking for me?”

“Hi Pam!” He was genuinely surprised to see her.

“What's going on?”

“I'm playing Cops and Robbers with Imaginary Pam,” he told her, gesturing at the handcuffs. “But do you think we could play Call of Duty instead?”

“And how do you know I'm not Imaginary Pam?” she teased.

Reaching for her chest with his free hand, Jeremy began groping her breasts. Bemused, she leaned in closer to give him better access. Once he was satisfied, he nodded and said, “You're definitely Real Pam.”

“You're positive?”

Jeremy took her hand and began nibbling her fingers. She laughed as his lips tickled her digits one by one. “You taste like Real Pam too,” he said.

“I didn't know Real Pam had a taste,” she replied.

“Sure, she does. She tastes like strawberries. You're Real Pam. For sure.”

His mental state seemed to be stabilizing nicely, having evolved from stoner talk to spacey forthrightness. Pam was starting to have fun. “Well, how do I know you're Real Jeremy?” she asked.
He responded by covering her eyes with his hand. Understanding the game, Pam let her eager hands roam across the young boy. Starting with his torso, her fingers blindly caressed his collarbone and counted his ribs. Once again, there was no reaction from him when she touched the ticklish spot on the side of his ribs. Then she explored the slender muscles of his arms, followed by a good tousling of the familiar texture of his hair. Her hands then drifted downward. Past his boyish jawline... Past his smooth chest... Past his taut belly...

“Oh my, what's this?” she playfully murmured as her fingers closed around something hard. “It feels very familiar. Who does this remind me of?” His palm covering her eyes was growing warm. “Is that you, Jeremy?”

“Surprise!” He took away his hand. He was all grins now. Pam employed a two-handed technique in which she simultaneously cupped his boys and stroked his shaft. He usually asked her to only do one or the other. Tonight seemed to be the exception. “That feels nice,” Jeremy sighed. He punctuated the praise with a stiff throb.

“I can tell,” she smiled, reaching into her pocket. “I've got something to make it feel even better.” Jeremy watched as she squirted some lube into her palm.

The aroma of artificial coconut, cloying yet alluring, filled the room. In addition to the scent, the new lube seemed much more slippery than their usual K-Y. Enjoying herself, Pam kneaded it into the soft skin that masked his underlying hardness. Jeremy flinched, sucking in his breath. “Oops,” Pam said. “Too hard?”

“No. That feels good.”

Pam experimentally squeezed his erect penis, eliciting another shudder from the young boy. He seemed to like it so she did it again. This time a moan, low and trembling, escaped his lips. If Pam was beside herself in arousal, she could only imagine how it felt for him. The odd thing was that Jeremy usually preferred a lighter touch. Throwing caution to the wind, Pam clenched her fingers as hard as she could muster.

Jeremy's flat hips rose off the bed as he grabbed her hand, squeezing so hard that his fingernails dug painfully into her skin. Thinking she had pushed things too far, Pam immediately slackened her iron grip. It took her a moment to realize Jeremy wasn't in pain. “Do it again,” he requested.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Pam complied. The coconut-scented lube squished between her fingers as she jerked him off in tight strokes. “Yeah... yeah...” he said softly, the words muffled as he pulled her wrist over his mouth. Then, finally, more loudly, “YEAH!” Without warning, Jeremy turned his head and bit down on her forearm. Amazed, Pam continued pleasuring the boy as his penis throbbed mightily against her tight grip. It was like they were at war, him pushing against her as she squeezed back. His biting only served to heighten the experience. It wasn't enough to break the skin, but she could definitely feel his teeth digging into the flesh of her arm.

His body tensed flat as a board for a long second before crumpling into relaxation. He didn't say anything other than a very satisfied sigh that made Pam feel very proud. Coconut lube dripped precipitously down her arm, but Pam took a moment plant a kiss on his cheek. She recognized the familiar, sleepy sound of his even breathing. His chin dug into his shoulder as he nodded off.

“Mission accomplished,” she whispered softly to herself. Leaving the young boy to his post-
orgasmic slumber, Pam went to the bathroom to rinse off her hand. She was surprised to find a clean imprint of a bite mark on her arm where Jeremy had been gnawing. Pam imagined him being so startled by the intensity of the orgasm that he felt compelled to bite her. The thought made her smile.

When she returned, she noticed that his sleeping body was contorted into an odd position, as if he were striking an odd dance move with his arm over his head while his legs twisted below. Guiltily, she remembered the handcuffs that still bound him to the headboard. Using the key attached to her wrist, she unlocked the cuffs. They clanked so loudly in her hands that she worried about waking Jeremy. Stuffing the handcuffs under the pillow, she gently tucked his arm into his side and covered him with a sheet.

“I probably should have wet a washcloth to clean him down there,” Pam thought to herself. But she didn't want to disturb his sleep. Besides, what was the harm? Tomorrow morning, he would just wake up on the sticky side. Being a boy, he probably wouldn't even notice.

She turned off the bedside lamp so the only source of illumination was the work light over the desk on the far side of the room. Pam checked her watch. It was only 10 pm. “I'll just stay awake for a few hours,” she strategized. “Make sure he doesn't swallow his tongue or wander off in search of a glass of water. Maybe I'll ask Apple if she has some pajamas I can borrow. And a book too...”

Pam was so lost in thought that she was completely unprepared when she turned around to see Jeremy sitting up straight in bed.

“Ack!” She managed to stifle her full-out shriek into a muffled gurgle. Facing away from her, his upright form looked thoroughly spooky in the darkened room. She half-expected his head to swivel 180 degrees in a remake of the scene from The Exorcist.

Her heart palpitations slowed as he turned around (normally) to look at her. “Oh. Hi Pam!” he greeted. He turned on the bedside lamp.

“I.. uh, hi,” Pam stammered. “What... why aren't you asleep?”

“I'm not tired,” he chirped.

Pam was dumbfounded. “But you just...”

“Just what?”

Sitting on the bed, Pam took him by the shoulders and urged him to lie down. “Okay, let's try this again,” she said. “Just close your eyes. Relax. It's bedtime.”

“But I'm not tired,” he repeated. Before she could react, he sprung from the bed. Grasping her shoulders, he guided her into the space he just vacated. “You should lie down. You should go to sleep.”

“I'm not sleepy,” Pam protested. She tried to sit up, but he held her shoulders in place on the mattress.

“Really? Can we play Call of Duty?” He was straddling her now and Pam could easily see between his legs. He wasn't quite fully erect, but nor was he completely wilted. Pam nervously looked at the door that was once again ajar. After washing her hands in the bathroom, she had forgotten to fully close it.

“Just a second, Jeremy,” she began. “Let's...”
He interrupted her by taking both her wrists and pinning her arms above her head as she lay underneath him on the bed. “I love you,” he said, tenderly looking into her eyes.

“... close the doo-” Pam trailed off. “What?”

“I love you,” he said again.

Pam was momentarily touched by the words until she remembered it was the weed talking. His red eyes and fuzzy expression were clear indicators that he was far from sober. Nevertheless, that didn't change how much she liked hearing him say those words. “You love me?” Pam asked, forgetting about the open door.

“I do.” His hands still clasped tightly around her wrists and his face was mere inches from hers. “Now you say it,” Jeremy ordered.

Pam self-consciously cleared her throat. “I love you too.” Saying those words aloud filled her with elation. He was still pinning her down and it only underscored the fact that she was at the mercy of his love. Moving closer, Jeremy kissed her. A boyish kiss, the kind where it was barely a peck on her lips. She liked it anyway though.

“This is nice and all,” Pam began, “but can we close the door?”

“Nope.” He kissed her neck, causing her to squirm in delight.

“Mmm.” Pam tried to focus. “No, really, Jeremy. It'll just take a second to close the door.”

He held her wrists tight while his lips wandered her neck. “But you like it when I do this.”

“I do but...” Pam trailed off as she felt something poking her stomach. Something hard. Leaping off the diving board, her mind was suddenly swimming in a deep pool of desire. Pam briefly wondered if she was experiencing a contact high. She was pondering this when she felt something cold around her wrist, followed by a metallic click. Realizing too late what was happening, Pam feebly attempted to escape Jeremy's grasp but the young boy's grip was surprisingly strong.

And then, just like that, she found herself with both wrists securely handcuffed.

“Hey!” Pam protested. She tried to bring her arms down, but was answered by the sound of metal on metal. Craning her neck upward, Pam realized that he had looped the handcuffs around the bedpost railing. How had done that without her noticing?

“Ha!” Jeremy grinned. “I got you!”

When she woke up this morning, being handcuffed to a bed by Jeremy would have been the last thing she expected to happen. Pam mentally kicked herself for falling for his lovey-dovey talk. Thankfully, the key to the handcuffs was still securely attached to her wrist. Pam began fumbling with key as she attempted to blindly insert it into the keyhole. “You're in big trouble,” she said sternly.

“I'm not in trouble,” he contradicted. “You're the one that's actually in trouble.” His hand began roaming across the front of her dress.

The handcuffs bound her wrists so tightly that it was difficult to maneuver the key into place. It didn't help when Jeremy began massaging her breasts through her dress. “Hey,” Pam barked. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”
“Stop... mmm...” Pam succumbed to a tingle as the young boy’s skilled fingers targeted her nipples.
“Stop touching me there.”

“Okay, I’ll stop,” he said, taking his hands away. The moment his attention ceased, Pam couldn't help but feel the tiniest bit of disappointment. But that feeling changed into surprise when he reached under her dress and began tugging her underwear down.

“Jeremy. What are you doing?”

“I want to pet your kitten,” he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Pam was torn between common sense and her growing arousal. Part of her throbbed when he so casually declared that he was going to ‘pet her kitten'. The innocuous nature of the phrase, uttered by an apparently innocent boy, was undercut by its illicit meaning. Despite her misgivings, Pam didn't fight as he slid her panties past her knees and then extracted each ankle.

“But someone might walk in on us,” Pam said, nodding at the open door. She was truly trying her best to be reasonable.

“I'll hide down here,” Jeremy proposed. Yanking the sheets off the bed, he wrapped them around his shoulders like a cape. He then clambered onto the foot of the bed and flapped his arms to make the sheet billow like a flag in the wind. Finally he crouched low, letting the fluttering sheet settle around him until he was completely covered up.

“This is silly,” Pam said. “It's going to be obvious to anyone that you're down there.” She waited for an answer but there was none. To an outsider, she may have been merely lying in bed, fully clothed in her dress, with a sheet covering her lower body. But the moving hump under the sheets was a dead giveaway that wouldn't have even fooled a toddler.

“I know you can hear me down there,” Pam continued. Once again, she began fumbling with the key to the handcuffs. Underneath the sheets, she felt Jeremy grasp her ankles and wrench them apart.

“Just you wait until I get these handcuffs off,” Pam muttered. She gritted her teeth as she tried to insert the key. This was impossible. She slipped the elastic ponytail holder from her wrist. Perhaps it would be easier if the key weren't attached to her wrist. Down below, the misshapen lump under the sheets began crawling between her spread legs.

“Here kitty kitty,” she heard him say. His sharp elbows poked her inner thighs. He had burrowed so far under her dress that she could feel his breath on a very intimate spot between her legs. Pam let herself be distracted for just a second, but it was enough to cause the key to nearly slip from her fingers. She caught it just in time. It would have been disastrous had the key fallen to the ground. She needed to concentrate to unlock the handcuffs, but she couldn't concentrate with Jeremy fooling around down there. “Could you come out from under that sheet?” she begged. “Please?”

Jeremy’s disembodied voice answered from under the sheet. “But I found the lost kitty. I think it misses me.” Pam felt something tickle her inner leg. It was soft but scratchy at the same time. She realized Jeremy was peppering her with gentle kisses. Kisses that were moving closer and closer to...

Glancing at the open door, Pam spread her knees wider. Her hormones were beginning to overpower her sense of self-preservation. So far this evening, he had helped her get rid of her hiccups and then she had treated him to some coconut-scented lube. It really wasn't her fault. There was only so much teasing a girl could take.

“Mmm,” she murmured as he planted a soft kiss at the top of her valley, exactly where her clit was
hidden underneath. He had never done anything like this before. His lips made no direct contact with her clit, but she felt herself swell nevertheless. Pam couldn't help but flinch when his fingers spread her open. Her sudden movement made the handcuffs clink against the bedpost, the sound a reminder of her current predicament.

Though she couldn't see him, his face must have been exceptionally close to her crotch. She swore she could feel the warm puff of his breath on her supercharged clit. “Hi there, kitty,” he said from under the sheet. Smacking his lips, he teased her by making some kissy-kiss noises. Was he really going to—

“Oh!” Pam gasped as he unexpectedly kissed her clit. They were his usual closed-mouth kisses, but they were enough to make her squirm in the mussed bed.

“Aw, what a sweet little kitten,” Jeremy said. “Mama cat loves you so much...”

Mama cat? Perplexed by this latest bit of stoner talk, Pam said, “Okay, this is starting to get... sweet baby Jesus that's your tongue.”

Something wet and wiggly was tickling her clit, causing her eyes to go wide. Her spine involuntarily clenched as she thrust her hips at the eleven year old boy. Jeremy was licking her clit, exactly like the cat licked its kittens in the nature documentary they watched earlier that evening. At first, his tongue darted at her clit in fleeting teases before settling into a delicious lapping rhythm. This continued for, quite possibly, the best sixty seconds of Pam's life before Jeremy paused.

“Does the kitten like this?” he asked.

“Yes!”

The hidden Jeremy chuckled. “I know what else the kitty likes.”

She felt his finger slip, effortlessly, into her wet kitten. “Oh my,” Pam breathed, curling her toes against the mattress. “Oh yes.”

“Good kitty,” Jeremy praised. “Come here... I'll be nice.”

Pam was squirming in earnest now. His probing finger was unlike anything she had felt before. She hoped the pot brownie wouldn't affect his memory because Pam definitely wanted to ask him tomorrow what, exactly, his finger was doing inside her kitten. She knew he wasn't thrusting, but his finger kept making contact with a certain spot. There was an indescribable pleasure as his digit wiggled to and fro. It was wonderful, though she had the sudden urge to pee.

The arousal continued to build inside her, gathering so strong that it was almost agonizing. The sweet ache had now spread from between her legs and was threatening to envelope every inch of her skin. Now that his finger was embedded inside her kitten, Jeremy was giving far too little attention to her clit. If only she wasn't tethered to the bed, she could take matters into her own hands. Frustrated, Pam yanked at the handcuffs but they held firm. “Jeremy, my clit. Please?”

It turned her on to beg an eleven year old boy for intimate attention, but her plea fell on deaf ears. Instead, she felt his finger redouble its efforts against a certain spot inside her. “Here, kitty,” Jeremy teased.

Pam bit her lip. She didn't want to make too much noise since the bedroom door was not closed. Jeremy's attention felt amazing, but now she really had to pee. Losing her patience, she futilely fumbled with the handcuffs key once more. “Clit... now,” she pleaded. “Jeremy? Please?”
She breathed a sigh of relief as something wet caressed her clit. She had grown so sensitive that his tongue felt rough against her hard pearl. Already tottering at the edge, the slightest nudge was all Pam needed. His tongue lapped her twice more before she exploded in a white hot orgasm.

“Oh god!” Pam thankfully remembered to keep her voice down. The urge to pee had become so overwhelming that it took all her strength to hold it. Strangely enough, that act merely made her orgasm all the more powerful. Lost in waves of pleasure, she writhed uncontrollably on the bed. The handcuffs key slipped from her fingers. Pam heard it clatter onto the floor behind the headboard. That should have been cause for alarm, except she was too busy coming to care about the key now.

“Clank... clank... clank...” The sound of the handcuffs against the bed frame was synchronized to Pam's moans. Out of sheer habit, her hands longed to touch her breasts but all she could do was wriggle helplessly as Jeremy coaxed every last ounce from her orgasm. He waited until the last shivers subsided before triumphantly rising to his knees from under the sheets.

“I rule!” he declared, letting the sheet flutter on his shoulders like a superhero cape.

“You're the best,” she affirmed, catching her breath. Now that her hormones were satiated, the next point of order was to get these damned handcuffs off. “Can you do me a favor?” Pam asked. “I dropped my ponytail holder behind the bed. Can you try to find it?”

She expected him to get on his hands and knees to reach under the bed. Instead Jeremy shuffled forward on his knees. The sheet remained wrapped around his shoulders, but it did little to hide the fact that he was once again sporting an erection.

“I don't see anything,” he reported, peering through the lattices on the headboard.

“Are you sure?” she persisted. “I'm positive I dropped it back there. It has to be down there somewhere.”

“It's not there,” Jeremy said, sending a quiver of fear through her heart. She pondered sending him off in search of a pair of cable cutters. With her luck, Jeremy would probably wander off and not return until the morning.

“Wait! I see it!”

An inundation of relief. “Really?”

“Yeah. Let's see if I can reach it.” Jeremy swung a leg over her chest, straddling her as she lay on the bed.

“Uh, okay,” Pam agreed. Throwing off the bedsheet, Jeremy was unusually comfortable with his lack of clothing. His erection swung wildly as he positioned himself atop her in a kneeling position. Straining, he extended his arm through the headboard lattice.

“So close,” Jeremy mumbled, his cheek mashed against the metal railing. “I need to be closer.” Shifting on the bed, he waddled his knees closer to the headboard. Pam had to dodge as his erect penis nearly poked her in the eye.

“Sure!” she croaked. “I'll just, um, wait patiently.” His squishy scrotum was jammed so tight against her chin that she could feel his testicles. Moreover, his erection was resting on her cheek as if it belonged there.

It had to be the marijuana. Jeremy normally would be quite shy about his privates in her face. This arrangement was exactly like the 'tower' position that she so rarely had the opportunity to enjoy. It
took all the cajoling in the world for him to tower her, but here he was doing it with zero complaints.

Sighing in frustration, Jeremy tried to reach the key with his other arm. “I almost got it,” he said. “I'm just like an inch too far away.”

“Take your time,” Pam advised. “No need to rush.” His penis was still sticky from their earlier play. It smelt like coconut. Whenever he bent to reach the dropped key, his tummy would press against the top of her head, restricting her breathing as he pushed his crotch into her face. If forced to choose, Pam decided that getting smothered by an eleven year old boy would be an excellent way to exit this life.

“Got it!” Jeremy crowed.

“Rats,” Pam said. “I mean, hooray. Can you just place it in my hand?” She opened her palm. Jeremy had either not noticed or didn't care that they handcuff key was attached to the ponytail holder.

“What's my reward?” Jeremy demanded. Wriggling away, he sat down on her midsection.

“Oof!” Pam was about to thank him for breaking her ribs when she noticed how his erect penis lay perfectly positioned between her breasts. Unlock first and play later, she told herself. “I'll get you some chocolate ice cream tomorrow,” she promised. “How's that for a reward?” Elated, she felt the key slip into the waiting keyhole.

“What else?”

“And a big kiss too,” Pam added distractedly. Her bound wrists limited her dexterity, making it difficult to even turn the key in the lock.

“How about a kiss right now?” Jeremy asked.

“Just a second,” Pam said. She successfully twisted the key clockwise and was rewarded by a loud click as the handcuffs unlocked. Finally. She was about to sit up when Jeremy, still straddling her, returned to a kneeling position.

“It's been a second,” he announced. Inching forward on his knees, he thrust out his hips so his penis pointed straight at her face. “Where's my kiss?”

Pam's jaw dropped. Her eyebrows raised clear across her forehead. Had she misheard him? Or misread him? Or was Jeremy asking her to... Before he could change his mind, Pam craned her neck forward to cover the mere inches that separated her lips from his erection. Her spine tingled as she made contact with his trembling erection with a quiet smack of her lips.

Jeremy didn't chuckle. He didn't pull away or tell her to stop. Instead, he just let his penis rest against her mouth. “You know, I can do anything I want since you're locked up,” he taunted.

His words sent a searing heat through her kitten. “Yes. Yes, that is true,” Pam agreed. Each word caused her lips to scrape deliciously against his erection. Not even thinking twice, she quickly re-closed the handcuff around her wrist. It ratcheted shut in firm, metallic clicks. “What are you going to make me do?”

“Give me another kiss,” he ordered. Pam immediately complied. Puckering up, she gave him a warm kiss on the tip of his penis and was gratified to feel him throb in response.

“How's that?” she asked.
“That was nice. Do it again.” His skin felt achingly warm against her lips. Pam began kissing him over and over. Jeremy must have been imperceptibly shifting his hips because her mouth wandered all along his shaft and Pam didn't have to move a muscle. Daringly, she began giving him lingering kisses in which her tongue joined in on the action, shyly darting out to taste his hardness.

What amazed her the most was Jeremy's willingness for the unfolding events. Had he been sober, he doubtlessly would be doubled over in hysterical peals of ticklishness. As it was, his eyes were half-closed and his jaw loose in an expression of contented pleasure. Lost in her version of heaven, Pam was using her lips to gently nibble at his foreskin when she felt Jeremy hand touching her hair. Was she imagining things? Or was Jeremy gently but persistently pushing her head closer to his crotch? Parting her mouth, Pam engulfed the young boy's erection.

“Hhrhrmmm.” Jeremy made a noise that was clearly not a protest. Her eyes wide with sheer delight, Pam let her tongue swirl against his penis. Underneath the remnants of artificial coconut lube (which wasn't half bad), she could clearly taste a boy. A young one. It was a flavor that had tantalizingly eluded her for so long.

But not anymore. She couldn't believe Jeremy’s appetite for oral pleasure. Holding her head in place with both hands, he began to thrust his hips, his erection stabbing her mouth in confident plunges. He had never performed this humping motion before. Had he been secretly practicing?

Whatever the case, it was incredibly arousing to see an eleven year old boy engage in such an overtly sexual movement. Previously, her preferred position had been for Jeremy to straddle her and masturbate, putting on a show as he towered over her. If towering was like standing outside in the rain, then their current game was like being caught in a monsoon. Her lips kept making contact with the perfectly smooth skin near the root of his penis. It was her first experience giving a blowjob without pesky and prickly pubic hair getting in the way.

Her kitten demanded attention, but the handcuffs prevented her from touching herself. Pam was caught in a feedback loop as her arousal and frustration pushed each other higher. She timed her breaths to match Jeremy's thrusts, enjoying the way his erection continuously penetrated her lips. The smooth muscles of his abdomen undulated in a hypnotizing manner, like rippling waves in an ocean.

The rolling sea was initially calm and measured, but they soon grew in intensity. Jeremy was thrusting faster now. Her mouth eagerly accepted him, but it wasn't as if she had a choice. Her wrists were securely handcuffed and her head held immobile by his vise-like grip. The young boy fit easily in her mouth, his penis not even reaching the back of her throat. Her saliva had washed away any hint of coconut. All she could taste now was the pure Jeremy: a sort of unripened masculinity with smooth overtones of his innocence.

A series of shivers descended on him. He pulled her hair. Hard. “Oh! Pam! I'm going to...” She felt him throbbing in her mouth, his erection flexing like a muscle. His grip on her hair was not at all malicious; it was clear that he was holding on for dear life as his orgasm hit home. Instinctively, Pam readied herself for a squirt of warm liquid that never came. For the briefest moment, she had forgotten that he was so young. This reminder of his youth filled her with longing.

“Oh... Oh Pam.” Her favorite thing (well, one of her favorite things) was hearing Jeremy say her name when he came. But hearing him say it now, while thrusting into her mouth and pulling her hair, made a good thing even better. Eventually, his hips began moving slower until he finally came to a stop, the tip of his softening erection still between her lips. Pam gave it a fleeting goodbye kiss as Jeremy pulled away and leaned backward. He collapsed in a graceless pile, his knees bent beneath him and his head thumping against her knees.

“Are you okay?” Pam asked. Since he still straddled her, she had an excellent view between his legs.
Finally satiated, his penis was finally returning to a state of hibernation. Flopping charmingly against his pink scrotum, his softening member was also covered in a glossy sheen. Pam smiled. “That's my saliva,” she thought wonderingly.

Jeremy didn't answer so she tackled the handcuff problem one last time. It took several minutes, but she was finally able to free herself. Sitting up, Pam rubbed the red marks left on her wrists by the handcuffs. She was relieved to find Jeremy now sound asleep. As gently as possible, she rolled herself out from under the naked boy.

Her dress was hopelessly wrinkled, but it couldn't be helped. Retrieving her underwear, Pam slipped it on before heading to the kitchen for some water. On her way back upstairs, she nearly bumped into Apple who was exiting the bathroom.

“Oh. Hi Apple,” she said.

“Hi Pam,” Apple said. Her breath smelled like minty mouthwash. “Is Jeremy okay?”

“He finally fell asleep. I think he'll be fine, but I'm going to spend the night. Just in case.”

A guilty look crossed Apple's face. “Sorry we let him eat the brownie,” Apple said. “We should have been more careful.”

“It was an accident,” Pam demurred. Perhaps all that sex had mellowed her out because she suddenly felt a genuine sense of contrition. “Uh, hey, sorry about that whole Kiss and Guess thing with Zep. I was just trying to make your friends laugh.”

Apple avoided her eyes. “I really didn't like it when you kissed him.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Please don't do it again.”

“I won't,” Pam promised.

There was a tense silence as the two of them stood on the landing. Finally, Apple offered, “Do you need pajamas for tonight?”

Pam nodded gratefully. “That would be wonderful.” She followed Apple to her room where Zep was already asleep in her bed. Pam tried not to laugh at the sight of the shirtless, punk-rock teen nestled in the pink sheets and stuffed animals on Apple's bed. Her eyes wandered across the rest of the room: a black and white poster of The Cure, an antique rotary phone, and entire shelf of Andy Warhol books. She noticed a framed photo of a boy, maybe nine or ten years old, who was smiling at the camera as he stood on an unnamed beach. Pam took special interest in his gawky shoulders and messy blond hair.

Apple caught her leaning into the picture for a closer look. “Isn't he the cutest?” she whispered to Pam.

Embarrassed, Pam straightened to look at the photo from an appropriate distance. “Yeah,” she answered. “Who is he?”

“That's Zep!” Apple smiled.

Unable to help herself, Pam leaned in again for a closer look. “Really? I never would have guessed.” If anything, the boy in the photo could have been a distant cousin of Jeremy's. He was a far cry from
Zep's current punk aesthetic and athletic build.

While the teenage girl searched her dresser drawer, Pam stretched her jaws by opening and closing her mouth several times. She had forgotten about that aching, post-blown job feeling in the hinge of her jaws. Not that she was complaining. It did help, though, that Jeremy's modest girth meant she didn't have to open her mouth so wide.

“Here you go,” Apple whispered, handing her a bundle of clothing. Suddenly realizing that Apple was massaging her jaw in a mirror image of herself, Pam quickly closed her mouth and took her hand away. She blushed when she remembered the scent of minty mouthwash on Apple’s breath.

“Thanks Apple!” she whispered back. “See you in the morning.”

“Okay.” Apple paused a moment, then continued, “I'll be sleeping in the living room with Becky and Rose. If my mom asks, can you just tell her Zep fell asleep in my bed? By himself?”

Pam pulled an imaginary zipper across her lips and nodded. “Of course. Good night!”

“Good night!”

Pam hastily retreated to the third floor of the condo. Jeremy still snoozed peaceably in the bed, just as she had left him. She quickly changed into Apple's pajamas. They were a girlish shade of pink and not really her style, but Pam was too tired to care. Now properly attired, she found Jeremy's underwear and pulled them onto the sleeping boy, one leg at a time. As usual, he slept through the whole affair.

The bed was big enough to fit both of them, albeit cozily, but Pam chose the armchair instead. Remembering Apple's request to tell her mom a little white lie about the sleeping arrangement with Zep, Pam could only imagine William's reaction if he found out she shared a bed with Jeremy. She wondered if William and Marla be surprised to see her tomorrow morning.

“I'll just tell them Jeremy didn't feel well,” she mused. “Like he had a stomach bug so I decided to spend the night so he wouldn't...” Her train of thought drifted off the rails. Fondly looking at Jeremy, she mumbled, “Wow. I just made an eleven year old boy come in my mouth.”

Focus. Pam shook her head. “Things will be fine tomorrow,” she though. “William thinks I'm the greatest, so why would he suspect a thing?” Yawning, Pam propped her head on her fist. Then she put her feet up on the bed. The sound of Jeremy's even breathing was like a puffing locomotive. Despite the hypnotizing sound, she managed to vigilantly stay awake until 2 am before falling asleep herself.

“Pam? Hey. Pam.” Someone touched her arm. “Why are you sleeping in this armchair?

She opened her bleary eyes to see Jeremy's concerned face. “Why not? It's such a comfy chair,” she murmured. Tucking her face into the crook of her elbow, she curled up into a ball. She was drifting off when Pam lurched into a sitting position.

“Jeremy! You're awake!”

It was such an obvious statement that he gave her a look. “Uh, yeah. I'm awake.”

Outside the bedroom window, she could see sunshine bursting through the trees. Pam grabbed him
by the shoulders. Jeremy nearly stumbled as she pulled him close. Aside from his underwear, he was all bare skin and tousled hair.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “Is everything okay? Do you feel weird?”

“Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?”

“Are you sure?” She remembered the news article about the effect of marijuana on developing brains. “What's your name?” she quizzed.

He looked at her like she was crazy. “What?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Jeremy Prater?”

“When's your birthday?”

“June 21.”

“What's my name? What's my birthday?”

“Pam Carpenter. December 21.” Jeremy squinted at her. “What's the matter with you?”

“No apparent cognitive damage,” Pam muttered to herself. She moved her hand back and forth in front of his face. “Follow my finger,” she commanded. He doubtfully did as she instructed. “Now close your eyes and touch your nose.”

“This is getting really weird,” Jeremy said. He passed that test too.

Motor functions appear normal, she thought with relief. Had he wandered off after she fell asleep? Pam began running her hands along his limbs to check for broken bones. “How long have you been up? What time is it?”

“It's seven in the morning,” Jeremy answered. “I just woke up half an hour ago and... what are you doing? Quit it!” He slapped her hands away from the ticklish spot near his ribs.

Pam was flooded with relief. If he was ticklish there, then everything was assuredly back to normal. “Thank goodness you're okay,” she said, hugging him tight. “I was so worried.”

“Uh, yeah,” Jeremy said, tentatively hugging her back. He asked again, “Why are you sleeping in the armchair?”

“What do you remember from last night?” she asked, answering his question with a question.

“It was Apple's birthday party,” Jeremy began. “I had cupcakes. You had bad hiccups.” He paused. “I played Madden with Zep. Didn't I?”

“Yes,” Pam said patiently. “You lost.”

He touched the band-aid on his elbow. “I don't remember this happening.”

“You tripped,” Pam told him. “Is that all you remember?”

She watched as he searched his memory. “Did we play Call of Duty last night?” Pam nodded, waiting for him to continue. “I guess I just fell asleep after that. It's weird, I can't remember what was
a dream and what was real. Did we...” he trailed off. Jeremy looked at her with a puzzled expression, then shook his head, as if he were shrugging off a thought.

“What is it?” Pam asked.

Jeremy shook his head again. “It's nothing. Can we have breakfast? I'm starving.”

“Why don’t your brush your teeth first?” she proposed. “You forgot to do it last night.” He reluctantly headed for the bathroom. Pam stood up to stretch. Her neck felt funny from sleeping in the armchair so she laid down in the luxurious bed. All's well that ends well, she supposed. She was adjusting the pillow when she felt something cold and metallic underneath it. The handcuffs.

Pam smiled dreamily at the ceiling. Even though the bathroom was across the hallway, she could hear a loud swishing noise as Jeremy began brushing his teeth. Feeling devilish, she grabbed her phone and called Suzy.

“Oh, it's me,” Pam said.

“Pam?” She had clearly woken Suzy up. “Why are you calling? What time is it?”

“It's 7:10,” she informed her friend. “Guess what?”

“What?”

Pam paused dramatically. “I made him come in my mouth last night!” Wiggling in the bed, she spread her limbs into an X among the soft sheets.

“Um, congrats?” Pam could practically see Suzy's expression of confused pity.

“It was so hot,” Pam confided. She giggled at the memory. “He pulled my hair when he came. He also, ahem, ate me out for the first time.”

“For the first time,” Suzy repeated. “You've been dating a year and you just now got to oral. Great. At this rate, you'll graduate from missionary to doggy style in, oh let's say, eighteen months.”

Pam examined her arm. Jeremy's teeth marks on her skin were faint but visible. Admiring the crooked pockmarks left by his incisors, Pam took a deep breath. “We haven't fucked yet,” she told Suzy. “And I'm not embarrassed to say that.”

There was silence on the other end. “Are you drunk?” Suzy finally asked.

“Nope. Stone cold sober.”

“So let me get this straight. You just woke me up, at 7 am on the weekend, to brag that you let a guy come in your mouth. And also to brag about that you're not fucking?”

“Not fucking... yet,” Pam said slyly. “I want to save it for a special occasion.”

“You know what? I'm hanging up.”

“Don't hate. Relationships can be more than just the physical stuff. You're just jealous that you're not in love.”

Suzy sighed so loudly that Pam had to hold the phone away from her ear. “I am seriously
considering your need for a good therapist,” Suzy told her. “Bye, Pam.”

“Call me later,” Pam said. “I still want to hear about Mr. Everhard. Bye!” She ended the call just as Jeremy returned from brushing his teeth.

“Why are you in bed?” he asked, pulling her to her feet. He laughed. “You're wearing Apple's clothes.”

She had forgotten about that. Finding a mirror on the back of the door, she regarded the outfit with a dismal expression. “I look so... pink,” she commented.

He slapped her on the butt. “Come on, Juicy,” Jeremy said. “I'm starving.”

Turning, she made another face at the letters emblazoned across the rear of the sweats. “Why would anyone want the word 'Juicy' written on their butt?” she frowned.

“Now everyone knows you're Juicy,” Jeremy laughed. “I'm going to start calling you Juicy.”

Remembering last night, Pam touched her lips. “Oh yeah? I'm going to start calling you Smoothie.”

Apparently, he didn't make the connection because Jeremy seemed pleased. “That's fine. I'm a smooth operator.”

“Fair enough,” Pam said. She looked in the mirror again. “Just don't tell anyone I was wearing these, okay?”

“I won't,” Jeremy promised. He held her hand as they walked down the stairs. “You won't believe this crazy dream I had last night. I was on some tropical island, drinking out of a coconut.”

Pam laughed. “I can hardly believe anything about last night.”
Peel Slowly and See

Chapter Summary

Pam is called away on a family emergency, leaving Kate to entertain her son.

Something was up.

That was the first thought that crossed Kate Prater's mind when she glimpsed her son's guilty expression in the hallway. She was well aware that the start of adolescence was commonly marked by moody and secretive behavior, so it shouldn't have been a surprise to find Jeremy acting this way. After all, his twelfth birthday was mere weeks away. With years of experience under its belt, her mom-radar beeped insistently when she noticed the alarm on Jeremy's face. It was somewhere between 'My curtains are on fire' and 'I just totaled the car'.

“Hi there, bud,” said Kate. “What are you up to?”

“Um, nothing,” said Jeremy. Wearing only his underwear, his hair was thoroughly tousled and his face an odd shade of pink. It was never a good sign when his blushing face threatened to match the fiery burnt orange of his hair. “How was your nap?”

“I couldn't sleep,” responded Kate. She had just come home from a long day at the hospital. “Are you hungry? I'm going to fix myself a snack.”

“Oh. Nice.” Jeremy subtly shifted so his shoulders squarely blocked the door to his bedroom. “No thanks, I'm not hungry.”

“Maybe I should do some yardwork too,” Kate mused. “I've been procrastinating about those flower beds for weeks now.” Perhaps if she waited long enough, he would spill the beans about his furtive behavior. Growing impatient, Kate regarded Jeremy's bare torso. “Where are your clothes, honey?”

Jeremy ignored her question. “Yardwork is a good idea,” he nodded, giving an anxious side-eye at the closed door. “So you'll be outside for a few hours?”

“What are you hiding in your room?” Kate inquired, cutting to the chase.

“Who, me? Nothing.”

Kate narrowed her eyes. “Jeremy, please don't tell me you're trying to raise turtles under your bed again.” She approached his door but he stubbornly blocked her path.

“Mom,” he began, “I really don't think you should go in there...”

“Why not?” she said, taking him by the shoulders and gently moving him out of the way. “Didn't you say there's nothing to see?” Kate grasped the doorknob.

“Mom, wait...” Jeremy said.

Not giving him a chance to continue, Kate pushed the door open. Peering inside the room, she was shocked at what she saw. “Oh my goodness,” she exclaimed.
Tiny white feathers covered every surface of the room. His bed, the armchair, the dresser... When she swung the door open, the whoosh of air sent the feathers on the ground upward where they floated in the air like snowflakes. In the center of it all stood Pam, wearing a sheepish grin.

“Oh! Hi Kate,” Pam said. She, too, was covered in feathers, although she was trying to dust herself off as best she could. Bits of white fluff clung stubbornly to her shirt and jeans. Her brown hair, pulled into a neat ponytail, appeared to be dusted with a layer of snow. White feathers were even settling in between the toes of her bare feet, nicely contrasting with the blue nail polish on her toenails.

“What happened in here?” Kate couldn't take her eyes off the mess.

“Just a pillow fight,” Pam explained. “You know, an impromptu one. Harmless too, until one of the pillows burst.”

“Impromptu?” Jeremy repeated. “Isn't that understood? No one plans for a pillow fight.”

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Pam said, waving her hand at him and inadvertently sending another cloud of feathers into the air. “Where's the vacuum cleaner?”

“I was about to get it,” he explained, “but I bumped into my mom.” Catching Kate's eye, Jeremy finally answered her question from the hallway. “I had to take off my clothes because they were covered in feathers. I didn't want to get them all over the house.”

Kate didn't dare step inside the room for fear of being covered in feathers herself. “Jeremy, you really need to play more gently,” she chided. “You hit Pam so hard with your pillow that it actually burst?”

The two of them exchanged a look. Pam finally spoke up. “Actually, I was the one that made the pillow burst.”

“Everyone always blames me,” Jeremy grumbled. “Pam is the one who needs to play gently.”

“Oh, come on,” Pam rolled her eyes. “I didn't even hit you that hard. I'm pretty sure it was a defective pillow.”

“Whoever heard of a defective pillow?” Jeremy countered. “Now you're just making stuff up.”

Kate backed out of the doorway. “Um, I'll just leave you two to clean this up.” As she left, she overheard them arguing about whether it would be better to use the vacuum or a dustpan to clean up the mess. They sounded exactly like a bickering couple. Kate ruefully shook her head. She had grown so accustomed to Jeremy being the instigator of trouble that she sometimes forgot that he wasn't a little kid anymore.

Nonetheless, Kate couldn't shake a funny feeling. It wasn't until later, when she was elbow deep in garden compost, that she realized what it was. After walking in on the pillow fight, there was the distinct feeling that she had interrupted something. Pam and Jeremy kept glancing at each other in a secret communication from which she was barred. It might have been her imagination, but Kate could recall a similar feeling in the past.

It left her with the unpleasant feeling of being left out. It was as though the two of them shared some rich life from which she was not included. A sharp twinge of jealousy made her realize that Pam probably knew her son better than she did. Feeling sorry for herself, she nevertheless resolved to keep an open mind. “Always presume good intent,” she told herself. A few days later, however, this mantra was tested following another incident.
After working an unplanned twenty hour shift at the hospital, Kate had returned home exhausted to the point of delirium. The sensible thing to do would have been to go directly to bed, but Kate found herself far too wired to rest. Her thoughts turned to tomorrow morning's brunch that she was hosting for her boyfriend David. It was his first visit to the house so everything needed to be absolutely perfect.

In her half-coherent state of sleep deprivation, Kate muttered to herself as she made a list of things that needed to be done before David's visit. “I need to clean that odd brown spot on the bathroom ceiling. I should ask Jeremy to bring up the spare dinner table chair from the basement to replace the broken one. I wonder if Pam has a good idea for dessert...” It occurred to Kate that she should be making a list, but she knew that she would forget most of it by the time she found a pen and paper. Instead, she continued pacing the house as she committed the list to memory.

By the time the to-do list grew to fifteen things, Kate was chanting it aloud to herself so as not to forget. “Number 16: find Jeremy or Pam and have them write all this down.”

On her way to the basement, Kate passed the living room where Jeremy was straddling Pam as she sat on the couch. Her head was tilted back while Jeremy bent over her in a distinctly intimate position. “I shouldn't disturb them if they're making out,” Kate thought distractedly. She was three steps past the living room when she stopped dead in her tracks.

Spinning on her heel, Kate poked her head into the room. “Ahem, hey there,” she said, clearing her throat discreetly. Was she seeing things? Jeremy's head was inches away from Pam's, his head tilted at angle such that she couldn't even see Pam's face underneath him. She couldn't help but notice how her son's hand was touching Pam's neck, while Pam's own hands rested on his hips as he straddled her.

“Hey mom,” Jeremy said.

“Hi Kate,” Pam said. If they were being intimate, they apparently didn't care that she was in the room. Pam said to Jeremy, “What are you waiting for? Just put it in already.”

“Are you sure?” Jeremy paused. “You're not going to blame me if it hurts, right?”

“It takes way more than that to hurt me,” Pam assured him. “I can handle it.”

Kate blinked. Was she hearing things too? “Uh, what are you guys doing?” she asked casually.

“Just a second, mom,” Jeremy said. His head leaned to the side as he moved even closer to Pam. “There... Done!” He swung his leg off of Pam, who immediately sat up straight and squinted.

Kate's head swiveled from Jeremy to Pam, then back to Jeremy. “Are you two going to tell me what's going on?” she asked.

He held up a bottle of Visine. “Pam is always telling me these eye drops don't hurt and I should stop being a baby,” Jeremy informed her. “So I told her that she should see how it feels.”

“See?” Pam said, still blinking. “It doesn't hurt.”

“So why are your eyes watering?” he challenged.

“That's just the excess eye drops,” she retorted, wiping her cheek.

Visine. Eye drops. It made sense now. When allergy season grew severe, it was the one thing that kept his eyes from itching. Feeling foolish, Kate was glad she hadn't said anything about her initial
“All right, your turn,” Pam said, holding out her hand. Jeremy reluctantly passed her the Visine. “Lie down on the couch,” she directed.

Kate watched them for a moment. Jeremy lay straight as a board on the couch while Pam knelt on the ground, bending low over his face.

“Quit breathing on me,” Jeremy complained, fidgeting. “It tickles.” Pam had the bottle poised over his face when he squirmed out of position.

“Sweet Georgia Brown,” Pam sighed, leaning back on her heels. “Is it impossible for you to be a big boy for ten seconds?”

“Hmm, I think I hear my phone ringing,” Kate muttered, meekly exiting the room. By this point, her to-do list has been thoroughly expunged from memory so she went upstairs and collapsed into bed. Pam and Jeremy had always been close, but it wasn't until now that she realized exactly how close they were. Had she found them kissing, it certainly would have been jarring... but not altogether unexpected. She wasn't sure how to feel about this.

Kate massaged her temples. “I need to stop working these twenty-hour shifts,” she murmured aloud. It was clearly affecting her mental state. Seeing things? Paranoia? Thinking back to her graduate school days, Kate wondered if she still had a copy of the DSM somewhere in the house. Hadn't there been some study about sleep deprivation and psychiatric disorders?

A good night's rest was exactly what she needed. When she woke up the next day, Kate laughed at her paranoid misgivings. Still on hospital time, she was the first one to rise so she quietly crept to the kitchen to make coffee. As she fetched the newspaper from the porch, it occurred to her that it wasn't Pam and Jeremy's relationship that was problematic. The issue was that she had grown too distant from her own son.

Even though she had cut back on her hospital hours, Kate realized that her time at home mostly amounted to superficial time instead of quality time. What were Jeremy's hobbies? What were his favorite subjects at school? She had no idea. If they were distant now, things would only get worse once he became a full-fledged teenager. Glumly stewing in guilt and pondering the ticking time bomb of adolescence, Kate was startled when her phone buzzed.

“Hello?”

“Hi Kate, it's David.”

“Hi David. How was the night shift?”

“Not bad at all. One C-section, two normal deliveries, and no breaches.”

“Wow,” Kate said. “You can’t ask for more than that.”

“Nope, it was smooth sailing. Say, you know that brunch we have scheduled today?”

“Let me guess. You need to cancel.”

“Not at all! I actually get to leave work early this morning. So, rather than go back to the apartment and immediately leave again, I was wondering if I could come over early to your place. Have coffee or something.”
“I guess that's fine,” Kate said. He normally lived several hours away but, thanks to a work exchange program, David was participating in a two-week residency at a local hospital and temporarily living in a downtown apartment. “When you say early, do you mean...”

“Can I come over in thirty minutes?”

It was 7 am. She had been expecting him to arrive at 11. Kate winced, remembering her long to-do list that she had mentally assembled and promptly forgotten. “Thirty minutes is awfully soon,” Kate demurred. “And the house is still a mess. I meant to clean up when I got home yesterday but I ended up sleeping for twelve hours straight.”

“I don't mind!” David assured her. “That's actually the main reason I don't want to go home. I know I'll just fall asleep.”

“Well... okay,” Kate agreed. “You can come over. But no fair judging the state of the house.”

“Did I ever tell you my great-aunt is Martha Stewart?”

“Ha ha. Goodbye, David. See you in thirty.” Kate hung up the phone. Glancing around the house, she decided that it was tidy enough. The more pressing matter was the fact that she had just woken up. It was way too early in their relationship for David to see her in this state.

It was that exact moment that Pam sleepily wandered into the kitchen. “Pam! Thank god you're up!” Kate exclaimed, startling her. “Oops. Sorry. Didn't mean to frighten you.” Kate quickly explained the situation. “... So I just need to go shower and get ready. If David gets here before I'm out, can you let him in and, you know, keep him company?”

“I've got it totally under control,” Pam promised, yawning mid-sentence. She began filling the coffeepot with water.

“Thanks Pam! You're a life-saver!” Kate dashed upstairs to get ready. Despite her best efforts, it took well over thirty minutes for her to shower, dry her hair, get dressed, and put on makeup. She checked the mirror. Her sandy brown hair, naturally wavy, framed her fair skin and angular jaw. Though compact in height, she still had the same slim body she had in college, thanks to the hospital's rushed mealtimes and the subsequent hours on her feet. By the time she opened her bedroom door, she could hear David's voice downstairs. Following the sound, she found him in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on an egg strata casserole while Pam slid a tray of bacon into the oven.

“Hi there!” David said. He set aside the egg strata to give her a kiss. He was still wearing his hospital scrubs, but David was still dashing with his curly brown hair and neatly trimmed beard. The thick frames of his glasses and his tall stature gave him a distinctly professorial look.

“Hi!” He was so tall that she had to push herself up on her toes to kiss him.

“Thanks for letting me come over early,” he said squeezing his arm around her waist.

“Of course.” He already had a cup of coffee in front of him and the delightfully brown scent lured her to the coffeepot. “I see you've already met Pam,” Kate said, pouring herself a cup.

“Sure did,” he nodded. “She was just telling me how long she's known your family.” He glanced at Pam, who had shyly retreated to the opposite side of the kitchen with her coffee. “You were saying you've known Jeremy since...”

“Since he was six,” Pam said. “I was your typically poor college student. One of my friends said she knew a family that needed a babysitter.”
“And the rest is history,” Kate finished. “Now we don't even let her leave the house.”

“Ha!” David laughed. “So I'm guessing you’re single, huh, Pam?”

Before Pam could answer, Kate chimed in. “Technically yes, but Pam does so much around here that she's practically married to Jeremy.” Both she and David chuckled, but Pam blushed furiously.

“Well, let's see,” David pondered. “You've known Jeremy since he was six and you were in college. So your early 20s, let’s say. What's that? A fifteen year difference?”

“Scandalous!” Kate remarked.

They all laughed before Pam said, “It's not like that though. At all. Really.”

David stroked his chin. “This reminds me of the situation with the new French president,” he said. He laughed to himself before noticing their blank faces. “You didn't hear about Emmanuel Macron?” Rubbing his hands excitedly, he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone. “So it goes like this. This guy just got elected in May. He met his wife in high school, sweetly enough.” David paused. “So what?” Kate said.

“High school love, right? So cute.” David took a sip of coffee. “Oh, I forgot to mention. *She was his teacher.*”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “Like a teacher-teacher? Or was she just an intern who was tutoring?”

“Right, good point.” Pam said, agreeing with her. “Was she just a few years older? Because that wouldn't be so bad. In my opinion.”

“Let me think.” David pretended to nonchalantly sprinkle pepper onto the egg strata casserole. “He was around fifteen years old. She was, oh, thirty-nine. So definitely his teacher. No big, right?”

Kate was aghast. “Fifteen and thirty-nine? Eww!” She glanced at Pam, expecting a similar reaction, but she was busy checking on the bacon in the oven.

“So you draw the line at a twenty-four year age difference,” David said. He was clearly amused that his story was going over so well.

“I draw the line at way less than twenty-four years. That's disgusting.” Kate made a face. “Doesn't France have laws about this? I knew they were sexually liberated over there, but this just takes the cake.”

“‘But can you really make laws about love?’” David asked, pretending to shoot a bow and arrow like Cupid.

“Another good point,” Pam said, nodding vigorously. “I like that.”

David abruptly stopped pantomiming with his imaginary bow. “Oh, did I mention that she had three children when she met him? Some of her kids were actually the same age as him.”

“I don't like that,” Kate said. She scrutinized him with suspicion. “Are you just fabricating this story to wind us up?”

“I'm not! You can't make this stuff up. Truth is stranger than fiction.”

She considered this. “And this guy got elected president? Was this public knowledge?”
“Oh yes.”

“Unbelievable.”

David turned to Pam. “What do you think? Should they have tossed the lady in jail and thrown away the key?”

Pam removed the bacon from the oven and replaced it with the egg strata casserole. “Well, it wasn't like she was forcing him to do something he didn't want. Right?” Pam glanced at Kate, then looked away.

“But she was so much older,” Kate objected. “She should have known better. I'm open-minded but fifteen is way too young. That would be like if Jeremy was involved with a...” She quickly did the math in her head. “... with a thirty-six year old woman. That's just a few years younger than me, for heaven's sake.”

“From what I recall, Emmanuel Macron was the one who put the moves on his teacher,” David told them. “The newspapers said he was a very mature fifteen year old. To her credit, she initially tried to rebuff him.”

“It takes two to tango,” Pam pointed out. “We shouldn't be laying all the blame on his wife.”

“Maybe,” Kate said. She shuddered before adding, “It's still gross though.”

David warningly wagged his finger at Pam. “There's your answer. Stay away from her son, Pam.”

Pam's face had turned so red that Kate was starting to feel bad for her. “How did we get started on this topic anyway?” she wondered.

“You said that Pam was practically married to Jeremy,” David reminded her.

“Oh, that's not what I meant. It was just a joke because Pam is stuck spending so much time with him. Although sometimes when they talk, it sounds like they're...”

The landline rang, something that hadn't happened in so long that Kate and Pam both momentarily froze, unsure what the foreign sound was. Pam went to answer it. Kate listened in, her instincts as a doctor telling her that phone calls before 8 am on a weekend were rarely good news.

“Oh. Hi dad,” she heard Pam say. Her voice then hushed, never a good sign either.

Kate turned back to David to give her some privacy. “So the breakfast menu is egg strata, bacon, sourdough toast, and some cantaloupe that hasn't even been sliced yet. No dessert, so I hope you weren't expecting something sweet.”

“I thought you'd never ask,” David said. He went to the entryway and returned with a box. Opening it with a flourish, he revealed the dozen doughnuts inside. Their sugary smell immediately caused Kate's stomach to rumble.

“Mmm,” she said. “Jeremy will flip out when he sees those.”

Pam returned, holding the phone as if it were a dead mouse. “Everything all right, Pam?” Kate asked, concerned.

She set the phone down on the counter. “It's my mom,” Pam said. “She somehow tripped on her morning walk and now she's on her way to the hospital. They're hoping it's just a bad ankle sprain.
But she might have broken something too.”

“That's terrible,” Kate said. “Which hospital is she at?”

“They're on their way to St Bonifacius,” Pam said.

“You should go see her,” Kate urged.

“I will,” Pam began. She worriedly sipped her coffee. “The timing is bad though. My dad is due for eye surgery tomorrow so he won't be able to drive. And my mom definitely can't drive either, even if it's just an ankle sprain.” She paused. “Do you mind if I take a few days to...”

Kate didn't even let her finish. “Of course you can take a few days off,” she said. “You have to take care of your family. Take as much time as you need.”

“I better pack some things,” Pam said, dumping the rest of her coffee in the sink. “Excuse me. Oh, it was nice meeting you, David.”

“Nice meeting you too!” he called. The moment Pam was gone, he turned to Kate. “Did I screw up? She seemed a bit perturbed by the Macron story.”

“Really?” Kate said. “I didn't notice.”

“Maybe I was imagining it. But I hope she doesn't think I was accusing her of anything.”

“Don't worry about it. Pam has a good sense of humor. I think she's just embarrassed that she and Jeremy get along so well. Like two peas in a pod those two are.” Retrieving the cantaloupe, Kate hunted for a sharp knife. “You know, it occurred to me... if the genders were reversed and my eleven year old daughter was spending a lot of time with a twenty-six year old man? Yeah, I would be weirded out. I just don't get that vibe from Pam though.”

“She definitely seems way too nice to do anything like that,” David agreed.

A timer beeped. Checking the oven, Kate decided the egg strata needed a few more minutes to brown. She began cutting the cantaloupe. “So are you enjoying the residency exchange program?” Kate asked David.

“It's fun,” he nodded. He poured fresh cups of coffee for both of them. “That reminds me. I got an email last night from the director of St John's back in Springfield. He said they're looking to do something similar this summer, except it will be a four week residency.”

“Wow, four weeks is a long time,” Kate said. Having successfully sliced open the cantaloupe, she began scooping out the seeds.

“You should apply,” David suggested. “It would be four weeks in July. Summers are always nice in Springfield.” He paused a beat. “You could stay at my place.”

Kate hesitated. “That does sound nice. But I can't just pack up and leave Jeremy for a month.”

“Why not? Didn't you just say that Pam runs the show around here anyway?”

“That's true. But I still feel bad abandoning the two of them. Especially Jeremy. He's growing up so fast and I really feel like we should be spending more time together.”

“Where is he anyway?”
“Still sleeping, I guess,” Kate answered. “He and Pam must have stayed up late last night. I hope he'll wake up in time to meet you.”

David stepped behind her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. He kissed her neck, causing a very warm feeling to spread across Kate's insides. “It's not a big deal,” he said. “You should let him sleep in.” Still kissing her, his hand slid across her front until his finger nestled in her navel.

Though she was enjoying his attention, Kate said, “Wait a minute... did you have an ulterior motive when you asked to come over early this morning?”

“Not at all,” he responded. “I was honestly just really hungry.”

Kate grinned. “Me too, actually. You don't mind eating cold brunch food, do you?” Turning off the oven, she cracked open the door and then took David's hand. He looked at her questioningly as she led him from the kitchen. “Come on, I'll give you a tour of the house. We can start with the bedroom.”

It felt strange having a different man in her own bed. But Kate got over it, especially once David removed her underwear and dipped his face between her legs. Self-conscious about her son sleeping downstairs, she did her best to be quiet as his tongue teased and tickled. Ten minutes later, any thought of discretion was forgotten as she frantically grasped his head as he made her come.

“How did I do?” he asked as he crawled up to be at face level with her.

Instead of answering, Kate slid her legs apart, letting his hard cock slide inside her in a single thrust. “Oh god,” she whispered. “Don't stop.”

And he didn't stop, not for a long while. When he was done, they took a moment to cuddle on the mussed sheets. “That was nice,” Kate said, kissing his cheek. “Thank you.”

“You should have me over for brunch every weekend,” David said, smiling.

“Speaking of which, we should probably go back downstairs,” Kate said. She knew it was silly, but she would be mortified if Jeremy knocked on the door right now. Tossing David his shirt, she said, “Come on, get dressed. You said you were starving.”

But when they crept downstairs, there was no sign of anyone. Kate abashedly realized that Pam had left while they were upstairs. She wondered what she must have thought when she saw the untouched brunch on the table with no one in sight.

The egg strata was a bit dry and the cantaloupe room temperature, but David didn't seem to mind. They browsed the newspaper as they ate. It occurred to Kate that this simple, domestic scene could become the new normal. She and David enjoying brunch on a weekend morning while Jeremy snoozed in his room. She smiled at the thought.

By 10:30 though, Jeremy still had not risen and David was starting to fall asleep at the table. “You don't have to stay,” Kate told him. “Go home and get some rest.”

“I'm not tired,” he claimed, stifling a yawn.

“Yes, clearly not tired,” Kate teased. She hauled him out of his chair. “Come on, you can meet Jeremy some other time.”

“Are you kicking me out of your house?” David asked as she shoved him toward the front door.
“Yes. You've overstayed your welcome.”

“Is that so?” He pulled her close for a kiss. It began as just a brief peck on the lips but evolved into something more as Kate found herself backed against the wall, her hand still on the doorknob, while David leaned over her. She felt a thrill when she realized his beard was imbued with her own scent from having his face buried between her legs.

“Can't we go back upstairs?” he asked.

It was tempting but Kate knew they would never leave the bedroom. “You need to get some sleep,” she told him. “Plus, Jeremy will be up any minute now.”

“Spoil sport,” he said, kissing her one last time. “I'll call you tonight?"

“Okay,” Kate agreed. “See you. Have a good day of sleeping!” Shutting the door, she returned to the dining room and began gathering the dirty dishes. Feeling lazy, she soon gave up and took a seat. She was munching a slice of bacon when Jeremy stumbled into the dining room.

“Hi there, sleepyhead,” she greeted, checking the time. “It's almost 11:00 am, so you're still in time for brunch. Want some egg strata? It doesn't have anything that you don't like.”

Yawning, Jeremy examined the dish. “No thanks. Where's Pam?”

“She had a family emergency,” Kate explained. “Her mom hurt her ankle and they think it might be broken.”

“When's she coming back? This afternoon?”

“No, she packed an overnight bag so she'll be gone at least a day or two.”

“Oh.” Prowling the breakfast table, it didn't take him long to discover the box of doughnuts. He piled a plate with a cream-filled bismarck, two churros, and half a cruller. He then topped off his breakfast of champions with a handful of bacon.

“I still don't understand how you stay so thin,” Kate remarked. Jeremy set up shop at the kitchen counter since there wasn't space at the dinner table for him to open the newspaper to the comics section. Wanting him to eat something at least minimally nutritious, Kate poured him a glass of milk.

She began cleaning up the brunch aftermath. As she loaded the dishwasher, it occurred to Kate that there was silver lining to Pam's absence. This was an excellent opportunity for her to spend time with Jeremy. Though she often relied on Pam to entertain him, especially after a long day at work, Kate always felt guilty that she was neglecting her son. Now she had the perfect chance to address that guilt.

 Emboldened with initiative, Kate turned to the counter but found it empty except for Jeremy's cleaned plate and drained glass of milk. “You're not getting away that easy,” she thought to herself. Wiping her hands on a dishtowel, Kate strode off with a determined bounce in her step. She found Jeremy in his room where he was hunched over his desk.

“Hi there,” she said. He didn't hear her because he was wearing earbuds. She knocked on his open door to announce her presence. “What are you up to?”

“Huh?” Jeremy said, distracted. He removed the pair of white earbuds.

“I just asked what's going on,” Kate said. His room, previously tidy last night, has somehow
deteriorated into a state of chaos. Several dresser drawers hung open, each one with an article of clothing hanging from it, while small pieces of unidentifiable plastic were scattered around his desk chair. Moving cautiously, Kate entered his room and sat in the armchair, moving his crumpled pajamas out of the way.

He must have noticed her look of dismay. Jeremy hastily turned off the music on his iPod. “Am I in trouble?” he asked.

“No,” Kate laughed. “Can't a mom have a conversation with her son?”

“Sure,” Jeremy said. He re-inserted one of his earbuds, leaving his other ear free to listen to her.

This wasn't going the way Kate hoped. “You still love that iPod Touch, don't you?” she asked. It was her Christmas present to him several years ago.

“This is my iPod Nano from Grandma,” he informed her. “I broke the Touch a long time ago. Well, it wasn't actually me who broke it. It was technically the washing machine.”

“Oh, right,” Kate said. “I knew that. So, what are you working on there?”

Jeremy regarded her with suspicion, clearly not believing that she wasn’t trying to trap him into some admission of wrongdoing. “I'm just putting together this model airplane,” he answered, pointing to his desk.

Kate strolled to his desk to look over his shoulder. “Wow, that looks really cool. P-61 Black Widow,” she said, reading the box.

Jeremy had begun poring over the instructions so he didn't answer right away. “Yeah, it's awesome.”

“I didn't know you were so obsessed with building models,” Kate ventured. “When did this happen?”

“I dunno. A few weeks ago, I guess. Pam got me that one first.” He pointed at a vintage biplane on his bookshelf. It was only then that Kate noticed the fleet of fighter planes and helicopters on top of his dresser.

“You built all of these? Good job.”

“Thanks.”

Kate was admiring his airplanes and trying to think of more compliments when she noticed a large mason jar on the dresser. Labeled 'Swear Jar’, it was filled with a handful of coins and bills. “What's this?” she said, picking it up and giving it a shake.

Jeremy glanced at her. “That? It's, um, a swear jar.”

“I can see that,” Kate said. “But what's it for?”

He shrugged. “You know. It was Pam's idea. Every time someone swears, they have to add money to it. So it's motivation to swear less. Unless you're rich. Then you can swear as much as you want.”

“Smart. Quite a good chunk of change in there,” Kate observed. “Will I need to increase your allowance so you can pay the swear jar?”

Jeremy set aside his bottle of glue. “I haven't added that much to the jar. Just two or three dollars. It's mostly Pam. I've been making her swear a lot.”
Kate narrowed her eyes at him. “You've been *making* her swear?”

Jeremy suddenly seemed flustered. “Well... I mean, I've been catching her swear.”

“It's not cool if you're making Pam swear, you know.”

“I know! That's not what I meant.”

Kate squinted at the contents of the jar. “Is that a twenty dollar bill in there?”

“Oh, yeah. That was the day that Pam was really... mad.”

“I see,” Kate nodded. Jeremy kept his eyes glued on his model airplane but she noticed his ears had turned pink. She had apparently struck a nerve. Kate wanted to ask more questions about that $20 dollar swearing day but then remembered that she was supposed to be building bridges, not embarrassing him. She moved on.

“How's school going?” she asked, noticing the pile of notebooks and textbooks on the corner of his desk.

“It's okay.”

His short answers were starting to drive her crazy, but Kate persisted. “Are you glad to be almost done?”

“Yeah. I can't wait for summer.”

“Mind if I take a look?” Kate asked. She began paging through a geometry notebook that was filled with Jeremy's messy handwriting. All the numbers and symbols were completely foreign. It wasn't until she was paging through his biology notebook that she felt more comfortable. She was much more knowledgeable about ribosomes than rhombuses.

At the very bottom of the pile was an unlabeled notebook. Each page had an entry for his name, the date, a subject, and then a grade written in red ink. One entry, for example, consisted of:

_Name: Jeremy Prater_
_Date: April 22, 2017_
_Subject: 3rd base_

This was written in Jeremy's handwriting. There was a separate note, written in red ink, that read: “B+ Keep up the good work! --Miss Carpenter” Kate recognized this as Pam's handwriting.

“What is this anyway?” Kate pondered aloud as she leafed through the notebook. It was filled with nearly two dozen entries, the only difference being the date, the subject, and the grade.

“Hmm?” Jeremy looked up. “Oh, that's nothing,” he said, snatching the notebook away from her.

He moved so quickly that Kate was left staring at her empty hands. “Was Pam grading you on something?” she inquired.

“It was nothing,” Jeremy repeated.

“I'm not mad, just curious,” Kate assured him. “Can I please look at the notebook?” She held out her hand. After a moment, Jeremy reluctantly handed it over. Kate skimmed the pages again.

“I don't get the subjects,” she said. “1st base, 2nd base, 3rd base?”
“It's baseball,” Jeremy explained.

“But why would Pam grade you on baseball?” Kate said, puzzled. “Are you trying out for the school baseball team?”

“Yes, I am,” Jeremy answered. “But I didn't make the team. I'm not that good yet so Pam offered to help me improve. Can I have that back? We were just joking around.”

But Kate continued flipping through the notebook. “I always thought soccer was your thing, not baseball,” she commented. She was well-versed in soccer because of Jeremy's interest, but she only knew enough about baseball to be dimly aware of the terminology. “Why all these bases?”

Jeremy hesitated. “Those are the positions I was practicing for. You know, 1st baseman, 2nd baseman... All that.”

“Oh, I get it.” Kate stopped at one entry. “You got a C- for 2nd base,” she noted. The accompanying comment in red ink stated, “‘For the love of Pete, please be gentle...’”

Kate glanced at her son. “What's that about?”

“I, um, threw the ball at her too hard that day.”

Jeremy stood by her side, one hand on the notebook, but she wouldn't let him take it. “Looks like your grades are good for 2nd base and 3rd base,” Kate observed. “I see a lot of Ds and Fs for 1st base though.”

“I got a B for 1st base last week,” Jeremy protested.

“Did you?” Kate found the entry. “Ah, here it is. B. I'm glad you're finally taking these lessons seriously.” She guffawed. “The comments are the best part. Pam is so funny.” Kate thumbed through the pages to search for them.

Be confident!
Don't rush, it's not a race
Good improvement from last time
Would it kill you to pay attention to your work?
Amazing... thank you!

Kate frowned. The last comment was for 3rd base and the page was covered in drawings of tiny hearts, as well as exuberant A+ written in extra large handwriting. “How come this entry has all these hearts?” she asked.

Jeremy took the notebook from her and shoved it under his pile of textbooks. “I don't know. Pam was just being girly. Girls draw hearts on, like, everything.”

Kate tried to remember what else she knew about baseball. “I didn't see any home runs listed in there,” she mentioned. “Think you'll be hitting any home runs soon?”

“I don't know, mom. Maybe.” Jeremy returned to his model airplane. “Are you going to spend all day going through my stuff?”

Kate spotted his sketchbook. “What about this? It's safe for me to look at this right? You're not going to yell at me?”

Jeremy sighed. “Go ahead.”
Kate eagerly began perusing his sketchbook. The first entries were filled with space monsters, superheroes, and explosions. As the pages progressed, however, the drawings became much more skilled with more attention paid to shading and line weight. The comic book sketches petered out, replaced by still life drawings of everyday things like glasses of water, flowers, and fruit. A head-and-shoulders portrait of Pam caught her attention.

“Jeremy, this is really good!” She held up the page for him to see.

“Yeah. It's okay. I did that last summer.”

A series of landscapes were next: oceans, deserts, forests... These were well-drawn too, but it was a figure drawing that caught Kate's attention. The sketch depicted a person in a half-reclining position, one knee bent and a hand resting on the leg. The head was missing though.

“I like this one too,” Kate said, holding it up.

Jeremy paused from his work to look up. “Yeah, that's Pam. She was eating potato chips on the couch.”

“How come you didn't finish it?”

“I was getting frustrated because clothes are really difficult to draw,” Jeremy explained. “Fabric drape is really tricky.”

“You won't get better if you don't practice,” Kate told him. She returned the sketchbook to his desk.

“That's what Pam says too.”

She looked around the room in search of more things they could talk about. Drawing a blank, she said, “Are you going to work on that airplane all day?”

“Maybe.”

Surely she could lure him away somehow. Kate tried to remember how they used to spend time together. “Want to go on a mother-son date?” she offered.

“A what?”

Kate put a hand on his shoulder. “You know. An outing. Just the two of us.”

“Like right now?”

Kate laughed ruefully. “Please contain your excitement. Come on, it'll be fun. I'll take you out for lunch, your choice. We could get ice cream. We can go that rock shop you like so much.”

“I gave up rock collecting years ago.”

Inwardly deflated, Kate did her best to remain cheerful. “Oh. Well, we can still have fun. Like what do you and Pam like to do together?”

“I don't know. We just hang out.”

“Just hang out? There must be more than that. I know you two have adventures all the time.”

“Yeah, but we don't plan them. They just sort of happen.”
Kate yanked him to his feet. “I know I'm not Pam, but we're going to have some fun. Go brush your teeth and get dressed.”

Trying to set an example, Kate remained upbeat as they drove off but Jeremy was as excited as an office worker at a mandatory happy hour. The first stop was the museum downtown. As they walked up the steps, Kate couldn't help but reminisce over Jeremy's obsession with the lion sculptures when he was little. Knowing he would be chagrined if she brought it up, she kept the memories to herself. Letting Jeremy choose the itinerary, they first visited a medieval war exhibit, replete with shiny knights in armor, sharp lances, and bedazzled horses. Next they walked through some drawing rooms that had been re-created from miniature models.

When they left the museum a few hours later, it was close enough to lunchtime. They ended up wandering into the district where ethnic restaurants and grocery stores congregated. There were Mexican grocery stores selling tamales, Muslim butcher shops with halal meat, and a smattering of Vietnamese restaurants offering pho. Jeremy paused in front of a Chinese grocery to scrutinize the whole ducks that hung in the window. They were roasted a crackly shade of orange-brown.

“Can we have duck for lunch?” Jeremy asked, his nose pressed to the window.

Kate stared at the ducks that still had their head and feet attached. “How about sandwiches instead?” she suggested, steering him to a banh mi shop. After securing their sandwiches and bubble teas, they decided to eat outside in a tree-lined park. A bubbling marble fountain and a colorful garden of pansies and violas made it feel as thought they were temporarily transported to a European city.

Jeremy loudly slurped at his mango bubble tea, sucking up the large tapioca pearls through the oversized straw. “Mmm, this is really good,” he noted. “I bet Pam would like this flavor. I've never seen mango on the menu at the place we usually go to.”

Kate smiled wryly. He apparently couldn't go five minutes without mentioning her. They unwrapped the white wax paper from their sandwiches She began eating hers but Jeremy carefully opened his and began poking around inside it. “What are you looking for?” Kate asked.

“Well, usually a super spicy pepper in banh mi sandwiches,” he told her. “Oh, here it is...” He extricated a long, thin strip of green pepper and set it aside. Only then did he begin eating his sandwich.

“That's just a harmless bell pepper,” Kate said, inspecting the discarded pepper on his napkin.

“No, it's not,” he contradicted. “Are you sure you don't want to take yours out? There'll be steam coming out of your ears if you eat it.”

Kate was about to reply when two girls walked past their bench. “Hi Jeremy,” the older girl said. Her willowy frame was emphasized by a sky blue dress while a pair of expressively dark eyes matched the long hair that fell to her waist. Holding her hand was a younger girl around three or four years old.

Jeremy hurriedly swallowed his mouthful of sandwich. “Oh, hi Gabriela,” he answered.

“Are you having mango bubble tea? That's my favorite.” She smiled warmly at him and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Um, yeah,” Jeremy replied. “I usually get hazelnut but this is pretty good.”

Gabriela shifted her weight as an awkward silence ensued. “This is my little sister Lucia,” she told them. The younger girl warily tried to hide behind Gabriela, who shook her hand encouragingly.
“Can you say hi?” Instead, the girl blushed and looked away. “She's kind of shy,” Gabriela explained.

“Yeah,” Jeremy said. Kate noticed that he was mashing the straw into his bubble tea instead of looking at Gabriela. Finally remembering his manners, he said, “Oh, this is my mom.” He nodded brusquely at Kate, then added, “Gabriela is in the same grade as me at school.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kate smiled. She never would have guessed they were the same age. Gabriela was a solid six inches taller than Jeremy, plus her blossoming girlhood was a direct contrast to his skinny boyishness.

“Nice to meet you too,” Gabriela said politely. She stood with one arm at her side while the other reached behind her back to clutch her elbow. Jeremy was still avoiding her gaze. Gabriela reached for her sister's hand. “Well, I guess I'll see you on Monday?”

“Yeah, see you then,” Jeremy said. “Bye!”

The two girls shuffled away. They were still within earshot when the younger girl whispered to Gabriela, “That boy's hair was on fire!”

Jeremy blushed as Gabriela turned to giggle at him. “That's not fire, silly,” she told her sister. “He just has red hair.”

They resumed eating. “She seemed nice,” Kate commented.

