“We can share the bed.” Anna stated.

“No, its fine, I’ll sleep on the couch.” Ryan said as he picked up his pillow.

“It’s been a week.” Anna said with a sigh, “You should come back to bed.”

Ryan looked at the doorway like he was unsure. Anna was growing exasperated with him. From wanting to do anything to be away from Ryan, and any other male in Sallas, she was now annoyed that he wasn’t spending more time with her. It wasn’t like she wanted to suddenly be with Ryan every moment of the day but it wasn’t like she hated him either. She couldn’t help but be fond of the only male that had ever shown her genuine sympathy.

Ever since Ryan broke down and told Anna how he felt they’re relationship had warmed up. They weren’t best friends but they had a few normal conversations, Anna would ask about his day and in turn he would help her be more independent, at the moment that primarily meant helping with potty training. He seemed like a nice guy and although Anna was somewhat resentful that she was still so reliant on him she couldn’t help but be happy that she thought they could easily spend her their lives sharing a house.

“I don’t know if I should.” Ryan put a hand up to the back of his neck.

“Look, I obviously can’t make you do anything.” Anna shook her head, “But you have classes and you really need to be well-rested for them. I can see the bags under your eyes.”

Anna could see Ryan was being swayed to her side of the argument but he still seemed unsure. It was like the cork had popped on his guilt about the situation and he just couldn’t put it back in. Far from being a male that ran the household he had completely abdicated his position.

“If for no other reason you should come to bed to keep up appearances.” Anna finally said.

“Huh?” Ryan grunted.

“What if someone comes in and sees you on the couch?” Anna asked, “What if Paul came in and noticed you’d been sleeping there? I’m not suggesting anything else, but we really need to play things safe… at least until we know how things stand.”

That seemed to get Ryan’s attention. He reluctantly dropped his pillow back down and looked up at Anna as if to make sure she was alright with this. When Anna nodded encouragingly Ryan lifted the cover and slipped into bed. He was smiling and Anna felt sure that he was glad she had given him a reason to stay in the bed.

The past week had been one of the strangest of Anna’s life. Her relationship with Ryan, such as it was, hadn’t really changed all that much. They didn’t talk a lot and when they did there was always an awkwardness that neither seemed able to dispel. The main change to her life was her freedom. Ryan had started treating her as an equal partner and that meant that whilst some things changed others stayed the same. It would take time to get used to the new dynamic.

Anna was still doing a majority of the chores because Ryan was busy studying. She had to keep the apartment tidy so as not to arouse any suspicion if anyone visited but Ryan was doing his fair share of the cooking. However, the biggest and most important development had been Anna’s potty training. Anna was proud to say she hadn’t messed her diaper since they agreed on potty training, this was mostly thanks to spending all her time at home and therefore near the toilet. The problem was her bladder which clearly still needed work. She just didn’t have the muscle strength to hold her pee for long enough.

The most important thing though was that Anna had never been happier. For once in her life she felt she had some control over her own destiny. Potty training was very much an optional thing for women, not that they were the ones that chose, and some men simply never put their women through it. The good news was that if Anna ever did get out of diapers she wouldn’t need to hide that fact. That was her thoughts at least, she didn’t want to speak to Ryan about it in case he had bad news for her.

“Goodnight.” Ryan said as he leaned over and turned off the bedside light.

“Goodnight.” Anna replied as she did the same thing.

As Anna laid down that night and felt the bed sinking under the weight of Ryan next to her she couldn’t help but smile. It wasn’t long until she heard Ryan lightly snoring and realised he must have been even more exhausted than she thought. She closed her own eyes and soon drifted off herself.

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Ryan didn’t know what married life would be like before his wedding but he never envisioned what he now had. He was just finishing up a lecture and putting his stuff away, he had been sat with the usual group of guys again though he felt more awkward than ever before, and he was more than ready to get back home.

It felt to Ryan like he was lying to everyone. These guys he spent his days with thought he was just like the rest of them, an alpha male keeping his woman down. They had no idea that when he went home he helped with the chores, talked to Anna like she was a human being and generally did everything he could to make her comfortable.

“I tell you…” Paul was loudly saying to his group of friends, “Jane is a real handful in the sack, you know?”

