**The Exhibitionist Next Door**

by BPClavel

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 371: Dale's Sress**

As they exited Mr. McRoberts office, Dale pulled Nate into the common area and then on across it. Once in a corner she bent over, placing her hands on her knees. Her head was hanging down as if she was looking at her feet. She appeared to be breathing heavily.

“Are you okay?” he asked, placing a hand tenderly on her back and standing so close that his leg was touching her ribcage.

“What am I going to do, Nate?” she asked in a panicky voice, standing up abruptly. “If they believe Alexa . . . then they think I was in on staging this. That would make her guilty of very little . . . if there’s no victim . . . but that would make the audience the victim, our victims . . . of an indecent exposure stunt. She and I would be similarly guilty. This could all come full circle. Mr. McRoberts said he would give us the same punishment. The police, or the courts, might end up giving us the same punishment, too. Could that happen? Oh, my God . . . what a disaster . . . so unfair! What am ever I going to do?”

“Calm down, Dale,” he said noticing that she seemed on the verge of hyperventilating.
“Those are some wild thoughts. No one’s going to believe Alexa. When the banner went up, you were in such a state of extreme trauma. Everyone saw that. No one is that good of an actor. McRoberts has lost all my respect, but I think he did give you one piece of good advice. I can’t say that I liked how he went about doing it, but maybe he was just trying to scare you into doing the right thing . . . naming names . . . telling your story and naming names. Just tell the truth.”

“I can’t, Nate,” she said.

“Of course you can. I think you have to,” said Nate.

“But, Michelle. I’m not doing that to her,” said Dale.

“Your loyalty is admirable, honey. But it’s misplaced. She did this to herself. Whatever happens to her will be none of your doing,” said Nate. “Think about this objectively. Set your feelings for her aside for a moment. It’s time to tell the truth and trust the system.”

“But not in Michelle’s case,” said Dale. “I detest the idea of lying. I do, and yet I have to. Maybe it’s not really lying . . . error by omission. Isn’t that what it’s called?”

“You asked my opinion,” said Nate. “I’m giving it to you. At the very least you need to tell them that you saw Jodie . . . that she was there. That will boost your credibility. Once they have Jodie, they’ll know that Alexa was lying. Jodie deserves what she’s got coming.”

“I’d give them Jodie, but she’d then name the others, she’d name Michelle,” said Dale.

“That sounds like a good outcome,” said Nate. “They’d all get what they deserve, and you would not be connected with having turned in Michelle. You wouldn’t be the one who ‘outed’ her this time.”

“I disagree. Not a good outcome. Not doing that!” said Dale obstinately.

“So you’re going to risk your future – our future – because of this illogical need to protect the guilty?” asked Nate. “Just tell them what happened. Let things take their course.”

“I’m okay with things taking their course . . . just not in Michelle’s case,” said Dale. “She is sorry. She told me she is. That’s good enough for me.”

“I don’t think she’s sorry. Had she really been sorry then she could have gone for help and prevented your Maverick ride into the gym,” said Nate.

“I’m not talking about that time. Later, when she was cutting my hair. She IS sorry. I know you don’t believe her, but I do,” said Dale.

“Well, if you see it that way, then I don’t know how to advise you. You are obviously going to take your own path,” said Nate. “But I love you. I’ll stick by you, no matter what you do.”

“Don’t you see, Nate? That’s all I’m doing. Sticking by Michelle,” said Dale looking up at him. He saw self-assurance mixed with an equal measure of self-doubt in her eyes.

Looking up, Nate saw Dale’s mother crossing the common area, coming toward them. “They’re asking for you now, Dale,” said her mother placing a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t make this any harder than it has to be. Just answer their questions.”

A few minutes later Dale, her mother, and Nate entered the faculty lounge just as Nate had done during first period.

Nate had a lot of déjà vu as the detective again introduced himself, “So, Miss Jordan, I’m Detective Jacob Harms. You’ve already met officers Kudrow and Adams. You may call me, Jake.” He held out his hand and Dale shook it tentatively. Turning to Nate, he continued, “Hello again Mr. Miller.”

“Greetings, Sir,” said Nate, also shaking his hand.

“You and Mrs. Jordan may wait in the outer office while we speak with Miss Jordan,” said Detective Harms.

“Mom?” said Dale turning to her mother in surprise.

“For God sakes, Detective Harms, I have already discussed this with Officer Kudrow,” said Dale’s mother. “I appreciate that you generally question people alone. That makes complete sense. The circumstances regarding my daughter, however, merit a little flexibility. She’s understandably quite traumatized.”

“Let us do our jobs, Mrs. Jordan,” interjected the tall uniformed policeman who had been introduced as Officer Adams. Mrs. Jordan had met him the day before, but Dale had seen him for the first time in the cafeteria. He was young and had very short, dark hair. In keeping with his appearance, he had the manner of someone with recent military experience.

“No one is trying to keep you from doing your jobs, Officer Adams,” said Mrs. Jordan. “You need to simply realize that my daughter needs to be comfortable. If she’s comfortable, I’m certain you’ll get a lot more information out of her. If she’s uncomfortable, she might not even be able to speak. I hope you are cognizant of the fact that you are asking her to discuss the most horrendous thing she has ever experienced . . . an atrocity involving her own forced nudity in front of a large crowd . . . with three male strangers. How easy would that have been for any of you at the age of eighteen?”

Looking at Officer Adams, Mrs. Jordan saw not a single hint of compassion or flexibility in his expression. An uncomfortable silence prevailed.

“Rob,” said Officer Kudrow. “I know you have kids, and I know they are young.”

“That has nothing to do with this, Officer Kudrow,” said Officer Adams.

“Just try and appreciate what Mrs. Jordan is saying. My two daughters happen to be about a decade older than Dale, either side of thirty. I recall their teenage years, those important formative years. I lost sleep last night thinking about this case. Sometimes being an officer is like that. The difficulty for me is that every time I look at this young lady, I think of my daughters. What happened to her . . . any parent’s nightmare. I don’t want to even imagine how I might have felt, what I might have been capable of doing, had one of my own been similarly assaulted.

“I may have been overstepping my authority when I told Mrs. Jordan that she and her daughter’s boyfriend could be present during questioning, but the fact of the matter is that I did. It is important to me personally that Dale be as comfortable as possible. The last thing I want to have happen here is for this young lady to view this session as a continuation of her personal nightmare. Victims of crimes should look upon the police as compassionate individuals, a source of security in a sometimes unfriendly world. Isn’t making Dale feel safe important to you?” Turning to the detective, he continued, “Detective Harms, dismiss me if you feel I’m out of line.”

“It’s okay, Sam, there is no rule that says that an officer can’t show a little compassion, a little humanity. Are you good with this, Officer Adams?” asked the detective.

“Not really,” said Officer Adams. “But it doesn’t matter. This isn’t a democracy. Your rank places you in charge, Detective.”

“But we all work together. We’re a team,” said Detective Harms. “But, okay ladies, Mr. Miller. Please sit down and make yourselves comfortable. Had Mr. Miller not been questioned earlier, then I would not be able to allow him to be present. Separating witnesses and getting their individual testimony is a rule that cannot be broken. However, if he promises to observe silently, then he may stay. Mr. Miller?”

“Yes, I understand,” said Nate. “I will keep quiet.”

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Dale squeezed Nate’s hand as they sat down side by side, Dale’s mother sitting next to Dale on her left.

“In your case, Mrs. Jordan, there are no issues. As you were not present at the incident yesterday, we will not be questioning you as a witness. Additionally, given your familial relationship to Miss Jordan, and the absence of an attorney . . . one is not needed . . . you may of course stay. In keeping with Miss Jordan’s wishes that you be present, we will proceed. ”

“Understood,” said Mrs. Jordan.

“I hope it is all right if I call you, Dale,” said Detective Harms, turning his attention to Dale. “I noticed that Officer Kudrow has been addressing you by your first name.”

“That’s fine, Detective…” said Dale making it obvious that she couldn’t recall his name. “I’m not very used to being called, ‘Miss Jordan.’”

“Detective Harms,” he said. “But please call me Jake.”

“Okay… Jake,” said Dale.

“I need to inform you that today’s discussion will be recorded. You have probably already noticed the microphone. We can discuss that further, if you have concerns. Do you have any questions?” he asked.

“I don’t mind being recorded, if that is what you’re asking,” said Dale looking over at her mother. Her mother nodded, indicating to Dale that she had no concerns.

“Okay, good,” said Detective Harms, turning it on and launching into a few introductory remarks. “This is Detective Sergeant Jacob Harms of the Prospect City Police Department. Present with me today are Officers Samuel Kudrow and Robert Adams, both also of the Prospect City Police Department. We are here today for the purpose of questioning Miss Dale Jordan, age eighteen, about the events which took place yesterday in Prospect High School. Dale, would you please identify yourself on tape using your full name.”

“Umm . . . This is Dale Jordan,” said Dale tentatively.

“Thank you,” continued the detective. Also present today are Beth Jordan, Dale Jordan’s mother, as well as her boyfriend, Nate Miller. For the record, Dale, will you please state that they are both present with your permission.”

“Yes . . . I definitely want them here,” said Dale.

“Good,” said Detective Harms. “With that complete, we may proceed. Dale, I think the best way to do this is for you to simply tell us what happened yesterday, chronologically. We might interrupt you with a question or two. If you include as much detail as you can recall, then we can minimize the number of interruptions. Why don’t you begin by telling us what happened at the point where you left your third period class. Tell us everyone that you recognized as you made your way through the hallways, as well as everyone that you saw upon arriving in the gym. Go ahead.”

“I wasn’t in on this. I really wasn’t . . . Detective Harms,” pleaded Dale, adding, “I’d rather call you Detective Harms.”

“That’s fine. If you are more comfortable calling me Detective Harms, then by all means do so. But what do you mean when you say that you weren’t in on it?” he asked.

“Alexa told you guys that she and I planned this. That’s completely untrue. She’s lying!” said Dale.

“Guys, how does she know about that?” asked Detective Harms, frowning and turning to look at the two police officers.

“I heard it from Mr. McRoberts,” volunteered Dale.

“You told me to tell him, Jake,” said Officer Kudrow. “You wanted his candid thoughts on the subject. I cautioned him, but he obviously could not keep it to himself.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” said Detective Harms. “But it doesn’t really matter. Dale, you only need to concern yourself with your own testimony. We are not here to discuss anything that Miss Finch may or may not have told us. We fully understand that she might not be telling us the truth. If there is one thing that I have learned over the years, it is that many suspects lie. Now, if you don’t mind, please give us your account of what happened yesterday.”

Dale proceeded to recount her experience in much more detail than she had originally intended. What Mr. McRoberts had said had shaken her. She did see the need for the police to have a factual account to weigh against Alexa’s deceitful version. She kept very close to the facts, except that she claimed that the mat room had been dark as she had entered. Similarly she avoided mentioning all conversations involving either Jodie or Michelle. She wasn’t very happy with herself to be protecting Jodie, but she knew she had to. Her feelings regarding the other girls who had taken part were somewhat mixed. In her heart, she felt that they were probably Alexa’s victims themselves on some level.

Nate and Mrs. Jordan listened to Dale's story with great interest. This was the first time that either of them had heard much of it. They had both wondered at many of the details, such as how she had been stripped, how she had been tied, and of course how they had managed to get her up onto the Maverick.

Nate found himself glad that they were recording Dale’s story. To him it was very obvious that she was largely telling the truth. Had Dale stripped herself and allowed Alexa to tie her, she would never have been able to put together such a detail rich account. And yet many of the details weren't what he had expected. They weren't exactly about how the girls had tied her up. It was obvious from her account that she didn't even know a lot of the details as she had not been able to see. Much of what she described had to do with what she had experienced. What it had felt like to be punched in the gut with no warning, the anguish of all the insults, the slaps coming out of nowhere, the mean laughter.

He was surprised that Dale was managing to tell her story without tears running down her cheeks even though her eyes were moist. He suspected that it was the simple fact that she was concentrating on remembering the details, as well as focusing on altering them carefully, that kept her from reliving the experience with more emotion. And yet he could tell that she was indeed reliving the experience, for she would grip his hand so firmly at certain junctures. And yet she didn't succumb to actual crying.

Dale's mother was a different matter altogether. Officer Kudrow had passed her a tissue box quite early in Dale’s testimony, and she had been making good use of it. From her reactions he could tell that the insults that Dale had been subjected to were particularly painful for her, not to mention the punch and the slaps. Dale had convincingly stressed the pain that she had experienced from being hit while blindfolded. How that had kept her worrying about when and from which direction the next blow would come.

Nate wondered how Dale would handle the orgasms on the Maverick's back. In fact, once he realized that she would be dealing with that part of the tale, it became what he was anticipating the most. He knew she wouldn't admit to orgasms, but he figured it would be fun to hear what she said when she got to that point in her story, no matter what it was.

He heard the bell for the start of fifth period, but Dale ignored it. She seemed interested in getting her story told. He imagined that her purpose might be twofold. First, she needed her story out there to win out over Alexa's deceitful account. And second, if she did it well enough, she'd only have to do it once . . . maybe.

Nate held her hand firmly. He concentrated on keeping quiet and holding still so as not to distract her. He could tell that having his hand in hers was important to her. He knew it was helping her through what was clearly a most trying task.

At one point, Detective Harms interrupted her with a few questions that focused on Miss Whitaker and her involvement. That interruption ended up being brief because Dale had little to say. She had not seen Miss Whitaker nor heard her voice during the entire ordeal.

There were a few other similar questions. The detective probing for details related to the identities of the other girls, and yet Dale did an exceptional job of acting as if she did not know who had been there, other than Alexa. At one point she went so far as to say that she thought a few of the laughs had sounded familiar, and yet she specifically said that she had no idea who they belonged to. To Nate that was quite astute of her, for it seemed to camouflage the untruths within her story. Nate wondered if Dale's mother was on to her, not that it mattered. He knew that she wouldn't call her out on it, especially not in front of the authorities.

As Nate listened carefully, Dale described the ride out of the mat room in some detail. She talked about utter fear and profound disbelief as she imagined what lay just ahead. She talked about how the thought of what was coming had shaken her to her very core causing her to come close to blacking out. She mentioned hearing one of the pallbearers, not using that term, asking her if she was all right. She spoke about how desperately she had wanted to reply, and the agony she had experienced because the gag had prevented her from doing so. She talked about struggling futilely against the ropes.

Throughout, Nate found himself getting emotional, actually hurting inside as he experienced all the pain and suffering from Dale’s point of view. In addition to that, he was reliving his own experience . . . his shock, especially his profound fright as he had imagined that something might indeed be attached to her nipples.

As she started to describe the anguish of being revealed as the banner lifted, the detective interrupted her. He mentioned not needing to put her through that portion of the story, as he didn't think it would shed any light on the identities of the additional accomplices. Nate expected that they had seen enough photographic evidence to know what had occurred from that point on, but the detective did not bring that up. He suspected that the detective was specifically avoiding reminding Dale of all the photographic evidence of what had obviously been a truly horrific experience.

At that point, the detective took a break to confer with the officers in the back of the room. While they were doing that, Nate saw Dale check her phone. Her face brightened considerably. She turned to him saying, "Nate…"

"Careful…" he interrupted her abruptly, pointing at the microphone on the table. Dale nodded saying, "Right, I'll tell you later."

"So much for fifth period, right?" said Nate.

"Yep, but it doesn't really matter," she said. "I have such a high A in English. Besides, I'm having so much trouble actually listening in my classes today."

"You and me both!" said Nate.

Detective Harms returned from their small conference saying, "Okay, Dale, I guess we don't have any more questions for today."