“Gabriela? Yeah, she's all right.” He shook his bubble tea in an attempt to dislodge the clump of pearls at the bottom. “She beat me in the spelling bee last month,” he added as an afterthought.

Kate nodded, then gave him a sly elbow. “She likes you, you know.”

Jeremy coughed on a tapioca pearl. “You mean she likes me?”

“You couldn't tell? Come on, Jeremy. It was obvious.” Kate paused. “Do you think she's cute?”

“I don't know,” he said. Jeremy occupied himself with a big bite of his sandwich, but she could see his ears turn pink.

“I thought she was very pretty,” Kate announced. “I bet if you asked her, she would be your girlfriend.”

“No way,” Jeremy told her. “Gabriela is too annoying. All she does at recess is giggle with her friends.”

“So she's not your type,” Kate guessed.

“Nope.”

“So... what is your type?”

“Beats me.” The moment he said it, she noticed how a passing jogger caught his eye for a split second. She was a younger woman, college-age probably, wearing form-fitting spandex tights and an overburdened sports bra that barely contained her ample bust. Kate's mind immediately returned to David's story about the Emmanuel Macron and his older wife.

“Or, rather, what would make Gabriela your type?” she quizzed, trying to forget about the French president.
“Um, I guess it would be cool if she knew more about video games. Or, like, I tried talking to her about stuff like X-Men and Star Wars once and she had no idea what I was talking about.”

His answer filled her with relief, but Kate tried to think of a tactful way to break it to him. “Hmmm,” she said. “That's a rather high bar for a girl to clear.”

“Pam knows about all that stuff,” Jeremy informed her.

All roads led back to Pam, Kate thought to herself. “Okay, so let's say, hypothetically, that Gabriela knew about all this random stuff. Would you like her then?”

“I don't know.” Jeremy demurred. “I guess she's pretty good at soccer. So that's cool. But sometimes she'll laugh at my jokes and I feel like she's only doing it to be polite.”

“Sense of humor is important,” Kate agreed. “Okay, so Gabriela isn't the one. Who else is out there? Any secret crushes I should know about?”

“No.” Jeremy shifted uncomfortably on the bench. “Are you done eating? Can we go now?”

“Let me finish my sandwich first,” Kate said. “No crushes? Really? You can tell me, I can keep a secret.”

“Mom, you're embarrassing me.”

He had turned so red that Kate took mercy on him and changed the subject. “Want to know how I knew Gabriela liked you? When she was standing there, she positioned her arm like this.” Kate stood up with her arm at her side. “But she kept twisting her arm at the elbow so the underside of her wrist faced you.”

Jeremy gave her a skeptical look. “That means a girl likes you?”

“Sure,” Kate said. “It's a totally subconscious gesture, but it has a lot of hidden meaning.”

“Huh.” Jeremy considered this as he finished his sandwich.

Noting the thoughtful look on his face, Kate continued, “It's not foolproof, though, so don't get yourself into trouble. Sometimes a girl might do it and it may not signify anything. I mean, I think I've seen Pam do the same gesture at you.” Blushing again, Jeremy crumpled up his sandwich wrapper. Kate was surprised at how uncomfortable he looked. Had she inadvertently implied that Pam disliked him? Amending her words, Kate added, “I mean, sure, Pam likes you. But she doesn't like like you.”

“So, you really like this new doctor guy?” Jeremy asked, changing the subject.

“You mean David? Yes, he's really sweet.”

“What do you guys do together?”

Kate flashed back to earlier that morning when David's tongue was buried in her pussy. Instead, she said, “We watch movies. Go out to restaurants. Tell stupid jokes. You know, stuff that couples do.”

“Oh.” Jeremy looked away.

She could tell her answer had somehow dissatisfied him. “What is it?”

Still not looking at her, Jeremy said, “Do you ever think you and dad might, you know, get back
Kate hesitated, torn between telling the truth and softening the blow. “I don't know, Jeremy,” she said. “It doesn't seem... I mean, I'm seeing David. Your dad has Marla. Don't you think everyone is happier now?”

“I guess so.” He kept staring at something across the park.

“I wanted to tell you the truth,” Kate confessed. “Are you mad at me?”

“I'm not mad. Just... disappointed.”

“I'm sorry,” Kate said, touching his hand. “I know this doesn't make sense right now. But that doesn't mean we can't talk about it. I think it will become clearer. Eventually.”

Kate desperately groped for something to reassure her son. At a loss for words, she took a bite of her forgotten sandwich. She was chewing when a burst of heat blossomed on her tongue. The spiciness was pleasant at first but kept growing in intensity until tears came to her eyes. Kate swallowed the burning mouthful while loudly gulping air.

Jeremy glanced at her. “I told you it was a spicy pepper.”

“It's not that bad,” Kate said, trying not to wheeze. Thinking it might help, she took another bite of sandwich, but this only compounded the flames on her tongue. The heat grew so intense that she quickly grabbed the empty paper bag for the sandwiches and spit out the half-chewed contents from her mouth.

“I'm really glad no one saw you do that,” Jeremy said, looking around the park.

“Holy smokes, that's spicy,” Kate gasped, taking a long draw of her bubble tea. The straw made a crackling sound as she reached the bottom of the cup. “Can I have some of yours?” she requested, trying to maintain an air of dignity before snatching the cup from his hand.

“I can drive home if you're not feeling well,” he offered.


Retracing their steps, they returned to the parking ramp to retrieve the car. It wasn't until they were almost home that Kate felt her tongue was no longer on the verge of spontaneous combustion. Having regained her powers of speech, she said, “That was a nice day. Thanks for hanging out with me.”

“Yeah. It was fun,” Jeremy agreed.

Kate's fingers thoughtfully tapped the steering wheel as she drove. “I know my answer about your dad wasn't what you wanted to hear. But we should really talk about it more someday.”

“It's okay. I was just being stupid.”

Kate squeezed his hand. “It wasn't stupid,” she told him.

He remained quiet for the rest of the drive, then disappeared into his room once they arrived at home. Kate, meanwhile, went to kitchen to find some ice cubes for her stinging mouth. That didn't seem to help, so she pulled out her phone to search for a remedy on the internet. Drinking a glass of milk
appeared to be the general consensus for neutralizing the burn of capsaicin. Desperate for a cure, she poured herself some milk and gulped it down. To her surprise, it worked like a charm.

All this mother-son bonding was wearing her out, so Kate took a nap. An hour later, she awoke feeling much better. Wandering downstairs, she found Jeremy watching TV. “What are you watching?” she asked, taking a seat next to him on the couch.

“Nothing good, that’s for sure.” Jeremy turned off the TV and moved to the large window overlooking the front yard. He peered up and down the street. “When did you say Pam is coming home?” he asked.

“I didn't. It depends on how things go with her mom. But it'll be a few days.”

“Oh.” He heaved a gusty sigh and pressed his nose against the window, leaving smudges on the glass. He reminded her of Whiskers, restlessly staring out the window and longing to be let outside.

“Will you survive without her?” Kate asked.

“Yeah, I'll be fine,” he said.

The listless tone of his voice indicated otherwise. “If you're bored, I'm up for doing something,” Kate proposed. “We could play a board game. Or watch a movie.”

“I'm not bored. I just wanted to show Pam something.”

“You can show me,” Kate offered.

“It's not that important,” he replied, brushing her off. There was that mysteriousness again.

“How come you want to show Pam, but not me?” Kate asked. She was equal parts disappointed and jealous.

“It's nothing,” Jeremy said. “I'm going to finish some homework.” He headed for his room.

“But it's Saturday night!” Kate called. He didn't respond. Discouraged, Kate wondered what he wanted to show Pam. She thought they had made some progress after today's outing. It was all about baby steps, she supposed. Doing her best to respect his privacy, she didn't bring up the topic again.

It was strange having just her and Jeremy in the house. Things seemed quieter. Sometimes a pall would settle over the house as Jeremy mopily wandered from room to room. When he came home from school, his first question was, invariably, whether or not Pam had called to say when she would be back.

Friday came with no sign from Pam. They muddled through the week, experiencing both highs (playing soccer in the backyard) and lows (Kate expressly forbidding him to utter the phrase “That's not the way Pam does it.”) While part of her enjoyed the time spent with her son, Kate guiltily breathed a sigh of relief when Jeremy left to spend the weekend at William's place. Being a single, full-time parent was exhausting. As far as she was concerned, the money they paid to retain Pam's services was dollars well-spent.

Kate felt better by Sunday afternoon when she was waiting for Jeremy's return. It was pleasantly sunny so she made a pitcher of iced tea to enjoy on the front porch. She was just starting her second glass when she saw William's car pull into the driveway. Jeremy tumbled out of the rear seat, carrying an overstuffed duffel bag in addition to the backpack strapped to his shoulders.
“Hi mom,” he said, giving her a quick wave. “Is Pam back yet?” He headed into the house without even waiting for an answer.

“Jeremy!” Kate was appalled, but not terribly surprised, by his manners. “What kind of hello is that? Get back here and give your mother a kiss.” Still wearing his backpack, Jeremy dutifully trotted to where she sat on the porch and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“How was your dad’s?” Kate inquired.

“Great.” He cupped his hands around his eyes to peer into the living room window. “So Pam’s not back?”

“No, but she said she’ll be here sometime this afternoon.”

“Okay.” Jeremy remained on the porch, but she spotted him tapping his fingers against his legs.

Kate sighed. “You may go,” she said, dismissing him. Jeremy disappeared into the house. William, meanwhile, had stepped out of his car to join her on the porch.

“Hi Kate,” he said.

“Hi William. Did you guys have a good weekend?”

“It wasn't too bad.”

“I hear a 'but' in there,” Kate said. William never stayed after dropping off Jeremy so she was taken aback when he lingered on the porch. Deciding to be polite, Kate gestured at an empty chair and poured him a glass of iced tea. There was a time when she would have been annoyed at his presence, but that was no longer the case. Thinking back to Jeremy's wish for them to be together, Kate realized that, though a true reunion was unlikely, she and William could at least physically co-exist in the same space.

“It wasn't too bad,” he said again, laughing as he took a seat in a wicker chair. “But Jeremy was hyper the whole time.”

“I'm guessing you mean more hyper than usual?” She regarded her ex-husband. Judging from the state of his hair, he had been wearily running his fingers through it all day. His normally neat brown locks (it was a mystery how Jeremy inherited his curly rust-colored hair) seemingly stuck out in every direction.

“Pretty much.” He drained half of his iced tea in a single gulp. “He was bouncing off the walls so much that the neighbors actually complained.”


Certain walls inside the house were adorned with Jeremy's sole imprints, but Kate decided not to mention this. “You're not giving him tons of sugar are you?”

“Of course not.”

“What about fruit juice?” Kate pressed. “That counts as sugar too.”

“Nope.”
Kate rattled the ice cubes in her glass. “I'm not sure what else we can do, other than cutting him back
to a diet of bread and water.”

“What about screen time?” William proposed.

“What about it?” Kate dismissed. “He doesn't have his own phone.”

“Doesn't he have an iPod Touch?” he frowned.

Kate clucked disapprovingly at her ex-husband. “He broke his iPod Touch ages ago. Get with the
program.”


“Does he though?” Kate said. “I don't see him playing games that much anymore. Definitely not
hours and hours like he used to do.”

“Are you kidding? That's all he does at my place.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the creaking sound of the garage door opening. Looking up,
Kate saw Pam's car pull into the driveway and then park in the garage. Pam emerged a few moments
later carrying her overnight bag. “Hi Pam,” Kate called. “Welcome back from… are you okay?”

Pam's face was pink and her lips tight in a dark scowl. It was a far cry from her usually sunny
expression. “It's nothing,” she said. Her feet thumped loudly on the wooden porch steps. “I was at a
red light and the guy in the next car was catcalling me.”

Kate made a sympathetic face. “I'm sorry.”

“It's not a big deal,” Pam said. Based on her sour face, Kate was sure this wasn't true. Nevertheless,
Pam nodded politely and said, “Hi William.”

“Hi Pam,” he said. “Say, Kate and I were talking about something and we wanted to get your
opinion. Do you think Jeremy needs more limits on screen time?”

“William thinks too much screen time is making Jeremy hyperactive,” Kate interjected.

Pam paused to consider this. “I don't think so,” she answered. “There aren't that many devices for
him around here. Just the iPad really. And I think the novelty wore off a long time ago.”

Kate nodded. “Not to take sides, William, but I have to agree with Pam. To be honest, sometimes
screen time makes him quieter.”

“Quieter?” William repeated, baffled.

“Sure,” Kate said. “Pam, what's that game Jeremy is always begging you to play? Courage and
Duty?”

“Call of Duty?”

“Yes, that's it.” To William, she said, “They usually play Call of Duty for maybe twenty minutes and
Jeremy doesn't get hyper. Or, at the very least, he's quiet as a mouse. Sometimes I check on him
afterward and he's napping.”

William was flabbergasted. “Are you kidding? At my place, he and Zep play video games and
they're yelling at each other for hours. And Jeremy can barely sit still for dinner afterward.”
“Zep?” Kate said. “Who's that? And what kind of a name is Zep?”

“He’s Marla's daughter's boyfriend,” William informed her.

“It's short for Zephyr,” Pam added helpfully.

Kate was unconvinced. “Oh. I thought maybe his parents loved Led Zeppelin or something.”

“That's what I thought too,” Pam agreed.

William impatiently shifted in his wicker chair. “We're getting sidetracked,” he said. “The point is that Jeremy needs more limits.”

“He does have limits,” Kate contradicted. “What are you implying?”

Instead of answering, William glanced at Pam. “You don't let him play Call of Duty whenever he wants, do you?”

Pam suddenly seemed uncomfortable. Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, she said, “Um, no. Not whenever he wants. Only when he's been good.” Kate couldn't help but notice how she blushed when she said this.

William must have noticed too. He gently cleared his throat and said, “Pam, I know you're not a parent yet, but just a word of advice: don't worry about being his friend. He'll walk all over you. You shouldn't feel bad about saying no when he asks to play Call of Duty.”

Pam's discomfort was growing even more apparent so Kate leapt to her defense. “Please, William. Get off your high horse. No one's asking you for your parenting advice.”

William sat back in his chair and sighed. “See? This is exactly why Jeremy is so difficult. Neither of you are setting limits on him.”

Pam tentatively raised her hand as though she were in a classroom. “Actually, just the other day I wouldn't let Jeremy play Call of Duty because he was being rude.”

“Really?” Kate said. “What happened?”

Pam nervously picked her fingernails. “Well, let's see. We were playing... I mean, he was playing Call of Duty when he belched really loud. So I told him he couldn't play Call of Duty for a few days.”


“He's just a kid!” Kate objected. “We should let him play Courage or Duty...”

“Call of Duty,” Pam corrected.

Not missing a beat, Kate continued, “… let him play that video game sometimes. It would be cruel to cut him off cold turkey.” William appeared skeptical, so Kate had to look elsewhere for support. “Don't you think so, Pam?”

Pam spoke slowly, carefully choosing her words. “Sometimes Call of Duty is a useful carrot to dangle in front of him. Like when I need him to do homework or help with chores.”

Kate looked triumphantly at William. “You see? Perfectly harmless.”
William shook his head at her. “Isn't there anything else besides Call of Duty that will motivate him?”

Kate didn't like agreeing with her ex-husband, but she had to admit he had a point. “Maybe you're right,” she conceded. “From my perspective, I mostly feel bad that Pam has to put up with so much Call of Booty...”

“Duty,” Pam prompted.

Kate was starting to get annoyed with the constant corrections. “...Call of Duty if that's the only carrot she can dangle.” Kate gave Pam a look of sympathy. “Aren't you getting tired of it? We need to brainstorm something better for you.”

Pam immediately shook her head. “I'm not tired of Call of Duty,” she said. There was an emphatic declaration to her voice that caused both Kate and William to simultaneously turn their heads. Pam blushed again. She continued, “I mean, it's better than using sugary treats like ice cream or cookies as a reward. Plus it's, you know, free. Like we're not paying for the arcade or the movie theater.”

William ran a weary hand through his hair, the same motion that Kate had imagined him doing all day. “This started as a discussion about Jeremy's hyperactive nature, but we're now reviewing the merits of some video game.” He glanced at Kate. “The reason I brought it up in the first place is because I've been thinking. Do you think Jeremy would like to go to summer camp?”

“Like one of those three day trips?” Kate clarified. “Like the one the Fosters sent Ashton on last year?”

“I was thinking a longer summer camp,” William proposed. “Like six weeks. It'll be good for him. Fresh air, the outdoors. Wildlife and campfires. He'll love it. Plus the best part? No screen time.”

Kate nodded thoughtfully, remembering David's invitation to stay at his apartment during his hospital's month-long residency program over the summer. Moving to Springfield, even temporarily, had been an unfathomable notion. Unless, of course, Jeremy had plans for the summer. Intrigued, Kate said, “That's not such a bad idea. I think he would like summer camp.”

William continued, “I've already done the research. There's a great place up north that isn't too expensive and it got great reviews. Kids love the place.”

Pam raised her hand again. “Six weeks? Shouldn't we ask Jeremy first if he really wants to go?”

William dismissed her suggestion. “He'll love it. Remember him and that tent last summer? He spent more nights in that tent than in his own bed that June.”

“Can you send me the link to the camp?” Kate asked. “I'm sure it'll be fine but I'd like to read up on it.”

“I'll send it when I get home,” William told her. “There was an informal reservation list so I already added his name. I can finalize it whenever you want. We just need to send a deposit to officially hold his place.”

Kate was already daydreaming about the hospital residency program. “I'll let you know by the end of the week, but I'm leaning yes.”

“I'm glad you agree,” William told her. “I was actually afraid you would say no.”

“Jeremy was so bored last summer,” Kate said. “This is a good chance for him to get away and have
a change of scenery.” The more they talked about it, the more sense it made. Kate thought of Jeremy's desire for them to be back together. Perhaps living in this house, with all its reminders of the past, was the reason the divorce weighed so heavily on him.

William got up to leave but Pam stopped him. “Um, aren't we being too hasty? Summer camp is a big commitment. What if Jeremy decides he doesn't like it? He's a picky eater too. What if he can't eat their food? What if…”

Kate smiled at Pam's concern. “I'm touched you care so much about him, Pam. But he'll be fine. Really.”

“If it's the money you're worried about,” William began, “we would definitely keep you on through the six weeks. It's not like we'll throw you onto the streets and cut off your paycheck.”

“Of course not,” Kate agreed. She expected Pam to be pleased by this bit of news, but, to her surprise, she only seemed to become more agitated.

“That's nice of you,” Pam said, clearly trying to be gracious, “but that's not really what I'm worried about.”

Kate saw William's perplexed expression. “What are you worried about?” she asked, gently setting down her glass of tea.

Once again, Pam shifted her weight from foot to foot. Kate noticed she was scowling again, the same expression as when she first arrived at the house after being catcalled. “I just…” Pam stammered. She trailed off, then abruptly said, “It's nothing. I'm just feeling out of sorts today. Excuse me.”

Without another word, Pam hurried inside the house, letting the door slam behind her. William looked at Kate in astonishment. “Was it just me or does she not want Jeremy to go to camp?”

Kate nodded slowly. “They've gotten somewhat... attached. I think she's just fond of Jeremy. And he feels the same about her. Plus, Pam is very much a routine-minded person. Regimented, you know? She always has oatmeal for breakfast. Vacuums if it's a Tuesday, laundry if it's Thursday. The gym at 2:30 sharp. I think she's just shaken up by the idea of having her life with Jeremy interrupted.”


“She'll get over it,” Kate said. “You know how I cut back hours at the hospital a few months ago? At first I thought it was my imagination, but I'm pretty sure she was miffed at me for changing up the schedule. Like she was annoyed I was around. But she eventually got used to it.

William considered this. “You're sure she was annoyed with you?”

“Like I said, it's the routine. She got used to picking up Jeremy at the bus stop, the two of them having dinner, Courage and Duty, or whatever, bedtime.” Kate paused in thought. “Now that I think about it, I think that's why she and Jeremy get along so well. They're both creatures of habit.”

“I thought you were an obstetrician, not a psychologist,” he joked.

“Very funny.”

William stood up. “I need to get going. I'll send you that camp info tonight.”

Kate began gathering the iced tea glasses. “Thanks William. Hey, is Jeremy's birthday party still planned for your place?”
“Definitely,” William answered, climbing into his car. “I reserved the pool last month.”

“Thanks again. Bye!” Kate waved as he drove off. Carefully balancing the tray of half-filled glasses and pitcher of tea, she maneuvered her way into the house. Opening the door was tricky and then she nearly tripped over Jeremy's shoes, but Kate made it safely to the kitchen where she found Pam sitting at the kitchen counter with her head in her hands.

“Are you all right, Pam?” Kate asked, successfully sliding the tray onto the countertop. Her relief about the tray quickly changed to alarm when she noticed the tears in Pam's eyes.

“I'm sorry I let Jeremy play too much Call of Duty,” Pam whispered, wiping away a tear with the back of her hand.

“Why, Pam, no one's blaming you for anything,” Kate said, hurrying to her side. She consolingly placed a hand on Pam's shoulder. “I'm sorry you got that impression. That really wasn't why William and I were having that conversation.”

“But it's t-true,” Pam said, covering her eyes as a fresh set of tears rolled down her wet cheeks. “I just let him play Call of Duty because it's the easy thing to do. And he's too young to know any better that I... I'm just being selfish.”

“Pam, no, that's not true.” Kate was at a complete loss for words. “Please don't cry. You know we all think the world of you. Me and William. And, of course, Jeremy. He's been asking for you all week. He said he has something special to show you. He wouldn't even show it to me. His own mother!”

Kate had tacked on this last sentence as a joke, but, for some reason, her words only made Pam cry harder. Wincing, Kate retrieved a box of Kleenex and tactfully set it within arm's reach of Pam. She obliged by wiping her tears and blowing her nose several times. Kate sat down on the stool next to her.

“Pam,” she began, “if I'm being too forward, just say so. But I'm guessing you don't want Jeremy to go to camp, do you?” Pam sniffled several times before barely shaking her head.

“Is it because you care about him?” Kate asked. Pam exhaled slowly, her breath shaking. She nodded slowly.

“I know you do,” Kate continued. “I can see it in the way you interact with him. The way you talk to him, the way you treat him. And I get it. You're worried he won't be okay without you. And I'll admit that the past week without you has been rough. But... don't take this wrong way, but Jeremy is going to be just fine. Without you. Without me. Without William. He's a strong kid. Right?”

Pam reached for another Kleenex to wipe her face. The counter was now littered with crumpled tissues. She remained motionless for a long moment before finally saying, in a small voice, “I guess so.”

Sensing an opening to further defuse the situation, Kate touched Pam's arm. “Sometimes I think you fuss over Jeremy more than I do. And I mean that in the best way possible.” She was relieved to see a small smile form on Pam's face.

Kate cleared her throat. “You know, Jeremy complained about my cooking all week long.” Pam was blowing her nose, so her reaction to these words was a chuckling snort. “Even at breakfast,” Kate continued. “I would put a bowl of cereal in front of him and he would make a face, muttering something about 'this isn't the way Pam does it'. Then he would sulk when I told him to eat it or go to his room.”
Pam laughed. “That reminds me,” she said, standing up. “I should get started on dinner.”

But Kate stopped her. “Why don't I handle dinner tonight? Jeremy will survive one more night of my cooking. Probably.”

“Are you sure?” Pam asked. “I feel bad because I've been gone all week.”

“Not a problem at all,” Kate assured her. “I want you to take it easy. Are you sure you'll be okay?”

Pam wiped at her eyes again. “I'll be fine. To be perfectly honest, there might be some monthly hormones at play. And that asshole who catcalled me didn't help things either.”

“He was probably compensating for his non-existent romantic life,” Kate sympathized. “Those guys are the worst.” She watched as Pam began gathering up her tissues. Despite the brief moment of levity, she had the air of a glum and defeated woman. It broke Kate's heart to see her this way. Remembering why she had been gone all week, Kate asked, “How's your mom, by the way? Is she doing better?”

“Sort of,” Pam shrugged. “The doctor said it will be six weeks before she can walk. And even then she'll need crutches for another four weeks.”

“Goodness,” Kate said. “Will your parents be able to manage? Didn't you say your dad can't drive because of his eye surgery?”

“That's right,” Pam answered. “But I think they'll be fine. I signed them up for an online grocery delivery service. They had no idea such things existed. My dad was surprised that his computer was good for anything other than Minesweeper and email.”

“Ha! At least your dad knows about Minesweeper,” Kate said. “My dad still thinks computers are the size of refrigerators. I offered to get him a laptop and he said he wouldn't have room for it.” Kate pulled out a notepad. “Any requests for dinner? I was just kidding about doing any actual cooking. I'm thinking of picking up some Italian from that new place on Buchanan and 24th.”

“That sounds great to me,” Pam said. Her cheeks were finally dry but her eyes were still puffy from crying. “Are you sure you don't want some help? I could-”

“Out!” Kate interrupted, giving Pam a stern look as she pointed in the direction of the living room. Smiling bashfully, Pam padded out of the kitchen. Retrieving a pencil, Kate perused the online menu and began jotting down her order on a notepad. After calling to place the order, Kate swung by Jeremy's room.

“Hey mom.” His face was hidden behind a comic book and he was plugged into a pair of earbuds. “Is it dinnertime?”

“I need to run some errands, but then I'm picking up some Italian takeout,” she told him. “I'll be back in an hour or so, okay?”

“Sounds good,” Jeremy said, not lifting his eyes from his comic book.

“Say, I need to ask you a favor,” Kate said. “Pam's back, but she had a really long day and I think she needs cheering up. Can you help with that?”

“Sure thing, mom.”

Kate patted his foot. “That's my boy. I'll be back in an hour. Don't spoil your dinner, okay?”
“Got it. See you later.”

Kate was just about to leave the room when Jeremy spoke up again. “Hey mom?” She turned as he pulled out one earbud. “Is Pam home yet?” he asked.

Confused at first, Kate's eyes narrowed when she heard the loud music wafting from his free earbud. Crossing her arms, she said, “You didn't hear a word of that conversation, did you?”

“Um...” His eyebrows guiltily knit together.

“You were just giving me stock answers,” she stated.

“Well... I heard most of what you were saying. You're going somewhere. I need to help with something. Don't spoil my dinner.”

Kate tapped her foot several times, reminding herself to be patient. She had several options. Confiscate his earbuds. Ground him for a week. But there were more pressing matters at hand. “Okay, number one: don't you ever pull that earbuds thing with me again.” Pausing, she enjoyed a satisfying parenting moment as he shrunk under her stern gaze.

“Sorry, mom.”

“Number two: as a matter of fact, yes, Pam is home,” Kate said. Jeremy excitedly tossed aside his comic book as though she had told him a Ferrari was waiting in the driveway. He was already halfway to the door when Kate stopped him.

“Hold up a minute,” she said. He froze in mid-stride. “I know for a fact that Pam had a bad day today.”

“It wasn't my fault!” Jeremy began.

Kate held up her hand to stop him. “I know, I know. What I'm trying to say is that Pam had a rough day so I want you to be extra nice to her. Okay? Can you do your best to cheer her up?”

“Sure, mom.”

Kate gave him a hard look. “Promise? This is not the time for one of your stock answers.”

“I'll cheer Pam up,” Jeremy said, solemnly raising his hand.

“Good.” She glanced at his comic book. “Cheering Pam up is your monster superpower, right?”

Jeremy rolled his eyes. “Mutant superpower, mom.”

“Mutant, monster... whatever.” Kate pointed a finger at him. “Go cheer Pam up. I'm going to run errands but I'll be back with dinner. It won't take more than an hour.”

“Out!” Kate said, her voice stern but her eyes twinkling. Pam gratefully left the kitchen under her watchful gaze. Taking the box of Kleenex, she retreated to her bedroom where she decided to change into something more comfortable. Even though she hadn't had dinner yet, Pam pulled on her favorite bedtime t-shirt that read 'Spring Break 1967'. The shirt would have been oversized even on a football player, but on Pam it hung almost to her knees.
She lay on her bed for a minute but the room seemed stultifying. After uselessly tossing and turning, it became clear that her bedroom was the wrong place to be. Pam went to the quiet living room and sank into the couch. That was better. Though she tried to think of something else, her thoughts kept returning to the conversation on the porch.

Jeremy, gone, banished to some godforsaken camp for six weeks? Aside from the fact that she would be bored out of her skull, Pam was also crushingly disappointed because she had already been making plans for them that summer. Six Flags. Backyard camp-outs. Mini-golf. Popsicles for breakfast and frozen waffles for dinner. None of that would happen now.

There was, of course, Call of Duty as well. Jeremy being home all day would have meant a virtually endless supply of private time.

Six weeks. The last day of school was in mid-June. If he left at the end of the month, that meant he wouldn't be back until the middle of August. Pam would have a single week of summer vacation with him, then school would start again at the end of August. Reaching for another Kleenex, Pam blew her nose. It just wasn't fair.

Complicating matters was the increasing guilt she felt over their illicit relationship. Pam had felt like an outcast ever since that breakfast conversation with Kate and David about the new French president. Sure, she had temporarily fooled herself into thinking her relationship with Jeremy was perfectly normal. The two of them could exist perfectly well in a vacuum. It was the outside world that posed a problem, that world filled with normal people and their everyday desires.

Normal people wanted flings with people their own age. They wanted vacations in Cancun and a house in the suburbs. People her age would get drunk in bars on Friday and Saturday night, then go to work on Monday morning. They would stumble through the week and repeat the process the following weekend.

That used to be her. How did she stray so far? How did she get to this point?

Her relationship with Jeremy notwithstanding, Pam had begun to notice a change in herself. She would feel a forbidden tingle of excitement when driving past a boy biking down the street. Or perhaps she would purposely linger near a group of rowdy boys at the mall. Her imagination would surge when hearing the phrase “soccer uniform” or “skateboard park”.

That was the problem. Normal people didn't feel any of those things. Normal people didn't sense a glimmer of self-recognition when hearing about the fifteen year old boy and his relationship with a thirty-nine year old woman.

Pam lay down on the couch to stare at the ceiling. Sometimes, more than anything, she longed to be a normal person. Her life would be far less complicated. She wouldn't have to dodge when talking about relationships with her friend Suzy. She might actually have an answer when her mom would inquire when she was getting married.

Pam couldn't forget the look of disgust on Kate's face when David mentioned Emmanuel Macron and his much older wife. In her most secret of dreams, Pam often imagined getting caught in a compromising position with Jeremy. Perhaps Kate, having forgotten something, would return to the house to find her and Jeremy in the living room, surprised and in a state of undress. In this fantasy, Kate would initially be surprised, but then the shock would wear off. She would give her blessing to Pam.

“If Jeremy's happy, then I'm happy too,” Kate would tell her.
Armed with such free reign, there would be no need to conceal their activities. It would undoubtedly be awkward at first. Kate would tiptoe into Jeremy's room in the morning to kiss him goodbye while Pam lay snuggled at his side. Or maybe Jeremy, ever the prankster, would peek down her shirt as he squeezed past her at the dinner table, earning himself a disapproving look from Kate. But everyone would eventually get used to it.

This, too, was nothing but a hopeless dream. Kate was clearly horrified by the Macron situation. Pam, for one, didn't see what the big deal was. Even when she tried her best to be objective, pointedly setting aside her interest in young boys, she had difficulty in recognizing the outrage. Emmanuel Macron had been fifteen, for crying out loud, an age at which some boys were already shaving. Pam knew this for certain because she often spotted them in public, proudly sporting patchy goatees and wearing their ever-so-helpful letter jackets embroidered with their graduation year.

The sound of footsteps interrupted her reverie. “Hi Pam.” Jeremy poked his head into the living room. Carrying his iPod and his earbuds in one hand, he approached her cautiously as if she were an injured bird that he had discovered in the backyard. She didn't blame him. Her eyes felt so puffy that it was a wonder she could still see out of them.

“Hi Jeremy.” A sliver of sun poked through the dark clouds in her mind. “You're a sight for sore eyes.”

He had been sidling up to her, but now he paused. “That means you're glad to see me, right?”

That made her lips curl into a tiny smile. Instead answering, Pam swept aside her collection of Kleenexes littering the couch. When he sat down on the cleared space, she wrapped an arm around him. Jeremy instantly cozied up to her, his shoulder fitting perfectly into the space under her arm, despite the oversized t-shirt that draped from her frame.

Jeremy began unraveling the tangled cord of his earbuds. “Want to listen to some music?” he offered. Pam expected him to hand over both earbuds, but he instead plugged one into his ear and handed her the other one. She had to tilt her head towards him to let it reach. As he pressed the buttons on his iPod, Jeremy's elbow dug into her side but Pam didn't mind.

As the music started playing, he leaned his head against her shoulder. She returned the favor by tilting her head so it rested atop of his. She wasn't really listening to the music though. It made her feel warm and fuzzy to be connected to him through the earbuds. Pam realized that she would have been content even if they just stayed like this all summer long. The thought made her lip tremble. She was about to start crying again when Jeremy spoke up.

“I should play you this new song I found,” he said, pressing more buttons. “I mean, it's actually an old song, but it was new to me. It's really cool though.”

A song began playing through the earbuds. Despite the fact that she was only listening in one ear, the song sounded very familiar with its jaunty piano and drums. It wasn't until the singer entered, in a pleasantly squawky and screechy voice, that Pam recognized the song.

*Jeremiah was a bullfrog / was a good friend of mine*

Jeremy started out by tastefully bobbing his chin to the music, but eventually he couldn't resist an all-out performance of air drumming. Not having a choice, Pam swayed along with him to avoid getting pummeled by his flailing limbs. For the chorus, Jeremy began singing along in his charmingly off-key voice.

*Joy to the world / all the boys and girls / joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea / joy to you and me*
Like most people, that was all Pam knew of the lyrics. Jeremy must have been listening to the song non-stop because he had the entire song memorized. Pam listened as he belted out the words.

*If I were the king of the world / tell you what I'd do / I'd throw away the cars and the bars and the wars / and make sweet love to you*

Pam stopped listening, her brain stuck on that verse. It was one of those rare moments where the staged set of the world melted away, revealing the artifice underneath: the lights, the props, and the trompe l'oeil... The hidden trap doors and the carefully painted sets... The actors, the actresses, the costumes and the makeup. All of it designed to conceal and obfuscate.

The only reason any of it existed was because people felt obligated to follow the script.

“I'm crazy, but not *that* crazy,” Pam thought to herself.

When the song ended, Jeremy capped it off with a cymbal flourish. “Pretty good song, isn't it?”

Pam nodded. “Yeah. Thanks. I needed that.”

Jeremy had begun coiling up the earbuds, but suddenly paused. Leaning over, he gave a kiss on the cheek. Then, flushing in embarrassment, the young boy returned his attention to the earbuds.

Pam was touched by his affection. “Did you miss me?”

“Did I ever,” he said, setting his iPod on the coffee table. “I was so bored that I assembled three entire model airp-” He suddenly broke off and gave her look that was both excited and nervous.

“What?” Pam asked.

“Um, I have something to show you,” Jeremy said.

“Okay, let's see it.”

Jeremy glanced nervously around the room to ensure they were alone. “My mom said she's running errands, right?”

“Yes. She'll probably be back around 7.”

Rising from the couch, Jeremy stood in front of Pam. After a moment's hesitation, he unzipped his fly. Pam raised an eyebrow but said nothing. “Okay, umm, give me a second,” he muttered, turning his back to her. Pam couldn't see what he was doing, other than fumbling around between his legs.

“Everything okay there?” she asked.

“Yes,” Jeremy answered. “It's just... well, this works better when I'm... Hang on.”

He had something to show her. Pam's heart skipped a beat. Surely he hadn't started ejaculating while she was gone? Her heart sank in disappointment at the thought of missing his first time. She was away for one single week and look what happened... Her lips pursed in resignation. Given the way everything else was going today, this additional misfortune made perfect sense. The universe was mocking her.

“Well, I've got the Kleenex right here,” Pam told him, “so at least we'll have an easy clean up.”

Jeremy twisted his neck to look over his shoulder. “What are you talking about? Why would we need Kleenex?”
Pam breathed a sigh of relief. “Never mind.”

No Kleenex meant no ejaculation. She hadn't missed anything after all. Her relief was only temporary, however, as another panicked thought entered her mind: what if his first time would take place at summer camp? The thought of missing it literally pained her, as evidenced by the sharp, stabbing sensation in her side.

Pam tried to focus on the present. “So what are you going to show me?” she asked.

“Just a second,” Jeremy said, a hint of frustration in his voice. “It's so weird how you get hard when you don't want it, but then you can't get one when you do want it.”

Pam had to repeat that to herself before she understood what he meant. “You're trying to get hard, but you can't?” she clarified.

“Yeah.”

“Well, this sounds like a job for Pam Carpenter.” When he turned to look at her again, Pam smiled brightly and began humming the Superman theme.

“You're really going to help?” he asked.

Pam stood up. “Of course.” When he was within arm's reach, she lifted the hem of her oversized t-shirt and pulled it over his head. Jeremy was now hidden under the shirt, the top of his head not even reaching the neck hole. The oversized t-shirt was just the right size for two. She couldn't see Jeremy's face, but surely there was enough light under there for him to see she wasn't wearing a bra.

“What's the matter?” Pam said, pulling him close until she felt his lips graze her nipple. “You're acting like this is your first rodeo.” She resumed humming the Superman theme, which grew progressively more difficult as Jeremy began kissing her breasts. She managed for several bars but gave up once she felt him nibbling on her nipple. They could have stood there for much longer, but Pam remembered he had something to show her.

“How did I do?” she asked, lifting her t-shirt to free him. Peering at his unzipped fly, she noted with satisfaction that he was now fully erect. She returned to her seat on the couch. “So what were you planning to show me?”

“Um, okay, watch this,” Jeremy said, bashful again. Holding his penis with one hand, he used his other fingers to grip the tip. With a single smooth motion, the eleven year old boy tugged his foreskin until his head popped into view, like a turtle emerging from its shell. Pam blinked several times. She wasn't accustomed to seeing the light purple at the tip of his boyhood.

“Whoa.” Pam's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. After all this time, Jeremy was finally able to retract his foreskin. “Gosh. Look at that.”

She could tell Jeremy was caught between shyness and pride at her unabashedly impressed reaction. Puffing out his chest, he said, “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah, I'll say,” Pam mumbled, still wonderstruck. “How did this happen?”

“I don't know. I was, um, playing around the other day. And it just sort of happened.”

Pam dreamily imagined Jeremy exploring himself in bed and his look of surprise upon discovering this new ability. The sight of his head made her sit up straight. All this time, it had been concealed but now she could finally see it in all its glory. She admired the helmet-like curve of his corona and
the adorable little slit at the tip. Also catching her attention was the contrast between the creamy skin tone of his shaft and the more delicate pink that composed the underside of his foreskin. The whole experience reminded her of fifth grade science when the teacher showed them how a caterpillar would cocoon itself and emerge as a butterfly.

“I can even make it go back to the way it used to look,” Jeremy said, pulling his foreskin forward. For a moment, he looked exactly like the regular Jeremy she knew and loved. Then he retracted his foreskin to reveal the delights underneath.

“Do it again,” she requested.

Pam watched intently as that malleable strip of skin covered up the shiny purple tip of his penis, sliding so far forward that there was the slightest overhang at the erect tip. Then Jeremy gently tugged the skin back to miraculously reveal the head of his penis again. It was like a trick. The best magic trick she had ever seen.

Pam eagerly leaned forward on the couch. “Uh, can I try doing that?”

Kate staggered into the house with two armfuls of grocery bags. “Hello? I'm home!”

No one answered. Setting the bags on the counter, she stepped into the living room where Pam silently waved and held a finger to her lips. Kate was puzzled until she noticed Jeremy sprawled across the couch, sleeping with his head in Pam's lap while she read a magazine. A throw blanket covered him from chin to shin, at which point his bare feet comically protruded.

“I got us a feast,” Kate announced, not bothering to keep her voice down. He needed to wake up for dinner anyway. She fished a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket. “Mandorli speziate, bocconcino, fettucine con cinghiale, ravioli di zucca, and insalata di stagione,” she recited. “And also piccola pasticceria for dessert.”

Pam's eyes widened in delight. “I don't know what any of that means,” she smiled, “but it sounds great!” She gently extricated herself from the couch, replacing her lap with a pillow to support Jeremy’s head. “I'll go set the table.”

Kate was glad to see a genuine look of pleasure on her face. Jeremy stirred when Pam left the room, but he didn't open his eyes. Crouching down, Kate poked his arm until he woke up.

“Huh? What's going on?” he said sleepily.

“Oh, wake up.” She yanked away his blanket. Groaning in protest, he curled into a fetal position. Kate stood with her hands on her hips. “What was the one thing I told you before I went to run errands?”

“To stop pretending I'm listening to you when I'm wearing earbuds,” Jeremy mumbled.

“The other thing!”

Grumpily sitting up, he scratched his chin as he tried to recall their conversation. “Um... you told me to cheer up Pam.”

“Correct. I told you to cheer up Pam, not take a nap,” Kate admonished. “What gives?”
He shrugged. “I did my best.”

“How? By getting some shut-eye? Please.” She glared at him as he rubbed his eyes and yawned. From the kitchen drifted the sound of clanking silverware mingled with Pam's humming. The melody seemed familiar. After a moment, Kate recognized it as the Superman theme.

“She sounds cheerful to me,” Jeremy remarked. “I think I did fine.”

Shaking her head, Kate took him by the shoulders and aimed him toward the dining room. “You know, Jeremy, I'm doing my best to teach you about women. I really am. But I can't help but feel sorry for your first girlfriend. She's going to need the patience of a saint to deal with you.”
Call the Doctor

Chapter Summary

After an embarrassing doctor’s visit for Jeremy, Pam reluctantly agrees to play doctor with him when they get home.

“Why do I have to go to the doctor anyway?” Jeremy complained. “I’m perfectly healthy.”

The two of them sat in a waiting room, the fluorescent lights stinging their bleary eyes. An unpleasant, antiseptic scent had assaulted Pam’s nose from the moment she stepped in the door. The smell was an unholy combination of industrial bleach, clinical latex, and something she couldn’t quite place. A toasty scent. Pam kept sniffing the air until she realized it was the smell of the overworked photocopier spitting out warm sheets of paper next to the receptionist’s desk.

She had been tasked with taking Jeremy in for a physical, the first hurdle now that he was officially scheduled to attend summer camp. The young boy was unaware of the decision, however, because his parents had decided to save the announcement as a birthday surprise. It was a thoughtful gesture on their part, but it meant Pam had been forced to literally drag Jeremy out the door that morning. For all he knew, this doctor’s visit at 7 am (on the first day of summer vacation, no less) was the equivalent of some sick joke.

“I told you,” Pam said, raising her voice over the sound of the bubbling aquarium behind her vinyl-backed chair. “It’s just your annual checkup. You know, the doctor will remind you to wear your bike helmet this summer. And then she'll make sure you don’t have, like, leprosy or something.”

Jeremy stood up to stretch. While Pam had risen early to get properly dressed, she had spent ten long minutes persuading him to at least change out of his pajamas before leaving the house. Lost in the throes of morning fatigue, he had somehow paired a white dress shirt with baggy skateboarder shorts whose pockets hung inside-out like a pair of elephant ears. Pam tucked them back into place for him.

“Don’t! It’s my new style.” He spitefully pulled the pockets out, daring her to object. When she said nothing, he began rifling through the magazines scattered across a coffee table. There was nothing but Highlights and AARP Quarterly. “This is the worst summer vacation ever,” he grumbled.

Tell me about it, Pam thought. Once it became certain that he would be attending summer camp, she had done her best to accept the situation. His parents were right: the summer camp was perfectly tailored to Jeremy’s interests. Archery, horseback riding, swimming, primitive camping... There would be an entire week devoted to different types of campfires. (Pam scoffed at that one. Hand Jeremy a single match and he could capably burn down a garage. Preteen boys were already well-versed in fire, thank you.) It was obvious that Jeremy would have fun at camp. Pam, on the other hand, had no clue how to occupy herself for six weeks.

“We’ll do something fun later,” Pam promised. “I'll take you out for breakfast. Doesn't that sound nice?” He didn’t respond. The waiting room smell was driving her crazy so Pam tried breathing through her mouth while she filled out a stack of forms on a clipboard. Current medication? No. Allergies? Yes. Jaundice? She leaned in close to study his skin. Jeremy, having located an old copy of Boys’ Life, sullenly glared at her when she invaded his personal space.
“What?” he said, irritated.

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“Nothing.” She checked the box labeled no. “Have you experienced any shortness of breath? Unexplained heart palpitations?”

He buried his face in the magazine. “My heart feels like it’s going to burst if I have to sit any longer in this stupid waiting room.”

“I’ll take that as a no.” Turning to the next sheet in the clipboard, she was dismayed to find another long section of checkboxes. The door chime sounded, momentarily interrupting her attention. A mom entered, followed by her teenage daughter. The woman spoke with the receptionist while the girl glanced around the waiting room. After a moment, she took the seat across from Jeremy.

Even though she was trapped in checkbox hell, Pam noticed him perk up out of the corner of her eye. He had been in the middle of yawn, but straightened when the girl sat down. Then his eyes kept flicking at her over the pages of his magazine. She appeared older than him, maybe fourteen or so. Her honey brown hair was pulled into a tall ponytail and her Adidas shoes were artfully scuffed. She offered Jeremy a shy smile, something that did not escape Pam's attention.

“Hey.” Pam elbowed him. “Have you noticed any blood in your stool?” That earned her a fresh glare from Jeremy when the girl disguised her giggle as a cough. “What?” Pam asked. She innocently pointed at the clipboard. “It's on the form. So? Have you?”

“No!” Jeremy returned to hiding behind his magazine.

When she reached the last page, Pam paused at the signature line that requested acknowledgment from a parent or guardian for any patients under eighteen years of age. Legally speaking, she wasn't his guardian. Shrugging, she signed her name and then wrote the date in neat block letters.

A nurse appeared at the door next to the receptionist. She was a heavy-set woman with thick shoulders and a warm smile. “Jeremy?” she asked. Pam passed him the clipboard as he scrambled to his feet. The nurse said, “You can come along too, Mrs. Prater.” Pam glanced around the waiting room before she realized the nurse was talking to her.

“Hurry up, mom,” Jeremy said, smirking.

His mirth disappeared when the nurse handed Pam a small plastic cup. “The first thing we'll need is a urine sample,” she explained to Pam. “It's very important that it be a mid-stream sample, which is why we request parental assistance for younger patients.”

“Um, sure,” Pam said, accepting the cup.

The nurse ushered them into a private bathroom containing a sink, toilet, and urinal. “Just place the sample in that cabinet over there when you're done,” she said. She shut the door, leaving them alone.

“He reluctantly pulled down his shorts. “You are so dead when we get home,” he threatened.

“Don't talk to your mother that way,” she reprimanded. “Keep that up and I'll wash out your mouth
with soap.” Pam crouched down next to him as he stood next to the toilet. “So the nurse said mid-stream sample,” she began.

“Yeah, what does that mean anyway?”

“I think it means you can't just pee into the cup. I have to get a sample after you've peed for a second or two.”

“That's weird.”

“Rules are rules.” Pam smiled encouragingly. “So, um, I guess you should start peeing into the toilet and stop. Then I'll hold out the cup and you can start peeing into that. Got it?” She watched as he aimed his penis at the toilet.

“Do you have to stare?” He gave her a disapproving look.

“Relax. It's not like I'm getting off on this.” Nevertheless obliging him, she turned her head to study the porcelain sink. He focused on a peeing state of mind while she peeked from the corner of her eye. Pam sometimes forgot that his penis had other duties than Call of Duty. He took a long breath, then held it. There was as a tentative spurt before his peeing gained confidence.

Despite her earlier denial, Pam had to admit it was interesting to watch the light yellow stream issuing from his fleshy tube of skin. With arched back and bended knee, he pushed his crotch forward to pee. It was a charming boy pose. Truthfully, she would enjoy watching Jeremy do anything: reading, sleeping, daydreaming, eating cake, Call of Duty... Heck, she would gladly pay to watch him shovel dirt for an afternoon.

The tinkling sound paused when Jeremy clenched the necessary muscles to stop, grunting quietly from the effort. That sound was cute too. The sight of his twitching penis was enchanting.

“Why are you smiling?” he demanded.

“Am I? I was just, you know, thinking about breakfast. Don't pancakes sound good?” He wasn't buying it so Pam kept things moving along. “Ready?” she asked, holding up the container. Apparently the pump had been primed because it took no effort at all for him to start peeing into the cup.

This time, she had the perfect excuse to watch closely as he filled the plastic cup. There certainly wasn't any sexual connotation, but it was an intimate moment nonetheless. Her senses were overwhelmed: the sound of his soft exhalations, the scent of boy pee, the feel of the body-temperature heat emanating from the cup as he filled it. Pam was so engrossed that she almost missed the threat of container overflow.

“Oops!” She swiftly pulled the cup away. The reward for her haste was a hot splash on her hand when Jeremy didn't stop peeing in time. “Hey!” she said. “You did that on purpose.”

“I did not!” The moment she moved aside, Jeremy switched from the toilet to the urinal. “Besides, that wouldn't have happened if you just let me do this by myself.”

Pam moved her dripping hand over the sink. Re-capping the container, she began washing up. While Jeremy finished at the urinal, she deposited the warm cup of pee in the cabinet as the nurse had directed. It felt strange to leave the yellow container in a cupboard as if she were putting away a can of soup. She turned to find Jeremy adjusting his shorts. He reached for the doorknob but Pam stopped him.
“Aren't you going to wash your hands?” she asked.

“What for? I didn't get any pee on me. And it was a self-flushing urinal so I didn't touch that either.”

“But still...” Pam insisted. “You were touching your thing.”

“My thing is very clean,” he maintained. “What's the big deal anyway? You're the one that's always begging to put it in your mouth.”

She couldn't beat that logic. Pam concealed her embarrassment by rearranging her bangs in the mirror. “I wasn't begging,” she excused. “I was politely asking.” Despite the breakthrough of that magical marijuana-fueled night when he had humped her mouth with youthful abandon, Pam was dismayed to discover that sober Jeremy was still skittish as a newborn colt when it came to oral sex.

“Whatever,” Jeremy said. He paused for a moment, remembering something. “Hey, Ashton told me there are videos on the internet where people pee on each other. Is that true? Why would anyone want to do that?”

Golden showers had never appealed to her. Although she enjoyed watching him pee, getting peed on was a different story. “Don't get any bright ideas, mister,” Pam told him. “There are also videos of guys snapping mouse traps on their wieners.”

Jeremy visibly shuddered as they exited the bathroom. “Are you making this up?”

“I wish I were.”

They found the nurse waiting at the opposite end of the hallway. Her services no longer needed, Pam was expecting to return the waiting room, but the nurse gestured her to come too. They entered the a small room where the nurse directed Jeremy to the exam table covered in loud, crinkly paper. Pam took a seat near a desk. The austere room had a brick-painted cinder wall at one end. A tidy row of medical instruments with knobs, gauges, and dangling cables hung above a desk. The air smelled strongly of band-aids. Pam couldn't decide if that was better or worse than the antiseptic scent of the waiting room.

“How's your summer so far?” the nurse inquired as she strapped a blood pressure cuff to Jeremy's arm.

“It's okay,” he answered. “It's the first day of summer vacation.”

“I bet you're not too happy to be at the doctor's office,” the nurse said. “At least it's the morning so you can have fun afterward.”

“Yeah. That's what my mom said too.” The nurse didn't catch the sarcasm in his voice. Rolling her eyes, Pam began scrolling through her phone as the nurse took his pulse. She wasn't really paying attention until she overheard the nurse instructing Jeremy to strip to his underwear.

“... and then just step onto the scale for me,” the nurse requested. She recorded his height and weight, then measured his waistline. After jotting down some notes, she stood and placed her pen behind her ear. “I'll let Dr. Parsons know you're ready. Don't you worry, we'll get you out of here in no time.”

“Can I get dressed?” Jeremy asked.

The nurse waved away the suggestion. “Dr. Parsons will just ask you to undress again, so it's not worth it. It'll only be a few minutes.” She exited the exam room, closing the door behind her.
“Brrr,” Jeremy said, shivering as he rubbed his bare arms. “It's freezing in here.” He sat down on the exam table, the paper crinkling beneath his underwear-clad bottom.

“I can warm you up,” Pam offered. Getting up, she perched herself next to the exam table and wrapped her arms around him. “Does that feel better?”

“Yeah.” He leaned his shoulder into her chest. She began rubbing her palms along his arms to warm him up.

Pam kept an eye on the door. They weren't doing anything naughty, but it would have been embarrassing nonetheless for someone to enter at that moment. Her breast smushed against Jeremy's pointy shoulder, but surely this was perfectly reasonable behavior. What kind of monster would idly stand by while an eleven year old boy shivered in his underwear?

A full-length mirror hung on a cupboard door, allowing Pam to see their reflection. Jeremy looked miserable, shivering and covered in goosebumps. She planted a consoling kiss on his cheek while she attempted to warm him. “Try not to get a boner, okay?” she whispered.

“Don't jinx it!” Jeremy warned.

A knock on the door forced her to release him. “Come in,” Pam said, returning to her seat. His underwear, she noticed with relief, appeared boner-free.

“Hello!” Dr. Parsons was a tall woman with auburn hair styled in a short and sporty bob. She was blessed with limitless reserves of cheer, a trait that made her seem younger despite the fact that she was most certainly in her late forties. People with this sort of energy always made Pam feel inadequate. The doctor was followed by a younger woman who shut the exam door behind them.

Dr. Parsons peered at Pam. “You're not Kate Prater, unless she recently had plastic surgery.”

“I'm Pam Carpenter,” she said, introducing herself. “I've been living with the Praters. I'm a personal assistant of sorts.”

“Ever since my parents divorced,” Jeremy interjected, not mincing words.

“I see.” Dr. Parsons seemed taken aback by this news. She recovered by introducing the younger woman. “This is Emily,” she explained. “She's finishing up her last year of pre-med and she's shadowing me.”

Emily was in her twenties, with blond hair that fell past her shoulders and a cheerfully round face. She wore a jaunty pair of pink running shoes that didn't quite match her blue scrubs. “Hi!” she said. “I'm really glad to be here today? And I hope you'll be patient with me?”

Nodding politely, Pam tried to ignore Emily's up-talking. Her voice raised in pitch at the end of each sentence, giving the impression that everything she said was a question. Pam settled into her chair as Dr. Parsons let Emily take the lead. The pre-med student checked Jeremy's pupils, peered into his ears, and asked him to stick out his tongue. Pam felt a twinge of sympathy when Jeremy winced at the cold stethoscope on his chest. The two of them took turns listening to his heartbeat and lungs. Dr. Parsons stopped the exam at several points to lecture Emily on the finer points, using medical jargon that completely went over Pam's head. Emily juggled clipboards as she took personal notes on one while completing Jeremy's forms on the other.

Emily asked him to bend over so she could check his spine for scoliosis. Then she had him hold out his arms while she windmilled them to check his range of motion. Jeremy gamely played along through it all. After asking him to rotate his wrists and flex his fingers, Emily paused to take a closer
look at his hands.

“You have the nicest looking fingernails I have ever seen?” she commented.

Dr. Parsons leaned close for a peek, then did a double take. “Impressive,” she agreed. “Those really are well-kept fingernails. For a boy.”

The attention embarrassed Jeremy. “Pam takes care of them for me. Like twice a week.”

The two women simultaneously looked her way. “Unkempt fingernails are a breeding ground for bacteria,” she offered.

“Okay, for this next part?” Emily said. “I'm going to need you to... drop your drawers?”

Jeremy's eyes flickered at Pam for a second. “Um, okay.” It was obvious he didn't want her there. Sliding off the exam table, Jeremy pointedly moved to the far side of the exam table, hiding himself from Pam's view. Then he hesitantly hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his underwear.

Emily gathered her long blond hair into a ponytail. Handing the examination clipboard to Dr. Parsons, she snapped on a pair of latex gloves. The exam table blocked the lower half of his body, but Pam could clearly see Jeremy's ears redden when Emily knelt before him, disappearing from view herself. Dr. Parsons took notes as the pre-med student made her report.

“Let's see,” Emily said. “Subject has no visible pubic hair? No sign of penile lengthening either? I would say puberty has not started?” Poor Jeremy. He kept glancing around the room in search of something to focus on.

Dr. Parsons nodded, making a series of checks on the clipboard. “What are other signs of puberty in boys?”

Emily paused for a moment. “Testicular enlargement?” she said. Thinking this information might come in handy some day, Pam began taking notes herself on her phone.

“Exactly,” Dr. Parsons approved. She opened the cupboard and, leaving the door ajar, handed Emily a tape measure.

Due to the exam table blocking her view, Pam had been unable to watch the proceedings but the open cupboard changed things. The mirror hanging on it perfectly reflected the scene, letting her see around the exam table. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Emily began prodding Jeremy's hairless scrotum in an attempt to isolate his testicles. She was either nervous or inexperienced because it took forever, particularly to Pam who could have located them with her eyes closed and one hand tied behind her back.

Jeremy uncomfortably stared at the ceiling through this entire debacle. His face grew even redder when he caught Pam watching in the mirror. She pursed her lips in sympathy, but he looked away.

“Testicles show no sign of enlargement?” reported Emily. “Each one is about 10 millimeters in diameter, which I believe is consistent sizing for a pre-pubertal boy?”

“Let's see here...” Dr. Parsons said, bending over. Jeremy's face turned ashen as the two women studied him. Dr. Parsons pondered his boy parts as though she were selecting fruit at the grocery store. “I disagree, I do see some signs of testicular enlargement. It's difficult with the scrotal skin in the way, but I would guess those are at least 13 millimeters. I believe puberty has begun.”

“Oh,” Emily said, clearly disappointed that she missed this diagnosis.
“Not to worry,” Dr. Parsons consoled. “It takes experience to recognize this sort of thing.”

Pam frowned at her phone. Testicular enlargement? Jeremy? This was news to her. Pam pulled up the ‘to-do’ list on her phone to add another entry.

**Call Suzy back**
**Schedule oil change**
**Write check for lawn care girl**
**Order birthday present (J)**
**Keep an eye on things down there (J)**

While she was at it, she also started a grocery list. They were out of bananas and almond milk at home. She wondered too if blueberries were still on sale. Summer fruit was so ephemeral.

Emily continued the exam. “Testicles feel normal as well? No sign of lumps?”

Pam put away her phone. Emily's up-talking was starting to drive her crazy. Not to mention the fact that she disliked the sight of another woman digging around in Jeremy's junk, doctor or not.

“Excellent,” Dr. Parsons said, scribbling something in the margin of the clipboard. “What else can you tell me?”

“Umm, subject is uncircumcised?” Emily said. “I'll do an examination of the foreskin and underlying mucosa.” She reached for Jeremy's penis but Dr. Parsons stopped her.

Speaking in a low voice, the doctor said, “For younger boys, you'll want to ask first if they can... you know.”

Emily stared blankly at Dr. Parsons for a second. “Oh!” Turning to Jeremy, she asked, “Are you able to retract your foreskin yet?”

“Yeah, I can,” Jeremy answered gruffly. Pam studied a poster on the wall about the importance of sunscreen, though she was still listening closely. It was a good thing this exam didn't take place last month. It likely would have embarrassed him even more to say he couldn't retract.

“I'm just going to take a peek?” Emily told him. “I won't hurt you, I promise!”

“Yeah. You better not, bitch,” Pam thought. She had given up pretending to look elsewhere, absorbed by the proceedings in the mirror. Emily tentatively lifted Jeremy's penis in her palm, as though she were handling a poisonous snake. With her other hand, she attempted to peel back his foreskin with her fingers.

“That's not how you do it!” Pam wanted to scream. After a few exploratory sessions, she had discovered that it was indeed possible, although tricky, to retract Jeremy's foreskin when he wasn't hard. It wasn't a technique that she often practiced because, like a good boy, he was always hard when Call of Duty was imminent.

Emily was having zero luck however. “Subject's foreskin appears unusually... inflexible?” she noted.

“Sometimes it's easier if it's erect,” murmured Dr. Parsons. “Ah, there it goes. See? Try now.”

Emily's clumsy fumbling had inadvertently made Jeremy hard. He glanced at Pam in the mirror, biting his lip in shame. It took all her willpower not to brush the two women aside and comfort him. The pre-med student required another long minute of floundering to retract his foreskin. Pam began to doubt Emily's medical credentials. How skilled could she possibly be if she knew so little about
boys' anatomy?

“I did it,” Emily said, smiling proudly at Dr. Parsons.

“What do you see?” Dr. Parsons quizzed.

“Epidermis of foreskin appears healthy? Visual appearance of corona is consistent with uncircumcised boys? No signs of keratinization?”

“Wonderful,” Dr. Parsons said.

“His foreskin is exspecially tight?” Emily remarked. Pam raised an eyebrow. She often heard people mistaking 'expresso' for espresso, but 'exspecially' for especially? That was a new one.

“What does that mean for the patient?” Dr. Parsons asked.

Emily nervously turned to Jeremy. “Um, do you get erections?”

Jeremy stammered for an answer. “I guess so.” He was blushing again.

“And do you feel any pain when erect?” Emily pressed.

“Uh, no,” Jeremy said, scratching his ear. “Not really.”

“Well, that's something to monitor in the future?” Emily told him. “Your foreskin is very tight, so you should let us know if it ever causes pain in any way.”

“Got it,” Jeremy nodded.

“And do you masturbate?” Emily inquired, apparently forgetting that Pam was in the room. The tone of her voice was altogether casual, as though she were asking for the time of day.

“Um, yeah,” he admitted.

“How often?”

Jeremy's face was approaching a shade of purple that Pam had never seen on him. “I don't know,” he mumbled.

“Once a month? Once a week?”

“Uh, no. More than that.”

“Twice a week?”

“I guess so. Sure.”

But the hesitant tone of his voice caused Emily to continue her brutal interrogation. “Every day?”

“No. Not every day. Maybe every other day.” He peeked at Pam in the mirror, but she stared at her phone as though she hadn't heard. They usually played Call of Duty a few times each week, but not every other day. She had often suspected he performed extra-curricular activities without her. It had been easier to catch him when he used Coppertone. Now that the young boy had graduated to scentless K-Y, her only tipoff was if she found him napping in the middle of the day.

Not that this bothered her. On the contrary, Pam liked to imagine him embarking on solo Call of
Duty missions.

“Well, that's good!” Emily informed him. “Masturbation will help your foreskin stretch and make it looser over time?” She had the worst bedside manner Pam had ever seen. She wondered if Emily might be better suited to a career in forensics where she would be working with cadavers all day long. Being dead, they wouldn't be bothered by her up-talking. Probably.

“Uh, cool,” Jeremy said.

Emily stood and began pulling off the exam gloves. Jeremy, clearly relieved, pulled his underwear back up. His relief was short-lived, however, as Emily peered at the clipboard and said, “Oh! I forgot to ask. Are you ejaculating?”

Jeremy sat back down on the exam table and stared at his hands in his lap. “No,” he said in a quiet voice. This time, he made no effort to hide his sigh.

Emily took the clipboard from Dr. Parsons and looked over her work, muttering to herself. “Caucasian male... two weeks before he turns twelve... uncircumcised... frequent masturbation.” She paused to write something down. “Not ejaculating... and not sexually active.” She glanced at Jeremy. “That is, I assume you're not sexually active?”

“No.” Jeremy shook his head. Pam pretended to text someone.

“That's what I thought?” Emily chirped. “Just wanted to make sure!”

“Do you ever find boys who are, you know, sexually active?” Jeremy asked.

“I personally never have?” Emily told him. “Granite, I don't see too many patients though?” It took Pam a second to figure out that she meant 'granted' and not 'granite'.

Dr. Parsons spoke up. “Occasionally, yes,” she admitted. “I've known of sexually precocious boys but they are generally few and far between.” She gave Jeremy an odd look. “Why don't we give you some privacy while you get dressed?” she suggested, beckoning to Emily. As they left the room, however, Dr. Parsons asked Pam to join them. “Could we have a word?”

Pam followed them into the hallway, her knees wobbling in time with Emily's squeaky pink shoes. Did the doctor suspect something in Jeremy's questions? Or her own demeanor? Dr. Parsons shut the door, leaving him alone in the exam room while they congregated near a hand-washing station in the hallway.

“I just wanted to bring you up to speed,” she told Pam. “Jeremy is fifty-five inches tall and seventy-five pounds. He decidedly falls into a lower percentile in terms of height and weight. What's his diet like?”

“It's good,” Pam said, relieved that they were merely discussing his eating habits. “Kate is very particular about making sure he gets lots of fruits and vegetables. We don't eat too much junk food.”

Dr. Parsons frowned. “That's good to hear, although somewhat troubling considering Jeremy is several pounds underweight.”

Personally, Pam didn't have a problem with his rangy frame. “He's constantly eating,” she reassured the doctor. “It's always snack time with him.”

“It's possible that he's just a late bloomer,” Dr. Parsons conceded. “I'll make a note to monitor his weight for the next visit. Maybe Jeremy will have a growth spurt by then.”
The phrase 'growth spurt' used in conjunction with 'Jeremy' sent Pam's mind wandering to a place that was inappropriate for the current setting. “Yes, maybe,” she agreed, pushing the image out of her mind.

“Let's see... what else?” Dr. Parsons continued perusing the clipboard. “Ah yes. As you may have heard, Jeremy has an exceptionally tight foreskin.” She looked at Emily. “During that portion of the exam, I generally ask the patient if they would prefer their parent or guardian leave the room. It usually makes for a less embarrassing moment.”

“Oops!” Emily made a note on her clipboard.

Returning to Pam, Dr. Parsons said, “So you should keep an eye on his foreskin. Well, not literally, of course.”

“Ha, of course not!” Pam laughed, doing her best to join the moment of levity as Dr. Parsons and Emily chuckled.

“Maybe ask him from time to time if it's bothering him. It should never be painful, particularly when he gets erections.” Dr. Parsons paused. “You could let his mom handle this one if you're not comfortable. Boys this age can be especially shy about this kind of thing.”

“He's a shy one all right,” Pam said.

“If he does report any issues, we can definitely refer him to a specialist.”

“What can they do?” Pam asked, curious.

“Phimosis is a condition in which the foreskin of the penis cannot be pulled back past the glans,” Dr. Parsons said. She sounded like a walking, talking Wikipedia article. “Generally, this is caused by a foreskin that is too tight. Obviously, Jeremy isn't suffering from phimosis, but he may benefit from the same treatment. Topical steroid creams are the best non-invasive remedy. They work by thinning the skin and aiding in stretching. In severe cases, circumcision is a more drastic, though effective, solution.”

Pam became physically ill at the thought of some scalpel-toting quack coming near Jeremy. It was a good thing she skipped breakfast or she would have thrown up on Emily's shoes. Collecting herself, she said, “But Jeremy isn't a severe case, right?”

“Not at all,” Dr. Parsons said. She lowered her voice. “To be perfectly frank, I would expect the tightness to disappear within the next few years, especially if he begins masturbating on a more frequent basis. As Emily noted, that gives the foreskin a good workout.”

Emily piped up. “But he said he already is masturbating frequently?”

“Not at all,” Dr. Parsons said. She lowered her voice. “To be perfectly frank, I would expect the tightness to disappear within the next few years, especially if he begins masturbating on a more frequent basis. As Emily noted, that gives the foreskin a good workout.”

Emily piped up. “But he said he already is masturbating frequently?”

Dr. Parsons gave Emily a knowing look. “So he says,” she said. “This is actually why I wanted to talk with you privately. In these modern times, boys and girls at this age have never felt more pressure to engage in sexual exploration. Bear in mind, I'm not accusing Jeremy of anything. But I get the impression that he is very curious about sex.”

Pam fidgeted with a bracelet on her wrist. “Really? He's never said anything to me.”

Dr. Parsons noticed her blushing. “I'm sorry. Am I being too straightforward? I know it's awkward to consider, but even Jeremy is a sexual being.”

“If you say so,” Pam answered, shrugging with practiced nonchalance. Calm, cool, and collected. It
was easy. You're doing great, she told herself.

“At his age,” Dr. Parsons lectured, “children are yearning for both peer acceptance and greater independence. It makes for an uneasy balance, particularly when their brains haven't fully developed. They can think concretely, but preteens still have trouble connecting their actions with future consequences. That's why it's best to be honest yet wary if Jeremy were to approach you with questions about sex.”

“I'll do my best.”

“Remember that he's very conscious about keeping up with his peers. For example, his question about sexually precocious boys his age.” Dr. Parsons smiled reassuringly at Pam. “Since I've clearly unnerved you so much, you'll be relieved to know that it's rather obvious he has very little sexual experience, with masturbation or otherwise.”

Pam wasn't sure she heard the doctor correctly. “And you know that because...”

“Judging by the pristine condition of his foreskin, of course.”

“Ah. Yes. Pristine.” Despite her embarrassment over the frank nature of the conversation, Pam couldn't help but feel a swell of pride. It was the same way she felt when the mechanic praised her for taking excellent care of her car.

“In any case, be patient with him. The onset of puberty is always rough on parents. Or caregivers. I'm sure you've already noticed some moodiness.”

“Oh, for sure,” Pam nodded.

“You'll have plenty more of that to look forward to,” Dr. Parsons warned. “Jeremy will undoubtedly get more argumentative and unreasonable. It's not uncommon to see boys exhibit increased aggression as well. It's all that testosterone, you see.”

“Sounds fun!” Pam said. “Good thing I always carry a taser with me.” Dr. Parsons and Emily glanced at each other, not laughing at her joke. “I don't actually own a taser,” Pam assured them. “And even if I did, I wouldn't use it on Jeremy.”

“Of course not,” Dr. Parsons said.

“Never.” Pam straightened, attempting to look the part of a responsible guardian as the doctor gave her the hairy eyeball.

After a few uncomfortable seconds, Dr. Parsons finally returned to consulting her clipboard. “We're just about finished for today. The last thing on the docket is some immunizations. Looks like Tdap and HPV.”

“Tdap is... tetanus, right?” Pam said, trying to remember.

“That's right,” Dr. Parsons said. “Tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. HPV is the human papillomavirus.”

“I've heard of that,” Pam said.

“It's very important for young children to receive a vaccine because HPV is a sexually transmitted disease,” Dr. Parsons informed her. “Not because children are sexually active, but because HPV is so common. It's estimated that some 79 million Americans have HPV, so it's best to prepare for when
the children grow older and become sexually active.”

“Is HPV dangerous?” Pam asked, frowning.

“It usually goes away on its own,” Dr. Parsons said. “The symptoms are minor, so most people don't even know they have it. But they may unwittingly pass it along to a sexual partner through vaginal, anal, or oral contact. Unfortunately, HPV can cause cancer in some cases.”

Most people don't even know they have it. Oral contact. Uh oh. Jeremy was intractable when it came to oral sex, but Pam couldn't resist sneaking a hand into the cookie jar, if only to steal a taste before returning the cookie to its proper place in the jar. What if Pam had HPV and unwittingly passed it to Jeremy?

“Um, does the vaccine treat HPV as well?” she inquired.

“It only prevents HPV,” Dr. Parsons informed her. “But it shouldn't matter since Jeremy is obviously not sexually active yet.”

“Sure,” Pam said, unconvinced.

“In any case, this is his booster shot for HPV,” Dr. Parsons said, examining the clipboard. “He already received his first shot last year. In March.”

March. Last year. Pam exhaled in relief. That was well before she and Jeremy started playing Call of Duty. “It's still effective with one dose, right?” she asked.

“Generally yes,” Dr. Parsons said. She frowned. “Do you have reason to believe Jeremy is sexually active?”

“Oh no,” Pam said. Backpedaling, she struggled to think of an excuse. “I just, you know... saw this documentary about HPV. It was, uh, one of those hysterical think pieces on... er, PBS. Or maybe I saw it on Reddit.” Shutting her mouth, Pam forced herself to be quiet. She sounded like a raving lunatic.

“Well, that's why we have vaccines: to keep ourselves safe.” Dr. Parsons tucked the clipboard under her arm. “Any other questions for us today?”

“No, that's all. Thank you!”

“I'll send the nurse back with the immunizations,” Dr. Parsons said. “Have a good day. Enjoy the rest of your summer!”

Emily shook Pam's reluctant hand. “Bye! It was nice meeting you?”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Pam escaped into the exam room where Jeremy waited, fully-clothed and staring at the ceiling as he lay on the exam table. “Are we done yet?” he asked, not even sitting up.