As all Paul’s friends and sycophants laughed Ryan had to pretend to join in. He hated the way the others talked about their wives, as if they were pieces of meat or toys. He would’ve been happy to say goodbye and run home but he had to keep up appearances. His body may have been with the other males in his class but his mind was at home with Anna. He hoped she was getting along alright.

If people found out what Ryan’s home life was like there would be hell to pay for both he and Anna. In some ways it was exciting but in many other ways it was utterly terrifying. He frequently wondered if he had made a mistake in confessing his true feelings to Anna but at the same time it felt inevitable, if it hadn’t been that night it would’ve been the next one or the one after that. He wasn’t the sort of person who could bottle up their emotions forever.

“What about Anna?” Paul asked as he gave Ryan a rough shove in the shoulder, “Does she put out?”

“Huh? Oh… yeah.” Ryan replied rather timidly. He smiled as everyone laughed obscenely. It was like being back in school.

“Good man.” Paul roared.

Ryan suppressed the desire to roll his eyes. He really couldn’t stand his closest neighbor, he was the perfect example of all that was wrong with Sallasian society. He was a great lumbering oaf who took great pleasure in his position of superiority despite doing nothing to earn it. Regardless, he kept himself quiet and made his way out of the lecture hall and into the hallways. It was busy which meant it was easy for Ryan to “accidentally” get lost and separated from the rest of the guys.

The sun was out but there was a noticeable chill in the air compared to the height of summer. Fall had arrived even if most of the leaves remained on the trees. Ryan walked out into the fresh air and towards home. He felt bad that he had to leave Anna alone for so much of the day and always worried that something might’ve happened. It was silly, she so rarely left the apartment, but he knew what the men here were like.

Whilst out in the world generally the general attitude of men to women was condescending more than anything within the confines of this ultra-competitive college it was much more hostile. Women were status symbols so those who had a wife flaunted it and the harsher they were the more manly they were seen to be. It quickly devolved into a race to the bottom with every man doing his best to show everyone else he was the harshest male around. It meant that life for the women at the college was actually worse than it would probably be outside of the bubble. Out there a woman could expect to just be belittled like a child, in here the women were at constant risk from men who saw it as their duty to be as macho and horrible as possible. Ryan hated all of it.

Ryan went up to his apartment and let himself in. As soon as he looked inside there was a shocked exclamation of surprise and he quickly pulled the door closed again with him still in the hallway. His cheeks had gone a rosy red.

During the week Ryan had bought Anna something to help wean her out of diapers. She had been very embarrassed at first and refused it but eventually she got it out herself sensing, no doubt, that Ryan’s intentions were pure and that it would actually help her. The pink training potty was scaled up for an adult woman but in all other respects was exactly the same as a child’s one. It even came with some little hand-puppets that were apparently supposed to keep the woman occupied as if she were a child.

It was that very potty that Ryan had just opened the door to see Anna using. He didn’t know how she felt but he was certainly very embarrassed for her. He had only opened the door for a couple of seconds but it was long enough to see his wife naked from the waist down and perched on the potty in the centre of the living room.

Ryan wasn’t exactly sure what to do next so he stayed out in the hallway. After a couple of minutes he heard footsteps rapidly approaching the door and a red-faced Anna opened it. She stood to the side with her head bowed as Ryan walked in. He tried to ignore the potty but he still ended up glancing over and saw a small amount of urine in the bottom of the bowl.

“I’m getting better…” Anna said quietly from behind Ryan.

“Well done.” Ryan turned and smiled at his wife. He reached forward and gave her a quick unsure hug.

Ryan was genuinely happy for Anna. Toilet training had been a very frustrating experience for her and it seemed like she had expected much faster progress. He had bought her the potty precisely because she was getting so annoyed at herself for failing to reach the toilet. Even that had been difficult at first. Ryan had noticed Anna was too embarrassed to try to reach the potty if he was in the room with her. He didn’t blame her.

Initially they had put the potty in the bathroom but it quickly became clear that was asking too much of Anna’s bladder. Anna had instead been taking it around the apartment with her. When she had made it in time she was very excitable and Ryan had to be careful not to be condescending in his praise.

“I’ll have to buy you a packet of pull-ups.” Ryan said, “For when you’re ready. No rush, of course.”

