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If Only...

by Marion Umney

The air was filled with pungent scent and a wave of nausea crept through her body as she gazed at the mountain of flowers. Sadness engulfed her, and confusion, and something else, something bitter and suffocating: it was all her fault.

It wasn't meant to end this way. It was all just a bit of fun. If only they'd never come across that website with the naked girls. They had giggled and tried to act worldly wise, but she could see Jade was uncomfortable and to tell the truth she'd been uncomfortable too. There was something sad and sinister about the pictures, the girls pouting with their chests thrown forward, their eyes half closed and their lips pursed as if about to throw you a kiss. She had felt a frisson of excitement and fear run through her body right down into her crotch. She remembered she had wriggled and giggled, but Jade had just stared then moved her body into the same pose, chest out, lips pursed, eyelids half closed.

"Come on, let's have a go," Jade was pulling her sweater over her head. "Come on. Get your phone."

She had joined in. Of course she had. That edge of excitement, walking on the precipice of the unknown, that adult world which was clearly attractive and desirable, yet also dangerous in some unfathomable way. As she pulled her jumper over her head she remembered shivering as the cool air met her skin and her nipples responded, and stood erect.

As they had snapped each other in various poses, they had slowly worked their way into their roles, copying the models had been surprisingly easy and almost instinctive. They got bolder and Jade threw off her knickers reclining seductively on the bed while she snapped her again and again. The session had ended when they heard the door bang. Her mother was home. Damn. They threw their clothes on fast, giggling as their legs got caught in 'inside out' trousers and Jade got her jumper on back to front. By the time her mother arrived at her room they had their homework out and butter wouldn't have melted in their mouths. She didn't suspect a thing.

It would have been fine if it had stopped there – just their day of fun and frivolity, pictures which would have been deleted pretty soon. It was when Shane had told her she was just a tart that she had seen red. Since watching the models she knew she had been trying to copy them, just a little. An extra button undone on her school shirt, her breasts pushed up in that new padded bra she'd persuaded her mother to buy. She liked him. She liked him a lot and she knew he liked Jade, so she sent him some pictures and he posted them.

She had expected Jade to be furious, but she hadn't expected the level of anger and fear that she saw in her face. Jade never spoke to her again.

It was only afterwards, that she heard about all the online and offline bullying. The attacks on Jade on Snapchat and the abuse she had received. She had moved schools, but by then the damage was done. She had become severely depressed and suicidal, the news reports said. No one took the signs as seriously as they should, they said. Safeguarding of vulnerable young adults needed to be addressed, access to suicide sites needed to be monitored. They were looking for someone to blame, someone grown up, but she knew that it was all her fault.

If only they had never looked at that porn site.

If only they hadn't taken the photos.

If only she hadn't been goaded by jealousy into sharing them.

If only Jade were still here for her to say sorry...