

BY DMYTRO KOLESNYK

The Sponge

John Loves a Hooker

Ninjas in My Bedroom

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Dmytro Kolesnyk

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Inspired by real porn

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Part One:

Promising Young Man

Beasts and Monsters

Vincent struggled to find the words describing the situation he found himself in, yet he imagined he would tell his friends about it as if it was the greatest day of his life. That was, after all, what they would expect to hear; he attempted to shed all nervousness and worries from his mind so that he too would believe it. “Vincent?” a voice spoke from behind the blinding light. Vincent turned away from his reflection in the tinted limousine window, still unable to get a word out.

“Vincent,” the man with the impeccable teeth snapped his fingers, “over here.” Jenko Robbins, Jenna Moone’s manager, producer, videographer, and occasionally social media consultant readied his fingertip over the *zoom* button on the palm-sized camcorder, ready to do that slow zoom-in Vincent has seen in a few films now. “Just look at the lens *here* and introduce yourself. And don’t act too nervous—a little is fine, but the fidgeting needs to stop.”

“I’m not acting.” Vincent focused on the blinking red light above the lens, hoping its steady beat would somehow sync to his pulse and bring relaxation. The vehicle picked up speed in a neighborhood where anything over ten miles an hour was discouraged and any speed bump the limo hopped over caused him to lose focus of that little red light. He

weighed his next words. His last name, *Poole*—what would they think of his last name? Would it sound weird? Was it wise to tell them his real name? *Them. Her*—there she was. Her short blonde hair illuminated by nothing more than the dim yellow dome light. Her lips forming a smirk. He was reminded of what those lips were capable of. He recalled wondering what that tongue would feel like when she licked her lips and flashed a wink his way. Even under the veil of darkness, her smile appeared inviting. She leaned in, the entirety of her presence now illuminated by the array of portable LED lamps blasting Vincent's face, and placed her manicured hands onto Vincent's lap. "Poole!" he blurted out.

"*Pool?*" Jenna asked.

"You need to cool yourself down, kid?" Jenko peeked over the fold-out screen on the camcorder with a patient smile. "Just wait 'till you see this place."

"No—that's my name—Vincent *Poole*."

"Alright!" Jenko said, "baby steps. Maybe we'll get this done today *after all*." He cut the shot. Vincent sighed in relief, but it was short-lived when the red light came on again almost immediately. "Had to reset the shot. Easier to edit. Okay—let's start this again." He zoomed the shot back out until Vincent's entire body was in frame and shooed Jenna's hand away from his shaky thigh. "Action," he waited, index finger hovering over that little button. "Name," he whispered, "come on."

"Uhh—yes—my name is Vincent Poole."

From behind the camera, just out of Jenko's peripherals, Jenna teased Vincent with a brief flash of her new 32DDs. She stuck her tongue out to Vincent and a middle finger to Jenko, giggling inaudibly until a smile finally emerged on Vincent's face. He relaxed a bit, realizing that his stress had more to do with the question of if this was really happening, and not so much with what was to come. It was strange to him, seeing Jenna as an actual person and not

somebody to be coveted. He never allowed himself to grasp the concept of fandom—his opinion being that people must be empty or misguided for being so crazy about a piece of music or art or any sort of performance or performer. He couldn't understand how people could be so open, forthcoming about the things they liked. As if people were so insecure about the things that brought them pleasure that it had to be validated, as if that would make the said pleasure more legitimate. This rang especially true for anything in the realm of pornography and why people would discuss the details of what they watch with others on the internet, openly follow porn stars on social media, or give complete strangers glimpses of what they're into when the doors are shut, when the lights are low, when the shame is staring right back at them in the reflection of the computer screen. Vincent considered all the shame watching Jenna's videos had triggered in him and how that wasn't enough to stop him from checking up on her cross-country tour and taking his chance at being at the right place at the right time. Quantifying one's shame is always audience-dependent, he figured.

"What is your birthdate, Vincent?"

"Uhh—twenty-three."

"That wasn't the question."

Vincent sunk into the plush leather seat, looking at Jenna for guidance, only to find her pushing at the inside of her cheek with her tongue. A sign of things to come.

"Actually," Jenko looked over at Jenna and whispered something. She nodded in agreement. "Just pull out your license, it's safer that way."

Now at risk of having his identity stolen, Vincent checked the road to see how fast the limousine was going, trying to assess his chances of survival should he have to suddenly bail. Any minute now, he figured, Jenko would get sick of his lack of compliance, pull out a pistol, and ask

Vincent if they would have to do things the hard way.

“It’s for *legal* reasons, Vincent. Come on now, we’re wasting storage.”

“Is this going to be shown?” Vincent asked, reluctantly reaching for his wallet.

“Yes—”

“Oh, then—”

“*But.*” Jenko interrupted, “we’re going to blur out all the important stuff.”

“So why then—”

“Because, Vincent, this is sexier than signing a release form, don’t you think? I’ll have the original footage in case of any legal issues that may arise. I’m trying to make this as organic as I can—you’re ruining the vibe with all these questions here.”

“Fine,” Vincent scoffed and leaned forward, pulled his ID out from the wallet and placed it in front of his forehead while staring down at his feet.

Jenna leaned in and lifted his chin up with a soft touch of her index finger, guiding him to catch a glimpse of her disarming eyes. “He-*eyyy*,” she whispered. “We’re gonna take care of ya, alright?” She pressed the finger on his lips, nudging him back into the seat. “Jenko,” she said, “be nice.”

“Yeah-yeah, fine—let’s just get this shot.” Jenko paused for acknowledgment, “Vincent?”

“Yes—yeah, let’s get it.”

“Now,” Jenko reset the shot, “with a big smile!”

“Okay,” Vincent’s hands asked for directions, “what do I do?”

“Your birthday, say it to the camera, hold up the ID.”

“But can’t you see it in the shot?”

“Vincent . . . please let me direct—I’ve got a thing . . . a line I wanna say. When I start the shot, *again* look up from your wallet, bring your ID up to your face and say your name and birthday. Aaaaaand go! Action!”

“My name is Vincent Poole,” he spoke slowly. A half-

hearted smile emerged on his face; the driver's license slid into the frame beside it. "And my—"

"And when's your birthday, Vincent?" Jenko interrupted.

"And my birthday is on December 22nd, 1992."

"December 22nd!" Jenko said from behind the camera, "that's Jesus' territory! Nice—just in time for the holidays—what luck. What do you do, Vincent?"

"I'm a programmer," he answered shyly.

"Oh that's great! That's exactly what we—"

"Student . . . of programming," Vincent added, then broke his eye contact with the camera lens to glance at Jenna. She approved and his smile took on its full form. She *shooed* at him to keep going.

"*Ab!* A student of the programming arts—that'll do, Vincent," Jenko said, signaling for Vincent to discard his ID. The shot zoomed out, revealing Vincent in his entirety. His new safety orange swim shorts, purchased exclusively for their visibility properties. A blue and red plaid shirt, while looking more appropriate back home in Portland, was easy to pick out from a crowd of overly tight and overly loose tank tops. An analogue watch spelled something interesting about his image that almost made sense to him. Half an hour ago near downtown, at the boardwalk, Vincent stood apart as the only guy worth paying attention to that wasn't blatantly asking for it. He had won a game he himself wouldn't admit to have been playing. "So, what brings you to Miami?"

"I am here to see my grandparents, for Christmas."

"Right on!" Jenko whispered to Jenna, sharing a giggle. "And do you . . . *love* . . . your grandparents?"

"Dude!" Jenna elbowed Jenko in the ribs.

"Ah!" Jenko turned to Jenna, "what the hell?" He scorned her and said, "I know what the hell I'm doing, alright?" Jenna sat back in the seat and crossed her arms.

Vincent remained in the position Jenko last left him, his eyes avoiding the confrontation unraveling only four feet in

front of him. He listened intently. When he saw that Jenko had the shot lined up again Vincent looked into the lens and said, “yes.”

“Sorry, Vincent, can you say the whole line: *I love my grandparents?* Now I’m gonna have to cut out a minute of you sitting there saying nothing while we do our thing here and it’s gonna look like I’m cutting to you answering *yes* from another shot—it’ll feel weird—people won’t buy it.”

“They won’t believe when I say that I love my grandparents?”

“Okay, never mind—there it is. It’ll do.”

“What?” Vincent stared, confused.

“Got the line, let’s move on. We’ll splice in a shot of Jenna oiling herself up over top of it ‘cause your face was weird when you said it.”

“You’re a good boy, Vincent,” Jenna smiled, then pulled herself up and stretched toward Vincent, brushing his hands away from his knees to make space for hers. Jenko zoomed in on her fingers as they massaged Vincent’s inner thighs, the shot moved up her arm, stopping at her mouth as she licked her lips and looked up at Vincent. A soft, “*hmm?*” Jenko panned the shot to Vincent’s face.

“Come on,” Jenko whispered, kicking Vincent in the ankle, “answer her.”

“I . . . *am*.” He answered, losing himself in Jenna’s sultry smile.

“*Mbbbhmmmm*.” Jenna moaned.

“So, then,” Jenko asked, “what’s our *good boy* Vincent here to do?”

“I’m here . . . ” Vincent hesitated. The jolt from every speed bump pushed Jenna’s hands deeper into his crotch; *happy accidents*, the look on her face indicated. Her eyes commanded him to not break eye contact as the words struggled to leave his mouth. “I’m here to fuck Jenna Moone.” He didn’t believe it until the last syllable left his mouth. “I’m going to fuck Jenna Moone.” He had to say it

again, just to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

"Goddamn right you are!"

Jenna Moore, the twenty-two-year-old up-and-comer, with big dreams of being respected based on her merit as a hard worker. She made her powerful debut in the twenty-sixth installment of the *Up-And-Cummers* series at the ripe age of nineteen, despite her being marketed as *barely eighteen* and her pleas to the producers to adhere to her request of keeping an honest image. Scene by scene, feature by feature, she gained notoriety as a serious performer by releasing a consistent stream of original, handmade content on her website. She remained relevant by keeping in touch with her fans on every topical platform of social media. Many nights, despite her resentment of having to keep up a manicured image, she would have to stay up until sunrise answering personal messages and responding to whoever seemed socially inept enough to spread the love. She'd get the idea across that she *really had* the potential to be some fantasy girl next door who would act totally normal if you met her and perhaps, with minimal effort on the fan's part, to recreate some things they witnessed her do on-screen in real life. Trends dictated what she wore and the lingo she used and even what social movements she would feel an obligation to inject a few words of support toward. A popular hashtag would seem meaningless and disingenuous, while attached to a link previewing her next big scene, if the content of said scene had no connection. Her first real stumble, a sign that she was overworking herself and not putting enough thought into her ventures, was when she made an attempt at garnering the attention of the younger audience by shooting and releasing her first interracial gang-bang scene, titled *Black Cocks Matter*, at a time when even jokes on the topic would be considered *too soon*. Jenna's attempt at appearing progressive and relatable backfired. It took entire weeks for the situation to blow over. The internet was enraged. The

world was against her. The only ones left defending her were the same fans who really believed she could show up at their door step in a wet t-shirt asking for a towel and a warm place to stay or the ones who *actually* paid for a one year-subscription to her website's content and expected a new cumshot to sync theirs to every week.

Dark times called for pause and self-reflection, and after finally admitting to herself that she was not capable of handling on her own all that *Jenna Moore* was set out to be, she agreed to the services of Jenko, one of the dozens of social media specialists who reached out before the first scene even leaked onto the free porn websites.

"The Cum-Back Tour," Jenko argued, "and before you wanna reject it, just hear me out. Yes—I know what you're thinking—it's cheesy, *but* it's so far past the cheesiness of the nineties that it's ironic now. It's funny and self-aware. The crowd will appreciate your ability to have fun knowing that you're alright with being silly from time to time."

For weeks before Jenna's downfall, Jenko had been trying to get a hold of her using every means possible that wouldn't raise red flags, even going as far as using something as unsexy as LinkedIn to appear professional. His previous gig at a local marketing firm had had enough of him insisting that *sex sells* was the only philosophy to abide by when getting a product to speak to people. He refused to open his mind to other possibilities; his employers had finally had it when he wanted to put a baby in a pink g-string for a baby formula advertisement. *If sex sells*, he wrote in the header for his pitch to Jenna, *and we're selling sex . . .*

The part that caught her attention was Jenko's recognition of the difficulties and time-consuming nature of marketing, a part of Jenna's work she felt nobody had ever understood. A part of her life she couldn't really talk to anybody about. Jenko understood mistakes and understood efforts going unnoticed and unappreciated. He spoke of visions and ambitions that stretched beyond simply existing

in this world for the sake of it. She was a star, but he promised to make her the brightest thing in the galaxy—a supernova.

Jenko and Jenna—there was a certain charm to the way it rolled off the tongue. He fantasized about the names being announced at the podium of next year's AVN awards. The lights, the applause as they would walk up stage to receive their statue together.

"The Cum-Back Tour?" There was something about the unchanging manic look in Jenko's eyes that assured her he was crazy enough, ambitious enough, to actually be worth listening to. That perhaps it might be beneficial for her to get over the hump of discomfort and awkwardness and let him take reigns over the part of her life she didn't know how to run. That dumb title was just a test. A test for her, the world, before he could help her show everyone out there just what Jenna Moone was capable of. "Would it be cheesy and unoriginal of me to say it's just crazy enough that it might work?" She asked once.

"That depends."

"Yea?"

"We gotta go all the way. Sincere. Genuine. Honest. That's the only way we're going to pull this off."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean no sarcasm. No masturbatory self-awareness nonsense. No matter how corny. We go all the way. You know why slapstick comedies in the 80s worked? They never held back, no matter how ridiculous. That was part of the charm. The dedication to the role was a huge part of the appeal, it was the secret that made it all work."

"Hey, are we still making porn here?"

"All I'm saying is, Jenna, *when*, and they will, ask you *did you really name your movie that?*, your only answer will be: *goddamn right, I did*. And you will believe it. And you will make them believe it. And then you can do anything. And then we can do anything we want."

* * *

"I was really excited when you announced your first anal scene." Vincent blurted out, immediately regretting opening his mouth, the feeling worsening when Jenna caught him watching her shake her hips on their way up a cobblestone walkway. "Damn it," he said through his teeth and turned to the parked limo, about to reach inside when Jenko's hand met his, pressing his fallen wallet into his stomach. "Oh, thanks!" Vincent grabbed it, leaned over the door, and looked back at Jenna.

"Like a human being," Jenko said, arranging his loose camera gear on the black leather seat, taking a count of his batteries.

"Huh?"

"You're wondering how you're supposed to talk to a porn star, Vincent."

"Oh, I was—"

"Or maybe you're now wondering if that was ever even a question in your head to begin with: *how do I talk to a porn star*. Ha!" Jenko dragged a large waterproof case along the floor up to the seat and straightened out the foam inserts, then pulled out the extra lenses, one by one, checking to make sure the caps were on tight.

Vincent looked up at Jenna in the distance, who looked back at them from near the arching gateway, one arm across her chest, tapping a finger against her lips. She watched Vincent while making a serious shape with her eyebrows. He made sure to not break the gaze. She tilted her chin down and sucked in a full breath of air, then suddenly shook her hips from side to side a few times and pulled her hand away from her mouth to reveal a big, goofy smile. Vincent relaxed. A dimple emerged on the right side of his face as she skipped off into the walkway past the staircase, leaving his sight.

"Who gets excited about an *anal scene*, Vincent?"

"I . . . I don't know what I was thinking."

"I'll tell you *who*—the guy that's jerking off. You don't think about Jenna's asshole when you wake up. You're not excited about it when you're doing chores or eating dinner or talking to your mother on the phone. That's a different you. The guy that's excited about Jenna's asshole is the one all alone when the lights are low, dick in hand, wondering when she would finally take it a step further. *When will someone finally shove a massive cock in her ass so that I can be the first to witness it . . .* You wait patiently while it's teased, maybe with the slip of a finger or tongue foreplay, but that thought vanishes the second you blow your load. No sane person would give it a thought outside those circumstances." Jenko fit the last of the batteries into the case and closed it up, snapping the latches in place. "Those are two different people, and one can't fake being the other."

"So what am I supposed to—"

"I need you to be both." Jenko grabbed his case and pushed Vincent's hand away from the limo door so that he could shut it. "If we want to show actual sex, if we want these interactions to be genuine, we need the *real* you when it's appropriate. Because the lights aren't low just yet. And Jenna's asshole is not staring you in the face at the moment. Right now, Vincent, assholes are for pooping only. And God do they smell. And mouths are . . . ?"

"For getting to know each other?"

Jenko walked around to the back of the car and pulled another large plastic case from the trunk along with a pair of tripods, asking for Vincent's help to carry it all. "You're not the first guy we picked up off that boardwalk." Jenko put his hand over Vincent's shoulder and led him up the stairs. "You're not the first guy to ride around in that limo with us. But so far, Vincent, you're the first guy that doesn't give off *Bang Bus* vibes, so we're giving you a shot."

"Uh, thanks?"

"Just do what your heart tells you, not what you think the camera wants you to do."

“Okay.”

“Unless you’re doing something wrong, then listen to me.”

Jenko’s rehabilitation of Jenna’s image was his first priority. Making her lovable was simple: splice in a few candid behind-the-scenes shots of her placing the *finishing* touches on her make-up. Have her talk about how she never did well in school, but there were a few times when she would ace a test or two without trying and get a glimpse of something greater. Some untapped potential. The obscure genius everyone has in them. The idea that Jenna doesn’t *have* to do porn. That, should her career end, she wouldn’t be out on the streets. That she wasn’t a prisoner to this industry, so that when she does finally move on to something else, people could still have a reason to pay attention to her life. She shared a story about a shy boy in school who gave her a flower for Valentine’s day, hinting at a romantic resolution.

“So?” Vincent asked when Jenna paused at the conclusion to her story, “what happened him?”

“I could tell ya,” Jenna winked and drew a sultry smile, then waited for Jenko to swing around and get a close-up shot of her smiling with Vincent in the background, “but that could sorta ruin it for you, don’t you think?”

They fed Vincent some questions to ask Jenna about her life as they shared a bottle of sparkling wine on the rooftop patio of the rented mansion. Jenko had a camera set up on tripods for both actors now, in medium shots, while he shot in handheld with third camera, floating around the scene, capturing intimate close-ups as he saw fit to his vision. The silver side of the portable reflector leaned against a spare light stand, reflecting the sun at the back of Jenna’s hair, the bright halo appearing overexposed in Jenko’s viewfinder. Another reflector, with the gold side out, added some much needed color to Vincent’s pale face. The sun’s reflection burned his eyes. He attempted to block the hot light from

his face using the champagne flute, but Jenko quickly caught on and insisted that he stop. The couple's attempts at small-talk were abrupt and awkward.

"Yes."

"Jenna," Jenko sighed and lowered the camera away from his face, revealing a defeated look. "We need more."

"I know . . . yeah." She leaned over the glass table and stared off into the distance. "Maybe," she looked up at Jenko, preparing to disappoint him, "maybe we needed a script after all?"

"We're better than that, Jenna. Come on!" He pleaded. "That was the whole point—"

"Yeah, I know. I *know* . . . *but*."

"Is it *me*?" Vincent asked.

"I mean . . . you are *you*, it's what we asked for. I guess *a little* acting wouldn't hurt to get things moving."

"But I'm not an actor?"

"Yeah. No shit." Jenko sneered at Vincent. " . . . sorry. We're trying to make Jenna likeable here . . . and you're just . . . not getting us there."

"Hey!" Jenna shouted, "I *am* likeable."

"Fine, you are. You *can* be liked. But to make you likeable we first need to make you interesting."

"Ughh." Jenna leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms.

" . . . Then likeable. Then *loveable*. Then . . . " Jenko set the camera down and ran around the table to Jenna. He got down on one knee and grabbed her shoulders, shaking her until he got her undivided attention. "What if . . . listen to this—what if we show someone *loving you!*"

"Uhuh?"

"Vincent!" Jenko jumped up and positioned himself between Vincent and Jenna, touching both of their shoulders. He leaned down to Vincent and asked, "Vincent, what's your stance on drugs?"

"Umm," Vincent paused to consider every branching

pathway in this timeline that the question created, “I think that people take them and that’s fine?”

“And, Vincent, are you one of those people?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” Jenko asked, trying to contain some sort of intensity.

“I don’t know! I’ve smoked pot a few times. Everything else I’ve only thought about doing in very specific scenarios in my head which would never realistically happen.”

“What about *molly*?”

“What’s molly?”

“It’s like ecstasy, but better.”

“The scenario for ecstasy would be a three-day long rave with a completely different group of friends with different values than the ones I have now with whom I would have to be really close and also it would have to be on an island where there wouldn’t be police or my parents.” Vincent said all in one breath.

“Jesus,” Jenna shook her head.

“But I don’t like raves . . . or islands so—”

“What’s wrong with islands!?” Jenko asked.

“I’m afraid that if I got stuck on one with a bunch of people, they might start a rave and make me do drugs for three days straight.”

“What in the hell.” Jenko and Jenna stared at each other in disbelief. Jenko turned back to Vincent with a dirty look, “are you being sarcastic or quirky?”

“I don’t know,” Vincent stared down at his feet. “I’m sorry. Thought I had something there.” He looked at his empty champagne flute, then at the two empty bottles of sparkling wine and added, “think I might be buzzed. This sun, too—”

“So,” Jenko spoke, as if to a child, “you need to drink more to loosen up? Clearly your mouth works.”

“I . . .” Vincent felt pressured to take mental inventory of every time he’s had alcohol at an outing and come to a

conclusion about whether drinking made him more fun and social or simply caused him to keep quiet and disappear into the background. There was no obvious answer, as the former led him to believe that he had lost control, and the latter that he had caught himself just in time before he was about to lose it. Neither answer satisfied him or made him feel any better about himself. "It could go either way?"

Jenko's mouth couldn't decide on forming a smile or a pout. "I'm slipping, babe!" he grabbed Jenna's shoulder, stared her in the eyes for a moment, then collapsed to his knees in front of her and placed his cheek against her oily thigh. Jenna patted Jenko on the head, then rolled her eyes and looked over at Vincent as if he knew what was going on. "My vision," Jenko spoke dramatically, "it's slipping away into mediocrity. I'm understanding now, suddenly, that this may be the case for many great works of art that could have been great, but had to find some sort of compromise towards the end for the sake of completion. I wanted to be different, but don't they all? In this brief moment of clarity I feel like an idiot for attributing the word *art* to what we're doing. What are we doing? Is this it, or will my crisis come to an end once I start thinking up random, desperate rapid-fire last-minute solutions."

"Umm," Vincent stared Jenna in the eyes, afraid to look down at Jenko. "So no more booze then?"

"Molly will have to do!" Jenko jumped up to his feet. "I have a few caps in the lens case."

"What's this molly deal for again?" Jenna asked.

"Love, Jenna." Jenko answered, skipping over to the gear stash he hid behind a row of tall planters on the rooftop patio.

"What's he talking about?" Vincent asked Jenna. "Is this still about the drugs?"

"*Drugs* is a strong word," Jenna smiled, then turned to see a tremble developing in Vincent's knee. His lower row of teeth chewed on his upper lip. She leaned toward him

and placed her hand on his leg. In a gentle, caring whisper she said, “it’s supposed to open you up.” Vincent wasn’t buying it. “Make you friendly!” She cheered. “Make you *love* everything—Jenko’s just trying to speed things up a little here.”

Vincent remained motionless. His eyes now avoided Jenna’s welcoming gaze. He kept his nervous shake in check, but in the back of his mind he knew that as soon as he stopped focusing on keeping his knees still they would resume their dance, in full force. It was artificial control. It was an illusion of control. Like the situation he found himself in. It was possible that any moment now Jenko would reach from behind Vincent and bring a capsule up to his face and and place it in his mouth and somehow make it seem as if Vincent had any say in the matter.

“Oh . . .” Jenna’s smile faded. Her shoulders sunk. “Honey—you really don’t want to do this, do you?”

Only very specific things, he thought, but there was not a natural way of putting them into words without sounding like he wasn’t one of those *Bang Bus* kind of guys. “I’m just not really into drugs, you know?”

“I understand—I’m sorry—with the budget and timeline of this whole thing. I don’t know what to say, Vincent, we’re rushing, making mistakes.” Jenna spun around in her patio chair and called to Jenko, whose head poked out from behind an array of gigantic pots with palm trees sticking out, “Jenko!”

“Yup?” He stood up, holding out two small zip-locks filled with about a dozen half-filled capsules of white powder, “I was thinking one-fifty for you, one-hundred for Vincent—since it’s his first time. Don’t know how accurate that scale was . . . or my *dispensing*,” he brought the two bags up to his face and studied each capsule, comparing the amount of powder in the capsules in each bag, “I can definitely tell one has more than the other. Or—one-fifty for both—get you on the same playing field.”

“Jenko,” Jenna waved to Jenko, “maybe this won’t work out so well.”

“What are you taking about?” Jenko lowered the bags down to his waist. His shoulders dropped. “We gotta get this going.”

“A trip’s only as good as the mindset you start it in.”

“So?” Jenko said, holding in his exasperated sigh until he finally tossed the bags back into the case, “we’re just giving up then?” He let it out.

“No,” she stood up and walked over to Jenko with open arms. “We just need to rethink this.” Speaking in a soothing tone now she said, “look at him—he’s shaking—he’s uncomfortable—”

“I’m not that—” Vincent turned around.

“It’s alright, hun!” Jenna said, then turned back to Jenko. “Let’s do this part later. Maybe he’ll ease up after we shoot the good stuff. Open up more. Besides, him suddenly being high as shit won’t match the rest of the stuff we shot—unless you want to redo all of it. Even then—people will notice something’s up with him. You don’t want the audience thinking we’re drugging poor, helpless kids just to get them to bend to our will, do you?”

“Ughhh.”

“We want to be authentic, right?”

“Ughhh.”