“Almost,” Pam said. “Just a few immunizations and then we're out of here.”

Jeremy groaned. “I have to get a shot?”

“Um, two shots, actually,” she corrected. “Don't worry, I'll hold your hand.”

“Stop talking to me like I'm a little kid,” he snapped.

Sometimes he liked being babied, but this evidently was not one of those times. “I'll just be over here
then,” Pam said, taking her seat.

The same nurse from before entered the room, carrying a white towel. Placing it on the counter, she unwrapped it to reveal two vials and a red plastic case, which she opened to reveal disinfecting wipes, band aids, cotton rounds and several syringes neatly wrapped in plastic. Even though she wasn't the one getting the shot, Pam couldn't stand the sight of the medical paraphernalia. The nurse may as well have strolled in with a medieval torture kit of ropes and thumb screws.

Jeremy stared at the wall as the nurse rolled up his sleeves. Despite his bravado, Pam could tell he was nervous too. The smell of rubbing alcohol filled the room as the nurse cleaned a spot on his slender arm. A wave of dizziness hit her when the nurse unwrapped a syringe, uncapping it to reveal the shiny metal needle. Perhaps she should have waited outside. Forcing herself to look elsewhere, Pam stared at her shoes.

“Ow,” she heard Jeremy say. Her eyes automatically pivoted to him. The nurse had already finished and was prepping the next shot, but Pam winced in sympathy at the grimace on his face. He remained quiet for the second shot, allowing her to steadfastly gaze at the floor.

“All done,” the nurse said, applying a band-aid. “You're finally free! That wasn't so bad, was it?”

Instead of answering, Jeremy rubbed his arm. He wordlessly slid off the exam table and shuffled to the door. Following him, Pam wanly smiled at the nurse. “Don't mind him,” she said. “He's always cranky in the morning. Thank you!”

She ran to catch up with him in the hallway. “That wasn't very polite of you.”

“I don't care.”

He sulked as they waited for an elevator, brooded on the ride down, then ignored her all the way to the parking lot. Freed from the doctor's clinic, she was grateful to inhale a lungful of fresh air, but she was worried about Jeremy. “Are you going to be okay?” Pam asked.

He didn't respond until they were both seated in the car. “I can't believe you sat in during that exam,” he complained.

“Jeremy, it wasn't my fault. They made me.”

“It was embarrassing,” he continued, “and I could tell you were trying not to laugh that whole time.”

“That's not true. I felt awful when she was poking and prodding you.”

He didn't seem to hear her sympathy. “How would you like it if I was in the room while the doctor examined you?”

“Well, I'll invite you along for my next visit. Then you can have your revenge.”

“When's your next visit?”

“Next year sometime.”

“Well, a lot of good that does me now.”

Pam tried to think of a way to cheer him up. She started the car. “Put on your seatbelt,” she told him.

“I don't feel like it.”
Pam tried to be patient. “Jeremy, we're not going anywhere until you put on your seatbelt.”

“Then I guess we'll just sit here. I didn't have plans today anyway.”

“Will you please just put on your seatbelt? Why are you being so difficult about this tiny thing?”

“Why not?” he asked. “What's the point of a seatbelt anyway?”

Exasperated, Pam reached over and buckled him in. “Don't you dare unbuckle that,” she warned as she put the car in reverse.

“This isn't the way home,” Jeremy observed as they sped away.

“I'm kidnapping you,” Pam informed him. She tried to remember which states had legalized marijuana. “Would you like to go to Colorado or Washington?”

“No, really. Where are we going?”

“You'll see,” Pam said. Though she had originally planned to take him out for breakfast, he was being such a brat that she wondered if they should just go home. Against her better judgment, Pam decided to be nice. As expected, his mood immediately brightened when they pulled up to Atomic Age. It was his favorite burger joint, but it was still early enough for their morning menu.

“Can we get drive-thru?” he asked hopefully.

The last time they got drive-thru, he made them eat in the car and the interior smelled like french fries for an entire week. “Let's eat inside,” Pam suggested, pulling into a parking spot. “Breakfast isn't conducive to drive-thru anyway. We can sit in a booth. I'll buy you those waffles you love so much.”

“The Housewife's Waffles?” The restaurant's signature breakfast offering, they were cornmeal waffles served with a side of cream, powdered sugar, toasted hazelnuts and strawberries. Despite the name, Jeremy never shied away from ordering them.

“Yes, as long as you start being nice. Deal?”

“I'm super nice,” Jeremy declared. “Don't move, okay?” He scrambled out of his seat and dashed over to her side. Opening the car door, he gestured with his arm as though she were exiting a limo onto the red carpet.

“Thank you, Jeremy,” Pam said. She checked the parking lot for faces, familiar or otherwise, before putting her arm around his shoulder as they walked to the entrance. The nurse this morning assumed Pam was his mom, so surely this was a harmless gesture.

Decorated in a vintage style to match its name, the interior of Atomic Age gleamed like a 1950s showroom. The walls were painted seafoam green and the floor sported a classic black-and-white tile pattern. Along the windows were a row of booths with burgundy seatbacks and chrome napkin holders. Overlooking the grill area was a long countertop and a line of built-in stools padded with the same shade of burgundy.

“Sit wherever you like,” a waitress told them as she glided past on roller skates. She wore a pink checkered dress with white trim at the collar and sleeves. Her vintage aesthetic was on point as long as one ignored her eyebrow piercing.

They chose a sunny booth in the corner. “The waitresses here always remind me of Apple,” Jeremy commented.
“Yeah, I can definitely see that,” Pam agreed, eying a plump waitress behind the counter.

Jeremy's eyes followed her gaze. “Not that waitress,” he said. “Apple is, like, half her size. I mean someone like her over there.” He nodded at a waitress with an hourglass figure.

They needed to talk about something besides Apple if Pam was to remain in a good mood. “What are you getting?” she asked, opening her menu. “Just the Housewife Waffles?” She paged through the menu. She always liked Atomic Age because their menus were composed of actual paper, rather than one of those plastic laminated deals.

“Can I get hash browns and bacon?” Jeremy asked. “And a coconut smoothie too?”

“Of course,” Pam said, remembering Dr. Parsons's message about his diet. Nothing about the doctor's visit seemed to add up. Jeremy under-fed and under-sexed? Preposterous.

“What are you getting?” he asked.

“Just the Denver omelette, I guess,” Pam said, wistfully closing the menu. “Can I have a taste of your smoothie?”

“Sure.” Unable to keep his hands to himself, Jeremy explored the condiments on the table. He sniffed a small pitcher of maple syrup, peeked under the lid of a dainty sugar jar, and toyed with a gleaming cow figurine made of porcelain. “You can have some bacon too,” he added absently.

“Maybe not bacon,” Pam said, sipping her ice water. “It's swimsuit season. I gotta look good.” Jeremy's birthday party, she knew, was planned for the outdoor pool at his dad's condo complex. She was also aware that Jeremy had invited a dozen friends, all boys. Pam hoped to blow away some preteen minds at the pool.

“You look great in a swimsuit,” Jeremy said.

“That's nice of you to say,” she said, “but you haven't seen me in a swimsuit in, like, forever.”

“I've seen you in your underwear,” he pointed out. “Same thing.” This observation was inopportune voiced just as a waitress rolled up to their table to deposit two glasses of water. She gave Jeremy a funny look, then glanced at Pam with a distinct expression of judgment.

Pam waited until the waitress departed, then narrowed her eyes at him. “Say it a little louder, why don't you?”


He was such a sweetie. Pam reached under the table to squeeze his knee. “Don't worry, my little pumpkin pie. I'm not mad mad.” Feeling mischievous, she pulled out her phone. “I was thinking of wearing a nice one-piece to your pool party. Something like this.” She showed him a picture on the screen. It was a photo of a woman wearing a conservative swimsuit with a flowing ruched top that effectively erased all feminine curves, good or bad. Adding even more coverage was a skirt lining the bottom. It was the sort of swimsuit that had 'mom' written all over it.

“Oh. Yeah. That looks good,” Jeremy said. “It's really... old-fashioned. In a good way.” Pam enjoyed the crestfallen look on his face as he struggled for something nice to say. “What about a two-piece swimsuit?” he suggested. “I bet that would look nice too.”
“Like a bikini?”

“Yeah.” He fiddled with the porcelain cow figurine, accidentally causing cream to pour from its snout.

“Hmm,” Pam pretended to consider the idea while handing him a napkin to wipe up the puddle of cream. “Maybe. I'll think about it, Jeremy.”

A waitress came to take their order, thankfully a different one than the woman who delivered their water glasses. She raised an eyebrow when she took Jeremy's order. “Housewife's Waffles, side of bacon, side of hash, and a coconut-banana smoothie made with chocolate milk?” she repeated.

“Yup.”

“How about you?” the waitress asked Pam.

“A Denver omelette, please.”

“Coffee?” the waitress offered.

“No, thank you. Just tea, please.”


“Oh, I do love it. But this guy I like complained about my coffee breath.”

“That's too bad.” Too hungry to wait for his food, Jeremy poured some maple syrup onto a spoon and downed it like cough medicine. “Wait a minute. Do you mean I said that to you?”

“Yes,” Pam held out her spoon for him to fill with maple syrup. It was so sweet that she almost choked.

Jeremy blushed. “Your breath wasn't that bad.”

Pam laughed. “So you were just joking when I tried to kiss you and you told me my breath smelled like... how did you put it? It smelled like your grandma after she ate her third liverwurst sandwich?”

“I didn't mean it,” Jeremy said, chuckling nervously. “You gave up coffee just for me?”


“It's not too bad,” he said, working his arm up and down at the shoulder.

“That med student was driving me crazy,” she grumbled. Imitating Emily's up-talking, she said, “Do you think she was born that way? Or maybe she was dropped as a baby?”

Jeremy instantly warmed to the game. “I bet she accidentally got a railroad spike jammed into her head? That happened to this one guy? And he turned exspecially mean?”

“That's crazy?” Pam said, “Granite, I think I'd rather hang out with a mean person than listen to Emily's nonsense?”

They kept it up until the waitress returned with their food, this time the one who had overheard the
underwear comment. Forgetting who she was talking to, Pam continued up-talking. “I need a straw, please? He said I could have a taste of his smoothie? Because he's exspecially nice?” she explained to the waitress.

The waitress looked even more perplexed than before. “Right,” she mumbled, handing Pam a straw from her apron.

Jeremy laughed once the waitress left. “She just looked at you like you were crazy?”

Now the waitress thought she was a slut and brain-dead. Wonderful. “Okay, we need to stop,” Pam announced. “This is getting out of hand.”

She let him play with her phone while they ate their breakfast. Jeremy returned the kindness by moving to her side of the booth so she could help herself to as much smoothie as she wanted. By the time they were done, the table had been reduced to a series of empty plates and crumpled napkins. Pam had expected at least one doggy bag of leftovers, but Jeremy had eaten every bite of his waffles and even finished her omelette.

After settling the bill, they returned home. Thanks to the early wakeup call, Pam was exhausted and it wasn't even noon yet. Looking forward to couch time, she took care of a few odd house chores before taking time to relax. She threw in a load of laundry, replaced a battery in a smoke alarm, and deadheaded the petunias in the front garden. Once that was out of the way, she eagerly headed for the living room. The moment she sat down, however, the doorbell rang.

“Jeremy, can you get that?” she called. He didn't answer. Groaning, Pam got to her feet and staggered to the door. She opened it to find Jeremy himself on the porch. He was wearing a white knee-length lab coat, carrying a satchel in one hand and clutching a clipboard in the other. A stethoscope dangled carelessly from his neck.

“Hello, I'm here to see Pam Carpenter,” he intoned, stepping into the house.

“Ugh. Haven't you had enough doctors for one day?” She shut the door behind him. They returned to the living room. “Where did you get that outfit anyway?” Combined with his white button down shirt, the lab coat indeed transformed him into a doctor from the waist up. From the waist down, however, he was still wearing his cargo shorts.

“My mom put it together for me when I was little,” he told her. “She said the toy doctor's kits were too stupid. Look, this lab coat actually fits me now. It used to hit the floor.” Placing his satchel between them on the couch, he began pulling out various medical instruments. “I've got band-aids, thermometers, a reflex hammer, a magnifying glass...” He showed her an object with a long black handle and a pointed end. “Know what this is?”

“It's that thing you use to look in a person's ear.”

“It's called an otoscope.”

Pam shrugged. “Where I come from, it's called that thing you use to look in a person's ear.’

Jeremy set the otoscope on the couch. Next, he produced a syringe with a metal needle. “Check this out!”

Pam retreated to the far end of the couch. “Don't you dare come near me with that,” she warned.

“It's not a sharp needle,” he contended, jabbing it into his arm. “It's blunt. See? I couldn't hurt you if I tried. Well, unless I accidentally poked you in the eye or something.” He continued stabbing the
syringe into his arm to demonstrate its harmlessness.

“I don't like needles,” Pam informed him. “Can you put that away?”

He obligingly returned the syringe to the satchel and pulled out a folded blue cloth. “This is for you,” he said, handing it to her.

Shaking out the cloth, Pam realized it was a hospital gown. “You're serious? We're really going to play doctor?”

“You said we could have fun today,” Jeremy reminded her. He cleared his throat. “I'll have to ask you to disrobe completely before changing into the gown.”

Under normal circumstances, Pam would walk over her grandmother's grave to play doctor with a young boy, but the sight of the syringe had given her the willies. “I have a headache,” she lied. She handed the gown back to him. “Maybe some other day?”

“It's perfect if you have a headache,” Jeremy enthused. He put the stethoscope in his ears. “I'm a doctor! I'll make it go away.”

Pam shook her head. “I really don't feel like it right now. Sorry.”

Jeremy frowned and began putting away the medical kit. “Can you just promise me one thing?” he asked, slipping off the stethoscope. “This summer, can we at least do one thing I want to do? I mean, I know there's almost three months of vacation left, but still...”

He scowled as he spoke, cramming the medical paraphernalia into the satchel. Pam could tell the young boy was doing his best to keep his emotions in check. Jeremy had no idea he would be attending camp. It occurred to her that he too was envisioning a summer filled with activities for both of them.

“Hey. Cheer up,” she said. He was taking off his lab coat but Pam stopped him. “I'll do it.”

“Do what?”

“I will play doctor with you.”

“You mean it?”

Pam really had no reason to say no to him, other than vague misgivings. Why shouldn't she do this for him? There needed to be some degree of trust to their relationship. “Yes, I mean it. Let's go.” Pam reached into the satchel and pulled out the blue exam gown. She started for his bedroom, but Jeremy didn't follow. Pam glanced at him. “What now?”

“I don't want to do it in my bedroom. I need an exam table.”

“Well, you're out of luck. Unless your mom has a secret sex dungeon slash doctor's room that she's been keeping from us.”

Jeremy made a disgusted face. “Don't talk about my mom that way,” he said. “It's weird.” Looking around in search of an exam table, he turned his gaze in the direction of the dining room. “We could use the dinner table.”

“The dinner table? You mean the one in the actual dining room? The one we sit down at and eat food on?”
“Sure. It's the perfect height.”

“It's also hard as a rock,” Pam pointed out. “Can't we just use the recliner in your room?”

“I want a real table,” Jeremy insisted. He began pulling up sofa cushions. “You can lay on top of these on the dinner table.” He headed for the dining room with the stack of cushions piled high in his arms. “I got this,” he told her. “What don't you change into your exam gown?”

Dragging her feet, Pam went to her bedroom to undress. The gown was an awful shade of baby blue that wouldn't look good on anyone. “Hey, it's okay if I keep my underwear on, right?” she called.

“No!” he yelled back from the dining room. “It's not okay.”

Sighing, Pam slipped out of her bra and panties. Playing doctor wasn't so much different from Call of Duty, she told herself. Just some poking and prodding, which wasn't unpleasant if she was in the right mood. If she played her cards right, Pam could just do some light teasing, get him off, and be home free once he fell asleep.

The gown billowed unflatteringly when she walked, despite the fact that it tied at the back of her neck and another just above her rear. The latter provided very little coverage. Teasing tufts of air kept tickling her bum. For some reason, wearing the gown made her feel even more exposed than if she had been naked.

“Finally,” Jeremy said when she entered the dining room. Whiskers lay sprawled on her back on the kitchen counter while he held the stethoscope to the surprisingly patient cat. On the counter next to him were the remains of a popsicle wrapper still streaked with blue juice.

“I'm pretty sure real doctors don't amuse themselves by listening to cat heartbeats while they eat popsicles,” she told him.

“I'd like to get your height first,” he said, ignoring her jab. That sounded innocent enough, except Jeremy had to use a yardstick. First, he placed it on the ground and marked a spot a few inches below her belly button with his finger. Then, raising the yardstick, he used his finger as a landmark to measure the rest of her body. Pam did her best to hold still as the yardstick touched the spot between her breasts and then her nose. He wasn't nearly tall enough to see above her head, so Jeremy had to stand on a step-stool to get the proper measurement.

“I'm going to say that's... thirty-three inches on top,” he decided. “So, let's see... Thirty-six plus thirty-three is sixty nine inches. So that means you're... um...” Pam impatiently drummed her fingers as he did the math. “Five foot nine inches?” He looked at Pam for confirmation.

“That sounds about right, doctor.”

“Excellent,” he said, writing it down on his clipboard. He led her to the other side of the dinner table where the bathroom scale waited. Pam reluctantly stepped onto it. “133 pounds,” Jeremy noted.

“I'm usually 129, I'll have you know.”

“Why usually?” he asked.

“It depends on the time of mon... ah, never mind. What do you want me to do now?”

“Please have a seat,” he requested. Three sofa cushions were aligned in a neat row along the length of the dinner table. Pam cautiously perched herself on the table, praying it would support her weight. They would have a devil of a time inventing an excuse to Kate about a broken table.
The exam began innocently enough. Jeremy opened his doctor's satchel and pulled out the otoscope. Pam did her best to hold still as he brushed aside her hair so he could insert the black plastic into her ear. Despite her reluctance, Pam fought to contain a shiver as moved close to her. The feeling was only compounded when he used a small flashlight to peer into her pupils. His ill-fitting white lab coat reminded her that she was playing doctor with a boy.

“Open your mouth and say 'ah' please,” he said. Pam obediently did as he requested. Jeremy put a hand on her bare knee to steady himself as he shone the light into her mouth. As she sat on the cushioned dinner table, Pam parted her legs ever-so-slightly to entice him but he didn't notice.

Instead, Jeremy put away the flashlight. “Can you stick out your tongue?”

She did as he asked, but her tongue went back in her mouth when she saw him reach into the pocket of his lab coat. “Wait a minute,” she said. “Is that the stick from the popsicle you just finished eating?” The wooden stick in his hand was streaked the same shade of blue as the discarded wrapper on the counter.

“Of course not,” Jeremy said. “This is a tongue depressor.”

“It's a popsicle stick.”

Jeremy placed a hand on her knee. “Please stick out your tongue,” he said. Rolling her eyes, Pam stuck out her tongue while he pushed against it with his popsicle stick. Jeremy peered into her mouth for a moment before nodding in satisfaction and returning the stick to his jacket pocket.

“I can still taste the wild berry flavor,” she complained, licking her lips.

Busily writing on a clipboard, Jeremy didn't answer. What was he taking notes for anyway? Pam tried to peek but he wouldn't let her see. He set aside the pen and armed himself with a reflex hammer to tap her knee. Perhaps it was beginner's luck but he scored a direct hit on her ligament, causing her lower leg to jerk as though yanked by an invisible puppeteer's string. Though he tried to dodge it, her foot kicked him square in the shin.

“Um, sorry,” Pam apologized. “I didn't mean to do that. It was an accident. Really.”

“I'm sure it was,” Jeremy carefully positioned himself to the side before cautiously tapping her other knee. He returned to his clipboard for more notes, then cleared his throat. “For the next part of the exam, I'll need to observe as you urinate,” Jeremy said.

“Doctors don't do that,” Pam objected. “You're just trying to get even for this morning.”

“The bathroom is right this way, if you please.”

There was no way she was going to pee in front of him. “I can't. I just went.”

Jeremy pursed his lips in disappointment, then wrote something on the clipboard. “Fine, I'll take your temperature then.” One by one, he began pulling several different thermometers from his doctor's bag. The first was an old-fashioned thermometer resembling a thin glass rod. Another one was a modern model that had thick tapered end that went in a person's ear. The third was brand new and still in its packaging. It took Pam a second to read the upside-down writing: R-E-C-T-A-L ... T H-E-R-M-O-

“Oh, safeword,” Pam said immediately upon deciphering the label. “You're not using that on me.”

“Safeword?” Jeremy was perplexed.
“It's another way of saying timeout,” she explained.

“Well, why didn't you just say 'timeout' then?”

“Because when you're in a role-play situation, you're... forget it.” Pam was aware that 'safeword' was a poor safeword, but she didn't feel like explaining right now. “The point is? I object to the... rectal thermometer.” It made her blanch to even say it.

Jeremy pointed at the packaging. “But it says this is the most accurate way of taking a person's temperature.”

Pam responded by handing him the old-fashioned thermometer and the in-ear version. “You've already got plenty of other ways to take my temperature,” she told him. “I'm putting my foot down.”

“I want to try all three,” Jeremy proposed, “and then compare the readings. It's like a science project!”

“I am not your science project. The answer is no.”

“I knew you were just pretending,” Jeremy complained. “You always back out of everything. We never do anything I want.”

“We can do anything you want,” Pam said. “Just not the rectal thermometer.”

Jeremy responded by unbuttoning his lab coat. “Okay, then.”

Pam held her breath as he removed it. “You don't want to play doctor anymore?”

“You're not playing by the rules,” he noted. “What's the point?” He grumpily tossed the lab coat on the floor. Not looking at her, Jeremy began putting away the various medical instruments on the table. “This summer is gonna suck so bad.”

Pam silently groaned. His birthday was only a week away, then he would be departing a week after that. They didn't have much time left together. Who knew how long he would sulk over this? Giving in, she said, “Okay! Okay. You can use whatever damn thermometer you want.” She glared at the young boy as he eagerly slipped back into the coat and adjusted the stethoscope around his neck.

“I won't use the really old thermometer,” he promised. “It'll probably give you mercury poisoning anyway. Could you get on your hands and knees, please?”

Pam nervously adjusted her blue exam gown, knowing full well that she wouldn't be able to remain modest if he was truly utilizing the dreaded rectal thermometer. Reluctantly, she rolled over onto her hands and knees. Gritting her teeth, she slowly rose into position on her hands and knees. It was difficult to be still when he brushed aside her brown hair and gently inserted the in-ear thermometer. After a moment, it beeped to announce its final reading.

“98.4,” Jeremy announced. “Wonderful.”

His fake doctor mannerisms were beginning to grate on her nerves. Jeremy set aside the in-ear thermometer and shuffled to the foot of the table as he opened the brand new rectal thermometer. Though she couldn't see him, Pam could hear it beep when he turned it on. Her shoulders tensed as she felt him undo the strings tying the hospital gown around her waist. There was a cool burst of air on her skin as he drew the gown aside, exposing her completely.

Then... nothing. Several seconds passed as Pam waited on her hands and knees. Glancing over her
shoulder, she saw him studying her proffered bum and kitten as though he were at a museum. It occurred to Pam that Jeremy had never seen her in this position before. “A real doctor doesn't stare at his lady patients,” she told him.

“Huh? Oh right,” he said, breaking character. “Um, let's see here...”

Pam couldn't help blushing when she felt something cold and plastic probing her rear. This wasn't exactly what she had in mind when she agreed to play doctor with him. The thermometer sensor was no larger than her little finger, but she still winced when the young boy firmly inserted it past her tight ring of muscle. She could feel his fingers against her skin as he held the thermometer in place. It felt like an eternity until she heard it finally beep.

“98.6,” Jeremy said with satisfaction in his voice. “That's right on the dot. I knew this one was more accurate!” Pam bit her lip when he unceremoniously yanked out the thermometer embedded in her bottom. The sensation of plastic scraping against her delicate tissue was distinctly unpleasant. Mortified, Pam primly returned to her sitting position. She would definitely insist on taking his temperature the next time he so much as sneezed.

“Was that so bad?” he inquired.

“Yes. Are we done yet?”

“Almost,” Jeremy said. He had forgotten to button his lab coat and the bulge in his loose basketball shorts was a clear indicator of how much he enjoyed that part of the examination. Nervously clearing his throat, he gestured at her blue exam gown. “I'll need this to come off,” he said.

“Why?”

“Don't be shy,” he coaxed. “I'm a doctor.” Pam undid the gown and let it fall from her shoulders. Then he tugged on her wrists until she rose to a standing position. Jeremy walked in a slow circle around her, looking her up and down. Pam had an inexplicable urge to cover her breasts as he gave her the eyeball. It had been a long time since she felt this bashful around him.

He spoke in abbreviated words as he took more notes on his clipboard. “Patient... has... ample... pubic... hair...”

“You don't have to say it,” Pam frowned.

“... and... generously... sized... breasts...” he continued. Pam didn't believe her breasts were truly generous but she didn't feel the need to correct him on that one. “What's your bra size?” he inquired, his pen poised over the clipboard.

She was either a 32B or a 34B, depending on who made the bra. “34B,” she told him.

The young boy nodded thoughtfully as he wrote that down. “Please raise your arm,” he directed, setting aside the clipboard, “then bend your elbow so your forearm touches the back of your head.” As she did that, Jeremy dragged the step-stool behind her and stood on it. Positioning himself behind her, he reached around to cup her breast with a very warm hand. Pam glanced over her shoulder. He was studying something on the iPad propped open on the dinner table.

She craned her neck to peek at the page. She laughed, with equal parts amusement and disbelief. “You're looking at Wikipedia? How reassuring.”

“Shh,” he said, distracted by the reading. He mumbled to himself, “Small circular motions... varying pressure... squeeze nipple.” She realized the young boy was attempting to check her for breast
cancer. After a minute of kneading, he asked her to raise her other arm so he could switch to her other breast.

She usually enjoyed it when he explored her breasts, but it felt weird to be doing it in the dining room. His so-called exam was taking far longer than necessary. Pam counted to twenty before asking, “What's the verdict, doctor?”

“This one feels, um, pretty awesome too,” he reported.

“Pretty awesome? That's your diagnosis?”

“Uh huh. I want to check your other one again though...” He persisted with the circular motions for a while, but that soon gave way to outright fondling. Despite her unwillingness, all this boyhandling was making her feel warm inside. Pam forced herself to hold still, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing her quiver when he tweaked her stiff nipple.

“You know,” she began, “you could have just asked to play Call of Duty instead of doing all this weird doctor stuff.”

“What do you mean?” he said. “This exam is very important for women your age. I'm glad to report that, so far, you appear to be a very healthy thirty-six year old woman and...” He noticed her icy look. “What?”

Pam crossly folded her arms across her chest. “Twenty-six year old woman.”

“Uh, twenty-six year old woman,” Jeremy said, pretending to consult his clipboard. “I must have done the math wrong.”

“Well, you did get a B- on your report card,” Pam retorted, pulling on the hospital gown. It was probably a bad sign that she craved the scant modesty offered by it. “Can I go yet? I need to go home and tell this brat I'm taking care of that he's not getting dessert for a week.”

“That sounds really mean.” Jeremy glanced up from his clipboard. “Didn't you say he was your little pumpkin pie?”

“Not anymore. Now he's a greasy and undercooked cornbread stuffing that's teeming with deadly bacteria.”

“I'll write you a prescription,” Jeremy offered. “They have medicine for that. But no, we're not quite done with the exam yet.” He gently pushed on her shoulders until she was laying on the couch cushions, then picked up the magnifying glass. “Could you spread your legs and show me your clitty thing?”

“Okay, hold on just a minute.” Pam held up her hands to stop him. “Safeword.”

Jeremy's shoulders slumped. “What now?”

“One: you know full well that it's not called a 'clitty thing'. Two: you also know, full well, exactly where it is.”

He impatiently twirled the magnifying glass. “Um, okay, I want you to show me your... uh, clit-or-is.” He said it slowly, like a kid at the geography bee who couldn't remember the capital of Florida.

Surely this would be the final part of the exam. How else could he humiliate her, after all? Deciding to get it over with, Pam lay back on the cushioned dinner table, parting her knees first then her lips
second. While Jeremy eagerly bent low between her thighs with his magnifying glass, Pam grimly stared at the myriad crystals adorning the chandelier on the ceiling. She wondered what would happen if it fell on her. Maybe not death, but she would certainly be maimed. She imagined how guilty Jeremy would feel for the rest of his life if she...

Something slipped inside her. Judging by its girth, probably his finger. Not expecting penetration, Pam's hips flinched as she pulled away. Jeremy immediately gave her a reproachful look. “Please hold still while I examine the interior of your vagina.”

Pam shuddered. “Kitten.”

“Vagina,” he insisted. “A real doctor doesn't say 'kitten'.

“Can't you at least get the stuff for me?” she asked, closing her legs. 'Stuff' was their codeword for K-Y.

“Sometimes we don't need the stuff,” Jeremy said.

“This is not one of those times,” she told him.

Setting aside the magnifying glass, Jeremy placed his hands on her knees to urge them apart. Out of sheer habit, Pam spread her legs for him and Jeremy promptly inserted his finger again. It slid in without the slightest hint of friction. “We definitely don't need the stuff,” he said. “See?”

Pam felt embarrassed. Apparently, some small part of her brain was having a good time. Or maybe it was just that time of month when she just happened to be extra wet. She bit her lip while Jeremy, still armed with that stupid magnifying glass, prodded her clit. Determined not to let him have the satisfaction of arousing her further, Pam groped for unsexy thoughts. College guys. Beards. College guys with beards.

She was imagining college guys with beards at a clinic for terminally ill kittens when she felt a decidedly odd sensation: a sharp pressure, followed by a cold scraping. “What was that?” she asked.

“What was what?”

The sensation repeated itself. “That. What are you doing?” Pam tried to sit up, but Jeremy placed a firm hand on her abdomen.

“Just, um, a medical procedure,” Jeremy said. “Am I hurting you?”

“No. But I just...”

“Good,” he interrupted.

Something didn't feel right down there. She felt Jeremy's finger slip inside her, probing for something. It was then that she noticed the worried look on his face. “What did you just put inside me?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

Pam sat up, her legs dangling off the dinner table. “Jeremy, I can feel it. And it's definitely not nothing.”

“Double negative!” he proclaimed, punching her arm.

“Quit stalling and tell me what it is!”
Jeremy shuffled his feet. “Um, golf balls,” he said, not looking at her.

Pam stared at him. “You're kidding, right?” Instead of responding, he smiled. A guilty smile. Panicking, she slid off the table and was about to dig them out when she noticed Jeremy's watchful gaze.

“Avert your eyes, child,” she said. Instead of doing as she told, he just stood there with his erection poking through his shorts. Pam raised her voice. “I said avert your eyes!”

Jeremy meekly turned to face the wall. Bending at the waist, Pam slipped two fingers in her kitten. They made contact with... nothing. The golf balls were too far inside her.

“Honestly Jeremy. Golf balls?” Her back protested from the bending, so she propped one leg on a chair and tried again to reach them. “What were you thinking?”

He kept his back to her as he spoke. “I cleaned them first, if that's what you're worried about.”

That was a small comfort, until Pam remembered Jeremy's notion of cleaning was really nothing more than a quick rinse under the sink. He was the type who, if he dropped a piece of toast on the kitchen floor, would merely dust it off and continue eating as if it never left his plate. “Lesson learned,” she muttered. “Trust an eleven year old boy and end up with golf balls crammed inside you.”

“There's only two. I thought they would be easy to get out.”

It was strange to talk to the back of his head. Plus Pam wanted him facing her while she chewed him out. “Turn around.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I really don't understand how your brain functions. Where do you get these ideas?”

“It was Ashton's fault,” Jeremy said, poking a toe at the floor. “He told me there are videos on the internet where guys, you know. Put balls inside a girl's thing.”

“It is Ashton's fault,” Pam exploded. “And look at me when you're talking!”

“There are so!” Jeremy made fearful eye contact as he stated his case. “The balls were shiny and made of metal. They slipped right in. And the girls in the video didn't mind it at all.”

Metal balls. Pam dimly recalled her friend Suzy mentioning this practice. Jeremy wasn't making this up, but he seemed unusually well-versed in the intricacies. Recalling his question about golden showers at the doctor's office, the light suddenly dawned on her. “When you say 'Ashton says there are videos on the internet...’” Pam began. Jeremy nervously shifted his weight when she glared at him. “You watched these videos with him at his house, didn't you? Metal balls in a girl's kitten. People peeing on each other.”

Jeremy's ears turned bright red. “It was Ashton's idea. Really! He always wants to watch sick stuff like this.”

“Well then. Ashton's mom will be getting a phone call from your mom,” Pam said. She was dying to deck him but the first point of order was the golf balls. This time Pam turned around so he couldn't see. Try as she might, she just couldn't get a hold of the first one. Her finger tried to curl around the dimpled surface of the golf ball, but in doing so she only succeeded in wedging it into a corner that she didn't even know existed. “Ow! Ow, ow, ow.”

“Are you okay?” he asked.
Wincing, Pam doubled over from the pinching. “Yeah, Jeremy. I feel great. I would feel even better if I could get these out of me. They're stuck.”

“Why don't you do some jumping jacks?” Jeremy suggested.

She fixed a dirty look on him. “Why don't you go pour lighter fluid on your penis?”

“I'm just trying to help,” he said in an injured voice. “Maybe I can get them out.”

“I think you've done enough, thank you.” Pam took deep breaths to calm herself. Taking baby steps, she lay back down on the kitchen table and placed a hand on her lower abdomen, willing the golf balls to come out. She tried to picture her muscles pushing them along, though she couldn't feel them in there at all. That was probably a bad sign. Being in a horizontal position seemed to ease the pinching, at least.

“What are you doing?” Jeremy asked.

“Trying to relax.”

“Want me to do that thing for when you have a headache?” He sat down at the head of the table and placed his fingers on her temples, massaging them in a circular motion. That did seem to help. Pam tried to forget she was laying naked on a dinner table with golf balls shoved inside her hoo-ha. After a moment, Jeremy said, “You know what this reminds me of? It's like that scene in Days of the Future Past when Wolverine is lying on the table and Kitty Pryde sends him back in ti-”

“Not now, Jeremy.” Concentrating hard, she tried to bear down just the slightest bit. Instead of pushing out, the golf balls only redoubled their pressure. Pam steeled herself for that searing pain. Instead, she felt an altogether different sensation. It felt good. Just to make sure, she tried squeezing again. This time, the feeling was so intense that her hips fluttered uncontrollably, causing a series of aftershocks as her kitten repeatedly clenched of its own volition. It was a sensitive spot, whatever the golf balls were pressing against.

“What was that?” Jeremy stopped rubbing her temples and peered at her with concern.

“I don't know.”

“Your, um, nipples got hard,” he observed.

“Did they? That's strange.” Pam casually snaked a hand between her legs. She was very wet. Would Jeremy notice if she touched her clit? She needed to do it. Exhaling softly, Pam dragged a finger across her swollen pearl before before mindfully squeezing her kitten again.

And then the doorbell rang.

The sound startled her so much that Pam recoiled as if she had been struck. Her entire body clenched up, much harder than her meditative squeezing, which sent a single golf ball shooting out of her kitten like a torpedo. It sailed halfway across the room before landing on the floor in a bouncing clatter.

“Awesome!” Jeremy said, genuinely impressed. “You did it!”

Before she could respond, the doorbell rang a second time. There was a loud pounding on the front door. “Water delivery!” a deep voice called.

Pam lay paralyzed, her mind foggy from arousal. Had she remembered to lock the front door? She
couldn't remember, which only led to further panic. What if the deliveryman barged into the dining room and found her naked with Jeremy? What if this was an elaborate sting and he was an undercover cop?

“Go make sure the door is locked,” Pam hissed at Jeremy. The only article of clothing within arm's reach was the exam gown. She protectively held it to her chest.

“I can't!” he whispered, pointing to the bulge in his shorts.

The doorbell rang again. Pam tried to think rationally. It was just the water guy. From past experience, she knew that if no one let him in, the deliveryman would leave the jugs of water on the porch. Every time he did that, Pam would nearly break her back trying to lug them into the kitchen.

“Just open the door for him,” Pam pleaded. “He's not going to notice. Have him bring the water to the kitchen while I hide.”

“No way.” Jeremy bolted for his room like a frightened rabbit.

“Get back here!” Pam ordered, to no avail. She heard the unmistakable thump of a water jug landing on the wooden porch outside the front door. Tossing aside the useless hospital gown, Pam hurried to the hall closet. Now that she was mobile, she could definitely feel the remaining golf ball shifting inside her kitten. Ignoring it, she threw open the closet door and grabbed the first thing she saw: her winter coat. There was only time to fasten every other button before flinging open the door. To her relief, there were no squad cars waiting in the driveway. The deliveryman was already on the way back to his truck.

“Oh, hi!” Pam called, stepping onto the porch. A breeze tickled her bare ankles.

“Hi there, didn't realize you...” he trailed off when he noticed Pam's coat.

“Just chilly,” she said. “The air conditioner is stuck on high. Do you mind bringing the water into the kitchen?”

“Sure thing,” he answered, giving her a skeptical up-and-down glance. He effortlessly hoisted the first five gallon jug onto a shoulder while cradling the second in his arm. Muscles bulging from the effort, he grinned warmly at Pam before his eyes drifted toward an exposed patch of skin on her chest.

“Um, right this way,” Pam said, pulling the coat tighter around her shoulders.

“Just straight ahead, then left at the dining room.” She made a face when her nipples chafed against the interior of the coat. Not wanting to inadvertently lose the golf ball, she kept her muscles tightly clenched with each step. It was like a bad dream in which she was walking on a tightrope with no underwear. The cool air wafting under the coat hem emphasized her damp kitten.

On his way to the kitchen, the deliveryman gave a curious glance at the dinner table covered in couch cushions. He didn't say anything, though Pam saw him sniff the air. Uh oh. Was there a lingering scent of sex in the room? She couldn't smell anything herself, but nevertheless hurried to open a window. As she was doing so, Pam saw the deliveryman's sneakered foot accidentally kick the forgotten golf ball. It zipped across the floor and into a corner where it nestled among Jeremy's discarded shin guards from soccer practice.

“Oops, what was that?” he said, trying to look at his feet.

“It was nothing,” Pam assured him. “Young boys always leave their stuff underfoot.” For good measure, she called in the direction of his room. “Jeremy! Get out here and clean up your crap!”
The deliveryman dropped off the jugs next to the water dispenser in the kitchen, then grabbed the empties. Pam ushered him back to the front door, wishing he would walk faster. Her muscles were getting sore from clenching. To her surprise, there was someone coming up the front steps. Someone wearing blue hospital scrubs and carrying a lunchbag.

“Kate!” she squeaked in horror. Her heart sank, along with the golf ball. Her briefest moment of inattention had let it slip. Squeezing tight for dear life, Pam prayed the golf ball would stay put.

Instead of noticing Pam's pained expression, Kate was puzzled by her attire. “Are you wearing your winter coat?” she asked.

“I was cold,” Pam explained. “I think I might be coming down with something.”

Kate nodded sympathetically, though her skepticism was clear. There was a thoughtful look on her face as she glanced from Pam's coat to the unknown man in her house. Surely she didn't think he and Pam were in the middle of an amorous encounter?

“We got our water delivery for the week,” Pam said, wanting to quash the notion. She gestured to the empty bottles in the deliveryman's hands.

“So nice of you to bring it in for us,” Kate said.

The deliveryman said something in reply, but Pam didn't catch it. She scuttled with stiff legs to the hallway where she called over her shoulder, “Jeremy, YOUR MOTHER is home!”

Kate closed the front door and stepped out of her shoes. “I thought I was interrupting something,” she said, winking at Pam.

“Ha ha, not at all,” Pam laughed weakly. She followed Kate into the dining room that was brimming with incriminating evidence. The couch cushions. The clipboard. Her hospital gown. The rectal thermometer. The innocuous pile of shin guards that hid a sticky golf ball.

“What's going on here?” Kate asked, nodding at the laden dinner table.

Pam desperately needed a distraction. Where the hell was he? “Oh, that was just...” Losing her patience, she once again hollered in the direction of his room, “Jeremy, get out here NOW!”

He unexpectedly turned the corner just as she finished the sentence, scrunching his face in discomfort as he received the full brunt of her shout. “Sheesh, I'm right here. You don't have to yell.” He made a show of rubbing his ears as Pam glared at him. He hadn't even bothered to take off the white lab coat. “Hi mom! You're home early.”

“They needed someone to take a shift tonight, so I volunteered to do a split shift,” Kate explained. “Look at you in your lab coat! It fits so well now. I remember when it used to come down to your ankles.” His mom straightened the lapels of the white jacket while Pam inched her way out of the dining room. Kate spoiled her getaway by glancing at the discarded exam gown on the floor, then at Jeremy's lab coat.

“Dare I ask?” she said. “Were you guys playing doctor?”

“Not *that* kind of doctor,” Pam said, trying not to blush.

“We were playing Oregon Trail,” Jeremy told his mom. “I was the doctor.”

That seemed plausible. “I had typhoid fever,” Pam added. She hurriedly swept the various medical
instruments, including the rectal thermometer and clipboard, into the satchel.

“Oh, sure, I remember Oregon Trail,” Kate said. “I believe that has the unlikely distinction of being
the first video game that Jeremy was obsessed with.” She gestured at the couch cushions on the
dinner table. “You were building a fort, right?”

“Exactly!” Pam said. Despite being naked underneath, she was beginning to sweat from her thick
woolen coat. “I'm going to lie down and rest for a bit.” Fighting the urge to just run away, Pam put a
hand on Jeremy's shoulder. “Why don't you put away your shin guards over there?” she said, giving
him a hard look. “Then put away the couch cushions, okay?”

“Sure, Pam,” he said. Kate moved aside a couch cushion and sat down at the dinner table with her
lunch, blissfully unaware of what had been happening on it ten minutes ago.

Pam retreated to her room to take off the ridiculous winter coat. Lying on her bed, she tried to dig out
the last golf ball. It had almost fallen out of her, so Pam thought it would be a piece of cake. But
instead of pulling it out, her finger only pushed it further in. Frustrated, she pounded her mattress
with her fist before remembering what happened when she was lying on the dinner table. Cautiously,
Pam gathered herself and squeezed her kitten. Nothing. Two golf balls were apparently necessary for
that particular trick.

Unsure how to proceed, Pam got dressed. As she opened her door, Jeremy passed by with an armful
of shin guards and his doctor's satchel. Heading for the kitchen, Pam wondered if she could casually
ask Kate for tips on how to dislodge a foreign object embedded in a woman's vagina. But when she
poked her head in the dining room, she discovered Kate had nodded off at the table after finishing
her lunch. Being a doctor, she often bragged about her ability to catnap, any time and anywhere.

Reversing her tracks. Pam went to Jeremy's room. The shin guards lay in a pile on his desk. Jeremy
brightened when she entered. He held up a golf ball.

“Don't worry, I got it,” he said. “One down, one to go, right?” He tossed the golf ball to Pam.
Annoyed, she caught it and immediately launched it back at him in one smooth motion. It wasn't her
intention to aim at his crotch though Jeremy caught it just in time. “Hey! You almost hit me in my
area.”

“You would have deserved it,” Pam shot back. “How am I going to get this last golf ball out? It's
stuck so deep that I can't even feel it.”

“I know!” Jeremy said. “You could go to the doctor.”

“A brilliant idea, Jeremy. And how will I explain when she asks how the golf ball got there in the
first place?”

Jeremy thoughtfully rubbed his chin. “Say you went mini-golfing in a skirt, but you weren't wearing
underwear. Tell her it was one of those fancy mini-golf places with windmills and tilted putting
greens. And then...” He paused, lost in thought. “Hmm. And then...”

“There is no 'and then' so forget your stupid mini-golf idea!” She kicked at a discarded sock on his
floor. “You're not helping! Your mom is napping at the dinner table. The clock is ticking.”

“Let me try,” Jeremy proposed. “Maybe I can reach it.”

“Your hands are smaller than mine. How on earth will you reach when I can't?”

Jeremy grabbed her hand to compare it to his own. With their palms flat against each other, their
fingers were exactly the same length. “Ha!” he crowed. “See? My hand isn't smaller than yours.”
Pam snatched her hand away. “Whatever. If our hands are the same size, it still doesn't get us anywhere.”

“Let's try anyway,” Jeremy urged. He tentatively tugged at her shorts.

Loathe as she was to admit it, Pam knew she would need his help. “I'm only doing this so I don't die of toxic shock syndrome,” she told him, wiggling out of her shorts.

“What's that?”

“It's what happens when an unclean object is inserted into a girl's kitten.”

“Oh. You can actually die from that? Weird.”

“It's not weird,” Pam snapped. “Can't you at least pretend to feel guilty about what you've done?”

“I told you I was sorry,” Jeremy said, “and now I'm trying to help. Doesn't that count?” He lowered himself to his knees. For a second, Pam thought he was begging for forgiveness but then she realized he was just waiting for her to spread her legs so he could reach inside her.

Reluctantly, she widened her stance until her feet were beyond shoulder width. Jeremy waited attentively at her feet. She gave him a look. “I am going to kill you if you get a boner.”

Still on his knees, Jeremy scooted closer. Despite her threat, Pam felt a rush as his finger slipped inside her kitten. One knuckle. Then two. “Darn,” Jeremy said. “My nail is just barely brushing the golf ball. But I ran out of finger.” She was about to comment on his choice of words when he extracted his finger and replaced it with another.

“I should use my middle finger,” he reasoned. “It's bigger so I should be able to reach... Huh, it sure is slippery in there. I can't decide if it helps or not. Plus I wish I could see what I was doing. This is like putting together a model airplane with my eyes closed.”

“Could you skip the play-by-play? Just tell me if you can reach it.” Her toes squirmed as his finger wriggled and wobbled inside her kitten, straining to reach the golf ball.

“I can't get it,” Jeremy finally said, leaning back on his heels. He held up two fingers. “It's probably, like, this far away. Maybe if I used a chopstick or something...”

“No.”

Jeremy waved his hands in exasperation. “So what do you want to do?”
Pam dropped to a squatting position. “Maybe I can reach it if I go like this...”

Jeremy watched as she dug for the golf ball. “Why would it help if you're in that position?”

“I don't know. It just does.” Her fingers made contact with a hard, dimpled surface. “You're right, I can feel the golf ball... But I can't get it out.”

“Let me try,” Jeremy suggested. He reached between her legs, but the angle was wrong. They bumped heads as he tried to get close enough to insert a finger while she squatted.

“Never mind,” Pam said, rubbing her forehead. “This isn't working.”
“How about I lie down on the recliner,” Jeremy said, “and you can squat over me? It'll work great! Just put your feet on the armrests, like this.” Jeremy clambered onto the armchair to demonstrate, balancing on the armrests while he faced the seat back. He held the pose for second, then lay down in the recliner to wait for her to climb aboard.

Pam unenthusiastically mounted the armchair. It took several tries as the armchair fabric felt particularly slippery against the soles of her bare feet. In addition, she wasn’t as light as Jeremy so there was much tipping and toppling to contend with as she attempted to maintain an even center of gravity. Finally balanced, Pam's knees were halfway bent when she stopped.

“I can't do this,” she said. “This position is too weird. It feels like I'm about to pee on you.”

“Um, yeah.” Jeremy scratched his ear. “I don't think my mom would like it if you got pee on this chair.”

“I didn't say I was planning to pee on you,” Pam sighed. “I just... look, I don't want to hear any more smart comments from you, okay? Can you just be professional about this?” Pam didn't realize how stupid that sounded until she said it. Asking an eleven year old boy to be professional was like asking a rhesus monkey to teach empathy-building to a Human Resources department.

Nevertheless, Jeremy solemnly nodded. Feeling very exposed, Pam bent her knees to lower herself into position over him, carefully keeping her balance by clutching the seat back of the armchair. Despite his silence, she could see Jeremy's eyes get bigger when her crotch loomed closer and closer. He put a hand on her midsection to stop her. “Um, okay. That's close enough. Don't crush me, okay?”

Pam blushed. That was the exact sort of comment she didn't want to hear right now. Apparently not trusting her, his hand remained poised on her lower tummy to keep her from getting closer. She bit her lip when he slipped a finger into her waiting kitten. Training her eyes on the model airplanes on his dresser, Pam tried to think of something else as the young boy probed her.

She glanced down at his prone figure beneath her. “How's it going down there?” she asked.

“Not so great,” he admitted. “I can touch more of the golf ball, but not enough to pull it out. Um, can you move away? You're sorta smothering me.” He pushed on her lower tummy. In doing so, his thumb inadvertently became lodged against her clitor.

“Sorry,” Pam said. Did he know he was touching her clitor? She couldn't tell. Though Jeremy couldn't reach the golf ball, his finger kept finding the sensitive spots inside her. His thumb pushed hard against her sensitive button, causing her nipples to stiffen under her shirt. Pam squirmed, but not from discomfort.

“Hey,” he said.

“What?”

“The golf ball just dropped some more,” he reported. His hand pressed against her tummy. “There! It moved again! I wonder why.”

“I think it might be because you keep accidentally rubbing my clitoris,” Pam admitted.

“I am?” It took him a moment. “Oh, you mean when I go like this?” He rapidly wiggled his thumb against her hard pearl.
“Mmmm... I mean, yes,” Pam said.

“Should I keep doing it? Maybe the golf ball will keep dropping.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Confirming a suspicion, Pam tried to catch a glimpse of his shorts but she couldn't see a thing since she was balanced atop him. She blindly groped with a hand until her fingers discerned a stiff bulge. “Hey! I told you not to get a boner.”

Jeremy rolled his eyes. “I can't help it, okay? Besides, I'm not the only one. You're, like, super wet.”

“Fine, whatever.”

“I mean... it's, like, creamy almost.”

“I get it, Jeremy,” she said. “You promised to be professional, remember?”

He obligingly worked in silence. It was a precarious position, squatting across the recliner with her feet planted on the armrests. Nonetheless, Pam's heart beat faster as Jeremy tenderly worked her clit. Though it pained her to admit it, the young boy's poking and prodding during doctor play had indeed awakened a base arousal deep in her brain. They almost got caught, too. First by deliveryman and then by Kate, giving her the same thrill as riding a roller coaster: terrifying yet exhilarating.

There was only so much teasing a girl could take. She was ready to come now, golf ball be damned. A faint tingle in her chest signaled an impending arrival. She thrust her hips forward, wanting to make better contact with Jeremy's wiggling thumb. The shifting necessitated a new grip on the back of the armchair. That turned out to be a mistake, as the increased pressure caused the chair to tilt into a fully reclined position.

“Whoa!” Pam gasped. There was a dizzying moment when she almost fell from her perch and landed on top of Jeremy. His finger vacated her as he tried to reach the lever to return the recliner to an upright position.

“There we go,” Jeremy said. The recliner lurched to its previous level, nearly throwing Pam backward from the armchair. He placed a steadying hand on her bum. “Don't worry, I got you!” Jeremy said. His mouth was so close that she could feel his breath with every word. Perhaps more importantly, the unexpected motion had caused the golf ball to shift, firmly pushing against the same sensitive spot that she felt on the dinner table.

“Don't stop!” Pam begged. Had her hands been free, she would have touched her clit herself but she didn't dare let go of the recliner's back. Still cupping her bum with his free hand, Jeremy obliged by grinding her clit with his thumb. Pam sighed. Such a smart boy, always knowing when she needed it gentle and when she needed it hard. A very warm sensation spread across her chest.

“Oh, that's really good,” Pam breathed, throwing her head back. Despite her awkward pose, the orgasm was unexpectedly delightful. “Really... really.... good.” Her toes curled against the armrests. The golf ball provided a delicious pushing in her kitten. The feeling lasted several seconds before the pressure disappeared into thin air. Pam swelled with relief. Jeremy must have been able to successfully...

“Ouch!” she heard him say from his position beneath her.

Weak with post-orgasmic gratitude, Pam climbed down from her perch and flopped onto his bed. “Did you say ouch?” she asked through half-closed eyes.

“The golf ball fell out of you and hit me in the face,” Jeremy said, rubbing his nose.
“It did?” Pam said, embarrassed. “Oops.”

“It was like you laid an egg.”

“Thank you for comparing me to a chicken.” Annoyed by his lackluster pillow talk, Pam gathered her scattered clothes. Once dressed, she crossed her arms and stood in front of Jeremy with her hands on her hips.

“I want to make one thing absolutely, positively clear: from now on, you need to get my permission the next time you put something inside me.” He was still reclining lazily in the armchair so she snapped it into an upright position to emphasize her point. “Got it?”

“Even if it's just my finger?” he asked.

“Even if it's just your finger.”

“I promise.” The solemnity of his vow was somewhat diluted by his mussed hair and the obvious erection poking through his shorts. Pam had an inkling of what was coming next. Clearing his throat, Jeremy said, “So, do you think we could play Call of-

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You're on your own, cowboy.” Pam opened his closet and began digging through a stack of comic books. She only had to toss aside four issues before finding a Playboy hidden in the pile. “Here we go,” she said, holding it up. “I think this will suffice if you need additional stimulation.”

Jeremy blushed furiously. “I don't know what those are doing in there. I borrowed those comics from someone.”

Pam checked herself in the mirror. “Oh, stop playing dumb. I've known about your Playboys since forever.”

He looked at her with surprise. “You're not mad?”

“Why would I be mad? I don't care if you like looking at naked ladies.” Flipping open the Playboy, Pam thumbed to a double-page spread featuring a platinum-blonde spread. She carefully placed the opened magazine on his lap. “Enjoy! I'll give you some privacy.” Before closing the door behind her, she winked at him. Jeremy seemed embarrassed.

In the hallway, Pam counted to five before quickly re-opening the door. As she expected, Jeremy was staring at the magazine with a half-vacant expression. He sheepishly closed it before cramming it underneath an armchair cushion.

“What?” he asked, caught between fear and annoyance.

“Hmm, I forgot what I was going to say.” Pam blew him a kiss, then shut the door once again. The embarrassed look on his face helped ease the mortification she just went through. Wanting a snack, she headed to the kitchen where she bumped into Kate whose arms were full with a large basket of neatly folded laundry.

“Sorry Pam! I wasn't looking where I was going.”

“You didn't need to fold laundry,” Pam said, holding out her hands. “Let me take that.”
“Oh no, I got it,” Kate said. “It's mostly belongs to Jeremy anyway. I figured I should do some chores around here to keep my ‘mom’ credentials.”

“Thanks! That's nice of you.” Pam's mind raced. It was easy to resist Jeremy for the remainder of the day, but surely her resolve would crumble by tomorrow. And he definitely merited more punishment than missing a single Call of Duty session.

“Jeremy's taking a nap,” Pam said, a plan slowly forming in her mind. “But I bet you could sneak in and drop off that laundry without waking him up.”

“I can be stealthy,” Kate said confidently. “Of course, it doesn't hurt that he can sleep through a hurricane.” She strode off in the direction of Jeremy's room. Pam reached into her hiding spot in the back of a cupboard and pulled out several squares of individually wrapped dark chocolate. Unwrapping one, she nibbled as she kept an ear cocked down the hallway.

“Mom! Why didn't you knock?”

There was a long silence before Kate said, “Jeremy, is that what I think it is?”

Pam couldn't make out his response but, based on his tone, it was definitely a denial. The back-and-forth continued, first in calm tones until she heard Kate raise her voice. “Where did you get this?”

Jeremy plead his case, though she could only hear muffled words. From what she could tell, he was throwing Ashton under the bus. Pam took another satisfied bite of chocolate. The sound of arguing continued from Jeremy's room, followed by the sound of stomping feet, more protesting, then finally a slammed door.

Pam waited innocently in the kitchen. Kate emerged from the hall, carrying a bulging grocery bag which she deposited in the kitchen trash. “What's going on?” Pam inquired.

“Just doing some housecleaning,” Kate sighed. She glared at the trash can as if it had personally offended her. “They said print was dead! I thought it would be enough just to lock down all the devices to keep my son from...” Kate trailed off as Jeremy stalked past the kitchen. He stopped in his tracks when he saw them.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Kate said.

“Don't talk about me with Pam!” Jeremy complained. “I hate it when you do that.” Pam pretended to study her nails. This was going well. Kate seemed to be receiving the full brunt of his anger while she herself was unscathed. Jeremy shuffled away, muttering something about playing outside.

“Don't you dare go to Ashton's house,” Kate called after him. “Not until I call his mom.”

“I know! Jeez...” Jeremy slammed the door so hard that the house shook.

“Boys being boys?” Pam asked.

Kate scoffed in disgust. “Boys being assholes is more like it. You do your best to raise your kid right and the next thing you know he's... Never mind. You don't want to know.”

“Want some chocolate?” Pam handed her several squares. “I always keep a stash. You know, for emergencies.”
Chapter Summary

Um, instant poll: are people out there actually reading / enjoying this story? It feels like I'm only hearing from the same four people whenever I post a new chapter.

EDIT: Thanks to everyone who left their kind messages. I don't expect people to comment all the time, or leave a comment just for the sake of leaving a comment. But I do get anxious when I post stuff and don't get much response. Thanks for the reassurance that I'm not crazy!

5:24 AM

When her alarm went off, Pam was already awake in nervous anticipation. She lay quietly in her familiar bed for a few minutes, calming herself, before she slipped from the sheets and pulled on a white terrycloth bathrobe. The hardwood floor felt pleasantly cool against her bare feet so she passed over her bunny slippers. When it was time to open the door, she operated the knob with the lightest touch, careful to be as quiet as possible. In the hallway, she crept on her tiptoes like a ballerina, skipping over the squeaky floorboards to maintain her stealth. Her objective, Jeremy’s closed bedroom door, loomed at the end of the hallway. Pausing at the stairs, she cocked an ear towards Kate's room. Nothing.

Upon reaching Jeremy's room, Pam quietly opened the door, waltzed around the scattered comic books on the floor, petted the snoozing Whiskers in the armchair, muffled a curse when she stepped on an errant Lego piece, and then eased herself into his bed. Jeremy did not wake. She took a moment to savor the stillness. It smelled nice in his room: the musty haze of carbon dioxide and the light perspiration of a sleeping boy. His shades were drawn, but the early rising sun had already cast its first rays around the edges of the window. It was, meteorologically speaking, the first day of summer after all.

She placed her hand on his, gently brushing the soft skin between his knuckles. The young boy still did not stir, so Pam kissed his cheek. Jeremy sighed, rolled onto his back, and wiped his nose, but resumed snoring lightly after ten seconds. Pam kissed him again, on the lips this time, her mouth lingering over his. He took a long, deep breath.

… And then went back to sleep.

Rolling her eyes, Pam carefully pulled his sheets aside, then tugged down his pajama bottoms. Studying him, she decided he was somewhere between soft and hard. Sometimes he would wake up
from her fiddling with his pajamas, but not this morning. With a glint of determination in her eye, she
gathered her brown hair into a ponytail.

Modern science had not yet been able to determine how many licks were required to reach the center
of a Tootsie Pop, but Pam had a very reliable figure of how many seconds of oral pleasure she could
get away with before waking up Jeremy. Licking her lips in anticipation, she enclosed the sleeping
boy in her warm mouth.

3 seconds: No change, except Pam's stomach audibly growled.

9 seconds: Full erection achieved. Deep throat factor: zero. (Subject still adorably fun-sized.)

12 seconds: Foreskin gently retracted with her trembling fingers.

15 seconds: Her stomach growled again, possibly in reaction to the tantalizing boy taste under his
foreskin.

19 seconds: Jeremy squirming, but half-asleep.

22 seconds: Jeremy stretching his arm, nearly whacking her in the face

Pam counted to twenty-seven before she hastily kissed his penis goodbye and yanked his pajamas
back into place. Straightening, she waited patiently with her hands in her lap. He took a deep breath,
yawned, then finally squinted at her through one eye.

“Hi there, birthday boy,” she smiled. “Were you having a funny dream? You kept saying my name.”

Jeremy pulled the sheet up to his shoulders. “It's not my birthday yet,” he murmured.

“Sure, it is,” Pam said. “It's June 21.”

Having closed his eyes, Jeremy took so long to respond that she wondered if he had fallen back
asleep. “I wasn't born until 11:11 at night,” he said, yawning loudly. “Ask my mom. She always
complains about how she spent the whole day waiting for me to get out.”

Listening intently, Pam's ears tried to detect any footsteps from upstairs. Since the house was
completely silent, she stretched out next to Jeremy on his bed. “So, in that case, anything you want to
do while you're still eleven?” she asked, curling a lock of his hair around her finger.

“I'd like to sleep some more,” he informed her, covering his eyes with a forearm.

“Are you sure?” Pam persisted. She traced a squiggly line across his chest. “I have a very special
birthday present for you.”

“I'll open it later,” he mumbled.

The bed sheet draped over his body betrayed the unmistakable lump she had left behind. Pam slipped
a knowing hand under the sheet and into the waistband of his pajamas. Her fingertips danced across
the lovely skin of his penis for a moment before gripping him firmly. If she held still enough, Pam
could practically take his pulse based on the hot blood swirling in his erection. Jeremy took a deep
breath, his skinny chest swelling with air. He held it for a second before sighing. A comfortable sigh,
not an exasperated one.

Encouraged, Pam kissed his earlobe in the spot that always made him shiver. “You're not going to
believe what I got you for your birthday,” she whispered. “You're going to want to play with it all
da-” Her ears perked up at the thudding footsteps upstairs, followed by the sound of a toilet flushing. His mom was awake. She reluctantly extracted her hand from his underwear.

“Oh, gotta go.” She gave him a peck on the cheek. “I can tell you're tired. Get some rest!” Retracing her steps, Pam leapt to her feet, muffled a curse when she stepped on an errant Lego piece, petted the snoozing Whiskers in the armchair, waltzed around the scattered comic books on the floor, and quietly shut the bedroom door behind her.

8:03 AM

“But I'm starving!” Jeremy protested. He performed a dramatic face plant into the kitchen counter. Pam browsed a newspaper at the dinner table, sipping her black tea. She and Kate had been enjoying the quiet morning when Jeremy stumbled into the kitchen, clad only his pajama bottoms, and demanded breakfast.

“It's just ten more minutes, Jeremy!” Kate pleaded. “Can't you be patient?” His mom, wearing an apron and armed with a spatula, was pouring neat spoonfuls of pancake batter onto an electric skillet while bacon sizzled away on the stovetop. An enormous pan of scrambled eggs was keeping warm on the back burner. Kate had insisted on cooking a special breakfast for her son's birthday, going so far as to banish Pam from the kitchen.

“What if I just have this banana?” he asked, reaching for the fruit bowl. “That's healthy, right?”

“Just wait,” Kate ordered. “See that big bowl of mixed berries next to Pam? I spent twenty minutes hulling those strawberries. And you're going to eat it...” she briskly flipped some pancakes, “...when the rest of breakfast is ready. Go put on some clothes, will you? You're twelve for heaven's sake. That's way too old to be parading around like that.”

“I don't have the energy,” Jeremy complained. He slumped onto a kitchen stool. “You're starving me. On my birthday.”

“Go play some video games or something,” Kate told him. “That's right, you heard me. I'll call you when breakfast is ready.”

Instead of going to the living room, Jeremy shuffled out the door to the backyard, his baggy pajamas sagging pitifully with each step. Pam finished her tea and, when Kate's back was turned, she plucked an apple from the fruit bowl. Stepping outside, she enjoyed the spongy feeling of the dewy grass between her toes. It was a lovely morning, the sort with cool, damp air that reminded her of camping.

She found Jeremy sprawled across a picnic table next to Kate's rose garden. He moved aside to let her sit on the table, but then immediately lay back down, using her lap as a pillow. “Ah, that's better,” he noted.

The rose garden was so peaceful that Pam wondered why they didn't come out here more often. The lines of a poem sprung in her mind: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may...” It was a nice thought, but wholly unfeasible because these roses hadn't yet blossomed, let alone dropped their petals. They were beautiful nonetheless, their tightly wrapped crimson buds studding the lush summer landscape
like drops of blood.

Jeremy's stomach gurgled. “Are you going to be all right?” Pam asked.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” he sighed. “The smell of bacon was driving me crazy though.”

Pam watched sympathetically as he rubbed his flat tummy. As if she needed any further enticement, Jeremy stretched his arms over his head, allowing her to count the skinny ribs on his taut torso. Her fingers tapped each little indentation like she was playing a xylophone, though she took care to avoid his ticklish spot.

It was so fun that she almost forgot the apple in her hand. Pam handed it to him. “Don't tell your mom, okay?”

The young boy eagerly accepted her offering. His teeth made a satisfying crunch when he bit into the luscious red apple. “Thanks Pam! You're the best.”

“Tell me something I don't know,” she smiled. Pam played with his hair while Jeremy, still reclining on the table, devoured the apple. The faint scent of roses mingled in the breeze as the two of them lounged carefree in the garden.

9:20 AM

After breakfast, Pam went to her room to get dressed. The three of them were heading across town to William and Marla’s condo where Jeremy had invited his friends for a pool party. Knowing her main outfit for the day would be a swimsuit, Pam decided a plain white t-shirt and jean shorts would suffice in the meantime. As she brushed her hair, she idly imagined Jeremy and his friends staring in awe as she strolled up in her bikini. She was lost in this fantasy when she heard a slight commotion in the hallway. Kate and Jeremy were arguing about something.

“You are not wearing that to your dad's,” Kate told him.

“Why not? It's my birthday party. I should wear whatever I want.”

“Can't you at least put on something nice? You look like you're going to a casting call for a modern day remake of Lord of the Flies.”

Their voices grew louder and louder until they reached Pam's room. Her door was already open but Kate politely knocked anyway to announce their presence. “Pam, could you do me a favor and make him look presentable?” Holding Jeremy by the shoulders, she gently shoved him in Pam's direction. “You always have a good eye for what looks nice on him.”

“Pam always thinks I look nice,” Jeremy pointed out. Standing behind him, Kate rolled her eyes.

“I'll take care of it,” Pam promised.
“Thank you,” Kate said. “I’m going to finish getting ready. Shall we leave in fifteen minutes?”

“That sounds good,” Pam said. She followed Jeremy to his room.

“I look fine, don’t I?” Jeremy asked. He was wearing a faded blue hoodie that sported paint stains and several holes. His gray shorts were, upon closer examination, a threadbare pair of cut-off sweats.

“Of course,” Pam said. She found his unkempt appearance charming but she supposed Kate didn't want any judgment from William or his girlfriend. “Your mom just wants you to look nice for a few hours. You don't have to wear these clothes all day. Did you remember to pack your swimsuit?”

“Yeah.” Jeremy stripped to his underwear, then joined Pam at the closet. “How about one of these?” He held up two t-shirts. One read 'The Party Has Arrived' while the other proclaimed 'I Do My Own Stunts'.

“I like those too,” Pam agreed. “But I think your mom wants something a little dressier. Try this instead.” She handed him a black polo shirt from the closet, then went to his dresser to search for pants.

“Not those jeans,” Jeremy protested when she set a pair on his bed. “I hate the buttonfly design.”

“These are the only clean jeans I could find.”

Resigned to his fate, Jeremy began hopping on one leg as he tugged on the jeans. He spent several minutes with the buttons on the fly before giving up. “I'll just leave them unbuttoned,” he proposed. “Nobody will notice, right?”

“Let me try.” Pam knelt down in front of him. “How hard could it possibly be?” Pretty hard, as it turned out. It was difficult to force the buttons through the stiff denim buttonholes. She wondered who invented the whole concept of buttonfly pants. Zippers were far more sensible.

“I got one!” Pam announced. “Three more to go...”

“Did you really get me something cool for my birthday?” Jeremy asked.

“I sure did. Actually two things. One you can open at your dad's. The other one you'll have to wait though.”

“Gosh, a second present. It is big?”

Pam shook her head. “Not exactly, no.”

“Expensive?”

Pam successfully buttoned another button. “Surprisingly, yes. It cost $75.”

“Will my friends be super impressed when I show it to them?”

“Um, I'm not sure. It's not exactly the sort of thing you can parade around.”

Jeremy rubbed his chin, thinking. “It is breakable?”

“Ha. You better not break it.” Pam managed one more button before giving up on the last one. Kate was coming down the stairs anyway. “No more hints,” she told him. “You'll have to be patient.”
Upon reaching his father's condo, they had scarcely stepped out of the car before Apple came running out the front door. She was dressed in regular jeans and a t-shirt. It occurred to Pam that this was the first time she had ever seen Apple dressed in non-vintage clothing.

“Happy birthday, Jeremy!” Apple clapped a cone-shaped birthday hat on his head, then secured it under his chin with an elastic strap. “How does it feel to be twelve?”

“I don’t technically turn twelve until tonight,” Jeremy told her.

“It's true,” Kate called out. She was hauling out a large plastic box filled with party supplies from the trunk. “It was the longest day of my life. Little did I know that it would turn out to be the longest twelve years of my life.”

“Don't make fun of me on my birthday,” Jeremy warned.

Kate kissed his cheek. “I'm joking, my precious progeny.”

“Let me take that box,” Apple offered. “It looks heavy.”

“It's lighter than it looks,” Kate said, shifting the box to her hip to hold out a hand. “You must be Apple. I've heard so much about you. Jeremy talks about you a lot, like how you went truffle hunting in the woods last week.” Truffle hunting? Pam hadn't been privy to this tale.

“Not as much as he talks about Pam, I bet,” Apple said, blushing. It was a suspicious blush that immediately caught Pam's eye. Was Apple trying to deflect Kate's comment?

“True, true,” Kate nodded. “Pam has sadly supplanted even me as the #1 woman in Jeremy's life.”

Apple laughed. “In that case, I better get in one last dance.” Taking Jeremy's hand, she began twirling him in the parking lot while humming the happy birthday song. He seemed both embarrassed and flattered as Apple guided him through some classic ballroom moves.

Traitor.

Oblivious to Pam's fuming, his mom smiled. “It's so sweet how those two get along so nicely,” Kate commented.

Big deal, Pam thought. Given the opportunity, Jeremy could get along great with venomous snakes, a prickly cactus, or (if he were sufficiently bored) a sack of pebbles. Pam retrieved some birthday presents from the trunk. “Hey Apple, can you take these inside?” she asked.

“Of course.” The moment she took the packages, however, Pam slipped an arm around Jeremy's waist, intertwined their fingers, and began sashaying him between the parked cars. Apple gave her a good-natured glare. “Wait a minute! Did you just cut in on my dance?”

“Yes,” Pam said, sticking out her tongue. Jeremy was too busy trying not to step on her feet, but Kate and Apple chuckled. It felt juvenile to stick out her tongue, but it was probably the most
satisfaction she could get in this setting. Pam would have preferred giving Apple a more obscene gesture.

11:47 AM

The sun had risen high in the perfectly blue June sky. The warm day was just right for a pool party. Pam didn't care much for planned communities, but she was nonetheless envious of the amenities offered by William and Marla's condo development. For his son's birthday, William had reserved the shared area consisting of a covered veranda with picnic tables and grills. The seating overlooked a shimmering pool surrounded by shade umbrellas, loungers, and a well-manicured garden resplendent with scented wisteria shrubs and sunny daisies.

Not hungry after Kate's lavish breakfast, Pam ignored the potato salad and hot dogs, instead sticking with a sensible salad of mixed greens. Jeremy sat between his parents on one side of a picnic table while Pam and Apple dined on the opposite side. Marla had discreetly made other plans for Jeremy's party. It was a thoughtful gesture on her part, as Jeremy was visibly glowing to have both his parents' attention.

One end of the picnic table was piled with various wrapped boxes. “Can I open my presents now?” Jeremy asked through a mouthful of hot dog.

“Let's wait until we finish eating,” said Kate.

“Maybe in a little bit, buddy,” William agreed.

“I wasn't asking you guys. I was asking Pam.”

His parents exchanged a wary look, then glanced at Pam. Being accustomed to this argument from Jeremy, Kate was exasperated but William uncertain. Apple giggled. “I've seen this on TV!” she said, elbowing Pam. “You're the good cop. Or is it the bad cop?”

Pam tried to laugh along with Apple, but something was brushing her leg. Under the picnic table, Jeremy's toe insistently poked her ankle. When she gave him a cautionary look, he flashed his puppy dog eyes.

“Please, Pam?”