"Will I be asked if I'm going to press charges . . . against Alexa?" asked Dale.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 373: Talking about the Future**

“No,” said Detective Harms. “I’ve already discussed this with your mother. Given your age, given the traumatizing nature of the incident and several other factors, state law allows for options. In this case your mother has agreed to act as claimant. She will be pressing charges on your behalf. She feels that you have concerns that these same girls, or even friends of theirs, might retaliate. Maybe allowing your mother to act as claimant helps with that concern, I don’t know. However, the best solution is for us to discover the identities of all who were involved such that they may all be dealt with appropriately . . . according to their specific individual levels of knowledge and participation.”

“Okay,” said Dale. Turning to her mother she added, “Thanks, mom.”

Her mother smiled and nodded. “It’s the least I can do, honey.”

"Okay, good," said Dale. "Then we may go?"

"Yes, and thank you," he said. "We may need to talk to you again, but that will be all for today.”

After exchanging a few customary remarks and pleasantries, the meeting broke up. While Dale took the opportunity to talk with her mother, Nate managed to corner Officer Kudrow. He had thought of several things to ask him privately.

At that point, Dale’s mom headed off to again confront Mr. McRoberts while Nate and Dale walked down the empty hallway, the very same one she had walked nude through just the day before. They had decided not to go to fifth period. After all, it was already more than half over.

“Oh, I almost forgot my text. It was from Nutshell,” said Dale, pulling out her phone and quickly entering a reply.

“So it was a text from Michelle that made you smile earlier?” said Nate.

“Yes,” said Dale. “She was able to get a hair appointment. I’m going with her right after school. You can probably tell how excited I am that she wants to get a matching haircut.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” said Nate in thinly veiled sarcasm.

“Are you worried about me going there with her?” asked Dale.

“No,” said Nate. “I still think that this ‘friendship’ thing is a sham . . . to keep her own butt out of jail, but even so I expect that she’ll stick with it. It’s working for her. Why would she upset the apple cart?”

“I can tell you’re coming around,” said Dale smiling. “She’s a sweetie, just like you.”

“Oh, don’t ruin my day,” said Nate rolling his eyes. “The last person I want to be like is Michelle.”

“Well, in that case, I can try and remember not to tell you when you are doing or saying something that reminds me of her,” said Dale.

“Yeah . . . spare me that,” said Nate.

They had arrived at the alcove outside of the library. There was no on there, so they sat on a couch against the far wall to continue talking.

“You can come with us . . . to the salon, I mean,” said Dale.

“With all due respect, that sounds pretty dull. If I was worried about your safety, I’d be there, but with Alexa in custody and Michelle pretending to be your friend, I think you can go without me. But, in case you’re wondering, I have figured out why she is getting her hair cut,” announced Nate.

“Let me guess,” she said. “It’s not because she wants short hair.”

“Right,” said Nate. “That’s not it at all. She’s doubling down. She knows that I’m onto her . . . that I know this reconciliation is a lie, so she knows she has to go to more effort to convince me. But I won’t be convinced. Just because she is willing to cut her hair to stay out of jail, doesn’t mean that she is your friend. It doesn’t mean that she deserves to get away with what she did to you.”

“Nate,” said Dale. “This morning you were talking like you were going to give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“What doubt,” said Nate. “What I said is that I’d get to know her, and that I expected that I’d end up liking her if she is like you describe. Even if she has a likable personality, that doesn’t justify what she did to you. That she is being friendly to keep herself out of jail . . . about that I have not doubt.”

“Just try and be open minded,” said Dale.

“In Michelle’s case, that’s asking a lot,” said Nate. “I’ll go to dinner, but not to the hair salon. As a matter of fact, I can’t . . . I’m booked. I’ve got an appointment of my own to keep.”

“You do? Going to run off with Tink again while I’m again with Michelle?” she asked teasingly.

“Nope. I’m meeting with Officer Kudrow,” said Nate.

“But you’ve already been questioned,” said Dale.

“Correct,” said Nate. “We’re getting together to talk about matters entirely separate from what happened yesterday.”

“But you had never met him until yesterday,” observed Dale suspiciously.

“I know,” said Nate. “But yesterday he said he’d like mother-in-law advice from me. He was quite impressed with how your mom spoke highly of me in spite of the fact that I had just absconded with her bare naked daughter. I thought he was kidding.”

“He wasn’t?” asked Dale.

“Maybe, maybe not. I’m not sure it matters,” said Nate.

“What kinds of questions might you have?” asked Dale. “Do I want to know?”

“Well, we do have track coming up this spring,” replied Nate. “It’s a long ways off. We’re just barely into December, and track doesn’t start until mid-March. I’m starting to imagine that by then I might finally be able to put all the pieces together . . . to make the dreams of someone very special to me come true. Before I thought that there were a few insurmountable problems, but I don’t anymore.”

“You better not be thinking what I think you’re thinking,” said Dale.

“You better believe I’m thinking what you think I’m thinking!” said Nate. “You yourself decided to go out for track. That’s one big hurdle taken care of right there. I expect that Coach Brand wants you on the team so badly that he’ll listen to my proposal with an open mind. And your track uniform . . . we’ll have no trouble regrowing the Racing Stripe well before the first track meet.”

“Nate, stop right there! Don’t give this another thought,” said Dale insistently.

“I thought we might have to wait until college, but our world has changed. The entire school, the entire community knows about your predilection for nudity. And what is more, I think the forced Maverick ride into the Prospect High history books has generated a lot of empathy for you. People have seen you nude, and for the most part I think there is some understanding and acceptance of who you are. Alexa vilified you for who you were. Who’s going to do that now? Anybody who starts complaining is going to be looked down upon. I think they’ll keep it to themselves. No one will dare start down the road that Alexa went down. The whole town saw where that can lead. Public opinion will be on our side, but even those opposed will keep quiet. Due to unwanted association with Alexa, they’ll keep their mouths shut. I’m pretty sure that’s how that goes,” said Nate.

“You’re just trying to scare me,” said Dale, her head angled down while she bit on a thumbnail. “You’re engaging in some serious wishful thinking.”

“I am?” said Nate. “I don’t think so. I saw who was clapping and who wasn’t in the hallway earlier today. You’ve got strong support. I know there is a minority that will not be in favor, but I know how I’ll deal with that.

“You do?” she said, clearly beside herself with fright imagining herself actually competing in track and field meets in the nude. Before it had been simply worrying about a fantasy . . . something that she knew would never come to pass. Now however, the possibility seemed to be real.

"Yes," said Nate. "Good old peer pressure. You heard the football players talking today. I'll deputize them all. They can help me make sure that the minority who don't like the idea of a naked girl on the track team, keep it to themselves."

"And the other teams?" asked Dale almost in a state of shock as she pictured herself running the first leg of the relay stark naked.

"Just imagine the number of Prospect High students and townsfolk who will come out to the meets knowing that you'll be competing butt naked. And those from other schools . . . their numbers will also be large. But they'll come because they want to see you, not because they are offended or want to complain or protest."

"You've actually been thinking about this, haven't you?" said Dale fretting.

"I have," said Nate. "And finally I think I know how to obtain the last piece of the puzzle, Law Enforcement."

"Right, it would be illegal," said Dale.

"Not necessarily," said Nate. "Certain things are illegal, but most of that falls under the category of obscene behavior. Nudity itself, well, that's were Officer Kudrow might come in. I'm mostly hoping that he will be able to advise me. It might be a long shot, but maybe he and I can team up somehow. Lots of work yet to do, but it seems like it's all downhill from here."

"I'll start hyperventilating if you keep talking about this," said Dale.

Nate could tell that she was beside herself with worry. He felt that he had accomplished his goal of distracting her from a difficult present by making her worry about one possible future. She liked to worry, about being nude anyway.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 374: Carly**

"It's a long way off, Dale. For the time being, until this Alexa matter is all settled anyway, we are going to have to be very, very careful. That’s, in part, why I picked a bra for today that has a narrow tight strap, one that would be evident under your shirt. But further out, probably sometime after the start of the New Year, we can have a lot of fun. Everyone knows that you like being naked . . . that Dale Jordan likes being naked. No more ‘Naked Carol’ or ‘Naked Maddie.’ This time we are looking at ‘Naked Dale!”

“Naked Dale?” she said, her mouth hanging open.

“Absolutely! There is no need for an alias now. And there is no reason to go out of town. Everyone you know now knows that you go naked . . . willingly . . . especially after your little ‘weather’ speech a little while ago. The opportunities to be naked have just increased exponentially. As you witnessed at lunch, students here want to see you naked. They are essentially expecting to see you naked. ‘Why do you have your clothes on?’ Isn't that what Ward asked? I expect that even Michelle will help me from the inside. She used to streak around with you, right?”

"But at night, in their yard," said Dale.

"Well, she won’t be going naked at the track meets with you. You'll be doing that all by your lonesome. But I think Michelle might help. She probably can’t wait to see you naked again. You do want the two of us to become good friends, right?"

"Yes, but not like this. I don't want you and Michelle to gang up on me," said Dale.

"I'm having a lot of déjà vu here, Dale," said Nate. "You wanted Carly and I to become friends. That worked out pretty well . . . for both her and me . . . for you too, I dare say. Maybe Michelle can help me by taking charge of your clothes and locking them up during the track meets or during practice . . . depending on what I decide. I can't go in the girl’s locker room, so having her do that could be a big help. You'll need your track uniform, the cute little racing stripe and your shoes . . . nothing more. I can just picture you now, walking around, waiting between events, trying not to act too self-conscious. But you will be self-conscious, just casually hanging out with all the dressed members of the track team. Oh, they'll have so much fun! We’ll all have so much fun! Your cheeks will be burning."

“Are you really meeting with Officer Kudrow?" she asked suspiciously. “When did you ever have a chance to arrange that?”

“Just now . . . after your questioning . . . didn’t you see the two of us talking while you were speaking with your mother? I’ve never had a contact in the Prospect Police Department before. That could come so in handy, right? And this guy strikes me as especially friendly. What makes it perfect is that he seems very sympathetic towards you,” said Nate. “And he wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

Suddenly Dale did recall seeing them talking with one another. "Oh, my God, Nate. Don't . . . please!" she pleaded.

"It's not up to you, Slave Girl," he said. “I just need to get going on the ground work for spring. Lots of ‘Naked Dale’ fun ahead! I want to come through for you! You concentrate on breaking records; I’ll concentrate on planning out a little bit of naked girl fun! If this works out for track, you’ll get your tan back. But this time it will be different. You’ll be tanning in public."

“Nate, you make no sense. I just had the most traumatic experience of my life, just yesterday. And now you are terrorizing me. Shouldn’t you be hugging me and comforting me?” asked Dale.

“I am hugging you,” said Nate. Indeed his arm was around her, so he pulled her close to emphasize the point. “I just know that you don’t want a normal life. Sometimes you say you do. But I know that is just Good Dale talking, the girl who you were pretending to be.”

“But I am Good Dale. I’m shy. Being naked is scary. It can be fun, but it’s scary . . . to think about,” said Dale.

“I know, Lover. But you like to worry. And in this case you have a lot to worry about,” said Nate.

“There you go . . . terrorizing me again. Can’t you just be compassionate and help me recover?” asked Dale.

“I’ll help you recover, but this helps you recover,” he said. “You love the roller coaster! Yesterday had lots of ups and downs, and you loved it. Admit it!”

“I’m not going to admit that!” said Dale. Nate stared into her eyes, raising his eyebrows. “…yet,” she added.

“But you will,” said Nate laughing and tickling her. “I know you will.”

Dale didn’t argue with him. She knew he was right. The memory of being exposed on the Maverick would be her all-time favorite memory before long. That she knew. She kept thinking about how she had the live-feed video in her backpack. She knew she’d watch it over and over . . . and all the emotions, good and bad, would come flooding back. Actually, she couldn’t wait to see it for the first time.

“But, like I said, track season is so far off,” said Nate. “If I were you, it might be the talent show that I would be the most worried about.”

“Nate…” said Dale, her jaw dropping.

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said in a reassuring tone. “I know how much you like the Shakira dress. I might let you wear it…”

“Nate, you need to be nice to me,” said Dale. “You’re not being very nice.”

“I am too,” said Nate. “I’m going out to dinner with you and Michelle, aren’t I?”

“Well, that is nice of you, but you are also scaring me,” she said.

“I’m just trying to make it fun to be Dale Jordan. And of course to be Nate Miller. He really enjoys this stuff, you know,” he said with a wink. “You’re not the only one that gets caught up in it. Maybe there is a Good Nate and a Bad Nate.”

At that point their conversation was interrupted by the bell ringing, signaling the end of fifth period.

“I don’t want to go to my sixth period class,” said Dale.

“Neither do I,” admitted Nate. “But you will . . . because you’re a Broncho-Bustin’ Gal and you’re getting back in the saddle. And I will . . . because I can’t think of anything better to do while I wait for you.”

As Nate and Dale stood up to join the throng of students flowing past the entrance to the library alcove, Dale suddenly caught sight of Carly.

"Carly," she called out loud enough to get her attention.

Carly looked over. Upon seeing them she slowed and turned, entering the alcove.

"There you are," said Dale. "I was almost starting to think that you were avoiding me."

"Who’s avoiding who?" asked Carly. "But it's okay, I don't hold it against you. I'm so sorry… My God, what you’ve been through. Can I give you a hug? You probably need all the hugs you can get."

"Oh, I do," said Dale, stepping toward her and accepting the offered hug. While they were hugging, Dale was puzzling over what Carly had said. "Who's avoiding who? What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," said Carly. "You've got a lot on your plate. I'm not going to criticize you. I'll cut you all the slack you need."

"Did I do something wrong?" asked Dale, opening up enough room between them to see Carly's face.

"Well, I did feel slighted yesterday, but I'm looking at things much more generously today,” said Carly. “Alexa’s such a bitch. I should have shown her who’s boss a long time ago.”

"Sit down for a minute Carly," said Dale. "Please talk to me. You’re the last person I want to feel slighted."

"Given what you went through yesterday, I was completely unjustified in getting my nose out of joint," said Carly.

"Talk to me," pleaded Dale.

"Just because I am your best friend, and just because I was one of two people to come to your rescue yesterday, and just because you were wearing my clothes, doesn't mean that you should have time for me," said Carly.

"I have time for you," said Dale.

"But you didn't yesterday. I was trying to be there for you. I waited for hours at your house . . . with Mary. We both waited. So I guess you didn't have time for either of us. You were gone for the longest time. Then you came back, but to Nate's house, not to your own. Your mom said you needed your space . . . that you didn't want to talk to us all at once. So, Mary and I, we waited patiently. A while later Nutshell was at the door, your mom called over to let you know, and you ran off with her! You didn't even have the courtesy to stick your head in and say ‘hi.’ You just up and left.”

Dale took a deep breath and put her face in her hands. After letting out the breath slowly, she took down her hands and reached for Carly, hugging her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That happened, but I wasn't avoiding you, not consciously."

"Oh, I know you weren't," said Carly. "But that's certainly how it felt. I know you and I are still solid. I know your history with Nutcase, probably better than anyone. I know why you ran off with her. I'm just glad to see that you're still in one piece . . . mostly anyways. I've heard that she's the one that butchered your hair.”

"You don't like my hair?" asked Dale.

"Oh, it looks fine," said Carly. "Forgive me if I don't have anything good to say about Nutcase. She's been so mean to you for so long."

"Please Carly, call her Michelle," interjected Dale.

Nate started laughing.

"What's so funny?" asked Carly.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 375: Carly continued**

"It's just funny to hear your call her Nutcase, and then to hear Dale reprimand you for doing so,” said Nate. "I myself have been calling her Nutjob. I've just tried to avoid doing so in front of Dale. Dale seems to have a lot of rules about what people can call ‘She-who-must-not-be-named-Nut-anything.’"