With a warm glass of sparkling wine Vincent swallowed his pride and the larger half of a Viagra pill. Vincent didn’t hesitate. At that point, he had already felt bad enough about holding the shoot up. He even considered offering to come back to shoot the opening scenes another day, should they feel his performance wasn’t adequate. His grandparents wouldn’t miss him or ask too many questions. Three days of his vacation remained, and he was willing to spend them in the company of complete strangers who may or may not

have been opening his eyes to a world he never gave much consideration, and perhaps even helping him to embark on a *boy-meets-world* scenario he didn't know he wanted, or needed. Like the stereotype of college girls discovering themselves in their first years of college, he too had something to discover about himself. The mindless internal ramblings distracted from the fact that his shorts were becoming tighter. He tugged at them, breaking away from the fruitless spell of this contemplation, and immediately placed both hands over his crotch to conceal his erection.

Jenko grinned, and without speaking a word stretched his hand out to the sight of Jenna, on the far side of the patio, lathering herself in baby oil, stripped down to an olive-green bikini with gold stitching. "*A whole new world . . .*" he sang off key, the lyrics interrupted by his own laughter.

"Right." Vincent pulled his hands away for the world to see. With a question mark over his head he pointed his crotch at Jenko, expecting some sort of explanation.

"Don't get offended. Over the pill, I mean. I'm sure it's all good down there."

"It is!"

"Buuut these shoots can take up to four hours sometimes. No one has that kind of stamina. No newbie, at least. At best, you'll be stuck with a half-chub for a few hours after it's all done. At worst, you'll go limp halfway through the shoot, take the pill anyway, then continue going with a shaken sense of pride and lack of confidence. Best to let it take over now."

"Four hours?!"

"It's not unheard of. We go there if we have to."

Vincent observed his bulge, which appeared to stop growing. He squeezed out a few kegels, making the bulge feel tighter in his swim shorts. "Is this it?"

"Hmm—let's hope not, huh? The pill's not magic, you know—it'll get you most of the way there. But the rest has to come from you. It wants to know that you want it. So

you're gonna have to want it."

"I *do* want it!"

"Then show us!" Jenko flicked Vincent's crotch with the back of his hand and smiled. "Grab a seat on that couch over there. I gotta talk to the star."

"Okay."

The patio couch was positioned flush against a glass railing on the far side of the patio, overlooking a neighborhood of identical mansions, all with their own arranged rows of artificially-planted palm trees and twelve-foot-tall metal fences. Spanning almost an acre, a manicured backyard stretched around all four sides of the main structure, two of the sides having massive pools with their own stocked mini-bars, tiki houses, and arrangements of outdoor furniture suited to accommodate parties of hundreds. Raised platforms for dancers bookended the party areas with spotlights pointed at each one. Concert-sized sound systems with speakers all around the perimeter ensured no corner of the property would be left out of a party. A three-hundred square foot cage with vertical bars sat in the middle of an empty part of the backyard, away from the crowded pool areas, where Vincent figured weird sex-crazed lunatics with too much money kept lions or tigers or alligators. His fingers grazed the tough cotton fabric of the couch which, judging by the series of sharp lines running diagonally, had been pressure-washed several times over the years by somebody with a steady hand.

"Hey!" Jenko flicked Vincent on the shoulder and planted himself on the couch right next to him. "If you really think about it, you've been training for this moment all your life, hah! How many countless hours have you spent mindlessly stroking it in front of your screen? Like painting that fence—you're gonna do great, I know it!"

"Heh," Vincent slung the back of his head on the headrest, his face to the open blue sky, "but who's Mr.

Miyagi?”

“Vincent, dearest,” Jenko said in a sweet, sarcastic tone, placing his palm on Vincent’s warm chest, “Mr. Miyagi has been inside you all along.”

“That makes no sense?”

“Eh,” Jenko groaned, “cheap sentiments generally don’t once you give them any kind of thought. Clearly too much blood is still flowing to all the wrong places. Think less, do more.” Jenko slapped Vincent’s bare shoulder, grinning at him, then transformed his lips into a genuine smile when he saw that look reemerge on Vincent’s face. “Nervous?”

“I mean, I guess—yeah.” Vincent looked across the patio at Jenna. Her oiled skin glistened in the sun while she concentrated on her yoga poses, limbering up for the big scene. Jenko looked over, too, then pulled himself up closer to Vincent and stretched an arm over his shoulder. “*Is this* a big deal?” Vincent asked, looking straight ahead.

“That depends, Vincent. It’s a big deal to Jenna, regardless of what you think of this industry, it’s her career, her passion, and she wants to be taken seriously again. She’s smart enough to know that endlessly tweeting apologies won’t get her anywhere, so she needs to take action while the world, her world, is still watching. Because that interest in what she does next with her career *is* waning. In her mind, that action is showing everyone that she’s only a human who’s lived a human life. Who makes human mistakes. Who has sex with human people. It’s a big deal to me because—and fuck you, don’t laugh—I’m an artist whose passion has been wasted on the wrong industries, the wrong people, and I’ve found both my canvas *and* my brush, in her.

Is this a big deal to *you*, Vincent?”

“I don’t know. Yes . . . but also, no? It’s cool, I guess, to have sex with a porn star. With *her* especially. But once my face is out there . . .”

“But your *full* name won’t be—”

“Yeah, yes, I know. Maybe my close friends would find

out. Not a big deal, I guess. When I have a girlfriend again, I don't know. It's going to come to light eventually and then she'll either leave me because she can't deal with it or she'll want to see it, in which case I have to do a really good job right now so that it's not too embarrassing or pathetic to review later. Just more pressure. What if my kids see it? What if I want to be a public figure and this comes to light and ruins my career? It just keeps going, you know?"

"I know what your problem is, Vincent."

"Yeah?"

"You think you're going to have a future where things will actually will work out. You're putting everything fun on hold in case your complete lack of action and decision over your life will somehow result in pieces falling into place for that future you've always dreamed of. You will have everything you want, as long as you stay out of your own way. Let's try something else, Vincent. Take a look at Jenna there."

"Okay," Vincent watched Jenna intensely.

"See her butthole?" Jenko waved to Jenna to grab her attention; she reciprocated with a big, happy smile. "Okay, you can't *see* it, but *imagine* her butthole. From now on, that butthole no longer poops. Her mouth, Vincent, has nothing more to say."

"Uhuh . . ."

"Now, imagine the world, Vincent: a world full of buttholes. All clean. Waxed and Bleached. Sanitized. Voided of their intended purpose—all for you to do what you want with them. Mouths, too. You start with her, Vincent. You do this right, and you can do anything you want. Got it?"

"I guess."

"You have to be a *beast*, Vincent. The world needs to see the beast. *I* need to see the beast. Jenna—"

"Gotta show them the beast, kiddo!" Jenna shouted from across the patio.

"The time for talking is over. Time for pooping is over."

Inside of everyone is a beast that wants to break free. Be an inspiration to others. *Let this* be a big deal, Vincent. Don't let it go to waste. Are you gonna do this or not?"

"Ok," Vincent laughed nervously, "fine—yeah. I think I can do this."

"The beast doesn't think, Vincent," Jenko reached around with his free hand and took a firm hold of Vincent's expanding erection, "the beast only fucks."

As Good As It Sounds

The *ding* from his phone made his lips tighten up, the patch of skin behind his ear itchy. It was a *ding*, according to the notification settings he'd programmed into his phone, that would mean the end of him. A notification he signed up for in case the words *Vincent Poole* began trending on Google. *Ding*, your life is over—do what you can with it while you still have time. *Ding*, all hope was lost. *Ding*, no mistake is ever forgotten, or forgiven.

When Vincent pulled out his phone to check it, he found that his entire world had not come crumbling down just yet. It was his mother, and he felt stupid for not assigning a unique sound to notify him of the end of times. His mother again, for the tenth day in a row, was checking in to see how he was doing with that supposed flu he caught while down in Florida. He replied with another iteration of being *just fine*, then waited anxiously for the follow-up message, something along the lines of *ok, but you still have to make up for Christmas and come see us on the next long weekend*. He waited, his hand clutching the phone in his pocket, for the response. He would have to reply immediately, as a good, bed-ridden boy who cared about his mother's feelings would do.

The coffee shop where he planned the meeting was just

crowded enough that it would keep *them* from expressing excitement to a minimum, as Vincent would prefer it. Congratulations were in order, but not the priority. There was no way to approach the subject that would result with preferred outcome, no matter how many times he played this conversation out in his head. There was the truth of what had happened, and he would have to deal with the fallout of what came next, or the real truth, which may cut his confession short and leave him in a worse state of mind than he had been in for the past ten days. He couldn't do a one-on-one, playing favorites. The idea of one friend finding out that they weren't the first to hear about this, or worse, being the last, would be hurtful to them, regardless of Vincent's own pain. He had spent the last ten days mapping out the group dynamic, allegiances and past events, any bit of information that pertained to the reaction he would receive when he presented to them this extravagant claim. Considering everyone else's feelings left no room for his own, and by the time he came face to face with the boys, suffering from the exhaustion of days of performing mental gymnastics, he began to resent them for what their simulated feelings had put him through.

"It's like . . ." Kyle struggled to put into words what the rest of Vincent's friends felt, ". . . I want to believe?"

The four of them sat on two identical, minimalist love seats in pairs across one another, a small glass table separating them. On it remained the last bit of Christmas spirit in the form of holiday-themed paper drink cups. Vincent had paid for everyone's coffees, pastries, and even the overpriced, stale breakfast sandwiches that were brought back to life in the microwaves in the back room. A desperate attempt to get them on his side before the inevitable divide.

"Jenna Moone, really?" Jim turned to Vincent on the couch, shaking his head. Vincent, in a random moment where guilt had escaped his psyche, felt a rush of excitement and pride upon hearing her name spoken out loud, as if

proving to his friends that he really did it was the last, the only moment of this interaction that had any shred of positive feelings, pride. Vincent drew a goofy grin and scanned the room.

“Would I lie to you?” Vincent pleaded, his gaze jumping from one pair of skeptical eyes to the next.

“I don’t know,” Mark, the youngest of the four, said, “uh, would you? Like generally. Do you?”

“No!”

“So then . . .” Kyle leaned in and whispered, “. . . she touch your penis?”

Vincent groaned.

“Butt stuff?” Mark added.

“Look,” Vincent pushed Kyle back into his seat, “it’s not about that—”

“Everyone hold up!” Jim butted in, “we don’t even know if he did it or not. The details can wait.”

Vincent fidgeted. The sight and smell of his breakfast sandwich, the soggy three-day-old croissant, the crusty slice of cheddar, and the pale slab of ham hanging out from the edge had him fantasizing about puking on the table right there and then. A show of his distress. A plea for attention. Anything for his friends to notice that the words coming out of his mouth didn’t match the tone he said them with. That something was off and they should notice. “Is anybody on my side here?” he cried.

“Vincent . . .” Jim took hold of Vincent’s shoulder, massaging it, “. . . baby,” he added, then flashed a playful smile. “Don’t be like that. But extraordinary claims . . . well.”

Vincent found peace in Jim’s ridiculous gesture. He closed his eyes and breathed calmly, enjoying the massage, before suddenly remembering where they were and batted Jim’s hand away. “Give me a sec,” Vincent pushed himself away and reached for his phone. On its display was a text message from his mother. She had already picked out a date for him to drive up to see her. In another message, that

came a few minutes later asking if he was Okay, again, his mother said that she did some reading on the flu, and that if he's as sick as he claims to be and for so long that he might have to go to the hospital. *I'm worried*, the third text message read, *if you don't get better I'm coming down there myself to take care of you. Please get back to me. Love. PS Your father is also worried.* Vincent swiped the messages from his screen and unlocked his phone, then opened up the browser to find Jenna Moone's Twitter page. There she was in the top right corner of his screen, encased in a circle half an inch in diameter—her profile photo. Her cloudy blue eyes were not wet and bloodshot but dry and radiated lust and excitement. Her short blonde hair was clean and shiny and tousled playfully, as if she'd just gotten off a roller coaster and ran her fingers through it once to clear it from her eyes, and not like somebody had been yanking on it while her cries to stop were being ignored. Her cheeks had a rosy glow to them and her mascara wasn't running down a face riddled with scrapes and bruises. Vincent cringed at the sight of the photo, cleared the image of her from his head, and scrolled her face out of existence to an archive of her recent tweets. "Here!" Vincent passed the phone to Jim, "read the latest."

"It's her last tweet, too," Jim took the phone into his hands, "December 23rd, nine AM."

"So what the hell does it say?" Kyle asked.

"*Today . . . I fuck a fan. Miami—*" Jim elbowed Vincent, then kept reading, "*lucky guy: teee-beeee-ehhh (TBA)! Stay tuned for more updates.*"

"This literally proves nothing." Mark relaxed back into his seat. "Vincent—Christmas vacations are always boring. You don't have to try to show us up. I literally spent an entire week reading game reviews and swiping left on fat chicks on Tinder. What do you have to gain from lying to us about—"

"Nothing!" Vincent shouted, snatching his phone from Jim's hand, then stood up abruptly. A dozen eyes of the

coffee shop patrons stared in his direction. He shriveled up and attempted to ignore the crowd, projecting a look of what he hoped was guilt onto his face. "This was a bad idea."

"Hey," Jim reached up and patted Vincent on the back, "just sit down, dude." Vincent complied; Jim's hand remained on his back as he descended back into the seat. "You wanna, maybe . . ." Jim signaled for the bathroom with a shake of his head, "come on." Vincent hesitated at first, but looking past the sarcastic look of a sad puppy on Jim's face, he finally got up in the hopes that the glimmer of compassion he saw wasn't just in his imagination.

"You guys are seriously doing this?" Kyle said as they walked off.

"Look, man," Jim spoke, "you're just not selling it. This whole . . . being modest thing . . . making it out to be no big deal—it just sounds so—"

"That's because that's not the part that's the big deal!"

"Then what is?"

"I need you to believe me first."

"You know that's hard. Oh. Hey! When does this thing release?"

"I don't know . . . that it will."

"Okay, now you're really bullshitting us. To think, I was the first to start believing you."

"I'm not lying . . . I" Vincent shook himself off but remained at his station, "there was a problem."

"What, couldn't get it up?"

"No."

"So . . ."

"Jim," Vincent looked away, "do you think there's a beast inside us?"

"The hell?"

"Like a . . . beast. I don't know—sexually. Waiting to break free."

"Goddamn it, Vincent. Have you been reading that pick-up artist shit again? You know that's for losers, right? Tell me you didn't pay for any of it, at least?"

"No—"

"Good! Next thing you know, they'll drag you to some jerk-off seminar, charging you \$800 for the weekend to watch some peacocking idiot in shiny clothes insult women until one of them sleeps with him—"

"No I didn't read . . . or buy anything."

"So what's this *beast* nonsense then?"

"It's . . . me. It's weird, you know? I feel more confident after it all happened, but I'm not supposed to? I don't know what to do with it all. It didn't go *right*."

"Wait," Jim turned to Vincent, "you're . . . you really did it?"

"Yes."

"Actually?"

"Actually. It happened, man—I don't know how many more times I can—"

"You fucked Jenna Moone?"

An awkward smile emerged on his face. It would have to do for now, "yep."

"We're gonna celebrate. Don't argue with me on this."

When the alcohol content was sufficiently high and the conversation rapid-fire enough to forget who spoke last, or what exactly was being said a moment ago, it was easy to gloss over the fact that the group was discussing, in a public space, using their outside voices, the details of the visual media that helped them ejaculate. At a pace this frantic, with the lights so low and the music so high, the laughter this wild and the interruptions this frequent, the images of their peers masturbating to the same images they described eluded everyone but the neighbors at the tables next to them and the server catching the tail end of whatever they were talking about before she got close enough for them to

stop. After two pitchers of the house lager, they had categorized various genres of porn according to best time of day, mood, or social status to watch them, as well as the categories one would never watch. The third pitcher eased them into pushing the boundaries they agreed upon earlier and shared specific methods of masturbation, including natural and artificial lubricants that can be found around the house. A debate about circumcision came up, but was cut short when it took a tangent into a discussion about Israel and Palestine. Moms were off the table completely. For siblings, the unspoken rules stated that they could discuss only the aesthetics of their faces, and perhaps the potential for happy long-term relationships. *Their buttocks are for pooping*, Vincent insisted repeatedly as a punchline to anything out of bounds, as if the rest were supposed to understand what it meant. By the time the fourth pitcher was drunk, Mark brought up the idea of pleasuring one's own prostate. There was silence. Then filler dialogue. Then vaguely homophobic jokes keeping the momentum going. By the fifth pitcher the four boys gave in and admitted, one by one, to a time where they considered, reasoned with overly complicated logic, and under the guise of scientific curiosity found it in themselves to stick one or two of their own fingers up their ass. For the half that told the truth, it was liberating; for the rest who only fantasized about it and lied to feel included, it was permission.

The scales tipped in Vincent's favor now. He and his friends had passed a threshold of awkwardness no one realized was keeping them apart on a deeper emotional level. The energy was overwhelming—erotic on a level that went beyond sexuality itself. Here were his friends: oblivious to their own potential. Here were boys, silly and childish, laughing at words like *buttocks* and *douches*, unable to tell if it was more appropriate to call a vagina a vagina and sounds like a pussy, or call it a pussy and sounds like douche. Here were dick jokes and air-strokes and cheek pokes: trends

which remain relevant as long as one has enough alcohol or a cheap sense of irony in them. His friends, here—beasts, waiting to break free. To lose control, but only in an effort to learn how much of it they had in them all along. How much different could they be? Vincent argued in his head that he had nothing to feel guilty about. After all, he figured, anyone was capable of doing what he did.

“Okay now!” Mark unconsciously planted his hand on Vincent’s leg, demanding attention from the group. His eyebrows floated up and down, independent of each other, until coming to an understanding somewhere down the middle, allowing his eyes to focus. The ear-to-ear grin on his face restricted intelligible sentences when he tried to speak. He scoffed and hiccuped and took a deep breath and finally the words came out, “Okay! Alright, guys—I’m only gonna say this is if everyone agrees, otherwise it’s gonna sound weird. But yo—hey, Vincent. And I’m only saying this if anyone agrees also but I’m really looking forward to seeing your dick, like on screen I mean.” He spun his hand around the table, nearly knocking over everyone’s drinks, then looked to Jim and Kyle several times for approval, “anyone?” A few shoulders shrugged. “Come on, who else? Otherwise I’ll take it back. Okay, I’m taking it back, you pricks.”

“Hey,” Vincent shook Mark’s hand loose from his knee. The collective looks of awkwardness and discomfort and the general lack of sense of a shared agreement of an opinion regarding Vincent’s adventure had, for a moment, put him in an uneasy state of purposefulness, as if he was not only responsible for managing the dynamic of their night out, but also capable of it. A sense of leadership. A call to action under the guise that boys will be whatever it was that everyone assumed they would be. With a tone of authority in his voice now he said, “you’ve been calling me a liar all afternoon, and now you’re gonna say that you haven’t for a second wondered what my dick would look like in this

scene?”

“And it’s not like I was wondering if it looked good or bad!” Mark pressed the palms of his hands together in front of his face, then pulled them apart as if to show the size of fish he just caught, “I meant more like *how* does it look while it’s fucking someone. Like: *Hey! That’s Vincent’s dick, and it’s super cool that Jenna Moone is interacting with it in any sort of way.* I don’t know, it would be sort of like, when you see it: *hey, that’s cool! I know who owns that dick.* You know?” Mark threw his arm over Vincent’s shoulder and added, “that’s him! He owns that dick. And then talking about dicks would be normal, fine.”

“What’s wrong with your dick, Mark?” Kyle asked.

“Nothing, man.” Mark hid his face behind a beer glass, “I just wish we could talk about dicks . . . encouragingly.”

“The hell are you talking about?” Jim asked.

“I mean,” Mark took a deep breath, then swallowed the sip of foam remaining in the bottom of the glass, “not what dicks *are*. But what dicks could do. *Our dicks*, individually. Vincent’s dick here had sex with Jenna Moone. What could *mine, yours* do?”

“Like who it could fuck?” Jim went for his beer, soon realizing that everyone’s glasses were empty, and signaled for the waitress to swing by.

“Sex, *sure*.” Mark dragged his words out, “but also, what it can do . . . with it’s life and all that. Know what I’m talking about?”

Vincent straightened up in the chair and made himself taller, watching Kyle intently. “You could . . .” he clenched his teeth and concentrated his eyebrows, indicating deep thought. *Be lucky? Be yourself? Be a beast, like me?* Nothing sounded right. The nuances and obligations of being a self-appointed leader hadn’t yet formulated. His facade of maintaining an enlightened look in his eyes and maintaining steady breathing would come crumbling down any minute. Perhaps it never even registered with them from the

beginning. Was he too drunk to sell it? Were they too drunk to even notice it?

“Shit, Mark.” Kyle intervened, “Vincent fucked a porn star, don’t have an existential crisis over it. What’s the big deal in it, anyway? You can literally *rent* pornstars these days.”

“Rent?” Jim said, “you know how I know you’re single?”

“You know what I mean. You guys are making a big deal out of nothing.”

“You’re the one who didn’t even believe me in the first place!” Vincent pleaded.

“Well now we do just a little bit more. Good for you. We had a drink. Cheers. Congratulations—you’re amazing! You’re a big man and you’re better than us.” Kyle raised his glass to the center of the table and slammed it back down, shaking his head at the audience. “We *all* had a winter break. Shitty, depressing winter breaks—“

“—Hey, man,” Jim interrupted, “anything happen . . . ?”

“Clearly, nothing as interesting as Vincent’s dragging out of—“

“Hey! I wouldn’t be dragging it out of you assholes didn’t spend a day interrogating me. I only brought it up because I wanted to talk about—“

“Oh! You have more to say?!”

“YES!”

“I didn’t *just* fuck Jenna Moone. There’s more to—“

“Oh yeah? Who else?”

“Nobody!”

“Vincent!” Jim shouted, “Kyle has a point. Something happened, obviously, let him talk.”

“But I didn’t even get to the—“

“—the *good* part? Please, Vincent—let’s get to the good part.”

“Alright,” Vincent slid out of his chair and stood by the table, grabbed his jacket from the seat and threw it over his shoulders, his fists punching the sleeves looking for a way in.

“Fuck this.” He spun around and disappeared into the crowd, past the bar, the dance floor, pushing his way through the congregation at the coat check by the entrance, kicking the door open, then stepping outside into the frigid, loud air of the Portland nightlife coming alive.

There was always a mystery about the desperate and antisocial nature of drinking alone that Vincent never clicked with him; he tried to solve it while sipping on his second rum and coke at the bar down the street from where his friends were probably reconsidering believing his extravagant claims. He watched the light from the bare bulb hanging over his head skate around the rim of the glass as he pushed it along the bar in front of his face, considering giving his friends the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps his positive energy would somehow find its way back to where he came from and they would reciprocate. There was no way whatever Mark had to say could be worse. More important. Vincent was more distressed. Anybody should’ve seen it. *Some friends*, he thought. They should be paying for his drinks right now. He watched the third drink arrive with dramatic pause, then cupped his hand around it to feel the cold one fingertip at a time. The thought of cold left him staring at the entrance where he expected his friends to barge through the door, all excited to see him. He would ceremoniously raise his glass to them. They would cheer. He would nod agreeably. They would gather around him while he sat on the bar stool, some rubbing his shoulders, some laughing at a joke he would make or simply mouth the words that would naturally form a smile on one’s face when said aloud. They would be good times with the boys. The kind of good times he would see on commercials for some bar and grill restaurant chains wishing everybody warm holidays and good eats and solid friendships.

But his friends never came. The ice was melting in his glass and it was dawning on Vincent that he had been sitting

still for what felt like at least ten minutes. The shifting images of people coming and going and the red and green lights, the wall-mounted TVs displaying sports and fireplace recordings on repeat, the shouting, the singing, the incomprehensible chatter, the squeaking of the vinyl seat covers, the bottles being poured and the shot glasses being slammed down on the bar top all turned to a blurry mess of sounds and images before his eyes as an anxiety overtook him, leaving him to wonder if he'll ever be able to focus on anything ever again as he tried to regain his grip on the slippery glass to assure himself that he had some minuscule semblance of control over himself. With his elbow on the edge of the bar keeping most of his weight upright, Vincent squeezed his thigh and focused on a single object in the distance to help his head from swaying. The red exit sign above the door would do. To clear his head, he singled out the bass riff from the song playing, calculated the tempo, then tapped his shoe against the foot rest of his stool to match the rhythm. His head joined the ensemble, bobbing up and down to the beat, following the rotation of his body as he attempted to raise his other elbow onto the bar. A success. He smiled like no one was looking and stared down into his glass of translucent brown liquid. A small bubble of air rose to the surface when the last large shard of ice cracked. He considered if there was any symbolic implication to the imagery that would reinforce his feelings. He would first have to figure out his feelings, Vincent reasoned. He swirled the glass along the bar's wooden surface and took a brave gulp. Then another. Demonstrating in a dramatic fashion that he was a man in desperate times, taking no pleasure in this outing, who's earned his right to drink alone in a public place where people go to enjoy themselves.

"I know I'm not supposed to . . ." a cheerful voice emerged, as if out of thin air. Vincent looked up at the bartender, who waved joyously in his direction with a bottle

of whiskey in her hand. She could've been in her twenties, a student. Perhaps, he considered, a free spirit in her thirties. Whatever her age, something about the glimmer in her eyes encouraged him to raise his head and straighten his shoulders the best he could. The wrinkles under her eyes were the result of poor lighting or her smile or both or neither, as it ceased to matter when Vincent noticed his defenses had lowered. “. . . I thought you weren't gonna make it there for a moment,” she grabbed a clear shot glass from underneath the bar and waved it in front of Vincent's face. His eyes followed. She cheered and placed the glass down, readying the bottle of whiskey for a pour. “Okay, well . . .” she paused, “. . . we're not *not* supposed to. A few a night is fine, the rest gets deducted from my tips . . .”