His foot, wriggling toes and all, wandered near the inside of her thigh. “Well, why not?” she reasoned to William and Kate. “His birthday only comes once a year.”

William sighed and shook his head. Pam was surprised to see him pull out a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and hand it to his ex-wife. “We had a bet on whether or not you would cave into one of Jeremy's demands,” Kate explained.

“I thought you were made of sterner stuff,” William complained to Pam, a twinkle in his eye.

“I can usually get Pam to cave. Like maybe eight times of ten,” Jeremy announced. “So can I open presents now?”
Pam sputtered for a response. He still had his foot between her thighs and his heel made light contact against the denim crotch, causing her to feel overly warm down there. Unable to think of a comeback, she shoved a present at Jeremy. He set aside his hot dog to tear off the wrapping paper.

In no time at all, he blazed through three presents. From Apple: a titanium spork-knife combo. From his dad: a headlamp and a pair of walkie-talkies. From his mom: a travel-size first-aid kit. Though perplexed by this last gift, Jeremy did his best to be polite. “Uh, cool. Thanks mom.”

“Look inside it, silly.”

Jeremy unzipped the case. Nestled among the band-aids, gauze pads, and packaged antiseptic towelettes was a shiny iPod touch. “Oh, cool! Thanks mom!”

“That's the response I was looking for,” Kate noted. “You're welcome.”

“The iPod is cool, but what's with all this survival gear?” Jeremy wondered. “Are you sending me off into the woods for some TV show?”

Kate and William looked at each other with nervous excitement. “We have a surprise for you,” his dad said. “We found a summer camp that we thought you would enjoy. You're going on an adventure!”

“There will be all sorts of fun stuff,” Kate chimed in. “Horses. Archery. Um...” She tried to remember what else the camp offered. “Pottery.”

“Cool.” Jeremy nodded, still being polite. “That's a lot of stuff to do. Is this an overnight camp?”

“Not just overnight,” his dad said. “It's a six week program.”

“Oh.” Jeremy glanced at Pam. He was smiling with his lips, but not his eyes. Looking away, Pam quietly prodded her salad with a fork. His parents were surprised by this non-reaction from their son.

“We have a brochure at home,” Kate told him. “Wait until you see all the cool activities they have.”

“And we can do some shopping for supplies,” William said. “You'll need a backpacking tent. Waterproof matches.”

“A Bowie knife and flare gun?” Jeremy said hopefully.

“Well, maybe a pocketknife and a whistle,” William decided.

“When does the camp start?” Jeremy asked.

“Sunday,” Kate answered.

“This Sunday? Four days from now?”

Kate and William exchanged a look. “Do you not want to go?” his dad asked.

“No... I guess I'm just surprised.” Jeremy picked up his hot dog, then put it down again. “I mean, that's not much time to get ready.”

“Don't worry about that,” Kate said. “We'll make sure you have everything you need. And we can always mail stuff if you need anything. And Pam can help you pack. Right, Pam?”

“Certainly,” Pam said, though she was far from certain of anything at the moment. Did Jeremy have
a worried look? She almost detected a hint of fear in his eyes. Wanting to reassure him, she reached across the table to pat his hand. “You'll be fine. Really. It's going to be fun.”

He nodded, then reached for the last present on the table. “Is this from you?” he asked.

“Yup.”

Jeremy unwrapped the small box, taking greater care with it than he did with the others. It jingled when he shook it. He held the box upside down. A thin plate of metal, attached to a silver chain, tumbled into his palm. It was a jigsaw piece, stamped with his name and birth date.

“It's like those dog tags they wear in the army,” Pam explained.

“I always wanted one of these,” Jeremy said, slipping the chain around his neck.

“That's perfect,” William said. “Now we'll be able to identify your corpse if you get lost in the woods at camp.” Only Apple laughed at his joke. Kate and Pam were not amused.

“Why is it a jigsaw shape though?” Jeremy asked.

It was actually part of a matching set, a bit of information Pam decided to omit. The companion piece was waiting at home on her dresser: a second jigsaw shape that fit perfectly with Jeremy's. Instead of explaining, Pam said, “Because you're such a mystery.”

Everyone laughed. Kate leaned over to whisper something in Jeremy's ear. He gave her a balky look. “Mom! No.” But Kate kept nudging his arm until Jeremy bashfully stood up and went over to Pam's side of the table.

“Thank you, Pam,” he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Everyone laughed again, probably because they weren't sure who was blushing more: Pam or Jeremy.

1:10 PM

Everyone had a job. William cleaned up the leftover food and plates from lunch. Kate, ever health-conscious, was carefully dissecting a pineapple to assemble a fruit platter for party snacks. Apple arranged party favors and noisemakers in oversized containers. Jeremy had changed into his swim trunks and busied himself with the pool skimmer, fastidiously snagging every last stray leaf or dead insect that floated in the water.

Pam decided her job would be to keep an eye on Jeremy while he skimmed the pool. If he somehow fell into the water, it would be her job to rescue him. Plus, it was fun to watch as he struggled to balance the unwieldy pool skimmer. Particularly once he removed his shirt, allowing her to enjoy the sight of his skinny muscles flexing in the sunshine. His brand new swim trunks were a maroon color and decorated by a repeating pattern of whale emoji, the one with an upturned tail and jaunty
Kate frowned at him as she cubed blocks of cheddar and pepperjack for the cheese platter. “Pam, could you make sure he put on enough sunscreen?” she asked. “I told him to put some on when he changed into his trunks. Knowing him, he probably just squirted some onto his forehead. There should be some in that little backpack over there.”

Pam slung the backpack over her shoulder and descended the steps from the patio to the pool. Jeremy had moved to the far side where he was attempting to scoop up a stray wisteria blossom that was just out of reach. “Hey you,” she called. “Did you put on sunscreen yet?”

“Uh, yeah,” he answered.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Pam said. “Let’s put some on before you turn crispy.” She took refuge under an umbrella that protected two poolside recliners. Jeremy set aside the skimmer and joined her in the shade. Her hand dug in the backpack for a moment before her fingers closed on a familiar-shaped bottle. Coppertone.

“We haven’t used this in a long time,” she remarked.

“Oh yeah.” He peered at the bottle, then smiled as though it were an old friend. “I forgot about this stuff.”

“I’ll do your back first,” Pam said. “Hold out your arms.” She squirted a healthy dollop of Coppertone into her palm and began working it into his skin, making sure to apply extra on his shoulders where he almost always sunburned. When she accidentally got some on his trunks, Pam dipped a hand into the pool to wet her fingers and clean it off.

“Turn around, please.” Pam swiped her fingers across his forehead, cheeks and nose, leaving streaks that resembled warpaint. Jeremy scrunched his eyes shut as she rubbed it in. It didn’t seem to matter how much sunscreen she slathered on him because his face was already covered in a fresh crop of summer freckles. Melanoma worries aside, she had to admit they were cute.

Pam did his arms next, then his chest. The Coppertone now filled the air with its pungently cloying scent. Despite the warm summertime breeze, Pam was suddenly transported back to last autumn when Jeremy would bring her the Coppertone and ask to play Call of Duty. Her lips curling into a smile, she recalled the countless times she would sneak out of his room late at night while the signature scent of Coppertone lingered in the air. It was only a few months ago, yet it seemed ages since she last waved him off, moving her open palm across his erection in that special way he liked.

Pam felt a twinge between her legs as her kitten unexpectedly went wide from the memories. Her breathing quickened when she knelt on one knee and bent low to apply sunscreen to his legs. Her face was inches from his crotch now. Surely it was her imagination, but the whale emoji adorning his trunks seemed to be winking at her.

Jeremy cleared his throat. “Gosh. This smell really reminds me of... you know.”

Pam straightened and began rubbing more Coppertone on his chest. He didn’t need anymore, but she couldn’t stop touching him. Her slippery fingers slid across his smooth chest, enjoying the contrast between hard bone and firm muscle.

“Yeah,” she said, smiling. “Me too. Remember that time we laid out in front of the fireplace in November and pretended we were suntanning?”

“Sure,” Jeremy nodded. “That was the day you asked me to put Coppertone on your back. And, um,
on your front too.” Now rubbing sunscreen into his neck, Pam glanced at his midsection where a prominent bulge was, rather obscenely, calling attention to the whale emojis on his swim trunks. She could hardly blame him. The sweet scent of Coppertone was making her sweat like a horny sailor. Pam bit her lip when her kitten involuntarily clenched, squeezing out a single drop of wetness.

The moment was interrupted when Apple called out. “Jeremy! Your friends are here!” Startled, Pam's head snapped to the stairs where Apple was guiding a group of boys toward the pool.

“Oh no,” Jeremy whispered. “What are we gonna do?” The bulge in his shorts was bigger than ever. And it wasn't going away anytime soon.

Led by Apple, the squadron of boys was closing in fast. Pam positioned him so his back faced the crowd, but she knew that would be insufficient cover. Taking Jeremy by the shoulders, she quickly whispered in his ear, “Don't be mad at me I love you okay?” Then she impulsively kissed him before shoving him into the pool.

“What are you-- HEY!” Jeremy’s arms helplessly windmilled in the air before he plunged into the water with a gurgling splash. His friends hooted and hollered as Jeremy sputtered in the pool. Apple gave Pam a bemused look.

“He kept complaining he was too hot,” Pam explained. “So I decided he would like it if... uh oh.” Jeremy had climbed out of the pool and was now dripping water onto the gray concrete. He didn't look very happy with her, but the impromptu dip in the water had taken care of the bulge in his trunks. Not even bothering to find a towel, he began stalking toward her.

Pam backed away slowly. “Careful there,” she called. “You don’t want to slip and fall on the...” Once he was ten feet away, Jeremy charged. Squawking in terror, Pam beat a hasty retreat. His friends watched with obvious amusement as he chased her around the pool.

“Jeremy, don’t!” Pam pleaded as she dashed away. “It was the only way! I was just trying to help!” They circled a row of loungers for several circuits before Jeremy found a garden hose near the row of wisteria trees. Even though he was a dozen feet away from her, the water pressure was sufficiently powerful to cover the distance. Pam dodged the water as best she could while frantically moving away from him. The sprays of water kept missing her by mere inches on either side. Not realizing what she was doing, Pam scrambled onto a short ladder that led to the diving board.

She glanced over her shoulder. He wasn't following her, which was a small victory. “Jeremy, can you please be nice?” she said hopefully. “I'm still wearing my regular clothes. Just wait for me to put on my swimsuit. Then you can get me wet. Okay?” To her relief, he set down the garden hose. The dripping boy climbed onto the diving board to join her. It wasn't until she noticed the sly grin on his face that Pam started to worry.

It suddenly dawned on her what he had done. “You weren't even aiming for me with the hose,” she said. “You were just trying to get me onto this diving board.”

“Yup.”

She glanced nervously at their audience. The boys seemed entertained, although Apple had a sympathetic look. “That was really smart,” Pam told him.

“Yup.” He was, ever so slowly, moving closer and closer. The diving board dipped under their combined weight. Pam retreated as far as she could until her heels were perched at the edge of the board.
“Any chance you could forgive me?” she asked, crossing her fingers.

Jeremy shrugged. “Don’t worry, the water isn’t too cold.” He charged, throwing his arms around her in a tackle that sent them both tumbling. Pam only had time for a quick shriek before they landed in the water. It was so cold that her spine immediately clenched in pain. She kicked her way to the surface where she gasped for breath. Treading water, Pam wiped aside her wet bangs so she could see properly, then made her way to the pool’s edge.

Having beat her there, Jeremy had already climbed out of the pool. She ascended the ladder, the water dripping off her in unpleasant rivulets. Her wet clothes clung to her skin and her hair felt like a sodden mess draped across her back. Pam realized she had chosen a poor day to wear a semi-sheer bra. Combined with her saturated white t-shirt, there was absolutely nothing to hide the obvious brown shading of her nipples. A towel would have saved her, if only there had been one in arm’s reach. As it was, countless pairs of eyes were watching her every move.

Pam didn’t know what to do. Cover her breasts with her hands, possibly drawing even more scrutiny? Or just pretend she didn’t realize what they were staring at? “Excuse me,” Pam said, pushing her way through the passel of preteen boys. It wasn’t easy, but she kept her arms at her sides as she strode past them. For the past several weeks she had often fantasized about commanding their attention, but this wasn’t exactly what she had in mind.

1:19 PM

“So much for looking nice at the pool party,” Pam muttered to her reflection in the mirror. It helped to change out of her sopping clothes. While she was at it, Pam slathered on generous amounts of sunscreen and put on her swimsuit. Then she salvaged her hair the best she could, putting it into a ponytail and styling her chestnut bangs. The original plan was to look like a glamorous movie star lounging by the pool, but now she just looked like some random woman who had been at the beach all day.

She studied her appearance in the mirror. Had she chosen a swimsuit that was too risqué? Her black bikini was styled with semi-transparent mesh at strategic points, highlighting her modest décolletage and the sides of her hips. Self-conscious, she found herself hesitating to return to the pool. Now that the moment of truth had finally arrived, Pam worried that someone (namely Jeremy's parents) would question why she chose such a revealing swimsuit for a boys' party.

“It’s a perfectly reasonable swimsuit,” she told herself. “It’s from Target, not Victoria's Secret. Totally acceptable.”

After numerous false starts, she steeled her nerves and returned to the pool. To her relief, it was completely empty. Taking advantage, Pam lay down on a chaise. She crossed and uncrossed her legs several times, trying to find a comfortable position. Was her tummy sticking out too much? Pam sucked in her breath until she felt dizzy. Then her exposed skin began prickling from the cool air so she moved to a sunnier spot. She was finally starting to feel at ease when a stream of boys came pouring down the stairs from the patio area. Pam tried to play it cool. “Maybe they won’t notice me
over here,” she thought.

That hope was dashed when Jeremy’s voice cut through the din. “Hey Pam! Can you help figure out this electric pump? We need to inflate a bunch of floaty toys.”

It took her a second to locate him in the teeming mass. Unable to find an alternate route, Pam had no choice but to wade through the crowd of boys. The haze of preteen hormones hung in the air like a thick fog, rendering her lightheaded. Three boys whacked each other with pool noodles. Another group chased one another around a lounger. No one seemed to notice that she was wearing a bikini.

Not even Jeremy, who wordlessly handed her the instructions for the air pump. He remained glued to her side as she read the instructions, his upper arm distractingly brushing the side of her breast. Each time Pam tried to subtly step away, he would lean in closer. It was difficult enough to concentrate in this crowd of boys. Jeremy was not helping things with this casual touching.

“Hey, what's that smell?” someone asked.

“Elliot farted.”

“I did not!”

“No, really. It smells like... I can't figure it out.”

“Oh yeah. I smell it too. It's...”

Everyone began sniffing the air. Pam was on the verge of deciphering the electric pump instructions when one of the boys announced, “I know! It's smells like an orange creamsicle!”

“Oh. Heh.” Pam said, looking up. “That's my sunscreen.”

“Your sunscreen smells like orange creamsicle?”

Being the closest to her, Jeremy moved close to sniff her neck. “Yum!” he proclaimed. The next thing she knew, Pam was inundated as the boys followed Jeremy's example. Crowding her, they began sniffing the air like baby sharks circling their first kill.

“I don't smell anything,” someone said. “Are you sure it's her sunscreen?”

The crowd of boys pressed even closer. Her kitten immediately perked up inside her bikini. If she were reacting like this, she wondered what was happening inside the boys' swim trunks. Were they inflating, one by one, in an unexpected rush of blood?

A boy grabbed her wrist and brought it to his nose. “Wow. They really nailed it. There are scientists whose only job is to create artificial smells, you know.”

“This one time, Pam was wearing something that smelled like a fizzy strawberry soda,” Jeremy informed his friends. “It was nuts!”

The boys formed a line to take turns sniffing her wrist. The irony was too much. Pam had spent the last few weeks picking out a cute swimsuit, but it was the scent of her sunscreen that actually caught the boys' attention. Accepting the situation, Pam patiently waited it out though she couldn't keep from occasionally squeezing her knees together. The attention was short-lived, however, as someone suggested it was time to get in the pool. The boys began taking off their shirts while Pam stood dazed in the middle of it all.
“Stay calm, stay calm,” she told herself. Her heart fluttered at the sight of so many disrobing boys. Surrounded by gawky collarbones and skinny chests, she didn't know where to look. “Take deep breaths.”

The group of preteen boys rushed for the pool, leaving Pam behind in a hodgepodge of discarded shirts, towels, and flip-flops. She cleared off a lounger and collapsed into it. It must have been the mid-day sun beating down. Every inch of her was melting.

1:37 PM

After she had sufficiently recovered from the sniffing, Pam decided she deserved a snack. She went up the stairs to the patio, where she found the fruit and cheese platters thoughtfully offered by Jeremy's mom. Among the plates of food was also the empty pineapple shell that Kate had so expertly eviscerated. It still appeared quite solid so Pam experimentally filled it with some iced tea. No leaks. Elated, she added a straw and returned to the pool with her fruit plate.

Pam often swore that Jeremy had some sort of telepathic radar that pinged him whenever she had food. Sure enough, she had hardly sat down when he appeared out of nowhere, dripping wet. “Hey, neat!” Jeremy said. “You're drinking out of a pineapple. That's so tight!”

“Yes, very tight,” Pam replied. Spending time with his friends always caused him to temporarily pick up their mannerisms and speech patterns. She held the pineapple at arm's length so Jeremy could sip from the straw. “Please don't get any water on me. We're even now, right?”

“Of course.” Jeremy helped himself to her fruit plate.

“After eating, you're supposed to wait an hour before you get back in the water,” she reminded him.

“But it's my birthday,” he said. “I can do whatever I want.”

“Right, right,” Pam said, unconvinced. She watched as he picked her plate clean of strawberries, leaving behind nothing but pineapple, grapes, cantaloupe, and a single cherry. She frowned at him. “You know, I was really looking forward to those strawberries.”

“Oops. Sorry.” He washed down his mouthful of strawberries with another sip from her pineapple. “I'd get you some more but, you know... My friends are waiting for me.” Picking up the cherry by the stem, Jeremy held it a few inches from her lips. “Here, have this instead. It's red, so it's sort of like a strawberry.”

Leaning forward, Pam sunk her teeth into the juicy red cherry while Jeremy pulled the stem free. He was about to return to the pool when she stopped him. “Wait,” she said, chewing. Holding his wrist, Pam spit the cherry pit into his palm and then closed his fingers around it.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” he questioned. Instead of answering, Pam kissed his closed fist and patted his butt to send him on his way. Shaking his head, he tossed the cherry pit into the grove of wisteria before running off to rejoin the party.
“The things I let him get away with on his birthday,” Pam sighed, surveying her fruit plate. She had barely taken two bites before another boy approached.

“Can I have a drink from your pineapple?” he asked. Despite a rather unfortunate haircut, he was sort of cute.

But not that cute. “There's plenty of drinks up there,” Pam said, pointing to the steps toward the patio.

“I don't want to go all the way up there,” he said. “I just want a sip.”

“Well, this is mine,” Pam reasoned. “It's got my germs all over it. You should get your own.”

“But you let Jeremy have some,” the boy persisted. “I saw you.”

“Yeah. But that was different.”

“Why?”

Pam groped for an answer, but couldn't think of anything. She was saved by the sound of a whistle. The boys in the pool immediately stopped, staring at someone coming down the steps. Pam turned to see what they were looking at.

Apple was gliding down the stairs, dressed in a classic red lifeguard's swimsuit. Though it was a one-piece, the bathing suit still showcased her curvy breasts and long legs. An unspoken communication took place among the boys as they stared at Apple, then glanced at each other. Pam couldn't help but feel a twinge of green jealousy.

Apple twirled a whistle around her finger and carried surfboard-shaped flotation device. “No running at the pool,” she announced. “It's against the rules.” Then she climbed onto the lifeguard's chair where she began scanning the pool like a hawk, blowing her whistle when someone brought food too close to the pool or when the boys got too rowdy. Pam rolled her eyes when Apple informed the poolful of boys that she was trained in CPR.

2:09 PM

Kate and William entertained the parents who had chosen to stay, serving them sangria and marcona almonds under a shady picnic table on the patio. This left Pam and Apple in charge of the pool party with its booming music and shouting boys. Apple did her best to limit the rough-housing but had given up once it became clear no one was listening.

Under the guise of injury prevention, Pam kept a careful eye on the pool though in reality she was quietly learning names. The boy with cute shoulders was Peter. The one who looked way too old was Dakota. Paul wore a pair of charmingly clingy swim trunks while Elliot had very long eyelashes.

The boys were probably around Jeremy's age, but Pam was amazed by the variety of body types. Two boys towered over the others. Another sported a muscular frame that seemed better suited to
high schoolers. Jeremy was the shortest of them all. If she hadn't known better, she might have guessed he was the younger brother who had joined his older sibling's friends for the day.

Her gaze reliably hidden behind her sunglasses, Pam wished Jeremy could have a birthday party every week. Other women her age went to bars and dance clubs where it was socially acceptable to check out their interests. Pam, however, was relegated to furtive glimpses of boys roaming the neighborhood or shopping with their moms at Target. Attending this pool party made her feel like a kid in a candy store.

And, just like a candy store, there was preponderance of empty calories. None of the boys were as cute as Jeremy, but a few came close. The only way anyone could beat him was if she made a combination of features. Feeling like an artist or a madwoman, Pam created a monster in her head: Tom's wobbly knees, Jake's sharp collarbone, Emmet's dark eyes, Oscar's belly button. She mentally placed a question mark over the swim trunks of her assemblage. She liked surprises.

Physically, he stood apart from his peers. But was that all that separated him? Why did Jeremy cause her boy-dar to ping like a submarine in wartime while she received nothing but radio silence from his friends?

From time to time, she would catch one of the boys checking her out. Without fail, they would shyly look away each time. Even Jeremy followed this protocol, except his glance was always accompanied by a second one, this one wrought with a knowing insistence in his eyes. He was the type of boy who, having been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, would nonetheless be raiding it again a few minutes later. Not only was he unconcerned about being caught, but he liked getting caught.

He was the only one sprinkled with this fairy dust. Despite the buffet of wonders spread before her, Pam decided she would rather spend a short afternoon with Jeremy than an entire weekend with any of his friends. He was magical. The rest were ordinary.

2:45 PM

“Marco.”

“Polo.”

“Marco.”

“Polo.”

Pam had been sitting at the edge of the pool, soaking her feet, when Jeremy's friends invited her to play Marco Polo with them. It sounded harmless enough so Pam accepted.

“Marco,” Pam called out, her eyes closed.

“Polo,” the boys responded. Echo-location was difficult because of the confounding reverb from all
the hard surfaces surrounding the pool area. Slowly moving through the water, Pam headed in the
direction of the loudest voices. She had been caught three times already. Her female voice was easy
to spot among the chorus of boys, even though they weren't very deep. A few sounded like they had
sandpaper in their throats, but most of the boys' voices had not yet broken.

“Marco,” she said, skimming her arms on the water in a wide sweep.

“Polo,” the chorus answered. Pam cocked an ear. Did she hear Jeremy’s voice in there? As she
moved in that direction, she heard the sounds of splashing as they tried to get away. A series of
waves pressed against her from all sides as unseen boys swam or waded past her. Her fingers
touched the tiled edge of the pool.

“Marco.”

“Polo.”

There were perhaps only three or four voices in front of her now. She was positive Jeremy was still
one of them. Keeping her hand pressed against the tile, Pam began closing in on her prey. Thanks to
her spread arms and the pool's edge, there was nowhere to hide. There was a flurry of motion as she
felt some bodies slithering away.

“Marco.”

“Polo.” There was only a single voice now, dead ahead of her. Reaching out, Pam made contact
with a pair of shoulders. Even with her eyes closed, she could easily recognize a familiar
collarbone. At the base of his throat she found a telltale indentation.

“A-ha!” she proclaimed. “I got you!” Pretending to flail in the water, Pam held Jeremy by the
shoulder while her other hand moved underwater to give his rear a playful squeeze. But something
didn't feel quite right... Pam opened her eyes. Instead of seeing Jeremy's familiar face, she was
startled to find his friend Emmet squirming in her grasp.

Pam snatched her hand away. “Sorry. I thought you were J... Um, never mind.” Emmet stared at her
with saucer-sized eyes. “You're it now!” she told him. Then she casually swam to the other side of
the pool.

2:54 PM

Pam abandoned the pool when the boys engaged in a battle royale over the pool toys, all of which
were shaped like food. Jake flipped over a pizza slice, ejecting Conor and claiming it for his own.
Elliot, Tom, and Paul were fighting over a pink doughnut whose vinyl material kept squeaking in
their wet hands. Emmet ousted Jeremy from the watermelon so Jeremy commandeered the cherry
from Oscar by beating him into submission with a pool noodle.

Then they stopped fighting long enough to decide that it was more fun to belly flop from the diving
board and land on a pool toy. The trouble started when Tom dove for the pizza slice while Jeremy
was still on it.
“Hey!” Jeremy yelled. “Safeword! That's not cool, Tom. You're going to break someone's arm.”

“Safeword?” Tom repeated. “What does that mean?”

Ten minutes later, his friends were calling out 'safeword' at every opportunity. Someone had to go to the bathroom? Safeword. Emmet couldn't find his glasses? Safeword. The Gatorade was running low? Safeword.

Apple, dutifully patrolling the perimeter of the pool, approached Pam with a frown. “Do you suppose they even know what that means?” she asked.

“I doubt it,” Pam said. In the distance she could see Kate and William, along with the other parents, listening from the covered veranda with puzzled expressions.

“I'm pretty sure I heard Jeremy say it first,” said Apple. “I wonder where he learned it from?”

“He probably heard it on TV.”

3:26 PM

“Who do you guys think is cuter?” a voice asked. “Pam or Apple?”

Reclining alone at the opposite end of the pool, Pam leaned closer to the walkie-talkie she was using to eavesdrop on Jeremy and his friends. They were gathered in a gazebo that was at least fifty yards away, but she could hear their conversation as clear as day.

Apple had ordered everyone out of the water for a safety break, then disappeared into the bathroom. She was gone so long that Pam started to wonder if she had locked herself in a stall to weep about the rambunctious party. So far, the damage tally was two broken chaise loungers, three tipped-over umbrellas, and one mangled rhododendron. It honestly could have been worse. Personally, Pam's goal was to get through the party without opening a box of band-aids or calling for a Jaws of Life.

She was on her way to check on Apple when she passed the boys congregating in the gazebo. Their conversation became noticeably muted as she approached. They were clearly up to no good. Wondering what they were talking about, Pam tried loitering near the food table but the boys were obviously waiting for her to leave. Her eyes fell on the pair of walkie-talkies that lay among Jeremy's birthday presents. Removing a pony tail holder from her wrist, she snapped it around a walkie-talkie so the “transmit” button was pressed. Pam left it on the food table and casually slinked away with the other walkie-talkie. Once she safely returned to her chaise across the pool, she slyly held the radio to her ear.

The audio fidelity was surprisingly good. Without the walkie-talkie, Pam wouldn't have been able to hear a thing. With it, however, it sounded as if she were in the middle of the huddling boys. When she first started listening, the conversation centered around who was best at soccer. They were clearly up to no good. Wondering what they were talking about, Pam tried loitering near the food table but the boys were obviously waiting for her to leave. Her eyes fell on the pair of walkie-talkies that lay among Jeremy's birthday presents. Removing a pony tail holder from her wrist, she snapped it around a walkie-talkie so the “transmit” button was pressed. Pam left it on the food table and casually slinked away with the other walkie-talkie. Once she safely returned to her chaise across the pool, she slyly held the radio to her ear.

The audio fidelity was surprisingly good. Without the walkie-talkie, Pam wouldn't have been able to hear a thing. With it, however, it sounded as if she were in the middle of the huddling boys. When she first started listening, the conversation centered around who was best at soccer. Then the discussion changed to who had the highest score for a video game called Destiny 2. Eventually, they graduated to arguing over who dominated the recent Marco Polo game in the pool. There was so much testosterone-laden one-upmanship that Pam wouldn't have been surprised if the boys pulled out...
a ruler, dropped their swim trunks, and started measuring.

Then things started getting juicy. “Who do you guys think is cuter, Pam or Apple?” someone asked. Pam wasn't familiar enough with his friends to recognize voices yet. They all chimed in at once which made it difficult to follow the conversation, if you could call it that. Pam listened carefully for Jeremy's voice but he remained maddeningly mute.

“Apple has bigger boobs.”

“Yeah, but Pam has a better butt.”

“I think Pam is nicer. And she smells good too.”

“Yeah. Her orange creamsicle sunscreen was tight.”

“Did anyone hear me when I said Apple has bigger boobs?”

“But remember when Pam's t-shirt was wet?”

“Her nipples were tight AF!”

“We can't really decide who is cuter until we see Apple's nipples.”

“I was floating on the watermelon toy when Apple said I looked like a cowboy.”

“She probably wanted to reverse cowgirl with you.”

The boys broke out in chuckles, until someone tentatively asked, “What's reverse cowgirl?”

A familiar voice piped up. “Everyone knows what reverse cowgirl is. Don't be stupid.” Pam's eyebrows raised in surprise and intrigue. Jeremy knew what reverse cowgirl was?

“Oh yeah? What is it?”

“I'm not telling,” Jeremy's distant voice crackled over the walkie-talkie, but she could practically see the smugness in his voice. There was a thwup sound. Glancing across the pool, Pam saw the boys winding up like baseball pitchers. They appeared to be throwing grapes at each other.

“Don't throw food,” Jeremy told his friends. “We're going to get in trouble.”

“I bet Jeremy doesn't even know what reverse cowgirl is.”

“He does so! He probably does it with Pam all the time.”

“Shut up!” Jeremy said. Pam didn't even need the walkie-talkie for that part because he shouted so loudly. His voice rang across the pool in a dizzying series of echoes. A series of additional thwups sounded via the walkie-talkie.

“Stop throwing food, Jeremy,” his friend mocked, “you're going to get in trouble!”

Squinting across the pool, Pam recognized Conor giving Jeremy a shove. Jeremy, of course, shoved back. A scrum broke out. Concealing the walkie-talkie in a towel, she called out, “Play nice over there, boys!” A dozen heads turned her way, startled at first, then contrite from her admonition. Smiling earnestly, Jeremy gave her a friendly wave. Pam rolled her eyes.

There was a brief moment of silence on the walkie-talkie. “Dakota, weren't you and Ashley going
out last winter? Did you guys do reverse cowgirl?"

“Geez, Conor, what is your problem?"

“Guess not. Kissing?”

There was a pause. “Maybe a little.”

“Second base? Did you get to second base?”

“Uh, I tried but she wouldn’t let me. I sorta cupped one through her shirt for, like, half a second though.” There was oohs and aahs of approval as though the boys were watching a fireworks display. Pam saw them slapping Dakota on the back.

Someone else cleared his throat. “My sister had a friend over one night and she was using my room to change. I didn’t know so I walked right in. I totally saw her boobs.”

Another round of cheers. “Who was this?”

“Allison Miller.” Whoever she was, Allison must have been fairly attractive because there was a palpable wave of excitement.

“So, Jeremy, have you ever seen Pam naked?”

“Shut up, Conor,” Jeremy said.

“What, not even a little? Doesn't she live with you? You must get to see something. Like if she had a towel wrapped around her and it accidentally falls off?”

Jeremy hesitated, causing his friends to immediately pounce, demanding details. “Um, I guess... well. This one time? I, uh, saw Pam in her bra. I knocked on her door and, when she answered, her shirt wasn't buttoned. Like she forgot to do it. And her bra was almost see-through.”

Upon hearing this tidbit, the boys cheered. “Was she nipping out? I heard girls can squirt milk if they’re nipping out.”

“Um, I don't think that's true,” Jeremy said.

“It is so! My brother told me.”

“Sure, whatever.” Jeremy glanced at his clearly enraptured friends. Even from across the pool, Pam could tell he was thrilled to be holding court. Emboldened, he continued, “And this other time, I got a peek between Pam's legs. She was... sitting on the couch. In her bathrobe. With her legs uncrossed.”

“Was she wearing underwear?”

Another pause. “Um, no,” Jeremy answered.

“What did it look like?”

“Well, you know...” Jeremy nervously cleared his throat. “There was hair. Like on top. And her kitten was kind of pink inside.”

“Her what?”
“Uh, I mean her pussy,” Jeremy amended. “It was sorta pink. I mean, I couldn't really see inside but I, uh, saw something pink.”

The boys were so distracted by this revelation that they promptly forgot Jeremy's odd choice of euphemism. “Was her pussy dripping?” someone asked. “I heard girls are constantly drippy down there. Like a leaky faucet.”

“They do not, dummy,” someone else replied. “They only leak blood during that time of the month. And it's not even dripping, it just comes out all at once.”

Pam shook her head in disbelief. Was the year 2017 or 1957? American sex education was clearly in dire straits. She wished she could help. It could be her job to travel from town to town, arming young boys with knowledge and technique. Countless heterosexual women would write to her, thanking her for their skilled husbands and impeccable sexual lives, even promising to one day send their own sons to...

“Well, Jeremy? Was it dripping or not?”

“How would I know?” he said. “It's not like I stuck my finger in it.”

“You should have asked. Maybe Pam would have let you.”

“She would not,” Jeremy denied.

“Just ask,” someone urged.

“Or maybe she would let you feel her boobs. Then you could get to second base... before you even get to first!”

“That would be so cool! Do you think anyone has ever done that?” An uncharacteristic silence descended upon the twelve boys as they pondered the question. Pam realized with a blush that Jeremy had done exactly that. He was feeling up her breasts well before she ever kissed him.

“Has anything else exciting ever happened with Pam?” someone inquired.


From the tone of his voice, Pam could tell he was dying to brag to his friends. She tried to think of a way to help him. Hiding the walkie-talkie under her chaise, she called out, “Jeremy? Can you come over here? I need a quick favor.”

All eyes were on him as he shuffled over to Pam's side of the pool. “What's up?” he asked.

Pam handed him a container of sunscreen. “Can you put some on my back? I think I need more.”

“Sure.” He squirted some into his palm.

Pam turned so her back faced him, then pulled her brown hair out of the way. “Just make sure not to get any on my swimsuit, okay?”

“Wait, how am I supposed to put sunscreen on your back but not get any on your suit?” he asked.

“Unclasp my top, silly.”

“Like, right here?”
“Why not? It's not a big deal.” Pam lay face down on her lounger while Jeremy stooped to examine the back of her bikini. Since his palm was full of sunscreen, the young boy was forced to unhook the clasp one-handed. Having perfected this technique with frequent practice on her bra, Jeremy was able to unclasp the bikini top as easily as unzipping his fly. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see his friends pretending to act casual as they observed the proceedings from fifty feet away. She hoped none of them noticed his expertise.

“Mmm, the sunscreen is warm from being in the sun,” Pam said as Jeremy worked it into her skin. It felt especially nice when his fingers massaged inside her shoulder blades.

“Is that good enough?” Jeremy asked.

“Don't forget to put some on my lower back,” she reminded. He did so, taking care to steer clear of her bikini and, by extension, the soft curve of her bum. “Be sure to get right up to the swimsuit bottom, please. I don't want a strip of sunburn.” Working carefully, Jeremy diligently finger-painted a layer of sunscreen across her body. Pam coyly arched her back, pushing her bum upward. The motion awakened a delightful sensation between her legs so she pulsed several times, causing her clit to throb.

“I think I got everything,” Jeremy said. “Should I re-hook your top?”

Pam let him fasten her bikini, but then immediately rolled onto her back. Extending a leg straight into the air, she wiggled her bare toes at him. “Can you put some sunscreen on my ankles and feet too?” When he made a questioning face, Pam said, “Or maybe I can ask one of your friends if you don't feel like it.”

“I'll do it,” Jeremy said gruffly. He squirted a thick dollop of sunscreen on her ankle and began working it into her skin. Pam held back a giggle when he tickled her sole with his slippery fingers.

“Be sure to get the spaces in between my toes too,” she advised. She was already worked up, but his nimble fingers only made her feel warmer inside as they wiggled into each little crevice. She held up her other foot when he was done with the first. Laying on the chaise lounge, Pam was very aware of his eyes flickering between her legs, not to mention the captive boys across the way. It excited her to have an audience.

“Thanks, cabana boy.” Pam said. “That was tight.”

“You're welcome,” he said, wiping his hands on his chest.

Sitting up, Pam adjusted her bikini and fished a five dollar bill from her purse. “Go treat your friends to something nice,” she said.

Jeremy stared at the money, perplexed. “Uh, okay. Thanks.” Accepting the cash, he shuffled off to rejoin his friends. The moment he was safely out of earshot, Pam retrieved the walkie-talkie and turned up the volume.

“Dude! That was insane!”

“Does Pam ask you to do stuff like that all the time? You were practically touching her butt.”

“*She* paid you? No way. I would have paid her to let me do something like that.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a whistle. No one had noticed Apple's return to the pool area. “Safety break is over!” she called. Abandoning the chaise loungers in a cacophony of scraping chair legs and pounding feet, the boys gleefully returned to the pool.
Apple strolled over to where Pam still lay on her chaise. “No more pool for you?” she inquired.

“I'm good,” Pam replied. “I don't feel like getting wet again.”

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3:53 PM

“Everybody out of the water!” Apple called. “We're heading inside. Video game tournament. Doesn't that sound fun?”

This was Apple's fourth attempt to clear out the pool. A few clouds strayed across the sky, occasionally blotting out the sun but it was still a beautiful June afternoon. Most of the boys were loudly congregating near the patio but a few stragglers remained in the water, paying little attention to Apple. She sighed and blew her whistle. No effect.

“Hey punks,” Pam said. “Conor, Peter, and Tom: I'm talking to you. Out of the water. Now.” The boys immediately picked up the edge in her voice. Glancing at each other, they began climbing out of the pool.

“I wish I had that kind of authority,” Apple said. “How do you know their names? I can't even tell them apart.”

Pam smiled modestly. “I've always had a knack for names and faces,” she said.

With a pained expression, Apple surveyed the boys as they chased each other by leapfrogging from one chaise lounge to another. “This is more exhausting than I realized.”

“Why don't you take a break?” Pam suggested. “I can handle the rest of the party.”

“Are you sure?” Apple said. “I don't want to toss you to the wolves.”

“I'll be fine. Sometimes, I get energized from the chaos.” As she said this, Jeremy raced past with a pack of boys hot on his trail. “Speaking of wolves...” Pam began.

“Pam, help!” Jeremy said, hiding behind her. “We're playing reverse tag and I'm the last one!” His hands gripped her hips as he peeked out at the advancing marauders. With a yell, Jeremy took off running again when they got close. Pam, meanwhile, was treated to a four second assault of flailing limbs, bare shoulders, and wet swim trunks as the boys simply slithered around her in pursuit of their quarry.

Having primly moved out of the way, Apple received zero jostling yet she still glared at the passing boys. “You don't have a headache?” she asked.

“I feel great,” Pam assured her.

Apple wearily blew her whistle several times and began herding the boys from the pool area. With Pam's assistance, a messy cavalcade formed, replete with tousled hair and colorful towels. Apple led
the way up the stairs while Pam brought up the rear, scanning the now-empty pool area for any forgotten items. Jeremy, she noticed, was just ahead of her in the procession.

Maybe it was because of the Coppertone incident before the party started. Maybe it was the boys sniffing her orange creamsicle-scented sunscreen. Or maybe it was Jeremy's delightful foot massage. Truthfully, there were countless reasons, but Pam was hornier than a teenager stuck in the backseat during a boring cross-country road trip with her parents.

“Hey Jeremy,” she said. Stopping, he turned to face her as his friends continued up the steps. Pam yanked aside her halter top to flash her breasts at him.

Jeremy's eyes bugged out. He was so shocked that his expression bordered on outrage. “Pam! Someone's gonna...” He quickly glanced around, but his friends still had their backs turned, oblivious. Nevertheless Jeremy stood frozen on the spot, astonished at her audacity.

Slipping her bikini top into place, Pam kissed the speechless boy on the cheek as she passed. “Hope you're having a nice birthday,” she said with a mischievous smile. He smelled like Coppertone and chlorine, an oddly alluring combination.

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4:25 PM

On the television screen, Pam's character sprinted across the tarmac before taking cover behind a police car. The game was Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, commonly accepted as the best version. The other boys had scoffed when Jeremy suggested that Pam join the video game tournament. But after she advanced to the quarterfinals, no one laughed anymore. Now it was the finals and Pam was squaring off against Conor and Jake in a three-way battle.

As she sat on the couch in the rec room, Pam tried to ignore the fact that she was surrounded by boys. She was accustomed to Jeremy sitting at her side, but this was new territory to have three squirming boys perched behind her on the couch as well as a gaggle of preteens sprawled on the floor at her feet. Pam always thought Jeremy looked cute in tall socks pulled up to his knees. Now she was sitting in a roomful of boys dressed in the same manner.

None of them, however, were aware of her distraction. Glued to the TV, the boys watched the unfurling action in the same breathless manner that people watched the Academy Awards. Pam tossed a grenade into the fuselage of an abandoned airplane to flush out Jake from his hiding spot. He dashed across the runway. Armed with a SPAS-12 Shotgun, she followed Jake's character into the terminal.

“Careful, Jake,” Jeremy said. “Pam has her favorite weapon.”

“Hey,” Pam said, not taking her eyes from the screen. “Whose side are you on, anyway?” Jeremy hadn't even made it to quarterfinals, which was a relief because she didn't want to beat him on his birthday.

“Yeah, that's how she got me,” Elliot said. “Pam is like a surgeon with that thing.” Pam liked Elliot, and not just because his arm kept brushing against her leg while he sat on the floor. During pool
time, she had accidentally made eye contact with him as he spit into the shrubbery. The incident sent
an inexplicable rush down her spine.

“Why didn't you warn us that Pam is this good?” Tom complained to Jeremy.

“Well, duh,” Jeremy said. “Of course she’s good. I taught her everything about Call of Duty.”

Pam shot him a wry look. “What are you talking about? I taught you everything about Call of Duty.”

Though her attention was focused on the game, a quick sideways glance confirmed Jeremy’s
embarrassed smile. She gave him a playful shoulder bump. “I have an itch on my back,” she told
him.

Jeremy obligingly began scratching her back. Neither of them took their eyes off the screen. “A little
higher,” Pam directed. “And to the right. Too far, go back... Ooh, that's the spot.”

“I can help,” someone volunteered. Pam felt a second hand scratching her back. Surprised, she
turned to see Tom.

“Quit it,” Jeremy said, slapping Tom’s hand away. “You're distracting Pam.” Jeremy glared at his
friend, then shifted position on the couch so his bare legs were sprawled across Pam's lap.

This was all well and good, but Pam's lull in concentration caused her to walk directly into the line of
fire of a sentry gun that Jake had armed. Glancing at Conor's screen, she watched him follow her and
Jake into the terminal. It was useless to fight the sentry gun, so Pam searched for an alternate route to
Jake's location. She ran up an escalator before she finally found him hiding behind an electric cart.
Aiming quickly, Pam dispatched him with two clean shots.

“Aw shit!” Jake groaned. He tossed aside his controller to assorted cheers and jeers from the rapt
audience. Remembering his manners, Jake modified his exclamation to “Uh, I mean, shoot!” and
then hastily looked at Pam for approval.

She ignored him. Conor was closing in on her with his Scar-H Assault Rifle. It wasn't a bad plan,
letting her take out Jake while he stayed out of harm's way. Pam turned a corner and unexpectedly
found herself face-to-face with Conor. She quickly fired off three shots but missed as he rolled out of
harm's way.

“You've got her Conor!” Emmet said excitedly. “She's out of ammo!” Everyone, including Pam,
leaned forward in their seats.

Before Conor could train his sights on her, Pam tossed a flash-bang at his feet. Blinded, he couldn't
aim, much less shoot, which made it easy for her to throw her knife. Instant kill. The crowd of boys
leapt to their feet as though Pam had jumped through a flaming hoop on a motorcycle.

The boys started chanting her name. “Pam! Pam! Pam!” She raised her arms in victory as they
cheered and clapped her on the back. Popcorn, flung by the fistful, flew threw the air like confetti.
Someone handed her a prize ribbon that read PUBLIC ENEMY #1. In the midst of the hoopla, Pam
overheard Jeremy telling anyone that would listen, “I taught her that move.”
Once the Call of Duty tournament was over, Pam herded the boys to wait outside the condo. Several parents had already arrived to pick up their children and even Kate had already left for her night shift at the hospital. The remaining boys passed the time by laying on the grass and smearing yellow streaks across their arms with dandelions. Though tired, Pam was disappointed that the party was ending. It was fun to be one of the guys for a day.

The crowd of boys dwindled until it was just her and Jeremy waving goodbye to the last car. “That was a good party,” Jeremy said as they walked the path to the condo.

“It really was,” Pam agreed. When they arrived inside, they found William and Marla drinking wine and watching television on mute with the closed captions enabled. Apple, meanwhile, was lying on a nearby couch with a wet washcloth across her eyes and a towel still wrapped over her swimsuit.

Jeremy waved a hand in front of her face. “Did we kill Apple?” he asked. “Oops.”

“I have the worst headache of my life,” she said.

“Don't worry, my friends went home,” Jeremy told her.

“Thank goodness,” Apple said, adjusting the washcloth. “I just want to spend the rest of the evening in a dark and peaceful place. A place where people talk instead of shout. Walk instead of run. Somewhere without destructive boys giving in to every base instinct that crosses their minds.”

“Sounds like a pretty boring place to me,” Pam commented.

“Yeah, I'd go crazy for sure,” Jeremy said.

Marla took a sip of wine. “And all those years you begged me for a little brother,” she remarked to Apple.

“It would have been cute for a while,” Apple said. “Maybe we could have given him away when he turned nine.”

William poured himself more wine. “I wish I had thought of that.”

“Geez dad! I’m standing right here.” Jeremy punched his dad's arm, nearly causing him to spill the wine. William hastily set down the wine bottle with a loud clatter.

Apple peeked out from under her washcloth. “Peace! Peace!”

“We can plan a low-key evening if you need some quiet,” William said. “Right, Jeremy? Maybe pizza and a movie?”

Instead of answering his dad, Jeremy turned to Pam. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“I might go soon,” Pam decided.

“I'm going home with Pam,” Jeremy announced.

His dad seemed surprised. “But it's your birthday. I thought we could wait until the exact time you're born and, I don't know, shoot Silly String at each other at 11:11. Like it's New Year's Eve.”

Jeremy began gathering his things. “That sounds tight, dad, but... well, you know.”
Every inarticulate answer deserves a baffled response. Jeremy was oblivious, but Pam noticed how hurt William looked. She felt a guilty twinge for being the reason his dad couldn't spend time with his own son. “Are you sure you want to come home with me, Jeremy?” she said. “I'm just planning on washing my hair. And eating leftovers.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Jeremy hopped on one foot as he tried to pull on his shoes. Despite the chair conveniently placed next to the door, he plunked down on the floor to tie his shoelaces.

“I could stay for a bit longer. Then we could have dinner here,” Pam suggested. She glanced at William. “And a movie too.”

Jeremy considered this offer, then began taking off his shoes. “Okay. But I'm still going home when you're going home.”

William shook his head. “I see I've been co-opted,” he said. “Pam obviously has a special way with boys.”

“You can say that again,” Apple agreed. “You should have seen her out there today. She was like a queen bee ordering those boys around.”

“We learned about bees in science last semester,” Jeremy said. “Did you guys know queen bees can't stand each other? They're super territorial. If a queen bee sees another queen, they'll fight to the death.”

“What if there are two queens that happen to be born?” his dad objected. “They'll kill each other right then and there?”

“They're not born as queens,” Jeremy explained. “Queen bees are actually just regular bees at first. She only become a queen because the drones choose a bee and give her royal jelly.”

“Royal jelly?” repeated Apple. “Where do drones get royal jelly from?”

“They make it themselves,” Jeremy told her. “The drones secrete royal jelly from their glands and then feed it to the queen. She loves it.” Everyone listened, enrapt, as Jeremy recounted the life of bees in earnest detail. William was fascinated, Marla grossed out, and Apple skeptical.

Pam herself was flustered. “Okay, this metaphor is getting a little weird,” she protested.

Taking her hand, Jeremy pulled her in the direction of the kitchen. “It's not weird, it's science. Let's find a snack,” he said. “Bzzzz, bzzzz, bzzzz.”

7:04 PM

After a pizza dinner, it was time for the movie. Since it was his birthday, Jeremy got to choose but nobody was familiar with his choice: Cabin in the Woods. Nonetheless, the living room shades were drawn and everyone settled in to get comfy. Zep had been summoned so he and Apple snuggled on the loveseat. William and Marla sat together on the couch, leaving a space on the end for Pam but Jeremy insisted that she join him on the floor.
“I got it ready for us,” Jeremy said, pointing to a stack of pillows on the floor. So Pam joined him, sitting on an oversized pillow while she leaned against the sofa. Jeremy did the same but they were barely ten minutes into the movie when he arranged her arm around his shoulder and then slouched into her side. Uncomfortable from his close proximity, Pam discreetly studied William out of the corner of her eye. Did he notice his son getting too cuddly? It didn't seem so, but she became even more self-conscious when Jeremy scratched his ear, accidentally touching her breast in the process. Or when he reached into the bag of almonds on her lap and his roving fingers dug too close to her crotch.

They were about an hour into the movie when a woman removed her shirt, then straddled a man as he lay in the forest. William leaned forward in surprise. “Jeremy! You said this was PG-13!”

Jeremy shrugged, his attention glued to the topless woman on the screen. Dimly aware that she should do something responsible, Pam hastily clapped a hand over Jeremy's eyes. His dad nodded approvingly but she felt like a joy-killing prude. On the loveseat, Apple and Zep chuckled as Jeremy attempted to pull her hands away.

“Come on, quit it!” he complained. “It's not like I've never seen a lady without a shirt.”

William cleared his throat. “Something you'd like to share with us, Jeremy?”

He stopped struggling. “No,” he said quietly. When the scene ended, Pam removed her hand from his eyes. He glared at her. She glared right back at him.

10:01 PM

The two of them were headed home. In the backseat, Jeremy’s birthday presents rattled back and forth with each turn of the car. On his lap he held a slice of birthday cake on a paper plate. Jeremy kept lifting the plastic wrap to swipe at the frosting.

“You're not going to eat that tonight, are you?” Pam asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. It's so good.” He held out a finger coated in frosting. “Here, try some.”

Keeping an eye on the road, Pam wistfully licked his finger clean. “Yum. But maybe save it for tomorrow? It's awfully late for so much sugar.”

“I guess you’re right,” he agreed.

The perfect summer day had given way to an equally lovely night. The temperature had dropped just enough to be refreshing, but not overly chilly. When they rolled down the car windows, the lingering scent of backyard campfires greeted them. In the criss-crossed suburban streets, they encountered kids playing soccer by streetlight and roving bands of teenagers on bicycles.

“I hope I don’t have to go to bed right away,” Jeremy hinted. “Doesn’t a campfire sound nice?”
While the idea was alluring, Pam felt unpleasantly sticky after the long day. “I know it’s your birthday and all, but I could really use a shower.”

“Me too,” Jeremy said. “Can I go first?”

It was unlike him to be so reasonable. Once they got home, she nevertheless let him go first while she opened some windows to air out the house. Accompanying the fresh air, however, was the sound of clinking glasses and music wafting along with the nighttime breeze. Peering out the window on the second floor, Pam discovered the next door neighbors were having a party in their backyard.

When Jeremy was done showering, Pam gratefully took her turn to wash away the day’s grit and grime. She left the bathroom window open during her shower to savor the cool summer air and listen to the crickets singing. After toweling off, she reached into the pocket of her bathrobe and pulled out a jigsaw piece attached to a chain. Slipping it around her neck, Pam admired the shiny metal glimmering against her skin.

Wanting to show it off, she put on her robe and opened the bathroom door. “Hey Jeremy!” she called. Not expecting to find him waiting outside the door, she nearly ran him over as she exited the bathroom.

“Yeah, Pam?” he answered.

“Oh, hi,” she said, tying her robe.

“Hi. I brought you your slippers.” He pointed to the floor where her bunny slippers waited for her.

“That was nice of you,” Pam said, stepping into them.

“Can I open my second present now?” he asked. She understood why he had been so reasonable about showering first. He must have been listening for her to finish and then came running because he was half-dressed, clutching a t-shirt and otherwise wearing only a pair of shorts.

“Check this out,” she said, ignoring his question. Leaning close to him, she plucked the jigsaw piece that dangled from his neck and matched it against her own. The two puzzle pieces neatly clicked together into a single shape. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“That’s my present?” Jeremy said, disappointed.

“No, it is not,” Pam sighed. “I just wanted to show it to you. I guess you don’t like it as much as me. Which I understand.” She used her fingers to adjust his floppy, wet hair. The sun had lightened it to a lovely golden shade of auburn. “Yes, I still have another present for you. Can’t you wait until after I dry my hair?”

“Can’t you do that thing where you wrap a towel around it?” he countered. Jeremy pulled on a clean white t-shirt. It was a basic but classic look that she always found hard to resist.

“All right, I guess you’ve waited long enough.” Doing as he suggested, Pam wrapped the towel around her hair, then balanced it on her head so it resembled a turban. Then she went into Jeremy’s room.

“Why are we going in here?” he said. “I thought you said you were going to give me my present.”

“I am giving you your present,” Pam answered. She leaned against his bed. Though the shades were securely drawn, they clattered with a gentle breeze that drifted through his window. Next door, there
was a steady ebb and flow in volume from the cheerful sound of the backyard party.

Puzzled, Jeremy glanced around the room. “Did you hide it in here?”

“Let's just say your present is definitely in this room.”

Jeremy strode to his closet and peered inside it. Pam shook her head. “Cold,” she said.

He opened his dresser next. “Even colder.”

Jeremy wandered over to his desk. Instead of putting his birthday cake in the refrigerator, he had placed it on his chair where it was just begging to be sat on. Instead of chiding, Pam watched as he moved aside half-empty boxes of model planes and checked underneath his bike helmet. He even examined the leafy fronds of a potted plant that tolerated untold amounts of neglect and abuse. “Starting to freeze,” Pam told him.

His head swiveled like a hawk. He took a few steps toward where she leaned against the bed. “A little warmer,” Pam said, smiling. Jeremy dropped to his knees and began digging through the junk under his bed. “Um, a little colder now.”

“This is starting to get annoying,” Jeremy said. Frustrated, he grabbed her shoulders and gave her a shake. “Just give me a hint. Please?”

“Um, you're getting warmer,” Pam laughed, letting him rattle her from side to side.

“What? That doesn't even make sense.” He began batting her with the unknotted portion of the terrycloth belt of her robe.

“How about that? You're moving from warm to hot.”

Jeremy paused, putting two and two together. He began tugging at the knot that cinched her robe. “Getting really hot,” Pam said. The belt came undone and her robe loosened.

“Careful, you're going to burn up!” Pam advised as the young boy opened her robe. Since she had come straight from the shower, she wasn't wearing anything underneath. Her breasts rose and fell in time with her rapid breathing. Pam carefully watched his expression as he looked up and down her naked body. “Notice anything different?” she asked, shifting her feet until they were shoulder-width apart.

“Uh. Gosh.” Jeremy stared between her legs. Where there had previously been a neatly trimmed patch of dark hair, there was now a smooth expanse of perfectly hairless skin.

She could understand his surprise. Aside from a single week when she was attempting to please a college boyfriend, Pam had spent the last thirteen years of her life with pubic hair and she herself required some time to get accustomed to the sight of the hairless mound gracing her girl parts. At first, she had second thoughts about getting a full Brazilian wax, but the awed look on Jeremy's face banished any self-doubt.

“Do you like it?” Pam asked. Judging from the condition of the front of his shorts, he liked it a lot.

“Yeah. You like...” Catching himself, Jeremy glanced at his closet. Pam bit her lip to keep from smiling when she realized he was about to compare her to the models in his confiscated Playboy magazines. Stammering, Jeremy finally said, “I mean, it looks... well, really nice.”

“Thank you, Jeremy. You're so sweet.” She paused a beat. “So where's my present?”
His face went blank. “Say what?”

“You didn't get me anything?” Pam shook her head in dejection, then reached for the hem of his t-shirt. “Can I unwrap you? As a consolation prize?” After she removed his shirt, he shook out his hair. After she pulled down his underwear, he bounced up and down to greet her. Pam took a moment to fondly savor every inch of him. Jeremy, of course, was hairless as always down there. “Now we're like twins,” Pam giggled.

“How?” The distracted boy was still staring between her legs. “Oh yeah, I guess we are.”

The wonderment on his face made her wish she had gotten rid of the pubic hair sooner. Pam parted her knees to invite the young boy. “Ahem. Want to play with your present?”

Her offer made him blush. Jeremy stood and lovingly ran a finger across her magically hairless skin. Pam sighed at the electric touch of his fingertip. He was running his fingers across her mound, then down either side of her kitten, not even making contact with any of her delicate spots but she was swooning from the newfound sensitivity.

Her nipples stiffened. “No more teasing, please?” she asked, spreading her legs a bit wider.

His finger found her clit, sending her limbs into a limp ecstasy. It was as though all her senses were reduced to that small bundle of nerves between her legs. There was no shortage of wetness as the young boy fondled her engorged clit. Finally remembering to breathe, Pam lazily spread her legs wider. Her bunny-slippered feet slid across his sheets. Only then did she realize that she had forgotten to remove her robe too, which still hung from her shoulders, as well as the towel wrapped around her head like a beehive. It felt scandalous to be half-clothed while Jeremy was completely naked. Adding to the impropriety was his open window that barely separated them from the small children chasing each other in the neighbor’s yard.

Maybe it was because of her aborted mission to his room at 5 am. Maybe it was because she had been marinating in preteen hormones all day. Or maybe it was the extra sensitivity from the lack of hair down there. But whatever the reason, Pam could feel the straining dam about to burst. Sometimes she would deliberately delay things to prolong the playtime, but she didn't have that sort of patience today.

“I need to do it,” she said, touching his wrist. “Like, right now. Okay?”

Jeremy nodded innocently. “Why are you asking me for permission?”

“I'm not asking permission. I'm just giving you advance... oh god, don't stop.”

That last word was scarcely out of her mouth when Pam arched her back and gasped. The only thing that mattered was Jeremy's finger dancing on her clit. She crossed her arms, her hands holding her sides, as though to contain the warm pleasure spilling from her body. Her nipples were hard but it wasn’t because of the cool air from his open bedroom window. Holding her breath, Pam hung on as long as she could until she panted from the effort.

It was a delicious orgasm, but Pam knew her sundae still needed a cherry on top. “May I have a kiss?” she requested. She still lay on his bed, her feet dangling off the side, so Jeremy supported himself by placing his palms flat on the bed on either side of her hips. With straight elbows, he teetered atop her, his sharp hip bones digging into her thighs as his own feet left the ground.

In the following weeks, months, and years, Pam would often reminisce about this moment. It was an accident. Really. A result of mere happenstance. Having graciously given her a lovely orgasm,
Jeremy was as hard as ever. Having eagerly accepted his attention, Pam was drowning in her own moisture. His erection pointed at her slit like an arrow on a compass. With puckered lips and his body precariously perched atop hers, Jeremy moved closer to kiss her, causing his penis to neatly slip into her kitten in a single, smooth thrust.
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare

Chapter Summary

Jeremy's birthday is capped off by a loud thunderstorm and an unforeseen event.

Pam lay nestled among the mussed sheets of Jeremy’s bed, eyes closed, awaiting his kiss. From the open window, the sound of a distant police siren caught her ear. Something didn’t quite feel right. Was she imagining things? Something was inside her kitten. It felt like Jeremy's finger, but that was impossible because both his hands rested on either side of her, palms flat on the bed, while he stood between her legs. What was it? It was something small. Something hard.

Something alive.

Her eyes snapped open. Jeremy had frozen too, poised in a half-lean and half-crouch atop her. His perplexed gaze rested on the intersection of their bodies. His puzzled gaze changed to surprise when he realized what he had done.

“Sorry!” Jeremy said, pulling his hips back.

“Wait!” Pam cried. But it was too late. He slipped free, leaving a Jeremy-sized vacancy in her kitten. At the same moment, a strong gust of wind caused his window shades to flutter as though pulled by an unseen hand. The shades clattered several times against the window frame before falling flat once again.

“Ha. Oops. I didn’t mean to do that.” Jeremy regarded her sheepishly, wearing the same disarming smile he wore when he did something wrong, like accidentally break a glass at dinnertime or carelessly spill modeling paint on the hardwood floor. He apparently did not grasp the gravity of what just happened. Another gusty breeze burst through the windows, this time accompanied by the sound of rattling leaves high in the treetops.

The towel wrapped around her hair drooped, obscuring Pam’s vision. From the party next door, a din of drunken singing drifted through the open bedroom window. When she remained mired in a paralyzed silence, Jeremy’s smile faded. Another part of him began to droop as well. Everything was going wrong. Feeling overwhelmed, Pam opened her mouth to speak but didn't know what to say. Her vision blurred from the unexpected wetness brimming in her eyes.

“Are… are you crying?” Jeremy asked. His face paled with dread.

“No, I…” Before she could continue, a single tear rolled down her cheek. Pam used the sleeve of her robe to wipe it away. A second tear escaped, rolling down her cheek and leaping from her chin, landing on her breast in a stinging chill. She drew her robe closed.

Jeremy cautiously touched her knee. “I'm really sorry,” he said. “I didn't mean to… you know. Put it there. It was an accident. Sorry.” He was thoroughly stricken. Scared, even. Pam realized he had never seen her cry.

“I'm not m-m-ad,” Pam stammered. She snatched a tissue from the box on his bedside stand and blew her nose. “Or sad. You didn’t do anything wrong.”
“Did I hurt you?”

His face was anxious. To Pam’s amazement, his erection had completely wilted. That had never happened before. Noticing her gaze, Jeremy fetched his bathrobe and modestly slipped it over his shoulders.

“No! Of course you didn’t. It’s okay,” she said, wanting to reassure him. She wiped her cheeks. “I’m okay. Everything’s fine.” Pam held out her arms. Hesitating just a second, Jeremy climbed into bed and snuggled by her side. This felt better. He nestled in the crook of her shoulder, his arm stretched across her heaving chest. They lay in silence for several minutes, though Jeremy kept glancing at her to confirm if she was okay.

“Why are you crying?” he finally asked.

“Because I can draw a straight line from my heart to yours, even though you’re only twelve, and I can’t stop thinking about how you’ll leave in four days which doesn’t give us enough time especially now that this happened, because I really wanted our first time to be special but instead there’s some drunk asshole singing Dave Matthews in the next yard while I’m wearing bunny slippers and have this stupid towel around my head but it still happened and it’s going to change everything even though it’s what I always wanted.”

Those were the disconnected thoughts running through her head. That was what she should have told him, had she possessed the capacity for complete honesty at that moment. But instead, Pam said, “I don’t know. I guess... Maybe it was just a girl moment.”

He nodded, clearly unsure what she meant by ‘girl moment’. He said, “I thought maybe you were upset because I'm supposed to, you know. Ask permission before I put anything inside you.”

He actually listened to her for once. This was a first since Pam was forever reminding him to put his dirty cereal bowls in the dishwasher. Pulling him close, she wrapped a sheet over his shoulders. They really needed to close the window because, the noise from the party notwithstanding, the summer breeze now possessed a chilly bite. But Pam didn’t want to get up. Beyond the edge of his bed, the room seemed a foreboding abyss. The inky darkness gathered in the corners, causing the usually familiar surroundings to seem alien.

“Let me modify that,” she said. “You need to ask permission first if it's something that's not attached to your body. No foreign objects allowed.”

“Got it.” Jeremy ran his fingers along the brushed terrycloth of her robe. They lay quietly until Pam’s heartbeat returned to normal. It all felt so dreamlike: the two of them alone in the house, the open window, the party next door, the accidental penetration.

“So... what was it like?” Pam inquired, wanting to confirm it actually happened.

“What was what like?” The vibrations from his voice tickled her chest when he spoke.

“You know. Being, um, in there. Inside me.” Though she did her best to be casual, Pam couldn't stop stumbling over her words.

“It was tight,” he replied.

“Thanks.” Pam stopped twirling his hair, then laughed. “Wait, do you mean it was ‘cool’ or, um, literally tight?” Not expecting her mirth, he glanced at her with surprise, an expression that was a welcome change from his earlier alarm.
“Oh.” Jeremy apparently hadn't considered this. “I meant it was cool. But, now that you mention it, I guess it really was tight.”

“I'll take that as a compliment.” She snuggled closer to him. His bathrobe must have slipped open because she could feel his boy parts mashing against her leg, though he had gone completely soft. This was perplexing. Under normal circumstances, all she had to do was bat her eyelashes and Jeremy would be as stiff as a guard at Buckingham Palace.

“What did it feel like for you?” Jeremy asked.

“For me?” Pam considered the question. No one had ever asked her this. “It felt kind of like your finger. But bigger.”

Jeremy seemed pleased with this assessment. “Really? It felt big?”

“Of course it did,” she said. “But I knew right away it wasn't your finger. I wasn't expecting it to… um…” Jeremy looked at her, clearly curious as to how she would frame the following words.

“I wasn’t expecting it to… go in there,” Pam said self-consciously. She had barely finished her sentence when the bedside lamp dimmed once, then twice. She cautiously rose to a sitting position, then glanced at Jeremy. He was just about to say something when the light blacked out completely, plunging the room into darkness.

It was only then that Pam noticed how hard the wind was blowing outside. Scooting toward the window above the bed, she opened the shade. Together, they peered at the world outside. The trees swayed briskly, the branches creaking and groaning, while lightning flashed in the distance. Undeterred, the guests at the party next door were either too inebriated or too fearless to heed the rumbling clouds.

“There must be quite a strong storm coming if the power already went out,” Pam observed.

Jeremy remained glued to the window. “Do you think we should go to the basement?”

“I don’t hear any warning sirens,” she said, cocking an ear. “The wind probably just knocked over some trees and downed a few power lines.” The electricity had gone out for the entire block because even the street lights were dark. She couldn’t even see Jeremy except when his face was illuminated by the sporadic flashes of lightning.

“Gosh. I’ve never seen it so dark in the neighborhood,” he said. “Or even in the house.”

“I have a candle in my room,” Pam mused. “On my dresser. Why don’t you go get it? There should be matches too.”

“You get it,” Jeremy said. “It’s your candle.”

“But your night vision is way better than mine.”

“No, it’s not. Besides, I shouldn’t handle matches when I can’t see what I’m doing. It’s a fire hazard.”

Baffled, Pam blinked several times. Since when did Jeremy care about fire safety? It suddenly dawned on her. “Are you afraid of storms?”

“No.”
“It’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Her heart inexplicably warmed at the thought of Jeremy being scared of something as innocuous as a thunderstorm. “I’ll keep you safe,” she promised.

“I said I wasn’t afraid!”

Though she couldn’t see him, Pam could clearly hear a note of anxiety in his voice. “I’ll go find the candle,” she told him. "You stay here.” Rising to her feet, she tried to find him based on the last location of his voice. “This is you, right Jeremy?” she said, squeezing his shoulders.

“Ha ha, Pam.”

“I wasn’t kidding! It's really dark. Where’s your blanket?” Feeling around the bed, she touched something lumpy under the sheet. “What’s this?”

“My foot.”

“Oh.” She continued her blind groping to locate the blanket that had been kicked to the other end of the bed. Her fingers unexpectedly touched another misshapen object. “Wait. What is this?”

“My other foot!”

“Ah, yes.”

“I wish you would quit fooling around and go find the candle,” Jeremy complained.

Having found the blanket, Pam carefully swaddled him, though it was difficult because she couldn’t see what she was doing. She was mostly successful, the only mishap being her breast brushing what felt like his cheek when she tucked the blanket behind him. Her robe must have fallen open.

“Ugh!” Jeremy said, swatting at the air. His fingertips swiped her nipple. “Something’s touching my face!” His hands pushed wildly against her chest before freezing. “Oh,” he said, squeezing a breast with each hand. “These.”

“Um, yeah. Those.” Pam took his hands away and closed her bathrobe. “I’m going to find the candle now. Try not to break anything, okay?” Closing her eyes, she mentally conjured an image of her surroundings. Thanks to countless late-night rendezvous, she had plenty of practice sneaking out of Jeremy’s darkened bedroom. Trusting her instincts, Pam successfully navigated to her room without even stubbing a toe. Feeling around the top of her dresser, she located the candle and matches on her first try.

A blinding burst of light stung her eyes when she struck the match against the box, followed by the acrid smell of sulphur. She lit the candle, blew out the match, and cautiously returned to Jeremy’s room. Even though she protectively cupped the candle, the flame flickered and wavered with her every breath. Jeremy was still in bed right where she left him. She placed the candle on his bedside table, making sure not to place it directly under the lampshade.

“Better?” she asked. His room was now bathed in a dim orange light.

“Yeah.” Jeremy yawned.

Pam looked at the clock, forgetting that the power was out. “It must be close to 11 now,” she guessed. “Should we just go to bed? Since the power is out?”

“But I want to stay up and party,” Jeremy protested, stifling another yawn. “I’m not tired. Can I have that last slice of cake? It’s right over there on my desk… somewhere.” The weak candlelight went no
further than their immediate surroundings.

“It’s getting too late for cake, Jeremy. You can have it tomorrow.”

“Okay,” he sighed. Outside, the loud snap of cracking wood caught his attention. The wind had grown sufficiently strong to strip away dead branches from the trees.

“I can stay until you fall asleep,” Pam said, reading the worried look in his face.

Warily peering out his window, Jeremy didn’t answer right away. “Thanks,” he finally answered. She waited for him to lay down. Instead, he asked, “Do I really have to go to bed?”

Pam watched him yawn again. “I suppose I never did get that kiss,” she said.

Jeremy threw aside the blanket around his shoulders. Kneeling on the bed, he pressed his puckered lips against her mouth as she tilted her head back.

“Mmm,” Pam murmured. She usually had to bend down to kiss him, but this time it was Jeremy who was a few inches taller since he knelt on the bed.

“Was that good?” Jeremy asked.

“Uh huh. Do it again?” This time she parted her lips, just a tiny bit, and was gratified when Jeremy did the same. He was always tongue-shy, so she was careful to let him take the lead. After a moment, his tongue tentatively brushed her own. Unable to help herself, Pam shivered as a delightful pleasure tingled along her spine. She collapsed backward onto the bed, arms spread wide.

Jeremy regarded her with suspicion. “I’m not going to bed,” he stated.

“I didn’t say anything about going to bed.”

Testing her, Jeremy slid off the bed and onto his feet. “See? I’m staying up.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Pam said, still nestled among his sheets. Why did she feel so woozy? Maybe it was the flickering candlelight on the walls. Or the gathering storm outside. Or Jeremy’s fingers undoing the knot to her bathrobe.

Her nipples were hard even before the young boy began touching her breasts. She closed her eyes. Surely she could let him have a little fun before bedtime. It was his birthday after all. Pam let herself enjoy the feeling of his hands running along every curve of her body. Through it all, she was dimly aware that Jeremy was also rearranging her on the bed: shifting her hips to the left, bending her knee here, positioning an ankle there.

It wasn’t until she felt something poking her leg that she opened her eyes. “What are you doing, Jeremy?” she asked softly. He had shed his bathrobe and now stood between her legs that were hanging off the bed. Pam realized this was an exact copy of their positioning from twenty minutes ago when he accidentally…

Outside, a gentle pitter-patter sounded from beyond the bedroom window. Pam realized it was raining. Softly at first but the raindrops multiplied exponentially, a growing intensity matched by the steely determination on Jeremy’s face. He stepped closer to the bed until his sharp hips dug into her spread legs. It wasn’t until Pam felt his erection, hot and hard, jabbing into her thigh that she understood what he meant to do. His brief visit to Eden had been sufficiently enticing that Jeremy wanted to return to paradise.
Flooded, Pam could feel her body getting ready for him. For a long minute, she let the boy poke and prod as he tried to find the way forward. Even in the dim candlelight, she could see the growing frustration on his face.

He needed her help.

But first, Pam unwrapped the towel around her hair and kicked off her bunny slippers. She wanted to do it right this time. Jeremy waited patiently, though she could feel his warm erection delightfully nudging her clit. Propping herself up on her elbows, Pam cleared her throat as she tried to remember the magic words.

“May I have a kiss?”