“That's rude, Nate," said Dale kicking his shin. After a pause, she continued, "But in reality, I'm the rude one. I ran off yesterday leaving you both high and dry. I apologize."

"It's okay," said Carly. "I know how your mind works, even when it’s not working. I know how much you have suffered all these years at the hands of Nutcase."

Nate gave her the thumbs up, and Carly winked at him in acknowledgment.

"I know I deserve that," said Dale. "Call her what you like, but please accept my apology. I was expecting to talk to you and Mary yesterday. Michelle showed up and the blinders went on, a character flaw Nate would say, I expect. And I want to thank you for helping me at center court yesterday. I don't know what might have happened had you two not come to my assistance. Maybe McRoberts himself would have eventually ‘saved’ me."

"You're welcome," said Carly. "Helping untie you was the least I could do."

"So, tell us about Alexa," said Nate. "We saw some pictures of you standing on her hair, holding her spankies and panties overhead."

"She deserved worse, but I decided to give her some of her own medicine. That's what she did to Dale at the Halloween party, so that's what she got," said Carly. "By the way, I have something for you."

She reached into her book bag and took out an envelope, handing it to Dale.

"What's this?" asked Dale.

"Hair," said Carly. "A good handful of Alexa's hair."

"Eww…” said Dale, handing it back. ”I don't want any of Alexa's hair!"

Carly laughed, "You're so predictable. I knew you'd say that." Handing Nate a larger envelope, she said, "… and this is for you, Nate."

Nate felt the envelope. "Panties?" he asked. Carly nodded.

"Eww…” said Dale a second time. She grabbed the envelope away from Nate and handed it back to Carly saying, "Nate doesn't need Alexa's panties."

"I don't, but I’d like the hair," he said.

Carly handed him the smaller envelope as the bell rang signaling the start of sixth period.

"I don't think I've been on time for a single class today," said Nate.

"Who cares?" said Carly.

"Carly, in those photos of you standing on Alexa's hair, you had help. Who was there? Who was holding her arms and legs out like that?" asked Dale.

"When I caught up with Alexa, she was being read the riot act by the pallbearers. Jason, Cody, Gage and even Ward . . . they were all there. Gage and Jason were holding her by her arms, while Cody and Ward were yelling at her. Up one side and down the other.”

“Even Ward?” asked Dale.

“Especially Ward!” said Carly. “He was irate. Had I not known better, I would have thought that he was your boyfriend, not Alexa’s. I know you don’t think much of him, but you’ve got one staunch defender there! But they all were so mad, acting as if they wanted to tear her limb from limb . . . mad about having been used . . . about how Alexa had tricked them all into delivering you to center court," said Carly. "I went up behind her, reaching up under her skirt, I pantsed her in one fell swoop. I yanked everything down to her ankles. I pulled so hard that they came right off over her shoes. She would've fallen on her face had the guys not been holding on to her.”

“Wish I could have seen that,” said Nate. “At least we have the photos, but we couldn’t tell who was helping you in them.”

“The guys were camera shy,” said Carly. “Once people were taking pussy pictures, they were turning their backs, trying to hide their faces. It was actually quite funny. One of the main reasons Alexa’s legs got spread so wide is that Jason and Cody were moving to the side, trying to get out of the shot.”

“You weren’t worried about your face being seen?” asked Nate.

“I figured, what the hell. Alexa deserves this. Even if she is tried and found guilty, the courts won’t sentence her to public exposure. That’s what they should do. Make her spend a few hours a day for the next year tied up spread eagle in the center of town. But we don’t see justice like that in this country,” said Carly.

“What a deterrent that would be!” remarked Nate.

“But now I’m worrying that she might be into having her pussy on display . . . like Dale,” said Carly.

“Probably not,” said Nate. “They broke the mold when they made Dale. But what if they come after you for doing that to Alexa?”

“If I go to jail for sticking up for a friend, then I’ll do so proudly,” said Carly. “But I don’t think that will happen. I already know that what I did has gotten the seal of approval from the court of public opinion. I’m almost as popular as Dale today. Suddenly everyone is talking to me, even football players. Suddenly everyone likes me. Not that I care. Not that I want to be popular.”

“So, Carly, remember your bedspread . . . the one with the giant daisies on it?” asked Dale.

“Of course. That old worn out thing,” said Carly.

“Well, I lost my virginity on it,” said Dale smiling.

“You’re shitting me!” said Carly, her mouth falling open.

“Yep, yesterday after the assembly. I figured I was already naked, so why not let Nate do the deed,” she said.

“So, that’s why you guys were gone for so long. I didn’t know you had it in you, Nate,” said Carly looking at him teasingly. But looking back at Dale she said, “Well, congratulations you two! Was it good?”

“Great!” said Dale beaming. “Right, Nate?”

“No complaints,” said Nate. “What can I say?”

“Well, I’m proud of you two,” she said. “I knew Dale was saving herself for Mr. Right. I just didn’t think we had any Mr. Rights in Prospect . . . well . . . right enough for her, I mean.”

“Yep, Mr. Right,” said Dale, hugging Nate’s arm and kissing his cheek.

“Mary did say that he borrowed a couple of armloads of stuff,” said Carly.

“I’ll wash everything and get it all back to you,” said Dale.

“But keep the bedspread,” said Carly. “It’s worn out, and I’m sure it means more to you now than it does to me. It would be weird for me now that I know. But good job you guys. You got laid and you’re still talking to each other. Quite an accomplishment!”

Nate, Dale and Carly sat there talking through the rest of sixth period. No one felt like walking into their class late, and there was so much to talk about. Nate had been surprised that Dale had announced that she’d lost her virginity, but he decided that it was her virginity and her decision. Plus he knew that she trusted Carly and told her everything. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that the surprising thing had been that she had told her in front of him.

Just before the end of sixth period Nate and Dale said goodbye to Carly and walked out into the parking lot to wait for Michelle by her car. There was no football or cheerleader practice that afternoon because the noise parade had originally been scheduled in that time slot.

A few minutes later Michelle showed up. Nate eyed her suspiciously. He knew that it was going to be really difficult to warm up to her. His hatred for her had only been rivalled by his hatred for Alexa. She said ‘hi’ to him cheerfully. He replied mechanically and glanced over to see Dale frowning at him. ‘What did she expect?’ he thought to himself, but he knew the answer.

“So, you’re getting a haircut,” he said to Michelle in the friendliest voice he could manage.

“Yep, short to match DJ’s,” she said, her guard obviously up as if expecting a snide reply.

“In that case,” said Nate. “Why don’t we get a picture of the two of you together, a ‘before’ picture.”

He saw Dale smile. “That’s a nice idea,” she said.

They posed together, each with an arm around the other’s waist.

“That should do it,” said Nate after he had taken three shots for good measure. “You do have lovely light brown hair, Michelle,” he added.

“Why thank you, Nate,” she said, acting a bit surprised as his complement had sounded quite genuine. “Our haircuts won’t match exactly because of the color difference, but I’m looking forward to giving short hair a try.”

“Well, if it looks as nice as Dale’s, then I’m sure you’ll be pleased,” he said. He was struggling to come up with something positive to say. He thought that his remark had sounded lame; however, both girls reacted positively.

Dale hugged him sweetly. Her eyes said it all. She was really appreciating that he seemed to be making an effort.

“Maybe the whole relay team should have matching hair,” said Michelle. “What do you think, DJ?”

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 376: Miss Whitaker**

“Sure,” said Dale with what looked to Nate like a forced smile. To Nate there was a marked lack of enthusiasm in her reply, but he wasn’t surprised. He was pretty sure that Dale would want the pixie haircut club to be exclusive to just the two of them. Opening it up to include other girls would dilute the meaningfulness for Dale. Maybe he could give Michelle a little advice, he thought . . . or not.

Nate said goodbye to Dale with a quick kiss to her forehead and stepped back. He stood there and watched as Michelle’s silver SUV left the parking lot.

A little while later Nate drove into town to meet up with Officer Kudrow. He had asked Nate to meet him in a group of portables that had been set up behind the police station. It was essentially the police department’s gym, complete with a few weight machines, some free weights as well as a few pieces of cardio equipment.

Officer Kudrow took a break from his lifting routine to talk with Nate. Handing him a bottle of water, they sat down at a table near the tiny kitchenette at the end of the portable. Over the course of the next forty-five minutes they got to know one another a little. Nate found him to be quite interesting and ended up feeling as if he had established a little rapport.

He did not broach any of the topics relating to the logistics of public or semi-public nudity. He knew that Officer Kudrow would be wary if he brought that topic up too soon. Officer Kudrow would need to get to know Dale a little before he would feel comfortable with providing the advice Nate sought, he realized.

Later, just as Nate parked his car in front of his house, he got a text from Dale. Looking up, he saw her looking out at him from her living room window.

Her text read, “Come over as soon as you can. My mom wants to talk to us, and until you are here, she won’t even tell me what it’s about. She says she doesn’t want to have to say everything twice.”

Without even going into his house to drop off his things, Nate went to the Jordan’s.

As Dale let him in, she looked at him sideways, biting a thumbnail. “Did you really meet with that policeman?” she asked quietly

“Yes, I met with him,” said Nate.

“He seems kind of like a protective father figure. I don’t think he’s going to help you take advantage of me,” said Dale meekly.

“That’s how he came across to me, too,” said Nate. “But it will work out perfectly. He’ll just have to get to know both of us quite a bit better. There is no way he would let anyone take advantage of you; however…”

“However?” asked Dale.

“Well, once he gets to know you a little, he’ll come to realize that taking advantage of you isn’t really taking advantage of you. He’s a smart man. I think he’ll see the light. He won’t want you to get in trouble and he won’t want to get himself in trouble. I imagine a future where the possibilities for nudity are greatly expanded, and the risks are all but eliminated,” said Nate.

“Nate, you’re scaring me again. It’s okay to scare me . . . a little. Just don’t become a monster, okay?” said Dale.

“I think you need a reassuring hug, Lover,” said Nate, taking her into his arms. “Wow, look at the flowers!” he added noticing a large bouquet on the dining room table.

“Aren’t they amazing? Have you ever seen such a beautiful bouquet?” asked Dale excitedly.

“Impressive indeed!” he said, looking at the bouquet composed of red, white and pink roses, more than a dozen of each. It was all contained in an oversize vase having the appearance of cut glass.

“The pallbearers sent it,” she said. “How thoughtful, right? Would you like to read the card?”

“Sure,” said Nate.

She handed him an elegant hand lettered card. It read, “Dearest Dale, Our hearts go out to you as you work at rebuilding your life. Our most sincere apologies for our unwitting role in Alexa’s evil scheme. While we had no advance knowledge of the plot that unfolded at the assembly yesterday, we deeply regret out involvement in it. We hope that you will be able to forgive us, and more importantly we hope that you are able to put this behind you and forge ahead as the confident young woman that we all have come to admire. If we can do anything at all for you, we would love the opportunity to make amends.
Most Sincerely, Ward, Jason, Cody, Gage.”

The card bore individual signatures of the four football players who had rolled the Maverick to center court the day before. They had obviously gone the extra mile by circulating the card amongst themselves or all visiting the florist together to sign.

“That’s really considerate of them,” said Nate. “I guess that might explain why they didn’t talk about what happened to you at school today.”

“I guess,” said Dale. “I wondered about that. But the flowers are so thoughtful. They brought tears to my eyes.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Nate. “However, just about anything seemed to bring tears to your eyes today.”

“It was a very emotional day,” said Dale.

“You’re just very emotionally susceptible right now, that’s what I think,” he said. “You just seem to have your heart on your sleeve.”

“I expect that’s true,” said Dale. Pausing, she continued, “I actually felt sorry for those guys. I mean, how could they have known?”

“Well, there was an awful lot of movement under that banner,” said Nate.

“Shut up!” said Dale punching him on the shoulder. “I was trying to get free, remember?”

“Oh, I remember,” said Nate, hugging her and lifting her chin up to plant a kiss squarely on her lips. “Certain things I’m sure I’ll never forget.”

Just then, Dale’s mother emerged from the back hall saying, “I’d forgotten what high school was like.”

Both Dale and Nate laughed. “It’s hell, isn’t it mom?” said Dale.

“I’ll say!” agreed her mother.

“So, was high school like this when you were there, mom?” asked Dale.

“Well, no. It did have its moments, but none of them were at all like what I experienced today,” said her mother. “However, the perspective difference between that of a student and a parent makes it impossible for me to know for sure.”

“Mom, your eyes are red,” observed Dale. “Have you been crying?”

“Yes, I have, but for good reason. What a day!” she said.

“About anything in particular?” asked Dale. “Or did it just all get to you?”

“Well, first things, first,” said Mrs. Jordan. “Let’s sit down. I’ve got the scoop on Miss Whitaker.

“She’s been having sex with Alexa, right?” said Dale.

“How did you know?” asked her mother in surprise.

“Michelle just told me . . . at the salon,” said Dale.

“Right, Michelle,” said Mrs. Jordan. “By the way, how did her haircut come out?”

“I like it. She likes it,” said Dale, pulling up a few photos on her phone.

“Wait,” said Nate. “Miss Whitaker and Alexa . . . having sex?”

“Yep, I guess that is what has been going on,” said Dale’s mother. “What I know, I was told in confidence. It will be in tomorrow’s paper; however, until then, don’t repeat anything. But that’s why she was arrested yesterday. I guess some students mentioned their suspicions to the police during questioning right after the assembly. She thought they wanted to arrest her because of suspected involvement with Alexa’s hazing scheme. However, so far they have not found any evidence that she knew anything about that, Dale.”

“I certainly didn’t see her or hear her in the mat room,” said Dale.

“Well, once she was in custody, the police searched her phone. Hundreds upon hundreds of texts, I understand. Lover’s texts. I of course haven’t seen any of them, but I understand that felony charges are being filed, sex with a student is a serious matter,” said Dale’s mother.

“Wow,” said Dale. “I guess it is believable, but . . . wow . . . right, Nate?”

“Yeah . . . wow . . . but no evidence that she knew or helped Alexa with the mat room attack?” asked Nate.

“Not that I’ve heard,” said Dale’s mother. “But she’s obviously in serious trouble, probably worse than Alexa. I’m sure she’ll never teach again. You two haven’t yet seen the evening newspaper, have you?”

“Nope,” they said simultaneously.

“Well, Nate, why don’t you run home and bring your copy back. Everyone around town will be seeing it this evening, so you two should be aware,” said her mother.

“What’s in the paper, mom?” asked Dale apprehensively. “Did I make the front page?”

“You did, dear,” said her mother. “And you are naked . . . still seated on the Maverick, but before you start panicking, you need to see it. Run and get it, Nate.”

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 377: The Front Page**

Nate gave Dale a quick hug, but then raced out the door as instructed. Mrs. Jordan held Dale as she looked as if she was about to start hyperventilating. Making the cover of the paper in the nude had been something that she had long feared, and now that nightmare had come true. “They wouldn’t put me on the cover naked, right?” asked Dale not believing what she had heard.

“I’m afraid they did. It sounds worse than it is. You’ll see,” said her mother. “I wish they wouldn’t have done this, but somehow it will be okay.”

Less than a minute later, Nate was back. The headline read, “Lady Godiva at Prospect High!” Just below that the subhead read, “School in Turmoil on the Eve of State Football Final due to Major Hazing Incident, one student and one teacher in police custody, investigation in full swing.”