Vincent stared at her blankly, unsure of what scheme she was conjuring up. Her smile was inviting. The tone in her voice indicated teasing. He smiled back, then quickly straightened his face up when he remembered that he had a dumb-looking smile. Her hand dexterity impressed him when his eyes fell on her skinny wrists. A weird thought, and he didn't know where it was all going. Dexterity was about as sexy as punctuality. What did that mean? Her teeth were straight and white and not too much of her gums showed, and what amount did looked healthy. *Healthy*, like in a mate. Her face was slim. Good cheekbones. Her skin looked warm, and despite the tricks of the lighting indicated a rigorous, but not an obsessive amount of upkeep, just enough that he could live with and not have to worry about managing her vanity should it come to that. A liquid stain on the base of her shirt showed some signs of an attempt to mend an accident. A free spirit that could laugh at herself. Vincent imagined a scenario where he accidentally spilled some coffee on their carpet in a place where they both lived together. It would be a lazy Sunday morning. He wondered what her reaction would be. Would she make him clean it up and be grumpy about it? Would she let it go, laugh it off,

and spend the morning with him drinking warm coffee in bed, not worrying about a thing? Would she make a good mother? Was he good looking enough? Between a one and a ten he could feel like anything on the scale depending on how many days it's been since his last haircut or the way he tied his shoes or if he had a clear goal in life he was actively working toward achieving or if he brushed his teeth or said something nice to his mother or masturbated a few hours before meeting a compatible mate or had just starred in a movie with Jenna Moone. *Vincent, my man*—a familiar voice ringed, awakening his shame and interrupting his thoughts—*you're gonna be a star*. A pressure in his chest. A pinprick on his conscience.

Vincent nodded agreeably, forgetting whose turn it was to speak.

“Uh-oh,” the bartender pulled the bottle away from Vincent’s new shot glass, “maybe I spoke too soon.”

“No!” Vincent snapped to attention. “Sorry,” he attempted another smile.

“So you’re good?” the bartender asked cautiously.

“Yeah. Yes.”

“Cause I’m just trying to liven you up a little here,” she extended the bottle toward Vincent again, carefully analyzing his movements, “don’t want to make things worse though, ya know? . . . I got it!” she put a finger up to her lips and smiled mischievously, “name an animal!”

“What?”

“And it can’t be a cow or a chicken or anything boring. I want you to name an animal and convince me why it’s the best animal. Then you get a shot. Show me that brain working. Help get your mind off whatever . . .” she twirled a finger by her temple, “. . . ’s happening up in there.”

“Uhhh,” Vincent thought, “turkey?”

“Really?”

“Why not?”

“Uhhh—Christmas? Ring a bell? That’s boring because

everyone just had turkey.”

“Oooook...”

“Plus! Eating turkey literally makes you fall asleep—there’s nothing more boring than a turkey. Try again.” She readied the nozzle over the shot glass and winked. “I believe in you.”

“Ummm,” Vincent thought hard, “platypus!”

“Uhuh,” she tipped the nozzle further down, allowing for a single drop to fall into the glass, “explain please.”

“Because they’re all stupid idiots!” Vincent said, then groaned and wrapped two fingers around the shot glass, raising it up to the bottle. “They’re idiots because they won’t listen to a friend when something’s the matter with them.” The happy energy washed away from his face to reveal the dead-faced pout he’d been holding in. He sat in silence for a moment, attempting to push away his negative thoughts, then said, “all those . . . I don’t know—*mind powers* they have. Can’t pick up on what he’s trying to tell them . . .”

The bartender pulled back her eyebrows and flashed a sympathetic smile. “That’s echolocation,” she poured the drink. “You’re thinking echolocation. That’s not mind reading.”

“Fine.” Vincent took the shot in a swift gulp. “Thanks.”

“Chin up, buttercup! I gotta run for a bit.” Vincent watched the next potential love of his life escape to the group of friends demanding shots a few seats over. It must’ve been his breath, he thought. Nobody likes it when there’s alcohol on your breath. He watched her as she took orders, smiling and laughing. With a swift flick of her wrist the bartender shoved a bottle of tequila off of a shelf behind her, gracefully squatted down to catch it with the palm of her hand and, in one smooth motion launched it up in the air above her head, spinning around two times before catching it again with one hand in front of her face, her fingers spread evenly, the shape of her hand gracefully wrapped around the bottom rim. With the bottle now raised

above her head, she pulled out four shot glasses with the other hand and placed them along the table. Rims touching. The drunk faces on the other side of the bar expressed excitement as she poured tequila into all four glasses in one fell swoop. Just as fast as the drinks went down their throats, the glasses went crashing down back onto the counter. The bartender shrugged indifferently as she put away the tray of unused lime wedges prepared for the tequila shots. It was beginning to be that time of the night, Vincent figured, when wasting time was not an option. He held out his empty shot glass and signaled for the bartender's attention.

She and her smile returned. Vincent's drunkenness suddenly caught him off guard and he struggled to keep the glass steady, his free hand clutched to the coat rack beneath the counter to keep his body from swaying. A rush of warmth spread from his calves up to his head, exploding in a hot feeling of pressure from behind his eyes. He fought the wicked smile taking hold of his mouth; she kept hers professional. *One shot on the house means double the tips.* Did she say that, or did he deduce that from the general knowledge of how bars and attractive bartenders function? Never mind. He set the glass on the table and searched for his wallet, setting it down in front of him. She poured.

"You know who's *not* a boring animal?" Vincent watched her elegant fingers, admiring how they looked wrapped around that bottle. He saw her lips, the shape of them when she made the *who?* sound. The way her back arched when she leaned forward. The way Jenna Moone bent over on the arm rest of that outdoor couch. The way her skin glistened in the sunlight as he made his way inside. "Me," Vincent answered, tugging at the developing bulge in his crotch now, guiding it to unfold in its natural direction. "*I'm* not a boring animal." Before he knew it, Vincent was already setting the empty glass down and asking for another one. The concerned look on the bartender's face was nothing like Jenna's when she asked him to take it easy. *Show*

them the beast, kiddo! As if the bartender wasn't interested in what was going on in Vincent's pants when she walked away again. As if he wasn't doing exactly what Jenna Moone was asking for. "I said that *I'm* not a boring animal!" Vincent shouted, "I'm a beast!"

The bartender watched Vincent cautiously from the other end of the bar, pretending to wash used glasses. Trying to end her shift early, hoping to go home with Vincent because what else would she do? Vincent scanned the surroundings to find that the bar was a lot emptier than he had remembered it. The coat check girl was sitting in her booth, bored, playing with her phone. A few coats remained. Some umbrellas scattered in the corner. Was it raining? Vincent would give the bartender his jacket. He was, after all, still a gentleman. He did everything Jenna Moone asked for. He did what Jenko told him to. Even when his nails dug into the back of her neck too deep. When he threw a clump of her hair off to the side and kept going.

The bartender didn't know what she was missing. "I'm a beast!" he shouted again, dangling the shot glass over his head.

The bartender returned, dragging her shoes along the sticky wooden floor, bottle in hand. Saying something along the lines of *last one* or *how far is your place?* Vincent looked at her with a dopey smile while she poured, imagining them not even making it to the bed, to the kitchen . . . No . . . not even to the lobby of his building before they would begin tearing clothes off one another. "I'm a star!" Vincent toasted to himself before letting the drink glide down his throat. "You wouldn't even believe . . ." he muttered. She assured him that she did believe him, then asked politely that he echo-locate himself back to his friends so they could take him home. Vincent didn't understand at first. She sighed, shook her head, then pulled her hand out, asking for Vincent's phone. He was glad to take her number but

became confused when she asked him who he could call. “Oh!” Vincent swiped the phone away from the bartender’s hand. “They wouldn’t understand. They. Are. Jerks. Every single one of them. They don’t know what it’s like to be a star like me.” Vincent stood up and leaned over the bar, watching the bartender resume her clean-up duties. “I’m a star,” he sighed longingly. “They’re just jealous, you know? Because they’re not a star . . . s like me. I’m a *real* star. A bona fide fucking machine. Portland’s finest . . . ” The bartender finally spun around, crossed her arms, and shot Vincent a stern look, shaking her head. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. I’m not a . . . I’m not one of those pathetic ones, you know. You don’t have to look at me like that—I know what that look means. I know what it means so it doesn’t work on me. The pathetic ones—it must work on them. But not me. Nuh-uh. They don’t . . . look—I *respect* women, alright? Just keep pouring *that* and I can keep talking. I’m a star. You could . . . you should’ve seen the way I was . . . *fucking her*. I can fuck.” Vincent pulled at his crotch to ensure he was still ready to go. “I keep going. I kept going—all the way to the end. Wait ‘till you see it, you know? I didn’t know I could fuck like that, but I did. Sooooo yeah . . . What I *did*, though . . . I don’t do that. Not like that. It’s not how I . . . nobody should do that and I don’t think it was right. I *know* it wasn’t right. That’s what makes me good at that because I know boundaries and safety and if somebody doesn’t want me to keep going, then I’ll stop but it was hard to know when that was that time and *what the hell* I just kept going, because that’s what a beast does, and a beast is not wrong it’s just another way of . . . *Expression*. But let me tell you—I can *fuck the shit* out of you. I respect your decision not to. But let me tell you—and I’ll respect you, as a woman. But I’m a beast, a star. I’m not pathetic like those other ones. There are so many pathetic ones out there who’ll say they know how, but they won’t and they won’t know how to respect you. I’ll fuck you good. I’ll fuck

you right.” He stumbled toward the counter and grabbed the bartender’s wrists. “Do you want to fuck a star tonight?”

She must’ve been Australian. The bartenders are always Australian for some reason. How else could she know so much about platypuses? *Platipy*? He was stunned to find no handcuffs around his wrists or discover any signs of bleeding or bruising when his cold fingertips felt around his face. The situation was past saving face. Vincent was glad that the pathetic crying and whimpering and pissing his pants helped to deescalate the situation as he considered his route home. His restless state of mind assured him that taking the bus was a bad idea. He had suffered enough embarrassment for one night. He didn’t want to look at any more people; he didn’t want more people to see him. Besides, his patience at the moment wouldn’t allow for anything that didn’t require constant movement if he wanted to remain lucid. Cabs wouldn’t stop for him, either. As if he was the *only* drunk person trudging down the street. He swore he saw someone in much worse shape getting picked up, but decided that the man must’ve been stabbed or otherwise critically injured and hoped the best for him. For what felt like two hours Vincent stumbled down some streets with his thumb in the air, losing feeling to the bitter cold, yelling for the curbs to be more consistent in their height and for the street lamps to be of the same color before miraculously finding himself in front of a familiar set of glass-pane doors, punching his buzzer number into the stainless-steel intercom, and realizing that he was talking to himself when it connected to his phone. Forgetting that his keys were in his pocket, he dialed himself again, pressing the corresponding number to unlock the door and stared in amazement as the magnetic lock unlatched before finally stepping inside. Vincent was greeted by two ferns sitting on opposite sides of the elevator. “Hello!” he said to the one on the left as he approached it, then pulled his pants down

at pissed into its pot. “And good evening to *you!*” he said to the second pot, graciously bowing before puking on the floor beside it. Someone must’ve pressed the elevator button. He danced around the lobby, tracing back his steps to figure out if it was him that pressed it or a friendly apparition. “Doesn’t matter,” he said while pounding on the button, watching the back light turn on and off.

To make sure the elevator didn’t fall while he got inside, Vincent jumped over the crack and sighed in relief that he survived. Some button got pressed. He was sure it was the right one. Motor memory. No—muscle memory. The door finally closed. Vincent giggled once again when the elevator jolted upwards. The lights were bright. Blinding. The mirrors reflected a blurry figure dancing to the rhythm of his hiccups. Upon realizing that the figure was him, Vincent stopped, gathered focus, and leaned closer to the mirror, watching the sullen reflection mock his every movement. Their noses met. Their lips touched. A loud *ding* interrupted the continuous line of saliva Vincent was drawing across the mirror. He straightened up and marched out into the hallway, kicking himself for not jumping over the gap and almost dying. The sudden warmth made his cheeks ache from grinning so much, and the quiet of the hallway exacerbated the ringing in his ears. No matter. No worries. He could touch the frozen tip of his finger to the frozen tip of his nose and that was hilarious and helped to keep him going. Hilarious, also, was his unrelenting erection, stiff and distracting, which he noticed while digging around for his keys and couldn’t help but to play with it while struggling to get the door open.

Cold and uninviting and boring. Vincent’s giggling ceased upon realizing that he had to invite himself in. He enthusiastically welcomed himself home. The drunk him assured the sad him that he would be taken care of, and after getting the heat set just right and the lighting to match the mood he rummaged through the fridge and emerged with a

can of beer and a slice of pizza, then sat himself down on the couch and flipped up the laptop screen to invite the sad him to gaze upon an endless source of short-term happiness.

Jim: Missed Call (7)

Mark 02:54: Dude quit being a little bitch and come back. Kyle is sorry for being a fuckface will buy drink

Like any other time, the destination was always clear; the journey, no matter how many times he had embarked on a similar one, was always different. With his dick firmly in one hand, Vincent typed into his laptop with the other: *blowjob compilation*. The usual when he wanted a quick one. A good start and see where things would take him from there. The search engine displayed 275,000,000 results. How many blowjobs had ever been given? The number was overwhelming. He needed to narrow his options down. Switching to the *videos* tab resulted in 117,000,000 options and came with a thumbnail for a quick preview. He tried the first one: *The Ultimate Blowjob Compilation, Part 1*, with a run time of about twenty-four minutes. Too long. Save it for later. He saved it as a tab and went back to the search. Vincent scrolled through the list of videos, opening up more tabs to watch later, adding up to over a dozen unique videos now. By the time he arrived at page 3 of the search the videos became repeats of previous ones and a wave of frustration came over him that resulted in going back to a random tab he'd already opened and tried it. Simple. To the point: *Blowjob Compilation*. It played, beginning with a brief intro composed of super-cuts of five-second previews of the fifteen-second clips of the scenes set to a fast-paced techno track. His hand got to work, stroking to the beat, wishing it would speed up when he found he wasn't getting hard enough fast enough, then scrunching his face in agony when it sped up, potentially causing him to finish too soon. He stopped and clenched his ass cheeks, raising his fingers

away from the keyboard in a shake that resembled jazz hands. This was a night to savor it, he decided.

He looked back down at the screen where the video had paused, and saw the girl's eyes watering while she looked into the camera, a man's hand pushing down on the back of her head. The mouse cursor hovered over the *play* button, then got distracted by the list of suggested videos stacked vertically off to the right. He clicked the first one before the few frames of the preview finished their cycle. *Double Blowjob Compilation*. The screen flashed with a dozen desperate faces. They looked up at him. Their mouths hungry. They moaned and begged as the mass in his grip grew. Saliva and oil and lubricant escaped through every little crevice in their delicate hands, dripping out of their mouths when they stopped to take a breath. A dozen Jenna Moone look-a-likes looking up at him to say: *feed me your thick cock!* as he pulled on the back of her hair while she begged for more, as he pushed her back down before she could get another word in, only to pull her head up again to hear her say: *fuck my throat! Fuck it deeper!*

Fuck my nasty whore mouth! Jenna Moone cried before Vincent set his laptop aside and leaned back on his couch, rubbing at his bloodshot eyes until flashes of green circles appeared in the black void. He did as she asked. A small bite of pizza. The tightness in his throat made it difficult to swallow. A sip of beer helped wash it down. Closing his eyes made him go down a roller coaster track that had no end and when he opened them again the women on his screen eagerly awaited the money shot. The music intensified. *Show me how deep you can go! Choke me with your beast cock!* He stood over her, watching a mess of juices drip out of the side of her mouth. She looked up, smiling that smile he wanted to see, asking for more. More. *MORE!* He slapped her across the head and shoved the smile back into his groin. She moaned and pushed herself away. *The cheeks, asshole!* He kept going. *It's gotta make that nice slap sound,* the voice from behind

him said, *for the effect. Aim better next time. Go again.* Vincent left a rosy mark on her left cheek. Then her right, pulling her hand away when it blocked his path. *Now turn your body away from her face a bit. I need a better shot!*

The next video on the list played, Vincent watched it while in a trance, his hand tugging away autonomously. The girls moaned, admiring what they were given to work with. Vincent couldn't help but worry now if the volume on his computer was too loud. His phone rang. It was Jim again. Vincent stared at the small screen, watching intently how that little circle with the white phone symbol inflated and deflated, and finally clicked on the video to pause it, triggering a pop-up ad to appear on his screen in a new window. The ad featured a photo of a domineering woman confidently displaying a flogger in her left hand as it rested on her knee, her other hand on her thigh, pushing her voluptuous ass wrapped in cheery-red latex outward, her shoulders back, rotated to the screen to display an impressive set of breasts almost entirely concealed in a tight red and black-striped Gothic corset with two-inch wide cutouts for the nipples, from which hung a set of heart-shaped tassels. She wore a shiny black beret and her silky black hair was tied in a pony tail that hung down to her shoulder blades. A pair of knee-high stilettos with five-inch heels partially concealed her muscular calves. One heel set firmly on the red velvet floor. The other pushing into the crotch of a naked man in submission laying on the floor beneath her. Superimposed over the photo, the words read: *Tired of masturbating to the same old? Submit to Mistress Gabriella and enter a world of pleasure beyond anything you can imagine.* A slow, seductive voice whispered on repeat in the background: *submit to me.* Vincent fumbled to close the ad and answered the phone.

Jim begged Vincent to come back and hang out, as the boys had decided to continue the night at Kyle's house. He apologized on behalf of his friends and said that they're a

bunch of dumbasses and assured Vincent that it was nothing out of the ordinary. He said that he almost completely believed him despite saying earlier that he had completely believed him, but that Vincent's hesitation to go into details made everyone suspicious. As if they would understand what Vincent would really be saying when he violently spun her around and tossed her onto her knees, spreading her legs aside with a kick and taking aim. *Yes! Fuck me! Fuck me harder! Stretch that pussy, baby! Slap my ass.* As if they would understand what went through his head when he left an imprint of his hand on her ass cheeks, one after another, until her skin looked like pink crumpled-up wrapping paper. *Fuck my wet cunt!* Jim claimed that Vincent's humility was coming off as disingenuous. Now that he thought about it, it was a trait in Vincent he wasn't too fond of and admitted it was something that the three of them talked about when he left. But other than that, they don't talk behind his back all that much. Jim accused Vincent of never speaking his mind and how he's been so distant lately, even before Christmas, now that he thought more about it. Jim retreated and apologized, then asked why Vincent thinks he's better than everybody. He said that good friends don't keep secrets or think they're better. Were they still good friends? How did the volume of a glass of beer equate to a can? How did Jenna feel when Vincent dug his nails into her ribs and pushed them together with all his strength? Jim said he must've had nine or ten or eleven cans' worth of beer glasses by now and that Vincent needed to catch up.

A real friend would come join him.

Were they still friends?

Vincent hung up and tossed the phone aside.

Blonde Bimbos was his next search. He scrolled through the quiet moments to get a rapid-fire fill of the exciting images. The blood was flowing again. Jenna's moaning sounded like crying, but Vincent had heard that before in these sorts of films. *Big Cock Fucking*, his fingers frantically

typed now. Shouting and moaning and endless cries of ecstasy. Blondes and brunettes and redheads and MILFs. He stroked. He tugged. He felt a pop in his hands when he squeezed her ribs tighter; she shouted something; he thrust harder. The video was coming to an end but Vincent was not yet satisfied. He squeezed and massaged his balls with the other hand, smacking the side of his scrotum for a little jolt of excitement. *What the fuck are you doing?* She yelped in pain but he ignored it, thrusting faster and faster to drown out her incessant noisemaking. He softened up. *Double Penetration.* The blood was escaping too quickly. She tried to yank herself away, but it was no use. Vincent grabbed her by the hair to keep her in place. The man with the camera tapped him on the shoulder and asked if maybe he should ease up. Vincent batted him away. The pressure built up in the tip. *Bukkake Throat Fucking.* He used what was left of his beer-infused spit to help him stroke faster. She waved her hand up in the air and Vincent grabbed it and pulled it toward himself. Her face slammed into the floor. He climbed on top and hammered her from above. The cameraman grabbed Vincent's shoulder and was met with a fist to the side of his knee, sending him into a cry of pain. *Get the fuck off of me now!* She couldn't fight him off. *Jenko! Help!* He smacked her face back on the floor when she raised her head up. *Interracial Gangbang.* Vincent felt the impact of a bare foot strike his back. *Fisting Rape Fucking. Double Fisting Hard.* A shiny layer of beer and precum infused spit coated his keyboard. He went in with more force than he thought he had in him, ignoring the punching in the back of his head. *Real Rape Crying Fucking Hardcore.* He finally burst inside her with the other man's arm wrapped around his throat.

The phone rang again. Vincent watched it vibrate on the hardwood floor, cringing at the buzzing sound. Feeling the first signs of an approaching headache. He looked down at his hand to find that he was completely limp, senselessly

kneading the lump of dough into his crotch. He pulled his cramping hand away and shook it loose, then cracked his knuckles. A pale, skinny red-haired girl gagged with a piece of her torn blouse lay stretched out on a stack of pallets in what looked like a filthy alley-way, her hands tied behind her back, her legs spread wide, feet plated on the cold concrete. Her screams were muffled and tears were rolling down her cheeks when Vincent paused the video and saw the same pop-up ad appear again.

Tired of masturbating to the same old? Submit to Mistress Gabriella and enter a world of pleasure beyond anything you can imagine.

“Submit to me,” the ad spoke. He leaned in closer to the screen. The intoxicating voice helped to drown out the annoying buzzing of his phone.

“Submit to me,” his head gently swayed up and down, as if in a trance, while his eyes remained fixated on the image in front of him. *Submit to me*, Vincent mouthed the words now, exaggerating the movement of his lips as he pictured what they would look like spoken by the woman in the photo. His finger hovered above the touchpad. Softly, Vincent placed the tip of his finger to it and pushed the cursor toward the figure, tracing the outline of the mistress, being extra delicate around the curves he admired most.

“Submit to me.” The voice was smoother than silk. Warmer than melted butter. There was a melody, a rhythm to the way she spoke. *Sub-mit-to-me*—spoken as if it was all one perfect sound. The final line to a bed-time story. A lullaby in itself. A sound bite of an opera one could only hear in a dream with no beginning or end, impossible to describe upon waking. “Submit to me,” the gentle sigh at the end helped to ease the tension in his thighs. He felt his shoulders become lighter each time it played. Vincent closed his eyes and pictured the sound coming from the red-hot lips of the dominatrix in the photo and he allowed it to take control of his hand, leading the tip of his finger to slide

gently across the screen, then move further down and massage the head of his unfolding penis. A warm rush of pleasure exploded from his pelvis, rushing up to his head until he felt his cheeks go red. He opened his eyes when the warmth concentrating at the center of his chest became too much to bear. "Submit to me." He whimpered and struggled to get a full breath of air. The voice pulled him in closer, then directed his mouse cursor to the bottom of the ad where the text read: *Click Here . . . If You're Brave Enough.*

HandsFree.mp3

If You're Brave Enough . . . The mouse cursor circled around the words while Vincent contemplated the call to action, then decided against it. He was in no mood to be scanning his computer for malware at whatever time in the morning it was at the point. Having grown up in the prepubescent age of internet pornography, sometime between dial-up internet, where a few slow-loading photos would have to suffice, rolling into the era of high-speed fibre optic where full length high-definition content would load instantly, leading to issues of chronic indecision, Vincent had accumulated enough first-hand experience of clicking on the wrong links in the past to justify his reluctance. Sometime between the two periods, when streaming porn first appeared, grabbing the curiosity of a thirteen-year-old Vincent, there would always be a risk involved with clicking on just any link that promised to show him something more interesting than what he was presently watching, resulting in a virus that would render his computer useless, or, at best, litter his screen with random porn pop-up ads at times when the rest of the family would need to use the only computer in the house. Antivirus software that worked reliably was still in its infancy stage, not that it was of any help, as he didn't even have the credit card needed to purchase it. Back

before malware could be wiped clean with a free download from a source that could be verified, back before he could simply plug his issue into a search engine that would spit out results with solutions to identical problems many thousands had before him, back before society figured out which generation would take reigns over this technology nobody understood Vincent took it upon himself to figure it out. In this age of discovery, Vincent would dig through every system folder he could find, trying to track down the source of whatever caused his computer issues, looking for strange program names, file extensions, seemingly out-of-place assets, nonsensical directories. Learning what processes belonged, along with their specific purposes, and which were intrusive or malicious. Sometimes the damage would be too severe, or he would accidentally delete a crucial system file, resulting in him having to wipe the hard drive clean. Do a full reset of the operating system. A big deal at first, but after the tenth or twentieth time, it became routine. A clean slate—he loved it. Before he even realized it, Vincent had become proficient with the ins and outs of computer operating systems. Before someone could guide him in the right direction, he had already discovered his passion. Before he could afford his first stick of RAM, he had found his calling.

Some pieces of a puzzle he didn't realize he was attempting to solve fell in to place and he felt a wave of relief wash over him as he shut his laptop and thought about how it was porn that had led to his fascination in computers. What led him to pursue a degree in computer science. What gave him a purpose and a goal in life.

It was almost four in the morning and the miserable hungover student in him begged for a gallon of water and a few ibuprofens. Vincent listened and complied, then stumbled into the bedroom and curled himself up in the cold blanket, cradling his deflating erection as he faded away into a deep slumber.

* * *

Dear Jenna Moone...