He leaned forward, just as before, supporting himself by placing his hands on the mattress. Something about this position allowed their bodies to align, or maybe it was the stars that aligned, because their mouths were just inches apart when Pam felt Jeremy slip into her kitten.

There was no mistake, no accident this time.

The two of them were still intimately intertwined when another gust of wind raced through the open window, pushing aside the shade in a loud clatter and snuffing out the candle’s fragile flame. The room returned to its prior state of complete darkness as the light rain intensified into a torrential downpour, breaking up the party next door. Amid the sound of yelps, pounding footsteps, and jingling keys, a symphony of electronic beep-beep-beeps reverberated as the guests unlocked their cars and raced for protection.

In the bedroom, however, they were dry and safe as Pam provided Jeremy with all the shelter he could ever need. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of smoke from the extinguished candle mingled with the smell of the rain. The unexpected darkness only heightened the sensation of the young boy embedded in her. She had done it. Finally. Having poached this final piece of Jeremy’s boyhood, it was now hers forever.

“Um, should we re-light that candle?” Jeremy said, withdrawing slightly.

“No!” Pam immediately scissored her legs around his slim waist before he could move away. Digging her heels into his soft backside, she urged him back into place. A flash of lightning lit the room, followed by a low rumble of thunder several seconds later. The brief illumination revealed Jeremy once again gazing out the window with a worried expression.

“Does this feel okay?” Pam asked, wanting to distract him from the storm.

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

Typical male answer. “What does it feel like?” she inquired. It was like a hostage negotiation. She just needed to keep him talking, although it was strange to carry on a conversation when they couldn’t see each other.

“Um, I don’t know. I guess it sort of feels like your hand. But not really.” Jeremy struggled to put the experience into words. “Kind of like the difference between wearing mittens and wearing gloves. This just feels more, um, form-fitting. Like you’re hugging me everywhere.”

Pam smiled in the darkness. It was cute hearing the young boy describe his own deflowering in his own words. The storm sent another burst of lightning and thunder, this time louder, but Pam was happy to see that Jeremy was too distracted to notice this time. Instead of glancing out the window, he was looking at where his body joined hers.
“It’s weird to think of how part of me is inside you,” Jeremy said. “Is it weird for you?”

“Not at all. It feels nice,” Pam said, in the understatement of the year. She swore she could feel all that hot blood swirling through his erection. He had buried himself to the hilt until his scrotum was squished between their bodies. Pam was glad she had chosen to get waxed for his birthday because her smooth girl parts felt like velvet against his boy parts.

“What?”

“Pam?”

“Yes, Jeremy?”

“Um, are we… you know…” he hesitated.

“What?”

“First promise you won’t get mad.”

“Everything you do is cute,” Pam assured.

Jeremy remained hesitant. “Are we, uh, fucking?”

A small tug in her brain reminded her that she was the responsible adult who wasn’t supposed to tolerate swearing. But hearing Jeremy ask that question, using that word (while he was inside her no less), was the equivalent of him dousing her with gasoline and tossing a lit match in her direction. A very syrupy arousal, starting at her kitten, slowly enveloped her body.

“Not quite,” Pam answered. It was the truth since he was just standing there motionless while she fought the urge to roll him onto the bed and ride him like a pony. “You’d have to… um, you know. Move it in and out.”

“Oh.”

“Would you like to try, um, fucking?” It was impossible to say without blushing, particularly since it was not a question often posed to a preteen boy.


Pam was well aware that he had never done it before. This was the filthiest dirty talk she had ever heard in her entire life. Her mind was swimming. Jeremy needed instructions for fucking. Good lord.

“Let’s see,” she said, trying to organize her thoughts. “First, you pull out. No, don’t use your hands. Draw your hips back. Just a little bit. Not all the way out. Now push back again.” She coached the young boy through the motions until he was literally inching in and out. It wasn’t much but Pam didn’t want to discourage him.

“There you go,” she approved. “Just like that.”

He practiced for a bit in silence. “Am I doing it right?” Jeremy asked anxiously.

“You’re doing great,” she assured. The last time they played Call of Duty was forty-eight hours ago and Jeremy’s orgasm had been dry as usual. It occurred to her that this would be a most inopportune time for him to squirt for the first time. Pam suddenly understood the attraction of Russian Roulette. But it was too late to stop now and, setting aside the potential of an unplanned pregnancy, it was a win-win scenario. The thought of the young boy’s hot seed in her kitten was every bit as alluring as the dry throbbing of his pleasure against the backdrop of her wetness. The dueling images made her
moan aloud.

Jeremy froze. “Am you sure I’m not hurting you?” he asked, worried.

Cucumbers were long and eggplants were fat. Those things could surely be painful, but Jeremy was closer to a generous baby carrot. “Not at all,” Pam said. “This just feels really… good.”

“For me too,” Jeremy confided. His words caused Pam to clench in ecstasy. Stamina was not his strongest suit. Quite frankly, she was surprised he was lasting as long as he was. When they made the switch from Coppertone to K-Y, Jeremy went through an adjustment period where it took him twice as long to climax (sixty seconds instead of thirty), so perhaps the transition from her hand to her kitten would also buy her extra time.

A brilliant flash of lighting shot through the room, followed by an especially loud thunderclap, this time powerful enough to make Jeremy glance out the window. In the brief instant she could see his face, Pam recognized his look of wariness. Feeling through the darkness, she reached for his hand. “It’s okay. Don’t be scared.”

“I’m not scared.” Jeremy punctuated his defiance by forcefully sinking into her, causing Pam to quietly gasp. He began moving again, an awkward stop and start that possessed little rhythm. The lightning was now arriving at steady intervals which permitted her the charming sight of Jeremy’s arching back and jutting hips. The overtly sexual movement from such a young boy sent shivers down her spine. It reminded her of a baby bird clumsily flapping its wings for the first time. In between his shallow plunging, he would make eye contact with her, wearing a faint smile that was both shy and proud. It melted Pam’s heart.

And another part too. She eagerly touched her clit. Pam was so sensitive that she realized this was going to be one of the rare times when she would come before him. Jeremy, however, had other plans.

“Um, can I take break?” he asked, coming to a stop inside her.

Pam hid her disappointment, which wasn’t difficult in the semi-darkened room. “You’re not used to using your muscles like this, huh?”

“Not really,” Jeremy said. “It’s kind of like doing sit-ups in gym class.” Another flash of lightning. He was rubbing his eyes with his fists. With a twinge of guilt, Pam remembered how much he had been yawning before they got sidetracked into this whole intercourse thing.

“Take as long a break as you need,” Pam said. Nevertheless, she once again wrapped her legs around his torso, wanting each part of him to stay exactly where it was. Three lightning flashes illuminated the room in rapid succession. Pam caught him frowning at her.

“Hey,” Jeremy said in the ensuing darkness. “Are you, like, touching yourself down there?”

Her finger stopped moving against her clit. “Um, no. I’m not.”

Jeremy began fumbling in the dark until his fingers grasped her wrist still positioned between her legs. “You are so! You already had a turn. What about me?”

Pam quietly sighed. Possessing very strong feelings about fairness and taking turns, Jeremy didn’t like being left behind. “All right, I’ll stop,” she acquiesced. Not trusting her, Jeremy found her other wrist and clamped down. He apparently did not want her hands anywhere near her clit. Thus deprived, Pam employed her last option for stimulation.
“What was that?” Jeremy’s disembodied voice asked.

“What was what?”

“It feels like… are you squeezing me?”

“Yes. You can feel it?” Concentrating, she clenched her kitten on his hard penis. It wasn’t the same level of pleasure as touching her clit, though it was quite agreeable all the same.

“Yeah. It's like your kitten is pulling me in. It feels really neat.”

“Neat, eh?” His word choice made her smile. Taking a deep breath, Pam squeezed as hard as she could. Jeremy rewarded her by involuntarily throbbing in her kitten. Big cocks were all well and good, but Pam had never felt anything as wonderful as Jeremy’s little penis twitching inside her kitten. He was the absolutely perfect size for her. Some women were Size Queens. Did this mean Pam was a Size Princess?

She began rhythmically squeezing him in earnest. After a minute though, she had to admit her muscles were getting tired. It grew more and more difficult to clench tightly, particularly at such short intervals. But Jeremy seemed to be enjoying the game and Pam didn't want to let him down.

She gave herself a mental prep talk, just like when she was at the gym. “One more,” Pam thought to herself. “Rest for a few seconds, then give it everything you've got. Do it so hard that he won't know what hit him.” Focusing her concentration, Pam gathered her every ounce of willpower. Hard. Harder.

And then something unexpected happened. While it wasn’t the direct stimulation she was accustomed to, all this pulsing had indirectly shoved her to the brink of orgasm. Pam lay still, muscles clenched, knowing that all she needed to do was release and squeeze once more to…

“Oh shit,” she though. This had never happened before. While pulsing was a pleasurable way to pass the time, she had never actually come from it.

“But you promised not to!” her brain reminded, the 2% of it that was still dedicated to rational thinking. What could she do though? She would have had better luck holding her ground against a runaway double-decker bus barreling down the street. Jeremy still gripped her wrists while she held him steady in her own vise. Pam helplessly succumbed to the orgasm while doing her best to conceal it.

The thunderstorm had temporarily subsided, luckily leaving the room in a merciful darkness, otherwise Jeremy might have seen the way Pam’s breasts rose as her arched back pushed them skyward. Or how her eyes rolled back in her head. Or the struggle to keep her legs from trembling. The most difficult task was remaining quiet. It would have helped to bite her fist but her wrists were still captive in his grip. It felt like she could break free from the orgasm if she could only break free from Jeremy’s hands. But she couldn’t. He was holding her tight and there was nowhere to go. Now her kitten was pulsating of its own volition. Pam just happened to be along for the ride.

Jeremy, too, for that matter. “Gosh,” she heard him say, oblivious to what was happening. “You’re really good at doing that.”

“Ahhh…” Pam breathed through a clenched jaw. Not helping matters was the fact that this was an especially intense orgasm because JEREMY WAS INSIDE HER. He was hard, yet soft. The perfect balance between firm and spongy. Pam was beside herself at the thought of coming all over his little boy penis.
Her cresting orgasm was just beginning to subside when the power came back on. The unexpected light from the bedside lamp was like a bucketful of cold water. Pam suddenly found herself face to face with Jeremy, both of them blinking and squinting as their eyes adjusted to the brightness.

Her face was still a mask of ecstasy, something which did not escape Jeremy’s notice. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I… just have to sneeze,” Pam said, scrunching up her face. She quickly rubbed her nose, then shook her head from side to side. “Shoot. Now I can’t.”

“Why is your face all red?”

“Is it? Weird. I guess I wasn’t expecting the light to turn on like that.”

“Wait a minute. Did you just have a second one?”

“One… Of course not. Jeremy, how could I? You were holding my wrists that whole time, remember? I couldn’t touch anything.” It was remarkably easy to lie to him. She supposed it wasn’t all that different from the time she convinced him to finish his glass of milk because the CDC announced there was a nasty case of rickets going around. Just a harmless little white lie for his own good.

Pam quickly changed the subject since he did not appear convinced by her earnest persuasion. “Let’s try something different. Do you know what missionary is?” she asked. She unwrapped her legs from his waist to free him.

“Something to do with spies?” he guessed excitedly.

“No, not quite,” she said, trying not to laugh. She patted the bed. “Come here and I’ll show you.”

Jeremy was about to join her when Pam noticed a streak of red on his penis. She frowned in surprise. How was that possible? Her period wasn’t due for another ten days at least. Not having noticed anything amiss, Jeremy lay down on the bed.

Embarrassed, Pam casually rose to her feet. “Just a second, all right?” she said, backing out of the room. “I’ll be right back.” Once she was out of his sight, she dashed to the bathroom, wet a washcloth in warm water, and hurried back to his room.

He was still laying in bed, thankfully unaware of the blood. “Just going to clean you up quick!” Pam said cheerfully, dabbing at his erection with the warm washcloth. Jeremy seemed bemused. She had never before interrupted Call of Duty to wipe him down, but he was going with it. As she cleaned him off, Pam noticed a tiny tear on the crown of his foreskin. Though small, the delicate tissue had clearly split open.

It wasn’t her blood. It was his.

Pam tried to stay calm. “Um, Jeremy? Are you all right? It doesn’t hurt down here or anything?”

“I’m fine,” he said, sitting up. “Why?” Pam winced as he peered at his penis. The bleeding had slowed, although the tear was plainly visible. He did a double take. “It’s not supposed to be like that, is it?” he asked.

“No, it’s not. Are you sure it doesn’t hurt?” Pam persisted.

“No… I mean, it felt kind of stretchy when we were… you know. But I didn’t know this happened.” The white washcloth in her hand was now streaked with pink, something that did not escape his
attention. “Was it bleeding a lot?”

“Just a tiny bit,” Pam answered. “Like a trickle. I guess the doctor wasn’t kidding when she said you have a tight foreskin. What was her name? Emma?”

“Emily,” Jeremy recalled. “She had blond hair? And she talked like this?”

Pam shuddered. “Yeah. Thanks for the reminder. Anyway, we’ll have to remember to be more gentle. Next time.” As she returned to the bathroom to rinse the washcloth, she prayed there would be a next time. The tear would undoubtedly heal, but she was worried about both physical and psychological scars. What if seeing himself bleed like that turned him off permanently to the idea of going inside her? Jeremy already disliked oral sex, though she still held out hope that it was a phase he would outgrow. It would be just her luck if he turned out lukewarm about penetrative sex as well.

Wringing out washcloth, she hung it to dry. Besides, Jeremy had been quite gentle (for once) and this still happened. If anything, his lovemaking technique was closer to wiggling than thrusting. Was his foreskin always going to be this delicate?

Medically necessary abstinence. The words sounded ridiculous together. Nothing was making sense, although that seemed to be the theme of the evening. First, she had to fake not having an orgasm. Then it was the guy who ended up bleeding because it was his first time. For a tale of lost virginity, it was completely backwards.

Jeremy was waiting when she returned to his room, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Pam knew what he was going to say before the words were out of his mouth. “Do you think we could still, you know, play regular Call of Duty?” he asked.

Pam was torn. On the one hand, it was his birthday. On the other, though, she was keenly aware that Call of Duty would risk further damage to his foreskin. “We should take a break for a few days,” she proposed. “I think you need some time to heal.”

“Just do it really gently,” Jeremy urged.

“We don’t want to make it worse,” Pam said. She untangled her bathrobe from the messy bedsheets and slipped it over her shoulders. Then she retrieved Jeremy’s bathrobe from the floor and did the same for him. He couldn’t hide his disappointment as she firmly tied his bathrobe in place.

“I’ll tower you,” he offered.

Pam pinched his ear. “Nice try. Maybe we could cuddle instead?” Jeremy sighed and took a seat on her lap, his legs dangling sideways as she sat on the bed. He opened his mouth to speak but instead stifled a yawn.

“See? Look how tired you are,” Pam said, cradling him in her arms. She began gently rocking him. “You’ve had a long day. All that horseplay at the pool. Being in the hot sun all afternoon. Eating nothing but sugar and carbs. Losing your virginity to me.”

That last sentence was merely an unspoken thought, albeit one that filled her insides with a warm glow. She fondly considered the boy in her arms. He seemed even younger due to the oversized bathrobe dwarfing his frame and the tired circles under his eyes. Jeremy was clearly on the verge of sleep so she continued rocking while enjoying the damp smell of rain from the open window. The brunt of the storm had passed, leaving behind only stray bursts of scattered rain.

Pam herself was holding back yawns when she felt Jeremy stirring in her arms. She looked down to find him tugging open her robe. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked. Not answering,
Jeremy’s eyes playfully challenged her as he began kissing her freed breast.

“Mmm,” Pam murmured when she felt his warm mouth close around her nipple. He reclined so low across her lap that she wrapped an arm around his shoulders to support him. His weight was a sweet burden, not bothersome in the least. Unable to help herself, she cradled him tighter and pushed his head close to her chest. She was so distracted by Jeremy’s soft lips that it took her a moment to notice that he had pushed aside his bathrobe to stroke his fully erect member.

Pam was temporarily hypnotized at the sight of his penis gliding into his fist. “Hey. Be gentle with yourself down there,” she reminded. His mouth still clamped around her nipple, Jeremy took her wrist and guided her hand between his legs.

His message was clear: well, you do it then. And Pam had countless reasons to do it for him. His penis was warm and throbbing; it was so small in her hand and he needed her so badly. But what about that tear in his precious foreskin? She reluctantly released Jeremy’s penis and instead cupped his scrotum. Her fingers gently kneaded the hairless sack until she located the two modestly sized balls under the squishy skin.

Perhaps it was because of the way he stubbornly latched onto her nipple, but their roles had never been clearer: he was a boy who needed something and she was the woman who could provide. Small details aside (for example: the pulsing erection against her thumb), it was a very motherly moment that sharply conflicted with her simmering arousal.

Not sure how to proceed, Pam continued massaging and rocking him. Maybe it was because he was tired. Or maybe there were primal memories of being breastfed that lurked in his mind. Jeremy’s eyelids grew progressively heavier until he couldn’t keep his eyes open. The sucking sensation from his mouth began to stop and start, slowly tapered, then finally came to a rest with his slackened lips around Pam’s nipple. His proud penis was the last to go. Beat by beat, his fading erection toppled over in slow motion until it became a shadow of its former self.

Holding her breath, Pam gently extricated herself from the sleeping boy, hoisting him into a partially upright position so she could slip from beneath him. To her relief, he didn’t wake when she lowered him onto the bed. “I can’t believe that actually worked,” she murmured. Pam couldn’t even remember the last time he fell asleep in her presence without Call of Duty to knock him out.

She shivered. The remnants of his saliva on her breast made the skin prickle in the cool air. Pam adjusted her robe. If she was cold, Jeremy was probably cold too. She was about to tuck him under the covers when she remembered his injury. He was never one to complain about sleeping naked, but tonight she decided he would benefit from wearing underwear at least.

Retrieving his discarded clothing from the floor, Pam folded his shorts and t-shirt and left them in a neat pile on the armchair, although she chose to deposit his underwear in the laundry hamper. They were probably clean enough, but she wanted fresh underpants for him. Something that hadn’t been lying on the floor. Opening his dresser, she chose a pristine white pair from a stack and then began the task of getting them on Jeremy without waking him. Taking one ankle at a time, she gently eased them up his legs.

When she reached his mid-thigh, Pam took a moment to examine his boy parts. The open cut on his foreskin was still visible, a darkened red wound that was partially hidden now that his penis had relaxed into its slumbering state. The bleeding had stopped, thankfully. Saying a quick prayer in her head, Pam gave his boo-boo a quick kiss before tugging his underwear into place. Jeremy sighed and rolled onto his side, which made it easier to tuck the sheets around his splayed body.

Still in caretaker mode, Pam continued with some minor tidying. She hung his still-damp swim
trunks to dry, straightened a tipped-over model airplane, and retrieved the lone slice of leftover birthday cake from his desk. It would definitely be better off in the fridge if he was planning on eating it tomorrow. The glint from his new iPod Touch on his desk caught her eye. Pam moved it over to his nightstand for him to find tomorrow morning.

Before setting it down, she pressed the home button to wake the screen. The time changed from 11:10 to 11:11 PM right before her eyes.

“You’re officially twelve, Jeremy,” she whispered, kissing his cheek and turning off the light. She went to the kitchen to put away his last slice of birthday cake. Even though it was covered in plastic wrap, she caught a whiff of the sugary chocolate frosting. Her stomach growled with temptation. Would he notice if she stole a taste? Shrugging, Pam pried away the plastic wrap, not even bothering with silverware as she took a big bite of his cake and licked her fingers clean.
The Last Romantic Day

Chapter Summary

Pam gets to spend a few hours with Jeremy before he leaves for summer camp.

“Think positive thoughts,” Pam told herself as she locked the front door to the house. She repeated this to herself as she calmly strode to her car, got inside and started it. Positive thoughts were her friend. Positive thoughts went where she went. It was easy to think positive thoughts. Especially on an afternoon like this: late June, perfectly sunny, comfortably warm.

Backing out of the driveway, Pam compiled a mental checklist of things to be thankful for. She was wearing a new skirt, knee length and a summery shade of rosé, that paired perfectly with her denim jacket. Her trusty BMW, just detailed, positively gleamed inside and out. A foil-wrapped bar of chocolate, 90% dark, waited on the passenger seat and Pam treated herself to a bite at every red light. Sure, she only got three hours of sleep last night, yet she didn’t feel the least bit tired or cranky.

What more could a girl ask for? As she drove, however, Pam tried to avoid looking in the rear view mirror, which had a clear view of the suitcase in the backseat. Needing a distraction, she turned on the radio. She decided she wasn’t in the mood ninety seconds later and turned it off. Before she realized it, Pam’s mind drifted from positive thoughts to reality.

Jeremy had spent the weekend with his dad. In a few hours, his mom would leave work and come by William’s condo. Together, Kate and William would drive Jeremy to camp, stay at a motel overnight, and then return the next morning. Having packed his suitcase for him, Pam was just stopping by the condo to drop it off. And say goodbye.

At the next red light, Pam double checked the navigation on her phone to make sure it was still working. No matter how many times she traveled to William’s condo, she could never get used to the alien feel of the suburbs. She passed countless strip malls armed with seemingly identical tire stores, nail salons, and restaurants. Peculiar restaurants, at that, such as General Tso’s Tamales. Did those things mix? Pam assumed it was merely a fluke until she passed a restaurant named Taquiera El Szechuan, shortly followed by another called Wok & Mercado. Asian-Mexican fusion was apparently the next big thing.

Behind her, the suitcase tipped over when she took a sharp turn. Packing for Jeremy had been surprisingly easy. Truthfully, he probably would have survived with the clothes on his back, but she packed a toothbrush and clean underwear to make his return more pleasant. Along with the soap, shampoo, sunscreen (not Coppertone), allergy medication, floss, and mosquito repellant in his toiletry bag, Pam had included a bottle of K-Y with the label carefully removed. She was fairly confident he would figure out what it was.

Shorts. T-shirts. Sweatpants and sweatshirt. Pam wondered if she should have included a warm hat, just in case. She was about six blocks away from William’s condo when she spied someone skateboarding on the sidewalk. Though the figure’s back was turned, he had an unmistakable shock of rusty red hair. Pam slowed down to peer out her window when she pulled alongside him, but Jeremy rolled behind some tall hedges that hid the sidewalk from the road. Speeding up, she continued driving until she located a break in the hedges where she parked and waited for him to catch up.
The sound of skateboard wheels on pavement announced his approach. Getting out, Pam left the
door ajar, one foot perched inside the car, as she nibbled another square of dark chocolate. Jeremy
had just zipped out of the hedges when she called, “Hey kid. Want some candy?”

Jeremy glanced at her in surprise as he whizzed by and Pam instantly felt bad. Not expecting to be
accosted in this manner, he wore a look of genuine alarm. The ‘stranger danger’ etched on his face
changed to relief when he did a double take and realized it was her. Unfortunately for Pam, Jeremy
wasn’t the only one surprised by her comment.

A woman pushing a stroller emerged from behind the hedges, frowning. Judging from her gray hair
and floral pantsuit, she was taking her grandchild for a walk. She glared at Pam with the expression
normally worn by a person examining the underside of her shoe after stepping in dog poo. When
Jeremy reversed course to skateboard toward the parked car, the woman subtly pushed her stroller
forward to block him from coming any closer.

“You shouldn’t talk to strangers,” the woman informed Jeremy.

Pam removed her sunglasses, hoping it would make her appear like a perfectly respectable citizen.
“Um, I was just joking,” she said to the woman. “I wasn’t actually offering any candy to him.” She
 glanced at the incriminating bar of dark chocolate in her hands. Rapidly breaking up the remaining
three squares, she stuffed them into her mouth to prove her point.

“This was all for me,” she continued. It wasn’t easy to speak intelligibly with her mouth full. “I
mean, he doesn’t even like dark chocolate.” It was the truth but the woman wasn’t having any of it.
Pam swiftly gulped the candy and wiped her hands on her jacket as they had suddenly turned
 clammy. Since her teeth were caked in chocolate, Pam smiled with carefully closed lips, reassuringly
she hoped, as she tried to peer around the woman who still stood protectively in Jeremy’s path like a
dragon guarding its treasure.

“Jeremy,” Pam said, gesturing helplessly. “Say something.”

“Yeah, it’s-“ In his attempt to go around the woman, Jeremy’s skateboard hit a bump and it went
flying out from under him. Pam cringed twice: first when he landed in a crumpled heap and then
again when his skateboard shot forward like a missile and scored a direct hit against the side of her
parked car.

Jeremy lay sprawled on the ground, though that didn’t stop him from gasping, “My skateboard!”

“My car!” Pam cried out simultaneously. She hurried over to assess the damage. Her car now sported
a fresh grapefruit-sized dent. Pam sighed. Of course this would happen immediately after she shelled
out $40 for a car detailing package that included an interior cleaning plus wash and wax.

The woman helped Jeremy to his feet. “Ow!” he said, cradling his arm.

“I’m a nurse,” she told him. “Let me take a look. Can you move your arm like this?” Jeremy did as
she directed. Inspecting him, she continued, “I don’t think anything is broken. I already see a nasty
bruise forming… but it doesn’t look too bad. Does it hurt?”

Jeremy gingerly tested his arm. “A little bit.”

“It’ll get better,” the woman consoled. “You’re lucky it’s a light bruise. It would be much more
painful if were bone deep.”

Jeremy chuckled and looked at Pam. “That’s what she said.”
“I’m sorry?” the woman said. Her expression was a mix of confusion and shock. She understood that something inappropriate had been said, but she wasn’t sure what.

“He’s just joking,” Pam told the woman. “He doesn’t mean that I’ve literally said that. Because I have not.”

Jeremy, still dusting himself off, glanced at Pam’s car. “Um, did my skateboard leave a mark when it hit your car?”

“Yes,” Pam answered.

A guilty expression crossed his face. “Um, are you going to leave a mark when you’re done with me?”

“What’s that?” the woman inquired with renewed suspicion.

At a loss for words, Pam nervously toyed with the buttons on her denim jacket. Switching gears, she threw an arm around Jeremy in a show of camaraderie. “Uh, he’s just joking,” she assured the woman. “This guy. Always the jokester.” Pam gave Jeremy a little shake like they were old buddies.

“Oh, he complained.

“Oh right. Sorry.” Pam patted his shoulder instead, then knowingly rolled her eyes at the woman. “Kids. Always busting something. Sheesh!” She smiled broadly, forgetting about the chocolate on her teeth.

“Psst… Hey. Pam.” Jeremy discreetly bared his teeth, then tapped his pearly enamel with a finger. He had picked up this gesture from her. Embarrassed, Pam closed her mouth and ran her tongue along her teeth in an attempt to clean them.

The woman glanced back and forth between them. “Do you really know this woman?” she finally asked Jeremy.

“Yeah,” he answered. “My parents pay her to take care of me.”

That sounded shady. “I guess you could say I’m a nanny,” Pam explained to the woman. She made a show of dusting some grass and debris from Jeremy’s shirt. “I have various household duties. I do some cooking, some cleaning… Well, all of it, actually.”

“Yeah, but sometimes I get home from school and she’s just reading a book,” added Jeremy. “Then she’ll get mad if I interrupt her.”

Pam frowned at him. “But I do all sorts of nice things too,” she reminded. “Like make his bed when he forgets, which is close to seven days a week. Or I’ll make his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with peanut butter on both slices so the jelly doesn’t leak through.” She paused to shoot him a haughty look. “Or I’ll let him play Call of Duty as a reward for not damaging my personal possessions.”

Jeremy worriedly looked at her car again. “You’re not going to tell my parents, are you?”

Sensing the woman’s eyes on her, Pam declared, “Yes, I am.”

“Can’t this be our little secret?” Jeremy pressed.

Maybe it was her imagination, but she could swear the woman blanched at his comment. Trying to
maintain her cool, Pam continued, “I will tell your parents. So they can discipline you accordingly.”

“Sorry, Pam,” Jeremy said.

“Be more careful next time,” she said. Pam felt bad for him because he didn’t realize she was only scolding him for the woman’s benefit. Thankfully, this exchange seemed to reassure her that their story checked out. To Pam’s relief, the woman pushed her stroller back to the sidewalk and continued her Sunday promenade. Glad to be in the clear, Pam fetched a bottle of water from the car to wash the last remnants of chocolate from her dry mouth.

“Can I have a ride back to the condo?” Jeremy asked. “I mean, if you’re not too mad at me?”

“Depends,” Pam said. “Can I have a hug?” Hearing this, Jeremy brightened. Instead of walking over to her side of the car like a normal person, Jeremy chose to skateboard away from her until he gathered enough speed to jump from the curb to the road where he performed a crisp 180. Pam didn’t flinch when he swooped in at full speed before abruptly stopping within six inches of her. Only then did he hug her.

“Hi Jeremy,” she said, leaning over slightly so only their shoulders touched. It was, unfortunately, out of the question to perform the sort of hug where their bodies pressed together and Jeremy’s chin would nestle in an intimate spot on her chest.

“Hi Pam.” While he hugged her, Jeremy kept a foot resting on his skateboard to keep it from rolling away. “Did you come to play Call of Duty with me one last time before I leave for six weeks which might as well be forever?”

“Very funny,” Pam said. She ruffled his hair. “Where did you learn to be so manipulative?”

“From you,” he answered. “So can we?”

“Is it just you at your dad’s condo right now?”

“Yeah, of course!”

“Maybe we will,” Pam said, tempted. She honestly hadn’t been planning for Call of Duty, but this was a golden opportunity if the condo was empty. “Are you positive everyone will be gone for a while?”

“Well, I mean, Marla is doing yard work. Or something. Apple was listening to music in her room, but she won’t bother us. And my dad is busy doing, like, stuff.”

Pam rolled her eyes. “So when you said, ‘Yeah, of course!’ what you really meant was ‘No, not at all.’”

“My bedroom at the condo has a lock on the door,” he reminded her.

“I’ll think about it, Jeremy.” A passing vehicle caught their attention. It was a pickup truck, packed with raucous teenagers from the main cab to the open back. There was even a boy on roller blades hanging onto the back of the pickup as though he were water-skiing.

“Cool,” said Jeremy. “I wish I was old enough to do that.”

Pam noticed the envious expression on his face. “Hey,” she said, “wouldn’t it be fun if you held onto my car and I pulled you back home on your skateboard?”
Jeremy stared at her. “Are you serious?”

“Is the Pope Catholic?”

“I dunno,” Jeremy said, inadvertently revealing his non-denominational upbringing. “Is he?”

“Who can say?” Pam shrugged. “He wears a special hat and sometimes he doesn’t eat meat. For all we know, he might a modern hybrid of Jewish and Hindu. Like all those fusion restaurants I passed on the way here. I guess Asian-Mexican food is now a thing.”

“Oh yeah. My dad tried some sesame chicken tacos and said they were great. He didn’t like the enchilada spring rolls though.”

Pam shuddered. “That’s gross.”

“You never like to try new things,” Jeremy said. “I think it sounds awesome.”

“I do so try new things,” Pam contradicted. “I’m not close-minded. I like Asian food and I like Mexican food, just not at the same time.” She got in the car. “Come on, grab on before I change my mind.” Once she confirmed Jeremy was securely holding onto the BMW’s spoiler, Pam slowly took her foot off the brake. They began rolling along, barely breaking 5 miles per hour.

“Faster!” he yelled at her.

Pam, having visions of Jeremy being flung across the road, didn’t dare go any faster. “I can’t! I’m almost out of gas,” she yelled back. After a block, though, she decided he could handle the breakneck pace of 10 miles per hour.

They caught up with the woman from earlier. She frowned at the sight of Jeremy hanging onto the moving car, followed by another severe glare at Pam. Pretending not to see, Pam glanced at the rear view mirror, where she saw Jeremy wave to a group of awestruck neighborhood boys.

“Hold on with both hands, please,” Pam called out her window. That sounded responsible, didn’t it? She gave the woman a polite nod as they passed her. Three blocks later, Pam carefully turned into the condo parking lot. Jeremy rolled up to her window before she could even undo her seat belt.

“That was great!” he proclaimed. “How fast were we going?”

“I think we hit 12 miles per hour at one point,” Pam told him.

“Next time can we try to get to go twice that? I want to go fast enough so the wind is whooshing my hair.”

Reaching through her open car window, Pam grasped him by the shoulders. “You mean like this?” she asked, pursing her lips and blowing in his face. Her warm breath made his hair flutter.

“Don’t!” Jeremy said, laughing.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Apple emerged from the condo, carrying a bulging trash bag. “I want to play!” Leaning close, she began blowing at Jeremy too. The combined effort caused the hair on Jeremy’s forehead to sweep backward as though pushed by a strong wind.

“Gross!” Jeremy chuckled. “It feels all warm and moist.”

“All right, stop complaining,” Pam said, releasing him.
Still giggling, Apple continued to the trash bins on the other side of the parking lot. Jeremy straightened his hair with his fingers. “I didn’t say you had to stop,” he said.

“I was getting dizzy,” Pam informed him.

“Hey Apple,” Jeremy called, “do you want to keep blowing m-“ He trailed off when he realized what he was about to say.

Pam caught him trying not to laugh as he checked himself. She shot him a dirty look. “Jeremy. Give me a hand with the suitcase, will you?”

Pam held the car door while he struggled with the heavy suitcase. “I don’t think this is going to work,” he said, huffing and puffing. “It’s stuck. The opening is too small.”

Pam smirked at him. “That’s what he said.”

“Ooh. Good one,” he said, nodding with approval.

“Try rotating it first,” she advised. After several attempts, Jeremy finally managed to yank out the suitcase onto solid ground.

Apple caught up with them. “So, don’t freak out, but my mom is looking for you,” she said to Jeremy. “Actually, you should freak out. She’s in one of her moods.”

Jeremy shuddered. “Where is she? Outside?”

“I think so. Last time I saw her, she was bringing your dad some dust wipes for his new car.”

“Perfect,” Jeremy said. Wheeling his suitcase, he grabbed Pam’s wrist with his free hand and dragged them both along.

“Your dad has a new car?” Pam asked.

“Yeah, a Honda Odyssey,” said Jeremy. “He’s worried about someone denting it, so he parked in the other lot where no one ever parks. I’ll show it you after we’re done playing Call of Duty.”

Apple unfortunately heard this last part. “Count me in!” she said, following them into the condo.

Pam and Jeremy exchanged a look. “Um…” they both said at the same time.

“Maybe some other time,” Jeremy told Apple. “Pam and I play by, uh, special rules.”

“That nobody else understands,” Pam added. Apple was about to plead her case further when everyone noticed a rather imposing figure waiting inside the condo. Marla stood stiff as a rod with her hands on her hips.

Not even greeting Pam, she gave Jeremy a hard look. “Jeremy, did you clean up all that fish food you spilled this morning?” Sensing a bad situation, Apple quietly slipped away up the staircase.

“I sure did,” Jeremy answered. “I used the dustpan and everything.” He pulled Pam in the direction of the stairs. “Come on, let’s go to my room. I have something cool to show you.”

“Just a second, Jeremy,” Marla interrupted. “Did you heat up some spaghetti in the microwave for lunch?”

“Yes,” he answered cautiously.
“Did you remember to cover it?” Marla continued. Pam recognized the exasperation in her voice. Was this how she sounded when she scolded Jeremy? She hoped not.

“No.”

“I didn’t think so,” said Marla. “Because now there’s dried spaghetti sauce splattered all over the inside of the microwave.”

“I’ll clean it up,” Jeremy sighed, letting go of Pam’s hand.

“Please do,” said Marla. “I want that microwave sparkling clean.”

Marla whisked away in a clatter of jangling bracelets while Jeremy trudged into the kitchen. Every surface sparkled and it smelled lemon fresh, so it was hard to believe anything needed further attention. Following Jeremy, Pam peered into the microwave when he opened it. Sure enough, the interior of the microwave looked like the scene of a bloody axe murder. Dark red splotches adorned nearly every square inch.

“Golly,” Pam said. “Was there even any spaghetti sauce left on your pasta?”

“Um, not really,” he admitted. Wetting a paper towel, he began scrubbing the dried stains. “I had to add more sauce, then microwave it again. Like twice.” He frowned at the spot he had been cleaning. Though the paper towel had turned pink, he had barely made a dent in the dried sauce stain. He glumly resumed scrubbing.

Pam had no intention of spending their last few hours together cleaning a stupid microwave. “Want to see a cool trick?” she asked.

“Yeah, I need a break,” Jeremy said. Though he had been cleaning for less than thirty seconds, he dramatically wiped his brow as though he had been toiling in the fields under a scorching sun. While Pam began hunting through the unfamiliar kitchen cabinets, Jeremy fetched himself a juice box from the fridge and a box of dried seaweed snack from the pantry. He then hoisted himself onto the counter where he watched her fill a bowl with plain tap water and a generous pour of white vinegar.

“Now I need a toothpick,” she told him. Not moving an inch from his spot on the counter, Jeremy opened a cupboard door that would have bonked her head had she not adroitly leaned back. He handed her a toothpick. She plopped it into the bowl, then put the whole thing in the microwave.

Sipping his juice box, Jeremy regarded her with a worried expression. “Uh, Pam?” he began. He had to raise his voice to be heard, since Pam was busy punching the buttons on the microwave, each press accompanied by a loud beep.

“Yes, Jeremy?” After starting the microwave, she parroted Jeremy by pushing herself onto the kitchen counter, sitting close enough to him so their elbows touched.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I feel great,” she said, examining her nails. “Why do you ask?”

He glanced at the droning microwave. “I guess I don’t really get why you’re microwaving a toothpick in a bowl of water.”

Their legs had been dangling freely from the side of the counter, but Pam rubbed her foot against his. “I told you. It’s going to be a cool trick.” She checked to make sure no one was around before giving him a peck on the cheek. “Trust me.”
“Okay,” he said, still doubtful. Jeremy opened the package of seaweed and popped several in his mouth. “Want some dried seaweed?”

Pam sniffed the container filled with flattened rectangles. Though a lovely shade of dark green, the seaweed smelled ever-so-slightly fishy. He had peculiar tastes for a twelve year old boy. “No thanks,” she said.

Shrugging, he crunched loudly on the seaweed, then washed it down with a slurp of juice. “Is this going to take much longer?” Jeremy asked, glancing at the microwave.

“It won’t take long.” Feeling flirty, Pam slid off the counter. When she knelt on the floor, her chin was perfectly level with the juice box clenched between Jeremy’s knees. “Can I have a sip of your juice?” she asked. Her hands squeezed his legs.

“Um…”

Not waiting for an answer, Pam deliberately puckered her lips around the straw embedded in the box. She took a long pull of juice, all while gazing into Jeremy’s eyes. “Yum,” Pam said, licking her lips. “Hawaiian fruit punch.” She wanted to toss the juice box over her shoulder and nuzzle his shorts, but the beeping microwave interrupted. Pam rose to her feet. Jeremy stared at her with a goofy expression before absent-mindedly picking up his juice box.

“All right, microwave. Let’s see what you got.” Pam opened its door, stepping back to avoid the billowing cloud of steam. Once it dissipated, she began wiping the interior with a paper towel. After just three swipes, it had turned mushy with tomato sauce. Tossing it in the trash, she tore off a fresh paper towel. A mere two sheet later, the microwave was cleaner than a floor model at an appliance store.

“Ta-dah”! Pam announced. She used a pair of oven mitts to drain the bowl of hot water in the sink.

“No way,” Jeremy said. Not wanting to move from his perch, he sprawled across the kitchen counter to peer into the microwave. “How did you do that?”

“I’m magic,” Pam told him, wiggling her fingers as though casting a spell. His t-shirt had ridden up as he lay on the counter. Unable to resist, Pam pushed her face into his soft belly and blew a loud raspberry. Jeremy squawked and tried to push her away.

“Quit it!” he laughed. His frantic squirming, however, only served to encourage Pam. She liked the way he lay on the kitchen counter, as though he were part of a banquet served especially for her. Had they been alone, Pam might have eased down his shorts to continue teasing him, but the sound of jangling bracelets alerted her to Marla’s approach. Jeremy had barely enough time to pull his shirt back into place.

“What’s going on in here, Jeremy?” she barked. “I told you to clean the microwave.”

“He did,” Pam said. Catching his eye, she subtly raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I already finished cleaning it,” Jeremy said. “All by myself.”

Clearly not believing him, Marla opened the microwave. Pam tried not to smile when she did a double take at the sparkling interior. Marla ran a disbelieving finger along the spotless surface. “I thought this was supposed to be harder,” she said.

Jeremy elbowed Pam and muttered, “That’s what she said.”
Pam couldn’t help laughing. Marla’s eyes darted immediately at her, then at Jeremy. “What was that?” asked Marla.

“Um, nothing,” Jeremy said.

Pam couldn’t stop giggling so she gave Jeremy a high five to cover her mirth. “Mission accomplished!” she proclaimed, positioning herself in front of Jeremy’s perch on the counter. “Hop on, cowboy.”

Jeremy didn’t hesitate a second. Despite all the planks she did at the gym, Pam momentarily staggered from the weight of the twelve year old boy. It had been awhile since she had given him a piggyback ride. Nevertheless, she tightened her core and began walking. As they left the kitchen, she noticed Marla’s annoyed expression. It wasn’t any fun to dole out chores when the servants were cheerful.

“Thanks Pam,” he whispered in her ear.

“You’re welcome. Shall we go to your room now?” She still wasn’t sure about Call of Duty, but they could at least get away from Marla. Jeremy’s grip on her shoulders tightened as she began climbing the staircase. The first flight of stairs was relatively easy, but Pam had to take a break in the middle of the second set. It was then that she remembered that Jeremy’s room was on the third floor.

“What’s the holdup?” Jeremy questioned.

“I’m getting a little tired,” Pam said, loosening her arms around his legs. “Maybe you could walk the rest of the way?”

But Jeremy didn’t want to let go. “It’s just a few more stairs,” he pleaded. “Besides, Apple can do it.”

“Apple gives you piggyback rides?”

“Sure.” Jeremy brushed her hair aside so it wouldn’t get in his mouth. “All the way up to my room. She does it all the time.”

That did it. Mustering all her strength, Pam powered her way up the rest of the second flight of stairs, the mere price being a possible burst lung. She began sweating because, exertion aside, Jeremy was draped across her back like a warm blanket. Huffing and puffing, Pam paused on the landing to gaze at the third and final flight of stairs. It was like staring at Mount Everest.

“Well?” Jeremy prodded.

“I can’t. I’m running out of love.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Yanking her head close, he swiveled her neck and planted a kiss on her cheek. “Let’s go!”

Pam giggled. They passed Apple’s room where the closed door only partially muffled the sound of loud music. Taking a deep breath, Pam pushed up the first step, then another. Her legs were starting to quiver from the effort. They were only halfway up the stairs when she leaned sideways against the wall. “I can’t, Jeremy. You have to get down.”

Jeremy had other ideas though. His lips smacked against her cheeks. “Mwah! Mwah! Mwah! You can do it!”
Pam grunted as she climbed another step. When she paused, Jeremy kissed her once more. Another lurching step up, another breathless pause. When he kissed her a third time, however, Pam simply couldn’t manage another stair.

“Okay, for real, Jeremy,” she gasped. “Time to get down.”

Jeremy peppered her cheek with kisses. “Pam! Pam! Pam!” he chanted. Despite the young boy’s encouragement, she was on the verge of toppling over. After a dozen kisses, Jeremy finally noticed that she wasn’t moving.

“Uh oh,” he said. “The regular power-ups aren’t working anymore. I better try something different.” His arms had been wrapped around her neck, but now a free hand snaked across her chest.

“Oh!” Pam immediately perked up at the feel of him touching her breast.

“Power-up!” he proclaimed, squeezing hard.

“Jeremy! Not appropriate.” Pam felt the need to chide him, if only to excuse the swelling nipple inside her bra.

“Double power-up!” he said, kissing her cheek while squeezing her breast at the same time.

Marla called to them from the first floor. “Jeremy! I forgot to tell you. I left the vacuum in your room. Can you make sure your room is clean? Don’t take all day because I need the vacuum down here when you’re done.” The sound of her footsteps echoed up the stairs. Was Marla coming up? Not only was Jeremy still fondling Pam, but there was also something hard pressing against her spine.

Suddenly powered by the strength of ten women, Pam pushed onward. Fueled by equal parts of panic and arousal, she climbed the remaining stairs, careened into Jeremy’s room and tumbled onto the bed just as her legs gave out.

“That was so fun!” Jeremy said, untangling himself from the crumpled pile that used to be her fully-functional body. “Way to go, Pam!” He gave her one final kiss on the cheek.

“What… kind… of… thanks… is… that?” she wheezed.

“Okay, here’s your super power-up,” he said, kissing her on the lips. It was nice except Pam couldn’t enjoy it because she was panting like a dog.

“Wait…” Pam said, trying to catch her breath. “Apple… piggyback… You give… her… power-ups… too?”

“I was just kidding,” said Jeremy. “She’s never given me a piggyback ride. I just know you hate it when she outdoes you.”

Annoyed, Pam was ready to whack him with a pillow but stopped when she noticed the pointy bulge adorning the front of his shorts. Since she was lying down and he was kneeling on the bed, it was perfectly at eye level for Pam. She tapped the bulge with a finger to make sure it wasn’t an optical illusion. It was not.

“You better be nice if you want me to play Call of Duty with you,” she warned.

Jeremy swung a leg over her waist so he was straddling her. “I’m always nice,” he insisted. He began reaching under her shirt. Pam allowed him a quick feel before pointing to the vacuum cleaner in the corner.
“Don’t forget you have a job to do,” she reminded.

“Can’t we play Call of Duty first? Please?”

Pam loved the sound of him pleading so much that she could listen to it all day. “What about that little owie down there from when we... you know. The other night. On your birthday. Call of Duty might make it worse.”

“It’s fine,” Jeremy insisted. “It hasn’t bled at all since then.” Wanting to convince her, Jeremy yanked down his shorts and underwear. “See?”

Pam gazed up at the boy straddling her midsection. “Um, yes. I do see.” Jeremy’s penis was its usual healthy shade of pink. She gently retracted his smooth foreskin. No damage. If anything, his erection seemed even firmer than usual. Pam pulled it down like a lever and let it bounce back up. Sproing-sproing-sproing.

When she did it for the third time, Jeremy reminded her, “You always get mad at me and tell me your boobs are not toys.”

“Two wrongs make a right, Jeremy,” replied Pam. Unable to resist, she made him bounce one last time. “Just kidding. I’ll stop.” She returned his package to its usual place in his shorts and said, “Vacuum first, Call of Duty after.”

“But I really think I need Call of Duty now,” said Jeremy.

“And I think this carpet needs vacuuming now.” Pam lightly ran a hand across the front of his shorts. “Come on. You can do it.”

Jeremy groaned and climbed off her. Resigned to his task, he plugged in the vacuum and began working. A dull roar filled the room as he dutifully cleaned the space, even moving the chair and shutting the door to get every inch of the carpet.

With the closed door lending some privacy to the room, Pam decided to remove her shirt to air things out. She felt uncomfortably sticky from the piggyback ride. This was also a good opportunity to fix her bra that had been tugged askew by Jeremy’s wandering hands. The cool air was heavenly on her damp skin. Feeling better, Pam rolled onto her stomach and propped her chin on her hands.

If listening to Jeremy beg for Call of Duty was the best thing ever, the second best was seeing the hoops he would jump through for a chance to play. She watched him circle the room, round and round, with the vacuum. It was one of the rare days when his outfit actually matched. His t-shirt was loose but not unfashionably baggy. And as though his tall athletic socks weren’t cute enough, he still retained a pokey bump in his shorts while he vacuumed.

Jeremy had once informed her that Call of Duty was the only way to get his erections to go away. She assumed he was exaggerating, so this was a good time to test the theory. For the next several minutes, Pam kept a careful watch from her spot on the bed. It would have been better for her to observe him unclothed (because science) but, as best she could tell, the erection in his shorts remained a very consistent size.

It wasn’t until he was done vacuuming the closet that Jeremy finally glanced in the direction of the bed and noticed how she was clad only in her bra and skirt. She could swear she saw the bulge in his shorts twitch. They looked at each other for a long moment. Pam touched her bra strap with one finger, then pointed at the closed door. Instantly understanding her wordless command, Jeremy turned the lock on the doorknob. Then, not even bothering to turn off the vacuum, he bounded
toward the bed with three giant strides.

Pam sat up and slipped off her bra. The young boy reached for her chest with eager fingers, but she stopped him, instead placing a hand on his head to guide his mouth toward her exposed breast. She sighed with pleasure. His warm lips had no trouble teasing her nipple to a stiffened peak. After a moment, she moved his head toward her other breast to make sure everyone was receiving equal attention. The next several minutes were spent making him switch from one breast to the other. Back and forth. Jeremy did not protest in the least.

She was soon soaking in a warm pool of arousal. When Pam moved to recline on the bed, Jeremy moved with her, as though his lips were magnetized to her pink nipple. Wanting to trade a hardness for a hardness, Pam squeezed the familiar bulge in Jeremy’s shorts. She was about to slide a hand into his underwear when the sound of knocking, barely audible over the still roaring vacuum, interrupted the proceedings.

“Jeremy, are you in there?” The doorknob rattled. “Why is this locked?”

They sprang into action. Pam deftly pulled her bra into place, then slipped into her shirt. Jeremy tugged his shirt low to cover his shorts as he hurried to the door. Before opening it, he glanced at Pam to make sure she was ready. She gave him a nod.

Marla stepped into the room, annoyed and suspicious. “What took you so long? What are you doing in there?” She had to raise her voice to be heard.

“I was doing what you asked,” Jeremy yelled, pointing at the vacuum.

“Turn it off!” Marla shouted back. He did so. Silence filled the room while Marla scanned the room in search of mischief. Back on the bed, Pam had primly arranged her legs under her skirt as she pretended to read a book grabbed from the nightstand.

“Why was the door locked?” Marla asked again. “You know I don’t like locked doors. Especially in my own house.”

“I don’t know,” Jeremy shrugged.

“You don’t know?”

Had she been able to think of a good excuse, Pam might have tried to assist but it was all she could do to slow her pounding heart. Instead, Jeremy was left to fidget with one hand on the doorknob and the other on his shirt hem. “I don’t know,” he said again. “It was an accident.”

“If you’re done, take the vacuum downstairs to Gwen,” Marla ordered. “She needs to do her room too.”

Jeremy unplugged the vacuum and began lugging it down the stairs, clearly straining to lift the heavy appliance. Pam wanted to help, but Marla was still giving her the evil eye. The woman of the house clearly knew something was up. Struggling not to break into a cold sweat, Pam stared at the meaningless words on the page. Marla finally left, but not before stopping one floor below at Apple’s room.

“Gwen, we need to talk.”

Without the slightest effort to eavesdrop, Pam could hear Marla’s lecture. Jeremy returned to the room, still embarrassedly holding his t-shirt in place over his midsection. He started to speak but Pam held a finger to her lips.
“… gone over this already, Gwen,” Marla was saying. “If Zep wants to sleep over, fine. But he’s not allowed to sleep in your room.”

“What’s the big deal?” said Apple. “He just sleeps on the floor. It’s not like we can fit two people on a twin bed. It’s impossible to get any sleep.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” Marla asked. “You have no idea how close I am to banning Zep from this house, period. He’s not allowed to sleep in here. Do you understand? I don’t like it.” There was a pause before Marla added, “William doesn’t approve either.”

“So what?” Apple shot back. “We’re not even related.”

“Don’t you ever say that again.”

“Fine,” responded Apple. The condo rattled as she slammed her door shut.

Marla’s bracelet jangled as she rapped on Apple’s door. “Gwen? Open this door. I’m not done talking to you.” Silence. Marla knocked on the door again.

Since Marla seemed determined to ruin everyone’s day, Pam decided to return the favor. Speaking slightly louder than normal, she said, “Jeremy, you vacuumed the closet, right?”

“Sure did.”

“That’s good. I noticed some mouse droppings in there.”

“Oh gross.” Not realizing her prank, Jeremy inspected the closet. “I don’t see anything. I must have vacuumed them up.”

“Let’s not mention this to Marla,” Pam said. “She seems like the type who would freak out about mice. Hey, want to show me your dad’s new car?”

Jeremy nodded. He held her hand as they walked down the stairs. On the landing below they found themselves face-to-face with Marla, now frozen outside Apple’s room. She already had a rather light complexion to begin with, but it had grown even more pallid.

Jeremy squeezed past Marla first, then pulled Pam along. “Excuse us,” Pam said. She was dashing to keep up as Jeremy yanked her down the stairs. “Ow. Ow! Your nails!”

Pam freed herself from his grasp when they reached the first floor. The fleshy underside near her thumb was pockmarked with telltale indentations where Jeremy’s nails had dug into the skin. She wanted to show him the damage to make him feel bad, but he had darted off in search of his dad. Pam followed Jeremy to the kitchen, where William was frowning at his phone and tapping away furiously on the screen.

“Dad,” Jeremy began, “can I show Pam the…”

“Just a second, Jeremy,” interrupted William.

Spotting the keys on the counter, Jeremy picked them up and quietly rattled them. He dropped his voice to a whisper, even though his dad was texting and not talking on the phone. “Dad. I’m just going to show…”

“Put the keys down,” William ordered, not looking up.

“But dad…”
“Back away from the counter.”

Making a face, Jeremy did as he was told. He sidled up to Pam and whispered, “I bet you anything he’s texting my mom. It’s the only time he gets this grumpy.”

“What about that time you lost his Fitbit by putting it on a stray dog?” Pam whispered back.

“Oh, yeah, that.”

“He was pretty upset.”

“Well, the Fitbit technically wasn’t lost. We knew exactly where it was. I tracked it on a map for a whole week before the battery died. It’s not my fault the dog decided to run away into the next state. I guess it makes sense that he was in good enough shape to go that far. His resting heart rate was amazing.” Because he had to stand on tiptoes to whisper into Pam’s ear, Jeremy’s unsteady swaying caused him to topple against her with each sentence.

Pam showed him the marks he left on her hand. “Look at what you did. When was the last time we trimmed your nails?”

“I dunno. Maybe a week ago?” Jeremy’s face fell when Pam reached for her purse. “Aw, Pam, do we have to?”

Pam brandished the shiny nail clippers she retrieved from her purse. “You can’t go to camp with nails like that. Besides I don’t think your dad is going to surrender those keys anytime soon.” She led Jeremy outside to the front steps that were warm from the afternoon sunshine. Pam took a moment to primly adjust her hemline over her knees before patting the spot next to her on the steps. Jeremy reluctantly sat down by her side.

“I don’t see why you’re bothering,” he said. Pam briefly examined his hand for a moment before twisting open the steel nail clippers. With a practiced touch, she extended his first finger and got to work. Click, click, click. The clipper made a satisfying sound as she trimmed his nails.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, I’m leaving in a few hours anyway.”

She wished he hadn’t said that. “So what? That means you don’t need tidy fingernails?”

“You know. We don’t time for…” He trailed off.

“For what?” she prompted.

“For Call of Duty,” he said.

In the next yard, a man was trimming a privet hedge with a pair of shears. Pam smiled to herself when she thought of how this man could hear their conversation and have no idea what they were actually talking about. “And why would we play Call of Duty?”

“I don’t think we’ve ever not played Call of Duty after you trim my fingernails.”

“Double negative,” Pam corrected. “I believe you mean we always play Call of Duty after I trim your nails. And besides, there’s a first time for everything, Jeremy.” She reached for his other hand. Their bare knees touched as she pulled him closer. The sun passed behind a cloud and its radiant heat disappeared like a rudely yanked blanket. Pam suddenly realized how much she would miss even the
everyday tasks like trimming his nails. Shuddering, she tried not to think about how this was the last time she would do it for six weeks. She stifled another shudder when she imagined his bedraggled nails once he returned from camp.

If he was thinking along the same lines, Jeremy was certainly not showing it. She had barely finished clipping his last finger when he immediately jumped to his feet. “Finally!”

“Not so fast,” Pam said, setting aside the nail clipper and brandishing an emery board.

Jeremy groaned, loudly, before sitting down again. Pam began filing away the sharp edges left by the nail clipper. She then used his shirt to wipe any dusty remnants. “There!” she said, examining her work. “Salon perfect! Some places would charge you twenty bucks for that, you know. Me though…”

Pam tapped her cheek. Jeremy rolled his eyes, but gave her a quick kiss anyway. They went back inside the condo where William and Marla were having a conversation across three flights of stairs. “Can you say that again?” William called from the first floor. Upstairs, Marla’s disembodied voice echoed down the stairs.

“Move the box labeled ‘winter’ from the garage storage to the attic,” said Marla. “Then move the bikes from the basement to the garage and check the tire pressure. Oh, and while you’re in the garage, can you find some mouse traps? They’re in there somewhere.”

“I’m not sure I’ll have time to check the tires before I leave for camp with Jeremy,” said William. Since he was facing the stairs, he couldn’t see Jeremy slyly tiptoe to the counter where the car keys lay. Before Jeremy could grab them, Marla responded from upstairs. “Just my bike then. And try to find the mouse traps too. Have you seen Jeremy, by the way? I have a job for him.”

“Oh great,” Jeremy muttered. Aborting the mission, he grabbed Pam’s hand. “We gotta hide. Quick!” They snuck past William, taking the stairs to the lower level of the condo. As she trotted after the young boy, Pam was pleased to feel no pain from his fingernails.

The living room was furnished with a thick crimson rug and cream colored couch in front of a fireplace, but Jeremy passed it up in favor of the basement level. They continued down the stairs to a large room with concrete flooring. An unused treadmill sat in the corner, along with some scattered dumbbells and yoga mats.

“In here,” Jeremy said, opening a door. Pam found herself in a small laundry room. In addition to the washer and dryer, a series of shelves held neatly folded towels, old board games, and out-of-season decorations like a light-up Santa and a kelly green cake stand shaped like a shamrock.

“How long are we going to wait in here?” Pam asked. Both laundry appliances were already running, filling the room with scent of detergent and dryer sheets.

“Maybe forever,” Jeremy mused.

“Well, in that case…” Pam took a seat in a chair with a broken armrest. Jeremy could have sat in the matching ottoman but he instead chose to curl up in Pam’s lap. It was a cozy fit since the chair was decidedly not designed for two people, but she couldn’t say no to him anymore. Time was running out.

“Look at your lovely nails,” Pam noted, holding his hand at arm’s length.

“Girls at school always make fun of me for my nails.” He rested his head against her collarbone. Jeremy was in full-on snuggle mode now.
“They’re just jealous. You’re getting more attention from girls. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“I don’t know. I guess so.”

“What about your guy friends?”

“They’ve never even noticed.”

“That’s probably because their nails are gross. All chewed up and full of dirt. I’m telling you, girls flip for guys with nice nails.”

“Girls like guys with nice nails,” Jeremy repeated. “Just because of the way their nails look?”

“Well, yes. The way they look. And feel too.” She was feeling delightfully warm inside, either from the homey scent of dryer sheets or from the cuddly twelve year old boy in her lap. “Hey,” she said, “want to take those newly trimmed fingernails for a test drive?”

“What do you mean by test drive?” he asked. Pam scooted him off her lap and onto the ottoman next to the chair. Then she reached under her skirt to remove her underwear.

“A test drive,” Pam said, spreading her knees slightly.

“Oh. Okay.” Kneeling on the floor, Jeremy reached into the darkened recess of her skirt. Pam couldn’t see his hand, but she could definitely feel his finger sliding into her kitten. Already a little wet from the cuddling, the feeling only intensified as Jeremy began pushing in and out of her.

“It’s so neat that you have this, like, secret compartment down here,” said Jeremy.

His observation essentially summed up the experience of sex with a young boy. Though embarrassed by the description, Pam was flattered by his fascination. “Do you wish you had one?” she asked.

“Yeah. I would keep important spy stuff in it. Like lock picks and a mini telescope. What about you?”

“Let’s see…” Pam considered. Smiling coyly, she said, “I would probably keep Jeremy Prater in my secret compartment.”

“Oh, come on,” he said, walking straight into her trap. “I’m too big to fit in there.”

“Some parts of you fit perfectly,” said Pam. “Especially one part.” He blushed when he realized what she meant.

“Do my fingernails really make that much of a difference?” Jeremy asked, gruffly changing the subject. “You’re just making that up, right?”

“It makes a huge difference,” Pam assured him. “Why would I make that up?”

Jeremy shrugged. “I thought maybe you were tricking me into letting you trim my nails every week.”

“When have I ever tricked you?” she said. He opened his mouth to answer but she stopped him. “Never mind. Of course my kitten doesn’t like sharp fingernails. It’s sensitive. It can even tell which finger is which.”

Jeremy was intrigued. “Really?”

“Really.” Pam smiled at the boy kneeling before her spread knees. She knew what was coming next.
“Close your eyes,” he ordered. Pam did as he instructed.

Something slipped into her kitten. “Ring finger,” Pam said confidently. She must have been correct because his finger immediately vacated her. Another one took its place. “Index.” She peeked out of one eye to find a consternated Jeremy.

“Just lucky guesses,” he muttered with a frown. “Keep your eyes closed. No peeking.”

Another digit pressed into her waiting kitten. “Middle finger,” Pam announced. “That’s an easy one.” The twelve year old boy began poking his fingers in rapid succession. Pam returned fire by promptly rattling back her responses.

“Thumb.”

“Ring finger again. Nice try.”

“Index finger. Your left hand this time.”

“Pinky, duh.”

“Which hand?” Jeremy challenged.

“Right hand,” Pam answered.

He sighed, but continued the guessing game. In no time at all, Pam has successfully identified every finger and every hand. Truthfully, she struggled in differentiating his index and ring finger but had gotten lucky. The other fingers, though, were easy as pie. Pam was ten for ten, but wondered if she could go eleven out of eleven as she eyed the tent in Jeremy’s shorts.

“Want to put anything else in my secret compartment?” she offered.

“No,” he said, grumpy. “That was all my fingers. You win.”

“I meant something besides your fingers,” Pam said. “You know, like…”

She was cut off by the laundry room door being thrown open. “All right!” Apple was shouting over her shoulder. “I’m doing it now! Stop yelling at me.”

Jeremy’s finger had been wiggling inside Pam, but now it was unceremoniously yanked out as he leapt from between Pam’s spread knees and hastily took a seat on the ottoman. Pam barely had time to pull her skirt back into place before Apple entered the room with a basket of laundry perched on her hip. Startled by their unexpected presence, Apple screamed and dropped the laundry basket.

“Holy shit!” Apple gasped for breath before bursting into laughter. “You guys just scared the crap out of me. What are you doing in here?”

“Um, hiding from your mom,” Jeremy answered.

“I know exactly how you feel,” Apple said. She bent over to pick up her laundry. Pam nudged Jeremy with her toe. She wanted to retrieve her underwear on the ground, but Jeremy was standing on it. His eyes bugged out in terror when he realized what she was trying to tell him. He swiftly grabbed the underwear, but then panicked when he didn’t know what to do with them. Pam held out her hand, but Apple glanced in their direction at that exact moment. Pam watched with dismay as Jeremy turned his back to Apple, frantically balled up the underwear, and jammed them inside his shorts.
“I can’t blame you for hiding down here,” said Apple. “My mom is being such a bitch today.”

“You can say that again,” said Jeremy. The balled up underwear in his shorts created an odd bulge. He tried casually pushing it down when Apple wasn’t looking, but it didn’t help. Pam decided it didn’t look too conspicuous as long you didn’t already know they were there.

Apple heaved her laundry basket onto the dryer. “Whew. That was a bigger load than I thought,” she said.

“That’s what she said,” Pam said automatically.

Apple laughed, but Jeremy did not. “Wait, does that really work as a ‘That’s what she said’ joke?” he asked. Giggling, Apple swiped her hand over her head, mimicking the motion of the joke going over Jeremy’s head.

“I’ll explain it you some other time,” said Pam. She checked the time. It was almost three o’clock. Kate was due to arrive soon and then Jeremy would leave for camp. Pam tapped her foot in frustration. She and Jeremy would be playing Call of Duty right now if it weren’t for Apple’s presence.

“We could put in your laundry for you,” Pam offered. “Then you wouldn’t have to wait down here.”

“Don’t worry, I can do it,” Apple told her. Since there was nowhere else to sit in the cramped laundry room, she hoisted herself onto the washing machine.

Jeremy glanced in her laundry basket. “Those are just bed sheets. Even I can do those. It’s easy.”


Jeremy persisted nonetheless. “I’ll measure out the detergent really carefully,” he promised.

Pam noticed the flustered manner in which Apple was studying her fingernails. Recalling Marla’s lecture, she suddenly understood why Apple wanted to handle her own bedsheets. “Never mind, Jeremy,” Pam said. “You’ve already done plenty of chores today. No need to knock yourself out with more work.” He glanced at her questioningly, but she just gently shook her head.

The laundry room door swung open again. This time it was William and, just like Apple, he wasn’t expecting anyone and gave a strangled shriek. “Good lord!” he said, jumping back in surprise.

“Cute scream, dad,” Jeremy said.

“What are you guys doing down here?” William asked.

They glanced at each other. “Waiting for the laundry to finish,” said Apple.

“This thing is comfy,” Jeremy said, patting the ottoman.

“I enjoy the smell of dryer sheets,” Pam volunteered.

“What are you doing down here, dad?” Jeremy asked.

William carefully closed the door behind him, which made the tiny room seem even smaller now that the four of them were crammed in there. “I’m just… looking for the, um, bike pump.”

“It’s on that shelf,” Apple pointed.
“Thank you, Apple.” William plucked the bike pump but made no move to exit the cramped room. Instead he pulled out his phone and began scrolling. “Just need to look something up,” he mumbled.

William was apparently hiding from Marla too. Pam was trying not to laugh when she saw Apple and Jeremy smiling when they realized the same thing. Their collective sense of freedom was short lived as the muffled sound of Marla’s voice reached the laundry room.

“Hey, where is everybody? Hello?”

It sounded like she was calling down the stairs. Everyone guiltily glanced at each other, though no one dared make the first move. Ruefully pocketing his phone, William shuffled out the door. The dryer chimed and slowed to a stop. Pleased to have a task, Apple began emptying its contents into a basket.

“Jeremy, can you come up?” It was William calling. “Marla needs help with something.”

“Darn it.” Sulking, Jeremy stomped up the stairs with loud steps. After crossing and uncrossing her legs a few times, Pam decided to go with him for moral support and to possibly get her panties back. It felt breezier than usual under her skirt as she hurried to catch up with Jeremy. She was about to follow him to the second floor when William stopped her.

“Say, Pam, could you do me a favor? I wanted to get gas for the car, but I have to finish up a few things for Marla. Do you mind topping off the tank for me?” He held out the keys. “It’s the blue minivan parked in the corner of the far lot.”

“Oh. Sure thing,” Pam said, accepting the keys. She wanted to pull Jeremy aside so she could regain possession of her underwear, but now he was trotting down to the basement with an armful of boxes. Oh well. It wouldn’t kill her to run an errand without panties. Probably. She stopped in the kitchen for some water before grabbing her purse and heading out the door.

“Let’s see,” she said, scanning the parking lot. “Blue minivan, blue minivan…” Her eyes landed on a sapphire blue Honda Odyssey gleaming like a jewel in the afternoon sun. When she climbed into the driver's seat, she was immediately bathed in the inimitable scent of a new car. It was strikingly different from her old BMW. Above her, the open moonroof displayed a picture perfect view of the blue sky. The modern dashboard had so many buttons that she felt like she was in a space ship. Compounding her disorientation was the fact that there was no place to insert the key.

“Where the hell is it?” Pam muttered to herself.

She kept hunting. Rattling the keys in annoyance, she then realized there wasn't even an actual key on the keychain that William had handed her. She was ready to give up when she noticed a button labeled, 'Engine Start/Stop'. Holding her breath, Pam tentatively pressed the button. A screen on the dashboard came to life, advising her to hold the brake pedal at the same time. She pressed the button again and was gratified to hear the car hum to life.

The car was running. That was one problem solved. Backing out of the parking spot was another issue altogether. Compared to her compact BMW, operating the Odyssey felt like maneuvering an ocean liner. It wasn't until she was halfway backed out that she noticed the backup camera image on the dashboard screen.

“Huh. How about that?” The live image helped a little bit, but she didn't completely trust it. Pam breathed a sigh of relief upon successfully pulling out of the parking spot. After all, she certainly didn't want to be the one to sully William's new car. If anything, that was Jeremy's job.
She took a moment to adjust the mirrors and the seat. Pam drove slowly as she acclimated to the new car. Taking a defensive stance, she carefully left a sizable distance between the cars ahead and dutifully stopped at every yellow light rather than going for it. Despite its size, she had to admit the car handled well. Pam was at a red light when another car pulled up next to her.

“Hey!” a man called to her. “Hey lady!”

Pam wasn't sure if he was cat-calling her or taunting her for driving like a grandma. Thankfully, she didn't have to respond because the light turned green. She was just starting to get the hang of driving the Odyssey when a voice made her bolt upright. “Um, hi Pam. Where are we going?”

Pam was so alarmed that she slammed on the brakes, then braced herself at the sound of screeching tires from the car behind her. This was it. William’s new car was about to get totaled. At the last second, the other car swerved into the next lane to keep from rear-ending the Odyssey. Her sudden stop earned her a finger from the irate motorist. Pam was trying to calm herself when a blur of motion in the rear-view mirror caught her eye. She was astonished to find Jeremy sheepishly smiling at her from the very last row of seats.

“What the hell?” Pam demanded.

“Uh, I’m just enjoying the new car smell,” he said. “Doesn't it smell great?”

Pam was speechless at first, then remembered she was at a complete stop in a three lane road. She double-checked her mirrors and began driving again. “You’re supposed to be at the condo,” Pam told him.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “Supposed to be.”

“But you're not.”

“Nope.”

“Explanation, please.”

“I didn't feel like helping Marla. So I snuck out the back patio. I needed a place to hide and first I thought about hiding on the golf course out back but I tried going there once and almost got hit in the head by a golf ball. Then I thought of my dad's new car and figured no one would look there. Pretty good hiding place, right? But I didn't know you were going to take my dad's car somewhere. I was super surprised when we started moving.”

“How did you get in here anyway? The doors were locked.”

Jeremy pointed at the open moonroof. “I climbed onto the hood and jumped in. Like it was a submarine hatch. I’m going to start getting into every car that way because…”

His tale was cut short by a loud beeping sound. Pam had been so engrossed that she didn't notice the stopped traffic ahead of the car. The beeping was accompanied by a jarring warning on driver's screen to 'BRAKE!' It was all so overwhelming that Pam slammed on the brakes much harder than necessary. Her seat belt securely held her in place, but Jeremy was not so lucky.

“Oof!” There was a dull thud as he disappeared from view.

“Jeremy!” Pam cried. Even though she was still in the middle of the street, Pam was ready to turn off the engine to dash out of the car to check on him.
He popped back into view like a jack in the box. “I’m okay!” he called.

Pam breathed a sigh of relief. Once again, they had miraculously avoided getting into a car accident. “Put on your seat belt,” she ordered.

“I want to sit up front.” Jeremy somersaulted over the middle row and scampered into the passenger seat. Pam waited until he was safely buckled in before moving again.

She glanced at his bare feet. “You didn't even put on your shoes?”

“I told you. I was on the run.” Jeremy began pressing buttons on the dashboard screen. “So, where are we going?”

“Your dad asked me to fill up the tank for him,” Pam said. “But instead I'll have to turn around and drop you off, you little stowaway.”

“What for?” Jeremy said. He looked out the window. “You're practically already there.”

He had a point. “All right,” Pam said. “Can you use my phone to text your dad and let him know where you are?”

Jeremy reached for her purse. Her phone was right there, but he first opened the zipper on an inside pocket and helped himself to a watermelon Jolly Rancher.

Keeping one eye on the road, Pam said, “Um, my passcode is...” Before she could continue, Jeremy rapidly punched in six digits and unlocked her phone. Pam gave him a look.

“What?” he asked innocently. Navigating to her Messages app, he cleared his throat and began tapping the screen. “Hi William. Your son is a sweetheart but your girlfriend is a total b...”

Pam took her hand off the wheel to slap his leg. “Don't you dare!”

“I was kidding. Look, I'm just saying, 'Hi dad it's jeremy I'm with pam be back soon'. How does that sound? I didn't use punctuation or capitalization either. That way, he'll know it's really me.”