The cover included a giant photo of the incident. It was a photo of chaos. Indeed, Dale was still on the Maverick and plainly nude, but it was a wide angle shot and not much detail could be discerned. She was but one of many people visible in the photo, which had obviously been chosen to show the level of disarray at the assembly. Fortunately it had not been cropped and enlarged to show just Dale. It was taken from the rear, so her face was not visible, and her braid and arms were such that much of her back and especially her butt crack were not visible. A bare hip and leg were clearly visible except where the head of someone blocked a small portion of her thigh.

“You know that it’s you, but no one could identify you with this photo alone,” said her mother hoping to reassure her a little.

“You’re not mad about this?” asked Dale.

“I’m furious,” said her mother. “It’s among the reasons why I had a good cry before you got home. To me it’s way over the line. But it’s out there, people are seeing it, so you needed to know about it. Maybe we’ll need to sue the paper; however, I expect their lawyers signed off on it for one reason or another. Your face isn’t shown and you are not identified. Nowhere is your name listed.”

“But everyone will know it’s me,” said Dale.

“I know that, but your name is not in the paper. Maybe that is why they thought they could get away with this,” her mother replied. “The incident is what the town is talking about, and the photos are already out there . . . on social media. I can see why the paper, struggling as is every newspaper these days, thought that they had to include a photo.”

“What does the article say?” asked Dale, still in shock from seeing herself nude on the front page.

“You can read it,” said her mother. “They interviewed and quoted lots of people, me included. I talked to the press a little. Mostly I was trying to get them to leave you alone. Fortunately, Mr. McRoberts forbid them from coming into the school. But they were in the parking lot all day talking to students. Of course the things that I said that I wanted them to include, they ignored. But to their credit, the story is much more balanced than what I hear is on the TV news.”

“Have they shown photos on TV as well?” asked Nate.

“I understand they have been broadcasting a few shaky videos downloaded from the web,” said her mother. “But I’ve also heard that they put black squares over your face and your . . . you know.”

“But those blacked out areas won’t have been blacked out on the Internet,” said Nate.

“I expect not,” said her mother. “I’m not sure what we can really do at this point.”

“Speaking of the media,” said Nate. “I saw a van pull up out front as I came in.”

“Really?” said Mrs. Jordan, rushing to the window.

A moment later the doorbell rang. Mrs. Jordan closed the curtain and shouted, “No comment,” through the door. Turning to speak to Dale she said apologetically, “I really hoped they would have the decency to stay away from our home. Let’s go to the TV room.”

After closing a few more curtains they went into the TV room, all three of them sitting on the couch, Dale in the middle.

“I’m so sorry, dear,” said her mother, her arm around her. “Are you two still going out to dinner with Michele?”

“That’s the plan,” said Dale.

“Well before you go, there is more that you need to know,” she said. “I’ll cut right to the chase. The good news is that I was able to persuade Mr. McRoberts to not forfeit the football game.”

“That’s a huge relief,” said Dale, still trying to recover from the shock of being shown nude on the cover of the newspaper.

“It is,” admitted her mother. “But there was a price to pay.”

As Nate studied her, he saw tears forming in her eyes.

“Mom?” said Dale, concern straining her voice.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping her eyes. “This is what I was crying about earlier.”

Dale put her arm around her mother to comfort her.

“It took everything I had to talk him out of forfeiting the game, absolutely everything I had. And there was no time . . . I couldn’t go around him . . . I couldn’t appeal to the school board. He was ready to pull the trigger ending Prospect’s chances at the title,” she said sobbing.

“It’s okay, mom,” said Dale. “If you saved the game, then you saved the town.”

“I’d like to think so,” said her mother. “But like I said, there was a price to pay, a huge price. And unfortunately, you’re the one who has to pay it.”

“Me?” asked Dale. “What price?”

“You won’t be cheering, dear,” she said, tears bursting forth. “Like I said, it took everything I had to save the game.”

“I won’t be cheering?” asked Dale in shock.

“McRoberts is disbanding the Varsity Cheerleading Squad through the end of the year. He says he will decide about basketball season come January. But for right now, none of you can wear your uniforms, cheer at any events, identify yourselves as cheerleaders, nothing.”

“None of us?” asked Dale. “How is this fair?”

“It saved the game, dear,” she said with a heavy sigh.

“But the State Championship without cheerleaders?” asked Dale, tears running down her face.

“The sophomore squad can cheer,” said her mother. “Just no varsity cheerleaders.”

“The six sophomores?” asked Dale, trying to comprehend.

“The worst part of it . . . for me anyway,” said her mother. “…is that it was my idea.”

“Your idea?” asked Dale in disbelief.

“I was desperate, honey, please understand,” he mother said tearfully. “I knew how important the game was to you. And it was late Friday afternoon, the day before the game. I had to cut a deal or go home. I was all out of poker chips. I can’t lie to you.”

Dale buried her wet face in Nate’s neck. “Nate, hold me,” she managed to say between sobs.

Nate held her tightly, too much in shock himself to speak. All he could manage to do was to hold her.

Dale’s mother got her own crying under control enough to resume talking, “He was adamant that given what had happened, not a single perpetrator go unpunished. He knows that Alexa’s accomplices were cheerleaders. Other than Alexa, they were the only ones let out of third period early. But every single one of the cheerleaders claimed to be innocent. And with you and Alexa only pointing your fingers at each other, it was impossible to focus on just the guilty parties . . . they haven’t been identified.”

She took a deep breath before continuing, “So with him preparing to pull Prospect out of the game, I proposed the only thing that I could think of that might meet his criteria . . . that he punish the entire varsity squad . . . the innocent along with the guilty. He was reluctant. It took some real effort to talk him into it.”

“I can’t cheer?” asked Dale.

“Only the sophomores,” said her mother. “I’m so sorry. This outcome is so distasteful and I hate myself for the role I played in it. I know how important cheer is to you, and what could be more important than the State Championship. But I was desperate. I hope that someday you’ll be able to forgive me . . . that I’ll be able to forgive myself.”

Nate moved to a kneeling position in front of both Dale and her mother. Extending an arm around Dale’s mother, he pulled them all together, encircling both women in a tight protective hug. Nate couldn’t help himself; he cried along with them. Just the thought of Dale’s horribly unjust punishment and her mother’s anguish over her role in it was too much for him . . . too much for them all.

“I really needed my grandmother with me today. She would have found the win-win situation in this quagmire . . . the solution that eluded me,” said Dale’s mother.

“Your grandmother?” asked Dale, wondering where that had come from.

“Yes, your great-grandmother Parsons . . . you know, you’re on her lap in the four generations photo. She was full of political acumen,” she replied. “I’ve been remiss in telling you what a fine lady she was, and boy did I need her today.”

Suddenly the front door opened and Dale’s father entered. “Did you guys see the press on the front lawn?” he asked upon noticing them in the TV room. But then realizing that they were all in a tight group hug, he asked, “Is everything all right?”

“Not really,” said Nate, once he figured out that neither Dale nor her mother were in any condition to respond. As Mr. Jordan entered the TV room, Nate added, “We’ve just learned that the football game will go ahead as scheduled, but that Dale and the other cheerleaders have been disbanded through the end of the year. They won’t be cheering.”

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 378: Mrs. Jordan’s News**

“Oh, my God! Why?” asked Dale’s father. Dale stood up so that her father could embrace her.

After receiving an explanation, he remarked, “I wasn’t expecting that. I’ve never heard of victims being punished along with perpetrators. I’m so sorry, Dale.”

“It’s hard . . . to say the least . . . but mom did what I would have done,” she said. “She saved the game. We need to focus on that. I need to focus on that,” she said, wiping her tears on Nate’s shirt. His shirt already showed plenty of evidence as having been used in that manner all day.

“I really wasn’t expecting anything like this,” said Mr. Jordan. “The reporters were only asking questions about your hair . . . they want to know what happened to your hair.”

“What did you tell them, dear?” asked Dale’s mother.

“Nothing,” he said. “As if I know why women change their hairstyles.”

"Unfortunately, there's more," said Mrs. Jordan. "I wasn't finished telling Dale everything when you came in, dear. McRoberts is also giving all the girls three-day suspensions. He says that three-day suspensions do not appear on students permanent transcripts, as if that makes it any more palatable."

"So, I'm going to be suspended, too?" asked Dale, her mouth agape.

"Well, he is trying to force the guilty parties to come forward, and he thinks that they might otherwise be caught . . . even if no one comes forward," said her mother. "So the suspensions will take place in one week . . . to give that a little time to play out. He says that he thinks there is a good possibility that the police investigation will nail this down before then. And should that happen, there will be no suspensions for anyone known to be innocent; however…" her voice trailed off.

"However?" asked Dale.

"However, he has you figured for guilty," she said. "So there is little chance you won't be suspended. He doesn’t think that you conspired with Alexa, but that somehow you provoked her . . . as in intentionally provoked her."

"He's the one who provoked Alexa," interjected Nate.

"I know," said her mom. "I agree with none of this. I'm angry about all of it. I’m merely being honest, telling you the truth. I fought for Dale today, and this is all I came up with. I’m so sorry."

"The man's looney," said Mr. Jordan.

"And he needs to be fired, and probably sued," added Mrs. Jordan. "But in the meantime, there is a football game to be won. Frankly, I don't see how that can happen at this point, given the level of chaos at the high school."

"I know the team. We'll do our best," said Nate.

"But it would be much better if the school went into this as a solid, enthusiastic unit, complete with cheerleaders, and without all the distractions," said Mrs. Jordan.

"No argument there," said Nate. “Cheerleaders are an integral part of the program.”

Dale was crying softly in her mother’s arms, Nate and her father both comforting her with a hand on her shoulder.

They had been hearing occasional knocking at a considerate level as well as some doorbell ringing, but just then, they heard loud pounding on the door. “Will you go yell at them, Nate?" requested Mrs. Jordan.

Nate went to do so, but a moment later he returned with both Susie and Kendra. They both had red eyes and looked distraught. They had obviously been crying.

Upon seeing them, Dale ran to them. All three girls hugged each other and bawled. Nate stood awkwardly by. He knew what they were going through, but there was no way to offer them any meaningful solace. The word had obviously reached them. They knew about the disbanding as well as the suspensions.

After the attempt to console each other seemed to be failing miserably, Dale turned her tear soaked face to Nate saying, "I'm going to lose it, Nate. I can't take anymore. I just can’t. Can you call Michelle and cancel."

Nate loved the idea of calling Michelle and canceling, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that he had to talk Dale out of that idea. Even though he thought he might be kicking himself later, he knew that right then they needed Michelle. She was the silver lining in the whole torturous mess, for Dale anyway. He remembered how much Dale brightened up whenever Michelle was around.

"No can do, Dale," he said. "I've been looking forward to this steak dinner date all day. This is my chance to get to know Michelle. We’re not canceling."

"We’re not?" said Dale, grabbing a handful of tissues and looking at him curiously. "But the press . . . they have us trapped in here."

"They're aggressive," said Kendra through her tears. "And you guys took forever to open the door."

"I'm sorry about that, Kendra," said Dale's mom. "We didn't know it was you."

“So, a date?” asked Kendra also reaching for the tissue box. “The two of you and Michelle?”

“Michelle Thompson,” interjected Susie for clarification.

“So the two of you and Michelle and who else?” asked Kendra looking quite puzzled.

“Michelle and nobody else,” said Nate with a sigh. “Just the three of us.”

“Dale is reconnecting with her friend from middle school,” added Susie with just the tiniest hint of sarcasm.

Nate could tell by the look on Kendra’s face that she found the development odd. He started to wonder if she might put two and two together given the timing. Every once in a while he was conscious of someone ringing the doorbell, but like everyone else he had gotten accustomed to ignoring it.

“She’s nice,” said Dale, not understanding why Kendra looked so puzzled.

“She is,” agreed Kendra. “. . . to everybody but you . . . and she’s a lesbian.”

“So,” said Dale defensively. “We’re just going out as friends. Can’t I have a friend who happens to be a lesbian?”

“Of course,”’ said Kendra. “But how does Nate feel about it?”

“I’m warming up to the idea,” said Nate trying to act as if he didn’t find the recent Michelle developments odd. “But we’ve got to get going. I know how we can get past the press without talking to them. Dale, can you give me Michelle’s phone number?”

Nate took the number and went next door to put on a sport coat. He avoided the press by slipping out their back door and then into his own. As he knew that Dale needed more time to get ready than he did, he started briefing his parents on the many developments of the day. Finally realizing that there was too much to tell and too many questions, he suggested to his mother that she invite the Jordans over to talk while he and Dale were out on their ‘date’ with Michelle.

Susie and Kendra had gone back to Dale’s room to help her pick out a dress and get ready. Dale had decided that she wanted to wear the blue dress that had been her birthday present from Nate.

While she was putting the dress on, Kendra asked, “Dale, did you know that your wastebasket is full of condoms?”

“Eww . . . Kendra!” said Susie wrinkling up her nose in disgust.

“Not used ones,” said Kendra, picking up the wastebasket to have a better look. “They look to all be unopened.”

“So?” said Susie.

“It’s just odd,” observed Kendra. “You don’t find it unusual?”

While Dale was struggling trying to think up an explanation that might make sense, Susie replied, “The more you know about Nate and Dale, the more unusual it gets.”

Deciding that the truth was the best explanation, Dale said, “It’s no big deal. We don’t need them. I’m on the pill.”

“Really?” asked Susie. “Since when have you been doing the nasty?”

“None of your business, Tink,” said Dale.

“But do your parents know?” asked Kendra.

“Good point,” said Dale, taking the wastebasket. She removed the condoms, transferring them to a drawer.

A few minutes later, Nate was back and they were making final arrangements to depart.

“So, how do we get past the press?” asked Dale.

“I’ve got it all worked out,” said Nate. “It involves running, which I know you’re good at, so you’ll need to put on your tennis shoes and carry the high heels. Michelle is already waiting for us . . . one block over and two blocks down. We go out the back door, sprint through the side yard . . . and we just keep going. We’ll be halfway to Michelle’s car before the reporters realize that their opportunity to ask us questions just evaporated.”

“Sounds perfect,” said Dale, going to change her shoes.

“What about us?” asked Susie.

“I don’t know,” said Nate. “Maybe Mr. Jordan can escort you guys out to your car, Tink. Or you could always take a few questions. They probably know about the cheerleader ban by now. I expect they’d love to get your reaction about that.”

“Whatever you want to do, I’ll help,” said Mr. Jordan.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 379: Michelle**

The sprint through the side yard worked perfectly. Once past the reporters, Nate and Dale tore through the dark streets, Dale in the lead.

Michelle’s car was easily identified as she was parked along the side of the road with the lights on and the motor running.

“Shotgun,” yelled Dale, hopping into the front.

Nate didn’t mind. He was more than happy to ride in the back. As Michelle put the car in gear and headed out of town, Nate noticed that he had been right. Dale had perked right up, talking excitedly, her cheerleading ban and suspension seemingly forgotten.

“Look at Michelle’s hair, Nate. Don’t you love it?” Dale asked gleefully.

He was glad that she didn’t pause for him to answer. Instead, she and Michelle chatted happily.

After they had been on the road a minute, he decided to mix himself into the conversation. “So tell me more about track? I have so many questions,” he said.

He saw a little apprehension in Dale’s eyes as she turned and frowned at him. Nate realized that she was recalling their conversation from earlier in the day. She was clearly thinking that he might bring up his plan for her to compete in the nude.

“What do you want to know?” asked Michelle.

Dale gave him the eye, clearly warning him to not ask anything that might relate to nudity at track meets.

“I’m wondering how you can be so sure that Dale will help the relay so much. I mean, she hasn’t run track for years, and she’s not especially tall,” he said.

“Just say it!” said Dale, looking relieved about what he had asked. “I’m short!”

“You are not,” said Nate. “But you’re not tall either.”