Vincent planted himself in the darkest corner in the classroom he could find. The professor spoke of data structures, still going over the curriculum for the semester. Something about storage formats that enable efficient access modification—

He couldn't focus. His head throbbed and he could feel his pulse beat on his eardrums. There was a pestering itch in his pants and the words *Submit to Me* playing on repeat in his brain. He couldn't give half a shit about data values or the relationships among them. He knew it all. He knew everything, and he knew his professor knew it when he examined Vincent's project last term. Being in the top five in the class was his default. He would aim for top three if a teacher would show any signs of uncertainty about Vincent's abilities. If a certain smart-assed student in his class boasted about their work or grades, Vincent would try a little harder and get himself in that number one spot. In other words, Vincent figured, a day of not trying was acceptable. It was well deserved. It was half-past eight in the morning and there was not an ounce of inspiration or the will to try inside him. The words *Design Thinking*, the title of the next class on his busy schedule, made him cringe just thinking about it.

Linear Algebra 2—it was all too nauseating.

```
def my_apology():
```

```
    print("Dear Jenna Moone")
```

Dear Jenna Moone . . . Vincent typed the words into his code editor. He looked around the room to see that the other students still had their eyes glued to their screens, as if they'd somehow see what he was doing in the back of the class on his. His ear was open for any sounds of the door from behind. After some debating, he opened up a browser and navigated to Jenna Moone's website, searching for any signs of upcoming films that might interest him or an

update on just about anything. There was nothing. He switched back into his code editor:

```
def my_apology(*wrongs):  
    print("what i did was " + wrongs[2])
```

```
my_apology("bad", "horrible", "unforgivable")
```

Vincent haphazardly backspaced the words out of existence and flipped back to Jenna's website, instinctively looking away from the photos where she looked into the camera. He navigated to the contact page, which allowed watchers of her content to send fan mail. As if she reads those, he thought while dragging his cursor to that blank white box, then stared blankly at the blinking caret, conjuring up an appropriate string of words.

Jenna Moore,

You may not remember

It must have been the hangover, Vincent reasoned, no way he was that much of an idiot. He gave it another shot:

First of all, I want to congratulate you on the upcoming release of your first feature film. I am sure that your fans are very excited. My name is Vincent. I was the guy you picked up on the boardwalk in Miami. I hope that my scene doesn't make the cut. I'm the programmer . . . student. I don't know where to start this. 'Sorry' would be it, I guess. But that's not enough and I know that. My actions were inexcusable, no matter the circumstances. I was given an opportunity to be a part of something and—

"Vincent?"

"Yes?" Vincent looked up, startled. He would accuse the professor of purposefully sneaking up on him, but Vincent couldn't remember if he was paying attention to his surroundings. "What? What happened?"

"Your submission."

Submit to me

Vincent lost himself in a momentary trance and suddenly felt compelled to mentally sort through last night's extensive search history, feeling that tinge of the post-

masturbation guilt without the payoff that came before it that makes it all worth it.

“Huh?”

“Your quiz, please. Time’s up. I’m seeing everybody else’s submission in my system there—are you having trouble accessing the gateway?”

What sort of masochist assigns a quiz in the second week of the semester? Vincent looked up at the professor, trying to sort out the confusion in his head, finding that he couldn’t even remember how he got to school that morning, let alone how the class started or what was being said. By the time it was too late he realized that the professor saw what was on his screen, and in what felt like another lapse in his short term memory was sure that he told the entire class when he looked down to find a hundred tired, glossy eyes staring back at him. *Alt-Tab. Alt-Tab. Alt-Tab.* One in two chance that he switched back to the right window. One in two chance nothing has changed. Maybe he didn’t see it. And if he did, it’s not like he was watching any inappropriate videos. Like a gunslinger in a duel for his life, Vincent’s draw speed, his muscle memory with pressing those two keys, had never failed him. Maybe he didn’t see it. It didn’t matter. In his frozen state he finally opened his eyes to give some sort of answer, but all he submitted were the digested remains of last night’s pizza onto his desk.

As the day progressed, Vincent became more aware of an awkward association his mind had created, taking over completely at times. The nausea, as it came and went multiple times, nearly resulting in him puking at inopportune times, had him clutching his crotch in anticipation of an erection; the erection, confusing and intrusive, expanded to the sound bite of Mistress Gabriella’s voice stuck in his head, as if an antenna searching for a signal that was being transmitted from his computer.

Immediately after the second class of the day ended, Vincent tugged away in a bathroom stall. His forehead rested against the white tiles while he stared into a vortex of brownish-yellow puke vanishing down the drain. The sound of her words in constant repetition was not enough to bring him to climax. It was difficult, nearly impossible, to focus one one thing at a time. That lovely melody ended too quickly, and each time the words stopped he became anxious from anticipation for them to flow through his head again and random distracting thoughts would seep in. *Submit to me. Submit to me. Dear Jenna Moone. Submi—I'm sorry. Submit . . .* He watched his spit roll down the edge of the toilet bowl. *Submit to me.* Who just came in? *Submit to me.* The sharp stench left his eyes itchy and watery. What would he have for lunch? How many Advils could he take before succumbing to liver damage, or was that Aspirin? How much liver damage was an acceptable amount?

Mistress Gabriella—the parasite. The leech feeding off whatever was left of his consciousness. The unwelcome intruder, breaking into his home to steal the last roll of toilet paper after a night of Mexican food. The pesky malware on his computer, installing countless browser extensions beside, above, and below his search bar, leading to that obsessive thought: *it doesn't seem to affect anything, but it's gotta be doing something malicious.*

Mistress Gabriella—the assurance that he would not miss anything important in the next two classes coming up. The week, perhaps. The strength keeping his feet planted while waiting to get on the bus home as his head struggled to remain upright. The force keeping the spasms in his esophagus steady when his seat smelled like piss. The lack of shame when the sight of the fern in his lobby reminded him of last night's events and the acceptance of the look his reflection gave him on the way up in the elevator.

When the signal guided him back to his apartment, Mistress Gabriella was the voice telling him it was fine to

take it easy for the rest of the day and not worry about school.

Vincent was becoming convinced she knew how to help.

Gabriellasrecordings.com led to a page similar to what the pop-up ad last night promised. The woman in latex appeared in various outfits throughout several pages. In one way or another, being dominant. Boxes of text promised endless pleasure, complete satisfaction. A safe place to explore one's desires; an environment for discovering desires the customer wouldn't know they had. A scrolling list of testimonials from pleased customers footnoted the home page. Hand-picked, for sure. Possibly fake, even. The validity of them didn't matter, as Vincent was sure that testimonials were, regardless of venue or service, almost always made up. Who had the time to write testimonials about anything? What kind of people could think their opinions should matter, especially regarding porn? Regardless, he explored further.

The navigation menu started off with an *About* link. He wasn't particularly interested in seeing what pleasures it offered. A *Contact* page—how weird can these people get? *Forum*. *Chat*. Finally, *Audio*, he clicked the tab, which popped open a new page with an extensive list of categories. Brief descriptions of each, with a thumbnail graphic relevant to the topic. *New*. *Body Worship*. *XXX*. *Cuckold*. *Addiction*. *Self-Help*. *Role-Play*. *Kink* . . . He scrolled on. The list seemed endless. His fingers swiped up on the track pad faster and faster until the list became a blur before stopping at the bottom. Unable to decide, followed by an uneasy realization that he *was* actually making a decision, he scrolled back to the top and clicked on the first category. Then another. He stopped at *Cuckold* to admire how prolific Mistress Gabriella was upon seeing how each category resulted in dozens of unique recordings. Depending on the length, they ranged from \$30 to \$70. Porn is porn, and regardless of his fragile

state, Vincent could not find it in himself to justify paying for it. There was *saving-porn-to-your-computer* level of out-of-touch. Then, somewhere down an endless chasm of complete obliviousness, which he himself couldn't picture being inside of, was *paying* for porn. His belief that performers should get fair pay was ultimately overshadowed by the idea that if he were to spend money on it then it would almost appear as if he needed it.

Vincent backtracked to the original page for *Audio* and scrolled to the bottom again, where he found a download link for a free recording. A preview, the text promised, of the powers of Mistress Gabriella.

He clicked it without hesitation now. His pants had almost completely come off by the time the download progress bar circle had completed a full revolution. He opened the file in his media player. *HandsFree.mp3* played through his laptop speakers.

That voice that followed him around all day, in all its glory, invited Vincent to partake in an adventure. He happily accepted.

"Hi there, sexy. I see you finally found what you were looking for. Me: Mistress Gabriella, of course. The internet is a scary place, and I just want you to know that I fully acknowledge the risk you took just to get here. Regardless of who you are, the unknown is scary. Something as simple as clicking a link on a strange website can lead your mind to think of the worst. The stress. The anxiety—it can be paralyzing. We underestimate the power of our own minds, our imagination, but it doesn't *always* have to have a negative outcome. You passed the first test. You took a leap of faith, and for that you will be greatly rewarded—that's the Mistress Gabriella guarantee.

"This was your first test in seeing if you could let go, because that's what this is all about. That is what I teach. Some people will never let go, never experience life to the

fullest, never liberate themselves from the mental prisons they themselves built. But you took the leap, and before we continue, I want you to understand that I am grateful for it. I am happy for you. I am extremely proud of you, and you should be, too. You took the first, very, very important, step towards true freedom. A risky step. A sexy step. And you're so, so brave for it.

"I know you're tired of this meaningless, shallow garbage, nonsense, they call *porn* these days infecting the healthy minds of stand-up guys such as yourself. Warping your perception of intimacy, love, relationships. Beauty most of all. I know you're a smart man. I know you know this, but without a healthy alternative, what else can you do? I know you're tired of staring blankly at your computer screen every night like some mindless zombie, trying to get excited over the same old content which you know, in the back of your mind, is not good for you. I know that you're tired of searching for the next crazy thing to get you off. I know how it goes, but also that you're better than that. Sex is deeper than that, and I want to show you how much is possible when we get your imagination involved. I want you to know that your long search is finally over.

"My name is Mistress Gabriella and I am going to take you places you could never have imagined. I want you to close your eyes and let my voice guide you down a wondrous, fulfilling journey of love and self-exploration. A journey of sexual rediscovery. A new you. Because, baby, when this session is over, you *will* be a new man . . ."

If Vincent wasn't able to convince himself that he was swayed by the tone of her voice, the promise of a new him was the trigger that he needed to pull his finger away from the spacebar, in case he needed to stop the recording, and allow things to unravel in what he hoped would be a favorable direction.

"For the most gratifying experience . . ." she continued,

“... Mistress Gabriella *insists* you listen to this recording through a pair of comfortable noise-canceling headphones . . .” Vincent pressed down on the space bar and ran to the kitchen to grab his school bag off the counter. From the small side pocket he pulled out a clump of jumbled wire where a pair of earbuds, lost somewhere in the mess, were supposed to be attached at the ends. On his journey back to the couch Vincent kept his frustration in check while untangling the mess. About twenty inches of slack would do. Laying with his face up on the couch, most of the bundle of wire rested on his chest, his ears plugged in. He pulled the laptop in closer. Vincent took a deep breath, fighting thoughts of shopping online for a new set of headphones, before reaching over to the laptop and striking that space bar. “. . . these recordings are *binaural*, meaning they’re cleverly designed to send very specific messages to each ear, individually. You wouldn’t want this sexy, erotic experience to go to waste now, would you?” Vincent nodded. “If I were you. If *I* were a good boy such as yourself, I would head on over to *gabriellasrecordings.com* where you can find a pair of custom-designed headphones approved and signed by yours truly . . . that’s *if* you want the best experience possible.

“But for now, oh—well, I’m sure you’re tired of waiting, aren’t you? There will *always* be more time to give Mistress Gabriella your money. For your benefit, of course. Silly boy . . .

“Now—are you ready, baby? Are you relaxed? Are you in a safe, relaxing environment where you are *absolutely sure* nobody will disrupt this session? It’s very important that you know this, even in the back of your mind, otherwise you may not experience the session in its full effect. Give yourself a minute to inspect your surroundings and make sure . . .”

Blinds closed. Door locked. Vincent scanned the living room through a thin slit of his eyelids. All clear. No alarms

set. No one will come to his door. Who might call? Call. Phone—airplane mode. More messages about last night from his friends. They can wait. He was flying to another world and electromagnetic interference was a risk on flights of all manners. With the press of that button the ascending stack of bars vanished from the corner of his phone screen, and with it, the last of his worries.

“... Good. Good boy. The first thing I need you to do now is to get *extra* comfortable. *Mhmm*, I think you know what I mean. I need you to feel sexy. Because I know you know where this is going, no? It is of utmost importance that you lose *all* of your clothing and find a nice, comfortable place to lie down. Once you’re done I want you to close your eyes, knowing that you will have to keep them closed for a long, long time. Now relax and await my further instruction...”

“... we’re going to count down from ten. When I reach *one*, you will find yourself in a state of complete relaxation. Every minute thought, every worry and every bit of stress will dissipate from your mind and body and you will only hear the music of my entrancing, comforting voice. I want you to place your hands over your belly. Lock your fingers together. When I tell you to inhale, you will focus your mind on your hands and feel the relaxing sensation of your chest fill with fresh air.

“Are you ready? *Breaaaaathee in*. Slowly, feel your chest expand, reaching for the ceiling.

“*Ten*. Now exhale, all the way, slowly ... good. You’re feeling more relaxed already. *Breathe in* ... hold it there ...

“*Nine*. Exhale. You’re now leaving your body, feeling twice as relaxed as before. You’re leaving your body, and along with it every worrisome thought in your head. Every little pain or twitch or discomfort you *allow* to bother you more than it rightfully should. *Breathe in again* ... you feel no pain now ...

“*Eight.* There is no itch you have to scratch. There is no nervous tick. There isn’t even a heartbeat to distract you. *Again,* take it in. Deeper and deeper and deeper we go.

“*Seven.* The world is dark, but I will guide you through it if you learn to trust me. If you follow my every direction. Only when you learn to trust me can you be truly free. *Exhale.* You can learn just how fantastic it can feel to let everything go and feel nothing but pure bliss. Mistress Gabriella can do that for you. *Inhale now.*

“*Six.* You can trust Mistress Gabriella because she wants nothing more than to satisfy the deepest of your desires. *Exhale.*

“*Five . . . inhale, slower now.* You don’t know where you are and that’s alright. Isn’t that just the mindset of the world right now? We are all just so lost in this uncertain world. These uncertain times. You look out into the complete darkness and see the hint of a candlelight glimmer in the distance. It feels like hope. I want you to *exhale*, then walk towards it.

“*Four.* We’re so close now. Come to me. My voice will take your hand and lead you to paradise. At this point my voice has dug deep into your subconscious, my voice is a part of you . . . you can hear me say *inhale, exhale . . .* yet I didn’t even say the words out loud. Can you hear it? That’s the power of Mistress Gabriella. It’s working now. Let me in deeper now. You’re going to feel so, so good. You *already* feel so, so good. Don’t you? Can you feel the warmth? That’s me. That’s my voice hugging you. Comforting you. That warmth is my voice telling you that everything will be alright as long as I’m by your side. And I will never leave it. After this is all done it’s entirely possible that I will remain with you always . . .

“*Three.* I’m going deeper now and you’re letting me. It feels so good to let me in, doesn’t it? There is no need to look back now—you won’t find anything of importance. Only the things you always knew you wanted to leave

behind, but without strength and guidance never did. The only important thing is that you're with me, and I'm not going anywhere. Just follow the light and have complete trust in Mistress Gabriella.

"*Two*. You're there now. That bright, shining light you've been following—that's been me all along. Your light in a world of darkness. The relief in a world of uncertainty. You adore its glow, the beauty of it is unfathomable. It's entrancing. Hypnotizing.

"*One*. My glow absorbs you. Takes complete control now. You have let go. When that last bit of air from your last breath escapes your lungs you will be completely mine.

"Are you ready?

"It's time to *EXHALE*"

Vincent followed the voice down a dimly lit stairwell, through a door with a golden handle that opened to a room kept awake with ambient jazz. The walls made of layers of deep-red velvet drapes. The carpet was a satisfying mixture of warm beach sand with the consistency of fresh snow on his feet when he walked through it on his way to a bed in the center of the room which, once he laid down, seemed to suspend him in mid-air while Mistress Gabriella continued to serenade him. She tickled his brain from every direction. No words to describe the feelings were his; only what she told him was true. Not an ounce of doubt went through his head when Mistress Gabriella told him, early on, that when he heard the word *waterfalls* that he would explode in pleasure. She promised he would. She also promised that he had no choice *but to* believe her.

". . . Oh, you're *such* a good boy. And good boys get very, very nice rewards. You've given me complete control over your thoughts now. Your body . . . Your . . . *cock*. *That's right!* I know you were waiting for me to get there. I know how badly you wanted me to say that word. You thought that maybe I even forgot about it. *Nub-uh-uh*. I am *very* well

aware of your . . . *Hmmm* . . .

"*Okay*—you worked hard enough for it, baby, you deserve a little more. Your *cock*. Your beautiful, throbbing cock. *Mhmm*, I bet you like that word: *throbbing*. Tell me, how does it make you feel? What does it do to your body? Yes—your body. My voice guides every bodily function of yours now, and I can make it do whatever I please, and you *will* love it. Every second of it. You love it. You love the idea that I can do whatever I want. And I *know* exactly what it is you want me to do. You want me to *water* . . .

" . . . *slide*. *Gotcha!* We're not there yet. Oh my—how I love to tease. We're not even close, baby. First, I need you to do something for me. Do you know what that might be? Don't be shy now, come on. I *know* what you're doing . . . *down there*. *Water* . . .

" . . . *balloon!* *Water balloon*. Oh—did I feel a little throb down there? *I said* I know what you're doing down there. Now stop! Take your hand off your cock. That's right—be a good boy a take your hand off that cock. Oh, and I know you want to stroke it so bad to the sound of my voice. *Water* . . . *Jug!* But you need to stop because *this* is a special recording. Because you're in for a real treat tonight. Take that hand off and put it back on your belly and listen closely, because tonight, Mistress Gabriella is going to make you come using nothing but her sexy, entrancing voice. All you have to do is surrender . . . and who are you to say that you already haven't? Surrender all of you—I want you to *really* believe it. Now tell me, baby. Tell me that your body belongs to me. Say it. Say it out loud."

" . . . my body belongs to you."

"Now say that your mind belongs to Mistress Gabriella."

"My mind belongs to Mistress Gabriella."

"Now say: your cock belongs to me."

"My cock belongs to Mistress Gabriella."

" . . . *good boy* . . . "

* * *

As if in a dream, Mistress Gabriella's face, despite her many attempts to describe it, failed to become a coherent image in Vincent's imagination, leaving him with a blur of lines and features and colors that would transform to something else the instant he looked away. Like in a dream, she assured him, as if aware of the ongoing uncertainty in the back of his mind, the point was never to retain an image once all of this was over, but a feeling. Mistress Gabriella would finally reveal herself after assuring Vincent that she had full control. Emerging from behind the red velvet drapes, Vincent watched her approach, the entirety of her framed in the space between his spread-out feet. Her legs were slim, toned, perfect for wrapping themselves around his body, just as she had promised. The warm light from above bent and warped as it reflected around the curves of her latex leggings as one six-inch heel passed in front of the other. The curves of her ass looked perfect for slapping, should she want to be a bad girl. Her pussy, Mistress Gabriella assured Vincent, was already dripping wet at the sight of him. Aching, begging for him to be inside of it. His fists clenched as he fought the urge to masturbate at the sound of every description, but Mistress Gabriella wouldn't let him, no matter how badly he wanted it.

"... The reward will be so, so worth it"

Her breasts were ready to burst from her latex top and she couldn't wait until the moment when her nipples might accidentally graze Vincent's lips. Her eyes commanding, yet safe. Her hair luscious, draping over her defined collarbones, just barely concealing that soft part of her neck that he couldn't wait to kiss all over. Her lips formed an infectious, entrancing, seductive smile when—

"... I look down at your cock and think about all the fun I'm going to have with it. You don't get to touch it, but . . . mind if I? I'm curious, you know? I've never seen such a *beautiful* cock. You're special, you know? Your . . . *cock*

is special. You have the most special cock in the world and it's all mine.

"Oh, baby.

"Oh, sweetie—you so badly want to touch it, don't you?"

"*Water . . . sports! Nub-ub-ub—I'm not even close to being done with you. Keep your hands to the sides. Press them against your legs. Feel the pressure. Feel the sweat building up. Feel the tension in your buttcheeks when you flex your cock while thinking of me.*

"*Squeezzzzzeee. Squeeze harder.*

"*Harder. Even harder.* You so badly want to touch it. You so badly want me to touch it, don't you?"

"Yes!"

"I want you to say it, say it out loud!"

"YES!"

"Don't be shy: say you want Mistress Gabriella to play with your sweet, juicy cock!"

"Play with my cock, Mistress Gabriella!"

"Good boy . . . and if you were too shy to say it, then you don't deserve Mistress Gabriella. This is your last chance . . ."

"Play with my cock, Mistress Gabriella!"

"*Hmmm*, glad we got that settled. Oay then, I see that you *are* a good boy. Good boys get good rewards. You're squeezing even harder now, thrusting your pelvis in the air. I take another step closer. My sweet, juicy mouth on a direct path to your cock. Can you feel me getting closer? Can you feel the warmth? My presence? My *glow* right above your cock?

"And another step. My mouth is within an arm's reach of your cock and you're thrusting harder and harder. Thrust your cock towards the ceiling, baby! I love to watch you squirm. I want to see you explode. I want to see the *water* . . ."

"*Works . . . hmmm*—it's not time yet. I can see you're

ready to burst, but I want to play with you just a little longer. You wouldn't want me to stop now, would you?"

"... no."

"I didn't think so.

Vincent dug his nails into his thighs, his legs became tense, ass hovering over the couch cushions as he thrust his crotch towards the ceiling. Mistress Gabriella placed her fingertips on his knees, working their way up to his pelvis while the hot breath from her mouth warmed the perimeter. Vincent thought he was done for when her hair brushed the tip of his cock, but she managed to restrain him in time. "If you can do this. If you can hold out for me, baby—you can do anything. Be strong. Do you really want to waste this? Don't you want to know what these lips feel like on your strong, patient cock? You can do it, I know you can. We're almost there"

His testicles nearly retreated back into his body when her hand grabbed them and began massaging. "So close now" His body stiff as a board, leaving only the backs of his heels and the back of his head in contact with the couch. She teased and teased and the ceaseless throbbing broke the surface tension of the precum on the tip of his penis, sending it streaking down the shaft, the sensation of it further driving him to insanity. "When my lips touch down on this cock, when I say the word: *water* . . . *oh, baby*—can you feel how close my lips are now? Can you feel my hot breath when I open my mouth—*open wide!*—and get ready to swallow your cock whole? You're so close. You're so close now, baby! Get ready for me: thrust that cock in the air. Thrust it with all your strength! Let my lips feel your warmth. My mouth is hovering over your cock and you're ready to explode! Thrust! Throb for me, baby! My goodness, your cock is twitching so hard right now and you can't wait to explode in my mouth. You want to explode. You're throbbing so hard and all I have to do is say the word

"*Hmmm* . . . should I say it?

"Should I be a good girl . . . ?

"Maybe. I don't know—maybe I want to be a *bad girl* . . .

"*It is* fun to be bad sometimes . . . dontcha think?

"Let me . . .

"Hmm . . .

"You know what"

Something was about to tear inside of Vincent when he finally heard, "*waterfalls!*" and there was a sudden warmth all around his legs. "*Waterfalls: come for me, baby! Come hard! Give me all you got. Waterfalls.*" The warmth landed on his stomach. It kept pumping and pumping. It struck his chest. His forehead. His body twisted and contorted and twitched as the tension slowly subsided.

He gasped for air.

She told him to relax.

He complied.

Mistress Gabriella welcomed Vincent back into lucidity to a familiar smell of chlorine and persimmons. She led him out of the velvet-draped room, up the stairs, following the faint ball of light through the darkness before it exploded, bathing him in a blinding flash of light when he opened his eyes and the room before him came into focus. She helped him to regain the feeling in his toes. He wiggled his fingers. His arms stretched to the ceiling as he exhaled with a massive yawn.

" . . . such a good boy. Now feel the tension in your chest ease as you take a long, deep breath. Perhaps a satisfying little crack in your spine. Feel your tummy expand and contract. Expand and contract and with every long breath you will feel me handing control of your body and mind back to you. You're free to do as you please now. Thank you, sweetie—I had so, so much fun with you. I know you enjoyed giving up control. I know you'll do it again. You now know that you *loooove* to submit to Mistress Gabriella.

Even now, while you're completely lucid, you recognize the tremendous pleasure you can feel if you simply learn to listen to my voice. All you have to do is *submit*—it's that easy!

“Now tell me, baby: tell me you will obey me.”

“I will obey you.”

“Oh, baby—now tell me that you will submit to my every command from now on.”

“I will submit to your every command.”

“Now tell me that you love me.”

“I love you, Mistress Gabriella.”

“Good boy.”

Part Two:

God is a Woman

Friends and Foes

Dear Mistress Gabriella,

I write to you again, with a heart full of love, devotion, and heavy wanting, my testicles bearing the weight of an affection deeper than I ever dreamed possible, infatuated by their tension, yet longing for your voice to ease them of this endless suffering. Mistress Gabriella, you've made a poet out of me, and I keep this side of me secret. You've taught me not only how to feel, but also the words with which to express myself in a manner which allows me to believe their authenticity. It is for your eyes only. Mistress Gabriella, you've taught me that love is not simply romance. That, although blind, is so much more than an obsession. An obsession can't be satiated; it is eternally destructive. When you're in my mind, my heart, stomach, and psyche ride an endless roller-coaster where the highs transcend reason and give my soul a pleasure my body lacks the tools, receptors to feel, and the lows bring me back down to a conscious level, where I have my reason back, and this reason assures me that I am not crazy, that I'm not taking this too far, that this, you, are the best thing in my life.

