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Binder

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Sarah Kryspin

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When I open my eyes, my breath catches.

It's *me*.

Alone in my dorm room, having strategically waited for my roommate to leave for her eight AM class, I've put on my binder. Fresh out of the envelope from Gc2b, the first one I've ever bought. And now it sits snugly against my skin.

I run my eyes over my body in the mirror. Then I look, stare at that piece of fabric which wraps tightly around my chest.

Chest.

Not breasts, not boobs, but a chest. *My* chest. Flat. I smile and turn sideways, looking myself over.

But I know it's an illusion. I wait for that jolt of discomfort to rush through me, that jolt that always comes when I touch myself there, for those breasts to make themselves known and shatter the illusion that my brain has hopelessly formed.

I inhale sharply and press my hands against the fabric.

Happiness rushes through my brain. I'm overcome. For the first time, I don't feel that jolt of discomfort—because there's almost nothing there. The binder conceals it all. I run my hands over my chest again and again, grinning into the mirror. I hold back laughter and cup my face. I'm going to look so good.

I grab the shirt that I had placed beside me, my chosen adornment for this moment of truth—it was light-green and striped, girlish, but not too much so. If I can look like a guy in this, I reason, I can look like a guy in anything.

I pull the shirt over my head, and turn toward the mirror. I look at my face, first.

My hair is short, a pixie-cut. I first got it cut like that when I was 16, and it was a big moment, almost as big as this one. I'd been begging my mom for months to let me get it done, but she had kept saying I'd look too much like a boy. After awhile, though, she caved. One of my friends, a bisexual girl, had had it done. Maybe my mom started thinking girls *can* have short hair. I had been looking into a mirror then as well, watching brown clumps of hair fall to my feet. When it was done my mouth hurt from grinning. That day, I took my first selfie.

Today was even better, though. This package, received at my own college address, paid for through my own debit card, had no hint of my mom on it. No more begging, I had told myself. My bank statement with Gc2b marked on it arrived like a medal of honor.

Still looking into my mirror, I lowered my eyes to the chest, where my shirt rested. No suggestion of breasts disrupted the stripes: they ran perfectly from left to right. I straightened up and my shoulders looked broader. My hands again found their way to my chest, searching for the lie, but there was none. It was flat.

Oh, *Jesus*. I actually look *hot*. I mean, I look like a fairy—after all, what straight guy would wear this shirt?—but I like it. Damn, like, *I* would fuck me.

I laugh and run my hand through my hair, looking at my reflection.

I wonder vaguely if I could get a gay guy to fall for me. Usually I carry such a dyke vibe that it's practically impossible. Maybe they'd be repelled when they found out. Maybe they'd call me a liar. Maybe they'd find my body disgusting — they wouldn't be the first.

But it's okay. I'm a queer person. Maybe a guy, maybe something else. I feel good and I look hot. That's plenty for me right now.

When I wear the binder outside of my room, I make chaos. Not the yelling chaos, not the running kind of chaos. I'm talking about the little gears turning in people's heads when they look at me. I'm talking about the chaos of someone stumbling over saying "Ladies first." I'm talking about people staring at me for a little longer, trying to figure out what I am.

I thrive on this chaos. I'm a disruption and I know it. I don't have parents here, so nobody gets to comment on my body or clothes. If anyone tried, they'd be a weirdo—Who are you, my mother?

When I lived at home, I could always hear my mom's voice when I stood in front of the mirror. I remember that time when I had refused to wear a dress or a skirt to church, begging to wear jeans and a button-down instead. I was holding my white button-down, pressing it nervously against my body.

"Do you want to be a boy?" She asked.

"No!" I defended, scowling and staring down at my loafers. A cool breeze from the window snaked up my bare back, curling around my bra straps.

"Then why don't you want to wear a dress?"

“It’s cold, and the tights are scratchy, and I haven’t shaved my armpits,” I explained quickly, raising my arm to show her the couple inches of tangled brown hair. She made a face and looked away.

“Alright, alright,” she said. God forbid I be seen with hairy armpits.

That satisfied her, and me, since I got to wear my handsome-ass clothes. Something told me though, that she didn’t really want to hear the truth. Later that day when a waiter called me “Sir” instead of “Miss,” my mom asked me why I didn’t correct him. I told her that I didn’t “care enough,” but the fact was that I cared far too much. I liked it. I liked being called “Sir.”

Here at college, I don’t have to justify myself to anyone. My backpack has three pins for pronouns: “HE/HIM,” “SHE/HER,” and “THEY/THEM.” I’ve got a rainbow magnet on my door and a rainbow banner over my bed. I picked everything out myself: the navy blue comforter, the luxurious blue towels, the classy blue laundry basket, and the convenient plaid blue ottoman. My mom can’t tell me not to watch *Queer As Folk*, or porn for that matter. As long as I’m not bothering anyone, my business is my business.

So when my parents announce they’re coming for the weekend, I have to make a bit of a mental adjustment.

It’s only been a few weeks since I got my binder, but I have to put it away. I tuck it in the back of one of my drawers, not wanting it to fall out while they were over. *That* would need some explanation.