“We’re not talking high jump here, Nate,” said Michelle. “Back in the day, Dale was the only one who came close to keeping up with me. She would even beat me on occasion if I had an off race.”

“But that was a long time ago,” said Nate.

“Why are you asking, Nate? You know I’m fast,” said Dale quite confidently.

“I know you’re lightning fast,” said Nate. “I can’t keep up with you, but it’s a valid question. Even if I’m just making conversation in order to get to know Michelle a little, where would the harm in that be?”

Dale smiled. She realized that Nate did seem to be making an effort.

“It’s like this, Nate,” said Michelle. “Last year we lost Natalie to graduation. That puts us right back where we end up every year . . . three fast girls. We need four. We often win with three fast girls, but it takes four to set records. This spring, without DJ, we’d probably be forced to have Kaitlyn on the relay. There’s no way to say this so it sounds nice. She’s slow. DJ in Kaitlyn’s place – there’s nearly two seconds off of our 4x100 relay time. I’m not kidding! DJ’s legs aren’t long, but they’re fast and they’re f\*\*king gorgeous!”

Nate saw Michelle wink at Dale. Dale slapped her shoulder with the back of her hand.

“What I meant to say,” continued Michelle. “…is that she has the sleek legs of a Gazelle. I don’t know if you know this, but Gazelle’s are small, and very fast. Like DJ. Of course Gazelles are not hot like DJ. They’re just fast.”

“Dale is fast,” agreed Nate, shaking his head. Michelle seemed to be flirting. He thought about calling her out on it, but decided that she was probably just trying to get him to react. He had some powder, and he decided to save it. He decided to play his own game, not hers.

“I know,” said Michelle, pausing while she made a turn. “She’s fast and she has the heart of a lion. You might not know her as well as I.”

Nate rolled his eyes. “And then again, I just might,” he replied, taking the bait before he could catch himself.

“Maybe so,” she said with a shrug. “DJ is good at short distances. She’s a sprinter, but she excels at the longer distances, too. I’ve got my own theory about that.”

“I’d love to hear it,” said Nate, trying to sound agreeable but at the same time as if he didn’t give a shit about her theory.

“After a few laps, everything starts to hurt . . . every muscle. The throat, the lungs . . . they burn. Most girls slow down. Not DJ . . . she speeds up. She either likes the pain, or she is able to ignore it.”

“I don’t like pain. I don’t ignore pain,” objected Dale.

“Whatever it is,” said Michelle. “You don’t slow down. I see the pain on your face, but you keep going. Somehow you use the pain to your advantage. Whatever it is, Nate, DJ seems to be able to stand more pain than the rest of us. I love watching her run.”

Nate saw her looking at him in the rearview mirror. ‘I’ll bet you do,’ he wanted to say, but he managed to bite his tongue.

When he didn’t respond, Michelle continued, “Nobody works as hard as she does at practice. What’s a little pain, right DJ?”

“Right! What’s a little pain?” said Dale laughing.

Nate realized that Michelle did know Dale. He observed Dale laughing happily in the dim light. My God, was she ever endearing. And Michelle was right, she was hot, and she could take the pain. She’d experienced her share that day, that was certain, and here she was laughing, smiling and enjoying their company.

After they had been seated in the fancy restaurant and been handed their menus, Nate decided that it was time to explore Michelle’s feelings and her commitment.

“So, Michelle, or should I call you, ‘Nutshell?’” he asked.

“Let’s stick with Michelle. DJ is the only person from whom I like hearing that nickname. It’s kind of a special, ‘between just the two of us’ thing. She came up with it,” she said, smiling across the table at Dale.

“So I’ve heard,” said Nate. “I expect you haven’t heard the news. Well, as you know, Dale is a cheerleader.”

“And a damn good one, too,” said Michelle. “Sexy as hell! I could watch her jumping around, doing handsprings and the splits all day.”

“Well, she’s been kicked off the squad . . . through the end of the year, maybe longer,” said Nate.

“She has?” said Michelle, her open mouth making it obvious that she had not yet heard the news.

Dale nodded, looking into her eyes.

“Yep,” said Nate. “And she’s being suspended for good measure, as well.”

Both Nate and Dale explained the details to Michelle; how the game had been saved, but how Dale and the other cheerleaders, the innocent along with the guilty, were paying a price.

"By looking into your eyes, Michelle, I can see how much this news hurts. Dale is your friend, right?" asked Nate.

"I'm proud to say that the past is the past. We are again friends,” she said. "Embarrassing that it took so long . . . my fault entirely."

As he watched, Michelle reached across the table and squeezed Dale's hand.

"You're in a unique position, Michelle," continued Nate. "You are her only friend who can right this injustice. You can tell McRoberts or the police what really happened . . . who exactly was in the mat room, that sort of thing. If you come forward like that, I expect they'll go easy on you. And then McRoberts can fix much of the injustice. In addition to Dale, girls like Susie Chandler, who we both know had nothing to do with this, can have their honor restored. And if you do it in time, they can help the team win tomorrow..."

"Nate…" said Dale interrupting him.

"Let me finish," said Nate. "The bottom line is that a true friend would not want to see her friend punished while she herself got off scot-free."

"Nate, I can't let her do that . . . turn herself in. She's had a change of heart. Don't you see?" pleaded Dale.

"Dale, this isn’t at all like the ending of, ‘The Tale of Two Cities.’ We all had to read that last year, right?” He saw both girls nodding. “While it might be honorable to die in someone else's place, this is the opposite. The noble thing here is for Michelle to prove her friendship by fixing this. She needs to turn herself in. She needs to suffer the consequences of her own acts, not you, not Susie."

"I can't allow that," said Dale, shaking her head.

"It's not really up to you," replied Nate. "Right now I think that Michelle is feigning friendship to keep from being kicked out of school, to keep herself out of jail. If she turns states evidence, she'll get off easy."

"I don't want her to do that," said Dale. "Among other things, that might ruin our chances for a few track records."

"Probably not," said Nate. "What it will do is remove her incentive to pretend that she is your friend. Once she does that, we'll both know that she is being honest when she claims to be your friend."

Once done talking, Nate looked at Michelle who stared uncomfortably back at him. For a long time no one spoke, Dale looked back and forth between the two of them as they seemed to each be waiting for the other to blink.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 380: Steak Dinner**

“Michelle, talk is cheap,” said Nate, finally deciding that she wasn’t going to respond. “At some point you need to do more than simply tell Dale that you are her friend. At some point you need to actually behave like a friend.”

“Stop it, Nate!” said Dale.

“I’m sorry, Dale, but someone has to ask the tough questions. I know that you’re not going to. My own self-respect demands that I stand up for you,” he said.

“Nate, please…” pleaded Dale.

Ignoring her, Nate shifted his gaze back to Michelle, “So, Michelle, it’s time to act like a grown up. You need to either tell Dale the truth, or you need to put your money where your mouth is and go to the authorities. You told Dale in the mat room that you were sorry. Had you really been sorry, you would have intervened. You weren’t sorry. You let everything proceed according to plan.”

There was another long silence as Michelle seemed to be considering how to respond.

“I got my hair cut, didn’t I?” Michelle blurted out. Nate started laughing, and Michelle continued, “I suppose now you are going to ridicule me for that as well.”

“I could, but I won’t,” said Nate. “Maybe it’s a start. I know it meant a lot to Dale. For me the haircut doesn’t really do much . . . it doesn’t offset any of the damage Dale has suffered. I think you need to do better. But that said, Dale so very much wants to be on good terms with you again. I can’t say I understand it, but it’s what she wants . . . and since it’s what she wants, it’s what I want for her. Think of me as not someone who is trying to shoot holes in your story, but rather as someone who is trying to offer you advice . . . friendship advice. For God sakes, stop leading my girl on! Either be her true friend, or stop making false claims.”

Suddenly Michelle reached for her purse. She took out a cell phone and placed in the middle of the table.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Nate. This is Alexa’s cell phone. She gave it to me for safekeeping. And here’s her password," she said writing on a scrap of paper from her purse and placing it on the phone. "I'm giving this to you. Turn on the phone. The police might come. They might have the phone company tracking it. I don’t know how that works. Alternately, take it and give it to the police. I’m sure everything's there. Alexa's texts will clear everything up for the police. That's why Alexa gave me the phone . . . to keep it away from the police. With it, the police will know who was involved – myself included. So I give you the phone. You can do with it what you feel is best."

They all stared at the phone in the middle of the table. For a moment, no one spoke.

“Put that away!” said Dale, reaching up and sliding the phone back across the table toward Michelle.

"I think Dale and I agree," said Nate. “This isn't what you want to do, Michelle.”

"Yes it is," said Michelle, sliding the phone back to the middle of the table. "I'm proving to you the sincerity of my friendship by going naked . . . pun intended . . . right Dale?”

Nate looked over at Dale and saw a hint of a smile.

"You now have the ability to turn me in," said Michelle.

"Like I started to say, this isn't what you want to do," he said. "If you give me the phone, I will turn it over to the police. They'll come for you, and your chance for leniency will be gone. I have a greater belief in justice and a greater trust in our judicial system than Dale, I think. I’m sure you’ll be treated fairly. Turn yourself in, take the phone, help them clear everything up. It’s called, ‘turning state’s evidence.’ I spoke with a police officer after school today, Officer Kudrow, so I know what I’m talking about. Worst case, you might get probation.”

“Just take the phone,” said Michelle. “Do with it what you will. You’re obviously a know-it-all.”

“Pease, Michelle, don’t give it to him,” pleaded Dale.

“I see what you’re doing,” said Nate. “You’re trying to drive a wedge between Dale and me. If I take the phone and turn it in, they’ll arrest you and she’ll be mad at me. And then you probably think that you might be able to move in and pick up the pieces after you get out.”

“I’m not trying to steal your girl, Nate,” said Michelle.

“I’m not so sure,” he said.

“Nutshell and I are friends, Nate,” said Dale. “We’ve talked about this.”

“Yeah, Nate,” said Michelle in a snide voice. “She told me I was permanently stuck in the friend zone. That hurt, but I’m a big girl. I told her to tell me if she ever changes her mind. After all, she’s still getting a reading on my gaydar. She says she won’t change her mind, but you and I both know, there’s a chance, right?”

“There is not, Nutshell,” said Dale. “I told you that Nate and I have committed ourselves to one another. We love each other. We are spending our lives together.”

“You told her that?” asked Nate in surprise. “I thought that was our secret.”

“Oh, come on, Nate. You’re not really unhappy that I told Michelle that you and I were going to be together . . . forever and ever,” said Dale.

"I guess not," admitted Nate. "But I'm not taking the phone. I’d give it to the police . . . and then you'd be unhappy with me."

"You got that right!" agreed Dale.

"I want the police to have the phone, but I want them to get it from you, Michelle. That's the best solution all around . . . provided you’re not just trying to damage my relationship with Dale," said Nate.

"I'll think about it," said Michelle, putting the phone back into her purse. "The phone also has the photos of Dale's late night streak in Madison Park," she added.

"All but one. Can I tell him?" asked Dale, looking at Michelle.

"Sure," said Michelle. "I don't care."

"Nate, remember how I pointed out to you the bruise Michelle had on her cheek the next morning?" Dale asked. Nate nodded, so she continued, "Well, when you threw me up over your shoulder, in that fireman's carry position. Well, right then the flash went off. Remember?"

Again Nate nodded, "I remember."

"Tell him, Nutshell," said Dale.

"Alexa’s timing was superb," said Michelle. "What an amazing photo! Alexa was beside herself with glee when she saw it. It had everything. Not only was it suitable for use in a gynecology lecture, but it had Dale's face, surprise written all over it, perfectly framed in that funny fur hat. And it had a tit, a very pretty tit. Alexa immediately started thinking up all kinds of evil uses for that photo."

"Tell him what you did!" encouraged Dale excitedly.

"I deleted it," said Michelle. "That very night . . . I had her phone in my hands . . . she was proudly showing me the spoils of the evening, and quick as a wink, it was gone! Was she ever livid! She hit me hard, like with the back of her hand. We were already struggling . . . relationship wise. And as to why I told Dale that I was sorry, but then did not intervene . . . all I can say is that I just wasn’t there yet. I know you don’t believe anything I say, but I was just starting to come around. Your mind might work differently than mine, Nate, but mine doesn’t just go from one extreme to the other in one step. I was sorry at that moment, but I am more sorry now.”

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 381: Steak Dinner continued**

Nate shook his head. It seemed like a poor explanation, but he didn’t see much benefit in dwelling on that point. Instead he decided to go another direction, “Michelle, I have an unrelated question to ask. You’re not on anybody’s radar. The police haven’t even questioned you. How have you managed that?”

“Well, Alexa and I never talk at school. We just pretend we don’t know each other, and we’ve been doing it for years. We have separate social circles. She hangs with the drill team, football player type. And I don’t have very many friends, but the friends that I do have . . . well, we know each other from track. That’s how DJ and I got know one another.”

“I wasn’t actually asking about that,” said Nate. “I know that, because I’ve seen it. What I meant to ask is how did you manage to get out of third period. The investigation seems focused on cheerleaders because they all left their classes early right before the assembly.”

“I foresaw that problem, so I was very sneaky,” said Michelle. “I actually didn’t go to a single class yesterday. I had an excused absence for the entire day. Officially, I was out of town . . . over in Fairview attending my grandmother’s funeral.

“But your grandmother . . . she didn’t die, right?” asked Nate.

“Nope, I just looked at the obituaries in the paper. I found an old woman who had a Thursday funeral. I filled out the school’s form, even stapling on a scan of the obituary for good measure. Worked like a charm, no questions asked,” said Michelle.

“And your mom signed it?” asked Nate.

“I forged the signature,” she said.

“Don’t they check?” asked Nate.

“What? You actually have your parents sign things?” asked Michelle. “I’ve been forging my mom’s signature for so long, that if they check, they’ll be checking it against another one of my forgeries.”

“Well, that works, I guess,” said Nate with a chuckle. “But this discussion makes me realize that you’re the only one not being punished . . . at all. Alexa’s in jail, all the varsity cheerleaders are banned and suspended . . . even Dale. And you’re good with this?”

Michelle didn’t reply and the waiter bailed her out by showing up to take their order.

As soon as the waiter was out of earshot, Dale changed the subject saying, "Nutshell, tell Nate everything . . . everything about Alexa. I want him to hear the whole story.”

"I can do that. How far back do you want me to start?" she asked.

"At the beginning," said Dale. "I want him to hear everything directly from you. And I’d like to hear it again myself . . . this time I’d like to hear it in chronological order."

"I can start even earlier than before, if you want me to," she said. "There's stuff I didn’t tell you."

"Well then, I want to hear it," said Dale.

“Do you want to hear about Alexa's broken home?" asked Michelle.

"I don't," said Nate. "A broken home is not an excuse for what Alexa has done."

"Who said it was an excuse, Nate? Not me!" said Michelle brusquely. "But while you and I agree on that, it's still part of her story. And frankly, it does tie in."

"I want to hear everything, broken home included, right from the beginning," said Dale.

"Okay, I'll try and just hit the high points," said Michelle. "Alexa was born back East, and she is an only child. I think her dad was transferred, so they moved to Prospect when she was one or two. She was a very happy child; at least that is what she claims. But then one day she and her mom came home from a weekend with the grandparents. She must've been four or five at the time, I don't remember exactly. Well, her dad was gone. Vanished! He had spent the entire weekend moving out, surgically removing every trace of his existence from their apartment. His clothes were gone . . . every sock. His toiletries were gone . . . every razor blade. His books and dvds . . . gone. Even every photo with him in it . . . all gone! He was never seen again. Her mom called the police, but the investigation was short. Kidnappers are not so meticulous. Alexa has a few photos of him. She got them from his parents . . . her grandparents. I’m pretty sure that is what she said."