Mistress Gabriella, would you think less of me if I were to say I wanted you all to myself? You see, I now am sure that God is a woman. You've made a believer out of me. But like any devoted believer willing to do as you ask, I need to know that you're listening. I know you're there—and that's more than most can be sure of when it

comes to faith. But like you ask of me to take things further, I ask for nothing more than acknowledgment of my existence. Yes, I know it's a big ask, having you all to myself. Let me rephrase that: I want you all to myself be it for an hour, a minute, a few seconds. A simple reply to any of my dozens of letters. A simple confirmation that for the few moments it took you to read my words, watch my videos, I had your complete attention. That I was in your mind. That I am in your world. This is all I ask.

Attached to this e-mail is my latest submission to your request as per the instructions from the Dangerous Masturbation recording. I hope you're really keeping that scorecard by your bed, as I believe I'm due for another three points with this one. It was a tough one to pull off (no pun intended). I know I shouldn't expect a prize, but is it wrong to hope for one anyway? Is this really a world-wide competition? Will you ever let us know? Will you keep me guessing? I'm not worried about a prize, but I do hope to win. I hope that when this is all over that I get to hear from you.

I hope that one day you will find me in your sights and I will finally feel like I exist.

Eternally yours,

Thomas Roberts

Mistress Gabriella was everything Shauna wasn't, in the sense that Mistress Gabriella *could* be anything he wanted, where his wife was merely that face he had to see at the end of each day, whether or not he wanted to, and jump through just the right hoops, say just the right things in order for the interactions to remain amicable, until the next day. It wasn't life, it was survival. Mistress Gabriella came and went as he pleased. The freedom he had while under her control was empowering. She wouldn't get upset if he wanted to pause her. She wouldn't throw a fit if he decided she should change her tune, appearance, personality. Shauna couldn't do that, even if he felt that some control over her was deserved, earned, or given to him by whatever means was

felt appropriate. As far as he was concerned, in these trying times, Shauna's existence only Mistress Gabriella's on hold.

It wasn't all bad, though. There were always the moments they could relive together. The past. The cherry-picked flashes of intimacy or inspiration or the addictive tension of a growing love they would recall to each other following an argument. A desperate attempt to find reasons to stay together. The idea that there was something worth saving on the notion that it was possible to create new stories and moments and new ways to love each other, while ignoring all the pain which precedes it. It was work. It was always constant work, and neither one of them really had an idea of what the payoff would be. *She* made it work, as that was the only way Shauna could get by. Thomas did the bare minimum, going along with her plan, afraid to bring up the idea that *simply letting things be and see what happens* would infuriate her and widen the gap between them. Shauna left him with anxious thoughts about their future together. Shauna made him daydream endlessly about how far he would go in life were she not in it, or at best help him figure out, on his own, what it was he wanted to achieve in life in the first place. Shauna didn't fit into his definition of love, not in the way Mistress Gabriella would describe it. Shauna never wanted to indulge his vague ideas about doing anything about their sex lives or even offer a blowjob based on the simple notion that they were supposed to be in love and that's what people in love do.

Shauna would never tell Thomas that he was the fiercest ninja warrior that ever lived.

Tucked away in his pants pocket, living in the memory card on his phone, Mistress Gabriella, like a genie, would emerge to fulfill Thomas' wishes with the right presses of a few buttons. He could have it all, she promised, as long as he was willing to give up everything he knew about himself. Somehow, the words: *your wish is my command*, worked in both directions. A healthy relationship, he figured.

“I’m the fiercest, most bad-ass ninja warrior that’s ever lived,” Thomas said under his breath while checking over his shoulder for any sources of interruptions. The square bump in his pocket itched. He grabbed it through the fabric of his pants and gave it a good squeeze. Any minute now. He waited for the rumble of the pistons in the air compressor next to his workstation to come to a stop. The noise made it difficult to focus; the vibrations shook the floor around him. The gauge on the air tank read 55 PSI. 60 will do this time. Last week, at 80 PSI, the pressure from the nozzle was severe enough to burst a few blood vessels on his scrotum.

Hardware Joe’s was set to close in about an hour and the last customer Thomas had to deal with left him in a state of frustration, a threshold for which Thomas had artificially lowered over the years so that he could excuse pleasuring himself at work to relieve it. There was something about the constant exposure to do-it-yourself-ers in the recent years, asking for custom lumber cuts, that would leave Thomas with a lingering sense of purposelessness. A reminder of his own stagnation. Who, what sorts of people had time to build their own decks or birdhouses or furniture? Every week of almost every month, Thomas would stand there at his station of chop-saws and rip saws and pamphlets, against a backdrop of posters and murals on the back wall displaying the endless possibilities of projects one could build using lumber. Several times a day an enthusiastic customer would approach with their ideas, ready to drop a load on Thomas about their project, their personal motivations for wanting to construct something. He would struggle not to roll his eyes when hearing about their unique twist on the formula. There was never a direct route he could take through the dialog that would get him quickly enough to the part where he could finally ask: *how many? How long? Thank you, have a great day.* On evenings when his pessimism succumbed to the bombardment of inspiration Thomas would take an idea home with him only to be

reminded by his wife that if he wanted to do something for the home, it would be more useful to fix the leaky faucets or simply clean up once in a while. There was nothing more toxic to Thomas' psyche than inspiration. Something about it always put him too close to the edge. An hour ago he couldn't cut a simple board of oak to within a quarter-inch tolerance and his world came crumbling down. Mistress Gabriella to the rescue.

Screw it. He set the valve to 70 PSI and hunched over the workbench overlooking the hardware store, allowing the violent rumblings of the compressor to seep in and exacerbate his anger. A loud hiss from the air blow-off valve was his signal to commence. From behind the waist-high workbench, he scanned the perimeter once more, checking carefully the slits from between the stacks of lumber, and peeled off the upper half of his orange cover-alls. He loosened the belt buckle and tossed it to the side, then opened up his pants just far enough to jam the air nozzle inside his underwear. *60 PSI is for wimps*, he decided as he squeezed the handle of the air blower and unleashed a cold blast of air into his crotch, feeling the flaps of his scrotum and foreskin violently thrash about.

"I'm a motherfucking ninja warrior!" He yelped in pain. Mistress Gabriella loved to watch him squirm. For love, he squeezed the handle again, first rubbing the cold of the stainless steel nozzle against the head of his penis. Another rush of air. Another distraction from the soul-destroying boredom causing him to rot from the inside out. Another few moments to shake Shauna from his mind and remember what it was like before her voice commanded him, steered his actions, even at times when she wasn't present. The nagging that was seen as comical, simply due it being ever present. The typical ball-and-chain jokes that exist only to help deal with the grim reality that there really is no alternative, should he want to remain a socially acceptable citizen. Another quick blast and suddenly

Thomas felt a rush of happiness wash over him. While pulling his erection up, keeping it upright by the band in his underwear, he was grateful to Mistress Gabriella for helping to open his eyes to the reality modern men had to face in this rapidly changing world. He discarded the air hose and caressed the tip of his penis, peeking out, aimed at his belly button, finally feeling ready to hit that little *play* button and allow Mistress Gabriella to take him on an adventure.

When was the last time Thomas had done anything for Shauna? Must have been Shauna's voice in his head again. Although his boss hated him doing so, and suggested several times that it would cause trouble, Thomas went ahead and took no breaks during his workday, hoping to combine them all together into one 45-minute escape at the end of the day. Mistress Gabriella was worth it. She would be proud. He considered putting that bit about himself in his next fan letter, talking about his sacrifices. He picked his words, making sure to not sound as if he was gloating when he would write them, as he pushed the double-swing-out doors to the employee area of Hardware Joe's, making sure to feel for every rub of his jeans against the head of his penis in every stride. The bathroom stall was forty feet away. He had to keep the momentum going. The doors swung behind him with a heavy *swoosh* and thump as the air escaped and the round rubber bumpers made contact.

"Yo, Tom!"

Thomas heard the voice through the opening between the swings of the doors. He stopped in his tracks, sighed, and swung around to see the face he didn't want to see just yet. With his knees buckling and the right side of his face being pulled down in sync with his kegels he swung his arm out and groaned, "whaaat?!" He stared Stephanie down as she pushed her shoulder through the swinging doors and stopped a few feet in front of him, both cringing and laughing as she scrolled through her phone.

"I got you!" she boasted. "Man, I got you *good* this time."

"Goddamn it, Steph . . ." Thomas yanked the phone out of her hands and inspected it. On the screen was a video from a few minutes ago of him pleasuring himself with the air blower. He scrolled through the timeline to get a sense of the length of it. He considered the angle, then pulled the phone away from his face, looking ahead and upwards, raising his hand to match the eyeline, "did you . . . ?"

"Yup!" she took her phone back. "Plywood. Top rack. Didn't see that one coming, did ya?"

"I checked the—"

"I know you did . . . I *saw* you checking the perimeter. I was worried about placing the step-ladder behind the rack there, thinking you'd catch on . . . I expected too much of you, huh?"

"Well, doesn't matter—you ruined it, anyway!"

"What do you mean?!"

"Because you're not supposed to tell me, shit!" Thomas stomped his foot, more frustrated now that his erection began to fade. "How many times have I told you? Damn it—at least give it a day or so. Keep me on my toes a bit. Let me revel in it. Let me wonder."

"Jeez . . . alright."

"Let there be suspense! Ughhh!" Thomas huffed at her.

Stephanie locked the screen on her phone and tucked it into her armpit as she crossed her arms, stared up at Thomas. "I don't appreciate your attitude."

Thomas anxiously rubbed at the bump his earbuds made in his pants. "I don't appreciate you constantly messing this up for me! I ask for one thing, done simply. You storm in here, all excited-like, completely ignoring . . . being *completely* ignorant of what I'm trying to do here, and want praise for a job barely done . . ." Thomas cut himself off upon seeing a single tear roll down Stephanie's cheek, "what's wrong, Steph?"

"I'm sorry . . ." her speech interrupted with a series of sobs, "I tried really hard. I was on there . . . *up there* . . . on the . . ." she pointed through the thin windows in the swinging doors at the top rack of plywood, sitting thirty feet above ground, "half an hour . . . *I* was there for half an hour, waiting for you to get going."

"I know," Thomas said, his tone more comforting now, "I know you try." Thomas hesitantly placed his hand on her shoulder and wiped the look of disappointment from his face. "You *did* do good this time. You're *very* creative, but Steph—"

"It's my birthday today!" She smacked his hand away, wiped the tear from her cheeks, and crossed her arms. "It's my birthday and if you don't pay me I won't have money for coke for my party and you'll ruin everything!"

"But you didn't do what . . . wait," Thomas stepped back. A look of terror across his face, "how old are you now?"

"Oh, thank you," she sneered, "*Happy Birthday, Stephanie* —"

"Yeah, yeah—happy birth—"

"I'm eighteen, you jerk!"

"Eighteen?!" his hands shook. He muttered a series of panicked *no-no-no's* under his breath. "Eighteen . . . *already?*"

"Yuuuup. Now just pay me please. I'll take two hundred since you think it's not worthy. I need to head back to my station and swap out some fluorescents before wrapping my shift up. Then it's time to par-tay . . ." she pulled her phone out again. With her face glued to the screen, Stephanie spun herself around and walked backwards toward Thomas, stopping shoulder-to-shoulder with him. Thomas pulled away, still watching her navigate the menus of her photo library. He clenched his fists. Sighed with defeat. His eyes filled with nervousness when she repeated *par-tayyyy* under her breath and pressed the tip of her finger to the *share* button on the screen and typed his e-mail into the *TO:* row.

“We good then?” Stephanie’s finger hovered over the *send* button. She looked up to see Thomas and the complete lack of enthusiasm on his face. “We *good* then?” She asked again. Nothing. “Thomas—”

“Stop!” He flicked her fingertip away from the *send* button. “No. No-no-no—no good. I don’t want it. I’m not going to pay you.”

“What!”

“You didn’t do what I asked *and now* you’re eighteen!” Thomas huffed and puffed, hopped away from Stephanie with his hands to the air, “don’t want it. It’s ruined and I don’t want it. I can’t use it. It won’t feel right and I can’t fake it. I know I can’t fake it. This is no good!”

“Tom!” she shouted. “Fine—one-fifty then!”

“No, you don’t get it! It’s ruined. I have to find someone else now, too. Damn it!”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re eighteen now!”

“So?”

“That doesn’t work for me!”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because it doesn’t work for me. Do you really expect me to explain everything about why I’m doing this? Is this really a part of me that you want to know much about? What I wanted was simple. Now you can’t give it to me. I can’t use you. I’m sorry, Steph.” Thomas checked his phone. The time was 4:35 PM and Thomas felt a second wave of anger wash over him when he looked at Stephanie and blamed her, on two accounts now, for his failings to Mistress Gabriella. The recording in his pocket, queued up on his phone’s media player app, demanded fifty-three minutes of his attention. If he were to skip the intro, the summary of his previous episodes, he could cut that down to forty-two. He did the math. He took mental inventory of all the male staff that remained in the closing shift. At this point he had learned who tended to skip out the last few minutes of work

and close early. The ones who remained fifteen to twenty minutes after closing to clean up their stations. The ones who took a shit before heading home. Henry, from tool sales. Henry, the serial shitter. Henry the cockblock. “Is Henry on shift today?” Thomas asked, suddenly forgetting the source of anger responsible for the look on Stephanie’s face.

“You can’t do this to me, Tom. Not today.”

“Your station’s right next to his. Notice if he took any long breaks in the last hour or so, came out with that little smile in the corner of his mouth?”

“Are you listening to me? Don’t do this to me—I need my money. Pay me.”

“Just trying to remember, is that on tuesda—“

“HEY!”

“What?”

“Where are you?!” Stephanie waved her hands in front of Thomas’ wandering eyes, “hello, you there?”

“Look, I gotta go. We’ll settle this tomorrow.”

“You’re not in tomorrow, asshole!”

Thomas backed away, keeping his eyes fixed on Stephanie he raised the palms of his hands up and said, “sorry,” then spun around and headed down the corridor.

“Attention all customers, Hardware Joe’s will close in twenty minutes,” the PA system blared overhead.

Thomas sat leaning on the bathroom counter fidgeting with his phone in one hand, twirling the cord to his earbuds in the other. His feet danced an impatient dance. There was Henry, taking his time in the stall that Thomas needed access to. Taking some much-needed Mistress Gabriella time away from Thomas. *It just had to be today.* Shauna complained to Thomas the night before that her shift would start at five in the morning today, meaning that she would most likely be home around the same time as him. Meaning that she would be around for the whole evening to steal his personal time.

There was not a thing more annoying to him than when Shauna couldn't give him an exact time when she would get home.

The noises coming from the bathroom stall gave promise that Henry was finishing up now. The stench indicated a lactose intolerance. Thomas closed his eyes and recalled the stench Mistress Gabriella spoke of, that of his enemies. That of the evil which lived beyond the Great Mountain. Full immersion. Thomas recapped the events of the first four recordings of the series:

Discovering his village on fire and the death of everyone he knew and loved. The treacherous path to the Great Mountain. His battle with the Guardian. And finally meeting his arch nemesis, *Nise Akuma*. All the imagery flashed though his mind with no clear end or beginning, just a blend of shapes and colors and sounds at a speed his consciousness could barely keep up with, only slowing down at the parts where he would be prompted to stroke his ninja cock.

"I miss the days when we just had magazines," Henry emerged from the bathroom stall. Thomas opened his eyes to see him walk toward the sink, both hands up in front of him. "Move." He butted shoulders with Thomas to get to the sink.

"What are you talking about?" Thomas backed away, forgetting about the erection poking through his pants.

"You and that pecker and that i-whatever device of yours. Magazines, I'm telling you—those were the days. You'd be lucky to even find yourself in a room alone with a good magazine. Most times, the best you could get is a few glances if you found yourself on the right page before getting caught at the grocery store. Memory. Memory and discipline . . . what am I getting at . . . you saw a picture you liked and you kept that in your head. You kept that in your head for hours, maybe days at a time until the opportunity came when you could do something about it. Now you got

these goddamned screens everywhere and you got these goddamned kids rubbing their peckers between their legs out in public on buses or park benches thinking they're being sneaky."

"Henry I'm in a rush—"

"Yeah always in a rush to find something better. Something to really get ya off. Whatever happened to just a blonde with big tits, eh? Those were the days—that's all anyone needed. Now its just *more*. *More, more, more*. Better, newer, more exciting. Something new every day, and then you wonder why your relationships are always failing. Can't just stick with one good thing."

"How do you know my relationship is failing?"

"I was speaking generally." Henry rinsed his hands and patted them dry with a paper towel.

"This is . . . therapy."

"Right," Henry tossed the paper towel in the trash bin and headed for the door. "Taking a good shit is therapy. Jerking off before going home to see your wife *needs* therapy. *What?* Don't look at me like that. You think people don't know what you do here? The last person to realize they have a problem with addiction is the addict."

"Attention all customers. Hardware Joe's will be closing in ten minutes. Please bring your carts to the front so that we may complete your order."

Sometimes having to stay behind close to an hour for clean-up, Thomas figured he'd have at least seventy minutes of freedom now. His station was cleaned ahead of time. The sawdust had been swept and vacuumed up. The floor mopped. The off-cuts all arranged in their respective bins. The bathroom to himself. The stress from the earlier confrontation all but forgotten once he got himself comfortable in the bathroom stall and hit *play*.

"Oh, hi there sexy," Mistress Gabriella spoke, "I just want to thank you again for taking part in this exciting, sexy

journey with me. I'm sure you're just dying to find out what happens in the last part of the chapter, so I'm going to go ahead and jump right in. Please be sure that you're in a nice, comfortable spot, free of all distractions. Relax for me. Breathe slowly. For maximum pleasure, as always, I recommend a good pair of stereo headphones. Pause this recording if you need more time to—"

"Calling Thomas. Calling Thomas in the lumber department. Please come to the manager's office immediately." Thomas regretted not bringing along his noise-canceling headphones to work that day.

Sick Puppies

Phoebe, despite having been dropped off only a few weeks ago, displayed a level of comfort and compliance usually observed in dogs well on their way to whichever ending Shauna saw fit. She was weeks, months, perhaps, ahead in her progress. A pit-bull with a brown-pink nose covered in shiny walnut fur with a pure-white, lightning-bolt-shaped stripe running from her chin to her first set of nipples. A half-breed, Shauna deduced, judging by the shape of Phoebe's mug, which looked as if she had been running head-first into walls since she was a pup. While observing Phoebe dance around in the cage, a hundred thoughts ran through Shauna's mind when she watched how her front left paw limped with every little tippy-tap. A limp she had an explanation for, but dreaded the idea that the question might come at her at any moment. Shauna would tell them about Phoebe's sweet doggy-smile, but that would only exacerbate the deformed ligaments skewing the side of her mouth.

Phoebe!

She loved the sound of her name, especially coming from the mouth of another female.

Phoebe!

Her tail wagged so hard that it pulled her butt along

with it, the momentum of it causing her little feet to slide sideways along the stainless steel floor of the cage. The sound of her nails scratching played in unison with her heavy breathing. The long pink tongue hanging off the good side of her mouth. Little droplets of drool splashing into the water bowl. Gentle brown eyes oozing with love at the sight of new people. The prospect of a forever home.

Eight-hundred-and-fifty-six. Shauna spelled the number out in her head letter by letter, stretching out the thought. Basking in the discomfort attached to it. A bit of self-torture to keep her on edge. Sharp. As if reminding herself of the number helped to somehow offset the guilt she wasn't even sure she was supposed to feel over the fact.

Eight-hundred-and-fifty-six. Seven years. An average of one-hundred-twenty-two-and-a-quarter animals a year she's had to put down now. On her computer, in her cramped little office, a record of every one of these animals, along with detailed descriptions of all the work she's had to put into maintaining their health, their rehabilitation schedules, their habits and quirks. For every futile semblance of a relationship, a sentence at the footnote of every file stating reasons for why a particular animal didn't get a *good* ending.

Shauna thought herself to be perfect for the job. There was nobody she could think of that would be more capable of maintaining composure while recognizing the cruel nature of having to keep an emotional distance to the animals she spends days and nights with while being tasked with explaining why a particular animal was especially special to every visitor in the broken-heart tourism hot spot which is the shelter she manages. Often she wondered how it was that *any* animal shelters could be run without her. What a mess they must have been. *Are.* Nobody is ever prepared for the steep learning curve that is recognizing that every life is beautiful and precious until a stamp suddenly decides it not to be. There were ones that came and went. Some young,

ambitious types, hoping to save the world one puppy at a time. The more enthusiastic ones were the quickest to burn out. Depression. Emotional fatigue. Caring for the animals was tough; admitting that they no longer held the capacity to do so was tougher. Then the guilt. The self-loathing. All the trials and tribulations Shauna endured over the years only to hear, by the end of it all, spoken in whispers behind her back, that she might be an emotionless psychopath for how casually her thumb pushes down on the plunger of that syringe before another world turns black.

Shauna knew what she was getting into from the get-go. The deep-seated scars on her thighs and forearms were a daily reminder that her job did not make her a terrible person. The thing she felt worst about were the occasional fits of tears she would keep only to herself.

Hoping to ease the tension in the room with the pair standing behind her, Shauna stretched out the fingers in her right hand and pushed them through a slit in the cage. Her thumb grabbing hold of the bar to stop it going further. Over her shoulder, she flashed a smile to the girl standing behind her and wiggled her fingers. Phoebe ceased her dancing and pushed her mug into Shauna's fingers and groaned happily. The little girl smiled and broke free from her father's grip and lunged toward the cage, her eyes fixated on Phoebe's dark pink nose.

Shauna gasped, then blocked the girl's fingers from the cage using her clipboard. "Don't stick your hand in there, sweetie."

"Why not?" the father asked, his hand reaching for his daughter's shoulder, moving in to create a barrier between her and Shauna.

"Does she bite?" The little girl asked, her voice muffled by the thick scarf wrapped around her neck and face. She stretched her head back and shook it side to side until her chin broke free from the scarf, revealing her mouth. A concerned smile. "But she looks so—"

"I thought this was supposed to be safe," the father spoke, the tone of his voice increasing in depth with each syllable, "in the listing I read it said *friendly*."

"She *is* friendly."

"Then I read the *other* listings. Most of them mentioned *friendly*."

"I'm aware of that," Shauna sighed and gave Phoebe another rub of the nose before turning to the pair, holding the clipboard against her chest. "There wouldn't be a listing for an animal if it wasn't friendly. Phoebe here is *especially* friendly. It's nothing to be concerned about . . ."

"And why the extra \$150 for this one?" The man looked past Shauna down the dimly-lit corridor, noting the dozens of other cages, reminding Shauna of the cheaper inventory.

Shauna understood the implication. "*Optional*." While keeping eye contact with the man, Shauna flipped the clipboard around to face him and drew her fingertip to the exact spot she intended to: a checkbox, the words *pay/neuter (optional)*. "It's not needed but highly recommended. We do it right here, in house. As soon as the application is complete and we receive the deposit, we go ahead with the oper—"

"Why not do it ahead of time?" The man took a defensive stance, "seems like a way for you to make more money."

"I don't make any money off of this."

"Wouldn't it make sense to have all the animals fixed ahead of time?"

"We . . ." Shauna paused mid sentence, then looked down at the little girl staring longingly into Phoebe's eyes. "Have you ever been on the market for a used car?"

"Excuse me?"

Shauna nodded towards the little girl, then looked the man in the eyes, waiting for him to get on the same wavelength as her. "Ever come across a *mechanic's special*? Body in good shape, low mileage? Something happened

along the way . . . a recall that was never fixed, a head gasket issue? You know . . .” Shauna saw by the look in his face that he was beginning to understand. She picked up the pace, “the car is cheap. The seller is upfront about the work that needs to be done. Sometimes, will even recommend a reputable shop to do the work. It’s up to the buyer . . . if the car gets another chance before it goes to the wreckers.”

“Mechanic’s special,” the man repeated, nodding his head.

“Mechanic’s special . . . but she is extremely friendly.” Shauna sighed. It barely worked this time. She would need to come up with another analogy whenever time would permit. There was nothing pleasant about feeling like a used car salesman who really did believe they were selling good cars but still stuck with the label, and all the stigma that came with it, of being a used car salesman. “*Very, very* friendly. We wouldn’t put an animal up for adoption unless we were absolutely sure that it was fit for a new home. A new family. There is nothing to worry about. It just takes a little bit of time is all. We have to let the animal get used to new people—it’s all part of the procedure. We have to watch carefully how they acclimate. It’s an important step that we take very seriously.”

“How long will it take?” The little girl asked, “when can we let her out? I want to play with her.”

“Soon, sweetie. We’re showing another doggy to that couple down the hall. Unfortunately these two doggies don’t get along well so we can’t let the both of them out at the same time. It won’t be too long now, their paperwork is almost complete.”

“What do you mean: *they don’t get along*? Is this going to be *another* problem?” The father asked.

“No!” Shauna dialed back her defensiveness, walking that practiced walk down the fine line between displaying competence and not being too much of a pushover, where every molehill in the form of a simple question becomes a

mountain of unending explanations. "Some dogs just don't get along with each other. It's perfectly natural. You see it in dog parks everywhere you go." Shauna punctuated the end of her sentence with a confident nod. "Phoebe has plenty of friends here," she added.

"Have you seen her fight with other dogs? I hear pit-bulls can be aggressive. I wanted to get something smaller for Lily, but she insisted on that—"

"That pink nose!" The girl interrupted.

"And, well . . ." the father chuckled, ". . . I just want to be absolutely sure that we're not making a mistake here." He cleared his throat and spoke slowly, "I don't think I'm in the wrong here for displaying my concerns."

"No, sir. Absolutely not. You have every right to have concerns. In fact, I'm grateful that you're expressing them. You have no idea how many people come in here not knowing what they're in for, not asking the right questions, and grab the first animal they fall in love with before realizing that they're made a huge mistake. There's nothing more hurtful to me than to see an animal I've put so much work into rehabilitating return only a few weeks later because the owners didn't think their decisions through. Please—all the questions you might have—now is the time."