“I approve,” Pam said. “Send away.” They stopped at a red light, giving her time to familiarize herself with the Odyssey’s high tech dashboard. There were so many buttons and readouts that she could have spent half the day studying the new car.

“There’s the gas station,” Jeremy said, pointing.

Still unfamiliar with the oversized car, Pam jumped the curb when turning into the gas station but otherwise successfully pulled up to pump without any other mishaps. She reached toward the steering column for the ignition before remembering the keyless start/stop. Hesitantly, she pressed the ‘stop’ button and was gratified when the car obediently shut off.

“Want me to wash the windshield?” Jeremy offered.

Pam stopped him before he could even unbuckle his seat belt. “No, thank you. It’s plenty clean enough,” she said.

“Can I have some money to buy myself a drink from the gas station?”

“You don’t need a drink. Just stay in here, okay? This will just take a second.” She opened the car door. Getting out was strange since she wasn’t accustomed to climbing down from a vehicle. The fact that she wasn’t wearing underwear did not help either. Pam kept a cautious hand on her skirt to
Even the gas cap had her flummoxed. There wasn’t one, it turned out. She had just inserted the nozzle and began filling the tank when someone said, “Nice car you got there. Is it new?”

Pam glanced over to see a guy in the next row admiring the Odyssey. He had a chiseled face that was accompanied by a tousle of curly brown hair.

“Brand new,” Pam told him. She didn't feel like explaining that it wasn't her car. To her dismay, the man stepped over for a closer look.

“It sure has a lot of cargo space,” he noted. “I mean, especially compared to my car.” Pam looked over to see his jet black convertible parked on the other side. The top was down, revealing a sleek leather interior, and a bold red racing stripe ran down the middle of the hood.

“Ha. Yeah,” Pam said. “I guess not.”

“Have you ever ridden in one of these?” he inquired. “It’s a Ford Mustang. They’re really fun.”

Another car pulled up behind the convertible at the gas pump. Two young women exited and immediately began admiring the vehicle. Unfortunately, the man didn't notice as his attention was still fixed on Pam, who was wishing the gasoline would pump faster. She really didn’t feel like chatting with this twenty-something man who just looked her up and down for the third time. Maybe he had a sixth sense that told him she wasn’t wearing underwear.

“I've never ridden in a convertible,” she answered.

“You should sometime. The Ford Mustang is a whole new experience. The wind in your hair, the blue skies overhead.”

“I can't. I, um...” Pam struggled to think of a good reason. “I have a phobia. Of being decapitated. It's actually a recurring stress dream of mine.”

The man gave her a funny look as he tried to figure out if she was joking or serious. “I know what you mean. I have the top up half the time anyway. Especially on longer trips in the Ford Mustang.” He kept referring to the full name of the car as though it were some magic phrase that would make Pam drop to her knees. “Like when I’m headed out of the city. Last weekend, I just started driving and discovered some vineyards east of here. I had no idea there was winemaking this far north!”

“Me neither,” Pam replied. “How interesting.” She desperately cast her eyes to locate the two women who had been admiring his car, but they had disappeared into the gas station. This was unfortunate because they were exactly the sort of ladies this guy was trying to attract with his fancy car. Instead he gamely stuck with Pam, who was not game at all. She had mentally checked out the moment she noticed his broad shoulders, the dorky sunglasses perched on his head, and the fact that he was well over thirteen. He likely qualified as conventionally attractive, but his hair looked better than hers, for heaven’s sake. She didn’t need that kind of competition in a mate.

“They had lots of signs for tastings. Free tastings,” the man said, smiling. “Can you believe it? Free booze!”

“I’m not really into the whole drinking thing,” answered Pam.

The man was befuddled, wearing the expression of someone who entered an elevator and found that none of the buttons worked. He was about to continue the inane conversation when the Odyssey’s horn honked for a long two seconds. Pam was so startled that she jumped away from the car.
Jeremy poked his head out of the driver’s window. “Sorry! That was an accident.”

“Will you cool it?” Pam asked. “No more fiddling around in there, got it?”

Jeremy, of course, had already moved on. “Whoa, look at that cool car,” he said, noticing the vehicle that had failed to entice Pam.

“It’s a Ford Mustang,” Pam said. Jeremy visibly swooned at the car’s name. “If you behave, maybe this nice man will take us for a ride sometime. You know, we can check out the vineyards. All three of us.”

Jeremy couldn’t tear his eyes away from the muscle car. He said, “Really? That would be so sweet. Thanks mister!”

The man’s eyes kept darting at Jeremy, then back to Pam. His smooth demeanor had vanished. “Yeah!” He hesitated. “So… is this your boy?”

“I don’t mind squishing into the back seat,” said Jeremy. “And I swear I wouldn’t get carsick back there. It’s been, like, years since I’ve thrown up in a car. Honest.”

“Pussy magnet, meet cock repellant. The man was embarrassed, Jeremy disappointed and Pam elated. As far as she was concerned, every woman needed a Jeremy Prater or similar for times like this. She wanted to kiss him right then and there, but he was leaning so far out the window that he was about to fall out of the car.

“Jeremy, what did I tell you about sticking your head out the window?” she admonished.

“I’m trying to get one last look at the Ford Mustang,” he said.

Pam waved him back inside. “You’re going to get decapitated, sweet pea. Sit down and buckle up.”

If the man had been previously befuddled, he was now altogether confused at hearing this boy call his mom by her first name. When Pam smiled at the man, he pretended to study the buttons on his gas pump, stroking his chin in deep thought, as though he had never been asked to choose between paying inside and paying at the pump.
Two women, the ones who had been admiring his car, sauntered past. “Hey, nice Ford Mustang you got there,” one of them complimented.

A wild look of relief crossed his face as the women stopped to admire his car. “You like it? Thanks!” He straightened his hair with a practiced flourish. Remembering his manners, he smiled apologetically at Pam. “Nice chatting with you. Have a good day!”

Feeling like a queen, Pam sauntered to the driver’s side door and mounted her trusty Honda Odyssey. Before starting the car, she rummaged in her purse and handed Jeremy a dollar plus all the loose change she could find. “Didn’t you say you wanted to buy a drink?”

He seemed surprised, but accepted the money. “Thanks!” He trotted toward the gas station, then retraced his steps to the car. Pam pressed the button to open the passenger side window. “Did you want anything?” he asked.

“No, thank you.”

He ran off again, disappeared into the gas station and, after a moment, returned with a bottle of blue Gatorade which he immediately began chugging on the walk back to the car. Half of it was already gone by the time he climbed back into his seat. Pam waited for him to get settled.

“Ready?” On her command, the car purred to life. They inched toward the exit where she signaled a left turn. Scanning for a break in the traffic, she said, “Thanks Jeremy.”

“For what? I didn’t do anything.”

Spotting an opening between cars, Pam didn’t answer right away. “You know… Thanks for being you.”

“Oh. Sure. You’re welcome,” he said, though he was still mystified as to the reason for her gratitude. Pam tore her attention away from the road to glance at him and was immediately caught in an inexplicable moment that made her heart clutch. Something about the way the afternoon sun illuminated the features of his face, the soft curves transitioning to hard lines, the manner in which his chin resolutely jutted forth while his eyes gleamed. Every detail about him suddenly seemed ephemeral, even his very state of being. He was a boy, yet he was not a boy.

Changing her mind, Pam flipped the turn signal to a right instead of left. They drove several blocks in silence before Jeremy noticed the passing scenery. “This isn’t the way back to my dad’s place,” he said. They passed some landmarks: the library, Atomic Age, and his school, now abandoned since it was summer.

“Wait, are we going back to my mom’s?” he asked, finally catching on.

“We sure are.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.” When they pulled into the driveway, Pam sent Jeremy to the keypad to enter the code for the garage door. After parking inside, Pam ordered Jeremy back into the car before hopping out herself. “Sit in the back, please,” she said. “I need to grab something from the house.” Inside, she briskly headed for Jeremy’s room where she plucked the bottle of K-Y from its hiding spot behind his mattress.

“We drove all the way back to get the stuff?” Jeremy wondered when she returned to the car.
Pam pressed the button to close the garage. “Stuff and privacy,” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the creaking of the garage door. Once it slid shut, however, a golden silence filled the air.

Pam took the seat next to Jeremy in the car. After all their failed attempts that day, she was filled with a sense of triumph as she began easing down his shorts.

“Oops, almost forgot about these,” she said, plucking her balled up underwear out of his shorts. Pam gave the panties a good shake to freshen them up before pulling them back on. This required some extra shimmying of her hips due to the fact that she was seated in the tight quarters of the minivan. Bending over at the waist, she smoothed out her skirt and then sat down again.

“That feels better,” Pam said.

“I think that’s the first time you put on clothes before Call of Duty,” Jeremy observed.

Pam took off her shirt to humor him. “Better?”

He nodded.

“Let’s see,” she mused. “Where were we?” Jeremy sat in a very stiff upright position so Pam decided to make him more comfortable. She fiddled with his seat until she found the recline lever. “How’s that?” she asked, tilting his seat backward.

The Odyssey’s seat was tilted so far back that Jeremy was practically lying down. “Good,” he said. He watched her squirt some K-Y into her hand. “Um, don’t spill any stuff in the car. My dad is gonna kill me. We probably should have gone inside the house.”

“No time for that,” Pam said. “Besides, it’s kind of fun playing Call of Duty in the garage.” It wasn’t exactly romantic, but it had the perfect combination of danger and safety, like a thrill ride at an amusement park. Biting her lip in anticipation, Pam gently kneaded the young boy’s penis. She loved the feeling of him growing hard in her hand, his hot blood filling every inch of his little shaft. Pam adoringly straightened his hair as she brought him to a full erection.

Jeremy touched her bare collarbone, tracing squiggly lines on them, before his fingers made contact with her bra. Pam moved a little closer, first to to make it easier for him to explore and second so she could kiss him on the lips. To her delight, Jeremy kissed her back. It was always a treat to taste his lips and stroke him at the same time.

An urgency became apparent in his touch as he caressed her chest. It was as though he were pushing her away but Pam knew better. A bra strap slipped free of her shoulder, the cup falling loose and allowing Jeremy’s hand to close on her bare breast. His other hand tried to do the same to her other side. Pam felt him fumbling blindly against her bra before he hesitated. She was unsure why until he stiffened in the reclined seat. Jeremy must have been more excited than usual because this was a fast Call of Duty session, even for him.

The young boy made a whimpering noise, perhaps even trying to say something, which was impossible since Pam’s mouth remained locked on his in a deep kiss. His little penis twitching mightily, Jeremy began coming in a series of undulating waves. Pam took advantage of his slackened lips to plunge her tongue into his mouth where it greedily searched for its counterpart.

His pleasure was now hers as well. Pam couldn’t help but moan too while she kissed the squirming boy. Jeremy’s hand retained its vise-like clamp on her breast; it wasn’t until she finally felt him loosen his grip that she slowly stopped milking his erection. Despite his rapid breathing, Jeremy gave her a tired smile.
“I can go inside to clean up,” he offered.

Pam placed a hand on his chest to stop him. “Stay here, sweetie,” she said. “I got this.” She slipped inside the house to wash her hand, adjust her bra, and moisten a washcloth in warm water. As she expected, Jeremy had dozed off by the time she returned. She carefully wiped him clean before gently pulling his underwear and shorts to their proper position.

She put her shirt back on next. It was a pity there wasn’t enough time because Pam was rather worked up and needing release herself. As she brushed out the wrinkles in her skirt, she wistfully pressed a hand between her legs and discovered that her panties were soaked from the odyssey in the Odyssey.

Pam considered changing into a fresh pair when she had a better idea. She stepped out of her panties, which felt weird because she was standing in the garage. Still snoozing away, Jeremy did not stir when she carefully lifted the waistband of his shorts, nor did he awaken when she placed the neatly folded panties on his relaxed boy parts. Pam was pleased to send him off to summer camp with a special souvenir.

Still in cleanup mode, she hung the damp washcloth in the bathroom, pulled on a clean pair of underwear, then returned the K-Y to its hiding spot in Jeremy’s room. The last task was a bittersweet one since she couldn’t help think of how it would be weeks before the stuff would be needed again. She returned to the garage just in time to hear her phone vibrate in her purse. Pam scrolled through a dozen messages that she must have missed when they were playing Call of Duty. They were all from William, each one a variation of “Where are you? We need to leave soon.” She texted back to let him know they were on their way.

Jeremy was still out for the count so she returned his seatback to an upright orientation and fastened the seat belt to secure him in a sitting position. Pam was worried the creaky garage door would waken him, but he didn’t even stir. Traffic had thinned considerably, letting her make the trip back to the condo in record time. The Odyssey was already feeling more comfortable to drive. Upon entering the condo parking lot, she found Kate already there and chatting with Apple out front.

William emerged from the condo. “There you guys are,” he said, tossing Jeremy’s suitcase into the back of the car. “I was about to put out an APB for you. What took you so long?”

“Sorry about that,” Pam apologized. “I realized I left my hair straightener on and had to go home to turn it off.”

“Don’t listen to him, Pam. I got here five minutes ago,” Kate said. She shook her head at William. “Take it easy over there, partner.”

“We need to hit the road if we’re going to get there before dark,” he said. William was climbing into the Odyssey when he noticed his sleeping son in the back, chin on his chest, precariously listing starboard and held in place only by the seatbelt. “What happened to him?” he asked Pam.

“Well tuckered out,” said Pam. “This Honda is such a smooth ride. It was like gliding on a cloud.”

Kate got into the passenger seat. “Now it will be an extra peaceful drive,” she proclaimed. “I was hoping to nap in the car too.”

“You know, this is the number one reason I bought this car,” said William. “I always wanted to motor around while the family catches up on their sleep.”

Apple slid open the rear door and gently shook Jeremy’s knee. “Bye Jeremy! Have fun at camp.
Don’t forget to write to me.”


Pam was next. Steeling herself, she tapped Jeremy’s shoulder. Hardly ten seconds had elapsed since Apple woke him to say goodbye, yet she could hear him lightly snoring already. “Hey,” Pam said. “Bye.”

“Hmm?” Jeremy groggily wiped his eyes before blearily focusing on her. “Bye Pam. Miss you.” He held out his arms for a hug so Pam leaned in. But instead of embracing her, he grasped her shoulders and gave her a kiss. On the lips.

Her heart soared like it was strapped to a rocket headed for the moon. Pam plummeted back to earth when she remembered she had an audience. Apple hid a grin. Kate and William, sitting up front, exchanged a bemused look.

Apple sighed and said, “I always knew he liked you more.”

“I did not expect him to do that,” said Pam, turning bright red. She made a show of wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Gross.” It wasn’t the greatest kiss, maybe a C+ at best, but there was no mistaking the heartfelt sentiment behind his warm lips. At least he didn’t give her a lingering kiss with tongue like she had been teaching him to do for the past two months.

“Does that count as his first kiss?” Kate asked William.

William considered. “Maybe. My first kiss was when I was fourteen, so Jeremy has me beat by two years. She was also older than me.” He glanced at Pam. “But only a few months older. Not like, oh I don’t know, twice my age.”

Pam knew they were making fun of her, but became flustered just the same. “Ha ha. Very funny, you guys. He was half-asleep. He didn’t even realize what he was doing. So it definitely does not count as a first kiss.” Her words would have been more convincing without her blushing cheeks.

“No, it counts,” said Kate. “Shoot, I wish I had caught that on video. I already have his first word, first steps, and first day of school. First kiss would have been perfect. We could have created a compilation video and played it as his high school graduation.”

William clutched his heart. “Memories! They grow up so fast.”

“Pam, I’ve got…” Kate counted on her fingers. “…seven words for you: I’m too young to be a grandmother.”

“Stop!” pleaded Pam. She looked at William. “You were worried about leaving late. Shouldn’t you guys get going?”

“Right you are, Pam,” said William. With Kate still giggling, he started the car and pressed the button to close the rear door. It slid smoothly and silently on its track until finally sealing itself with a hermetic click.

Pam and Apple waved as the Odyssey drove away. Jeremy wasn’t even awake to wave back and maybe that was a good thing. Pam felt certain she would have burst into tears to see him waving goodbye. Nevertheless, she felt a lump forming in her throat.

And she wasn’t the only one. To her surprise, Apple wiped away a tear. “I’m going to miss having him around,” confessed Apple.
Pam hid her surprise. It hadn’t occurred to her that Apple might miss Jeremy as well. “I know,” Pam agreed. “Me too.”

Apple wiped away another tear, then laughed sheepishly. “It was fun. Having a pretend little brother, you know? Playing cards. Making sushi runs. Having slumber parties in my room because we watched a scary movie. Stuff like that.”

Under ordinary circumstances, Pam would be fighting the urge to claw Apple’s eyes out. But rather than jealousy, she felt an altogether foreign sense of solidarity with Apple. She couldn’t remember ever having felt this way before. Reaching into her purse, Pam produced a packet of tissues and handed one to Apple.

“Thanks,” Apple said, blowing her nose. “So what are you doing the rest of the summer?”

Pam opened her mouth to answer but fell silent. Her summer was now wide-open. Limitless. Why did that sound so scary? In the distance, she saw the Odyssey shimmer like a mirage in the early evening light before it turned a corner and disappeared.
Chapter Summary

… nor any drop to drink. With Jeremy temporarily out of the picture, Pam is left to her own devices.

It was eight a.m. on a Thursday. The neighborhood, brimming with green lawns and stately trees, slowly rose from sleep along with the confident climb of the warm July sun. The neighborhood followed its own rhythm that alternated between activity and serenity. Every now and then, the silence would be punctuated by a slamming car door. A jogger and her dog might amble along the sidewalk. A pair of cyclists would swoop past on the smooth asphalt. The quiet streets held the adventurous promise of a summer day.

The Prater house was silent too, empty except for a lone occupant. Inside, Pam lay on a bed. Jeremy’s bed, specifically. Dressed in a t-shirt and undies, her eyes were closed and her breath came in measured tones. Pam was not sleeping though. Her fingers roamed inside her underwear.

“Mmm,” she murmured. In her mind, an elaborate fantasy unspooled. Jeremy was coming home three weeks early due to an outbreak of malaria. Quinine was the only cure, but the camp headmaster decided she didn’t want to tempt the impressionable children with tonic water because it was clearly a gateway to mixed drinks and, subsequently, a lifelong battle with alcoholism.

Jeremy, having magically shown up at the front door of the house, declared how much he missed Pam. “I can tell,” she told him, eyeing his shorts, “but I need to finish this crossword puzzle first. Can you sit quietly for a few minutes?”

He would do his best, but the boy could only wait so long. Jeremy was so desperate for her attention that he offered to do anything she wanted. “Anything? What about towering me?” she challenged. “Would you do that?”

Pam would take her time undressing until Jeremy tore off her clothes himself. Too impatient to move to the bedroom, he had her lie down right on the living room floor while he straddled her. The naked twelve year old boy loomed over Pam, his shins pinning her shoulders to the bed, his hard penis almost brushing her chin.

“Can I?” she asked, kissing the tip. Jeremy nodded. Pam swooned, first at the taste of him and then at the realization that he would do anything she wanted. During his stay at camp, he had outgrown the shyness and ticklishness of being in her mouth. When she ran her tongue along the underside of his erection, Jeremy shuddered and grabbed her head with his hands. He easily fit in her mouth. Being the talented woman that she was, Pam didn’t even need her fingers to retract the boy’s foreskin, instead letting her tongue and lips do the work. When she paused to take a breath, the tip of Jeremy’s penis emerged shiny with her saliva.

Back on the bed, in real life, Pam rolled over so she was laying on her stomach. This position let her mash her crotch against her fingers as well as bury her face in Jeremy’s pillow. His familiar scent causing her kitten to clench with wetness. The imaginary Jeremy was now pulling her hair. The imaginary Pam moaned through the mouthful of his erect penis, both of them getting closer and closer to…
The doorbell rang, yanking her out of her fantasy. Pam’s eyes snapped open. Had she misheard? Whiskers, previously dozing in Jeremy’s armchair, now stiffened, her tail rising in a defensive posture. Her alert feline eyes darted in the direction of the front door. The doorbell chimed several more times in quick succession. Pam instantly recognized the impatient ding-ding-ding. Only one person rang the doorbell like that.

Holy shit, she thought. Her fantasy came true. Jeremy was back!

In a single motion, Pam pulled her hand out of her underwear and bounded out of the twin bed. Her bare feet slapped the hardwood floor as she dashed to answer the door, unable to keep her lips from curling into a joyful smile. She could see the fuzzy outline of a short-statured figure through the frosted window door. Victory! She knew this summer camp thing wouldn’t last.

Pam’s face fell when she flung open the door. Instead of Jeremy, a vaguely familiar boy stood on the porch. “Oh,” she said, disappointed. Whiskers hid behind Pam’s legs to investigate the stranger.

“Um, hi,” the boy said. “Is Jeremy home?”

“No,” answered Pam. “Jeremy’s at camp.”

“He is? I didn’t know that,” the boy said. “When will he be back?”

“Three weeks, five days, and nine hours,” Pam said, rattling off the numbers like a true believer awaiting the Rapture.

The boy gave her a strange look. “Oh,” he said. “Do you think I could use your phone? My brother dropped me off and he already left. I need to tell him to pick me up again.”

While speaking, the boy kept alternating between eye contact and looking at the ground. Pam was starting to wonder if he had some sort of learning disability when she remembered that she was only wearing a t-shirt and underwear. She suddenly felt self-conscious even though it was an oversized shirt that easily reached her mid-thigh.

“Sure, come on in,” Pam said. She held onto her shirt hem as she walked. While not the skimpy kind, she didn’t want him to see the frolicking bunnies on her underwear. When she glanced at the boy following her, however, she noticed his eyes were still fixed on his own feet.

“The phone is right over there,” Pam said, pointing to the kitchen. “Let me get dressed. I was just about to jump in the shower, but I can wait until your brother picks you up.”

The boy veered toward the phone while she glided to her bedroom and half-closed the door. Her kitten throbbed insistently, reminding her of the task that got rudely interrupted by the doorbell. Kate had begun her residency in Springfield, meaning Pam now had the entire Prater house to herself. The newfound privacy allowed her certain luxuries and she had somehow picked up the habit of masturbating in Jeremy’s bed every morning to take the edge off his absence.

But not today. Pam considered closing her door and finishing the job. Though it was an appealing option, she decided to play host instead. If Jeremy was a perfect ten, then the boy was a solid six and a half. Maybe a seven since she was still so worked up. Her nipples were still hard, hidden only by the loose-fitting cotton tee. Tossing her shirt on the bed, Pam slipped into a bra. She was reaching for her sweats when she thoughtfully stopped. The boy was nowhere near as handsome as Jeremy, but Pam perked up at the prospect of a little male attention.

“Did you get a hold of your brother?” Pam asked, returning to the kitchen in her bathrobe. Though cinched closed, the white cotton of her bra was partially visible beneath the robe. The boy gave her a
quick glance before looking at his feet once more.

“Um, yeah,” he said. “I had to leave a message though. He should be here soon.”

“Not a problem,” Pam said, smiling warmly. She suddenly placed the boy’s face, then it was just a matter of remembering his name. “You’re… Braden, right?”

“Yup.”

He wasn’t at Jeremy’s birthday party, but Pam could recall him at a school event. Or was it a soccer game? His face was hidden under a baseball cap’s brim, which also unfortunately concealed his light blond hair. She had a feeling his hairstyle would have been delightfully messy without it. (Pam forbade Jeremy from wearing baseball hats for this very reason.) His choice of headwear aside, the boy had other things going for him though. He was well under five feet tall. His slender arms appeared even skinnier under his baggy t-shirt. He wore socks pulled up to his knees.

In short, he had all the bases covered. “I’m Pam,” she said, holding out her hand. She felt a tingle of electricity when he tentatively shook her hand. It was at that moment that Pam remembered she had neglected to wash her hand after the aborted session in Jeremy’s bed. As discreetly as possible, she sniffed her finger when Braden wasn’t looking. It was still pungent with the scent of her girl parts.

“I know,” Braden said. “I remember seeing you at our soccer games.”

“Ah yes,” said Pam. Her mind conjured a vivid lineup of Jeremy’s teammates. Braden didn’t have the cutest face, but he was decent from the neck down. She suddenly had the crazy urge to make him sniff her finger.

“Go Dragons!” Pam said, quashing the thought. “Will you be playing again this fall?”

“Maybe.” Braden stood stiffly next to the kitchen countertop. Pam gestured to a stool. He sat down. Somewhat reluctantly, she noticed. Had she transferred her pheromones to him when they shook hands? If so, they certainly weren’t working.

“Just maybe?” Pam clarified. “You’re not into soccer anymore?” She rummaged in a cupboard while they talked. Whiskers skulked into the room and quietly settled into the corner where she watched Braden with suspicious eyes.

“I still like soccer,” he said. “But my birthday is, like, one day before the age cutoff. So I always have to get special permission to play in the older age bracket.”

“Got it,” Pam said. She poured two glasses of chocolate milk. “So you’re not going to be in seventh grade like Jeremy?”

“Nope,” Braden said. “Sixth grade. I’m only eleven.”

“Really? So you’re eleven? That’s strange. I thought you were twelve for sure.” That was a lie. She had him pegged at eleven from the moment he stepped inside the door. Instead of answering her attempt at flattery, Braden sat mute as a statue. He shook his head when Pam slid the glass of chocolate milk across the counter.

“I’m not supposed to snack between meals,” he told her.

“But this is just milk,” Pam persisted.

“Chocolate milk,” he corrected.
“Everyone needs calcium.”

“My mom doesn’t like it when I have too much sugar.”

“It could be our little secret.” Sipping from her own glass, Pam smiled at him. “I won’t tell.”

Braden didn’t take the bait. “I better not,” he said, shaking his head.

This wasn’t going well. Pam certainly wasn’t trying to seduce him or anything, but she missed being around a boy and doing boy things. “Hey, want to see something cool?” she asked. She had him turn on his kitchen stool so he faced the dinner table. Pam pointed at the typewriter on it. “I picked this up at a yard sale for cheap. Isn’t it neat?”

“What is it?

“It’s a typewriter. You’ve never seen one?”

“No.”

“Let me show you how it works,” Pam said, taking a seat at the dinner table. She waited for him to come closer, but Braden chose to remain perched on his stool behind her. Pam chose a fresh sheet of paper, fed it through the roller and cranked the dial until the paper slid into place. “So I just load the paper like this, see? Then I turn it on.” The machine hummed to life. “Then I can start typing.” She pressed a few random keys, causing the typewriter to clack in a pleasing manner.

“So it’s for writing?” Braden asked. Though still planted on his stool, he was at least leaning closer to peer over her shoulder.

“Exactly. Want to give it a try?” she offered.

Braden seemed confused. “But wouldn’t it be easier to use a computer?”

“Well, yeah…” Pam was taken aback. “But this is so much more fun to use. See?” She pressed a few more keys. “It’s a tactile experience. You can see the words on an actual piece of paper instead of on a screen.”

“It’s really loud,” said Braden.

“That’s part of its charm,” said Pam.

“I like computers better,” he declared.

Pam frowned. If she had shown this typewriter to Jeremy, he would have eagerly plunked himself in her lap and started typing swear words. She turned off the typewriter. Braden sat up straight with perfect posture on his stool, like a model in a doctor’s office poster. When Pam turned to face him, his higher vantage point offered the perfect opportunity to sneak a peek down her partially open bathrobe, yet Braden’s eyes remained maddeningly glued to her face.

“I guess you’re right,” Pam said. “Computers are definitely better at some things. Do you have one?”

“Yup.”

“What are your favorite games?” she inquired.

“My dad doesn’t let us play games on it,” Braden said without a trace of resentment. “It’s for school work only.”
“I see,” Pam nodded. “Hey, want to play Call of Duty? The video game, I mean?”

Braden was confused. “What other kind is there?”

“There aren’t any other kinds!” chirped Pam, perhaps a little too cheerfully. She stood up. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

But Braden frowned at her. “Isn’t it rated M?”

“Um, I’m not sure,” Pam said, lying again.

“I’m pretty sure it’s rated M,” he said. “I’m…”

“… not allowed to play M rated games,” said Pam, her voice overlapping his. This was so weird. Braden looked perfectly normal, but he was apparently a Carthusian monk trapped in a boy’s body. What kind of eleven year old turns down chocolate milk and Call of Duty? If Jeremy were here, he would be raiding either the candy in the cupboard or the breasts under her robe. He sure as hell wouldn’t be following any goddamn rules.

Out of the thousands of preteen boys in the immediate suburbs, Pam got stuck with the squarest kid this side of the Mississippi River. Why Lord?

Still ignoring her bra peeking from the bathrobe, Braden was now absent-mindedly staring out the kitchen window that overlooked the backyard. Pam followed his gaze to a scraggly and neglected evergreen that Kate had planted last spring. “Hey,” she said. “Want to set that tree on fire and then wait for the firemen to show up?”

“What?” he said, slightly alarmed.

“Nothing. Just kidding around.” Pam wondered what his brother looked like. If he was old enough to drive, that meant he was at least sixteen. But maybe he would be a young sixteen.

“Your brother is taking his sweet time, isn’t he?” Pam commented.

“Yeah. Artie said he was stopping at Radio Shack after dropping me off. He’s probably too busy to look at his phone. He loves that place.”

Artie. Radio Shack. These were not good signs. They were red flags. Heck, they were flags soaked in blood. Planting her forehead in her palm, Pam muttered, “I fucking give up.”

“Pardon?” said Braden.

“I said, ‘Goodness, look at the time,’” Pam said. “I really need to jump in the shower. Would you mind waiting for your brother on the porch?” Not objecting in the least, Braden followed her to the door as she ushered him out.

“Have a great summer!” she said, not even waiting for an answer before closing the door.

Whiskers had followed her to escort the unwanted guest off the premises. “Well, Whiskers, that certainly was a waste of time, wasn’t it?” Pam murmured. Sighing, she considered going back to bed. She had woken up at three a.m. and had been unable to fall back asleep after much tossing and turning. Then she thought about getting back into Jeremy’s bed and finishing the job, but she was no longer in the mood. The morning was shot.

Stupid Braden. Even Whiskers could tell he was a dud.
Not knowing what else to do, Pam hit the showers. For the first few days alone in the house, it had been thrilling to use the bathroom with the door open, but the novelty had since worn off. After drying off, Pam hung up her towel and strolled to her room, enjoying the fresh summer air on her bare skin. This was another perk of her newfound privacy, walking naked from room to room.

She could leisurely go through her morning routine, without anyone knocking on her door and asking how much longer it would take. Why, she could even make herself a cup of tea without getting dressed. Pam had tried this once when Jeremy was home, strolling to the kitchen in an untied bathrobe, and he stared at her as though she were walking on water.

He didn't finish his breakfast that morning because of the ensuing Call of Duty. Pam ended up driving Jeremy from bus stop to bus stop where she pleaded with the comatose boy to get out of the car. They were two blocks away from the school when he finally stumbled onto the bus. Driving home, Pam swore it would never happen again. As a preventative measure, she began wearing two bathrobes in the morning, her lighter summer one underneath and her warm winter robe tied over it, just to be safe.

But not anymore. Cinching her robe was now optional. It fluttered open as her body air-dried on the warm morning. Feeling lazy, she procrastinated on drying her hair and went to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. This was another benefit of Jeremy’s absence. Now that there was no one around to complain about her coffee breath, she drank the stuff by the gallon.

“Oh shit,” she said when she spilled some coffee grounds. Pam could also curse whenever the fuck she wanted to curse, without anyone reminding her to add money to the swear jar. Freedom was a good thing, she reminded herself, sweeping up the mess. Pam was distracted from her task when her phone lit up with a notification. It was a text from Suzy.

I'm calling in sick. Want to have an early lunch @ The Lost Peacock?

Pam smiled. Suzy was either having a ‘can’t adult today’ crisis or she was hungover. Pam texted back an affirmative reply. The day’s plans were falling into place. She could meet Suzy for lunch downtown before heading to work at the temp job she had secured for the summer.

As she poured herself a cup of coffee, Pam remembered something else she had been meaning to do: write a letter to Jeremy. She took a seat in front of the typewriter. When she spotted it at the yard sale, part of her hoped that Jeremy would be impressed with typewritten letters and be inspired to write back. But she had only received two pieces of correspondence from him so far. The first one read:

Dear Pam,

Today I got to shoot a crossbow. Don’t worry, I did not shoot my eye out.

Jeremy

His second letter was merely a Polaroid of him and three other boys. They were shirtless, wearing shaving cream on their chins while making funny faces at the camera. Jeremy was slightly sunburned and he had two band-aids, one on his elbow and another on his shoulder. A scrawled caption read, “Look! I started shaving.”

Pam had gotten excited when she first saw the picture of the boys and their bare torsos, but the other three were not cute. While attractive from the neck down, their mugshots would have been unexceptional, to say the least. Nevertheless, she kept that photo on the nightstand next to Jeremy’s bed, where every morning she ignored the others while longingly gazing at him and then getting down to business.
Switching on the typewriter, Pam loaded a fresh sheet of paper, placed her coffee mug within arm’s reach, and enjoyed the breeze from the open door leading to the backyard. Humid, sticky air wasn’t too bad when you were wearing next to nothing, Pam discovered. When she sat up straight at the typewriter, the posture pushed her exposed breasts up and out from her open robe. Crossing her legs, she took a sip of coffee and began typing.

_Dear Jeremy,_

_If you could see me right now, you would totally cream your jeans. Figuratively speaking. You’re not that kind of guy (yet)._  

_Regards,_

_Pam_

Giggling to herself, Pam pulled the sheet free to re-read her handiwork. It was obviously out of the question to send him such a letter, which was why she kept an industrial-strength paper shredder (pilfered from Kate’s home office) by her side. When she positioned the sheet of paper near the rollers, the machine hummed to life, then made a pleasingly destructive sound while shredding the letter. Brrzzzzt.

“Okay, seriously though,” she murmured, loading a clean sheet into the typewriter.

_Dear Jeremy,_

_How is camp? I hope you’re having fun. Are you wearing sunscreen every day?_

Pam frowned. That didn’t feel right. She didn’t want to nag him. Freeing the paper, Pam fed it through the shredder, this time mimicking the ‘brrzzzzt’ sound with her lips.

_Dear Jeremy,_

_How is camp going? I’ve been thinking about you a lot._

Wait, did that sound inappropriate? Sighing, she gave the shredder another snack. Brrzzzzt. Pam drank more coffee as she gathered her thoughts. Didn’t she have an entire lesson based on letter writing in fifth grade? She racked her brain to remember. Coming up blank, she pulled out her phone and searched for “how to write a letter”, which turned out to be a mistake because twenty minutes later she found herself reading a history of Victorian era pornography on Wikipedia while sipping her second cup of coffee.

The letter. “Damn, dang, darn,” she mumbled, backtracking several pages of worth of browsing on her phone. She skimmed several articles, one of which was entirely dedicated to Letter Closing Examples. Pam already had plenty of those so she kept searching. The best advice was to ‘imagine what you would say if the person were sitting in front of you.’

_Dear Jeremy,_

_How’s it going? It’s really quiet without you around. Sometimes it feels like this empty house is haunted because I hear these random thumps or, even worse, footsteps. It’s probably all in my head. I hope._

_My part-time job is going well. Boring, but well. I told one of the guys at work that he looks like Dwight from The Office. He must not watch that show because he just said, “Oh. Thanks!”_
I went for a long bike ride yesterday and saw a kid, maybe four or five, fall into the lake. It happened on the terrace where the food trucks are. A woman passing by screamed “Kid in the water! Kid in the water!” I’m not sure why she was panicking so bad because the water was less than a foot deep. Maybe she thought we have sharks.

This was going well. Pleased with her progress, Pam took another hit of coffee and continued writing as though Jeremy was sitting in the room.

I’m going to a wedding this weekend. I’m a little worried because I know for a fact that the bride and groom have awful taste in music. I’m going to punch them if they cue up “YMCA” and tell everyone to hit the dance floor. Or, god forbid, play that Chicken Dance song. Shudder.

I feel weird going to the wedding by myself. Maybe you could have come along, if you were here. I would pay you.

Just kidding.

This reminds me of that game we play where I hide a ten dollar bill on my person and you get to keep it if you can find it.

I miss the way your hair smells in the morning. I wish we could wrestle. I would let you win and I wouldn’t complain if something started poking me during the wrestling match.

All good things,

Pam

“Oh crap,” Pam said, gazing at the typewritten words.

How did she veer so far off course? And everything had been going so well. She briefly considered trimming the letter with a scissors and physically removing the last five sentences. But it would look weird, a sheet of paper with a rectangular hole in it. Firing up the paper shredder, she guiltily killed another tree. It wasn’t until after she destroyed the letter that it occurred to her that she should have saved it to re-type. Now she would have to start over from the beginning.

Dear Jeremy,

I hope you’re having fun at camp. I can’t wait to hear what other weapons you’ve learned to fire.

Speaking of which… You haven’t by chance started squirting, have you? Please tell me the answer is no.

God, I’m horny. So… very… horny…

COME BACK. NOW.

Best,

Pam

It was the letter she wanted to send. It was the letter she could never send.

Brrzzzt. A warning light appeared on the shredder’s console. ‘EMPTY BIN’. Peering inside the machine, Pam found it full of paper shreds so she compressed them with her bare foot. She wanted to mail this letter today and there was no time to waste. Her fingers were poised over the keyboard when something soft brushed her bare ankles. Pam peered under the table to find Whiskers staring at
“Oops. Sorry Whiskers,” Pam said. “Are you hungry?” She went to the kitchen to fill the cat’s dish and then poured herself a fresh cup of coffee.

“Focus,” Pam told herself as she loaded another sheet of paper in the typewriter. She took a sip of coffee. Then another. She was vacantly daydreaming when she caught herself massaging a decidedly perky nipple. Sighing, Pam set down her coffee mug with a loud thump.

This is what happened if she didn’t get in her daily masturbation each morning. Not to mention a drawback to lounging half-naked around the house. Pushing her chair back, she decided to take a break to finish drying her hair. Pam returned thirty minutes later, ready to work. Her brown hair was pulled into a brisk ponytail and she was now appropriately dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

“For real this time,” Pam said, rubbing her hands together and stretching her neck from side to side.

Dear Jeremy,

I thought of you the other day when a bird flew into the living room window. It reminded me of that time I was baking cookies and you were playing in the backyard. I called to you that the first batch was coming out of the oven and you were so excited that you ran right through the screen door and tore a boy-shaped hole in it.

Pam smiled at the memory. That happened years ago, when Jeremy was only eight. Convinced that his dad would kill him, Jeremy went so far as packing a suitcase to run away from home. Pam managed to talk him off the ledge with unlimited helpings of milk and cookies, followed by a Connect Four tournament.

After work today, I’m planning to treat myself to dinner at Atomic Age. Maybe I’ll get that sundae you like so much.

I hope you’re having fun at camp. Are the mosquitoes bad up there? Please don’t bring home any diseases.

I miss you this much (times 10) =>…………………………………….<==

Love,

Pam

Good enough. She triumphantly freed the sheet of paper from the typewriter and tucked it into an envelope. Pam finished getting ready, then dawdled around the house until it was time to meet Suzy. The midday train to downtown was not at all crowded so she strolled into The Lost Peacock right on schedule. When she scanned the restaurant’s tables, however, Suzy was nowhere to be found.

Checking her phone, Pam wasn’t surprised to find another text. I’m running late… be there soon. Suzy was the type who was eternally late to everything. Pam’s stomach growled. Suddenly faint with hunger, Pam leaned against the podium next to the door. Thanks to the disappointing Braden and the subsequent distraction of writing to Jeremy, she had forgotten to eat breakfast that morning. The smells wafting from the restaurant’s kitchen only made things worse.

The hostess strode up to the podium. “Just a table for one today?”

“Two, actually,” said Pam. “I’m waiting for a friend.”
"I can get you seated at a table while you wait. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, please."

She led Pam to a spot near the window. The restaurant sported small round tables and wicker-backed chairs that were reminiscent of Parisian sidewalk cafes. Settling into her chair, Pam studied the other customers while sipping her fourth cup of coffee for the day. An obviously retired couple sat in the corner, both drinking red wine even though it wasn’t even noon yet. A business-attired woman ate alone at another table, typing on a laptop while picking at a dish of pasta. Two men were drinking beer at the bar, tourists probably, judging from their golf shorts.

After getting her fill of people-watching, Pam studied the paper table tent next to the salt and pepper shakers. One side listed the restaurant’s happy hour specials. The other side was an advertisement for an upcoming collaboration with the Humane Society. “ADOPT A KITTEN!” it announced in bold letters over a photo of a fuzzy, gray-faced kitty.

I wish someone would adopt my kitten, Pam thought. Hunger pangs aside, that was her other problem at the moment. Masturbating in Jeremy’s bed was a welcome diversion, but it was nothing compared to the real thing. Being with Jeremy was like lounging in a sunny window with an unlimited supply of kitty treats and toys. Now, though, her kitten was locked up in a boarding kennel where it languished from neglect.

She missed Jeremy’s roaming hands. She missed that mesmerized look on his face when he touched her, the uncertainty of a pre-pubescent boy who couldn’t understand his newfound obsession with the female body. Pam was fondly reminiscing about their Truth or Dare game when a woman entered the restaurant. “Can my son use your restroom?” she asked the hostess.

Pam’s ears perked up. Casually turning her head, she saw a boy hidden on the other side of the woman. Pam could tell he was her type just from the way he fidgeted. He had dark brown eyes and a shy manner; the sort of of boy who preferred playing alone at recess.

He appeared to be seven years old. Maybe eight. Pam felt a twinge of guilt. This was quite young, even for her, but she nevertheless flashed an encouraging smile as the boy passed her table on his way to the restroom. He blushed and looked away. After turning the corner, he turned his head to glance at her again. Anticipating this, Pam averted her gaze just in time to avoid detection.

His mother was absorbed with her phone, so Pam freely watched as the boy almost entered the women’s restroom by accident. To anyone else, it would have been a minor incident but it shifted Pam’s imagination into overdrive. What if she had been in the restroom when he mistakenly entered? Maybe he was too naive to understand why girls had to sit down when peeing. Maybe he would ask to wa-

Pam snapped out of it. Taking a deep breath, she had a sip of ice water. Pee fantasies had never been her thing. Why on earth was she thinking about them? And not just that, but this boy was a third grader at most.

She was still wrestling with her conscience when the boy exited the bathroom. The front of his shirt had two wet spots that, though splotchy, were still discernible as handprints. This was apparently the type of boy who was too impatient to dry his hands with a paper towel or air dryer. Amused, Pam smiled at him again when he passed. This time he managed to shyly return her smile.

Seeing her son return, his mom put away her phone, then frowned in exasperation at the boy’s shirt. She took his hand and they left. The door scarcely had time to close before it opened again. Suzy stepped into the restaurant, scanned the room, and headed for Pam’s table without breaking stride.
Even though it was late morning, Suzy was wearing a little black dress and heels. A different woman might have felt self-conscious, but not Suzy. She confidently marched to the table, her chin held high, completely unbothered by the glances in her direction. “Is it still morning?” she said, checking the time on her phone. “Good morning, Pam!”

“Good morning,” Pam answered, eyeing her friend’s half-brushed hair and less-than-fresh makeup. It didn’t add up. Suzy was the type of girl who would sooner jump off a bridge rather than do errands in her sweatpants. Having lived with Suzy for four years in college, Pam had a sneaking suspicion. “How was he?” she inquired.

“How was who?” Suzy asked. She flagged a passing waiter. “Garçon? Some coffee, s’il vous plait?” She gave him her usual thousand watt smile which made the waiter check out the bare legs extending from her dress. They made eyes at each other for a moment before the waiter left.

Pam drummed her fingers on the table until the flirting ended. “The guy you slept with last night. How was he?”

Suzy was still admiring the backside of the departing waiter. “I totally approve of these French waiter uniforms,” she said before returning her attention to Pam. “Anyway… You asked how was he. How did you know?”

“Look at you. You obviously fucked him, slept over, called in sick, then invited me out to brunch. In that order.”

Suzy leaned back in her chair and gave her an admiring smile. “You’re so smart, Pam.”

“Thank you.”

“It was pretty good,” Suzy continued. “He likes his women on top and who am I to argue? He had to leave early this morning for work and was nice enough to let me sleep in. But then all he had in the kitchen were two packets of instant soup, a bowl of after-dinner mints, and four different brands of tonic water. No coffee, though he did have this fancy coffee grinder, but that made no sense because then why didn’t he have coffee and a coffeemaker?” Suzy paused her diatribe to look around the restaurant. “Where is that cute waiter with my coffee? I’m dying, can I have some of yours?” Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed Pam’s mug, took one sip, then reached for the cream and sugar.

“So where did you meet this guy?” Pam asked.

“Tinder,” Suzy replied. “I know! I said was done, but I got bored at work yesterday.” As she spoke, she distractedly rummaged through her purse. “Do you have any Advil? I have a terrible headache.”

“Nope. Sorry.”

“It’s in here somewhere… The bottle’s cap came off last week so I know there’s got to be one floating around.” Suzy began laying out the contents of her purse one by one: a compact, lipstick, keys, some loose bills, a handful of change, a case of birth control pills, two mismatched earrings, a hairbrush…

The pile kept growing. Every time Pam thought she was done, Suzy would toss out something else. A lighter. Ticket stubs from the club downtown. The aforementioned after-dinner mints. Having finished their meal, the exiting elderly couple passed by at the exact moment Suzy deposited a sizable number of condoms on the table. Pam smiled politely at their surprised expressions but Suzy either didn’t notice or didn’t care.
“That’s a lot of condoms for one girl,” Pam observed.

“They’re different sizes,” explained Suzy. She was now holding her purse upside down and shaking it. “What am I supposed to do? Hand a kimono to the magnum guy? Or vice versa? That’s just asking for trouble.”

“I suppose so.” Pam scanned the room for the waiter but there was no sign of him. Still starving, she helped herself to the after-dinner mints in Suzy’s pile of stuff. “Two kinds of birth control,” Pam noted. “It’s reassuring to know you’re practicing safe sex.”

With sigh of relief, Suzy located the errant pill of Advil and downed it with the remainder of Pam’s coffee. “Yeah. I’m not a huge fan of condoms, but sometimes they’re a necessary evil. I’m not militant about it though. I mean, I’ll let a guy bareback me if he seems nice and if it’s the third date.”

“Same,” Pam said earnestly.

“Attagirl.” Suzy tossed something toward her. It was wafer-sized, wrapped in plastic and light as a feather. “Here, you can have these.”

“What are they?” Pam asked.

“Those birth control patch things. I didn’t like wearing it. Maybe you’ll like them. That should be, like, a three month supply.”

Pam passed them back to her friend. “I’m good, thanks.”

Suzy leaned back and tipped the mug upside-down to get the last precious drops of coffee. “What are you using for birth control then?”

Pam’s head spun like a merry-go-round when she remembered the night of Jeremy’s birthday. As far as she was concerned, the best form of birth control was a boy who was too young to ejaculate. She couldn’t tell Suzy this, of course, nor was Pam willing to admit that Jeremy’s first homecoming dance happened less than a month ago. “We’re doing a combo of pulling out and the rhythm method,” she told Suzy.

“That doesn’t make sense. That’s like saying your two favorite things are facials and swallowing. Which is it?”

Pam shrugged helplessly. “Sometimes he’s happy with just a handjob too,” she offered. “In any case, I’m not at all worried about getting pregnant. I’m very in touch with my body.”

Suzy laughed. “Aren’t you the same woman who thought your period was two weeks early, but it was because your pee had turned red from eating too many beets?”

“That was one time! No one told me beets do that.” Pam could feel herself blushing. She was saved by the waiter who finally returned with Suzy’s coffee.

“Thank goodness,” Suzy said. He had barely set it down before she began doctoring it with cream and sugar. “I would also like a cheeseburger and pommes frites, please.”

“Let me get Frederic,” the waiter said. “It’s nothing personal, but this isn’t my regular table. I don’t want to steal his tips.”

Suzy touched his hand to keep him from leaving. “Please don’t. I haven’t even seen Frederic yet and I’m fairly sure he’s ignoring our table. Could you please take our order? I’m starving. So is my
friend.”

The waiter hesitated. Pam noticed Suzy’s finger as it lightly stroked his hand. As far as she could tell, Suzy’s type was basically a guy (and sometimes a girl) with a pulse. The waiter’s uniform made his legs appear extra long while the casually unbuttoned collar of his white shirt emphasized his three-day stubble and sharp jaw. Had a cigarette been dangling from his lips, he would have fit in perfectly on a Parisian street.

“Cheeseburger and pommes frites,” the waiter said, nodding. He turned to Pam. “And for you, miss?”

“The chicken club salad, please,” Pam said.

“Salad?” Suzy gave her a disappointed look.

“Oh, all right… Make that a chicken club sandwich,” Pam amended. She sighed when she saw Suzy’s raised eyebrow. “And pommes frites too.”

“Yes! Brunch on a weekday!” Suzy reached across the table to give her a high-five. The amused waiter nodded and left.

Pam gestured at the condoms still on the table. “He was totally staring at those, you know.”

“What’s the big deal?” Suzy said, waving an airy hand. “We’re all adults here. Besides, what’s in your purse? Come on. Spill it.”

“You’re serious?” Now it was Pam’s turn to commandeer Suzy’s coffee. She preferred black but Suzy’s had turned beige. Pam drank some anyway.

“One hundred percent serious.”


“That’s really everything?”

“Yeah. I didn’t do this side compartment. But I think it’s empty.”

They were interrupted by the waiter, returning with two champagne flutes on a tray. “Mimosas, on the house,” he announced with a flourish.

Suzy smiled at him. “You’re so nice…”

“Dominique,” he answered, deferentially tilting his head.

“Suzy,” she said. They shared another long moment before he finally left.

Pam cleared her throat. It was as though she were invisible during this exchange. “I’m Pam,” she called in the direction of the waiter who was now long gone.

Suzy picked up her flute of bright orange and bubbly mimosa. “Yum. What a thoughtful guy.”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea what his thoughts are,” Pam said. Suzy had already downed half her drink so Pam pushed her own mimosa across the table. “I have to go to work after this. You can
Suzy eagerly accepted the drink. “Thanks! I need some vitamin C,” she said. “Anyway, weren’t you going to check the rest of your purse?”

Pam unzipped the interior pocket, then remembered. This was where she kept the random things that Jeremy handed to her. “Okay, so I have crap too. Here’s a flint arrowhead that Jeremy found when we were hiking in the woods behind the house. Careful, it’s kind of sharp. This is a pencil eraser shaped like a rocket ship. I think he won that at Skee Ball. And this is a Harley Quinn Lego figure that he wanted me to have.”

By now, a smug look had formed on Suzy’s face. “Keep going,” she said.

“That’s everything,” Pam said. “Except for this…” She deposited a small pocket knife decorated with an ace of spades. “I should probably tell him I have that. He’s probably looking for it. And then I also have these.” She added an assortment of band-aids and some pink Jolly Ranchers to the table.

Suzy picked up the hard candy to squint at the label. “Watermelon.”

Pam felt the need to explain. “They’re Jeremy’s favorite. He’s a nightmare to be around when his blood sugar gets low.”

The contents of Pam’s purse lay on one side of the table while Suzy’s were on the other. “Do you notice any difference between the stuff in your purse and the stuff in mine?” Suzy asked, glancing from pile to pile.

They both had a hair brush and keys in common. Otherwise it was condoms vs Lego figures. “You’re a slut and I’m not?” Pam suggested.

“Very funny.” They began returning things to their respective purses, clearing the table just in time for the waiter to bring their food.

“Chicken club sandwich,” he said, setting a plate in front of Pam. “And over here we’ve got a cheeseburger and pommes frites for… Suzy, right?”

“Good memory, Dominique,” she complimented.

He very unnecessarily rearranged the condiments on the tables, never once breaking eye contact with Suzy. “Do you need anything else?”

“I’ll let you know if I do,” Suzy beamed.

Once he was out of earshot, Pam waved her hand in his direction. “My name’s Pam,” she said. “In case you were wondering.”

“Don’t be jealous,” Suzy said, uncapping a bottle of ketchup. “Although that was definitely the most incredible eye-fucking I’ve had the privilege of participating in.”

“I’m not jealous,” said Pam. She set aside the bun of her chicken club sandwich and began eating its contents with a knife and fork. “After all, I’m just wearing regular clothes,” she gestured at her modest white v-neck shirt and jeans, “and you look like you’re ready to fuck your way to freedom.”

“This is just my favorite dress,” objected Suzy. “Guys like it too.”

Pam glanced at the low neckline of her friend’s little black dress where Suzy’s breasts were pushed
up like a shelf. “I’m sure they do.”

They ate in silence for a moment before Suzy said, “Sometimes it’s hard to believe that we were college roommates.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look at what we each have in our purses. My purse says ‘I’ve got a date’ and yours says ‘I need to go pick up the kids from soccer practice in the minivan.’”

“I’ve never done that,” stated Pam.

Suzy ignored this. “It’s just Jeremy this, Jeremy that. Why are you so eager to be a mom?”

“I never said I wanted to be a mom.”

“That’s hard to believe, based on your Jeremy-centric daily schedule. Don’t you want to spend time with a guy who’s old enough to drive? Or never mind driving. How about a guy tall enough for the roller coaster at Six Flags?”

“Jeremy is tall enough,” Pam said. “He can ride any ride he wants.”

Suzy nodded with skepticism. “Undoubtedly. Anyway. You must have a lot of free time now that he’s at camp.”

“Yeah. But I’m still staying busy.”

“Maybe you’ll get more action with your mystery man now that Jeremy is away,” Suzy said. “Right? You’ll have plenty of time to go out, see the town, get laid.”

“Not really,” Pam said. “We’re… taking a break.”

“What? I never even got to meet him.”

“Taking a break is different from breaking up,” Pam told her.

“Was this an exclusive relationship? Or just casual fucking?”

Pam tried to recall what she had told Suzy in the past about this imaginary guy. It was difficult keeping everything straight. “Um, I’m not sure. We’ve never really talked about it.”

“Do you consider him your boyfriend?”

“Of course I do. What kind of question is that?”

Suzy was about to eat a french fry but instead set it down. “Let me put it this way,” she began. “What was your last fight about?”

Rather than making up stuff, Pam decided to answer truthfully and simply omit the fact that, for all intents and purposes, her boyfriend was a twelve year old. “That’s an easy one. Neatness. Or lack thereof.”

“Does he fart in front of you?”

“Oh yes.” Pam couldn’t recall a time when Jeremy didn’t fart in front of her.
“And do you fart in front of him?”

“No.”

“That’s… telling.” Suzy paused, mentally filing away her responses. She continued the interrogation. “Do you tell him when you’re having your period?”

“Um, sort of. Sometimes I just keep my underwear on during sex. But I don’t tell him why.”

“That’s a non-answer,” Suzy parried. “Do you hide your girl supplies from him?”

“No,” responded Pam. “He’s seen boxes of tampons and pads around the house.”

Suzy paused in surprise. She had been expecting a different answer. “Okay last question: when you’re fooling around, who comes first?”

“Fifty-fifty split on that one.”

“Fifty-fifty? Even? Or does the scale tip a teensy bit?”

“It was always him at first. But the scales are quite even now.”

Suzy resumed eating. “Well, I’m stumped,” she said, munching on a French fry. “It’s like half of the things you do are couple-y type things and the other half is very casual dating. Like I can’t decide if you should be peeing with the door open or the door closed when he’s around.”

“That’s me! I’m an enigma wrapped in a riddle,” Pam proclaimed.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s a good thing, Pam,” Suzy said. “In any case, I don’t think you have a boyfriend. You should go out on a date. When the cat’s away, the mouse will play.” Suzy winked at her.

“I don’t know if that’s me,” Pam said. “I’m more like the woman patiently waiting at the seashore for the sailor to return.”

“Screw that. Aren’t you curious about what else is out there?” Suzy asked. She pushed aside their plates. All that remained of Suzy’s lunch was a puddle of ketchup while Pam’s plate still had the untouched sandwich bun and the raw onion she had carefully extracted from the chicken club. Pulling out her phone, Suzy moved her chair next to Pam. “Let’s see what’s happening on Tinder, shall we?”

Pam blanched. “Do we have to?”

Suzy paid no attention to her reluctance. “What do you think of this guy? Trey, 24. University of Wisconsin.”

Pam peered at the photo on Suzy’s phone. Trey had a goatee, glasses, and wore a baseball-style jacket. “I don’t think so.”

Suzy swiped left to bring up another profile. “Malik. 29 years old. Nice sunset in his pic.”

“Or sunrise,” said Pam. Malik was also shirtless, showcasing his bulging muscles. “He looks like he spends all his time at the gym. Next.”

Santiago was 27, but his pictures only showed him from the chin down in a gray suit and polka-dotted blue tie. Krishna was 30 and wore several prominent gold chains around his neck. Jamal’s
profile stated that he enjoyed vegan restaurants and smoking at the beach. Pam had Suzy swipe left on all of them.

“You are so picky,” Suzy complained. “Keep in mind that you’re just looking for a date. You’re not spending the rest of your life with these guys.”

“God, you sound like my mom,” Pam grumbled. A notification appeared at the top of the screen. She informed Suzy, “You’ve got a message from Gary.” Pam squinted at his picture, then clicked into his profile. “Gary. Who is… 41 years old?”

“Oops, just ignore that,” mumbled Suzy. “That reminds me. I should update the settings for you.”

Pam watched her adjust the age range filter from 20-45 to 20-30. “Wait a minute,” Pam said, noticing her flustered expression. “Were you trying to meet forty year olds on Tinder?”

“No, of course not,” Suzy said. “It was just… I wasn’t getting any hits one day. So I adjusted the age range filter upward. I matched with Gary and texted him a few times. I never actually met him.”

“Gary was wearing asshole sunglasses,” Pam said, “and, well, his name was Gary.”

“This isn’t about me,” Suzy said. Her finger remained poised over the age filter. “Do you want me to set the low end lower? Perhaps you’d prefer a fresh eighteen year old?”

Pam was tempted to ask exactly how low the age filter could be set. Instead, she took the phone and said, “Leave it. Just let me take over. It’ll go so much faster.” She began swiping left in quick succession. “Jesus hair and beard? Gross… Drives a Hummer? No… A DJ? God, no…”

“Those guys were perfectly cute,” Suzy objected. “And why are you anti-Hummer?”

“I’m not anti-Hummer. I’m anti-faux status symbol. How superficial could you get? Driving a Hummer is the male equivalent of women who wear engagement rings with gigantic diamonds.”

“Yeah, but…” Suzy began.

Pam was just getting started though. “The women are literally saying ‘Look at the size of my rock!’ while the men are figuratively saying, ‘Look at the size of my cock!’ Everyone is so obsessed with size. It’s so lame.”

Suzy tried to get a word in. “What about…”

“Look at this guy,” interrupted Pam. She had been dutifully swiping left throughout her tirade. “Not only is his shirt unbuttoned, but he’s also wearing a backwards baseball cap. And that’s not even a selfie. He actually posed that way and had someone photograph him. It’s just so immature.”

Suzy paused, not daring to speak yet. “Are you done?”

Pam set down the phone. “You have no idea.”

“So let me get this straight,” said Suzy. “You spend all your time in the company of a twelve year old boy and you’re complaining about immaturity?”

“Jeremy is a different kind of immature.”

“Didn’t you once tell me he burned out your hair dryer by letting it run for two hours straight?”

“It was a science experiment for school!”
Suzy scratched her chin. “Was he demonstrating the danger of… letting a hair dryer run for two hours straight?”

“No, he was melting a tray of strawberry milk ice cubes,” said Pam. “He was trying to… never mind. Okay, fine, Jeremy can be immature sometimes. But it’s a cute immaturity.” She tried to think of a good example. Her eyes fell on the table tent with the public service announcement from the Humane Society. “Like when he gets too enthusiastic and pets a kitten too hard,” she said. “It’s two adorable things all rolled into one.”

Suzy was not convinced. Before she could continue the discussion, Dominique returned with a carafe of coffee. Refilling their empty mugs, he asked, “Room for cream?”

“Yes, please,” said Suzy.

“No, thank you,” said Pam.

“Looking for a date, I see,” he said, noticing the open Tinder app on Suzy’s phone. “Have I mentioned I’m not doing anything after work?”

“You didn’t,” Suzy answered. “Although I’m not the one looking for a date. We were trying to find one for my friend here. Pam needs all the help she can get.”

“I do not,” Pam muttered, not bothering to raise her voice because she knew Dominique and Suzy were too busy eye-fucking to pay attention to her. To her surprise, Dominique finally glanced her way.

“Nice to meet you, Pam.” He briefly grinned at her before turning back to Suzy. “My buddy just moved in with me. He’s from Austin so he doesn’t know anyone around here. Maybe you ladies would be interested in meeting for drinks later?”

Pam smiled politely. “That’s nice, but…”

Suzy kicked her under the table. “What she really means is yes, that sounds wonderful.”

Pam kicked back. “I have to go to work,” she objected. “Remember?”

“My shift doesn’t end until five anyway,” Dominique said, unaware of the battle taking place under the table. “Want to meet somewhere downtown? How about Scofflaws? It has great drink specials. Plus an amazing rooftop patio.”

“That sounds great!” said Suzy. “We’ll be there, Dominique.”

He pointed at each of them in turn. “Suzy. Pam. See you later. And don’t worry about the bill. Lunch is on the house today.” He winked at Suzy before sauntering away.

“Free lunch!” Suzy crowed. “I’m going to start calling in sick every day.”

“Count me out,” Pam said. “I don’t want to meet these guys for drinks. You’ll be fine without me, right?”

“No, I will not be fine,” Suzy said. She checked the time. “It’s only noon. Perfect. I’m going home to take a nap. Then I’ll clean up and meet you at your office. We’ll head over to Scofflaws together. Sound good?”

“I’m not even dressed for going out,” said Pam.
“I think you’re lovely,” Suzy said. “It’s a clean and uncomplicated look. You know. Some guys like a good, basic girl.”

“Thanks a lot, Suzy.”

“I mean it! Look, if it makes you feel better, I’ll dress the same way.” She critically eyed Pam’s plain shirt and jeans. “Or as close as I can. I’m going to assume you’re wearing nice underwear that wasn’t purchased at Sears. Did you shave today?

“My legs are more hairless than…” Pam was about to say a twelve year old boy, but stopped herself just in time. “Um, smoother than a supermodel.”

“Excellent. And what about the rest of the goods?”

“If you must know, I got waxed a few weeks ago and it still looks great.”

“You? A wax? Wow. I thought you were never going to tidy up down there.”

“It was very tidy!” said Pam.

Suzy downed the rest of her mimosa. “Uh huh. Your chances of getting laid get cut in half when you sport a bush like that.”

“You can stop interrogating me about my grooming habits. I do just fine, thank you. And besides, I am not going to sleep with a random guy tonight. He’ll be lucky if he gets a kiss on the cheek. Heck, he’ll be lucky if I even show up.”

“We’ll just have one drink,” Suzy told her. “You can do that, can’t you? I promise we can bail if these guys turn out to be losers.”

Suzy grabbed her purse, Pam grabbed her own and they left the restaurant together. It felt like they were walking out on a bill, but the hostess merely smiled when they passed her stand. Dominique really had taken care of the bill. This was the sort of thing that always seemed to happen when she spent time with Suzy.

They parted ways on the sidewalk. “See you at five!” Suzy said cheerfully.

“See you at five,” Pam said, not at all sharing in her friend’s excitement. The Lost Peacock was just around the corner from her workplace, so Pam killed time by walking around the block a few times before going to work. She was so preoccupied by the pending evening plans that the back of her shoe got caught in the revolving door when she entered the building. A jolt of fear struck her as the moving panels ground to a halt, trapping her in the door for brief moment before it started moving again.

A security guard stepped forward when she finally emerged from the revolving door. “You all right, miss?”

“I’m fine,” Pam answered. The back of her shoe was now scuffed, but she was otherwise unscathed. The elevator dropped her off on the tenth floor where she walked into the offices of Alchemy Labs, a local agency that did marketing work for various businesses around town. After checking the work schedule taped to the wall, Pam headed to the kitchen to assist the food stylist. Today, they were prepping meats and vegetables for an upcoming piece on Labor Day grilling.

The revolving door incident set the tone for the rest of the day. Pam sleepwalked through work as she spent the afternoon worrying about the meetup. The only memorable point was when she told
faux Dwight that she had a date and he couldn’t hide the envy on her face. Thirty minutes before the workday ended, Pam found herself in the ladies’ room brushing her hair and touching up her makeup.

Pam listlessly gathered her things when it was time to leave. While exiting the building, she was careful to keep herself clear of the whooshing panels of the revolving door. She squinted as her eyes adjusted from the fluorescent interior lighting to the natural outdoor light. The sun shone bright on the hordes of workers spilling out of their downtown offices and into the restaurants offering streetside patio seating. She found Suzy waiting on a bench next to a bubbling fountain. True to her word, Suzy had dressed casually in jeans and a plain white top. Unlike Pam, however, her jeans were bedazzled with a swirly patterns of sequins and her top appeared to be made of skintight lycra.

“You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?” Pam sighed.

“What do you mean?” Suzy said, jumping to her feet. “Let’s go! Aren’t you excited about going on a date?”

“That’s one way of putting it.” Pam grew increasingly nervous as they approached Scofflaws. It felt like she was going to an interview for a job she neither wanted nor needed. Nevertheless, she followed Suzy inside. She would meet Dominique’s roommate, exchange some chit-chat, then escape home where she would curl up in Jeremy’s bed to eat ice cream.

Unlike other drinking establishments, this one had large windows that lent a bright and airy cheer to the interior with its assorted couches and armchairs centered around a bustling bar. As they passed through the crowd, Pam felt the eyes of the numerous patrons, both men and women, sizing up both her and Suzy. She had forgotten what it was like to be a twentysomething in a bar on a Thursday evening.

They climbed the stairway that led to the outdoor section. Despite her trepidation, Pam had to admit the view was stunning from the rooftop patio. In the distance, the hazy skyline was framed by a series of blue and white umbrellas offering shade at strategically placed tables. A perfectly mowed patch of grass offered lawn-bowling on one side while the other end was dotted with classic wooden picnic tables and red checkered tablecloths.

“Doesn’t look like they’re here yet,” Suzy said, glancing around the rooftop.

“Why don’t you grab that table over there?” Pam suggested. “I’ll fetch the first round from the bar. What do you want?”

“A Negroni with extra orange slices,” replied Suzy.

The bartender was a blond woman with an angular face and a pierced lip. She was busily slicing lemons and limes so Pam waited until she was done before ordering. “Do you have something that looks alcoholic but really isn’t?” Pam asked. She really didn’t feel like drinking.

The bartender gave her a bemused look. “Um, how about a seltzer and lime? It looks just like gin and tonic.”

“Perfect. I’ll have that and a Negroni. With extra orange slices, please.”

As she returned with the drinks, Pam saw Suzy chatting with two men at her table. She recognized one as Dominique, though he had changed out of his waiter’s uniform. The other man was presumably his roommate from Austin. They already had beers in their hands.
“Pam!” Dominique waved at her. She was surprised he remembered her name. “You made it!”

“I’ve been looking forward to it all day,” Pam replied. She must have sounded sarcastic because Suzy gave her a dirty look.

“This is my roommate Devon,” said Dominique.

Pam handed Suzy her Negroni so she could shake Devon’s hand. A clean-cut blond, he had an animated and sunny face, the sort that always seemed to be on the verge of laughing. “Nice to meet you, Pam,” he greeted. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Really?” Pam said. Conventionally attractive, Devon was the sort of guy she would take home to meet her mom. And therein lay the problem.

“Well, not really,” admitted Devon. “I know you had a chicken club and fries for lunch. And that you didn’t eat the bread.”

Everyone laughed, though Pam also glanced suspiciously at Dominique. He gave her an apologetic shrug. “Don’t freak out. It’s a waiter thing. We all do it.”

“I’ve never tried lawn bowling and Dominique said he would teach me,” Suzy said, hopping off her stool. “You can have my seat, Pam.” Before leaving, she leaned close and whispered into Pam’s ear, “Devon seems cute. Be charming!”

Pam could only glare as Suzy pranced away with Dominique. This wasn’t part of the plan. She nervously sipped her seltzer water. Perhaps something stronger would have been helpful after all. She groped for something to fill the silence.

“So, what do you do?” she asked.

“I just moved here last week,” Devon said. “From Austin. I don’t have a job yet, but Dom said he might be able to get me a host position at The Last Peacock.”

He meant The Lost Peacock, but Pam didn’t bother to correct him. “Did you work at a restaurant in Austin?”

Devon took a swig of beer. “In Austin? Nah. I worked in graphic design.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“Yeah, it was all right. Austin has a lot of manufacturing companies and data farms, so we did a lot of local work. Before I left, the company was exploring a contract with Hewlett-Packard.”

“I see.” As far as responses, that was the bare minimum Pam could muster. To save herself from having to say anything, she sipped her seltzer water.

“My manager said that if he landed the contract, he would get a Hewlett-Packard tattoo,” Devon said, laughing. Pam did her best to laugh as well. “I told him no way. If I’m getting any more ink, it has to be something that goes with this.” He rolled up his shirt sleeve to reveal a tattoo encircling his bicep. It was either barbed wire or a thorny vine. Pam couldn’t tell which.

“I got this one too,” Devon said. He pulled up his other sleeve to show her a tattoo of an old-fashioned compass, complete with letters representing north, south, east, and west.

“Wow,” Pam said. “Look at that.”
While she pretended to admire the tattoo, Devon took the opportunity to flex for her. She must have looked suitably impressed because he said, “You know, if you want a tattoo, I know a guy who will do it for super cheap.”

Pam’s closest experience to getting inked were the temporary tattoos that Jeremy fished out of cereal boxes and generously insisted on sharing with her. “Maybe,” she said. “I’d have to think of a cool tattoo first.”

Devon nodded knowingly. Noticing her empty glass, he said, “Let me get you another. What are you drinking?”

“Oh, gin and tonic,” Pam answered.

“Noted,” Devon said, saluting her. “Be right back.” He headed toward the bar where he melted into the growing crowd. Thinking she had a few minutes of freedom, Pam breathed easy until Devon returned less than sixty seconds later with a tall gin and tonic for her and a fresh beer for him.

“Easy breezy,” he said, setting down the drinks with a flourish.

“That was fast,” Pam said.

“I made friends with the bartender when we got here,” Devon told her. “It always comes in handy, especially at a crowded place like this. Can you sit tight for a second?” Without waiting for an answer, Devon slipped away again, this time in the direction of the restroom.

Feeling self-conscious about sitting alone, Pam looked around the rooftop. She spotted Suzy on the green lawn, laughing, as Dominique stood close behind her and taught her the proper form for lawn bowling. They were clearly having a good time, just like everyone else on the rooftop. Pam gamely reached for her gin and tonic. She garnished it with the lime slice, gave the whole thing a stir, took a tentative sip, and promptly coughed in alarm. There was far more gin than tonic. She couldn’t drink this. Making sure no one was looking, Pam discreetly poured the contents of the glass into a nearby potted plant. Like clockwork, a passing waiter plucked her empty glass from the table without even breaking stride.

Pam congratulated herself on her perfect crime. Except when Devon returned from the restroom, the first thing he noticed was his lone beer on the table. “Did you finish your drink already?” he asked, impressed.

She shrugged. “I’m a thirsty girl,” said Pam.

Devon gave her a wink and headed for the bar once more. “I’ll be right back,” he said.

Pam mentally banged her head against an imaginary wall. There was just no escaping the situation. After winking at her, Devon hadn’t even bothered to hide his appreciative eyes that looked her up and down. Though she had been doing her best not to flirt, Devon was apparently receiving different signals. She longingly gazed at the exit. Pam wondered what Devon would do if he returned from the bar to find an empty chair. The place was so crowded that he wouldn’t have any difficulty finding a new girl.

Pam was trying to talk herself into jumping ship when Devon emerged from the sea of people and set down a fresh drink for her. “This place totally reminds of a great place back in Austin,” Devon told her. “It was an awesome beer garden with ping pong tables. I won a tournament they had last year.”

“Really?”
“Oh yeah,” Devon nodded enthusiastically. “I even shut out the first two matches, eleven to nothing.”

“Wow.” Pam was now reduced to taking pretend sips of her gin and tonic. Hopefully Devon wouldn’t notice that her drink was magically replenishing itself.