"Harsh!" said Dale.

"The beauty of it was that she must have been at just the perfect age. I mean a terrible age for that to happen. She loved her father, and she felt that he abandoned her. Not her mother, but that he abandoned her. She doesn't blame herself . . . for him leaving, she just took it very personally," said Michelle. “Sometimes she tells people that he was placed into the witness protection program, but she doesn’t believe that is what happened. She figures that he just wanted to start anew . . . without his young family.”

“Haven’t they tracked him down to pay child support?” asked Nate.

“I don’t know, Nate. Not that she told me, but maybe they have. Maybe she just prefers the story the way she likes to tell it. The pure, never heard from again version,” said Michelle.

“Maybe it was an alien abduction,” said Nate.

“Meticulous aliens,” added Michelle laughing. “They should have taken Alexa, too. Right, Nate?”

“Agreed,” said Nate nodding. “Maybe they did. Maybe she is a Stepford Alexa.”

“You guys are so insensitive,” said Dale.

“Okay,” said Michelle. “Let me see. Where does the concise version of the story go from here? Straight to sexual orientation, I suppose. So . . . Alexa and I are lesbians…”

“Really?!?!” said Nate interrupting her. “Ouch!” he added a moment later. “Dang it, Dale!”

“If you deserve it, you get kicked,” said Dale kicking him a second time. “Just listen!”

“Ready to behave, Nate?” asked Michelle, smiling, gleefully siding with Dale.

“Just tell your story,” said Nate.

“I don't know what you guys think, but Alexa and I think that sexual orientation is genetic. Neither she nor I think it has anything to do with her father having left or any other environmental influences," said Michelle. "And I've gone back and forth on whether she is bisexual or not. My current opinion, my personal opinion, and I am a self-trained amateur psychologist, is that she is a lesbian with daddy issues. As you know, she's had lots of boyfriends. She'll give a guy a blowjob at the drop of a hat, and she gets screwed . . . a lot. But I tend to see that as simply her desire to have men in her life. I wouldn’t go so far as to claim that she is trying to replace her father. I just think that she wants and needs contact with men. She wants men to like her. So she has always pursued relationships with the opposite sex. All this has gone on, and yet she and I are or were in a committed relationship."

"How is that even possible?" asked Nate. "How could you put up with being cheated on?"

"She wasn't cheating on me," said Michelle. "I put up with it because I knew it meant nothing to her. It was just sex, and it didn't count because it was with guys."

"Huh?” said Nate. “You lost me."

"If you don't get it, then I won't be able to explain it to you," said Michelle.

"She doesn't enjoy sex with men?" asked Nate.

“Okay, Nate, I'm sure you're curious, so I'll try to explain," said Michelle. "Here's what she would tell me. She said she enjoyed being with guys, and she enjoyed the sex. What she claimed is that she never developed any emotional attachment to any of the guys she dated . . . that I was the only one she loved. I think that emotionally these other relationships were essentially ‘just friends’ relationships for her. It worked for us. She was a lesbian who could enjoy male company, and she wasn't ready to come out. Parts of it were hard for me, but it wasn't really all her contact with guys. That didn't bother me that much, I guess, because I never thought I might lose her to a guy."

"Then what was the hard part?" asked Nate, struggling to try and understand.

"The hard part was never being able to share. Never being able to let people know that I was in a relationship. Never being able to walk down the hall holding her hand. Not being able to go out on dates," said Michelle. "When you're in love, you want others to know how happy you are."

"You wanted to tell people?" asked Nate.

"Not really," said Michelle. "It really just weighed on me that I could tell no one . . . absolutely no one . . . and that we had to always be so careful. There were slip-ups, but given Alexa’s promiscuity, no one seemed prone to thinking that she might be a lesbian or even bisexual. It was especially hard to try and keep my mom from learning that I was in a relationship."

"She doesn't know?" asked Nate.

"My theory is that she knows, but that we both pretend that she doesn't," said Michelle.

"That doesn't sound healthy," said Nate.

"Well, thank you, Nate!" said Michelle acting quite perturbed. "I didn't ask for my life. I'm not unhappy about being a lesbian. I didn't pick my sexual orientation. I didn't ask for things between Dale and I to work out as they did. I didn't ask to live in Prospect . . . this hellhole. My life picked me. I do the best I can with what I’ve got.”

"I'm sorry," said Nate. "I didn’t intend to insult you."

"Tell him why Alexa hates me," said Dale hoping to change the subject. "We've both been trying to understand that for a long time."

"From the beginning?" asked Michelle.

"Please," replied Dale.

"Well, back at the start of middle school, back when one's gaydar is first developing, Alexa started picking up vibes," said Michelle. "At the same time that she started to realize that she was gay, she came to realize that Dale and I were as well."

"I'm not lesbian!" said Dale adamantly.

"Whatever," said Michelle, tilting her head to the side and looking up at the ceiling.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 382: Alexa Explained**

Nate was curious so he had ask, "So, Michelle, do you think Dale's a lesbian?"

"Whatever," repeated Michelle chuckling.

"Well?" encouraged Nate.

"She says she's not," said Michelle. “We probably need to believe her. What do you think?”

“Stop it guys,” said Dale. “It’s not my fault your gaydar is on the fritz.”

“Well, Alexa would see us together, holding hands and such. But it wasn’t just the hand holding . . . we were inseparable,” said Michelle. “She knew we were fellow lesbians, so she kept a keen eye on us.”

“Not fellow lesbians,” complained Dale.

“Fine, Alexa mistook us for her fellow lesbians,” said Michelle, spacing out the words and shaking her head. “She developed a huge crush on Dale. She had pictures of Dale in her bedroom. She would doodle ‘Dale’ in her notebooks . . . very ornate doodles . . . teen girl stuff, right? She showed me a few of those doodles.”

“Did you know about any of this, Dale?” asked Nate.

“Not before yesterday,” said Dale.

“So then when Dale destroyed my life…” said Michelle.

“Don’t say it that way, please,” pleaded Dale.

“I’ve just thought of it in those terms for so many years,” explained Michelle. “Well, at that point, Alexa came to me. We formed a tight two person support group which transitioned quickly into a romance. Without each other, I don’t know how we would have survived these difficult years.”

“But that doesn’t explain the Alexa hatred,” said Nate.

“Well, that comes in levels . . . I should say layers, as in layers of an onion,” explained Michelle. “One of the layers was anger at Dale for what she did to me, and what happened to me as a result. Maybe the big thick layer was Alexa’s crush on Dale. She wanted her so badly. I was a consolation prize of sorts, but I didn’t really mind. I understood that . . . I too would have rather been with Dale. So I just put up with it. What else was there to do? Alexa is a complex being. So, there was the wanting Dale layer, and then there was the knowing she couldn’t have her layer; although she did try.”

“She tried?” asked Dale. “You didn’t tell me that yesterday. I would have remembered her coming on to me.”

“She tried out to be a cheerleader every year,” said Michelle. “She didn’t really want to be a cheerleader. She enjoyed drill team. She just wanted to be close to you.”

“And you put up with that?” asked Dale.

“I didn’t think it would work out for her. Besides, what’s a girl to do,” she said with a shrug. “She was always flirting with guys . . . I put up with that.”

“I remember her trying out,” said Dale. “My primary theory, for the longest time, about why she didn’t like me was that I thought she believed that I had kept her from being chosen. But that never made any sense. We cheerleaders all got to watch the tryouts, but we didn’t pick the new cheerleaders.”

“Another layer, an important layer, was that she thought you were a dishonest lesbian,” said Michelle. “We both thought . . . think . . . that you are pretending to be hetero.”

“Here we go again,” said Dale, rolling her eyes. After a pause she continued, “So, she was upset at me for pretending to be hetero when that is exactly what she herself was doing? Pretending to be heterosexual.”

“Pretty much,” said Michelle laughing. “What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive, right?”

“Wipe that smirk off your face, Nate,” said Dale punching him.

“I can’t help it. It’s funny,” he said putting his hand on his shoulder in a defensive gesture.

“More layers?” said Michelle, acting like she was putting on her thinking cap. “That’s mostly it. Other girls at school, like Jodie, have a whole different set. Alexa would talk up those other reasons as if they were her own, but mostly just to gain support for her evil plots.”

“Tell me about this other set,” said Nate.

“Dale told me that you already know about that set. The jealousy set,” said Michelle. “Ward would feed her a steady diet of it. How the guys all had the hots for Dale because she was a female ‘one of the guys’ . . . a tomboy of sorts.” Looking at Dale directly she added, “And I know you’re not a tomboy. Dang it! So shut up about that!”

Nate started laughing. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was starting to see why Dale said that he and Michelle had a lot in common.

“But I’m not a tomboy,” said Dale meekly.

“Think about it, Dale,” said Michelle. “Maybe ‘tomboy’ and ‘butch’ are not exactly opposites.”

Dale’s mouth fell open. “What are you saying?” she asked.

“You are about the most feminine girl I know,” said Michelle. “Beautiful, delicate features. The Homecoming Queen type, and yet you’ve always spent about as much time styling your hair as a guy. And you’re the opposite of delicate. You’re strong, you’re fast, you’re rough and tumble, you love the outdoors. You were better than the guys at Red Rover and Indian Leg Wrestling…”

“You remember that, too?” interjected Nate.

“Of course,” said Michelle. “Dale and I would Indian Leg Wrestle . . . butt naked. Just try and wrap your little male mind around that!”

“You never told me that,” said Nate turning to Dale. “No wonder you’re still so good at it. You were pursuing it as a sport as recently as middle school.”

“A girl can’t share quite all her secrets,” said Dale looking down sheepishly.

“Is it any wonder that we thought . . . think that you might be a dishonest lesbian?” asked Michelle. “At the very least, you have to admit that you are sending out some mixed messages.”

“But I’m in love with Nate. Think what you like . . . I guess. I slept with him last night. I’m sleeping with him tonight,” said Dale.

“Back to Alexa,” suggested Nate.

“Right,” said Michelle. “So the girls at school have a lot of jealousy when it comes to Dale. She’s impossible to compete with. All the guys want her. All the cheerleaders and most of the drill team know that their boyfriends would drop them in a heartbeat if they thought that they had a shot at Dale. So, lots of layers of envy and jealousy.”

After a significant pause, Michelle continued, “It tainted my relationship with Alexa. I always knew that Alexa would run off with DJ at the drop of a hat if the opportunity came along. I hated that, so I gave it back to her in full measure. I never for a moment let her think that I wouldn’t do the same. And what was really hard for Alexa is that she thought it would happen. She knew she didn’t have a shot, but she thought that I did. Remember, we both thought that you were gay, so every time something would happen, she saw us back together again. And boy did she hate hearing me refer to you as ‘DJ’! So I did the only logical thing: I only referred to you as ‘DJ.’ It would remind her that you and I had been a thing . . . she was so jealous of that.

“The night I sucked your pretty little titty in Jodie’s bathroom . . . Oh, was she ever livid! She pictured us back together again. And when you asked me to dance at Sadie… Neither of you are going to believe this, but I slapped you for your own sake. I was worried what she’d do if she saw the two of us dancing and enjoying ourselves. Better than anyone, I had a handle on what she might be capable of.”

“You’re right,” said Nate. “I don’t believe you.”

“Suit yourself,” said Michelle smugly.

“So you decked Dale to protect her from Alexa?” said Nate, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I don’t care if you believe me,” said Michelle. “It meant a lot to me that she asked me to dance. I so very much wanted to dance with her. You saw me there . . . no one to dance with. Alexa wouldn’t be seen dancing with me . . . goddam dishonest lesbian.” She paused to laugh. “You might not know this either, but DJ and I used to dance and dance. Always naked. Two teen girls dancing the night away. Sorry to mention that.”

“At least that part of your story checks out,” said Nate laughing.

“What?” asked Michelle.

“I’m afraid I did tell him that part,” said Dale. “I have such good memories of all the time we spent together.”

“Ahh, me too,” said Michelle, again reaching across the table to hold hands with Dale.

“Nate, yesterday Michelle was referring to this as a love triangle,” said Dale.

“Because that is what it was,” said Michelle. “Alexa, DJ and I. It was a full blown love triangle. Maybe not in the conventional sense, but Alexa and I never made love that Dale’s presence was not felt.”

“Eww…” said Dale wrinkling up her nose. “I didn’t need that image.”

“Sorry . . . what I mean is that for various reasons you were never far from our thoughts,” said Michelle. “This is a little hard for me to admit now. It’s all so personal . . . embarrassing even.”

“We should have made up long ago, Michelle,” said Dale.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 383: Alexa Explained continued**

“I wanted to,” said Michelle. “I just couldn’t see how it might play out favorably. The best thing for Alexa and I seemed to be to keep you at a distance. When Alexa finds out that you and I are again friends, it will be her nightmare come true. She wouldn’t have given me her phone for safekeeping had she considered this a real possibility. If they let her out of jail, on bail maybe, you and I have a serious problem. We’ll need to go buy bulletproof vests.”

“I hope you’re not serious,” said Nate.

“Probably not,” said Michelle. “I don’t think Alexa is violent in that way. However, this year has brought behavior that I never might have imagined last year.”

“So where does Miss Whitaker fit in?” asked Nate. “I guess you told Dale earlier that you knew that Alexa and Whitaker were having sex.”

“Everything’s just coming right out, isn’t it?” said Michelle. “I hope he can be trusted, DJ. I don’t want this to get out.”

“Whitaker having sex with a student . . . that’s already out,” said Nate.

“It is,” said Dale, looking at Michelle and nodding. “My mom says that it will be in the morning newspaper.”

“Serves her right,” said Michelle laughing. “Miss W, what a f\*\*king idiot. So the police know?”

“Miss Whitaker turned herself in with her cell phone in hand. I guess if was full of incriminating texts to and from Alexa. Sex with a student is a big no-no. It doesn’t matter if she is eighteen,” said Nate.

“I suppose not,” said Michelle. “But like I said, she’s an idiot. Alexa was at least smart enough to not make the cell phone mistake. If they’ve got access to texts between Alexa and Miss W, then they probably know about the grade fixing.”

“Grade fixing?” asked Dale.

“Call it what you like,” said Michelle. “Just about everyone had to take Miss W’s U.S. Government class.”

“I didn’t,” said Dale.

“That’s because you’re a brain. You were in the AP class,” said Michelle.

“I was,” said Dale.

“Alexa had Miss W so tightly wrapped around her finger that she could bargain with grades. I think it started with the two of them working together to keep a few girl’s GPA’s high enough to maintain Drill Team eligibility, but it grew from there. Most of the girls in the mat room yesterday got A’s they didn’t earn. How do you think Alexa got them there? Helping them cheat, and then blackmailing them by threatening to turn them in for having cheated. Alexa is so devious. So, if the grade fixing comes out, they’ll nail Alexa’s accomplices. But the net will go wide. Others who were not in the mat room are caught up in it, guys too . . . Ward, for example. Alexa helped him maintain eligibility to play football.”

“Will you be caught up in that?” asked Dale.

“No, I refused to let Alexa fix my grade in Miss W’s class. I earned that B, fair and square. I was careful not to earn an A. I foresaw what might happen. It will be pretty obvious who was involved. The C and D students who miraculously got A’s in Miss W’s class,” said Michelle. “I steered clear of Miss W. I detest her.”

“Because Alexa was having sex with her?” asked Dale sympathetically.

“Duh!” said Michelle. “That and a few other things. Like I said, I didn’t care much about Alexa having sex with guys. I had gotten used to that. Alexa would tell me that it was the same because Miss W meant nothing to her. Even if that was true, it still bothered me. Once she started being involved with her physically, that was the beginning of the end for Alexa and I . . . at least for me.