Ryan turned to see a small smile curl the corner of Anna’s lips before it quickly disappeared. He was proud of her though, she was doing very well. It seemed with the success of Anna’s potty training their relationship was also improving. They were able to have friendly conversations which was a step up from ignoring each other. Ryan had learnt a lot about Anna including a lot of her dreams, he hoped to fulfill at least some of them one day.

Fulfilling Anna’s dreams required him to fulfil his first. As a regular man most of what she wanted, such as leaving the country or gaining the smallest amount of autonomy, was impossible. As an executive it would still be very hard to get out of a country that didn’t like its citizens leaving without a reason. But if he could run his father’s company visas and the like wouldn’t be so difficult to obtain. It was yet another reason he was laser-focused on getting through college and into business as soon as possible.

“Oh, just some bad news, there’s going to be a party here in a few weeks.” Ryan said as he made his way towards the bathroom.

“Ugh, really?” Anna replied as she followed him down the hallway.

“Sorry, but yeah.” Ryan shrugged, “Like you said, we have to keep up appearances.”

Ryan had been about to get into the shower but just as he turned on the water he heard his phone ringing. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and saw that it was his father. It felt like a lead weight dropped in his stomach, he had been trying to find any reason not to return calls or answer his father’s texts recently. He turned off the water again and walked quickly through to the bedroom.

“Hello?” Ryan said as he finally answered the call.

“Ryan! I was beginning to think you were avoiding me.” Michael’s voice was loud and he was laughing. It was clear he couldn’t fathom why anyone wouldn’t want to talk to him.

“Of course not.” Ryan replied perhaps a bit too seriously.

“Right… How’s college life treating you, son?” Michael asked.

“Things are going great.” Ryan answered, “I’m enjoying the course and my grades are good.”

“Fantastic.” Michael said, “We’ve got an office already lined up for you here. A corner one. Do you remember old Mr. Watkins? Jeff Watkins? He’s retiring in a couple of years. Should be perfect timing for you to step right in to his shoes.”

Ryan felt his heart skip a beat. He knew his father was planning to fast track him up the corporate ladder but he had no idea he was being lined up straight for a position on the board. That would be incredible, he’d be right in the thick of the action and making more money than he would be able to spend. It was everything he dreamed of and it was being offered to him on a silver plate.

“How’s Anna by the way?” Michael asked when Ryan didn’t respond to him.

“She’s… She’s fine.” Ryan said as he was rapidly brought back to his phone call.

“Are you sure?” Michael asked, “If she’s not up to snuff we could replace her. You can send her back to that family of hers and you can pick someone else. I can’t say I think much of the in-laws, they seem rather low class and Harold can’t swing a golf club to save his life. With your future ahead of you I’m sure women would fling themselves your way.”

“That’s not necessary.” Ryan replied woodenly. It suddenly felt quite hard to talk and he would dearly have loved for this phone call to end.

“You’ve got her under control then?” Michael continued probing, “Shown her who’s boss?”

Ryan pulled the phone away from his head and looked into it. He blinked a couple of times and frowned. Something seemed wrong, this conversation was rapidly becoming an interrogation. Had someone at the college said something to Michael? Maybe Michael never truly believed his son could keep a woman in check…

“Ryan? Are you there?” Michael’s voice was distant.

“Yeah… Yeah, no, everything’s fine.” Ryan finally said as he brought the phone back to his ear.

“Great!” Michael’s enthusiasm didn’t sound entirely genuine, “Well, just to let you know, you are to come home for Thanksgiving. We’ve invited Anna’s family over as well.”

“Actually, I think we were planning…” Ryan started. He desperately wanted to keep Anna away from either of their families.

“We’ll see you then.” Michael interrupted with finality. The tone of his voice was clear: Do not argue with me.

The phone line went dead and Ryan fell backwards on to the bed. A conversation with his father was more exhausting than any of his classes or nights out with Paul’s friends. He looked up at the ceiling and sighed heavily, there would be nothing else to do but play happy families. It pained him that he would have to ask Anna to go back into that subservient role even if it was only temporary. He told himself that it was for the best and that they would both be better off long term if he had the job he so desired.

“Is everything OK?” Anna’s voice came from the doorway. Ryan sat up and couldn’t help but smile when he saw her.

“Sorry. More bad news…” Ryan said as the smile faded.