"Well . . ." the man took a knee beside his daughter and joined her, cheek to cheek, in a contemplative gaze, staring out at Phoebe. He squeezed her hand and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. A smile emerged from the corner of his mouth. Shauna saw the light at the end of the tunnel. She only realized how tense she had been when her shoulders finally relaxed and she let the arm keeping up the clipboard drop to her thigh. "Honey," he spoke gingerly, "this is what you really want?" Without breaking eye contact with Phoebe, the girl straightened herself up and nodded several times. "In the listing there," the man pointed to the clipboard, "says something about a limp in her left paw. Any idea what happened there?"

"But Daddy, her nose!"

"I know, honey. I just need to know if she's healthy. You want a healthy puppy, don't ya?"

"Yes."

"You want the puppy to run around and jump and have lots of fun . . ."

"Uhuh."

"I assure you," Shauna stepped in, "that Phoebe is perfectly healthy. She has a slight limp, but she can still run and jump and have all the fun in the world. Love," Shauna sighed, "a loving home is all she needs now." The look on the man's face demanded a straight answer. "We have been observing her for several months now. From what I've seen, Phoebe is a perfectly capable dog. X-rays showed her paw may have been broken some time ago, the previous owner must not have taken her in to get it fixed. The bones healed wrong. It causes no pain from what I can tell, but I can't imagine it's the most comfortable thing. It's possible, I think, to still correct the paw with some surgery, but I don't think —"

"Surgery?" The girl frowned.

"And how much would that run me?"

"I don't think it would be necessary. She'll grow into a healthy dog. Live a long life in the right family."

"How much?" The father demanded.

"We don't do the sort of procedures here, but I would estimate a couple thousand."

"Oh boy," the father stood up, massaging his beard. A slow shake of the head. His eyebrows made a shape that indicated a deep-seated disappointment. Shauna read the look and emotionally prepared herself to hear those words she'd heard a thousand times before. With her clipboard now tucked into her armpit she wiped the sweat from the palm of her hand in preparation for that goodbye handshake. The man did the same. He opened his mouth, but stopped his words when he caught sight of his daughter

and panicked, yanking her towards him, when he saw her arm stuck elbow-deep in Phoebe's cage, rubbing the dog's belly. "Lily!" he shouted and yanked her away by the scarf.

"Owww!" Lily cried, then immediately resumed grinning. "Did you see her dancing for me, Daddy?"

As much as Shauna wanted to raise her voice and send the pair on their way, she couldn't. Phoebe was approaching her due date; her chances of getting the good ending becoming more slim with each passing day. Shauna stood there in shock, mouthing the word *sorry* repeatedly in a panic until she found her voice again.

"She loves me!" The girl cheered.

"Would you look at that," Shauna said, almost believing her own enthusiasm. "She loves her," she assured the father. The grip he held his daughter with loosened. He pressed his lips together and gave Shauna the go-ahead with a slow nod. Shauna reciprocated with a smile. She looked down the hallway into the foyer, where her assistant was finishing up the paperwork on a resident Labrador anxiously waiting to leave with his new parents. The deal was done; the process wasn't yet over. Paperwork still remained. A brief interview. From there on she may as well have been on autopilot. The girl asked if could pet Phoebe again and Shauna complied. The tail wagged. Her butt shook with a force that could knock a group of children over. Phoebe yelped in excitement and danced in circles, inviting her future owner to pet her all over. She moved in closer. When Phoebe shoved her mug through the cage, the girl pulled back, suddenly taking notice of the deformity on the dog's face.

"What's wrong with its face?" The girl asked. The words wiped the smile from Shauna's face. "*That* wasn't in the pictures."

Her usual ten-hour long shift became fourteen when a

concerned citizen showed up with a box of kittens he found near a dumpster behind his building. Every minute counts, and so, running on fumes and her third pot of coffee since the afternoon Shauna got to work and cataloged every single one of them. Names, brief medical exam, profiles. She felt guilty keeping the volunteers working overtime and sent them home after they were done with bathing them and taking photos for the files. She stayed until 10 PM, occasionally calling her husband for a few minutes of emotional support. His generic, half-hearted assurances and shallow advice irritated her, but it helped to drown out the sound of dogs howling and the discomfort of heartburn.

When she got home Shauna kept the hallway light off as she undressed, hoping that her husband wouldn't catch a glimpse of her weary eyes when she got home. That he would spare her the speech about how she works too hard. It *wasn't* ruining their relationship, as he would often assure her, but technically, generally, in the way things in this world were meant to function, she was doing something wrong. Shauna would hope he was thankful that she refuses to talk about her work, about how difficult some days get. She could never get past that part of the simulated argument in her head on the account of how self-congratulatory it all sounded. How little it would benefit their situation. That aside from drawing attention to how little Thomas worked, it would result in her further proving what she thought other people considered her to be: a heartless, inconsiderate bitch.

Thomas greeted Shauna with a peck on the cheek, slipped the coat off her shoulders and draped it on top of the shoe rack that sat right below the coat hanger, all the while dancing around her as if on tiptoes. When he asked her how her day was, she simply replied, "hungry." With a nervous, but excited look on his face, Thomas led her to the dining room table where a warm slab of lasagna waited for her. She sat, not bothering to ask if he was planning on

joining her. "Did you . . . make this?" She asked, jabbing a fork into the top layer. No answer. She pressed harder, finally pushing the fork through the overcooked pasta. "Oven, at least?" The steak knife couldn't split the piece. The last bit of energy drained from her face when the innards of the lasagna escaped out the side with every attempt at extracting a bite-sized piece of dinner.

"Baby . . ." Thomas ran his finger down the back of Shauna's neck, being careful to stay out of her peripheral vision. "I didn't know when you were going to be home . . . it was *cooked*. Then It was microwaved. Then it sat out for a few hours—"

"Uncovered, I'm guessing?"

"In case you—"

"I told you, Tom, that I was going to be several hours. Would've been nice to come home to . . . *you know* . . ." She chopped off a slice of her lasagna, making no effort to keep the spill from escaping off the plate and shoved what remained into her mouth.

"So . . ." Thomas stared blankly out into the living room, still giving her that massage that no one wanted to give or receive. "How was your day?"

Phoebe with her pink nose were in the queue now. Shauna took a mental inventory of the sodium pentobarbital she had left in stock. She estimated that two of her five volunteers will call in sick tomorrow. She needed to arrange for three dogs to get neutered. Four of her cats were in heat and only two would live past their cycles. A new trainee was scheduled to start tomorrow, fresh from veterinary school, and Shauna would need to assign tasks to him that would appear more important in order to justify his pay. A shipment of food will arrive in the afternoon and she needed to get in touch with animal control to get a raccoon off her hands. She observed the mess in the living room and said, "the usual." She swatted his fingers away from her neck. "What did you get up to after work today?" Did he

clean? Did he get groceries? Did he spend the entirety of the early evening jerking off?

Thomas pulled up a chair beside Shauna's and sat facing her. Chin up, shoulders back, he said, "If you really want to know, I was looking for a new job today."

"Oh!" Shauna lightened up. "It's about time. Why now?"

"Well . . ." Thomas stalled.

"Well?"

"I don't have my old job any longer."

"Oh, Tom." She pulled her chair out and spun towards Thomas, "oh, no. What happened?"

"Are you already mad?" Thomas said defensively.

"Can't I be?"

"Well, maybe if you give me a chance to explain myself first, maybe if you could give me minute of open ears before making your mind up—"

"How do you expect me to react to—"

"How am I supposed to talk to you if you keep doing this? Every single time. Anything I say to you . . . before I get even a word out, you already make me feel as if I've done something wrong." Thomas stood up and turned away from Shauna.

"Tom . . ." Shauna grabbed his hand. With her fist holding up her chin she sighed deeply and spoke, ". . . sit down. Tell me then." Thomas hesitated, "please," she added. "Oh come on." Shauna pulled him down onto the seat.

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me, please."

"Okay," Thomas straightened himself up, "it wasn't a huge deal—what I was doing. I was listening to my music at work and my boss didn't like it but it's not like he ever said anything about it . . ."

"Music?"

"I mean, sure—I shouldn't listen to music at work, but you'd think—"

“*Music*, Tom?” Shauna shook her head. She groaned, resting her chin into her hand and squeezing her eyebrows together.

“Music, I’m telling you . . .”

“Tom . . .”

“What are you getting at? Are you getting mad? Are you mad now? What are you trying to say here?”

“Tom.” Shauna grabbed Thomas by the knees and looked him dead in the eyes. “Please, Tom, tell me you weren’t listening to *that* trash at work?”

“What do you mean?” He pulled away.

“*Mistress Gabriella*. Oh no . . .” Shauna moaned, “were you masturbating at work? Did you get caught? Don’t tell me you were fired for masturbating, *please*.”

“How did you know about—”

“Well, smart-ass, you used *our* credit card to pay for it. For one purchase, at least. I saw it on the statement. I thought you’d fess up. I was hoping you would, at least. I really didn’t think I’d be confronting you about this right now, so . . .” Shauna took a deep breath and calmed herself, “. . . if I come off a little confrontational, Tom, please, understand that I didn’t have time to prepare—”

“Shit.” Thomas’ eyes trailed off. He jumped up from his chair and paced through the kitchen, circling the table several times before stopping at the fridge where he opened the top freezer door to hide his face. “Honey . . .” he spoke through the cold mist and low hum of the condenser, “I’m so sorry . . .”

“Tom, look—I don’t care if you watch . . . or listen to porn. Everyone does. I do. But getting caught masturbating at work is a problem, and not for the reasons you think I’m giving you grief for. Spending \$250, and who knows how much of your own money, is a problem. Not having sex for five months at a time is a problem. My IUD is going to waste, and I can tell you right now that I’m not aiming to get another one in a year when this one expires. Do you know

what that means?”

“Oh, come on,” Thomas peeked out from behind the freezer door, “you *know* I want kids. Stop making it seem like—”

“*Anyway*. Is this hypno-fantasy crap the reason you *never feel like it* anymore? How long have you been addicted to this nonsense?”

“It’s not nonsense!” Thomas pulled his head out and slammed the freezer door. He crossed his arms and looked down at Shauna, “and it’s not *just* porn! She engages with you on a much deeper level that you’d think. It’s not about jerking off, it’s about the feeling of complete satisfaction, from beginning to the very end. It goes so deep, Shauna. This is so much healthier than regular porn. It’s relaxing and adventurous and—”

“Yeah, I get it—more than what I could give you. Thomas, I’m happy that at least *someone* can give you that. It’s better than cheating, anyways. But honey—spending *our* money . . . and this incident at work—where does it end? At some point you’re gonna have to engage with me about . . . anything. Talk to me.”

“Yes!” Thomas shuffled over to Shauna, his voice more optimistic now. “I’ll get there. I promise!” He asked for her hand; she reluctantly gave it.

“Really, really promise me . . .”

“Yes!” His eyes begged for hers to believe him; they did their best to pretend.

“Okay.” She slid her hand from his and moved to the couch in the living room, slipping off her cardigan sweater and laying it atop the couch as she went. Thomas followed her, keeping his head down while keeping a distance of two feet behind her. Shauna sank into the couch cushions. Her neck gave way for her head to collapse. She stared up at the ceiling. Unable to breathe comfortably, she tilted her head down and spotted her own reflection in the black TV screen across the room, where she watched Thomas crawl up next

her and put his head in between her arms. He pushed his head in deeper, pressing his ear up against her breasts. Shauna's hand wandered until it found a comfortable position on the side of Thomas' head. She sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to Thomas groan suggestively, then finally found enough strength in her fingers to scratch the side of his head.

A few minutes later Thomas broke the silence. With his mouth against her belly, with his words muffled, he said, "she does girls, too." Shauna lay there motionless, almost as if refusing to acknowledge his words. "Couples, even. There's this one series where we each get a recording to listen to simultaneously and follow her instructions. I read some testimonials and it said that—"

"Thomas." She cut him off, her composure slowly degrading. "I don't want to hear it."

"No, really. I'm actually glad that you know now. Maybe now we can finally give this a chance. Maybe it's what we need!"

"Stop it!" Shauna pushed him off of her. "What we need is for you to be done with this. Completely! Do you understand? Tom, you sound obsessed! This whole time we've been sitting, instead of thinking about how to get better, you've just been thinking about this Mistress Gabriella! Get your priorities straight." Shauna took a moment to cool herself, "How long has this been going on? How much money have you spent?"

"It's not that—it's not what you think," Thomas pleaded. "This can really help us. I can't believe I didn't think of it earlier. Please—Mistress Gabriella can help us. She can help us explore that—"

"Oh, *Mistress Gabriella* told you . . ."

". . . yes."

"Thomas! How much money?!"

Thomas sunk into the couch and mumbled something.

"What was that?"

“. . . about three thousand.” Thomas mumbled a little louder this time.

“Jesus Goddamn Christ!” Shauna jumped off of the couch. She stopped herself halfway through the motion of kicking the coffee table over, then screamed and did it anyway. “You’re quitting this shit, right now! Got it?!”

“Baby, please—I’m trying to fix us . . .”

“Thomas, I . . . I have no words. We’ll talk about it tomorrow. I’m going to bed. Please don’t come join me.”

The Perfect You

A half-finished arts degree. A volunteer at a nearby animal shelter. A house painter for the duration of an uncomfortably hot summer some years ago. A disgraced lumber department saw operator. A misunderstood husband. Thomas' resume wasn't looking impressive, no matter how much slack he gave himself, as he compiled the list in his head.

Shauna was long gone when Thomas woke up that morning curled up in a thin fleece blanket with his cheek stuck to the leather couch cushion. The coffee table was back on its legs and on it lay a stack of papers. At the very top of the stack was last month's credit card bill, the charges coming from *gabriellasrecordings.com* crudely outlined in thick red marker. The words beside the outline read: *get your shit together*. Beneath the bill were some torn-out pages with job listings from the free local papers Shauna snatched from the lobby that morning. Baristas and babysitters. *Can you provide references?* Thomas ran simulations of interviews in his head. Janitors and pizza delivery drivers. *I would, but my last boss had a grudge against me and I don't think he'll provide a fair assessment of my abilities and work ethic.* Lawn-keeping, dish-washing, amusement park tending. *Can you at least tell us why you quit or were let go from your previous job?* Cashier. Waiter. Hardware

store clerk—an opening in the lumber department. *Oh, it was nothing. I was using the air hose by the room-sized industrial saw to stimulate my genitals during work hours when no one was looking. I jerked off in almost every bathroom stall, the elevator, even in the loading bay during winter seasons when the sun set early. Do you want to know more? I operated dangerous machinery like forklifts and circular saws while entranced in fantasy worlds filled with sexy vikings or sexy knights or sexy ninjas. Good stuff—highly recommended. I spent all my money on these fantasy recordings and if you don't give me this fucking job my wife will leave me and I will probably kill myself.* Parking booth attendant. *Can you tell us why you would make a good fit for this job?* Fast food cook. *Yes, I think that this is a great opportunity to work on my people skills. I can tell you that with hard work and complete dedication I will climb the ranks of your company and become an indispensable asset.*

Every scenario for every job listing played out the same in his head. Thomas loathed the idea of actually getting up from the couch and witnessing his own reflection in the bathroom mirror. Sulking in self-loathing would last half a day at most before even he would find it an acceptable excuse to avoid acting like an adult. His anxiety kept him planted. With every conclusion he came to, every thought of utter futility, the highlighted words *gabriellasrecordings.com* on the credit card bill were the only thing keeping him from having a complete breakdown. He thought of her voice and all the times it led him out of a funk. When life got too hard all he had to do was put of a good pair of noise-canceling headphones and find a secluded corder to hide in. She would keep him company. She would make everything right. With her voice in his head Thomas was the strongest, tallest, most attractive man with the largest cock anyone had ever laid eyes on. His confidence would be unparalleled and his strong will enabled him to do anything he pleased. As long as he surrendered himself to her voice there was nothing he couldn't do. No goal would be too unobtainable. No mountain he couldn't climb. There was not a woman on this

planet he couldn't seduce. *Submit to me*—the words empowered him.

Despite being completely under her spell, Thomas never felt like he wasn't in control over his own life, except for when the recording ended and the noise-canceling headphones powered down. Three thousand dollars' worth of content ensured that he would always have his fill.

His phone sat in his usual gray hoodie, hanging by the front door. On it were reminders that days like these weren't the end of the world. They were reminders that perhaps Shauna just wasn't cut out, from the very beginning of their relationship, to satisfy Thomas completely. He felt humbled knowing that maybe she *didn't* actually know everything. When Shauna was not around he could finally be the man she always wished he could be. Strong. Confident. Mature. A woman that truly loved him would accept him and all his faults. She would give him the time and space needed to become better. His guilt wouldn't permit him to directly resent his wife, but instead everything she stood for.

So many recordings. So many fantasies to escape into. So little judgment. Right there and then Thomas could just press that button and enter a world of enrichment and empowerment. So easy. He knew it wasn't real. He was aware that the feeling would be fleeting, but most of all, he knew that all his doubts about Mistress Gabriella's powers would fade the second he pressed *play*.

With a deep groan and a lazy stretch Thomas peeled his ass off the couch and allowed his body to guide him to what he needed most. On the way to the hoodie, he spotted the coffee press in the kitchen. Although cold by now, there was still plenty left for a full cup. He recollected times when Shauna would kiss him on the forehead in the mornings before leaving and remind him of the leftover coffee, insisting for him to heat it up first. Those were the nicer mornings, when the nights before didn't end with him on the couch. When Thomas could tell his friends that him and

Shauna were solid and it wouldn't put him deeper into a hole of despair. When he could still tell her that he loved her without rewinding the moment in his head to verify its authenticity. When he didn't have to search through old photos to remind himself what her smile looked like.

He poured the remains of the coffee press into a small pot and placed it on the oven while replaying last night's events over in his head to see where he went wrong. One. Two—maybe even three things were on his list to feel ashamed about. Between pouring the contents of the pot into a cup and preparing to take the first sip Thomas burst into a fit of tears when the smell of coffee filled his nostrils. He suddenly realized that he never used the word *pathetic* to describe people because he was subconsciously afraid of being a hypocrite. With everything he felt rising to the surface, exciting out through his eyes, Thomas barely found the strength to get the second sip of coffee past the lump in his throat, then erupted into an uncontrollable sob at the hint of an idea that despite his shortcomings, Shauna still thought there was something left in him worth making coffee for.

He cried some more in the shower, letting everything out until he convinced himself to feel as if a physical weight was literally being lifted from his shoulders. The weight of his circle-jerk self-loathing, his insecurities, the shame of hiding so much from his wife, which he realized was perhaps doing more damage than he would ever admit.

Get your shit together. Her words rang through his head, only now the tone lacked judgment. *Get your shit together, Thomas!* He made fists of his hands and punched the water raining down on him. Thomas leaned into the tile wall with his palms spread and shouted, “get your shit together, goddamn it!” He could feel the rush of blood rise from his tense ankles up through his thighs. A bulging warmth in the sides of his neck. A wild excitement bursting through his

eyes. He knew he had it in him, whatever that may be. Baby steps. It was a new beginning and baby steps were the only sensible way to approach a way to a new him.

With rapid body movements and heavy breathing Thomas maintained his high level of energy as he wiped himself dry. While shaving, he faced the mirror, looking into the eyes of a new man. Determined eyes. He recited affirmations from modern self-help gurus and quotes from Winston Churchill.

His outfit was nothing special—a black shirt and gray slacks. He took the time to check himself for stains or tears or any folds that didn't belong. A pair of worn leather boots regained their shine with a few wipes of leather conditioner; his excited feet brought them to life.

Before walking out the front door, he pulled out his phone and sent Shauna a text message: *im doing it baby. I know I messed up but im going out there now and I will fix things I prmoise. Were gonna make it. Ill make dinner tonight and I want to hear all about your day. With me luck love you*

Outside now, only a few blocks from home, Thomas anxiously checked his phone for a response from Shauna. There was nothing. He sent a follow-up text message:

I know I sound liek an idiot but im really excited and cant come up with anything original atm

First thing on his list was the café down the street where Shauna would buy her morning coffee after nights when Thomas would spend the night on the couch. Thomas handed in the resume he used from several years ago. When the manager asked what he'd been doing for the past three years Thomas froze and stuttered and in an attempt to save face left immediately after being able to get only one word out: *saw*. On his way out he thought of an appropriate response to the question, as he was sure it would come up again. *I was back in school*, would have to do. Some would find

a thirty-five-year-old returning to school to be admirable, he figured. He came in back after the manager vanished and got himself a large black coffee to help maintain his perkiness. Despite the failed first effort he kept his chin up on the day down the street. His shoulders remained square and his stride was that of a man going places, in every sense of the word.

On his way to the next job opportunity, a fast-food joint, Thomas caught sight of a pawnshop across the road. In the window display was a katana on a stand. The sword itself was out of its sheath, resting in a hand-crafted cradle, reflecting rays of the morning sun into Thomas' eyes. *You can do it*, an encouraging voice spoke from deep within. He stopped in the middle of the street, contemplating the sword and the voice. A voice which, as much as he hoped, did not sound like it came from the same woman who left him with half a pot of coffee that morning. He repeated the words over and over again, trying his best to warp the voice, using all his willpower to make it sound like anything but Mistress Gabriella.

It really *was* his wife, he reasoned. It only sounded so strange because he never really heard her speak in such an encouraging tone before. He couldn't trust his own imagination. *I know you can do it. Take my hand. Listen to my voice. With me by your side anything is possible.* The voice was no less infectious than how it sounded in the recordings themselves. The light on the sword glimmered. He squinted harder, trying to focus. *My sexy ninja warrior. Mhmm, your sexy ninja cock.* The glimmer reminded him of that faint light in the endless darkness leading him to safety. To comfort. This light was all that existed and all that mattered.

All you have to do is walk towards it and give in to my voice.

With every passing moment in this trance Thomas began to forget what Shauna sounded like, and for the first time since he can remember, it made him uncomfortable. He thought of the last words she spoke: *Please don't come join*

me. There it was. There was that tone again. He thought of the coffee and the tears he shed and wondered if maybe she even left a kiss on his forehead that morning. He couldn't picture it, but he could hear: *take my hand. Trust me and I'll make your every dream come true. Follow me down this path. Let my voice guide you.*

A truck stopped in front of the pawn shop and broke his trance. He continued onwards down the street. Cold wind blew on his face and his chilled ankles refused to pick up the pace. The fast-food restaurant was only ten minutes away and Thomas now struggled to gather the courage needed for the upcoming interview.

I can help you. I want to help you, sweetie. You can be anything you want to be. He reminisced, recalling one of the very first recordings he listened to before discovering the darker, more depraved side of Mistress Gabriella. Before the high-production fantasy adventures which he spent most of his money on, before the public masturbation and imaginary scoreboards. Somewhere in the self-help category, a recording titled, *The Perfect You*, caught his attention at a time when he needed it most. When even something as trivial as being unable to pay his portion of rent would lead him down a spiral of guilt and self-loathing severe enough to have him consider suicide.

The guided jerk-off encouragement sessions and hour-long orgies satisfied him plenty, no doubt, but when they ended, when he finally returned to the real world, a thought would almost immediately impregnate his consciousness: *I'm not good enough for this. None of these things would ever actually happen to me.* The fantasy was only good for as long as the recording lasted.

The Perfect You changed that.

In that moment of derealization, standing there in the middle of the street with the Colorado winter cold seeping into his bones, Thomas remembered feeling lost in that endless blackness where it would always begin, where he

would walk towards that faint candlelight, falling deeper and deeper into a trance as he lost himself in Mistress Gabriella's narrative. Only at that time there were no promises of sexual satisfaction. There was no teasing or spanking or exploring sexuality of any sort. When she instructed him to finally open his eyes there was only him, standing on a secluded beach, staring out into the vastness of an open ocean ahead. She asked him to bask in the feeling of the warm sand beneath his feet. To dip his toes into it. The sun above blanketed his body and mind in a perfect sort of warmth that spread outwards from his body with no end in sight. Gentle waves crashed in front of him. The water crept towards his toes and surrounded his feet. It could touch his toes, but only if he wanted it to. His head was perfectly clear; his body weightless; his mind free of all negativity. Mistress Gabriella provided little instruction. She simply assured him that all his stress and worries couldn't reach him in this safe place. She had him look out into the distance, far beyond the horizon, and consider the idea that it was absolutely possible to have a mind that allowed itself to be free of any kinds of thoughts. There was no need for thinking in a place like that. Nothing could touch him. He was perfect and beautiful and loved for everything he was. For ten straight minutes Thomas listened to nothing but the sound of the ocean through his stereo headphones. When Mistress Gabriella spoke again she reminded Thomas that this was a place completely devoid of all judgment and contempt. In this here place, she said, he could be anything he wanted to be. An ideal husband. A caring, considerate lover. He could be an artist or a successful businessman or both. His body, too, could be whatever shape he desired. Taller, strong, faster. His penis, larger. For the first time in his life Thomas believe it was actually possible.

When he awoke from that trance he was a new man, and for once his feelings of inadequacy didn't hold the weight they used to. He could go on being this perfect version of

himself, Mistress Gabriella promised. All he needed to do was profess his eternal love and dedication to her.

Thomas stopped at the front door of the fast-food restaurant when he caught sight of his own reflection in the glass. His perfect self now stared back at him. What was he doing? He was better than this place. Who was he kidding: flipping burgers, taking orders from lesser people? Scrubbing toilets and enduring the nauseating smell of boiling oil for eight hours a day, being shouted at by entitled customers, smiling all day at them like an idiot, punching numbers, taking names, calling orders, listening to others' daydreams, minimum wage, wearing their stupid uniforms, convincing himself that any of this would amount to anything worthwhile in the end. This place didn't deserve him. This place could go to hell. Everything else on his list could, too. He hated himself now for even considering applying for the job.