“I can’t imagine how complicated your relationship with Alexa has been, all these other people in the mix,” said Nate sympathetically. “I mean, it’s been just Dale and I, and yet it has been complicated.” After a little thought, Nate added, “Wait, I take that back. In a way we’ve had a love triangle going, too.”

“Susie?” asked Dale.

“No, not Susie . . . Michelle,” replied Nate. “All fall I’ve wondered if you might one day run off with her.”

“And then yesterday, I did,” said Dale.

“You did,” said Nate nodding.

“I’m sorry, Nate,” she said. “I was not thinking about how that must have felt from your point of view.”

“I didn’t think you were,” said Nate. “And now here we are . . . the three of us . . . on a date . . . our little love triangle . . . all together at last.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, bucko,” said Michelle. “I can’t tell you how many times Alexa tried to arrange threesomes with me. I always refused. Quite recently with Ward . . . for the umpteenth time. And when I wouldn’t get into bed with her and a guy, she assumed it was a guy aversion. So she thought I should join her and Miss W in bed . . . can you even imagine?”

“I guess I’m not going to try,” said Nate laughing. “I guess I’ve lead a sheltered life. I didn’t know Prospect High was such a wild place.”

“So you didn’t know there was an orgy going on behind the scenes?” asked Michelle laughing.

“I didn’t,” said Nate.

“Well, I would swap places with you in a heartbeat,” said Michelle. “You’ve got Dale, and she says she loves you. How great is that? She’s a blast, always so full of life, so full of spunk.”

“It is pretty great,” said Nate looking over into Dale’s eyes and exchanging smiles.

As the waiter delivered their steaks, Nate asked him if he wouldn’t mind taking their photo. He explained to the waiter how the girls had just gotten matching haircuts . . . in case he hadn’t noticed. After he had taken a few shots of the three of them, Nate took his phone back and took a couple of photos of just the two girls.

“We got ‘before’ so now we need ‘after,’” he said. There was a nice fountain in the entryway, so Nate had the girls pose together in front of it so that they would have photos other than just those with their meals.

“Your hair does look very nice as well, Michelle,” he said after they had returned to their seats. “It will be interesting to hear what comments you two get when people realize that you have matching haircuts. I expect that will have people talking.”

“Do you think they’ll be thinking that you’ve lost Dale to me?” asked Michelle.

“How could they not?” asked Nate. “I mean, Dale was obviously hitting on you at Sadie. Given how she went down hard, everyone knows about that. So . . . one, you’re a lesbian; two, Dale was hitting on you; and three, you have matching haircuts. I mean, on the face of it, it will have to look as if you two hooked up.”

On that note, they took a break in the discussion and all started eating.

Given Michelle’s explanation of Alexa, Nate thought of a question, “Michelle, my theory of Alexa’s motivation was that she wanted to get Dale back. That Dale had ‘outed’ you, so Alexa decided to ‘out’ her. That wasn’t what was going on then?”

“Actually, that is exactly what Alexa was saying. That was the justification that she gave me. She felt that Dale had ruined my life by ‘outing me’ against my wishes. And then she learns that Dale has a big bad secret that she is trying desperately to keep hidden. To Alexa it was the perfect opportunity to pay Dale back in kind. And she wanted the outing to be big and bad. She wanted it to hurt. Along with Jodie she had it all planned out for the Parker Halloween party. Their plans for that night were quite modest in light of what Alexa pulled off yesterday. So outing Dale IS the reason that she would always verbalize.

“However, I have a slightly different take on things. I think she wanted the threesome thing to be over, once and for all. She knew that she had completely ruined her own chances with Dale, so Dale had become only someone that I might run off with. That is why she spoke to me in the mat room. She wanted Dale to know that I was there such that Dale would forever be mad at me . . . and once and for all stop trying to heal our relationship. She wanted Dale gone from Prospect High. She thought that this would result in Dale’s transfer to another school, at the very least. So in short, outing Dale was a big part of this, but ending the love triangle was the powerful driving force behind it all.”

“I always expected that when I finally heard the rationale, the whole story . . . if I ever heard it . . . that it would still make no sense,” said Nate. “I mean, it looks as if it backfired for her. Here you and Dale are having dinner together.”

“Just because Alexa’s smart, doesn’t mean that she can predict the future. And she’s gone a little bit crazy . . . she has . . . just saying,” said Michelle.

“I guess you’re right,” said Nate. “She can’t think she’ll walk away from this unscathed.”

“Oh, she thinks she might. She’s young, and it would be a first offense. She thinks that could be worth a lot,” said Michelle. “And she actually thinks that she might manage to pin it on Dale. She hopes to paint herself as Dale’s accomplice in Dale’s own exhibitionist fantasy scheme . . . including Dale wanting to be tied up to feel vulnerable. But I think she was in too much of a rush. Had she had more time, she might have been able to manufacture some real convincing evidence . . . or maybe she did and I just don’t know about it. But I’ve got an insurance policy to make sure that she doesn’t get away with that.”

“You do?” asked Nate.

“The phone,” said Michelle with a wink. “It never occurred to Alexa that I might switch sides . . . why else would I have it. She could have destroyed it, or even just hidden it.”

“Are you going to give it to the police?” asked Dale.

“That’s not plan A,” said Michelle. “I know Nate wants me to, but I’m not used to caring about what guys think. Sorry, Nate, I’m not.”

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 384: Bedtime**

Deep in thought, they all resumed chewing bites of steak.

After a considerable pause, Michelle said, “Hey, Nate, got any naked pictures of Dale?”

“Not saying,” said Nate.

“Well, you’ve got my cell phone number,” she said. “Send me a few! You’ve got Dale herself . . . the flesh and blood Dale. The least you can do is share a few Dale photos.”

“Sorry,” said Nate. “I don’t give away pictures of Dale, especially not naked ones.”

“I know you’ve got more than you know what to do with,” said Michelle acting quite friendly. “Come on, send me one.”

“Sorry,” said Nate.

“Well, let’s trade then,” said Michelle. “One for one. What do you say?”

Nate shook his head, “I don’t need photos of Dale in Madison Park.”

“Here’s a nice one,” said Michelle working with her phone. “This should probably be worth something in trade.”

Seconds later Nate’s phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and opened the image.

“How in the hell did you get this?” he asked in shock.

“Let me see,” said Dale, grabbing his arm to pull it over so she could look. “Oh, my God, Michelle! How DID you get that?”

The photo was an excellent image of Target Girl naked on The Wheel in the Fiji House basement. She was turned exactly sideways, such that her nipples pointed just ever so slightly to her left. She was wearing nothing save the white blindfold, and of course the straps securing her to The Wheel, one of which had a knife protruding from it.

“So what’s that photo worth in trade?” she asked.

“I don’t give out Dale photos,” said Nate.

“Okay,” said Michelle. “Well, how about this one then?”

She poked again at her phone and again Nate’s phone buzzed.

Opening the image, Nate said, “That was the same night.”

“Let me see,” said Dale, again reaching for Nate’s arm and leaning close. “Ouch! Where are you getting these?”

The second photo was of Dale on the fraternity lawn. She was facing the camera, feet apart, arms out. She looked as if she were sliding sideways on the grass, trying to stop. There were quite a few others on the lawn in the night scene, but the flash had frozen Dale with the happiest look on her face, her mouth open in the widest smile. Her eyes were similarly wide open, radiating glee.

“God, you’re cute,” said Nate. “I could just eat you up.”

“Isn’t she pretty,” said Michelle. “I just adore that photo.”

“Where did you get these?” asked Nate. “I love them!”

“I’ve got more,” said Michelle. “But shouldn’t there be something in it for me.”

“You wouldn’t blackmail her, or otherwise use them to do her harm, right?” asked Nate.

“Of course not, Nate!” said Michelle acting pissed off. “I’ve had these for a month. A big batch of them, actually. I’ve never shared them. Alexa never saw them. You better believe that she would have done something nasty with them. At the very least, they would have made the pep rally slide show.”

“But where did you get them?” asked Dale.

“From Martin,” said Michelle. “He called me just after the two of you went up there that weekend before Halloween. He said, ‘Guess who has a gorgeous bald twat? Once I saw the pictures, I knew that my brother and I had the same taste in pussy. I have to agree with Martin, Dale. You do have a ‘gorgeous twat.’ It looks awesome, completely bald like that.”

“Thank you . . . I guess,” said Dale looking a little unsettled.

“Alexa and I both shave. In case you're interested," said Michelle.

"Hmm . . . I think I'm just into guys," said Dale.

"About trading photos, Michelle, maybe someday, if I get to know you better, but probably not. Dale's comfortable with me having photos because she trusts me completely," said Nate.

"And I expect she trusts me," said Michelle.

"But I don't," said Nate. "Frankly, I am quite concerned that you have these photos."

"And yet I've had them for a month and have never shared them until tonight. Surely that shows that you can trust me," said Michelle.

"It's definitely to your credit," said Nate. "But trust? I'm not there yet. I saw you deck my girl. That hurt . . . a lot. That's a pretty deep hole to dig yourself back up out of."

"Nate…" pleaded Dale.

"Dale… I'm just being honest. If one day Michelle and I manage to trust one another, it will only be because we pounded through the issues. Pretending that there aren't all these hurdles gets us nowhere.”

"I guess," said Dale with a heavy sigh. "But back to the previous topic . . . Martin . . . he didn't take those photos, did he?"

"No," said Michelle. "He said he went through the spook alley with Tiffany, his girlfriend. You might recognize her, Dale."

"I saw her that night . . . the redhead," said Dale thinking back.

"Well, Martin recognized you that night . . . and he knew that you had seen him as well," said Michelle. "He didn't take any pictures himself, but he said he had no trouble rounding up photos of you the next day. Many people had them and were sharing them. As far as he knows, no one knew who you were. According to Martin, you were a phantom that appeared at the U on Halloween and disappeared back into the ether."

"I'm surprised we mostly got away with that," said Nate. "Especially after Dale went crazy . . . after her mask was off."

"Well, I've got more ‘crazy Dale’ photos," said Michelle. "But you still owe me for the two samples just sent."

Nate decided that he needed to move the evening along, so when the waiter came with the dessert menu, he declined on behalf of all of them, asking for the check. He had purposefully forced himself to leave some steak on his plate. He was already thinking of the game the next day. He wanted to get a good night’s sleep, and he knew that Dale needed her sleep as well.

When the check came, Michelle grabbed it. He wasn't surprised. In fact, he was expecting that she might. She was trying so hard to be as friendly as she could. So he didn't object and let her pay.

Later that evening he and Dale were at his house, brushing their teeth. Dale had reiterated her interest in making love, but he could tell that she was too tired. She even looked as if she might fall asleep standing at the sink.

Minutes later, she was naked in his bedroom, and she again asked him to make love to her. She rubbed his dick through his pants encouraging him to get his clothes off quickly; however, she was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Nate climbed into bed next to her, allowing his boner to press firmly against her thigh. This was familiar territory for him, lying awake with a naked sleeping cheerleader and a painful erection. And yet he was glad she had gone to sleep quickly. She needed her sleep after getting so little the night before, and he was glad that she had fallen asleep without revisiting the emotional abyss of being denied the opportunity to help her team by cheering at the big game.

He himself lay awake thinking about the big day just ahead, at least there wouldn’t be school; however, there was the all-important game as well as the noise parade. Both events promised to be very tough for the demoted cheerleader in his arms. He tried to think of what he might do to ease her pain, and yet he had no ideas.

After all was said and done, he had to focus on the game. His leg was feeling much better, and yet he would still be wearing the brace as a safeguard. He tried to concentrate on the game. He knew that was what Dale would have him do. Likely putting on a brave face and picking up the pieces in the coming week would be easier for Dale, for both of them, if Prospect managed to prove the experts wrong and pull out a win.

It was his turn to experience a little sleeplessness, but fortunately it didn't go on for too long. He allowed himself to think of the treasure in his arms. That did the trick and he eventually was able to join her in dreamland.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 385: Game Day Morning**

Nate gained consciousness gradually the next morning. As it was Saturday, there had been no need for an alarm. Dale was still in bed with him. That was a rare occurrence, but a very pleasant surprise. She tended to be awake and out of bed before he had even woken up. It had always been so, even their very first night together in the tent on the mountain. The next morning she had been gone, having wandered up to the lookout where Mike had invited her in for a cup of coffee.

“Good morning, Lover,” she said softly once she noticed that his eyes were open. She snuggled into him, pressing her nude body against him.

“Good morning,” he said happily, turning and kissing the closest thing, her forehead. “It’s nice to sleep in and it is especially nice to wake up being hugged.”

Yep, on both accounts,” she said. “I’ve just been lying here, enjoying being close, and thinking.”

That comment brought Nate back to reality. It was the day of the big game and Dale was not going to be allowed to cheer.

Taking a deep breath, he said, “Pleasant thoughts, I hope.”

“Not especially,” said Dale. “It’s going to be a challenging day. I’m a naughty girl. Girls aren’t supposed to do whatever it is that I did. I’m being punished. I’m going to need to be a brave girl . . . even braver than yesterday at school. I’m going to need you to make it through this.”

“Well, I’m here,” said Nate. “We’ll make it through together.”

“But you need to focus on football . . . Number seventy-nine, starting left defensive end for Prospect High School, Nathan Miller!” she said in a dramatic voice obviously imitating the announcer at a football game.

“That’s me!” said Nate.

“Can I be your personal cheerleader, Nate?” she asked. “Your secret cheerleader? I mean, I won’t be able to actually cheer or anything, but it might be nice for me to imagine that I have a least some role, no matter how tiny.”

“I’d like that,” said Nate. “In a way it’s ironic that you would say that. All fall I’ve felt like you were my own personal cheerleader. Did I mention that, or did you come up with this on your own?”

“I don’t remember you mentioning that,” said Dale.

“Well, it would be an honor to consider you my personal cheerleader. Unfortunately, it seems like a big waste of your talents. All the other guys should be benefiting from your school spirit . . . and the way you can shake your money maker . . . not just me. But I guess there isn’t anything that we can do about that,” he said.

“Nate, I need your help with something,” she said.

“You name it, Lover,” he said agreeably.

“I’ve got a crazy thought going around and around in my head. Even though I know it’s a crazy thought, it’s still in there going around and around. Will you tell me that it’s a crazy thought, unless it isn’t, so that I can get it out of there?” she asked.

“You? Crazy thoughts?” he said laughing. “But, sure. That sounds like a service that I can provide. Tell me your thought. Maybe it’s not so crazy.”

“I’ve just been lying here thinking that this might all be my fault after all. Maybe I am to blame. Maybe I really was naughty. Maybe I did provoke Alexa. Maybe I deserve this. Maybe McRoberts is right. Maybe I am guilty and need to be punished . . . banned . . . suspended.”

Nate laughed.

“Please don’t laugh,” she pleaded. “Help me with this. It’s hard enough without getting laughed at. Help me keep my sanity. I don’t want to go crazy.”

“Those ideas are just so crazy that I’m having trouble deciding if you are serious or not,” said Nate. “Am I really supposed to take these thoughts seriously?”

“Last night you told Michelle that you thought you had a greater belief in justice and a greater trust in our judicial system than I do,” she said. “Do you remember saying that?”

“Yes, I said that,” said Nate.

“Well, it’s not that, Nate. I have a belief in justice. I guess it is just a little more obvious to you who is guilty and who is innocent,” she said.

“It’s completely obvious to me,” said Nate.