“So how about you?” Devon finally asked. “What do you do?”

Pam resisted the urge to check the time. They had surely been talking for at least fifteen minutes and this was the first time he talked about something other than himself. “Well, normally I work as a, um, household assistant for this family that lives outside the city. But the kid is off at summer camp so I got a temp job for a few weeks.”

“Where’s your temp job?”

“Alchemy Labs. It’s this marketing agency just down the street. The listing said it was going to be office clerical work, but that only lasted the first two days.” Devon had an unnerving habit of staring her right in the eyes as she talked. Not wanting to seem like a shy girl who talked at the ground, Pam did her best to return the eye contact.

“So what do you actually do?” he asked.

“It depends on the day. I’ve been helping out in the photo studio for the last two weeks. They always need help coordinating the shoots. Sometimes my day starts with choosing outfits with the art director and then ends with helping the food stylist bake cookies.”

“Well, let me know if they need any graphic designers,” Devon said. “Maybe I could give you my resume.”

“Definitely,” Pam said. She had suspected the conversation was motivated by his own self-interest. She was about to take another pretend sip when a passerby bumped her elbow, causing her to spill gin and tonic on her lap.

“Yikes!” Devon scrambled to locate something to wipe up the mess. It was at that moment that Suzy and Dominique returned from lawn bowling.

“Hey, you two,” Suzy said. “How’s it going over here?”

“Good. Really, really good,” answered Pam, hopelessly dabbing at the soaked patch of denim on her leg. The napkins at Scofflaws were exceptionally non-absorbent. “Hey, I was thinking of leav-“

Suzy didn’t let her finish. “Dominique said his apartment is just a few blocks away and we should come check it out. Doesn’t that sound great?” The three of them waited for her response. Fearing the role of party pooper, Pam suppressed a sigh and nodded.

Refusing their offer to pay for drinks, Dominique and Devon went to settle the bill. Once they hit the sidewalk, Pam deliberately started dragging her feet. As she hoped, the guys forged ahead while she and Suzy lagged behind. Once they were out of earshot, Pam tapped Suzy’s shoulder. “Listen,” she whispered to her friend. “I had a great time, but I’m ready to go home. You’ll be okay if I bail out, right?”

Suzy was aghast. “Pam, you can’t leave yet! It’s barely seven o’clock. What’s the rush?”

“I’m tired and I’m starving and I still have to work tomorrow and…”
Suzy held up a hand.

“Chill the eff out,” she said. “We’re just going to take a peek around their apartment. Aren’t you curious about all these new condos being built? I’ve always wanted to see the inside of one.”

Pam did not have a passion for real estate and she knew for a fact that Suzy sure as hell didn’t either. “You can check it out without me.”

“Pam, you can’t leave me alone with two strange guys in their apartment. What kind of friend are you? Come on, chicks before dicks. I need you there. I mean, what if they try to gangbang me?”

“You’d probably like it,” Pam scoffed.

Suzy ignored this. “We’ll just stay fifteen minutes,” she promised.

“I’m going to start dropping hints at ten minutes,” Pam warned.

“Deal.” Suzy then hurried ahead to catch up with the guys, going so far as to squeeze between them on the sidewalk and put her arms around both of their waists. Only Suzy could guilt trip Pam about personal safety and then go right back to flirting with two guys. Pam frowned at their laughing and bantering. She had a bad feeling about this.

Devon, finally noticing the lone straggler, wiggled out of Suzy’s grasp and waited for Pam to catch up. He put his arm around her shoulder. “What’s the matter, Pammie? Feeling left out?”

“Um, no. Not really.” They passed a restaurant where Pam stared longingly at the patrons sitting down to their dinners.

“We’re right in here,” Devon said, steering her into a modern building composed of glass and steel. A receptionist, dressed in somber black, sat behind a long granite counter. Beyond her was a series of sleek gray couches and a glittering wall stacked high with hundreds of tiny prisms that refracted the evening sun into rainbow patterns on the tiled floor.

“Wow,” said Pam, not expecting such grandeur. A sixty foot aquarium, housing a colorful array of tropical fish, unfurled across the room in undulating waves.

“Nifty, isn’t it?” Devon smiled. He was clearly pleased with her reaction. He hurried her along to catch the elevator’s whose doors were starting to close. They caught it just in time, although in the process interrupting a moment between Suzy and Dominique.

“Oh, hi there,” Suzy giggled, breaking off her kiss with Dominique.

“Don’t mind us,” Dominique said. He pushed Suzy into the corner of the elevator and continued nuzzling her.

The soft sound of smacking lips filled the elevator. Pam didn’t know where to look since there were mirrors on every surface. Not helping matters was Devon with his arm still around her shoulder, pulling her so tight that her cheek almost touched his. After the longest elevator ride of her life, Pam was relieved when a chime finally sounded and the doors slid open.

Dominique led the way, swinging Suzy’s hand as they walked together. They followed a twisting, carpeted hallway before he finally stopped to unlock a door. Pam blinked in surprise upon entering the apartment. A cluttered kitchen was the first thing she saw, followed by a sparse living room containing a futon, an armchair, and a television elevated on cinderblock shelving. The walls were unadorned and painted a flat off-white.
It was a jarring difference from modern furnishings of the building lobby. The apartment’s only redeeming feature was the view of the glimmering skyline from beyond the thick glass windows. Gazing at the sprawling city and the summer blue sky, Pam couldn’t help thinking of Jeremy and how he was hundreds of miles away. A lump formed in her throat.

“Let me give you a tour,” she heard Dominique say. By the time Pam had sufficiently gathered herself to look away from the window, Suzy had disappeared with Dominique, leaving her alone with Devon in the living room.

“That was a short tour,” Devon observed, glancing at the closed door to what was presumably Dominique’s bedroom. “Want to see the rest of the place?”

Pam followed his gaze to another room where an unmade bed and scattered clothes were visible through the partially open door. “No thanks,” she said. “I got the gist of the place. It’s really nice.” She took a seat in the armchair with battered upholstery and checked the time. In eight minutes, Pam planned to knock on Dominique’s door to remind Suzy of their agreement.

“Okay.” Devon was clearly disappointed that she didn’t want to tour his bedroom. An awkward silence followed before Devon headed to the kitchen. “Want something to drink? We’ve got beer, vodka, whiskey, tequila, gin…”

“I’ll just have some water,” Pam said.

Instead of water, Devon returned with two glasses containing ice cubes floating in a brownish liquid. “Two whiskies… with water!” he proclaimed. “Cheers, Pammie!”

“Please don’t call me that.” Pam reluctantly accepted the whiskey, though she refrained from drinking it. The muffled sound of Suzy’s laughter crept out from the closed door. Devon must have heard too because he turned on some music before sitting down on the futon across from Pam.

“Want to know a secret?” he asked, raising his voice to be heard. The sound of light jazz had filled the room, the sort of fruity music Pam associated with a dentist visit.

“Uh, sure,” Pam answered.

“I think you are super cute,” Devon smiled. Apparently emboldened, he drained his whiskey in a single gulp. There was no coffee table so he set his empty glass on the floor.

“Thank you.” Not expecting this, Pam distractedly took a sip before remembering what she was drinking. The whiskey burned her throat so bad that she fought to keep a neutral face.

“I mean, Dom told me you were cute, but man… when I saw you in the bar? I was like, ‘Damn!’ You know?”

“Dominique said I was cute?” This was surprising news since she had felt invisible to Dominique.

“Of course.” Devon lurched from the futon and moved behind Pam’s armchair. She stiffened when she felt a hand touching her hair.

Pam tried to distance herself from his caressing hand. “Um, Devon? You’re nice and all, but I don’t know if I want to, you know…” The song ended and, in the brief silence before the next one, Pam listened intently to discern what was happening beyond Dominique’s closed bedroom door. To her consternation, there was nothing but silence. Pam decided to give Suzy one more song before knocking on the door.
“How about a shoulder rub?” Devon offered.

“I don’t know, Devon…”

“Come on. Doesn’t this feel good?” His fingers dug firmly into her muscles, kneading and relaxing them. Pam had to admit it did feel nice. Massages were not Jeremy’s forte. If anything, she was lucky to get thirty seconds of half-hearted karate chops from him before he insisted it was his turn. Another lump formed in her throat as she thought of how much she missed him. Pam made it go away with another sip of whiskey. This time, it didn’t burn so much going down. When she woke up this morning, this would have been the last thing Pam expected for her Thursday evening: drinking whiskey and listening to corny jazz in an apartment decorated like a college dorm room while a stranger gave her a back rub.

Things would have been different had this been a typical Thursday evening with Jeremy. He might be entertaining himself by throwing a tennis ball against the garage door, which would lead to him growing ravenously hungry, which would lead to a quiet dinner with the two of them perched at the kitchen counter. After they were done eating, he would zoom around the backyard while Pam watched from a patio chair. The temperature would fall, then the evening shadows would creep across the lawn until Pam would finally send him in for a shower. After he finished, Pam would invent an excuse to fuss over him while he impatiently stood in the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. Maybe his shoulders were dry and needed lotion. Or maybe the scrape on his shin required ointment and a band-aid. (Since he rarely sat still, Jeremy seemed to have no shortage of wounds from the knees down.) Inevitably, the towel would come off and Pam would be inspecting a freshly bathed twelve year old boy. A comforting stillness would fall over the house while they played Call of Duty, sometimes in his bedroom or sometimes right there in the bathroom. The stillness would eventually give way to Jeremy’s light snoring once she tucked in the exhausted boy. Pam would tidy his room, turn off the light, and head to the kitchen to make herself a cup of herbal tea before getting ready for bed herself.

Pam sighed wistfully at this half-memory and half-fantasy. Feeling warm and fuzzy inside, she drank more whiskey, the amber liquid going down smoothly, until ice cubes rattled in the empty glass. Maybe those people who drank alcohol on a daily basis were onto something. She hadn’t felt this relaxed in a long time. Still massaging her, Devon’s adept hands seemed to know the exact location of every knotted muscle in her neck and shoulders. No harm in getting a free massage, Pam reasoned. She was starting to sink into the armchair when Devon leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek.

“Devon, don’t…” she murmured. Despite her protest, Pam didn’t try to move away from him.

“Don’t what? Doesn’t this feel nice? Be honest.”

“Yes.” It must have been the whiskey forcing the truth out of her. “Yes, but…” Devon shushed her by tilting her head to the side and kissing her exposed neck. Pam couldn’t suppress the shiver that ran along her spine. It had been a long time since she was treated to this kind of attention. No matter how often she tried to teach him, Jeremy hadn’t quite mastered this level of kissing yet.

“What were you saying?” Devon teased.

“Mmm…” Pam sighed. The feel of his warm lips against her neck was wonderful. Surely she could get Jeremy to do this one day. He just needed practice. After all, he had grown quite proficient at fondling her breasts. Come to think of it, Pam had hardly given him any coaching for the last sixth months. All she had to do was unbutton her shirt and let the young boy go to town. Jeremy knew exactly how to touch her, how to fondle her stiff nipples just the way she liked. Devon wasn’t doing so bad either.
“Oh shit,” Pam murmured. Between the kisses on her neck and daydreaming about Jeremy, Pam was so distracted that she didn’t notice that Devon was expertly massaging her breasts, one in each hand.

“Like that, baby?” Devon whispered.

Unable to answer, Pam was flooded with an inexplicable guilt. There was a reason why she shouldn’t be enjoying this, but she couldn’t think of it. Cruelly deprived for the past three weeks, her body felt like it was on fire. Devon’s hand reached through the opening of her blouse and slipped under her bra, causing Pam to sit up straight and clench her knees together.

“What did you say?” Devon asked, pausing.

Pam caught her breath. “What? I didn’t say anything.”

“Yeah, you did. It sounded like ‘Germany’ or something.”

Pam blushed. “Oh. Right. Germany! I, um… have fond memories of Germany.” It was hard to think with Devon still groping her nipples. “It’s where I made out with a guy. For the first time.”

“Whoa. That’s hot.”

Pam closed her eyes. Now she knew the reason she felt guilty. Was she cheating on Jeremy? Was it even possible to cheat on a twelve year old? The whiskey was making it difficult to think straight. All she knew was that she missed feeling that tingly surge at the top of her spine. Just one more minute, Pam told herself. She began counting in her head.

It was around the forty second mark that Pam felt Devon grasp her wrist, leading it somewhere. She thought nothing of it until she felt the rough denim of his jeans, followed by a distinctly hard object.

Pam yanked away her hand as though she were touching a hot iron. “Um, okay!” she said as her eyes snapped open. The arousal was draining out of her like someone pulled the stopper out of a bathtub.

“What?” Devon asked, confused.

Pam pulled away, removing his hand from under her shirt. “I think… Maybe we should do something else.”

“Something else?”

“Yes.” The music in the room faded away as the song ended. This time, the silence between songs was accompanied by a distinct noise from Domineque’s closed bedroom door. Pam realized it was the sound of two bodies slapping together, accompanied by Suzy’s low moans and coos. Pam suddenly missed the awful sounds of smooth jazz.

“Excuse me,” Pam said, stumbling to her feet. The effects of whiskey on an empty stomach were apparent now as she struggled to walk straight. “The bathroom is over here, right?” She randomly chose a door. Breathing a sigh of relief, Pam locked herself in the porcelain tiled room and splashed some cold water on her face. What was she thinking? These shenanigans with Devon were a mistake. Pam straightened her bra and shirt. All she had to do was wait for Suzy to finish fucking and she was home free.

After stalling for as long as possible, Pam bravely left the bathroom. Devon was waiting for her on the futon. “Ready to do something else?” he asked, smiling. Pam wasn’t sure what he meant until she spotted the box of condoms next to him.
“I’m not sure I’m ready for that,” Pam began. “I mean, I…”

“I’m ready. Want to see?” Not waiting for an answer, he unzipped his pants. The next thing she knew, Pam was staring at his penis.

If touching his jeans-clad bulge had been a step too far, this was jumping off the deep end. For starters, it had been a while since she had seen an erect penis. An adult erect penis, that is. The first word that came to mind was ‘big’. Devon’s penis was obscenely big. It was though she were a European driver experiencing her first time on an American highway filled with SUVs and pickup trucks.

Devon lightly stroked his erection. “Come on, baby. You know you want this.”

Pam briefly considered leaving the apartment and waiting for Suzy in the hallway. But if she did that, Suzy would likely stay in Dominique’s bedroom all night. “Actually, I think I’ll just sit over here,” Pam said, resuming her spot in the armchair. She gritted her teeth. Maybe this was the price she had to pay for the shoulder rub.

“You got my cock so hard,” Devon breathed.

“I can see that,” said Pam, accidentally gazing for a moment too long. She was by no means getting turned on, but the scene was short-circuiting her brain. The sight of Devon’s junk made her realize how spoiled she was by Jeremy’s junk.

Jeremy didn’t have bulging veins. Jeremy didn’t have hairy balls. Jeremy was, quite simply, more elegant down there. Better proportioned too. It was like the difference between a fresh-faced teenage sailor and a burly seafaring captain. All those years at sea had accumulated, rendering Devon leathered and wrinkled and sunburned, with a probable case of scurvy.

“Come here, baby,” said Devon.

“I’d rather watch from over here.” Pam paused, unsure how to proceed. What would Suzy do? “I, um, like watching guys jerk off. I want to see you shoot everywhere. That would be so hot.”

Her encouragement apparently worked because Devon started masturbating faster. “You like seeing this hard cock?” he asked, grinning. “Does it get you wet?”

“Oh yeah,” she said, forcing a smile. “Jack it for me.” The sooner he finished, the sooner this whole ordeal would be over. Pam hoped the same could be said for Suzy and Dominique in the other room. Their moans seemed to be growing louder.

Devon fixed a steely gaze on Pam. Perhaps he was getting excited by the unfiltered sounds of sex echoing throughout the apartment because he spread his legs and said, “Are you ready, baby? Here it comes. Here it comes!”

At the same time, the slapping sound from the bedroom became faster, approaching a frenetic pace. Pam heard Suzy groan. “God! Oh god, baby!”

“Shit! Ride it, baby!” Dominique chimed in.

Everyone was apparently getting off at the same time, except Pam who was getting tired of all the ‘baby’ being bandied about. Back in the living room, Devon gasped. Pam glimpsed something spurting through the air. Even though she was safely out of range, she primly moved her feet as far away as possible and averted her gaze as though he were a passenger picking his nose on the train. Devon finally let out a long sigh and slouched into the futon. Though his penis was still visible, his
erection was fading and his output was thankfully being soaked up by the featureless beige carpet.

Devon must have noticed her gaze. “Don’t worry,” he assured her. “I got plenty more where that came from. Your turn is coming soon. Just give me a few minutes.”

“Oh. Goody,” Pam muttered. If Devon heard, he was too exhausted to care. Quite frankly, so was Pam. She went to listen at Dominique’s closed door. It was silent so she raised her hand to knock on the door. Before her knuckles could make contact, the door swung open.

“Oh. Hi Pam!” Suzy seemed surprised. A sheet was wrapped around her body but her shoulders were bare.

“Hello Suzy,” said Pam.

“I was just getting some water,” Suzy explained. Clutching the sheet close, she glided to the kitchen and began hunting for a glass. On the futon, Devon had the good sense to cram himself back into his jeans.

“Are you about ready to go?” Pam asked her friend. “Because I am.”

“Mmm hmm,” Suzy couldn’t answer right away because she was chugging water. “Of course. Just let me get dressed.” She disappeared back into the bedroom. To Pam’s surprise, Suzy re-appeared less than three minutes later, tousled but fully clothed.

“That was fast,” said Pam. She picked up her purse.

“So long, boys!” called Suzy.

Dominique muttered something unintelligible from the bedroom. Devon waved at them. “Wait,” he said. “Pam! Can I get your number?”

She hesitated and glanced at Suzy for help. “I gave Dominique my number,” Suzy told Devon. “We live together so you’ll be able to reach her that way.”

“Oh. Okay,” Devon said. He looked so disappointed that Pam felt the slightest hint of guilt.

They let themselves out of the apartment, pausing in the hallway to get their bearings. “Which way is the elevator again?” Suzy wondered.

“I think it’s this way,” Pam said, heading left. Still tipsy, she accidentally led them to the stairway. Retracing their steps, they wandered the twisting hallway until they finally found the elevator bank at the end of a corridor. The doors slid open and the two of them stepped inside the mirrored elevator.

Pam ostentatiously checked the time on her phone. “Let’s see,” she said. “That was… twenty five minutes. Thanks a lot, Suzy.”

Taking advantage of the reflective surfaces to straighten her hair, Suzy paused to shoot Pam an innocent look. “I was waiting for you to knock that whole time!”

“What?”

“Yeah! What the hell took you so long?”

“I thought you were… busy.”

“I was just passing the time. I knew it wouldn’t work the moment Dominique took his pants off.”
Pam rolled her eyes. “God. You’re such a size queen.”

“That’s not what I meant.” The elevator deposited them on the ground floor. “Haven’t you ever
looked at a cock and known right away?”

Having overheard, the receptionist gave them a funny look. Pam smiled wanly as they passed. “I
can’t say I have, Suzy.”

“Dominique was straight as an arrow,” Suzy continued, oblivious to the receptionist. “I like a little
curve. You know that.”

“It sounded like you were having a great time,” Pam said. They stepped onto the bustling sidewalk.
Pam took another moment to get her bearings.

“I was totally faking,” Suzy said. She followed Pam, not even asking where they were going. “I
mean, Dominique was a pretty good kisser but holy shit does he suck at fucking. And it didn’t help
that he had the wrong tool for the job.”

“Well, he is European,” Pam pointed out. “He’s centimeters and grams, but you’re inches and
ounces.”

“Exactly,” agreed Suzy. “That’s actually a good way of looking at it. He’s metric and I’m… what’s
the other one called?”

“Imperial,” answered Pam. They walked past a restaurant that smelled of burgers and fries. Pam
placed a hand on her tummy. She was getting so hungry that it was starting to hurt.

“Metric versus imperial,” mused Suzy. “It just wasn’t meant to be. Oh well. What about you? Did
you like Devon?”

Pam blanched. “You have to ask? Of course not.”

“Darn,” Suzy said. “I was hoping you would get laid. I think you need it.”

“He tried to make out with me,” Pam said. They had been walking briskly but now slowed to a
shuffle as they got stuck behind an elderly couple on the sidewalk.

“You?” Suzy was astonished. “You, Pam Carpenter, made out with a guy?”

“Please Suzy. I’m really not in the mood for your schtick.”

“Sorry. I thought you would just end up watching TV or something.”

Pam quickly sidestepped the elderly couple. Suzy trotted to catch up. “I watched him jerk off,” Pam
said, making a face.

Suzy’s jaw dropped again. “Wow. Pam. I’m so impressed.”

“It actually was not fun at all. And I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” They walked an entire block in silence. “So we both struck out tonight,” said Suzy. “Big
time. But the important thing is we tried our best. Right?” When they stopped for a light, Suzy
grasped Pam’s shoulders to look her in the eye.

“I know one thing: double dating was fun,” Suzy declared. “It was nice having a wingman. We
should do it again.”
Pam gave her friend a withering stare. “I hate you.”

Suzy looked worried. “Is this worse than that time we were living in that ratty Evanston apartment and I broke your favorite coffee mug?”

“Much worse.”

“What about that first shaky year in the dorm room when me and my date borrowed your bed?”

Pam thought for a moment. “Okay, I was much madder then. Mainly because you didn’t tell me until after I slept in the bed and wondered aloud about the weird stains on my sheets.”

“You didn’t talk to me for a week,” Suzy remembered.

Pam nodded. “And then you let me use your meal card for the rest of the month.”

“Yeah. And we’re still friends now, even though that was much worse than what happened tonight.” Suzy pointed at Flying Pies Pizza across the street. “Doesn’t pizza sound good? It’s exactly what we need after a night like this.”

Pam stood firm, but Suzy beamed at her with pleading eyes before she slowly began pulling Pam across the street. Before they entered the restaurant, Pam said, “I have to go to a wedding this weekend. Against all better judgement…” She sighed. “Will you come along? So I don’t have to go by myself?”

“Of course. What are friends for?”

“And this pizza is on you, right?” she asked. Suzy nodded solemnly and held open the door. Pam went inside.
The Detour, Day 1

Chapter Summary

Pam runs into a tiny hiccup after embarking on a retrieval mission.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: this is a "no sex" chapter. Again.

Good things come to those who wait. 😊

It all started because of the brief glimpse of the moon she caught that morning.

That was the thought in Pam’s mind as she cruised down a country road lined thick with pines. Their effervescent scent filled her car despite the fact that her windows weren’t even open. The air had held an unmistakable imprint of nature, of green mosses and decaying matter and sticky sap. Pam longed to pull over to press her hand into the wet dirt, to feel as as one with the earth, like when she was little and would bury herself in the fallen leaves of autumn. As she was dressed in a sports bra and stretchy leggings, however, Pam was by no means equipped for a hike through the dense woods. Compromising, she opened her car windows to imagine the wilderness permeating every pore of her being.

The late afternoon sunshine broke through the trees. Squinting from the bright light, Pam groped around for her sunglasses on the passenger seat which also held her phone, a water bottle, some strawberry lollipops, and a partially folded map that resembled an accordion. She relaxed behind the shaded lenses that offered protection from the piercing sun. The heart-shaped sunglasses were not her usual pair, but they were her only option at the moment.

Keeping one eye on the road, Pam unlocked her phone. To her relief, she was back in range of a cell tower. At least temporarily. She had traveled so far north that cell service had grown intermittent hours ago. According to the map, the camp was a mere twenty minutes away. She stepped on the accelerator.

None of this was planned. Otherwise, Pam would have dressed in something more sensible than her gym clothes. And she would have eaten something more substantial in the last seven hours besides strawberry lollipops. It had been a strange day, but she couldn’t complain. Jeremy was leaving camp early, and that was all that mattered.

(Eleven hours ago)
Pam was sound asleep when a noise startled her. It was a short whirring followed by a loud slap, as though something had fallen. Knowing she was home alone, or at least supposed to be, she cautiously opened her eyes. Directly across from her bed, the window shade swayed to and fro. She had closed it before bed but now it was inexplicably open, revealing a picture perfect view of the new moon rising in the east.

How had it opened all by itself? Pam glanced suspiciously at Whiskers, who was sleeping on the corner of her bed. The cat was known to enjoy batting at the window shades. Had she been playing with the window shade and caused it to accidentally retract? That didn’t make sense. Pam would have noticed her bounding from the window sill to the bed.

Setting aside the mystery of the window shade, Pam admired the sight of the crescent moon hanging low in the sky. Though the sun hadn’t yet risen, there was a clear delineation between the darkened starfield up top and a slowly brightening sky closer to the horizon. Perched on a gorgeous strip of pure ocean blue, meanwhile, was the silvery new moon.

It seemed so far away. The distance immediately made her think of Jeremy. Maybe he was looking at the moon too, at this exact same moment. Her mind drew an imaginary line from her bed to the moon, then another line from the moon to wherever Jeremy might be. At the very least, they had this much connecting them through the cold emptiness of space. She felt a twinge of loneliness before finding comfort in the idea of sharing such a celestial sight with Jeremy, however far apart they might be.

Pam tried to go back to sleep. After several minutes she decided she wasn’t tired. She couldn’t remember the last time she woke up this early yet felt so well-rested. Rolling out of bed, Pam fed Whiskers and fetched the newspaper from the porch. The inviting morning air inspired her to make an early trip to the gym. She had energy to burn.

A peculiar thing happened on the way: she hit nothing but green lights. “Must be the early hour,” she thought to herself as she navigated the deserted streets. By the time she arrived at the gym, Pam was treated to a brilliant sunrise, all milky orange and wispy whites that obscured the new moon she had awoken to earlier. She knew the moon was still up there somewhere. She just couldn’t see it.

The gym floor was empty except for a woman on a treadmill and another woman doing pilates near the window. This, too, was lucky because she usually had to listen to at least one grunting bro in a muscle shirt. Feeling brave, Pam took off her hoodie and worked out wearing only her blue sports bra and leggings, her favorite pair because of the diagonal mesh cutaways below the knees.

There was an initial feeling of overexposure, but Pam soon warmed up. The treadmill felt like it was set on decline. The dumbbells seemed lighter than usual. Full of pep from her good night’s sleep and feeling sassy in her sports bra, Pam blasted through her workout in no time at all.

She was taking a break at the water fountain when she glanced out the window that overlooked the swimming pool. A boys’ swim practice was underway. They were too far away to be certain, but the boys appeared to be middle-school aged. Pam didn’t realize she was staring until she noticed someone waiting behind her for the water fountain.

It was the woman on the treadmill, smiling politely at her. “Wait, don’t I know you?” Pam asked. The woman’s bright eyes and dimpled smile rang a bell.

“I was about to say the same thing,” the woman replied. “I feel like I know you too. But outside of this gym setting.”

Pam searched her memory. “You’re the soccer coach for the Dragons,” she guessed.
“Yes! I’m Amanda.”

They shook hands. “I’m Pam. I’m friends with the Prater family. I think we met at a game last year.”


“Are you still coaching soccer this year?” Pam inquired. She peeked at the pool area. Why weren’t the boys weren’t wearing form-fitting swimwear? Surely their baggy trunks were holding them back.

“Oh definitely.” Amanda wiped her face with a towel and adjusted the ponytail that held her long, pale brown hair. “I signed the team up for a lot of games this year. We raised some money and we’re going to make a run at nationals.”

“That’s exciting,” Pam said. “Jeremy is always happy when the season starts. He, like, wears his shinguards to bed.”

Amanda laughed. “Good to know he’s staying in the zone. I think we have a really good chance this year. We had good players last season, but we just couldn’t get them on the field at the same time. Vacation, illness, transportation issues. Stuff like that. I’ve been working to get the parents on board for a solid commitment this year.”

“Let me know if you need any help,” Pam offered. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the swimming boys toweling themselves off at the pool’s edge.

“I might take you up on that,” Amanda said thoughtfully. “It got kind of crazy doing everything by myself last year.”

After exchanging phone numbers, they chatted for a few more minutes before Amanda returned to her treadmill. Pam checked on the boys’ swim practice. They were now doing the backstroke, holding red flotation pads with their hands above their heads while propelling themselves with leg kicks. Reminding herself not to look too long, Pam reluctantly returned to her workout. As she assumed a plank position, it occurred to her that the boys weren’t wearing the appropriate swimwear because they didn’t make speedos that small.

By the time she completed her workout, Pam felt so great that she changed her mind about guys at the gym. She wished there had been some so she could show off a little. Humming cheerfully, she waltzed her way outside and took a deep breath of the summer air. It was that rare combination of humid and cool, the kind that only happened on August mornings.

It was then that she noticed a dotted line drawn in chalk on the sidewalk. Rendered in thick strokes, the white lines meandered on the pavement like a pirate’s map leading to treasure. Curious, she started following the crooked line even though it led her in the opposite direction of her parked car. Fifty yards later, she had followed the dotted line to a chalk drawing of a red balloon on the sidewalk, along with five confidently scrawled words: ‘TRANSMISSION INCOMING… PLEASE STAND BY’

It was so cosmic that Pam took a phone picture to remind herself. Cutting across the empty parking lot, she was walking past a pileup of electric rideshare scooters when she noticed a familiar tint of green on the ground. It was a twenty dollar bill. Clean and crisp, like it had just emerged from a banker’s til.

Pam glanced around the parking lot. She was starting to feel like an unwitting participant in a hidden camera video. There was no one around. Tossing aside her caution, she picked up the money and pocketed it. Upon returning to her car, Pam changed her mind about heading home.
“This calls for a celebration,” she murmured. “To Starbucks!” She turned on the radio. For a moment there was nothing but dead air, but then she heard the opening piano chords of one of her favorite songs: “I Believe” by Stevie Wonder.

Pam sang along at the top of her lungs. She felt utterly invincible now. A great workout. Twenty found dollars. Her favorite song on the radio. And, on top of all that, she had yet to hit a red light the entire morning. She had mixed feelings on the last one since the lack of stops meant she had to keep both hands on the wheel and therefore could not engage in air drumming.

At the Starbucks parking lot, a crew of workers in orange vests were directing traffic past construction and re-surfacing projects. “How you doing today?” one of them asked when Pam glided to a stop next to him. The tone of his voice suggested he had asked the question approximately six hundred times that morning.

“This is the most amazing day of my life,” answered Pam.

The man regarded her with a startled expression. “Oh. How nice.” He quickly waved his flag to let her pass.

After finding a parking spot right next to the entrance, Pam did a little tap dance. Her tune changed once inside the coffeeshop. The line was twelve people deep, full of morning commuters and college students. “I guess that’s the end of my lucky day,” Pam thought.

The barista behind the counter called out drinks and names as they were prepared. “Iced Americano for Otis? Tall white chocolate mocha, no whip, for Maeve? Tall caramel macchiato for Eric?”

One by one, the customers stepped forward to claim their drinks. Pam, meanwhile, was still stuck in a line that didn’t seem to be moving. She got a chill, however, when the barista called out the next drink and name.

“Grande coconut milk macchiato for…” the barista squinted at the name scrawled on the cup, “Jeremy?”

Pam’s jaw dropped slightly. That was exactly what she always ordered at Starbucks. When no one claimed the drink, the barista raised her voice and called out again.

“Grande coconut milk macchiato for Jeremy. Anyone?”

The waiting customers glanced at each other, but still no one stepped forward. Shrugging, the barista held the drink high and asked, “Anyone want a free grande coconut milk macchiato?”

Pam raised her hand. “I’ll take it.” Bypassing the long line, she moved to the counter and gratefully accepted the drink.

The barista slid Pam a steaming bowl of oatmeal with blueberries. “He ordered this too. Did you want it? We’re just going to throw it out otherwise.”

“Sure. Thank you!” She was starving after her workout. The way this day was turning out, Pam was starting to wonder if she should buy a lottery ticket. Taking a seat, she enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. A steady stream of passersby circulated outside the window of Starbucks. Sipping her coffee, Pam was glad she was not part of the hurrying crowd.

On her way out, she saw a familiar boy, one who timidly returned her look of recognition. “Hey,” she said. “Elliot, right?” He was one of Jeremy’s soccer pals in attendance at the birthday party last month.
“Hi Pam,” Elliot answered.

“How’s your summer going?” she inquired.

“It’s okay.” He held the door open for his mom, who was pushing a stroller with one hand and holding an infant in the other. “I just had a dentist appointment.” His mom smiled at Pam, a friendly smile, but one that questioned this stranger talking to her son.

“Hi,” Pam said, offering a handshake. “I’m Pam Carpenter.”

“She’s Jeremy’s babysitter,” added Elliot.

“Oh sure! Nice to meet you, Pam. I’m Elizabeth.” She paused, thinking. “Wait, are you the same Pam who won the video game tournament at Jeremy’s birthday? Elliot, what was that game called?”

“Call of Duty,” he answered. “Pam is super good at it.”

“All the boys still talk about that day and how you beat them all,” Elizabeth told Pam. “It’s like you’re some mythical goddess to them.”

Pam laughed. “I don’t know about that.” They were so busy chatting that nobody noticed the curly haired toddler in the stroller as he dumped out a baggie of Cheerios onto his onesie-clad belly, followed by a carton of chocolate milk.

“Jasper!” his mom scolded. Elizabeth leaned over to clean up the mess, but the infant in her arms began pulling her hair. She passed off the unhappy baby to her son. “Elliot, hold your sister for a second, will you?”

The infant apparently did not like her older brother, because she immediately began kicking and wailing. Elliot held her at arms length as though the infant was an ornery raccoon. “Mom! It’s not working!”

“Let me try,” Pam offered. Elliot gratefully handed over his baby sister. The infant immediately calmed, staring at Pam with wide and mesmerized eyes. Tufts of thin hair spiraled from the center of her head and she exuded the incomparable scent of a freshly bathed baby. Pam giggled when a strand of drool leaked from the baby’s shiny pink lips.

“Thank you so much, Pam,” Elizabeth said. She was tossing napkin after napkin into the wastebasket as she cleaned up the toddler’s mess. She paused for a moment to regard her calm daughter in Pam’s arms. “Look at that. She usually screams if anyone else holds her. Even my husband.”

Pam was starting to flush, not just from the baby’s fascination, but also because of a warm motherly instinct surging through her body. She suddenly wished she could hold this baby all day. Having left her hoodie unzipped, she could feel its chubby thighs pressing against her exposed tummy.

“She’s very sweet,” she told Elizabeth. The baby began squeezing her nose with tiny fingers.

“Cora, don’t do that…” her mom sighed. “Sorry. I’m almost done here.”

“It’s all right, I don’t mind,” Pam said.

“Looks like you’ve definitely got the magic touch,” Elizabeth told her. Tossing one last handful of napkins into the trash, she quickly reprimanded the toddler in the stroller one last time before retrieving her daughter. Pam reluctantly returned Cora to her mom. Frowning and whimpering, the
baby reached for her with an outstretched hand.

“Gosh. She really likes you,” Elizabeth observed. Holding her daughter’s wrist, she motioned her to wave. “Can you say bye-bye?”

“Bye!” said Pam. “Bye, Elliot.”

“Bye, Pam. Is Jeremy going to be back soon?”

“Fairly soon. He has another ten days of camp to go.”

“Can you tell him he should come over when he gets back? Tell him I got a Playstation VR setup and it’s totally insane.”

“Jeremy isn’t too big on sanity. I’ll tell him,” Pam promised. Elizabeth giggled, but her son didn’t get what was funny. Upon reaching her car, Pam wistfully turned to see if she could spot Cora inside the Starbucks, but she and her mom had disappeared into the crowd.

Another vehicle pulled into the space next to her. “Hi Pam,” a familiar voice said. In the passenger seat was Zep and sitting behind the wheel was Apple, checking the side mirrors several times as she inched into the parking space.

“Oh, hi Zep,” Pam greeted. “This is the morning of unplanned run-ins. You guys are, like, the millionth person I’ve bumped into today.”

“William is letting Apple drive his new car,” Zep informed her. It was only then that Pam recognized William’s sapphire blue Honda Odyssey. She guiltily glanced in the back seat and remembered how she and Jeremy had christened the car.

“This thing is so frickin’ huge,” said Apple, nervously clutching the steering wheel.

Glancing at Pam, Zep made a zipping motion across his lips. She laughed. Even though the car was still moving, Pam gave Zep a fist bump through the open window.

“Ugh. Thank god.” Apple triumphantly shifted to park and turned off the engine. “I never want to operate this thing again.”

“You’re the one who begged William for a test drive,” Zep reminded her.

“A mistake,” Apple said.

“I felt the same way when I drove it for the first time,” Pam said. “You’ll get used to it.”

A phone rang. Everyone reached for their respective devices to see whose was ringing. Apple sighed when she pulled her phone from her purse. “And here’s William, calling to make sure I didn’t get in a fender bender…” She answered her phone. “Hello?”

“So what are you guys up to today?” Pam asked Zep.

Zep slouched into the passenger seat. “I wanted to go to the park and drive those remote-controlled boats in the pond. But Apple thinks we should play croquet before it gets too hot. So we’re going to discuss it over Starbucks.”

“You want us to come back?” Apple said into her phone. “Like right now? As in this very minute?”

Zep glanced at her, then back at Pam. He shrugged. “Or maybe we’ll just go home and look for stray
golf balls on the course behind the condo.”

“I could drop you guys off somewhere,” Pam volunteered.

Apple was still on the phone, but she heard Pam’s offer. “Do you want to meet us at the Starbucks near your office?” she asked William. “Pam is here and she says she can drive us home.” Listening to William’s response, Apple looked at Pam for a long moment.

“He wants to talk to you,” Apple said. She handed her phone to Zep who passed it to Pam through the window.

“Hi William,” Pam said.

“Hi Pam,” he answered. “So… Jeremy’s camp just called me and said they decided to close down a few days early.”

Pam’s heart skipped a beat. “Close down?” she repeated.

“They had some severe weather last weekend. It knocked out some infrastructure so they’ve been running on generators. Rather than stick it out for the next week and a half, they decided an early release would be easier for everyone.”

“How early?”

“Today and tomorrow,” William answered. “I just talked to Kate and she can’t do either day. I’m free today, but I definitely can’t tomorrow.”

“I could pick Jeremy up today,” Pam offered.

“You’re beating me to the punch,” William said. “Are you sure? I hate springing this on you at the last minute. You could do it tomorrow if that works better.”

She could either see Jeremy today or she could see him in twenty-four hours. “I can definitely pick him up today,” Pam assured.

“It’s a long drive,” William reminded her. “Almost seven hours. And that’s without stops.”

“It won’t be a problem,” said Pam. She wondered if she could do it in five hours. “Maybe we’ll get a room before making the return trip.”

“All right, I’ll call the camp to let them know you’re coming today,” William said. “I’ll text you directions too. Coverage is spotty up there. Thanks so much for doing this, Pam. Can you let Apple know she can keep the car for a few hours?”

“Of course. Bye!” Pam returned Apple’s phone and quickly explained the situation.

Zep eagerly removed his seat belt. “Yes! Remote-controlled boating is back on!”

“Croquet,” Apple crossly reminded him.

“Have fun up north,” Zep said to Pam.

“Drive safe,” Apple said. “Tell Jeremy one of our goldfish died, but I can’t tell if it was Vlad or Donnie.”

“Dead goldfish. Got it.” Pam waved goodbye as they entered the Starbucks. She took a moment to
gather herself behind the wheel of her car. Jeremy was done with camp? More than a week early? Surely this was a dream. She pinched herself twice. Pam felt jittery with anticipation now and it wasn’t because of the caffeine she just consumed.

Her phone chimed. It was William with directions to the camp. Pam read, then re-read the message. Was there anything keeping her from heading north right this very second? She couldn’t think of any reason why not.

Four hours later, Pam was experiencing the slightest regret at her haphazard decision. As William predicted, cell coverage quickly died out once she left the city limits. After several anxious miles, she stopped at a gas station to buy a map. Having neglected to bring her own sunglasses, Pam also purchased the only style available at the gas station: a gaudy pair of red heart-shaped sunglasses.

Food was another problem. Not wanting to lose precious time, she had ignored lunchtime with the singular purpose of seeing Jeremy as soon as possible. That was a mistake, as she was getting lightheaded by the time she finally found a roadside convenience store that offered something besides soda. Pam rewarded herself with salted peanuts and strawberry lollipops, both of which were consumed while driving.

The further north she drove, the more unreliable the radio station signals became. Pam rummaged in her glove compartment which contained a trove of cassettes from her college days. Not bothering to see what tape it was, she blindly popped them into the player one by one: R.E.M.’s Automatic for the People, Sonic Youth’s Goo, Conversational French (Intermediate Level), and the soundtrack to Pulp Fiction.

Though initially pleasant, the nostalgic music only added to her disorientation. It had been a long time since she listened to these songs. She switched to the French tape. By the time she closed in on six hours behind the wheel, Pam had resorted to speaking to herself en français to stay awake. “Non merci, je n’aime pas aller au discotheque,” she recited. “Peut-être demain on va chercher du vin rouge.”

She began perking up once the camp grew close. Following signs now, she turned off the main highway and onto a dirt road. The road grew narrower and narrower until it felt like the woods were encroaching on the car. Rabbits and squirrels darted into the darkened underbrush to avoid her ambling vehicle. Not even sure this was the right way anymore, Pam was relieved to see a hand painted sign for the camp.

**Camp Ojibwe**

1 mile

Her BMW made a final push up a small hill, then burst into a clearing. A shallow-roofed building with battered cedar siding stood to the left while a series of identical cabins were nestled in the pines to the right. Directly ahead was a glimmering lake with three bobbing docks and several canoes. In the center of it all were clusters of young boys milling restlessly and camp counselors who towered above their charges.

Pam’s heart thumped in her chest. She scanned the crowd several times, but she couldn’t locate Jeremy. It didn’t help that the low-slung sun rendered everything as indistinct silhouettes. Doing her best to be patient, Pam followed another handmade sign directing her to a pickup queue behind four other vehicles.

Pam eagerly parked her car. To celebrate her successful arrival, she treated herself to a long swig of water and unwrapped another strawberry lollipop. A camp counselor with a clipboard and radio was talking one by one to each of the waiting vehicles. Even though it wasn’t anywhere near her turn,
she got out of the car. Her back was stiff from the long drive and it felt heavenly to stretch her legs.

The parents ahead of her in line were doing the same. The man glanced at her sympathetically. “Long drive?” he asked.

“All the way from Chicago,” she answered, leaning left and right to ease her aching back.

“Wow, that’s far,” he said. “We only had to drive from Milwaukee. Luckily.” The man waited for her to respond, but his wife gave Pam a frosty smile before pulling him away.

She was trying to figure out what their problem was when Pam heard someone shouting her name. A blur shot from of the crowd and barreled into her. The next thing she knew, Pam was hugging an exceptionally energetic Jeremy who couldn’t stop bouncing on his heels.

“Pam!” he yelled. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

“Surprise! I missed you!” He needed a haircut and he was perhaps a quarter inch taller, but otherwise it was the same Jeremy she had been thinking about for the past five weeks. She started laughing. Jeremy was squeezing her so hard that it was starting to hurt. Despite her aching back, Pam was able to lift him just enough to spin him in a circle.

A crowd of boys had followed Jeremy and were studying Pam’s car. “Wow, what kind of car is this?” one of them asked. “It looks vintage.”

“It’s a BMW.” Jeremy stopped hugging her while he talked to his friends, but his arm remained wrapped around her waist. “It’s from the 90s. Right Pam?”

Before she could answer, a camp counselor shouted, “Boys! How many times do I have to tell you? Stay out of the parking area until your name is called!”

Pam reluctantly let go of Jeremy. He rejoined his friends on the grass where they chattered at a respectable distance from her car. Ahead of her in line, the camp counselor had the parents sign a clipboard, then spoke into his radio. After shaking both their hands, he slowly approached Pam while making a note on his clipboard.

“Sorry for the wait—” When he finally looked up from his writing, the camp counselor fumbled with his clipboard, nearly dropping it. “I… Can I help you?” he asked. Despite his patchy stubble, he couldn’t have been more than nineteen years old. His name tag read ‘Brad’.

“I’m here to pick up Jeremy Prater,” she said. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jeremy slip into the passenger side of her car. He was joined by another boy in the driver’s seat while five boys crammed themselves into the back.

“Oh, okay.” Brad glanced nervously at his clipboard. “So you’re his… mom?”

It wasn’t until he looked her up and down for the second time that Pam realized what was going on. Because she had left her hoodie unzipped, her bright blue sports bra was clearly visible, along with her bare midriff and the stretchy leggings with mesh vents. Combined with the heart-shaped sunglasses and the lollipop in her hand, she either looked like a superhero or a femme fatale, depending on your point of view. No wonder that wife was glaring while her husband made small talk with Pam.

“I’m his guardian,” Pam answered. She wedged the lollipop in her mouth and casually zipped up her hoodie. Any progress she made in appearing respectable was instantly erased as the sound of Dusty Springfield belting out ‘Son of a Preacher Man’ boomed from her car.
Heads turned as the commotion jolted the bucolic camp. The staring faces made Pam acutely aware of how different she was from the other parents who had come to retrieve their sons. These parents were at least a decade older, wearing polo shirts or flowing sundresses that hid their aging waistlines. They were not wearing skintight workout clothes that attracted an undue amount of male attention, preteen or otherwise.

Pam peeked through the driver side window. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded, raising her voice to be heard over the music. Jeremy professed his innocence by holding up his hands. The boy in the driver’s seat guiltily pressed a button on the dashboard to stop the music. His compatriots in the back burst into muted laughter.

“Stop horsing around in there,” she told them. “All of you, get out of my car. Please.” The car doors swung open simultaneously, the boys streaming out like water from a broken dam. Pam turned back to Brad. “That Jeremy Prater,” she told him, gesturing with her thumb at the group of boys now forming a human pyramid on the grass.

“Okay,” Brad nodded, finally convinced. He took down her name, had her sign several documents, then handed her a debriefing packet and commemorative camp t-shirt. After that, it was just a matter of shoving Jeremy’s suitcase into the backseat, tossing his sleeping bag in the trunk, and waiting patiently while he high-fived two dozen boys. The sun had just dipped below the horizon by the time they pulled out of the camp.

“Can I have one of these?” Jeremy asked, holding up the bag of strawberry lollipops.

“You may.” He had already pilfered her heart-shaped sunglasses, so why not? Pam stole a fond glance as she navigated the narrow road. The sunglasses looked both ridiculous and endearing on him. “Did you have a good time at camp?” she asked.

“Yeah. It was okay.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“It was great,” he volunteered.

“What was your favorite thing?”

“Umm, movie night. That was pretty cool.”

“That’s it? Nothing else?” Pam frowned. His parents could have saved a boatload of money by letting him stay home with her and a Netflix account.

“I don’t know,” Jeremy shrugged. He unfurled the commemorative camp t-shirt. “Do you want this? It probably won’t fit me.”

“What does it say?” asked Pam. Keeping one eye on the road, she glanced at the words on the shirt: Capture the Wonder of Boyhood.

“Uh, maybe,” she said. "I’ll try it on. See if it fits.”

Jeremy tossed the shirt into the backseat. He must have been exhausted because he started to nod off in the few minutes it took to reach the main highway. With one hand on the wheel, Pam gently retrieved the lollipop from his slackened lips and returned it to its wrapper. Though he was fast asleep now, Pam kept a protective hand on his leg. She needed to physically confirm that he was
there and this was real.

As she drove, it occurred to Pam that she hadn’t formulated much of a plan beyond picking up
Jeremy. Truthfully, she was getting quite tired herself. “I’ll just drive a little bit more,” she thought,
stifling a yawn. “Then we can find a Holiday Inn or something.”

They had been driving for about an hour when it happened. One minute, they were zipping along at
sixty miles per hour. The next, the car seemed to be coasting without power along the darkened
highway. Confused, Pam stepped on the gas several times. Instead of the usual burst of acceleration,
the car continued losing speed until she was forced to pull over onto the shoulder.

The engine was completely dead. There were no warning lights on her dashboard. Nothing
happened when she turned the ignition. Pam couldn’t understand it. The fuel gauge was more than
half full. The battery certainly wasn’t drained. What was happening?

The highway felt eerily silent now. Unlike the city, the country roads up here did not have
streetlights. Pam checked her mirrors hoping to see other motorists, but there was nothing but empty
darkness. Turning on her hazard lights, she reached for the phone in her purse.

“Oh no,” Pam said.

’No service’ the phone announced. Pam tried to quell the rising panic in her stomach. Jeremy
remained sound asleep in the passenger seat, completely unaware of their predicament. Pam
wondered what to do. She could start walking, search for help. But she couldn’t leave Jeremy here
by himself.

She was about to rouse him when she noticed two pinpricks of light in her rear view mirror. Turning
her head, she saw a beautiful sight: a car that seemed to be slowing down. Pam tentatively got out of
her car, praying that it wasn’t some psycho with an axe. She breathed a sigh of relief when a woman
emerged.

“Did you need help?” the woman asked. She remained a safe distance away.

Pam realized the woman was equally wary of the situation. “Yes. Thank you so much for stopping.
My car just died and it won’t start. Do you know if there’s a gas station nearby? With a mechanic?”

The woman shook her head. “Not this far north. The next gas station is still an hour away and it
doesn’t offer any services.”

“Oh, shoot.” Pam tried to think of other options. Inside the car, she saw Jeremy stretching his arms.
Removing the heart-shaped sunglasses, he looked around in confusion before noticing her standing
outside.

“Pam? Why are we stopped?”

“My car just died,” she told him.

“Can you fix it?”

“I don’t think so, Jeremy.”

Pam noticed the woman peering inside the car, not having realized Jeremy was there. “My mom is
really handy,” the woman said. “She used to be a mechanic. I was just on my way to see her. I could
ask her to take a look at it. She lives about half an hour from here.”
“Thank you,” Pam said. “I would really appreciate it. Do you know how far it is to the nearest motel?”

The woman shook her head again. “There aren’t any nearby. You’d actually have to go a few hours north to find something. This is a national forest so it isn’t very developed.” She paused apologetically. “I’d invite you to stay at my parents’ but they live in a cabin with a single room. Even I’m sleeping on the floor.”

“We could sleep in the car,” Jeremy suggested. “I have my sleeping bag.”

“I guess we’ll have to,” Pam said.

The woman seemed dubious about this notion. “I’m not sure if that’s a good idea,” she said. She suddenly brightened. “Wait. I completely forgot. The Sisters of Saint Clare. They’re just a few miles from my parents’ place. They might have room for you to stay. At least temporarily.”

“The Sisters of Saint Claire,” Pam repeated. “Sure. Is it a church or something?”

“Sort of. It’s a convent.”
Chapter Summary

Stranded up north, Pam and Jeremy adjust to their new surroundings.

It was the sound of ringing bells that woke her. Pealing and reverberating, the bells sliced through the morning stillness, their location close enough to be audible yet far enough that the sound had a muffled quality. Pam inhaled deeply, oxygen rushing into her lungs, as though she had been asleep her whole life. Opening her eyes, she found herself in a small room with austere white walls. She squinted at the crucifix at one end of the room, then at a framed portrait of the Virgin Mary above her head. Other than the sparse decorations, the carpetless room also had a small desk and a second bed where Jeremy lay asleep.

Mere inches separated his twin bed from hers. Pam reached over to touch his arm. Had she really picked him up from camp yesterday? Did they really spend the night at a convent? The answer to both questions was yes.

It was a mystery, though, how he was sleeping through these ringing bells. Curious, Pam stumbled to her feet to investigate. The door to the room stuck stubbornly when she tried to open it. Bracing her foot on the tiled floor, Pam yanked with her all her might. Finally managing to open the door, she peeked out and saw several robed figures leaving their rooms. Though their pace was calm, they walked with great purpose. The bells surely meant something to them.

The door across from hers opened. A woman wearing a white veil and long black robe emerged. “What’s going on?” Pam asked her.

The woman was surprised by her question. “It’s morning prayer,” she responded. She had dark, expressive eyes and very high cheekbones that framed a warm face. Despite her religious apparel, Pam guessed they were close to the same age. “Are you an aspirant?” the nun asked.

“I… don’t know what that means,” Pam answered. She had fallen asleep in her workout clothes and now this nun was skeptically glancing at her choice of apparel.

“Oh. Never mind. If you’d like to come to prayer with me, I can wait for you,” the nun said. “You’ll have to wear something different though. Look in your closet. There should be clothes in there.”

The last time Pam attended church was probably sometime in middle school when her grandparents took her to a Christmas service. Still, it seemed rude to say no. “All right, I’ll come along,” Pam said. “Let me get ready first.”

“Don’t take too long,” the nun said. “Morning prayer starts in five minutes.”

Pam nodded and closed the stubborn door, a task which required her to press her shoulder against the plank of solid wood. The bedroom was equipped with its own private bathroom, so that was her first stop. After peeing, Pam splashed some cold water on her face and quickly brushed her hair until it looked semi-presentable. In the closet, she found spotlessly white button-down shirts and plain black skirts with elastic waistbands, both in different sizes. She chose medium, but wished she had chosen a small shirt size after looking in the mirror.
The nun was waiting in the hallway, so there wasn’t time to change. Pam checked on Jeremy. Still sound asleep. Finding a notepad, she jotted him a quick note on her whereabouts. While she was at it, Pam relocated the pair of tall prayer candles and matches on the desk, hiding them in a drawer. Jeremy burning down the convent, even by accident, would probably count as a mortal sin.

Pam pulled on the doorknob several times before the door creaked open. The nun nodded approvingly when she saw Pam. “Very nice,” she told Pam, “but you should probably button the top buttons on your shirt.”

Pam did so as they walked. The white shirt had such stiffly starched collars that her fingers had difficulty buttoning all the way to the top. She hoped she didn’t look too bedraggled. Her athletic shoes peeked out from under the black skirt, not at all fitting in with the simple clothing. “I’m Pam, by the way,” she said, introducing herself.

“Sister Mary Sue,” the woman smiled. “Pleased to meet you.”

Pam followed her down the dimly lit hallway lined with faux-wood panelling. As they left the dormitory wing, the decor shifted from simple to ornate. They passed a small, brick-lined chapel room where Pam caught a glimpse of plain wooden chairs, tall pillar candles, and religious paintings on the wall. Finally, they entered a long hallway with stained glass windows which led to the adjoining church constructed from stone and marble.

Pam paused to take in the grandeur. A rib-vault ceiling amplified the sound of every footstep. A wide aisle separated two dozen wooden pews. She was surprised to see nearly every seat occupied by nuns, each one wearing habits of black and white. She hadn’t realized the convent had this many sisters.

Sister Mary Sue and Pam slipped into a spot in the last pew. A bell rang and the silent crowd of women switched to a kneeling position on padded platforms conveniently positioned on the ground. Since she had no experience, Pam was a step behind everyone else and was the last to kneel. The nuns closed their eyes in silent prayer. Following suit, Pam tried to remember the words to The Lord’s Prayer.

“Our Father, who art in heaven…” she recited silently in her mind. What came next? Her fingers, clasped together in imitation of the nuns, nervously tapped against her knuckles. “Hallowed be thy name… something something.”

Feeling like a marionette, Pam dutifully followed along as the nuns stood to sing unfamiliar hymns, knelt to pray, then repeated the process all over again. Mouthing along with the singing was easy enough, but she didn’t know enough prayers to fill the time spent kneeling. Pam mentally recited the first line of The Lord’s Prayer a few times before throwing in the towel and switching to The Star Spangled Banner.

“And the rocket’s red glare / the bombs bursting in air / gave proof through the night / that our flag was still there…” Surely this still counted. She was praying for the nation.

After a final hymn, the nuns began filing out pew by pew. “What did you think?” Sister Mary Sue asked.

“It was nice,” Pam said. “Really calm. And contemplative.”

“I’m glad you liked it,” Sister Mary Sue said. “Breakfast is in ten minutes. I have to help in the kitchen, but the refectory is across from the dormitory area.”
“Got it.” Pam paused. “What’s a refectory?”

“It’s the dining hall,” Sister Mary Sue explained.

“Got it,” Pam said again. “Any special rules I should know about?”

Sister Mary Sue nodded. “Good question. Just remember that you’re not allowed to touch the gruel until after you’ve finished your tin of water.” She glanced at Pam and laughed. “Oh! The look on your face. I’m joking. You can just find a place at the table. Someone will serve the food and you don’t have to worry about your dishes afterward. We eat in silence though. No talking allowed.”

“Okay,” Pam said. It was relief to know that the nuns still had a sense of humor. She pointed at a hallway. “My room is that way, right? I should wake up Jeremy for breakfast.”

“Jeremy?” Sister Mary Sue was puzzled.

“Jeremy is my, um, traveling companion,” Pam said.

Sister Mary Sue nodded slowly. She seemed rather uncomfortable at this news. “Does… Have you met Mother Agnes? Does she know Jeremy is here?”

“We met her last night,” Pam said. Mother Agnes was the head nun of the convent. “She knows.”

Sister Mary Sue remained dubious. “Oh. It’s just that… well, I’m not sure if we’ve ever had a man eating with us in the refectory. Unless you count the occasional priest.”

“Jeremy isn’t a man,” Pam said. “He’s a boy. He’s only twelve.”

Sister Mary Sue was relieved. “Oh! I didn’t realize you were traveling with your son. Of course he’s welcome.”

“I’m not his mom,” Pam explained. “I take care of him. For his parents. Kind of like a nanny.” She cringed at the word, but it was the easiest way to describe their relationship without raising eyebrows.

“I understand now,” Sister Mary Sue said. “Yes, your room is down that hallway. I’ll see you after breakfast!” She waved at Pam and hurried off.

Back in the room, Pam found Jeremy asleep in the same position. Bending over, she placed a hand on his shoulder and gently shook him. He rubbed his eyes and stared at her.

“Geez,” he said. “What’s with those clothes?”

“Good morning to you, too. It’s a long story.” Pam sighed. “Get dressed. It’s time for breakfast.”

Groaning, Jeremy lurched toward the bathroom. The walls were apparently paper thin because Pam could hear him peeing loud and clear. She wondered how long they would be stuck at this convent. The motorist who stopped to help them last night, Jane, promised to arrange for a tow truck to haul Pam’s car. Her mom would hopefully be able to quickly diagnose the problem. Pam tried checking her phone for messages before remembering there was no service.

Her Jeremy retrieval mission had started out so promising. Perhaps this was karmic payback for all that luck from yesterday morning. The toilet flushed and Jeremy strolled out of the bathroom. “Don’t forget to wash your hands,” she reminded.

“Oh yeah.” He returned to the bathroom. Pam wondered what other bad habits he had picked up at
camp. She affectionately watched the slightly sunburnt boy washing his hands at the sink and decided that spending a few days at a convent was an acceptable price of admission for getting him back a week early.

“Come here,” she said, holding out her arms. Hugging him, Pam reveled in the familiar scent of a boy in the morning. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I kept having weird dreams though. I dreamt my mom decided to move and sold the house before I had a chance to get stuff from my room. That didn’t happen, did it?”

“Your mom did not sell the house,” Pam assured him. “All your things are exactly where you left them. Besides, she would have said something when we called her last night. Get dressed or we’ll be late for breakfast.”

Jeremy began rummaging in his suitcase. Pam felt envious that he at least had a wardrobe to choose from. She, on the other hand, looked like an actress auditioning for the part of a maid in a medieval play. Squeezing a finger under her collar, she tried to scratch an itch that was just out of reach.

“Okay, I’m ready,” Jeremy said. “Let’s go.”

His hand was already on the doorknob when Pam stopped him. “Wait. What does your shirt say?” she asked. Jeremy turned to face her. He wore a long-sleeved shirt depicting a flamethrower-wielding figure with a burning head of hair, accompanied by the declaration ‘I’m a spicy ginger’ in cursive script.

“I don’t think you should wear that to breakfast,” said Pam. “It doesn’t seem… appropriate.”

“But you’re the one who bought this shirt for me,” said Jeremy. “Why did you buy it if it’s not appropriate?”

“Let’s just focus on finding a different shirt,” suggested Pam.

Taking off the shirt, Jeremy returned to his suitcase. Pam tried not to stare at his exposed shoulder blades. They jutted from his back like little angel wings that hadn’t fully formed yet. “How about one of these?” he asked, holding up a shirt in each hand. One had a graphic of a video game controller and the words ‘Beast Mode’. The other shirt read ‘Unleash the Beast’ in bold letters.

“Maybe something without the word ‘beast’ in it,” said Pam.

He returned to digging in his suitcase. “I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Jeremy, these are nuns. They’re women of God. They’re not ready for you to slide into their DMs.”

“How about this one?” He held up another candidate. It had an illustration of a dinosaur straddling a monster truck and shouting ‘REXtreme!!!’ via a word bubble.

This was probably as close as they could get to not making a nun faint. “Good enough,” Pam said. “Let’s go.”

Jeremy followed her out of the room and down the long hallway. Remembering Sister Mary Sue’s instructions, Pam found the chapel first, then searched for the refectory. She spotted a series of long tables through a stone archway. “Oh, I almost forgot,” Pam whispered to Jeremy. “We’re not allowed to talk during meals, okay?”

“Say what?” said Jeremy, alarmed.
She didn’t have time to respond as they had already entered the refectory: a large room with exposed wood beams and a floor tiled with a hypnotizing pattern of cream and brown diamonds. Two rows of long tables ran the length of the room. As Sister Mary Sue warned, the refectory was silent except for the sound of clinking silverware. The moment Pam and Jeremy entered, however, dozens of heads turned to regard the curious pair of newcomers.

Pam froze. She could feel Jeremy hiding behind her as the nuns stared. Sister Mary Sue, patrolling the tables with a pot of coffee in one hand and tea in the other, noticed them and gestured to an empty spot at the end of a table. Beet red now, Pam slid onto the bench with Jeremy close behind.

The room returned to normal once they were seated. Pam unfolded a napkin in her lap and elbowed Jeremy to do the same. A server arrived to deposit bowls of plain oatmeal and plates of toast and scrambled eggs on their woven placemats. Spotting a dish of peanut butter, Pam passed it to Jeremy. Sister Mary Sue stopped by with tea for her and milk for him. She gave Pam an acknowledging nod before moving on.

Since she was starving, Pam appreciated the silent meal that precluded small talk. When Mother Agnes greeted them last night, she fed them cream of chicken soup and toasted slices of homemade bread in her office before showing them their room. Though delicious, it wasn’t enough for Pam who was still running a calorie deficit after subsisting on peanuts and strawberry lollipops. Now comfortably seated at the breakfast table, she quietly began devouring everything in sight, even reaching for the fruit platter once she finished her food. It was far from a lavish affair, but Pam was too hungry to be picky.

Jeremy, meanwhile, set aside his peanut butter toast after two bites. “Pam,” he whispered. “Everyone is staring at me.”

“Be quiet,” she hissed back. “We’re not supposed to talk.”

“This food is weird,” he muttered. “I’m not hungry.”

The nun across the table gave them a look of disapproval. Pam smiled sheepishly. Knowing Jeremy would be hungry later, she placed a banana on his plate and pointed at his glass of milk. She waited for him to peel his banana before helping herself to his abandoned peanut butter toast.

As they finished eating breakfast, the nuns left the refectory one by one until only Pam and Jeremy were left. Sister Mary Sue refilled Pam’s tea, then disappeared into the kitchen through a set of swinging double doors. She returned with a steaming mug of hot cocoa and a piece of shortbread for Jeremy.

“Don’t tell anyone about this please,” Sister Mary Sue said, winking at Jeremy.

“Thank you,” Jeremy answered. He paused fearfully before taking a sip of the cocoa. “Oops. Did I just fail a test? Are we still not allowed to talk?”

Sister Mary Sue laughed. “You can talk now.”

Pam introduced them. “Sister Mary Sue, this is Jeremy.”

“Nice to meet you, Jeremy. What do you think of our convent so far?”

“It’s pretty nice,” he said. “These long tables remind me of the dining room at Hogwarts.”

Sister Mary Sue glanced around the room and nodded. “I can see that,” she said. “I love Harry Potter. They don’t have nuns at Hogwarts though, do they?”
“Nope. But I’ve seen them in other movies. They usually look older though. The nuns here look really young.”

Pam gave him a look. Sister Mary Sue laughed again. “I’ll take that as a compliment. You’re right though. The average age of our nuns is twenty-six years old.”

Jeremy swallowed a huge glug of hot cocoa. “That’s how old Pam is,” he said, wiping his lips.

Pam placed a hand in front of his face. “Please stop talking, Jeremy,” she said.

He nibbled his shortbread. “It’s true.”

Amused by this exchange, Sister Mary Sue took a seat next to Pam. “How was your breakfast?” she inquired.

“So good,” Pam said. “I was starving. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome.” Sister Mary Sue slung a dishcloth over her shoulder. “So… Mother Agnes asked me to bring you to her office after breakfast.”

Pam wondered if she had done something wrong. “Should I be nervous?”

“It’ll be fine,” Sister Mary Sue said. “Mother Agnes is very sweet. She probably just wants to make sure you’re settled in.” As she was saying this, Sister Mary Sue picked a piece of lint from Pam’s shoulder and straightened her collar.

“I’m not terribly reassured since you seem to be tidying me up,” Pam said.

“Yeah, usually Pam is the one doing that to me,” Jeremy chimed in. He was pleased when Sister Mary Sue laughed.

“Relax!” she said, patting Pam’s shoulder. “I need to take care of one last thing in the kitchen. Then we can go.” Removing her apron, Sister Mary Sue stepped through the swinging double doors once again. Once she was out of sight, Pam wheedled Jeremy until he allowed her a sip of hot cocoa and a taste of shortbread. The burst of sugar was exactly what she needed.

“Hey, let’s help them clean up,” Pam said, nodding at the breakfast dishes strewn about the tables. She began stacking plates and consolidating silverware while Jeremy gathered the cups and glasses. By the time Sister Mary Sue returned, the only remaining task was to wipe down the tables.

“You’re so kind,” Sister Mary Sue said, surveying the room. “The kitchen crew will be happy when they see this. I’ll let them know you helped.”

“Do you remember how to get back to the room?” Pam asked Jeremy.

“Yeah.” He made a series of motion with his hands. “It’s that way, then that way, then this way. Right?”

“Uh, yeah, something like that,” Pam said. “Just walk all the way down the long hallway and choose the door on the right. Ask someone if you can’t find it.” Jeremy confidently strode off. Keeping an eye on him, Pam watched as he promptly turned the wrong way when exiting the refectory.

“Other way!” she called. Performing a brisk 180, Jeremy gave her a thumbs up before strolling off. Pam shook her head. Laughing, Sister Mary Sue escorted her to Mother Agnes’s office. Pam felt like she was back in grade school and paying a visit to the principal.
Mother Agnes smiled when she saw them approaching. “Good morning, Pamela. Were you able to rest well?” she inquired. She ushered both of them into her office. “Did you get enough breakfast?”

Pam sat down in a chair. “I slept great. And breakfast was delicious.”

Mother Agnes seated herself behind a large mahogany desk. The worn top was showing its age, though the rest of the desk still sported its original caramel color. Aside from a crucifix and a portrait of Jesus on the wall, the office was minimally furnished with a bare floor and curtainless windows that brightened the room with natural light. A pair of apple trees, their branches heavy with green orbs, stood so close that a person could open the window to pick the fruit.

“She’s his nanny,” Sister Mary Sue reminded.

“Of course! I forgot.” Mother Agnes smiled at her. “I must say, Pamela, I was quite pleased to see you attend Lauds.”

Sister Mary Sue noticed the blank look on Pam’s face. “Our morning prayer,” she interjected.

“Ah yes,” Pam nodded. “It was a nice way to start the day.”

“I agree,” Mother Agnes said. “I asked you to stop by because Jane Evans called this morning. She said her mother took a look at your car and it’s… a broken timing belt. Her mother placed an order for a new one, but it will take a few days to arrive. She said once it is here, it will be no problem to install it.”

“They did all that already? I should have given her my credit card number to pay for the timing belt.”

“I agree,” Mother Agnes said. “I asked you to stop by because Jane Evans called this morning. She said her mother took a look at your car and it’s…” Mother Agnes consulted her notepad, “a broken timing belt. Her mother placed an order for a new one, but it will take a few days to arrive. She said once it is here, it will be no problem to install it.”

“Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem,” Sister Mary Sue said, once again noticing Pam’s confused expression. “Mary giving birth in a stable. Jesus sleeping in a manger.”

“Oh sure!” Pam said. “Like in The Little Drummer Boy. I love that song.” Mother Agnes and Sister Mary Sue exchanged a look. She realized this was not the response they were looking for. “I mean, thank you for having us,” Pam told them.

“You’re welcome to remain as long as you need,” Mother Agnes said. “During your stay, however, I would ask you to respect our lifestyle. Are you familiar with a nun’s vows, Pamela? We take three:
Pam nodded. Her mouth went dry when Mother Agnes mentioned ‘chastity’. While chatty and conversational at first, the nun had become quite serious, leaving Pam to feel like she was under a microscope. She wondered if she should be taking notes.

Mother Agnes continued, “Regarding poverty and obedience to God, it seems you’re already doing quite well.” She paused to regard Pam with a hint of pride. “You are wearing the clothes of an aspirant and you are attending Lauds.”

“She helped clean the refectory after breakfast too,” Sister Mary Sue told Mother Agnes.

Mother Agnes was pleased. “Excellent. I notice that you’re wearing earrings though. I would appreciate it if you would remove your jewelry once you return to your cell. And while you don’t appear to be wearing makeup at the moment, please refrain from that as well.”

Embarrassed, Pam touched an ear, not even realizing she was wearing earrings. At least they were small studs and not gigantic hoops. Nonetheless, they apparently did not pass the nuns’ sniff test. “I’m sorry,” Pam said. “I can take them off.”

“Thank you, Pamela. And as for chastity…”

“I’m not a virgin,” she blurted out. “Will that be a problem?”

“Of course not,” Mother Agnes replied. “When women join our convent as aspirants or postulants, many of them have already lay with a man. Though they will not formally take vows until the novice stage, we do ask that newcomers respect the vows all the same.”

“I can respect the vows,” Pam said. “If it counts for something, I haven’t lay with a man for a long time. Like a year and a half, at least.” Nonplussed by this admission, Mother Agnes and Sister Mary Sue shifted uncomfortably in their chairs.

“Well, that’s… very good to hear,” Mother Agnes said. There was an awkward pause before she changed the subject. “We follow a rather regimented schedule here at the convent. Sister Mary Sue, would you be willing to make sure Pamela and Jeremy are comfortable?”

“Yes, Mother Agnes.”

The phone on the desk rang. “Excuse me,” Mother Agnes said. “I’m sure I’ll see you later today, Pamela.”

Pam and Sister Mary Sue left the office, closing the door behind them. “After breakfast is chores,” Sister Mary Sue said. “We have a midday prayer at 11:30 and then lunch is at noon.”

“That sounds easy enough,” Pam said. “I can help with chores.”

Sister Mary Sue shook her head. “How about tomorrow? You should take some time to get yourself settled in. I’m sure Jeremy needs entertaining. I’ll see you after lunch?”

Pam immediately thought of a dozen ways she could entertain Jeremy, all of which would get her chased from the convent by pitchfork-wielding nuns. Or chased out of anywhere, for that matter.

“See you after lunch,” Pam nodded. She returned to the dormitory wing, walking down the long hallway until she found their room. At first, she thought the door was locked before remembering the sticky door. When she finally managed to push it open, she found Jeremy pulling the doorknob on
“Oh, hey Pam,” he said, letting her in.

“Hi Jeremy.” Now back in the privacy of their room, she gratefully unbuttoned the top buttons of her shirt that were strangling her.

“So I have some good news and bad news,” Pam said. She removed her earrings and put them in her purse. “The good news is that my car is fixable. The bad news is that it will take at least a few days. The car needs a new timing belt.”

“What’s a timing belt?” Jeremy asked.

“I didn’t ask. Probably something that looks like a belt. And is in charge of the timing. Anyway, we’ll probably be here until the end of the week. Think you can handle that?”

“I guess it’s fine,” Jeremy said. “I still have all my stuff from camp.”

“Lucky you,” Pam said. All she had were her workout clothes, which were utterly useless in the conservative atmosphere of the convent. She rummaged in Jeremy’s suitcase until she found his toiletry bag. “I’m going to get cleaned up.”