Forgoing my favorite piece of fabric, I instead pull one of my old lacy Victoria’s Secret bras over me. The wires poke at my skin, but I try to ignore it as I put my T-shirt on. “It’s just one day,” my friend reminds me. “You’ll survive.”

I find my mom's car and we hug. It's been weeks since we've been face to face. Later on in my room with my mother, father, brother and sister she smiles at me and compliments my stylish outfit.

"Thanks!" I smile.

"My beautiful daughter," She beams.

My gut flips, but I try not to let the smile fade, glancing at my sister. She's the only one in my family I've told about the binder. Last year before prom, when my mom abandoned me at Men's Wearhouse and went off to cry in the car, my sister stayed with me. (Later, my mom said she'd been *embarrassed*. *Her*, embarrassed? What about me? My *mom*, not coming with me to buy my *prom clothes*. She left me in a store where I was an outlier, hearing the men tell me that they'd have to put me in the kid's size, keeping me there for hours where the other boys took minutes.)

As we go walk to lunch, I can feel my breasts moving around. The straps keep falling off my shoulders, loose. I slump over slightly, wishing it fit better. I should have tightened them, I think.

"Hun, stand up straight," My dad says from behind me.

"Ugh," I groan, and try to stand up better. My dad puts his hands on my shoulders and pulls them back, trying to fix my posture. I pull away, scowling at him. Posture doesn't work like that.

We eat, talk about my classes, and watch a soccer game get out of hand with a dumb ref. It's pretty fun, but I'm not sad to see them go, either. When they leave my room, I tear off my bra and chuck it into the laundry. Ah. Free at last.

When my mother finds it, everything is silent.

It's the summer after my first year of college, and my mom's helping me unpack in my room, until she freezes. Quiet.

I look at her, my heart pounding. She's holding the fabric in her hand with a frown.

"What's this, some kind of sports bra?" She asks, glancing up at me.

I let out a small sigh of relief—she's let me off easy. My mind searches for a lie and I grab one. "Uh, maybe, I don't know I just found it in my drawer," I said, reaching out my open palm. "I'll take it."

She turns away, putting her arms through it and stretching it out. The light shines in through my bedroom window, the grilles casting a criss-crossed shadow on the floor. "It doesn't look like a bra," She says, straightening up, my pale-pink curtains swaying in the background.

My posture stiffens and I push my open palm towards her. "I said I don't know what it is." I stare at the stretching fabric. There's a thump from outside, behind the closed door. I can hear the muffled sounds of footsteps and suitcases dragging up the stairs—my brother and sister coming home—but I am blocked by the door.

She faces me with a small, pitying smile on her face. "Honey, you know you can tell me anything."

Yeah, right. I crease my eyebrows. "Yeah," I answer.

"You don't have to hide things from me," she says.

My frown deepens.

She talks on, giving me a sideways glance. "You don't usually keep secrets."

I huff out a breath, crossing my arms. “I’m not keeping a secret, why are you wasting my time with this?” Tears edge at my eyes but I hold them back. “It’s just some random thing! It’s probably my friends’ or something!” I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing for her reaction.

“Well, it was just a question! You didn’t have to get so *angry*.” She says, looking at me.

My jaw drops and I stare at her in complete fucking awe. “What? What?” I say, literally trying to understand from what planet she hailed where that wasn’t supposed to make me angry or angrier. I wasn’t even *yelling*. Though I was close to.

“Please leave.” I grunt out. The knuckles on my outstretched hand turn white as I press my fingers against the fabric, begging for her to release it. My eyes are wide and pleading.

She looks at me blankly. “Jesus, I come in here to help you unpack and you act just like your father -”

“Leave!”

“Next time you want me to help you unpack your stuff I’ll remember about this. You have no respect, no respect, did I teach you this?” She trails off like an idiot, pushing and prodding me like a three-year-old poking a tiger.

“Please, leave! Just leave!”

She shakes her head in disapproval, dropping the fabric, and leaves the room.

I catch the fabric. Slam the door shut and fall into my bed, clutching the binder close to my chest. I wrap myself in a cocoon of sheets, and wait for the sobs to shudder through me. I try to remember what led to this:

When she wouldn’t let me cut my hair.

When she wouldn’t let me wear a tuxedo to prom. She had abandoned me to the maze of suit jackets and cologne and the bigger, taller guys than me. Off crying in the car while I held

back tears in the store. After that, I wasn't much looking forward to prom. How could she have done that to me?

And yet, on my birthday, I had discovered a card at the base of the stairs, cradled by a bouquet of roses. "I am sorry for how I reacted," She had written. "I love you unconditionally."

That wasn't much different from the day I got my hair cut; worry written across her face as the locks fell to my feet, but when it was over, she smiled for me.

I turn over in my bed, sniffing. I run my fingertips over the compression fabric. Then I roll out of bed, crossing over the floral rug, and face the door. Breathing. Maybe, just maybe. . .

Finally, I open it. I step into the hallway, the hardwood flooring cool on my feet.

"Mom? I have something to tell you."

She steps into the hallway, looks at me with the fabric in my hands, and a compassionate smile emerges. My eyes slip shut as I take another breath.

Then I open my eyes and speak.