“Well, thinking about this objectively, I think I see grey where you must see only black and white. I don’t see Michelle as guilty like I know you do. I know she was there. I know she helped the evil princess, but I see extenuating circumstances. And I’m having trouble seeing myself as entirely innocent. And then, if I’m not entirely innocent, then no one is completely guilty,” she said. “I mean, I must not be innocent. I wouldn’t feel this guilty pit at the base of my stomach if I were completely innocent. And McRoberts just might be right to be punishing me along with the others . . . right?”

“That’s absolutely crazy,” he said. “Fortunately, you already know that.”

“But why is it crazy?” she pleaded.

“It just is,” he said. “It reminds me of how I have heard that some rape victims blame themselves. You are not to blame for what happened. The idea is so crazy that I am having trouble coming up with a logical argument to prove to you that it’s crazy.”

“Please try,” pleaded Dale.

“Well, it’s just that no girl, or boy for that matter, deserves to be stripped, tied and displayed to hundreds of their peers in a spread-eagle position,” said Nate. “That’s just crazy. Let’s think of what you are guilty of: being smart and athletic, having school spirit, being considerate of others, being attractive and desirable. Okay, some streaking. What else? Well, even the things you are accused of: ‘outing’ Michelle . . . so long ago that it hardly matters . . . pretending to be heterosexual. Okay, I guess you are to blame. I guess McRoberts’ punishment is fair after all.” He laughed.

“Nate, you’re not helping,” said Dale.

“It’s just crazy, that’s all,” said Nate. “No one deserves to be tied naked to their school’s mascot, their genitalia on display for all to see. No one deserves that. You especially don’t deserve that.”

“It seems like a crazy idea,” she said. “But it’s hard to refute . . . logically, isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” said Nate. “But it is crazy. You know it and I know it. Are you ready to get up?”

“I guess so, should we go out to breakfast?” she asked.

“That sounds fun,” he said sitting up.

Dale headed home to shower. For one reason or another, they had never really showered together. Upon entering her house, she discovered that her mom was up and in the kitchen.

“Good morning, Dale,” she said. “I know you’re probably going to jump into the shower, but would you like a quick cup of coffee first?”

“That would be nice,” said Dale. While her mother poured her a cup, Dale thought of something she had been thinking about. “Mom, I’ve been wondering . . . why would Mr. McRoberts even consider cancelling the game?”

“Well, my guess is that he’s feeling a lot of pressure, dear. I think he’s in over his head . . . without the skillset to deal with a major catastrophe.”

“Pressure?” asked Dale.

“He’s getting it from every direction, even your mother,” said Mrs. Jordan with a smile. “But in addition to me and a few other parents, he’s got the School District Superintendent (his boss), and the school board, breathing down his neck. The press is hounding him, too. This is all playing out in the public eye. On top of everything, he knows he has already screwed up, so he’s fighting for his professional career.

“I overheard talk in the outer office of people wanting decisive action. Everyone is telling him that the situation demands real leadership. Allowing the team to play in the game as if nothing happened, with the press scrutinizing every move, probably makes him look like he has his head in the sand. Late in the day, he told me that he feels that he can’t coast through the game and hope to salvage his job next week. Right now the spotlight is on the school.

“The difficulty in talking him into disbanding the cheerleaders was convincing him that it would appear to be a big enough response. He wanted to cancel the game to show the world that things were not ‘business as usual’ at Prospect High.

“And there is yet another consideration that came up in our several discussions. He feels that if he is ultimately fired, that cancelling the game will somehow look good on his resume. Fired for doing what was right, even though he knew it would be unpopular. And he says he’s not targeting you. He even thought out loud about letting you cheer alone, but I don’t think he was ever really entertaining that idea. Among other things, he thought that could further damage your already compromised ability to get along with your peers. Bottom line, the man is just trying to save his own butt,” said Mrs. Jordan.

Deep in thought, Dale took her cup of coffee and headed down the hall to the shower.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 386: Dale’s Mother Comes Clean**

After Dale had showered and dressed, she walked out to the living room. Her father was there in his recliner.

“Have a seat, dear,” he said, indicating the couch.

“What’s up?” she asked, suddenly realizing from his manner that something big seemed to be in the air. As she sat down, she noticed a wrapped present, an old photo album and the framed four-generations photo from the wall on the coffee table.

“Are you ready, Beth,” said her father, calling into the kitchen. “Dale’s here.”

“Which album is this, dad?” she asked, reaching for it.

“Not yet,” he said holding up his hand. “Let’s wait for your mother.”

“Good morning, Dale,” said her mother entering the living room, bringing the coffee pot to refill Dale’s cup. “Was the date with Michelle fun?”

“I had a good time,” said Dale taking a sip and relaxing. “It was a little rocky at moments, but at least Michelle and Nate got to know each other a little.”

“I’m glad that it went okay,” said her mom quickly returning the pot to the kitchen and taking a seat next to her on the couch.

Her mom leaned over and hugged her. Dale set the cup of coffee on the coffee table so that it wouldn’t spill. What started as a quick little hug transitioned into a clingy one.

“Are you okay, mom,” asked Dale, noticing that her mom’s eyes were moist.

“I’m fine,” said her mother. “It’s just that I have something to tell you. Something that I have wanted to tell you your entire life.”

She picked up the four-generation photo from the coffee table and placed it on Dale’s lap. “Dale, the woman whose lap you are sitting on…”

“My great-grandmother Parsons?” asked Dale.

“Exactly . . . my beloved grandmother,” said her mother. “I was thinking about her a lot yesterday. Do you remember that I mentioned her last night?”

“I do,” said Dale. “You said that you wished she had been with you yesterday at Prospect High.”

“That’s right,” said her mom. “You don’t know how hard it has been for me to keep this from you all these years. She is arguably the most important woman this state has ever produced. She was the President of the state chapter of NAWSA, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, during the years leading up to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment by Congress in 1919. She led the fight to get our state to ratify the amendment, and is credited with having accomplished that goal when many thought that it could not be done. Then, as now, this was a very conservative state. As you know, the amendment was ratified in August of 1920 giving women the right to vote.”

“You’ve always talked about the Nineteenth Amendment, mom,” said Dale.

“I have dear,” said her mother. “That is the one part of this story that I did not keep from you. It was a difficult uphill battle. Men had to be persuaded to support the amendment, for only men could vote.”

Taking the photo from Dale’s lap and placing it back on the coffee table, she picked up the photo album and opened it across their two laps.

“She was particularly proud of this photo,” said her mother. “Here she is with Carrie Chapman Catt. This was taken in Washington D.C. early in 1920, so after the amendment had been passed but with plenty of work still ahead. Mrs. Catt was the National President of NAWSA, having taken over after Susan B. Anthony retired. There are many heroes of the Nineteenth Amendment, but Mrs. Catt is at the top of the list, and in her speeches she often mentioned your great-grandmother as being instrumental in securing the support of a younger generation. In other words, your great-grandmother was a part of something very big, an important part . . . certainly within the state, but nationwide as well.”

“She looks so young,” commented Dale.

“She was young,” said her mother. “Young and beautiful.”

“This is so cool, mom,” said Dale, trying to turn the page.

“Not yet, dear,” said her mom, taking the album and closing it.

“Why have you never told me this?” asked Dale.

“I promised my mother that I wouldn’t tell you,” said her mother, looking deep into Dale’s eyes. “Why don’t you open the present, honey?” she added indicating the package on the table.

Dale picked it up. It had the look and feel of a gift that had been wrapped many years earlier and then put in storage. The light blue wrapping paper was somewhat dingy, and the ribbon was smashed flat. The simple tag read, ‘Dale,’ nothing more.

“Open it?” asked Dale.

“Yes,” said her mother.

Halfway through the removal of the paper, Dale paused to study the anxious expressions on both of her parent’s faces.

“So, she was a Suffragette?” asked Dale.

“Well, yes and no,” said her mother. “She preferred the term ‘Suffragist.’ The term ‘Suffragette’ was coined somewhat late in the movement by the Daily Mail, a London newspaper. It is a diminutive that was intended to be derogatory. It came to be the term used in Britain for the violent suffragists. Your great grandmother was like you, peace loving and intelligent. She was a real fighter, but always on an intellectual level.”

The present was a book, and as she removed the last of the paper, Dale studied the cover. “Votes for Women,” she read aloud.

“Look at the subtitle, dear,” encouraged her mother.

“Dale Parsons: the Essential Suffragist,” read Dale.

“Yes, dear, this is your great-grandmother’s biography, written in the nineteen-sixties,” said her mother.

“Mom?” she asked, looking into her mother’s tear filled eyes.

Her mom leaned in and embraced her saying, “I’ve always found it curious that I got away with referring to her simply as ‘your great-grandmother Parsons.’”

“But, mom?” asked Dale, trying to understand.

“Yes, Dale. We named you for your great-grandmother . . . she was such a wonderful person . . . and you are so very much like her,” said her mother.

“I’m named for my great-grandmother, for a suffragette?” asked Dale.

“A Suffragist, honey. Yes, you are named for Dale Parsons, a remarkable woman,” she said.

“But Flash Gordon? His girlfriend . . . Dale Arden? That’s who I’m named for, right?” asked Dale in confusion, her reality suddenly being stood on its head.

**The Exhibitionist Next Door - 387: Dale’s Mother continued**

“I’m sorry, Dale. My mother made me promise.”

“Now I’m really confused,” said Dale pressing her palms into her cheeks.

“My mother did not want us to name you ‘Dale.’ But then after we did, she made us promise to never tell you. Flash Gordon was merely a cover story . . . a pretty good one, as it turned out.”

“I always enjoyed that you bonded so tightly with Flash Gordon and his Dale,” said her father.

“I love Flash. I love Dale,” said Dale, tears in her eyes. “But why would grandma make you promise?”

“Here, I’ll tell you, but first I have one more thing to show you,” said her mother, again picking up the album and opening it. “There is a plaque dedicated to Dale Parsons in the rotunda of the state capitol. We will all need to go see it together the next time we are in the capitol. This is a picture of it . . . the plaque has a picture of her on it. Isn’t she young and beautiful?”

“But grandma? Why?” asked Dale in consternation.

“Yes, that,” said her mother turning to a different page in the album. “Here is Dale Parsons’ obituary. Read the second to last paragraph.”

As Dale read, her eyes grew large.

“Yes, dear,” said her mother. “She was apprehended nude three times during the early twenties. It was a very different era. While she was in fact jailed, more than once, indecent exposure was dealt with quite differently then. You have to remember that, in the early twenties, hemlines were mid-calf. In other words, showing the knee was considered by many to be indecent . . . and Dale Parsons was apprehended completely nude. Can you imagine?”

Dale’s mother laughed, shaking her head, but Dale had a look of utter shock on her face.

“Well, as you’ve just read, she was eventually diagnosed as having Hysteria. That was actually a common medical diagnosis back then . . . but only for women, of course. Well, the recommended treatment was hysterectomy. Once the doctors decided that the uterus was the problem, they wanted to get it out of there. Well, she refused. Fortunately! Otherwise you and I would of course not exist. And fortunately, Dale Parsons still had a few strong allies in the feminist community . . . women with clout who stood by her even during this difficult period. Others turned on her, and she became somewhat of an outcast,” said her mother. “As you’ve read, she was institutionalized for a period in 1923 to 1924.”

Looking over at Dale, she saw that she had her head way back against the couch cushion, her mouth and eyes wide open.

“Is this too much all at once, dear?” she asked.

“I’m in shock,” said Dale. “But keep going. I guess I need to hear this. If I’m named for her, as you say, then I need to know, right?”

“Well, when I was little, my grandmother Dale told me stories about being comfortable with her body,” said her mother. “When I was older the stories became more detailed and took on real meaning for me. I can share the ones that I recall with you. But, to make a long story short, she was an embarrassment to the entire family, especially to my mother. Imagine growing up with Dale Parsons for a mother . . . her renown as a suffragist, but also her notoriety due to the indecent exposure incidents, add in the fact that she spent time in a mental institution. But I loved her so very much. Like I said, she was so very much like you, strong, smart, and confident. If she decided to accomplish something, absolutely nothing got in her way. You too could get a constitutional amendment ratified, dear.”

“So, that’s why you didn’t tell me?” asked Dale. “Because she was the family embarrassment?”

“Your grandmother did everything she could to try and keep us from naming you, ‘Dale,’” said her father. “But then when we disobeyed her, she made us promise to never tell you who you were named for. She was sure that your mother got her relationship with nudity from her mother’s stories….”

“Mom . . . you?” asked Dale, a look of bewilderment on her face.

“I’m afraid so, Dale,” admitted her mother, nodding and looking deep into her daughter’s eyes. “I’m afraid so.”

“Like mother, like daughter,” said her dad, chuckling.

“Oh, my God, this is too much!” said Dale.

Her mother hugged her, “I know, honey, but maybe it helps a little to know that you are not alone. Since your exhibitionism is now widely known, it seemed to be time to finally come clean.”

Dale pulled back. Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

“The current President of the state chapter of the League of Women Voters contacts me every year. NAWSA became the League of Women Voters in 1920. She tells me there are quite a few women who are excited to meet Dale Parsons’ great-granddaughter and namesake. She will be so excited to hear that I have finally let you in on the big family secret. They have you penciled in to address their convention in 2020. That will be the centennial year for the Nineteenth Amendment. They are already planning quite a celebration.”

“But, mom . . . you, nudity?” asked Dale.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Fortunately, I’ve had your father, just as you now have Nate,” said her mother.

“Wait . . . just how much do you know?” asked Dale.

“We know quite a bit, dear. Your dad wanted to stop you from going out at night a couple of years back, but I wouldn’t let him. You see, I understand how this is. I’m pretty sure it is genetic. My mom . . . somehow it skipped over both her, and Tess . . . Tess seems to be immune. My mother never believed it was genetic. You know, the nature vs. nurture debate. In case she was right, your dad and I did everything we could to prevent exposing you . . . pun intended,” said her mother smiling. “That is why we went along with the promise after defying her and naming you ‘Dale,’. But, I guess that did serve its purpose. If nothing else, I suppose we have proven that ‘nature’ not ‘nurture’ is behind this need that both you and I experience.”

“And you know about Nate?” asked Dale.

“We keep a pretty good eye on you, dear,” said her mother. “We didn’t know about Nate until sometime in the fall. But now that we’re talking, I would like to know more about one weekend in early August. You went out that night, and you didn’t return. Your father and I were in a state of panic, not knowing what to do. We were ready to head out and search for you, when you called. It was such a relief to hear your voice. I didn’t even mind that you lied to me . . . at least I knew that you were safe.”

“That was the morning that Nate saved me,” said Dale. “But, wait . . . Dad . . . what has he seen?”

“I’m afraid so, dear,” said her mother. “Run around naked like that and things are going to be seen. It’s a small house, and given the current generation’s penchant for grooming . . . well, things really get seen. But don’t worry about your dad. He’s as good a man, as true a husband and father, as there ever was.”

“Mom, can I tell Nate, or is there still more that you haven’t yet told me?” asked Dale.

“Well, someday we’d like to hear all about how Nate ended up being involved, and we’d like to hear all about that weekend back in August,” she said. “We’ve been so curious. But possibly you and Nate can tell us together . . . that is if you are ready. And there is one thing that I so very much want to do. I want to introduce you to your great-grandmother. But if you’d like, Nate can come to the cemetery with us.”

Next door, Nate was reading the morning newspaper when he got a text, “Hey, Lover! You are not going to believe this! We’ve got skeletons in our closet. How soon can you get your butt over here? I guess I have to stop calling you, Buster.”

Nate tucked the newspaper under his arm and headed next door. The front page featured a big article about Miss Whitaker. There was another smaller article about Dale; although, again she was photographed from the back and not mentioned by name.