The bathroom held a sink, a toilet and a shower stall, with little room for anything else. Pam washed her face and, lacking a toothbrush, brushed her teeth with toothpaste smeared on her finger. She wondered how long it would take to hitchhike to get to the nearest store. Probably hours. Gazing regretfully at her reflection in the mirror, she made a second attempt to tame her unkempt hair. What it really needed was a thorough shampooing, but Pam didn’t have her hair dryer and straightener to properly finish the job. She grimly realized she might have to go a whole week without washing her hair. These nuns were hopefully not the judgmental kind.

Back in the room, Jeremy was drawing while seated in bed. She was about to ask him why he didn’t sit at the desk when she noticed that, instead of a proper chair, it only had a stool that was far too short to reach the desktop. In addition, the desk was missing a leg and propped up by a block of wood. Money was apparently tight at the convent.

Mirroring Jeremy, Pam sat crosswise on her own bed. In this position, the soles of her feet just barely grazed his in the space between the beds. The two twin mattresses, arranged apart at arm’s distance, reminded her of old-fashioned TV shows where a married couple would sleep in separate beds.

“Do you miss being at camp?” Pam asked him.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged.

She wondered why he was being so evasive each time she asked him about camp. “What did you do last night?” she persisted.

“It was supposed to be movie night. But we couldn’t watch anything because they didn’t want to run the generators.”

“What movies did you watch before the power went out?”

Jeremy shrugged again, still absent-mindedly drawing. “All sorts of stuff. We started with Star Wars at the beginning. We were in the middle of the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe when camp ended. We had to stop after Guardians of the Galaxy Volume One.”
“I remember that one,” Pam volunteered. “Maybe we can pick up where you left off once we get home.”

“Maybe,” Jeremy said. He set down his pencil. “Are we going to have to stay in this room the whole time?”

“Of course not,” Pam said. Then she remembered how Mother Agnes referred to the rooms as ‘cells’. Surely that was merely religious slang. “Want to go exploring?”

Opening their door required much tugging, but it finally opened with a loud creak that made them both wince. It felt like they were doing something forbidden. Jeremy craned his neck out the door, with Pam leaning in close behind him to take a peek as well. The hallway was empty.

“The coast is clear,” Jeremy said.

“We’re not doing anything wrong,” Pam insisted, though she wasn’t certain herself. She had seen several dozen nuns at breakfast, but they were now nowhere to be found. The tranquil convent seemed almost sinister. Jeremy must have felt uneasy too because he slipped his hand into hers. Their footsteps echoed in the long hallway as they passed a bust of a pensive Jesus, a painting of a sorrowful Jesus, and a stained glass window of a radiant Jesus.

“Jesus really had all the feels,” Jeremy observed.

Pam studied the glass window. It depicted Jesus surrounded by several nuns wearing rapt expressions. A nearby plaque proclaimed, “Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience to God.”

“Those are the vows a nun makes,” Pam told Jeremy.

“What does ‘chastity’ mean?” he asked.

“Um… it means they’re not allowed to play Call of Duty with anyone.”

Jeremy was shocked, like she just informed him that they were cannibals. “What about playing it by themselves? That’s okay, right?”

“Nope.”

He read the plaque again. “Gosh. That must suck.”

“I know, right?”

Next, they passed a wall adorned with artfully hung rosaries, each one meticulously arranged in the shape of a heart. There were at least a dozen of them. “I’ve never seen this many rosaries in one place,” said Pam. They looked pretty, especially with the sunlight shining via strategically placed skylights on the colored translucent beads.

“Me neither,” said Jeremy. “You know, this would be a great place to make a stand.”

Pam was confused. “A stand against what?”

“An army of vampires.”

“Duh,” she said. “I should have known.”

Having little appreciation for religious art, Jeremy forged ahead and, still holding his hand, Pam had no choice but to follow. They peeked into the eerily empty refectory. Despite the darkened room,
Pam saw a large reproduction of The Last Supper on the wall, something she hadn’t noticed at breakfast. Continuing the reconnaissance mission, they slipped through a door leading to a small courtyard that contained zinnias and daisies growing against a backdrop of stately evergreens. Completing the look was a lone statue. Of Jesus, of course.

Being outside felt better than the foreboding interior of the convent, except they were chased from the courtyard by a wasp. After dashing back to safety inside the convent, Pam turned to Jeremy. “I’ll give you ten bucks if you can find a room without an artistic representation of Jesus,” she challenged.

Jeremy thought for a moment. “I know!” he said. Pam followed him as he trotted down the hall, glancing at each door, before he paused in confusion. “The women’s restroom is over there. But where is the men’s?”

“Um, I don’t think this place has a men’s room,” Pam reminded.

“Oh yeah.”

Pam poked her head into the women’s restroom. “Hello?” she called. No one answered. “Go ahead and check. I’ll keep watch.”

Jeremy cautiously entered the restroom, returning less than ten seconds later. “Never mind,” he said with disappointment. “There’s a picture of Mary holding Jesus in there.”

“Protection against vampires,” Pam reminded him. She saw a door marked ‘Community Room’. Surely that meant it was for everyone. Inside, they found several large conference tables, some couches, and a foosball table. Jeremy insisted on a game and, after losing, demanded best two out of three. Pam requested best out of five after he won two games in a row, which Jeremy changed to best of seven when she took the lead. After a series of back-and-forth matches, Jeremy finally won.

“Tiger J takes home the Sisters of St. Claire Championship Cup!” he exulted.

“We’re doing a rematch tomorrow,” Pam told him. The foosball had been a welcome distraction, one that made her forget they were trapped in a creepy convent. That is, until the sound of rustling footsteps caught her ear.

“It’s the vampire army,” Jeremy said, paling.

Shushing him, Pam opened the community room door. A steady stream of somber nuns were marching past. Jeremy joined her at the door. “Wow. This is the most orderly fire drill I’ve ever seen,” he whispered to her.

“It’s not a drill, silly,” she whispered back.

“What is it?”

Pam didn’t know either. Sister Mary Sue emerged from the pack of nuns. “There you are,” she said. “Ready for lunch?”

“Yeah!” Jeremy said, rubbing his stomach.

“Oh, it’s the lunch crowd,” Pam said. “I thought we missed something.”

Sister Mary Sue glanced behind them at the Community Room. “We just finished midday prayer,” she informed them.
“I knew I forgot something!” Pam said. “I’ll come tomorrow, I promise.”

“We’re not keeping attendance,” Sister Mary Sue said. “Besides, it’s your first day. If you wish to attend, just remember to listen for the bells.” She didn’t seem the least bit upset but Pam felt guilty nonetheless. She and Jeremy must have been too absorbed in foosball to hear the bells.

They followed the nuns to the refectory for lunch. The cooks must have been in a salad mood because the meal consisted of egg salad sandwiches, a salad of tossed greens, and a fruit salad to finish. Once again, the room was silent except for the sound of clinking silverware. No one seemed to notice Pam’s absence at midday prayer, though Jeremy once again drew curious looks.

Sister Mary Sue found them after lunch. “Would you like a tour of the grounds?” she offered, leading them outside. “Let’s see. You’re already familiar with the church. There is a daily meditation session, each morning here in the courtyard, if you’re interested. There’s a vegetable garden over there, behind those shrubs. And if you continue across the lawn, there are plenty of hiking trails that wind through the forest.”

Pam nodded throughout the tour, but she grew increasingly apprehensive as she listened to Sister Mary Sue. She hoped her car would be fixed soon because there was no way Jeremy would be entertained for long in this setting. The one thing that did perk him up, however, was the chicken coop and rabbit hutch.

“This is where we keep the poultry,” Sister Mary Sue explained, pointing to a cedar fenced partition that held clucking chickens on one side and wary rabbits on the other. “Those were fresh eggs you had for breakfast this morning. Unfortunately the fencing isn’t quite high enough to keep out predators, which is why we’re building a real barn.” A dozen yards away was a poured concrete foundation, plus several piles of lumber and roofing shingles.

Pam felt inadequate. “You’re raising your own food and building your own barn? Wow.”

“We’re talented, but not that talented,” Sister Mary Sue laughed. “The local high school shop class is building the barn for us as their summer project. I don’t expect it to be perfect. But I’ll be happy if it has four walls and a roof.”

“What do you mean by predators?” Jeremy asked.

“Oh, you know, sometimes we find there are missing chickens or rabbits in the morning,” Sister Mary Sue said.

Jeremy was intrigued. “Were they mysteriously drained of blood? With two puncture marks near or on their necks?”

Sister Mary Sue shook her head. “No… nothing like that.”

“What kind of predators were responsible, Sister Mary Sue?” Pam asked, knowing perfectly well what Jeremy was implying. “In your opinion?”

“Probably badgers or coyotes,” Sister Mary Sue said.

“Badgers and coyotes make sense,” Pam agreed. “Right, Jeremy?”

“Maybe,” he said, shrugging.

They followed Sister Mary Sue back to the main lawn. Though otherwise surrounded by woods, the convent had a sizable backyard bordered by a low brick wall where a few nuns were perched,
watching as a group of sisters played tag. It was odd seeing them running across the lawn in their habits. The discomfort must have been mutual since Pam caught them exchanging looks once they noticed Jeremy’s presence. Being a woman, Pam blended in well enough, but he stuck out with his shorts, t-shirt, and boy parts.

Sister Mary Sue sat down in the shade of a large sugar maple. Pam was about to do the same when two nuns approached them. “Would you like to join us?” one of them offered. Her face was pink from exertion.

“We’re playing tag,” the other one said.

“No, thank you,” Pam said. “I bet Jeremy wants to play though.” He was not at all enthused by the idea of playing tag with a bunch of nuns. “Go on, you need some exercise,” she encouraged.

Jeremy reluctantly trudged off with the two nuns. They hadn’t even started playing when one of the nuns sitting on the brick wall spoke up. “Sister Joan!” she said. “Do you really believe it’s appropriate to invite a male to play?”

Sister Joan rolled her eyes before turning to respond. “He’s a boy,” Sister Joan said to the nun on the wall. “How is this not appropriate? ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”

“I am aware of Jesus’ words,” the nun answered. “But let me remind you this is a contemplative order.”

Sister Mary Sue called across the lawn. “Sister Catherine. It’s all right. It’s just a game.”

There was an uneasy silence. The nuns on the lawn hesitated for a moment, then resumed their game of tag, Jeremy included. Despite the detente, Pam felt uncomfortable because the nun on the wall, Sister Catherine, was now scowling at her. It was the same nun who caught them talking at breakfast, she realized.

“Jeremy doesn’t have to play tag,” Pam said quietly. “I didn’t realize it was inappropriate.”

Seated on the grass, Sister Mary Sue was busy arranging her black skirt to meticulously cover her knees and ankles so that only her shoes were visible. “It’s fine, Pam,” Sister Mary Sue assured.

Taking a cue, Pam copied her modest pose. “Are you sure? Because Sister Catherine keeps glaring at me and I think she’s going to break one of the commandments. You know, the one about murder.”

Sister Mary Sue laughed, then brushed a few stray blades of grass from Pam’s skirt. “The fifth commandment is actually ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ Scholars debate the original translation of the last word. Unlawful killing, or murder, is frowned upon. But killing in the context of warfare is okay. As is capital punishment and self-defense.”

“That’s fascinating,” Pam began, “but I’m not sure whether to feel relieved or threatened.”

“Sister Catherine is probably just in a bad mood,” Sister Mary Sue said. “I’ll say a prayer to Saint Jerome on her behalf. He’s the patron saint of anger.” Sister Mary Sue waved across the lawn at Sister Catherine. Instead of responding, Sister Catherine stalked away to the courtyard.

At least her fellow sisters were kinder, Pam thought. They had also clearly underestimated the energy of a twelve year old boy. Red-faced, huffing and puffing, the nuns struggled to keep up as Jeremy raced the length of the lawn. It didn’t help that the women were handicapped by their clothes. All were wearing black skirts, though some of the sisters didn’t wear head coverings. The others sweated
profusely under their veils. Despite the shaded tree, even Sister Mary Sue seemed warm in her white veil.

“Are you allowed to take off your veil if it’s too hot?” Pam asked.

Sister Mary Sue shook her head. “Wearing a veil is a sacred part of being a nun. The only time we remove it is when we are in our cell. I usually wear mine until it’s time for bed. It takes getting used to. I had a hard time at first, but now it feels funny when I don’t wear it.”

Pam tried to imagine what it would be like to wear a veil all the time. She would be forced to buy gallons of bleach to keep it clean and white. It would get in the way during Call of Duty. On the plus side, she would never have to worry about a bad hair day like she was having today.

A series of shrieks from the lawn caught her attention. Jeremy was now ‘it’ and the nuns were scattering to get away from him. He might have been reluctant at first, but Jeremy was now fully committed to the game of tag. Pam watched him chase down a hapless nun and slap her on the back.

“Tag! You’re it!” he shouted.

Pam flagged him down the next time he sprinted by. “Hey Jeremy. Be gentle out there, okay?” He innocently raised his hands, then dashed off when someone began chasing him. It was Sister Joan, the nun who had initially invited them to join, and she gave up the pursuit when her veil came loose. She hastily stopped to fix it.

“It takes a lot of dedication to be a nun,” Pam observed to Sister Mary Sue. “I don’t mean to be rude, but… do you like it?”

“I do like it. It’s a very freeing life.”

“Why did you choose to be a nun?” asked Pam.

Sister Mary Sue hesitated. “It’s complicated,” she said.

Feeling intrusive, Pam fell silent. Back on the lawn, the group had switched from tag to dodgeball. Sister Joan whispered something in Jeremy’s ear. They must have formed an alliance because the two of them began taking out the other nuns one by one. It wasn’t exactly a fair fight because Sister Joan was younger and far more spry than her colleagues. Despite the veil and habit, Pam couldn’t help but notice Sister Joan’s plucked eyebrows. There was no other possible explanation for eyebrows that flattering.

The field of participants was eventually winnowed down to Sister Joan and Jeremy. Two dozen nuns lined up on the edge of the lawn watching as Jeremy, ball in hand, stalked Sister Joan. Perhaps mindful of Sister Catherine’s admonition, they watched in an unnatural silence like a crowd at Wimbledon. Bursting into a sprint, Jeremy closed in and threw a fastball in midstride, scoring a direct hit on Sister Joan.

Unable to contain themselves, the nuns on the sideline broke into clapping. Jeremy performed a victory jig. It was only after the clapping died away that they noticed how Sister Joan remained prone, face-down in the grass. Jeremy had hurled the ball with such force that she had tripped upon impact. Once she was finally helped to her feet, the nun’s formerly pristine white habit was now splattered red with blood. Startled at the sight, Jeremy automatically searched for Pam.

“Oh dear,” Pam said, jumping to her feet.

“Um, I’m really sorry,” Jeremy called, stepping aside as the other sisters rushed to help. He loitered
awkwardly near the scene of the crime with an embarrassed look on his face. Pam had seen that expression before at the skate park when Jeremy collided with a six-year-old girl who was thankfully attired in every piece of safety gear known to man. Though shaken up, the girl’s helmet, kneepads, elbow pads, wrist guards, and gloves allowed her to emerge unscathed. Sister Joan, however, was not so lucky.

“I’m all right,” she kept insisting as a crowd formed around her. “It’s just a bloody nose.” Despite this assurance, Pam could see a nasty cut on her chin in addition to the blood gushing from her nose.

Sister Catherine rushed into the fray. “Oh my goodness! What happened?”

“Sister Joan got hit by the ball and fell,” someone said.

Sister Catherine immediately seized on Jeremy’s guilty expression. “You! Did you do this?”

“I… well, yes,” Jeremy stammered. “It was an accident.”

Sister Catherine glowered at him, her severe disposition contrasting sharply with her fair, freckled face. “Say you’re sorry, young man!” she demanded.

When Jeremy instead cowered in fear, Sister Catherine stepped so close that Pam thought she was going to hit him. Pam swiftly moved to Jeremy’s side and placed a protective arm around him. “He already said he was sorry,” she informed Sister Catherine.

When the nun saw Pam next to Jeremy, she grew even more furious. The other sisters around them took a step back when they noticed Sister Catherine’s seething rage. Even Jeremy trembled as he pressed against Pam’s side. Menacingly, the nun stepped closer until Pam could plainly see her flaring nostrils and smell her distinct scent of Ivory soap. Undaunted, Pam stood her ground. The two of them faced off, silently, for a full five seconds before Sister Catherine finally returned her attention to Sister Joan.

“It wasn’t Jeremy’s fault,” Sister Joan said, holding a blood-stained handkerchief to her face. “I tripped over my own feet.” After much debate, two colleagues began escorting Sister Joan to the infirmary, though she wouldn’t stop insisting she was fine. Sister Catherine gave Pam a cold look before following them. Finished with calisthenics for the day, the remaining sisters ambled back into the convent.

Pam and Jeremy lagged behind the group. She chuckled ruefully. “You know, on the one hand, I cannot believe you just gave a bloody nose to a nun. On the other hand… I can totally believe it.”

“She told me not to go easy on her!”

“When a girl says you shouldn’t go easy on her, that means you should go easy on her,” Pam gently informed him. Reconsidering, she added, “Well, usually. There might be times where she actually doesn’t want you to go easy.” Pam wagged a finger at him. “But dodgeball is not one of the times.”

Determined to stay out of trouble for the rest of the day, Pam occupied Jeremy as best she could in the staid setting of the convent. They passed time wandering the grassy paths surrounding the convent. Afterward, they dawdled in their cell with Pam hand-washing her only set of civilian clothing while Jeremy was in charge of making the beds.

To her relief, evening prayers was uneventful. At Mother Agnes’s request, Jeremy participated in the service. Wearing a long and brown tunic, he assisted the head nun with the censer, a brass incense-burning orb suspended from a chain. Pam nervously watched as the young boy followed Mother Agnes, gently swinging the smoke-emitting censer to and fro, as the nun blessed the congregation.
Pam kept expecting Jeremy to lose self-control, swing it like a mace over his head, and start shouting battle cries. He thankfully did not.

Dinner followed, after which the nuns quietly filed back to their cells. Pam and Jeremy dutifully took their place in the procession. Once back in their own cell, she sent him to shower while she checked the workout clothes she had hung to dry. Thanks to their moisture-wicking properties, she was glad to find them only slightly damp. Her workout clothes were not ideal sleep attire, but Pam couldn’t stand another second in the restrictive nuns’ clothes.

Jeremy emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his waist. Eager for her turn, Pam made a beeline for the shower. After drying off and dressing in her workout clothes, she felt more comfortable than she had been all day. Her wet hair was going to be a mess, but that couldn’t be helped. Using a bar of soap, Pam began washing her only pair of underwear in the sink.

When she went to hang them to dry in the closet, Jeremy was nowhere to be found in the tiny cell. Immediately wondering what kind of trouble he was up to, she put on her shoes. Before she could lace them up, Pam heard a noise from the open window.

“Psst. Hey Pam.”

Peering out the window, she saw Jeremy earnestly waving at her. “What are you doing outside?” she asked.

“It’s a surprise,” he said. “Can you come out here?”

“Sure.” Pam briefly wondered if she should put on the black skirt and white dress shirt. But she wasn’t planning to go anywhere near the church. As quietly as she could, she slipped out of their room, padded down the hallway, and found Jeremy outside. He grabbed her hand and led her in the direction of the woods beyond the grassy lawn. The evening had stretched well past dusk. Beyond the forested canopy lay the first hint of the expansive starfield high in the sky. It was a beautiful night.

A sound from the woods caught their attention. It sounded like cracking branches. “What was that?” Jeremy asked.

“Hopefully not vampires,” Pam said.

“You think so?” he said, pausing to scan the obscured forest.

“I was kidding. It was probably just a deer or something. What did you want to show me?”

“Over here.” They stopped near a large tree stump that the sisters had re-purposed into a natural seating area, lined with a creaky trellis that separated the lawn from the woods. Several hundred yards away, the convent’s small windowpanes glowed yellow. Telling her to wait, Jeremy disappeared behind a thicket of wild dogwood.

Pam took a seat on the tree stump. The all-encompassing calm was like a salve to her senses. She took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. It didn’t take long for her to grow attuned to the atmosphere of the woods. Vigorous vines of moonflower covered the trellis, their snowy white blossoms perfuming the air. In addition to the whirring songs of crickets, she could hear the gentle cracking of branches as Jeremy prowled the woods. A blur of light caught her eye. She thought she was imagining it until she saw another blink of light in the inky darkness.

Fireflies. Turning in wonder, Pam watched as the streaks of light darted every which way. They resembled tiny shooting stars that were close enough to touch.
“Jeremy,” she whispered, “where are you? Come back. You gotta see this.” To her left, the underbrush crackled and Jeremy stepped from behind a stubby pine tree. Pam gestured at the twinkling bursts of light. “Look. Fireflies.”

“Oh. I guess they found you,” he said.

Pam heard a note of dejection in his voice. “They’re beautiful,” she said. “Why are you disappointed?”

“Well, you know.” Jeremy sat down next to her on the tree stump. “I wanted to surprise you with them.”

“Surprise me?”

“Yeah. Want to see one up close?” He held up his carefully cupped hands. Leaning in, Pam peeked between his fingers and saw a firefly blink in rapid succession. It was though he had scooped up a handful of interstellar dust and was showing her a newborn star.

“Can you see it?” Jeremy asked.

“I can see it,” Pam confirmed. “It’s lovely.” Jeremy peered through one side of his cupped hands while Pam looked through the other side. Together they watched the firefly as it calmly blinked between Jeremy’s palms.

“I meant I wanted to be the one to show them to you,” he clarified. “They were everywhere at camp. When I first saw them, I knew you’d like them. We don’t have fireflies like this back home. I was really excited when I noticed them here at the convent.” He paused. “But then the fireflies came to you before I could show you myself.”

Pam’s heartbeat thumped in time with the blinking firefly in Jeremy’s hands. She was touched that, of all people, she was the one with whom he wanted to share this magic. She already knew the answer, but wanted to hear him say it. “Did you miss me?” she asked.

Jeremy suddenly got very shy. “Yeah,” he said, embarrassed. “I missed you a lot.”

Their faces were separated by his cupped hands. Gently moving them aside, Pam kissed the twelve year old boy on the lips. She had been pining so long for this moment. His mouth was exactly as she remembered. Their faces were inches apart when she slowly pulled Jeremy’s hands apart to free the firefly. It flew upward in a lazy spiral before rejoining its comrades in the stillness. She was still holding his wrists when Jeremy kissed her back. He was out of practice, but the inexperienced kiss was no less thrilling.

They started taking turns: Pam would kiss Jeremy and, after a pleasant pause, he would kiss her back. Sometime during this back and forth, Jeremy’s hand wandered underneath her zip hoodie. Though he was nowhere near her breasts, the mere suggestion of his hand on her ribcage made her nipples stiffen. His touch was soft, and slightly sweaty, on her skin.

Her own fingers had moved dangerously close along his inner thigh. “Do you want to go back to the room?” Pam whispered. Jeremy nodded. Holding hands, they began walking across the lawn that had grown damp with evening dew. The leaves on the trees were perfectly still. The singing crickets serenaded from every direction. The calm night was made calmer by the twinkling fireflies that created a dizzying illusion of hurtling through the cosmos.

They were still fifty yards away from the convent when Pam saw a shadowy figure standing next to the iron gates outside the courtyard. Or did she? It was so dark that she couldn’t be sure. Her eyes
strained against the murky shadows. By the time they got close enough to see, no one was there.

They reached their room. The stillness of the night had enveloped the convent, such that Pam felt like
she was disturbing the peace as she wrestled with the stubborn door to their room. When she finally
managed to open it, the door opposite the hallway opened too. It was Sister Mary Sue.

“Good night, Sister Mary Sue,” Pam said politely. She was worried that she had disturbed the nun,
but Sister Mary Sue seemed startled to see them.

“Oh! Pam. And Jeremy too,” Sister Mary Sue said. “I keep forgetting that I have neighbors now.
Yes, good night!” She had been ready to leave her cell, but abruptly re-entered and closed the door.

Jeremy sat on the bed, waiting for her. Her body tingling, Pam took a seat next to him. “I have
something to show you,” she said. Her shaking hands fumbled with the zipper of her hoodie. After
spending weeks in purgatory, she was about to return to heaven. She had waited so long for this.
Jeremy was back. And they were alone.

Except for the Virgin Mary gazing sternly at her. Pam had barely unzipped her hoodie when she
noticed the framed portrait on the wall behind Jeremy’s shoulder. She previously thought Mary wore
a serene expression, but there was now a distinct hint of judgement. Jeremy turned to see what she
was looking at. In this unexpected moment of clarity, Pam tried to think of reasons why they
shouldn’t play Call of Duty. She found them in abundance.

The door didn’t have a lock. The Virgin Mary was giving her the stinkeye. And in the distance, she
could hear the chorale strains of a nighttime hymn, an angelic sound that was, quite frankly, killing
the mood. Surely this was a higher power at work, warning her. A convent was, after all, the most
logical place for this sort of epiphany.

Pam inhaled slowly, held it, then exhaled in a measured tone. Her hands retreated from her zipper.
“Why don’t you brush your teeth?” she suggested. “I’ll go after you. Maybe we can turn off the
lights and try to see the fireflies from our window. Before we go to bed.”

“Okay,” Jeremy agreed. He too must have sensed the impropriety of the situation because he
shuffled to the bathroom without complaint. Pam collapsed backward onto the bed, her arms spread
wide in frustration. As she stared at the ceiling, she noticed the crucifix on the wall, perched several
feet above her head. What would happen if it somehow slipped from its nail and hit her right
between the eyes? It wouldn’t kill her. But it would definitely maim her.

It was going to be a long week.
Pam became a tad overconfident after a successful day at the convent.

Pam tried to sit straighter at the breakfast table. During mealtimes, the nuns sat with perfect posture and she felt inadequate with her layperson’s slouch. This was hopefully the only giveaway that she didn’t belong at the convent. Though her face was puffy from the early morning prayer wakeup and her legs prickly with stubble under her skirt, Pam felt she fit right in among the homely sisters.

She was attending breakfast alone today because Jeremy had refused to get out of bed. Given the choice between cranky-sleepy boy versus cranky-hungry boy, she decided the latter would be the least painful scenario. Knowing he would need a snack, Pam quietly hoarded food at the communal table. Nobody noticed when she helped herself to some extra bread and made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, which she wrapped in a napkin and discreetly slipped into the roomy pocket of her black skirt. An apple and banana made their way to her other pocket.

When she left the refectory, Pam was surprised to find Mother Agnes waiting. “Pamela, may I have a word with you?” Mother Agnes gestured her into an alcove in the hallway. “I’m sorry to say I received a complaint,” she began. Pam guiltily touched the food in her bulging pockets.

Mother Agnes continued, “I was told you left your cell last night, wearing clothing proscribed by the convent rules. Is this true?”

Already pulling the fruit from her pocket, Pam hastily shoved it back. “Oh. Yes. I’m sorry. Jeremy wanted to show me something outside and I forgot to get dressed in the… other clothes.”

“Please be respectful of our dress code,” Mother Agnes said. “If this sort of behavior continues, I will have to ask you to leave. I would be very sorry to do so. But visitors must respect our rules.”

“It won’t happen again,” Pam promised. “I’m so sorry.”

“Forgiveness and redemption are the cornerstones of our faith,” Mother Agnes said. “I know you’ll do better next time. After all, this is only your second day. How are things going?”

“Very nicely,” Pam answered. “I feel like I’m really getting the hang of the convent.”

“I noticed Jeremy didn’t come to breakfast,” Mother Agnes observed.

“He’s never hungry in the morning,” Pam said, smoothing her bulging pockets. “He makes up for it at lunch though.”

“The sisters enjoyed having him during evening prayers yesterday. It’s wonderful to see a young person getting involved.” Mother Agnes looked at her thoughtfully. “You should participate too, Pamela. Would you like to do a reading for tonight’s evening prayer?”

“A reading?” Pam was taken aback. Public speaking gave her the willies. Just like clowns. Or chest hair. Or, god forbid, clowns with chest hair.
“We always like to hear from new voices,” Mother Agnes told her.

“Oh, okay,” Pam said, agreeing despite her reservations. “I guess I can do a reading.”

“I look forward to it.” Mother Agnes nodded solemnly before shuffling away.

First Pam got in trouble for not wearing the convent clothes. Now she had to do a reading. Perhaps this was Mother Agnes’s way of punishing her. She wondered who had complained. The only person that saw her last night was Sister Mary Sue. She couldn’t help feeling betrayed. She thought Sister Mary Sue liked her.

Pam returned to their room. The sticky door was terribly creaky, yet Jeremy slept through the din. Emptying her pockets, she placed the food on the desk, then headed for the bathroom. Pam had just sat down when she heard Jeremy yawning sleepily, clear as day, despite the closed bathroom door. She peeked in on him. He appeared sound asleep. She self-consciously sat down again, but couldn’t go. Perhaps she would have felt better if there had been a window or fan in the tiny bathroom, but there was neither. Feeling silly, Pam crept from the cell to pay a visit to the women’s restroom across from the community room.

When she returned, Jeremy stirred at the sound of the sticky door. “Oh no,” he mumbled through a mouthful of pillow. “Did I miss breakfast?”

“You did. But luckily you have me.” Pam handed him the food from the desk.

“Ooh, thanks!” Jeremy gulped down his peanut butter and jelly sandwich in four bites, then started on the banana. “Is there anything to drink? I’m thirsty.”

“I couldn’t smuggle any drinks out. You could have tap water from the sink though.”

“The water here tastes funny,” he said. “I wish I had a glass of milk. Do you think they would give us some if we asked?”

“I don’t know. They’re kind of strict around here.”

“But I need it. I’m a growing boy.” He said it so earnestly that Pam didn’t feel like she had a choice. After he got dressed, they went to the refectory. It was empty except for a sister cleaning the tables.

Pam cleared the throat. “Excuse me. Do you think we could have a glass of milk? My… um, Jeremy, here, missed breakfast.”

The sister nodded sympathetically. “Of course. I’ll be right back.” She entered the kitchen through a set of swinging double doors. When she returned, however, she was empty-handed and wearing a sheepish expression. Sister Catherine followed from behind the double doors.

“I’m sorry,” Sister Catherine said. “But breakfast is over.”

“Can we just have a glass of milk?” Pam asked. “Jeremy missed breakfast.”

“Breakfast is from 7:30 to 8 am,” Sister Catherine answered. “Rules are rules, I’m afraid.”

“But… he’s a growing boy,” Pam said. The other nun, she noticed, was ashamedly looking elsewhere.

“He’ll have to wait until lunchtime,” Sister Catherine said. “If you’ll pardon us, we have chores to finish.” She gestured at the other nun to finish cleaning the tables.
Pam spluttered in disbelief at Sister Catherine’s indifference. They had either gotten on her bad side after yesterday’s dodgeball game or she was a heartless bitch. Pam considered marching into the kitchen herself and chugging as much milk as she could find. Then she had a better idea.

“Jeremy and I could help with chores,” Pam said. “What would you like us to do?” Sister Catherine was taken aback by the offer. The nun cleaning the tables looked even more embarrassed now.

Sister Catherine consulted a clipboard. “You could weed the vegetable garden. It’s something we’ve been neglecting. It’s just off the courtyard in the back.”

“We’re on it,” Pam promised. “Come on, Jeremy.” Her enthusiasm lasted until she saw the size of the garden. Pam had been expecting something like Kate’s backyard garden bed back home, but this patch of earth was easily four times that size. A lush wall of green beans climbed a battered lattice support, crisp lettuce grew profusely in tidy rows, and the tomato plants were taller than Jeremy.

“Well, it shouldn’t take too long with the two of us,” Pam said, rolling up her sleeves. Was this breaking the nuns’ dress code? She hoped not. For being so early in the morning, the mid-summer sun was beating down heavily.

“Are you kidding?” Jeremy said. “This thing is the size of a football field.”

“It is not the size of a football field.” Pam glanced around. “It’s more like a baseball infield.”

“Whatever. This will take forever.”

“It will with that attitude.” After directing him to the cucumbers, Pam started weeding the green beans. Sister Catherine would see the immaculately weeded garden and would instantly realize the error of her ways. She would start being so nice that the other nuns would thank Pam for guiding Sister Catherine to the true path of Jesus Christ the Savior. Pam was making good progress, on both the weeding and her heroic fantasy, when Jeremy wandered over from the cucumber patch.

“Hey, Pam. Which one do you like better?” Jeremy held up a modest cucumber in one hand and an enormous zucchini in the other.

“Yum. Cucumber is my favorite,” she told him. Having finished the green beans, she moved onto the herbs, starting with the fragrant rosemary.

“Are you sure you don’t like zucchini?” Jeremy asked.

“It’s okay. But I like cucumber better.”

“But Pam, what about this zucchini?” Jeremy couldn’t keep a straight face when she finally glanced at him. He was holding the giant vegetable at a strategic spot in front of his shorts. “What do you think?” he asked.

Pam pushed a strand of hair from her face with a dusty hand. “Will you quit clowning around? We’re going to be out here all day if you don’t help.” She stole one last look at the zucchini in his hand. “And I still like cucumber best,” she said firmly.

Once she finished with the herbs, Pam continued on to the carrots. The sun was even hotter now, causing her to sweat profusely in her high collared shirt. She pictured Sister Catherine’s guilt if both she and Jeremy keeled over from dehydration, their bodies lifeless in the verdant garden. “All you had to do was give them a glass of milk!” the other nuns would wail as Sister Catherine hung her head in shame.
Pam was on radish duty when Sister Joan appeared carrying two glasses of lemonade. The nun appeared to have recovered nicely from yesterday’s bloody nose. “It’s so hot out that I thought you might need some refreshment,” she said.

Pam accepted a glass. “Thank you,” she said, wiping her sweaty brow with her forearm. She drank thirstily.

“I have one for Jeremy too,” Sister Joan ventured. She looked around the garden. “Is he out here?”

“He sure as hell better be,” Pam muttered without thinking. Sister Joan reacted to her epithet by pretending to study the green beans.

They found Jeremy next to the potatoes, lying flat on his back and scratching his belly. He clenched a long stem of grass between his teeth while watching the clouds race across the crystal blue skies. Not realizing Sister Joan was there, Jeremy pointed at the sky. “Hey Pam! Come look. There’s a cloud that looks exactly like… like a baby alligator.” He paused to squint. “No wait. It’s a duck-billed platypus. Wow.”

Pam rolled her eyes. Sister Joan cleared her throat and said, “I brought some lemonade. Would you like some?”

Startled, Jeremy sat up. “Oh, hi. I was just taking a break. Sure, I’ll have lemonade.” He glanced worrily at Sister Joan’s face before accepting the glass. “Sorry again about yesterday. I, um, hope you were able to get all the blood out of your clothes.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Jeremy,” Sister Joan said. “I know it was an accident. And yes, I was able to get the blood out.”

Jeremy crunched on an ice cube. “Whew. It’s super hard to get blood out of clothes. This one time, my friend Ashton and I were playing with a nail gun when…”

“Not now, Jeremy,” Pam interrupted. Smiling politely at Sister Joan, she said, “This lemonade is really hitting the spot.”

“I thought you might need it. It’s a hot day to be doing such messy work,” Sister Joan replied. She looked Jeremy up and down. “Goodness. Look at how dirty your legs are getting.” Sister Joan knelt to brush some dirt and debris from his knees. Pam had no idea why she was fussing over him. First of all, it made more sense for Pam to clean him up after they finished weeding. Secondly, Jeremy had barely broken into a sweat, unlike Pam who sported unsightly stains in front and back of her shirt.

“Is it all right if I pick things from the garden?” Jeremy asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Sister Joan said. “Enjoy your lemonade! Can you bring the glasses back to the kitchen when you’re done?”

“We will,” Pam said. “Thanks again!” She elbowed Jeremy.

“Thank you!” he gurgled through a mouthful of lemonade. Sister Joan left, leaving Jeremy to eye Pam’s glass of lemonade. “Can I have some of yours?” he asked. His own drink was nothing but ice cubes.

“No way. This is mine and I’m working way harder than you.”

“But I didn’t get anything to drink with my breakfast, remember?”
“You should have woken up earlier,” Pam countered. She took a swig of lemonade. “You don’t want this anyway. It’s mostly backwash.”

“I don’t care,” Jeremy said. He handed her his glass. “Here. Let’s trade.”

Pam reluctantly turned over her lemonade. “What am I supposed to do with this?” she asked, rattling the ice cubes in his glass.

Jeremy was already wandering back to the cucumber patch. “An ice cube is water,” he called over his shoulder. “Just suck on it until it melts.”

“Believe me, I’d love to,” Pam muttered when he was out of earshot. He had a point though. The cooling and hydrating ice cubes provided the perfect boost to continue weeding.

It was close to 11 o’clock when they finished. Pam had saved the tomato plants for last and triumphantly emerged smelling of their fragrant leaves. She hoped they would mask the fact that she wasn’t wearing deodorant. She had been getting by with Jeremy’s toiletries but there was no deodorant for her to borrow since he didn’t even need it yet. Pam wondered if showering three times a day would violate the vow of poverty. Hot and humid air had moved in while they scrabbled in the garden, leaving them both uncomfortably sticky. While Pam was covered in her fair share of dusty earth, Jeremy was inexplicably covered in twice as much dirt, no matter that she had done the majority of the weeding while he handled a modest patch of garden.

“What’s that?” Pam asked.

“Garlic,” he said.

“And why?”

“Vampires.”

“Oh. Smart.” As far as boyish diversions, Pam decided this one was relatively harmless.

They passed the barn construction on the way back to the convent. The work area was abuzz with high schoolers, some busily laboring while others aimlessly milled about. Two adults, presumably the shop teachers, patiently issued directions to the half-listening teenagers. Nonetheless, the partially completed barn looked promising with solid two by fours framing its walls and roof.

Pam was admiring the work-in-progress, but Jeremy had his mind on others things. She caught him checking out the high school girls in their cutoff jeans and tank tops. Pam, meanwhile, was distressingly being ignored by the teenage boys. She wasn’t sure if it was because she was a sweaty mess or because she was wearing frumpy nuns’ clothing.

“I was once like you…” Pam thought as she enviously watched a teenage girl in shorts and t-shirt chatting up her friendly male counterpart. Wiping her sweaty brow, Pam resolved to get cleaned up even if it meant breaking the vow of poverty.

In the refectory, they bumped into Sister Mary Sue after dropping off their empty lemonade glasses. “What happened to you two?” she asked, noticing their sweaty faces and dusty clothes.

“We weeded the garden,” Jeremy said.
“How nice,” Sister Mary Sue said. “I overheard Sister Kay asking if anyone could help with cleaning manure from the cow barn. Maybe you two could help out? I’ll find an extra rubber apron and goggles for you. They’ll come in handy when the time comes for chicken slaughtering.”

Sister Mary Sue paused to gauge their feeble expressions. Pam tried to transform her grimace into a polite smile, but Jeremy was openly horrified. Sister Mary Sue laughed and said, “I’m sorry. I really need to stop doing that to you.”

“Oh,” Pam said, relieved. “You were just kidding? Ha.” Sister Mary Sue had a tendency to gaze intently when speaking. It made Pam feel as though she were confiding, not joking.

“Don’t worry, we don’t even have cows,” Sister Mary Sue said. She noticed the leafy fronds in Jeremy’s hand. “I see you harvested some garlic.”

Beaming, Jeremy opened his mouth to explain. Pam cut him off before he could get started. “Jeremy is a huge fan of fresh garlic,” she told Sister Mary Sue.

“I’m glad he got a reward for his hard work,” Sister Mary Sue answered. “Although I may have to say a prayer to Saint Vita for you.” Noticing their blank expressions, she added, “She’s the patron saint of cleanliness.”

“What’s a patron saint?” Jeremy asked.

“Praying to a patron saint is like asking a friend to pray for you,” she explained. “Each patron saint has his or her own specialty. For example, Saint Anthony is the patron saint of lost things. You would pray to him if you lost something. Or Saint Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of animals.”

Jeremy was intrigued. “So there’s a patron saint for everything? Is there one for protection?”

“Of course. Saint Christopher. Why do you ask?”

“Vam-“ Jeremy began.

Pam interrupted again. “Why don’t you get cleaned up? The room is that way. I’ll be there in a minute.” Once he was gone, Pam said to Sister Mary Sue, “Mother Agnes talked to me after breakfast. I’m sorry about wearing my workout clothes when I left our cell last night. I swear it won’t happen again.”

“Workout clothes?” Sister Mary Sue repeated. “What are you talking about?”

“I went outside with Jeremy last night,” Pam reminded her, “and I was wearing my regular clothes. Instead of this.” Pam gestured to her soiled clothing. “Mother Agnes said someone complained. It wasn’t you?”

Sister Mary Sue shook her head. “I didn’t say anything to Mother Agnes. To be honest, I don’t even remember noticing your clothes last night.”

Surprised to hear this, Pam said, “Oh. Never mind, I guess.” An awkward silence followed. Groping for something to say, Pam continued, “I’ve been meaning to ask you. Do you know if there’s a store nearby? I really need to buy some, er, personal care items.”

Sister Mary Sue slapped her forehead. “I completely forgot! We have a communal supply closet for that sort of thing.” Pam followed her to the community room where Sister Mary Sue slid open a closet door next to the board games. On the shelves, an array of neatly organized toiletries greeted Pam’s surprised eyes. There was everything from toothbrushes to foot creams.
“We get a lot of donations,” explained Sister Mary Sue. “Please take whatever you need.”

Scanning the shelves, Pam chose a toothbrush, floss, deodorant, a disposable razor, and some shaving cream. Jeremy still had soap and shampoo from camp, so she skipped those items. Unable to find a trustworthy moisturizer, Pam decided to tough it out until they returned home. Feminine hygiene products were discreetly stored on the bottom shelf, but she thankfully had no need for them at the moment.

“This is the most well-stocked supply cabinet I’ve ever seen,” Pam said.

Sister Mary Sue regarded her with a faint smile. “Just because we’re nuns doesn’t mean we forego all grooming habits,” she said. “Anything else you need?”

Pam felt guilty for raiding their supplies. “You wouldn’t happen to have a hair dryer, would you?”

Sister Mary Sue rummaged in a box. “Aha! Found one. I also see hair brushes. Tweezers. Nail clippers. Sunscreen.” She uncapped a bottle, sniffed it, then promptly recoiled. “Oof. Coppertone. It’s pungent.”

Pam hoped Sister Mary Sue didn’t notice her blushing. Nail clippers and Coppertone? The Lord was mocking her. “I, um, don’t need any of those things,” Pam said.

Sister Mary Sue handed her the nail clippers anyway. “Take these in case you change your mind,” she said. “Do you suppose Jeremy is interested in assisting Mother Agnes at midday prayer? If he does, he’ll have to clean his hands. It looked like half the garden’s dirt was crammed under his nails.”

“I guess you’re right,” Pam agreed. “How about an emery board too?”

Sister Mary Sue sighed in mock exasperation. “This is convent, Pam. Not a salon.” Pam was already starting to apologize when the nun patted her shoulder. “I wish I knew why it’s so fun to make you squirm,” Sister Mary Sue said, adding emery boards to the pile.

“Maybe because you’re a total…” Pam trailed off, unable to think of a biting (but not too biting) retort.

“Listen to you! Refraining from calling a holy woman names. That’s what I call progress.” Sister Mary Sue had to help her carry everything back to the room since Pam’s hands were full. “Mother Agnes told me you’d be doing a reading for evening prayer,” Sister Mary Sue remarked as they returned to the dormitory area.

“Yeah,” Pam grumbled. “I hope you enjoy watching a nervous and stuttering woman with sweaty armpit stains on her shirt.”

“Not to worry. This is extra strength deodorant,” Sister Mary Sue said, reading the label.

“For being a chosen emissary of the Lord, you are not helping.”

“You’ll do great,” Sister Mary Sue assured. “Have you already chosen your reading?”

“Chosen?” Pam yelped. She very nearly dropped her armful of toiletries. “I’m supposed to choose what to read? She didn’t tell me that. What do I do?”

“Just pick something from the Bible,” Sister Mary Sue advised. “Relax. It’ll be the easiest twenty minutes of your life.”
“Twenty minutes!” This latest tidbit sent Pam into a panicked tailspin. “I have to read to a crowd for twenty minutes?” She was considering which illness to fake when she noticed Sister Mary Sue hiding a grin.

“I’m kidding,” Sister Mary Sue said. “Pick something that’s not too short and not too long. A one minute reading is fine.”

Pam glared at Sister Mary Sue. “I thought nuns were supposed to be compassionate and empathetic.”

Sister Mary Sue smiled innocently. “We are. We also enjoy hazing the newcomers.”

They reached the room Pam shared with Jeremy. Unable to work the doorknob, Pam was reducing to knocking on the door with her forehead while Sister Mary Sue watched in amusement. “Jeremy. It’s me,” she called.

The door cracked open an inch. It stuck there a moment before Jeremy was able to open it completely. “Trick or treat,” Pam said, dumping her armful of toiletries on the bed. Sister Mary Sue, however, remained in the hallway.

“Come on in,” Pam invited.

Standing a good distance from the threshold, Sister Mary Sue shifted her weight uncomfortably. “I can’t,” she said.

Puzzled, Pam returned to the hallway where Sister Mary Sue handed her the toiletries. “Cloister rules,” Sister Mary Sue said.

“I’m sorry, what?” Pam asked.

“Did we forget to cover this on your first day? These are cloistered cells. No one is allowed into another person’s room.” Seeing Pam’s confusion, she continued, “It’s a religious thing. A religious solitary thing.”

“But I’m not even a real nun,” Pam pointed out.

Sister Mary Sue shrugged. “Yet we still ask you to wear our clothes. The same applies for your cell. It would be disrespectful of me to enter. Any other nun here would tell you the same. She would never break the privacy of your cell.”

“Well, that’s… very good to know,” Pam said. “Thanks again for showing me the supply closet.”

“Any time.” Sister Mary Sue retreated to her own cell across the hall.

Back in the room, Jeremy sifted through the things on the bed. “What is all this?”

“Girl stuff,” Pam answered with a sigh of relief.

Jeremy held up the nail clippers. “Do you think you could trim my nails for me?”

Pam hesitated. This was Sister Mary Sue’s fault. She never would have taken the nail grooming supplies if the nun hadn’t insisted. Or perhaps this was, once again, a higher power at work. But what exactly was it trying to tell her?

“All right,” she agreed. “But I’m only doing it because your nails look horrific.”

“Yeah, they’re even bugging me.” The beds were so close together in the small room that Pam could
sit on her bed, Jeremy could sit on his across from her, and he could still easily place his hand on her knee. She began trimming his nails in a businesslike manner. Though they were both sticky from gardening, Pam couldn’t help thinking of all the fun places his hands could roam.

Pushing the thought from her mind, she trimmed and filed his nails in record time. “All done!” she announced, kissing his hand. As though congratulating her, the sound of church bells rung out. “That’s the reminder for midday prayer. Sister Mary Sue asked if you want to do the incense thing again. Do you?”

“Ooh, the thing with the crazy smoke? That was fun,” Jeremy said. “Sure, I’ll come along.” He went to the sink and began washing his face. Since the clock was ticking, Pam kicked him out because she sorely needed a rinse-off in the shower. She reluctantly stepped out after sixty seconds, though she could have spent all afternoon in there.

They left the cell in proper attire, with Jeremy in a brown tunic and Pam in a fresh black and white number. She slipped into a pew in back while Jeremy followed Mother Agnes to the front of the church. An introductory hymn followed. Pam dutifully went through the motions of standing, kneeling, and mouthing along with the prayers she didn’t know.

Sister Mary Sue rose from her pew and strode to the lectern. In a clear voice, she said, “Today’s prayer is a reminder of our sacred vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to God. Lord: teach us to be rich in spirit and poor in material attachment. Strengthen our body so it may remain in a state of purity and protect our soul in its daily struggles. Let us live Your will, Lord, in our daily contemplation as we endure moments humble, reverent, and loving. Amen.”

“Amen,” intoned the pews of sisters.

“Amen,” Pam whispered. State of purity? The mere phrase made her anxious. She was unnerved not only from the prayer’s content, but also by Sister Mary Sue’s effortless delivery. Pam wasn’t sure she could be that calm, cool, and collected in front of a crowd.

Lunch consisted of a chilled pea soup and dainty cucumber sandwiches. Afterward, Pam headed straight back to the cell. Jeremy trotted along to keep up. “Why are you walking so fast?” he asked. “Are we about to do something really fun?”

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” Pam said, cracking open a Bible, “but it’s just me and the holy book from here on out. I’m doing a reading for evening prayer. I need to find something good to knock the socks off these nuns.”

“Said no one ever,” remarked Jeremy.

“I’m a little stressed out,” said Pam. “Bible now, hijinks later. Okay?”

“Said no one ever,” he repeated.

“Please, Jeremy. I need to concentrate.” Staring at the table of contents, Pam wondered what she had done to deserve this.

“I want to help,” Jeremy said. He perched over her shoulder while she hurriedly paged through the thick book. “Wait, go back. I think I saw something good.”

“This isn’t working,” Pam told him. “I appreciate your help. But you need to find your own Bible.” Leaving the room, he went off to search for one. Pam took advantage of his absence by changing into her workout clothes. The bright sunshine in the windows had rendered the room uncomfortably warm.
Jeremy returned with a stack of books. “I found a Bible in the community room,” he told her. “A nun said I could borrow other books too as long as I returned them.” Noticing Pam in her sports bra and leggings, he got comfortable by removing his shirt. That was how they spent the rest of the afternoon: him on one bed and Pam on the other, both studiously glued to the Bible. She caught herself admiring the shirtless boy from time to time, but otherwise the vow of chastity remained fully intact.

“I’ve got a good one,” Jeremy announced. “Psalm 58:10. The righteous will rejoice when they are avenged, when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked.”

“That’s… not quite what I’m looking for, Jeremy.”

“Okay, how about Deuteronomy 32:35. It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them. Doesn’t that sound cool?”

“That would be perfect if I were reading to a crowd of my worst enemies,” Pam said. “I’m not looking for revenge on anyone. Well, except maybe Sister Catherine.” She clapped her Bible shut. All this spiritual browsing was giving her a terrible headache. She wondered how the sisters would react if she led them in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Jeremy rolled onto his back and began drumming on his tummy. “Well… why don’t you just flip open the Bible and point to a random sentence?”

Pam was too distracted by his bare torso to answer immediately. “Might as well,” she decided. “I’m having zero luck anyway.” Closing her eyes, she blindly opened the Bible and marked a spot with her finger.

“Mark 12:19,” Pam said. “Master, Moses wrote unto us, if a man’s brother die, and leave his wife behind him, and leave no children, that his brother should take his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother.”

“Raise up seed,” Jeremy repeated. “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know,” Pam lied. “Something to do with farming, probably. Let me try again.” She closed her eyes once more, flipped to a random page, and began reading. “This one isn’t too bad.”

“What is it?”

Pam marked the page with a piece of paper, then closed the Bible. “You’ll have to wait for my reading. I’m going to take a shower before we go to evening prayers and dinner.” Although it felt good to finally clean up, the butterflies in her stomach had transformed into a swarm of angry bees. Oh well. If she was going to crash and burn, at least she would do it with freshly shaved legs.

“Are you nervous?” Jeremy asked as they headed for the church.

“A little bit,” Pam admitted. She double checked to make sure her shirt was tucked in and her skirt was clean.

“I had to give a book report in front of the whole class in fourth grade,” he said. “It was so awful that I had an upset stomach afterward. Like really upset. You know, the kind where you feel all sloshy inside, which makes total sense since it’s diarr-“

“I get it,” Pam interrupted.

They arrived at the church five minutes early, sitting in the first pew which had a clear view of the
lectern. Pam had never sat this close to the front. She peered uneasily at the waiting microphone, which might as well have been a loaded gun.

When the time finally came, Mother Agnes glanced in her direction. Pam walked to the lectern without tripping. So far, so good. She nervously adjusted the microphone, causing it to thump and crackle over the loudspeakers.

“Today’s reading is from 1 Corinthians, chapter 4,” she said, cringing at the sound of her voice. Despite the copious deodorant she had applied, she could feel an unpleasant warmth emanating from her underarms. Pam began reading with only a slight waver betraying her outward show of confidence.

This, then, is how you ought to regard us: servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

She somehow got through the entire reading without stumbling over her words. There was a brief moment of panic at the end when everyone expectantly stared at her. Pam had already completed the reading, so she wasn’t sure what they wanted until she saw Sister Mary Sue mouthing words at her from the second row of pews.

“This is the Word of the Lord,” Pam said into the microphone.

“Praise be to God,” the assembled nuns replied.

The remainder of prayer time passed in a blur. As Pam was leaving the church, she found Mother Agnes waiting for her. “Pamela, that was a wonderful reading you chose,” she said. “It was a beautiful reminder that we are humble servants of the Lord. No more, no less.”

“Thank you,” Pam said, relieved to hear such praise. There was even a change in demeanor of the other sisters. Instead of suspicious or judgmental glances, they now offered her small but approving smiles as they passed her on their way to the refectory.

“I enjoyed your reading,” said a nun whose name she had not learned.

“Me too,” said another. “It was very inspiring.”

Other passing sisters offered kind remarks as well. Excluded from this newfound camaraderie was Sister Catherine who ambled past as though Pam were invisible. Jeremy and Sister Mary Sue were the last ones in the long procession.

“That was pretty good,” Jeremy said, “but I still like the vengeance stuff better.”

“I’ll keep those in mind for next time,” Pam said. Sister Mary Sue said nothing, instead offering Pam a high-five once everyone’s back was turned. The crisp sound of their slapping hands echoed in the empty church.

Still experiencing a reader’s high, Pam wasn’t hungry at dinner. A salad was more than enough, though she did partake in dessert: fresh apricots at peak season freshness. There were so many that they ended up taking a small bowl of the fruit back to the room.
“Do you want to shower first or should I?” Pam asked, chewing an apricot and tossing the pit out the window.

“You already showered,” Jeremy reminded.

She peeked at the armpits of her white shirt which, as Pam expected, had betrayed her with telltale damp stains the size of quarters. “I just need a quickie to freshen up,” she said. “Why don’t you go first?”

“Can we go look for fireflies afterward?” Jeremy asked, taking off his shirt.

“Totally.” Pam said. He didn’t catch her peeking when he strolled into the bathroom in his underwear. Feeling guilty, Pam glanced at the portrait of Mary on the wall. Her beatific expression squarely placed the ‘Virgin’ in Virgin Mary. It reminded her of the earnest praise of her fellow nuns. Pam resolved to stay strong.

Ten minutes later, Jeremy emerged with a towel wrapped around his midsection. Pam took his place in the bathroom where she deliberately showered in cool water. The tingling pinpricks on her skin slightly alleviated her impure desires, but they also caused her nipples to stiffen. The cold shower was a 50/50 split in terms of effectiveness.

After toweling off, Pam realized she didn’t have any fresh clothes to change into. She cracked open the bedroom door. “Jeremy? Can you hand me my workout clothes?”

No response. Did he already head outside in search of fireflies? Hanging her towel on the rack, Pam opened the door the rest of the way and found herself face to face with a naked Jeremy.

“Oh! I didn’t hear you,” he said, blushing. Jeremy grabbed his towel to cover himself.

Fumbling with her own bath towel, Pam did the same. “Why didn’t you answer? I thought you were outside.”

“I did answer. I said, ‘Just a sec.’ Didn’t you hear?”

“Nope.” Pam opened the closet. Her workout clothes, despite yesterday’s hand-washing, were wrinkled and not-so-fresh smelling. Donning the nun’s uniform was not an attractive option either. Once they had figured out her size, Sister Mary Sue had dropped off several sets of clothing but Pam was dismayed to find they were all the same white shirt and same black skirt.

Jeremy watched as she sat down on the bed. “Are you just going to wear your towel?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, helping herself to another apricot. “It’s way too hot in here.” The last rays of the setting sun streamed through the window, lending an unearthly orange glow to the room. Copying her, Jeremy took a seat on the other bed. With the towel wrapped securely around his waist, the young boy began leafing through one of the books he borrowed from the community room.

For the first time all day, Pam was able to relax. There was much to be thankful for. She was finally feeling normal with clean hair and freshly shaved legs. Not only had she perfectly executed her reading, but the nuns were even complimentary of her choice. Most importantly, the vow of chastity remained as well-respected as a priest at a Boy Scout meeting.

Another day, another notch in her belt. Certainly there had been moments of temptation, like when she clipped Jeremy’s fingernails. Or just now, when they saw each other naked. She saw the way Jeremy’s eyes drank her up like a boy lost in the desert. From her quick peek, she had been able to discern that he was still pink and hairless in all the usual spots. Pam congratulated herself for
Feeling smug, she reclined on the bed but was suddenly blinded by a glint of light. Blinking, she traced the source to the crucifix on the wall. Its silver metallic finish reflected the evening sun, scattering pricks of light across the room. Pam shifted her head to avoid the blinding rays.

Her thoughts returned to Jeremy’s lithe body. The one discrepancy had been his scrotum. Pam could have sworn his boys looked bigger. She suddenly remembered the doctor’s words at Jeremy’s pre-camp physical: *Testicle enlargement was one of the first signs of puberty.* That was intriguing enough though her next thought rattled her to the core: what if Jeremy was already productive?

Jeremy lay on the other bed, reading his book and oblivious to her thoughts. With his back to the window, the waning sunlight dramatically lit him with a halo effect. With his skinny chest and towel wrapped around his waist, he looked like a boy waiting his turn to pose for a Greek sculptor.

“What are you reading over there?” Pam asked.

He held up the book to show her the cover: *National Parks Guidebook, 1971 edition.* “This is a really neat book,” he said. “The drawings are amazing. Want to see?” Carefully getting up, he secured his towel with one hand and switched to her bed.

“Yellowstone National Park,” Pam read aloud. The illustration depicted a herd of serenely grazing bison while Old Faithful erupted in the background.

“It’s amazing that a geyser could shoot like that,” Jeremy noted. “Look how high it gets.”

The sexual tension was getting so bad that Pam essentially had two choices: spontaneously combust or make Jesus cry. “Vow of chastity,” she mentally recited, inching away from Jeremy on the bed. Unfortunately, she moved into a spot where the glinting sun reflected from the crucifix shone directly into her eyes. Hesitating only slightly, Pam removed the crucifix from the wall. They could always put it back up later. While she was at it, she also took down the portrait of the Virgin Mary and stashed both items on a closet shelf.

Engrossed in his book, Jeremy did not notice her actions. “It says Old Faithful got its name because the geyser erupts on a highly predictable timeline,” he reported. “Depending on the length of the last eruption, Old Faithful will shoot again in 65 or 95 minutes.”

“Amazing,” Pam said. On the downside, they were stuck in a convent. On the upside, the concept of cloistered cells did not exist back home. And here she was with the most adorable twelve year old boy ever, both of them wearing nothing but damp towels. Now that the religious imagery was removed, Pam no longer felt timid. Throwing caution to the wind, she sat down next to Jeremy and slyly pinned the corner of his towel between two fingers.

“Say Jeremy?” she began. “Could you be a sweetie and get me a glass of water from the bathroom?” If there was indeed a higher power at work, then surely it would intervene.

“Um, sure,” he said, setting aside his book. When he stood up, his towel remained pinned in place thanks to Pam’s fingers on the cotton edge. He was already three steps toward the bathroom before he stopped, stark naked.

“Whoops,” he said, flushing.

“Let me help you with that,” Pam said, snatching his towel before he could reach it. She shook out his towel before reaching behind him to wrap it around his waist. Jeremy obediently stood facing her with his arms raised. Leaning closer, Pam smelled the faint scent of soap on his skin.
Screw it, she thought.

Pam dropped the towel, then dropped any remaining pretense by letting her fingers caress the little penis suspended between his legs. “Um, Pam? What are you doing?” Jeremy asked.

“Getting re-acquainted with an old friend,” she said, not looking up. “You don’t mind, do you?” She felt him growing hard. “I didn’t think so.”

“Are you sure we should be doing this?”

“Nope. We probably shouldn’t.” Pam cupped his sack in her palm. Had his boys grown bigger? She wasn’t sure. Pam experimentally bobbed her hand, like a customer sizing up apricots at the farmer’s market. They felt somewhat bigger. Maybe. Wondering how she could tell for sure, Pam suddenly had an idea.

“I don’t feel like it,” Jeremy said.

“What are you talking about? I didn’t say anything.”

“I’m not going to tower you,” he informed her.

“I wasn’t going to ask you to tower me.”

“Yes, you were. I could tell. You always get that look on your face.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Pam told him. She paused. “Now that you mention it though… Maybe you should tower me.”

“Right now?”

Cupping his scrotum in her palm, Pam used her other hand to pet his erection. Since he was standing and she was sitting on the bed, she was able to look right into his eyes while touching him. “Please, please, please?” she asked. “It’ll make me so happy. Don’t you want to make me happy?”

“Fine, I’ll do it,” he said, sighing.

Despite the green light, Pam couldn’t stop touching the young boy. She explored every inch of him: the soft parts, the hard parts, and everything in between. By the time she was finished, Pam could have skipped the trip to the bathroom and hung the damp bath towel on Jeremy’s erection.

He was ready. So was she. Still wearing her towel, Pam lay down on the bed and waited with bated breath as Jeremy climbed into place atop her. Kneeling on the bed, he hesitated only for a moment before swinging his leg over so that he was straddling her face. This motion caused his boy parts to momentarily wobble like a bowl of Jell-o, much to Pam’s delight.

Another treat was Jeremy’s dangling scrotum. It rested gently on her chin when she pulled him close, something that had never happened before. “Looks like someone did some growing at camp,” she noted.

“What do you mean?” His erect penis, pointing skyward directly in front of her face, forced Jeremy to lean to one side so he could see her when he spoke.

“Look, they’re practically covering my mouth,” Pam told him. His skin felt impossibly soft against her lips. “Ah con barry tawk, thee?”

“What?”
Pam turned her head to avoid his suspended bits. “I can barely talk, see?”

“Oh.” Jeremy bent over for a closer look. “They look the same to me.”

Pam couldn’t keep from kissing his boyish orbs. “Not to me. You’re definitely, um, dangling more than you used to.”

“Well, yeah. That’s just because it’s hot out.”

“What do you mean?” She began nuzzling him with her nose.

“I always, you know… dangle more. When it’s hot out.”

Pam was confused. “That’s a thing? You mean it happens to everyone?”

“It’s a thing for me. I don’t know about everyone though.”

“Oh.” Pam felt a little silly now. She had always considered herself well-versed in mechanics of male genitalia. Had they been closer to home, she could have asked Suzy for confirmation. As it was, Pam was stuck in a place where the women could freely extemporize about the annunciation but would excommunicate anyone who mentioned ejaculation.

“Well, I still think your boys are a tiny bit bigger,” Pam said. She fondly admired the erection that was inches from her face. “Can I give you a little kiss?”

“Closed mouth or open mouth?” Jeremy asked.

“Closed. I swear.” Not hearing any objections, Pam planted a trembling kiss on the underside of his shaft. He smelt the same. But did he taste the same? She kissed him again, a slightly wetter kiss this time. He did not protest so she continued, her lips exploring as they inched from the base of the young boy’s penis all the way to his bulbous tip, at which point Pam could not resist licking that familiar purple and pink head. Her kitten throbbed at the pure, unadulterated taste of a boy.

“You should try putting it in my mouth,” Pam suggested.

Jeremy made a face. “It tickles too much. You know that.”

“Pretty please?”

“Okay, okay,” he grumbled, sighing again. “But I’m going to stop the second it gets ticklish.”

In her heart of hearts, Pam believed he would enjoy oral sex if he just gave it a chance. Until Jeremy came along, Pam had always been a willing, though not exactly enthusiastic, giver of blowjobs. Now, though, it had become one of her greatest personal goals: getting the twelve year old boy to orgasm in her mouth, preferably without him first eating a marijuana-laced brownie.

Propping her head on a pillow, Pam relaxed her jaw, her mouth falling open. Other than that, she lay perfectly still. Perhaps, she thought, Jeremy would be more amenable to her mouth if he were in charge.

Realizing she was waiting on him, Jeremy tentatively pushed his hips forward. The mattress shifted as he re-distributed his weight to his knees next to Pam’s ears. Using a finger, the boy pushed his erection downward to aim at her mouth. Aside from her thumping heart, Pam otherwise remained motionless though she eventually pursed her wet lips around his warm penis. Jeremy obligingly rested in her mouth for a few seconds before pulling out.
“How was that?” Pam asked. She licked her lips, where a decidedly boyish taste lingered. “It wasn’t ticklish at all, was it?”

“I guess not.”

“Why don’t you do it again?”

Like a thief in the night, he once again tiptoed into her waiting mouth. The first time, Jeremy had barely penetrated her lips. This time, he pushed further until he was half in and half out. Without any prompting, he continued until Pam felt his soft sack against her chin.

It would be different one day but, at present, the length of his erection was far too modest to engage her gag reflex. Pam was beside herself in pleasure nonetheless. She was enjoying everything. The taste… The temperature… The way his shins pinned down her shoulders…

Gazing at the boy towering above her, Pam recognized a hint of arousal in his eyes. As though confirming, the tender hardness in her mouth twitched. Twice. Unable to help herself, Pam’s tongue greedily made contact with the underside of his erection.

“Ha,” Jeremy chuckled, pulling his hips back and freeing himself.

Pam mentally kicked herself for not being patient. “Too ticklish?” she said, disappointedly regarding his shiny, saliva-slicked penis.

“Yeah.”

“Sorry.”

“Can we play Call of Duty? I mean, with your hand?”

His bobbing penis was so tantalizingly close, yet so far away. “Do you have any stuff left?” Pam asked. She consoled herself with the fact that using her hand would still be fun. After all, this erection wasn’t going to go away by itself.

“Um, a little.” Pam regretfully watched as Jeremy dismounted and fetched the toiletry bag from his suitcase. “I was trying to save it because I knew I would run out.”

He handed her the K-Y. Pam held the bottle up to the light and shook it. He wasn’t kidding when he said ‘a little’ because there were only a few drops left in the unmarked container. He had apparently been quite busy at camp.

“There’s no point in saving it,” Pam reasoned. “It’s like when a person gets lost in the desert and ends up dying of dehydration because they were too meager in water rationing. We don’t want that to happen. When was the last time you played Call of Duty, anyway?”

Jeremy thought for a second. “Maybe a week ago?”

“You poor thing.” Pam had him lie down on the bed. In that short interim, his foreskin had somehow returned to full coverage of his ever-present erection. Pam started by carefully retracting that peachy soft fold of skin, taking time to once again appreciate the dark pink color underneath. Squirting a dollop of K-Y into her palm, Pam contentedly began finger-painting his stiff penis.

His little shaft kept inching forward to meet her finger. “Does that feel nice?” she inquired.

“Yeah.”
“And how about this?” Closing her fingers, Pam gently milked his erection.

“That’s good too,” he confirmed.

It all felt so right. Jeremy lying on the bed, his legs dangling off the side. Pam kneeling on the floor, her slippery hand gliding up and down his erection. From this vantage point, she had a perfect view as his relaxed scrotum drew itself upward until it coalesced into a tight creamy-pink globe. It reminded her of the apricots she had enjoyed for dessert. Pam had a sudden desire to pop his fruit in her mouth where it would explode in juicy sweetness.

The alternative, kneading that quivering knot of boy flesh, was quite enjoyable though. Jeremy’s eyebrows knit closer as though he were concentrating on a difficult math problem. She could easily read the arousal unfurling across his face. Still touching him, Pam waited for just the right moment. She recognized it when Jeremy’s chin almost imperceptibly thrust into the air.

Pam pulled off her towel, letting it fall to the floor. “Jeremy,” she said. “Look.”

His senses already overloaded, Jeremy needed a few seconds before he was able to focus on her exposed chest. The moment he did, however, his penis began twitching in her hand. All it took to push this twelve year old boy over the edge was a brief glimpse of her bare breasts. A quiet gasp slipped from his slackened lips.

Was he squirting yet? Surely he would have told her by now. Pam leaned in until her face was inches from his midsection. At this close range, she was surely at risk of getting hit. But that wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing.

Nothing came out. Old Faithful was not quite faithful yet. Or old, for that matter. Pam didn’t know whether to feel disappointed or relieved. His dry orgasms were nonetheless an immensely satisfying sight. He wriggled and writhed on the bed, unable to escape her coaxing hand.

After he was done, Pam joined him in bed and playfully slapped his arm. “Vow of chastity,” she said.

“It was your fault!” Jeremy protested.

“I know, I’m just joking.” She kissed his cheek. “Was that nice?”

“Yeah.” He burrowed into her side. Before Pam could even wrap her arms around him, he had fallen asleep.

Her hand was still sticky with the K-Y. There was no reason to let it go to waste. Pam reached between her legs. She sighed when her fingers made contact with her swollen clit. Though she had masturbated countless times in the past five weeks, it felt ten times as nice with Jeremy snuggled by her side. His cheek smushed against her breast as though it were a pillow.

She began riding a rollercoaster ride of sorts. Pam would touch herself until she got very close, then back off for a few minutes before starting the process again. Jeremy’s warm breath on her nipple kept teasing her to new heights. It wasn’t until the fifth or sixth time, twenty blissful minutes later, that she couldn’t hold back any longer. By now, a steady wetness trickled out of her kitten and her clit throbbed without even being touched.

“Jeremy?” She gently shook him. “Psst. Wake up. I got it ready for you. See?” Pam took his hand and positioned his fingers between her legs. He was half-awake now. “Jeremy, please? You remember how this works, don’t you? Just rub me right… here.”
He began doing so in his semi-conscious state. Pam spread her legs a little wider. “Oh god, that’s good. Oh god. Oh Jeremy… Jeremy!” Now fully awake, the young boy’s fingers mashed against her clit just like she taught him. Gasping and trembling, Pam came. She came with the full force of five weeks of frustration. She came with the satisfied pride of a woman being pleasured by a young boy who knew exactly how she liked to be touched.

“Did I do it right?” Jeremy whispered.

Pam smiled. It had been a while since she heard him ask that. “Yes. Thank you, Jeremy,” she said, kissing his cheek. His ears turned rosy when he heard her praise. Wearing a proud smile, the young boy dozed off.

Pam wanted to do the same, but she hadn’t gotten ready for bed. Forcing herself up, she reluctantly got dressed in her leggings and sports bra. Though far from being the ideal sleepwear, they were her only choice since her underwear, hand-washed earlier in the sink, had not yet fully dried. She was absent-mindedly brushing her teeth when Pam noticed the blank spots on the wall where the religious imagery previously hung.

Feeling the slightest hint of guilt, she retrieved the crucifix from the closet and returned it to its rightful place on the wall. After making sure the crucifix was level, Pam re-hung the portrait of Mary as well. Her pangs of conscience somewhat mitigated, she finished getting ready for bed.

Then it was Jeremy’s turn. Sitting on the mattress, Pam gently brushed the hair from his forehead. “Hey,” she whispered. “Can you go brush your teeth? Come on. I know you can hear me.”

Or not. The young boy was out for the count. She decided to let it go. Pam had sent him to camp with a full toothpaste and, judging by the now flattened tube, he had done a surprisingly good job of brushing at camp. Climbing into her own bed, Pam arranged the sheets and settled in. She had no sooner turned off the light when she heard Jeremy stirring.

“Pam?” he asked sleepily. “Are you still there?”

“Oh, look who’s suddenly awake,” she answered ruefully. “It sure is dark out here in the country.”

Jeremy’s disembodied voice answered from his bed. “Yeah. It was like that at camp too.” He paused. “You sound really far away.”

“I’m right here,” Pam said. “I’m holding out my hand.” They fumbled in the darkness as they attempted to locate each other.

“Oh, there you are,” Jeremy said. He slipped his hand into hers, their interlocked fingers suspended in the space between the beds. From outside, the sound of wind in the trees whispered little words. A hint of wild forest air crept into their little room through the open window. Unlike the city back home this air was virgin and primordial, like they had somehow traveled back to the beginning of time.

Sleepy tendrils enclosed Pam’s mind. “Good night, Jeremy,” she said, still holding his hand. She didn’t want to let go.

“Good night, Pam.” He was quiet for a moment, long enough for Pam to drift so far that she wasn’t certain if he spoke these next words or if she was dreaming. “So what are we doing tomorrow?” he asked. Wearing a half-smile, Pam managed to squeeze his hand before her wrist went limp and she fell asleep.
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