Shauna had finally replied to his text message: *good luck. Maybe some real lasagna this time :-)?*

He was heated, nearly bursting from the anxiety of having to consider every angle of his ongoing internal struggle. After all, he knew he wasn't insane. A little fragile at worst. The reality of his low self-esteem set in when he surrendered to the idea that he might, after all, need a little pick-me-up. Give himself an hour or so to hang out at the apartment. Warm up a bit. Another cup of coffee and crack a few eggs. If he would find the time, and *only* if there would be time, he might give one of those recordings a listen. For old time's sake, before giving it up forever and completely.

And *what the hell*, why not stop by that pawn shop on the way back?

The Perfect You took about twenty-four minutes of his mid-day break. Six hours remained until Shauna's return from

work. Thomas emerged from the trance feelings sharp and engaged, with a tense feeling in his balls that he found enough self-control in himself to leave be for now. In no time he was up from his bed, pacing throughout the house, making a game plan for the rest of the day. The shiny new sword? Two hundred dollars—Shauna would understand. A gift to himself for being such a good boy and probably finding a new job. Thomas unsheathed the blade over the kitchen table and examined its edge. The grind on the edge had an even, wave-like pattern. He flicked his thumb across the top of it, listening for the dry *cling* it made the harder he pushed. On the last flick he was sent into shock when his thumb slipped and ran across the blade, then was quickly disappointed to find that his thumb was still intact. He did it a few more times, his face filling with disbelief as he realized that the blade was almost completely dull. A quick internet search revealed that most swords sold are purely ornamental, *sword-like-objects*, as the description put it, and that a real katana would cost a lot more than the \$160 he paid.

For a few minutes Thomas sat over the kitchen counter with his face in the palms of his hands, holding back from feeling like an idiot while hyping himself up to continue on with the day. With his disappointment somewhat subdued, he mapped out routes for the remaining venues where he could drop off a resume. With a few more breaks, he figured, he could fit three or four more places; he was sure that it would take no more than two to land him any sort of gig. He might not have the time to hand-craft the lasagna as Shauna had desired, but then again, with his new job and all, she would understand.

A bottle of wine for Shauna on his way back—she would love that.

When the planning was done Thomas took a short rest on the couch. With his headphones back on his head, the media player in his hand, he scrolled through his library and

quickly realized that he still had a few minutes remaining on his latest fantasy adventure, *Revenge of the Ninja*. So much money spent—he couldn't let it go to waste. That series alone, being a five-parter, had cost him \$250. Thomas considered what he would miss in those last minutes of the adventure. The whole point of these recordings was to be completely immersed in them, starting in the middle, or worse, near the end, would ruin it. This was to be the last time, why not make a thing of it? Hell, the complete series would only span the length of a feature film. Putting it like that, it only made sense that he would start from the very beginning. Shauna wouldn't get mad at him for watching a movie in the middle of the day. Two hours—there would still be plenty of time for interviews. Besides, how many interviews can one really fit into one day? For an introvert like Thomas, it would be a feat to even fit one, given the amount of emotional exhaustion he would probably have to endure. If he couldn't get the job today there would always be tomorrow.

Shauna is smart. Shauna is rational. She would understand his struggle.

He tried—for now that would have to suffice.

Wasting no time now, Thomas got to work on the necessary preparations. *Comfort*, that was the word Mistress Gabriella stressed. If you're not comfortable, you'll have a difficult time relaxing. In the closet he found an old space heater kept nearby for when the pipes froze during these Boulder winters. He set it down in the center of the carpeted bedroom floor in front of a stack of towels he lay down to sit on. The coils in the heater sprung to life with a reverberated metallic ringing and filled the room with a warm orange glow. The Hayabusa Village was burning and Thomas wanted to feel the heat for real this time. Complete immersion. Mistress Gabriella would be proud of his ingenuity. *Good boy*. He set the unsheathed katana on its stand by the base of the heater. A bottle of lube sat on the

edge of the towel to his right. When the temperature in the room became comfortable enough Thomas stripped down his clothing and tossed it aside, then took a kneeling position in front of the heat.

Headphones on now. The ten-foot long cord laid haphazardly across the floor. His fingers found the in-line switch on the cord and hit the switch to activate the noise-canceling function. The headphones turned on with a sudden *pop* and the ringing from the heater ceased to exist. The sounds of traffic from two floors below disappeared. Thomas forgot whatever noises it was that Shauna was making at him last night.

The radiating heat blasted his face. He shut his eyes. The media player was loaded with the file named *ninjarevenge1of5.mp3*. His fingers instinctively found the *play* button and pressed it without hesitation.

Mistress Gabriella finally spoke and began with her introduction, then led him down the hallway where she counted down from *ten*. When her countdown reached *one* the world went black.

Revenge of the Ninja

Thomas opened his eyes to witness a world on fire. His burning village, his home up in flames. The place where he grew up and trained to be a warrior. Where he raised a loving family. House by house, pillar by pillar, he watched it all crumble to the ground in piles of charcoal and fading embers. The mess engulfed in thick clouds of dark gray dust. He stood at the center of it all, the black canvas of his outfit absorbing the encompassing heat. He stared in all directions through the slit in his hood. His eyes swelled with rage, determination. Vengeance. His hand gripped the katana that had been passed down by a hundred generations. Its shiny blade glimmered in the fires.

Mistress Gabriella took the form of a raven flying overhead the massacre, delivering exposition to the hero below. In one ear Thomas heard the crackling of embers from the wooden structures, the hissing of the straw roofs as they came undone. He heard the cries of the villagers he could not save. His wife. His daughter. The trampling of the hooves as the men, no, *monsters*, who did all this as they hurried away on horseback. These men, the raven promised, whose blood will soon be on Thomas' blade.

Through the right ear Mistress Gabriella spoke in her sweet, honeydew voice, guiding his emotions through the

journey.

"You fall to your knees and shout to the sky: *I will have my revenge! Any being which has set a finger on this village will suffer by the edge of this blade! You will become undone by the fury flowing through my veins, and with these gods above as my witnesses, this fury shall not seize until this sword ensures that your lineage ends. You will be erased from history . . .* Your wife, your daughter—look at what they've done. The horror. The horror! You are no stranger to violence. Why, you've never been one to run from a good fight. But this, this is different. This is inhumane.

"Hmm, who's to say monsters don't exist? You grab a handful of dirt from a hoof print and raise it up to your face. That smell! That wretched smell! You turn your face away in disgust. It smells like rotten carcasses. It smells of death.

"But how could that be? A mere footprint? *These aren't men*, you think. Could it be death itself that did this?

"This man you were hunting—the elusive *Nise Akuma* . . . you don't think . . . no, it can't be? Could *he* have done this? Did he send you on a wild goose chase only to get you out of your village so that he could massacre everybody before your return? It must be. You're sure of it now. You're the greatest ninja assassin to ever live, is it possible that this beast feared you? To this day, can you think of a single enemy that had successfully eluded you?

"No. No you can't. He must be something else. Something . . .

"Something . . .

"*Ohhhh* . . . just the thought of it sends a chill down your spine.

"Human or not, you will have your revenge. There's a reason he needed to get you out of that village: he's afraid. *It's* afraid. It knows that you're the greatest ninja assassin. That if you were here you'd defeat every one of these beasts. He's afraid. Can you smell it? Can you smell this fear?

“I know you can . . .”

“You poor, poor ninja. With nowhere to sleep now, you lay down in the village square. The heat from the destruction will keep you warm through the night. You think about the fire, and as the flames wither and the smoke clears to reveal a stunning star-filled sky, you make a fist above your head, trapping what remains of the heat, and bring it down to your heart where you will keep this memory of the flame. It will continue to burn inside you for as long as you shall live.

“With your hand still on the blade you continue to watch the sky, plotting your revenge, when you spot a shape flying above you. It’s me—a sleek, black raven, circling around you. I’m getting closer now. Fifty feet ahead. I finally land on the ground in a small clearing up ahead. Right before your eyes I transform into a ninja warrior, just like you. I’m here to be your sidekick. I’m your guidance in times of need. All you have to do is listen to every word I say and I swear on my heart that you will get your revenge. Justice will be yours. But for now . . . a *hard* working ninja warrior needs his *hard* earned reward . . .”

Thomas already knew what came next. The warmed-up bottle of lube was already in his hand. With a quick squeeze he squirted a dollop into the palm of his hand and spread it onto his erection, working it down from the tip. When the ninja companion approached closer he started stroking, slowly, still aware of how long he would need to last.

“. . . you watch me—this mysterious black outfit—its curves lit by the enveloping flames as I come closer. My sexy, seductive eyes glisten with a look of thirst—a want of something only you can give me. *And I will take what I want from you.* I’m so close now. Can you see me? Picture me, baby. I *know* you can see me, and I can definitely see that bulge just itching to break free from that tight ninja outfit of yours.

“I look so, so sexy. You’re dying to know what’s beneath

this tight black canvas outfit. Picture a pair of long, silky smooth legs, just begging to wrap themselves around your strong ninja body. My tight, fit tummy. *Mhhhm*, I am a ninja warrior, after all. A pair of perky, voluptuous breasts and a pair of tasty, lick-able nipples anxiously waiting to feel the texture of your hungry tongue.

“I stand over you and pull back my black hood. With a gentle sway of my head I let free my long, raven-black hair. It swings side to side before finally settling down atop my chest. I undo my top. One button. Then another. I keep going as the top opens up more and more to reveal my cleavage, all the way down to my belly button. Oh, sweetie—I bet you’re just dying to see them. *Oh my*, just look at that bulge, I bet you’re just *dying* for me to take a peek at yours, aren’t you?

“I lick my lips as I bend over at the waist over top of you. My hands reach down towards your ninja pants. With a swift pull of a string your pants go flying through the air and your cock springs up. It looks at me right in the face. *Oh my goodness!* Look at that beautiful ninja cock of yours! You’re so hard, baby. *Mmmhmm* . . . your cock is throbbing and I can feel my pussy getting wet from simply looking at it. Yes, you want to see my pussy. You want to see it so bad. *Ohhh*, how you crave to play with it. To taste it!

“But you’re gonna have to wait, sweetie.

“I admire your beautiful cock with a look of lust and wanting. Your strong, suckable ninja cock. You’re watching my breasts dangle in front of your face as my finger touches down on the tip of your cock, spreading your precum around the top of your head with the tip of my finger. *Round and round* my little finger goes. *Round and round*. I lean over you and your tongue reaches for my nipples. *Oh, so close*. So close you can almost taste them. *Mhmmm*, I keep teasing you with my breasts while spreading your juices, working them slowly up and down your shaft.

“*Up and down and now your cock is throbbing so hard. Up and*

down”

Throbbing—a word sounding so intense to Thomas now that it sent his testicles into a frenzy of twitching and pulsing, feeling as if he would erupt at any moment. He slowed his strokes, fantasizing about the payoff.

Mistress Gabriella had trained him well.

“Your cock is pulsing and you can’t hold it any longer. But you’re going to have to wait, my brave ninja warrior. This cock is mine and I’ll do with it what I please. You’re not going anywhere until I get my fill . . . can you make it, baby? Can you make it until the very end, for your Mistress Gabriella?”

“Yes.”

Having crossed the Divine River, where Thomas fought off hordes of treasure-wielding giant carps and bloodthirsty manvipers, past the Forbidden Forest where the trees wailed tantalizingly and a magic well infused his penis with a spell that made Mistress Gabriella desire it even more, Thomas had reached the peak of the Great Mountain where The Guardian, a thousand-foot long serpent, circled the skies, ensuring that no man or beast would cross the no-man’s-land it was entrusted to protect. The scales on the creature were sharp as swords and painted the sky with a million twinkles as they reflected the moonlight. Two giant fireballs burned in its eye sockets and its tail had the strength to move mountains with a single whip.

Just as The Guardian passed beneath the peak where he stood, Thomas jumped off the ledge, landing onto the serpent, then drove his sword into its spine to keep himself steady. The creature let out a horrific shriek that flattened the trees below and sent all the birds flying in the opposite direction. Thomas held strong as it tossed its tail in every direction and spun around every possible way, then turned its head toward the moon and shot towards it at full speed. He fought the force of the freezing wind as they ascended.

His legs found the strength to move further up while he impaled the creature over and over with his sword to climb to its head. With every pause he watched the frost build up on his blade; with each new strike it shattered into little pieces. The bright moon was getting closer now. The light from it blinding. When his fingers began to freeze the raven flying by his side reminded him of the fire that burned in his heart.

“Remember the fire, ninja! Remember how hot it burns. The rage! The might of your rage melts the ice from your body and you find the strength to keep going. The serpent is howling in pain with each stab. Do not feel sorrow for this creature. You made a promise: you were to destroy anyone and anything that stood in your way. The Guardian is the only thing keeping you from crossing that mountain. Do not stop now. Do what you have to!

“The creature takes you past the stratosphere, but the fire inside you is so hot now that you begin to feel warm now. You’re comfortable in this situation. This is what you do. Grab your sword, ninja! Clutch it tightly with both hands. Drive it into this creature’s spine and keep going further. You’re so close now. Listen to my voice as I guide you. I’m right behind you. Can you see me? You can do this! *I know you can!*

“Do it, ninja! Do it because you know what’s waiting for you when you fulfill this task. A good ninja gets the reward he deserves”

STAB

STAB

STAB

The towel was drenched in sweat from his ass and legs. Thomas was up on his feet now, mirroring the movements of his ninja avatar as he attempted to keep himself upright while flying up towards the moon at a hundred miles per hour. His feet trampled over the messy cord from his headphones, occasionally becoming wrapped between his

toes and ankles. With his katana in his hands, he stabbed downwards into the carpeted floor with each mention of the word.

“... one stab. Two stabs. Three stabs. Four. You’re so close, baby. You stab that nasty beast. Any minute now you’ll be among the stars, but there is nothing to worry about. I believe in you. You’re on the creature’s head now and when you drive your sword into its skull the fireballs for eyes shoot out into the sky like flares, illuminating the path ahead. While standing on this creature’s head as it wails in pain you can see what’s on the other side of this mountain. You see for the first time where you must go to exact your vengeance. Your destiny.

“The creature’s cries intensify. *What’s the matter*, you think, *not done just yet?* Anything that stands in your way must cease to exist. Finish the job, ninja! You raise the sword over your head, channeling the fire, the fury from your arms into the edge of this sword. The blade glows brighter than the blinding moonlight . . .”

Thomas did as Mistress Gabriella instructed. He got ready for the big swing. The blade fixed over his head. His erection stretched towards his belly button. He could feel the blood pulsating in his forearms as he squeezed the handle harder. When she gave the instruction he—

“... slash it across the back!”

—struck the metal grate of the space heater, nearly knocking it over. A faint *clink* was all he could hear through the noise-canceling headphones.

“... you strike it again and again and again until the head of this demon detaches. It’s body flails randomly. You lose grip and fall back towards the mountain, keeping pace with the severed head on the way down. The holes where it’s eyes used to be stare at you when you say to them: *you wretched beast! Heed these words: you are not the first and you will not be the last. If there is an afterlife for wicked monsters such as yourself I want you to spread the word of me. The depth my of revenge*

transcends this world, and when my life here is done I'm coming for all of you in the next. Over and over again for the rest of all eternity!

“You close your eyes as you plummet towards the ground. With a clear mind now you accept the consequences of your actions. You're not afraid. You know that in this life or the next your mission will continue. It will be complete. You feel the cold air blasting your face. With your arms crossed now you take a deep breath—”

The sword sat planted into the hardwood beneath the carpet now. Thomas squinted his eyes so hard that it felt as if his eyeballs were pressing against his brain, cheeks stretching towards his eyebrows. His hands crossed over his chest. He felt a sensation in his stomach, as if he was doing down an endless roller coaster with no upswing in sight. Body swaying freely while his feet kept him anchored to the ground.

“—holding your breath. Any minute now . . . you're not afraid. My brave, sexy ninja warrior. You feel the brush of tree branches against your cheek when suddenly a pair of claws dig into your back. It's me, your raven. Your savior. Your trusty guide. Of course you weren't afraid. Why, with me by your side, you're always safe. You knew this all along, didn't you? With your complete trust and surrender no harm would ever come to you.

“Good boy. Good ninja.

“My raven wings spread wide as I glide upwards and drop you off back at the peak of the mountain. You open your eyes. Behind you, far off in the distance, you spot the remains of your village, Hayabusa. You turn to look in the opposite direction. *What's that?* Another town, this one running rampant with residents. You've heard of this place. The place the elders spoke of. The place one must never set foot in. Thousands of years of feuds between them and the Hayabusa Village, as told by the scrolls. Tales of rivers running red with blood. Fires burning for hundreds of years.

“The Gods wouldn’t have it. They had to put an end to it. *The Great Mountain*, yes, the one on which you stand now, was put here by the Gods to maintain peace between the Ninja clans and the Samurai. *Mura Mujitsu*—that’s what they called it. *Could it be?* You wonder. Could this be where the elusive *Nise Akuma* lives? It must be, there could be nowhere else. For all you know, not even hell itself would accommodate a monster such as it.

“It’s time to take a rest. You drive your sword into the mountaintop and sit down on your knees. With your hands atop your thighs you close your eyes and speak to the Gods above. You thank them for the strength they’ve given you to keep going. You thank them for granting you passage. You thank them for putting this mountain here and protecting his people from these monsters for all these years.

“You look to the sky and see a bright-shining star, the brightest in the entire sky, then you hear my voice say: *you’re welcome.*”

“One thousand swipes of your blade—one for every one of these monsters that deserves it. Men or samurai. Peasants or farmers, they all plead for help before they meet their demise at your hand. Women or children—they all need to die. *Monsters*, all of them. Do not be deceived by their looks. They can’t fool you because you know what they are capable of. *Nise Akuma*—the one who took everything from you, this monster—its blood runs through the veins of every being on this side of the Great Mountain. You know that the world will never be safe unless you end their lineage right here. Do the right thing, ninja, slaughter them all!

“You storm through every house along the path to the main temple, wiping out everything in your wake. The heat of your fury leaves a trail of fire with each step. As the flames grow more fierce you feel yourself become stronger. *You feel invincible!* I fly overhead, examining the massacre. Admiring your work. Admiring your strength and your will.

Waiting for my chance to pounce on you.

“Don’t keep me waiting too long now. The villagers attempting to escape meet their doom with a lightning-fast shriuken to the backs of their heads. You continue to dismember and impale anything that moves or breathes.

“You’re so close to your goal now.

“Not far off in the distance, at the top steps of the village center temple, stands a towering figure. You focus in on it. The noises from all around you become muted as you try to make out the details of what you see. It stands there, In ceremonial samurai armor—watching you intensely. The same armor the beast wore when it slaughtered your family. Through the shiny, chrome mask, through that slit cut into the shape of a grin, you can picture the face of a demon. Pure evil. Those sharp metal teeth, the converging eyebrows. You think .. could it be—the creature is laughing at you? Mocking you?

“It doesn’t think that you have what it takes to defeat the great Nise Akuma. As you make your way towards the temple stairs you look up to see a hundred guards, all in samurai armor, wielding deadly samurai weapons, standing between you and your goal.

“One by one they charge at you.

“One by one they fall.

“You swing up! You swing across as they rush towards you! Their heads and limbs fly in all directions. Your sword is drenched in their blood but it’s hungry for more! You swing down—”

The cotton handle of the katana absorbed his sweat when he gripped it tighter and swung the sword through the air. *Up. Across.* On the way down the blade struck the space heater. The muffled *clink* indistinguishable from the sound of swords clashing.

Up!

Across!

Down!

The momentum of the heavy blade swings carried his

body side to side. His tired feet struggled to keep balance and kept even busier having to manage the tangling cord beneath them.

CLINK!

“CLINK!”

CLINK!

The final strike of the sword sent the space heater to fall forwards. The hot metal grate began to melt into the carpet, releasing fumes of burnt plastic. He kept swinging. He was near the top of the stairs now—as far as he got into the recording the last time. Full, undivided attention now. He looked up as the last of the samurai guard was disposed of to see his nemesis look down at him up ahead.

“Nise Amuka attempts to speak, but the words are cut short when you begin to drive the tip of your blade through its chest. You stop. Halfway through you stop and look up at the figure.

“Why did you stop? This is a monster. *A murderer!* An evil demon. It reeks of death—can you smell it? Do you remember the smell? Don’t let yourself get fooled. Do the right thing. You’re doing this for the greater good . . .

“No. Not like this. You take a closer look. You notice something in those holes for eyes. You want so badly to see something, something besides that complete blackness. That void. Something inside tells you that behind that monstrous mask there might after all be a man.

“A man, like you.

“I mean, think about it. The blood on your blade. The blood dripping from this figure’s chest—does it not look real? The screams—*the terrible screams!* Why, did they not sound like the screams of your Hayabusa village when it burned? Hmmm, you stop to consider that these are, were, people. Living, breathing human beings, going on about their lives. Their skin the same color as your families’; their

flesh just as fragile. Their lives worth living.

“So, then, how could these *people* allow themselves to be led by such a beast? A monster. The physical manifestation of evil spreading its disease upon this realm of the living.

“Something feels wrong, you think. What have you done? You look closer at this monster in front of you, down on his knees. He begs for punishment. The afterlife does not deserve him, he pleads. Death would not do justice to all those who suffered by him. *Nise Akuma* had no choice, he explains to you, as the scrolls warned him of a powerful evil which lived beyond the Great Mountain. His people lived in fear, constantly wondering if any given day might be their last. He *had* to do something.

“But still, he failed. He failed every single one of them. A disgrace to his people, now and for all of eternity. He takes a knee as you pull the blade out his chest and bows his head, stretching his arms out towards you. *Take my weapons*, he begs, *let me wander this wretched scorched earth in solitude for the rest of my days. In time, when I eventually see them in the afterlife, I hope that my people would have learned to forgive me.*

“You raise your sword over your head. With a powerful downward slash his hands fall to your feet. He thanks you. When he looks up you spot your own reflection in his mask. *What have you done?* The world is on fire. You got your revenge. What now? The more you look the more disfigured your face becomes in the curves and pits of the mask.

“What have you done? Is this a land worth living on, where you’ve butchered every living being? Which you’ve defiled? You think the Gods will care to restore what once was when they learn of how their subjects treat their efforts?

“Everything is dead . . . and *oh my god*—that wretched scent—you can smell it, can’t you? This scent which will haunt you for all of eternity, reminding you of all the pain you suffered. Of all the pain you’ve caused.

“You see no reason to keep living now, and without a

moment of hesitation you turn the sword on yourself and spend your last moment thinking about how the tip of the blade feels as it pierces your skin, how it's the last time you'll ever have to feel pain, before driving the sword into—”

Thomas did as the ninja. With his hands stretched out in front of him, holding the sword to his belly by the dulled blade, he pushed the tip into his skin, savoring the energetic chill spreading through his body. Becoming harder when the tingle ran through his spine. Goosebumps littered his skin. He pushed harder, hoping to break the skin a little, but the tip wouldn't budge. He let one hand off the blade and used it to squeeze the base of the head of his penis, keeping his erection sprung to the fullest in anticipation of the reward Mistress Gabriella promised.

“You turn your back to your sworn enemy and plunge the sword deep into your stoma—”

Thomas spun around and got caught off-guard by the shift in balance from the sword in his hand. His foot slipped and he tripped in an attempt to kick the cord away from his feet. Falling towards the floor now, the weight of him was enough to send the tip of the sword through his belly button, then further in as he fell. Lacking the sharpness to puncture the back skin, it slid up through his body, pushing aside his organs on its way, finally pitching a tent with his skin near the collar bone when his knees struck the ground. With a frantic, confused look in his eyes Thomas trembled while his hands danced around his belly, up to his shoulder, trying to figure out what had happened.

“ . . . watching the path of destruction you left on this journey. This eternal fire now. You look up to see the Great Mountain, beyond which the village of Hayabusa has become nothing but a distant memory . . . ”

It didn't take long before the first towel caught fire. Even with the shock of it all, Thomas could still feel the heat building up underneath him while Mistress Gabriella dictated her closing statement. She reminded him of what a

good boy he was, but also that even good boys don't always get to come. That's what made it so exciting.

“Under Mistress Gabriella's control . . .” a dramatic pause. She licked her lips into the microphone before finishing, “you never know what you're gonna get.”

Now and Forever

Watching his squad mate being stuck in a loop of vomiting on the floor, wiping his face, try to regain composure, then lose it all for several minutes in a row now was the first moment of reprieve the Fire Marshall could get since arriving on the scene. Almost completely entranced now by the sight, all the noise from the stomping and demolition and shouting and running around fell to the background. The image ceased to be vomit and dry heaving, and through heavy concentration and mental gymnastics became a reminder of better times. A recreation of a scene of a pleasant lunch with the boys. Some locally made burgers, brought in by the Fire Marshall himself as a treat for the crew back at the station. Some laughs. Some ball-busting. The usual. Had he known he would be asking his men to pry a sixty-pound greasy lump of burnt flesh and bone from the floor of this apartment with a snow shovel he would have saved the burgers for another day.

By four P.M. the fire was subdued. By six-thirty the police had interviewed enough residents of the building and passersby to have a completed report. The windows were strategically shattered from the outside to relieve the potential backdraft; the cool air coming through them now served to keep the crew refreshed with cool winter air as

they made their way in and out with heavy gear on their shoulders. Despite convincing the Fire Marshall that it was not their duty to dispose of the body, the EMTs remained on site to ensure that it was done correctly. They hovered from corner to corner, occasionally stumbling into a rapid-fire exchange of profanities with the disgruntled fire crew.

The coroner arrived, complaining about getting no help with dragging the stretcher upstairs while he crashed it into any remaining piece of furniture in its path. He muttered something to the EMTs, then quickly shut up when his eyes met the Fire Marshall's. Continuing past the hallway, the coroner arrived at the entrance to the door to find some of the fire crew hacking away at the floor by the remaining limbs, trying to set them free. The rest took turns ramming the shovel beneath the torso, being careful not to hit the sword sticking through it. One of the crew had had it and, in an attempt to expedite the process, took a firm hold of the burnt handle of the katana and yanked up on it from a squatting position. A foul stench exploded as the corpse split open, demonstrating to everyone in the room that, despite his crispy appearance, the man on the ground was only done to a medium-rare.

All the new yelling and commotion caught the Fire Marshall's attention. He stormed in to see what the fuss was all about, only to find more of his complimentary lunch had made its way to the floor. Soon enough a piercing shriek erupted from the street below, yelling out the corpses' name.

He had his headphones on—that was about all the information Shauna could get from the Fire Marshall while he fought to keep her from breaking into the bedroom until the police came to drag her out. The following police interview provided little insight into either party. Shauna would be too embarrassed to reveal what Thomas may have been listening to; the officer wouldn't even come close to guessing. He insisted that she stay with a relative for the time.

“Insurance?” the officer asked. It was nearing ten in the evening and the Boulder police work was piling up on that Friday evening.

“No,” Shauna answered. She decided to save the tears for whenever this adrenaline and shock would subside. No sense crying now without having clear, well-constructed reasons to do so. Anything else would be reactionary and unproductive. She fidgeted in her seat while the man across the desk jotted down, in point form, whatever information he could extrapolate from her minimal responses.

“Family?”

“No.”

“On your husband’s side? Are you able to contact them?”

“Not exactly on good terms.” Shauna crossed her arms and stared at the officer with a firm look.

“I suggest you get in touch with them. This is a difficult situation to be in—you don’t need to go through it all alone.”

The half-hearted words of comfort were only met with a half-hearted enthusiasm to hear them out completely, just enough to show a smidgen of respect for authorities Shauna felt was a socially responsible amount. With each meaningless suggestion about what to do next Shauna drifted further away, wondering exactly what it was that Thomas was listening to. Wondering about Mistress Gabriella. With every passing moment she felt the anxiety of not being able to figure it out then and there rising up to her throat while she was trapped in this post-interview pageantry she was forced to sit through to not arouse any suspicion from the law enforcement. All this thinking she was doing, all in an effort to avoid the pervasive idea that she should have noticed something in Thomas’ behavior that led to all this.

How long was it getting worse for? When did she quit paying attention completely? What was on those recordings? Porn, plain and

simple, she convinced herself.

"Hey," Shauna snapped to it, "what if I were to guess what he was listening to at the time of death—would that help?"

"What do you suggest it could be?" the officer readied his pen, "I'm not sure how you could have proof of such a thing—the phone was destroyed in the fire."

"Do you have it? Can you recover the storage?"

"I doubt it, but I'll make a note here." The officer jotted down a quick note, paused to think, then asked, with a genuine curiosity in his voice, "what do you think—"

"It's these . . . hypnosis, sexual-type hypnosis tapes he listens to." She stopped, feeling self-conscious about the idea that this man sitting across the desk from her might judge her, thinking that she was a wife incapable of satisfying her husband sexually. She took a deep breath and continued, "I know how it sounds, but please, just listen. Thomas was really into these sexual recordings, is it possible that it was something on a recording that could cause him to . . . ?"

"I'm not sure how that would help, Mrs. Roberts. "Even if it were these recordings—"

"*Mistress Gabriella!*" Shauna interrupted, "write that down. It's her who makes these."

"And you suggest that we . . . ?"

"Just write it down. Look into it. If what I said was true, that it was *her* that he was listening to, can you . . . convict her . . . of anything?"

"Honestly," his pen remained still, "I doubt it." He took a deep breath and considered the possibility. "I really doubt it. Mrs. Roberts," he set his pen down on the clipboard and interlocked his fingers, looking into Shauna's eyes, "it's best you don't focus on—"

"You wrote nothing." Shauna pointed at the paperwork. "*Mistress Gabriella*—write it down." She shoved her finger into the clipboard.

“Miss—”

“Please, just write it down. Please look into it.”

“I get that you’re upset.”

“Thank you, officer. That’s very observant of you, officer.” Shauna stuck her finger to an empty space on the report, “Mistress Gabriella—put it there.”

“Okay . . .” the officer pulled the clipboard toward him and wrote down the name, shaking his head as he said, “. . . but I can’t promise anyth—”

“Then what good are *you people*?”

It was half past midnight when Shauna left the police station. On her way down the steps she examined each pillar she passed and fantasized about driving her fist into it. Recognizing the potential to break her hand, she did it anyway when one of her many subdued fits of rage erupted. Upon striking the rounded pillar, her fist slipped, only tearing off the skin from three knuckles. Regardless, the shock sent a deep pain reverberating through her shoulder and up her neck. She swung again, but stopped midway through to cradle the sore hand and focused on the pain, hoping to help keep the incoming tears at bay.

Down on the street a cab stood by, as promised by the helpful officer. She dreaded the idea of having to deal with another human being today. No motels. No more questions. No more paperwork. She got in and gave the cabbie the address to the animal shelter, massaging her sore hand as they drove off. The couch in the lobby would have to suffice.

Barking and yelping and clawing and howling, the noises grew exponentially louder as Shauna was met by her usual welcome committee. It was one in the morning and no begging or pleading could convince the animals that it was not yet time for breakfast. Shauna gave Phoebe, caged up in the hallway across from her office, a little tap on the nose,

then walked inside, past the couch, and took a seat in her computer chair. She rummaged around in her desk for a bottle of painkillers, anticipating a stress headache. Having collected enough saliva in her mouth she managed to swallow one dry. The next two went down easy. She took a few anti-nausea pills to help her pass out in anticipation of the emotions that might come on soon.

Unable to stop herself, she flicked the mouse on her desk and woke up the computer. Before she could formulate her reasons for doing so, the words *gabriellasrecordings.com* were in the URL bar and she had hit the *enter* key. A familiar home page. Something she didn't want to learn more about, except for a quick glance that morning to read about those couple's recordings Thomas had mentioned.

She scanned through the various categories of recordings, hitting *CTRL+F* on each new page, hoping to skip having to read all the descriptions and jump straight to her keywords: *stab*, *impale*, *skewer*, *sword*. Nothing. No, she thought, that would be too easy. Nobody is that reckless or stupid. *Nobody* is that evil?

It had to have been an accident. How far gone *was* Thomas?

Three-thousand dollars worth of content was a hell of a lot to sift through. With the police not taking her theory seriously, she questioned herself if it was worth looking for something that wasn't there. *Three-thousand dollars*—where does she even begin?

From the looks of it there could have been hundreds of unique recordings. For over half of them, just reading the titles would make Shauna cringe. Thomas' phone was burned up, and even if she could get her hands on the memory card, there was little chance it would be functional. It was a dead end. Even if the card could be recovered, how long to sift through three-thousand dollars' worth of content?

In a desperate state of manic frustration Shauna was

about to pull out her credit card and start buying recordings at random when she spotted the *MEMBERS LOGIN* link in the top right corner of the page. *How bad did it get, Tom?* She clicked on it and a login window popped up, requesting the user's e-mail address as the login name. She filled it. For the password she typed in the first thing that came to mind: the password Thomas has been using for all of his online accounts. The password she had begged him to change over a hundred times before. She typed: *Thomas#1234*. It worked. She was inside. It was the sudden reminder of his extreme carelessness and all the commentary she had about it that broke the seal and she burst into a fit of tears.

Through watery lenses she stared at the screen as she dug further. A private message section. Shauna briefly entertained the idea that Thomas was a person capable of hiding secrets from her. There was now a possibility that he may have been cheating on her. But who would have *this* Thomas? she thought. Would *she*? How many ways were there to cheat? she considered as she scanned through his outgoing mail. Judging by how frequently the word *love* was used in the message heading, she didn't bother looking at the body of the text just yet and opened up a new tab. This was pathetic, at worst.

Despite getting her fill of Thomas' other life, Shauna couldn't bring herself to feel sleepy, finding herself stuck in an endless loop of wishing to forget everything that's ever happened and working out the logistics of getting her life back in order. The weight of everything that's happened hadn't yet dawned on her, and the awareness of it made her anxious with anticipation. When does she begin mourning? There were things yet to do beforehand. She needed answers, but to what? Figuring out the questions was an insurmountable task. Who *is* Mistress Gabriella?

She scanned through the testimonials page. There looked to be hundreds, and every single one that she set her

eyes on sounded desperate or pathetic or embarrassing enough to appear genuine. Men claimed to send her thousands of dollars in pledges, as if competing with one another, simply because she had instructed them to do so. Others boasted about leaving their spouses after Mistress Gabriella had opened their eyes for them. *Couples recordings?* Fan clubs from all ends of the internet dedicated to her work praised her. Some left their phone numbers or e-mail addresses right there out in the open. Words of love and affection with levels of poor grammar ranging from shameless East Indian men to shy, secluded Koreans. Declarations of eternal servitude and claims of personal growth. It seemed endless.

With every minute spent combing through what only resulted in unproductive questions in her head, Shauna had had it and clicked on the link in the header that brought her to the *PHONE SEX* page.

Can't get enough of your Goddess? the main text read, or did you want something a little more . . . personal? You're in luck, baby. For a small fee you can have me on the line within minutes. I know you want the real me. Question is: can you handle me? My hours are . . .

It appeared that she worked midnight shifts, one timezone over somewhere on the west coast. When she dialed the number, Shauna was thrown off, not expecting to get through on the first try. When Mistress Gabriella finally spoke, Shauna found that she couldn't tap into the rage she'd kept on the surface in preparation for the call. Her voice was tired and broken and after thirty seconds of silence Mistress Gabriella had to repeat herself.

"Hello, sexy?"

"Hi."

"Mhmmm, a *la-aady*? What a treat, I don't get that too often. Ah, they don't know what they're missing. You're one of the smart ones. I hope you're ready for an unforgettable night. Are you nice and comfortable? I hope you are . . ."

"I think we need to talk," Shauna said through her teeth.

"That's what we're doing, honey."

"Oh enough. Read the room, lady."

"Oh . . ." Mistress Gabriella's voice lost that magical chime. "I'm listening. What is this all about?"

"My husband—"

"Uh-oh, did somebody get into trouble? I'm sorry, sweetie, but I don't do refunds."

"You *killed* my husband," Shauna growled into the speaker.

"*Uhuh*," she smacked her lips a few times, "I can assure you, damn it—"

"WHAT?"

"Honey?"

"Stop calling me *honey*!"

"Fine. Listen—I only get about a minute here to get the hook in, any longer and they'll give me talks about—"

"What the hell are you on about?"

"If you want to keep talking, you'll have to start paying."

"You can't be serious!"

"Absolutely, I am. Them's the rules. Look—I'm dying to hear about your husband and all. I'll tell you what, though—when I transfer you, use this code: *gabriella69*. When you get transferred to the operator, Mary, use that and it'll get you the first two minutes free if the call goes above ten minutes."

"I don't want to talk to Mary!"

"Yes, I heard you. Please listen, I'm trying to be helpful here. I'm sure you don't actually mean what you said when you mentioned that I killed—"

"Of course I meant it!"

"OK, gotta transfer you now, hun, hold on—"

"No, you hold the—"

"—hell up!"

“Excuse me, miss?”

“Put Gabriella back on the line!”

“I’m sure you’re very anxious to get going, miss, but I’m afraid you will have to pay to resume your session.”

“Goddamn it!”

“I understand that you must be very excited. Mistress Gabriella is *very* good, and I assure you that she is dying to have you back on the line. Unfortunately, before you can get to—”

“Fine!”

“Will that be Visa or Masterca—”

“*Express!*”

“Just a moment . . . now, may I have the sixteen-digit number and the expiry date?”

“Yes. Oh, and . . . ” Shauna considered the \$800 worth of content Thomas left on their credit card bill and reluctantly added, “gabriella69.”

“How’d you like Mary?” Mistress Gabriella came back on the line.

“She’s a secretary, what the hell kind of answer do you expect out of that question? Let’s get back to it, I’m losing my mind here.”

“Okay then, shoot.”

“My husband.”

“Yes, yeah—killed himself, I heard that. What was he listening to?”

“To you! To your voice! To your brain-jumbling pseudo-hypno garbage recordings!”

“Right. Which one?”

“Why does it matter? What are you going to do about it?”

“Think, hun. Help me out here.”

“I don’t know . . . he was playing with a sword, I think, before . . . and then everything burned.”

“*Ohhh*”

"What. What is it?"

"If it's what I think it is—"

"THEN WHAT?"

"It's one of my favorites."

"Are you not registering what I've been telling you?!"

"No, no—I am. How did he do it?"

"He impaled himself on a sword!"

"Oh my . . . must've been towards the end then. Gosh, you never know what to expect, do you?"

"Lady! My husband was burned alive earlier today. My apartment and everything in it burned with him!"

"Well, I can see why you'd be upset."

"How can you be so indifferent?"

"Hun, what do you want from me, honestly? I didn't know the man. I don't know you. You have my sympathies, fine. But you have to understand—I get a lot of strange fans. I deal with a lot of . . . sick people. Sick people with desires sicker than what I can satiate at times. With how long I've been doing this, would you not understand that I came to develop an emotional detachment from the goings-ons of what happens after I hang up the phone, finish a recording?"

"What *can* I do to help? About as much as I'd ever be willing to do."

"I want you to turn yourself in."

"Uhuh . . . for murder? Arson? Hun, you're distraught. Your husband died today, perhaps you need to get some sleep and think on whatever you want to do in the morning. How much do you know about your husband. *Really* think about it. Because I'll let you know that for every love letter I receive I get equal parts death and/or suicide threats demanding more, bigger. How well do you know him? Because if you give me his name I'm sure I can find all sorts of information on my end that would have you change your tune about how you're going about dealing with this situation. You have to understand that I can't be held

accountable for every sick person who—”

“My husband wasn’t crazy!”

“Put yourself in my shoes for a moment and say that again.”

“I’m going to report you!”

“Fine! Waste more time!”

“I’ll tell your boss!”

“Hun—”

“Enough with the goddamn pet names already!”

“—then give me a name already!”

“I’m not telling you my damn name!”

“Fine. Do you think that what you’re doing is wise? You think my boss here, who manages a phone sex operation, will waste a moment of his time disputing a claim regarding a customer who isn’t even his?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mary doesn’t belong to Mistress Gabriella. This phone line doesn’t belong to Mistress Gabriella. *Gabriellasrecordings* belongs to Mistress Gabriella. *I mean . . .* when it’s a matter of a sick man who hurt himself while enjoying a product from *gabriellasrecordings.com*, you *are* speaking to the boss.”

“So it’s a side gig then?”

“*This here* is the side gig. Your matter is of no concern to anybody here.”

“Then . . .”

“Now . . . anything else you’d like to talk about? Perhaps something to get your mind off all this? Get your ten minutes? I can help you relax. . . .”

“So that’s it?”

“Hun, what else do you want from me? Mistress Gabriella said no, there is nothing left to discuss regarding your husband.”

“I want a goddamn apology, now.”

“I’m sorry that your husband killed himself—will that do?”

“That’s not an apology and you know it. Say you’re

sorry for killing my—”

“I did no such thing.”

“Just say it! Say you’re sorry!”

“Hun, for all I know you’re recording this conversation, and as strongly as I believe you have nothing on me, I can’t give you any sort of admission of guilt on record. I have no time to deal with whatever legal nonsense can come of this.”

“NONSENSE!?”

“Miss, perhaps you could use some therapy. If that’s too pricey, there may be some recordings that might hel—”

Shauna wasn’t completely aware of the rage flowing through her veins until she slammed the phone down on her desk and found it difficult to aim the trembling tip of her finger at the red *END CALL* button. It was approaching five in the morning now and the caged animals were sure that it was time for breakfast. Their barking and yelping and scratching would not cease. Phoebe’s distinct yelp, echoing through Shauna’s office, was the most difficult to drown out, and after a while became the only thing she could hear. Shauna spun her chair around to look at Phoebe. Her front paws *tippy-tapped* across the stainless steel cage in sync with the back ones. Her maroon-pink nose glistened and spread its snot on the metal grate. Those affectionate eyes. There was something about that disfigured face and the fact that the dog had less than a week to live that, once their eyes had locked and their guards were down, permitted Shauna to erupt in a convulsive fit of cries rivaling in volume that of the residents’ early morning hunger songs.

Across The River

It was at his funeral that it had dawned upon Shauna that there was nothing about Thomas that she particularly liked. Something about his coffin, among thousands of others, listening to the same sermon she'd heard at least twice before, created a sort of disconnect where she found moments of pure objective reason. The harder she tried to come up with a romanticized summary of his life and friends and goals he never would have achieved the more she resented herself. A resentment she could only blame Thomas for. Even in his death, she thought, this pathetic excuse of a man could go on making Shauna feel like a bad person for simply recognizing his shortcomings. Even in death there was that voice of his in her head which never allowed her to be content with who she was.

Shauna wished for rain, hoping that a blanket of black umbrellas might better let her hide her face from the mass of people, who she was sure also wanted to be elsewhere. She wished to hide from everyone else's attempts at tears. Half-assed sympathies. At that moment, what scared her the most was accidentally making eye contact with one of the relatives who would somehow read her mind at that very moment and know exactly what she was thinking. At gatherings such as these, she figured, people could only feel

one of two things: despair or indifference. There was no in-between. Like the outfits everyone wore, their feelings were picked out ahead of time. She was terrified at the thought of somebody reading her and picking up on none of the former; she was even more terrified of spotting the latter emotion on anyone there—the confirmation that *nobody* ever cared for Thomas. Reminding her once again that she may have wasted a chunk of her prime years being encumbered by him.

She listened to words of condolences from his close relatives and friends, most of whom she never felt like she could get close to. Their speeches sounded shallow, but when it was her turn to speak she didn't exactly do as well as she'd hoped. Between the contemplative pauses, waiting to see if a tear would leave her eye, she fiddled with the rough edges of the burnt plastic remains of his phone that the police finally released, recognizing that it was of no use to them. While fighting what the words *submit to me* meant to *her*, she convinced herself that she was more emotionally removed from the clasp of Mistress Gabriella's seduction than her clients would be. She was confident that listening through these tapes would help her look past the fluff and find something out, something deeply disturbing, about the person who, for a lack of a better word, she now considered to be a foe, technically.

Sometime between the casket being lowered into the grave and the last of the hugs and goodbyes, the rain Shauna had wished for came down in full force, and she watched with relief as the lifeless black shapes scattered and left her to sulk in silence. The sound of the downpour striking her umbrella reminded her of the crackling fire encompassing her, in surround sound, as she watched her village burn down. *Revenge*—the word hung in her head like a burnt piece of flesh at the roof of her mouth begging to be tongued loose. The *Check Engine* light on her instrument cluster. The dentist appointment she would put off

indefinitely. Trivial—all of it. She shook herself off, ready to leave the dreary sight of the depressing grays and muted greens and make her way back to the part of her life that she felt had always found real comfort in—her place of work.

Before she could take another step she began to further ponder the inevitability of life's everyday trivialities, and that no matter how long she would put them off for, they would always have to be taken care of. This compulsion. This seed she planted in her own head. This *revenge*. This silly word and all the silly sentiments that go along with it. Who *wouldn't* think of revenge in a situation like hers? It would be as natural as one using the phrase *like white on rice* when describing two things that went well together. *Clichés were significant for a reason*. They were a summary of universal sentiments. A shortcut for when getting to the point would take too long. Stupid thoughts come and go, and she wasn't going to be hard on herself for thinking them. Dumber people have thought up dumber things. *Done* dumber things. It's not what you think, but what you do. It's not what you do, but *how* you do it. It's not like listening to another one of Gabriella's recordings would bring her one step closer to rationalizing on acting on an instinct, which she had already logically stripped down to its bare bones, in the clearest way she could put it: *you took what's mine; I take what's yours*.

She examined the horizon. All but one of the black figures had disappeared by now. Standing by her car, she watched as the rim of the last figure's umbrella tipped up to reveal a familiar face. A friendly wave of the hand followed. She caught herself playing with the lump of plastic in her pocket, groaned, then slipped her hand out to reciprocate the gesture before making her way over.

"Richard," she said, flashing a restrained smile, as if she couldn't make her mind up about whether or not she was pleased to see him, "were you here the entire time? Must've blended into the crowd. I didn't see you."

“Did you ever?”

Pathetic—there was something liberating about that word now. There used to be many, much more compassionate adjectives which Shauna would use to describe Thomas’ actions, character, friends. Never to their face, but she was always a firm believer that if you think about something, someone hard enough, they would pick up on it unconsciously. Especially in a sort of relationship where she would have to face that person at the end of each day. She would have to leave her judgments at home. Wipe her slate clean. Do or think only the things that would leave the other party feeling comfortable in her presence. Why she did this she didn’t know. It felt like the right thing to do. Everything she did for him was nothing more than simply the right thing to do, so that she could feel like a decent person. Her consideration for other’s feelings felt like selfishness, but only in the same sense that giving a homeless person the change out of one’s wallet would bring on a temporary sense of happiness to oneself for having done something good. Treating Thomas with any sort of decency brought Shauna a twisted sort of that peace of mind that gave her permission to wander to a dark place and have it feel justified, earned. Somehow being aware of the moral licensing on her part made it even easier on her conscience.

Now though, reflecting on her years with him, her mind would footnote the word *pathetic* at the end of every jumbled mess of a sentence in her head and she would feel nothing, not until the manic beginnings of the next train of thought. She felt like she could breathe again, only to realize that every ounce of relief at the end of every breath would bring on another hurtful memory of when she couldn’t say what she wanted to Thomas, to his family, to Richard—the pathetic shell of a man who would call himself a close friend of Thomas. The borrower of money he thought she didn’t know about. The one who slept on her couch after a

divorce. The one who would give Shauna the sort of inviting look that hinted she would be welcome to jump into his arms should things not work out with Thomas. The one who lost his driver's license last week to a traffic stop, and now needed a ride home from the funeral.

"... did you think, that at any point, he was taking this thing too far?" Shauna continued her thought out loud for the passenger to hear.

"Honestly . . . no." Richard said defensively. "So he jerked off at work, who hasn't?"

"Before that—was he acting weird? Was he sad? Lonely? Distant?"

"You tell *me*, you're the one that saw him every day."

"He's *different* with me. I need to know what you talked about, guy stuff. Did he talk about me?"

"I mean, not specifically."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean we'd go through the routine: *Hey, how's Shauna? Oh, she's fine. You guys happy? Yeah—she's great, I feel like we can talk about anything. Her career's great, we're moving along smoothly . . . standard stuff.*"

"Is that what he would say?"

"Yeah, just the general get-life-out-of-the-way kind of talk."

"And then what?"

"Then we'd do our thing. Xbox. Maybe smoke a joint. Talk about stupid shit."

"Did you talk about Mistress Gabriella? And don't give me a *who?*—there's no way that didn't come up."

"... Yes."

"What did he say?"

"Stuff—I don't know what you want me to say—it's porn. Guys talk about porn."

"Do you listen to her?"

"..."

"Tell me!"

“Yes! Sure—I tried it out. It was fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yeah, I mean it was weird at first. But there are a few good ones out there.”

“Which one did you listen to?”

“Shauna, this is pretty weird to talk about.”

“Yeah, it’s also pretty damn weird that Thomas would kill himself listening to her tapes. I’m past the weird—I don’t give a shit if you’re uncomfortable. If you’re trying to keep some sort of facade in hopes of getting to sleep me in the near future you can drop it ‘cause it’s still not happening. There! *Whoo*—now *that* was weird. Shit!” Shauna shook herself off, then rolled down the window for a breath of fresh air. “Now that we got that out of the way can we talk like adults?”

“Shauna—what the hell are you—”

“Hey, it’s done with. I don’t care. I saw the way you looked at me, now you got your answer to that gnawing question in your head. *Get over it*. Now tell me, what tapes did you listen to?”

“Do you need specifics? This is getting really awkward for me.”

“Yes!”

“Why—how is knowing what kind of porn I’m into gonna help with what happened to Thomas?”

“I need to know!”

“Why?”

“Because I need to know how this bitch works.”

“Who—Gabriella?”

“Yes!”

“Why?!”

“Because I need to! I need to know everything! What got *you* into it?”

“...”

“Richard!”

“Okay, fine. Look—this is strictly a sexual thing and

does not reflect what I'm actually like—it's just what worked. There's one where you're a patient. She plays a psychiatrist . . . you're laying on her couch. She's talking . . ."

"Seems pretty normal to me, Richard."

"Once she has you nice and comfortable, she'll walk over to you and . . . pull her dick out."

"*Uhhuh* . . ."

"Big one, too."

It was around the third or fourth time when Shauna and Thomas showered together that she caught on it—Thomas *always* insisted on going in after her, always taking roughly a minute to finally join her. One day, when her curiosity couldn't take it, she waited about twenty seconds before yanking the shower curtain back, only to find Thomas tugging away at his flaccid penis, stretching it out, presumably before she could lay her eyes on it. She immediately looked away and said something about soap or breakfast, almost as if oblivious to what he was doing. She asked him to join her and mentioned nothing of what she saw ever again.

Many months went by of him performing the routine. To make him feel better Shauna made a habit of it to compliment his genitals at first sight, whether in the shower, before jumping into bed, or simply changing in front of her, hoping to ease his supposed insecurity. He eventually stopped feeling the need to add an inch in order to feel comfortable in front of her. With time came more comfort, and so the tugging ceased. Sensing his comfort around her, Shauna's compliments about his penis were no more.

As the years went by, she began to miss such harmless little secrets between the two of them, and was lost not knowing what she appreciated more—the secrets, or the illusion of knowing absolutely everything about the person she was set to spend the rest of her life with.

As far as her stubbornness and self-assurance was

concerned, there was no guidebook on dealing with grief, or whatever the words were which she assigned to the feelings she was experiencing from one day to the next. While scrolling through an endless list of recordings, hunched over in front of her computer in the darkly lit office of the animal shelter, she wondered if this Mistress Gabriella might have had her own twisted take on the subject. From seeing the recordings claiming to relieve migraines, ease stress, manage depression, analyze anxiety, help to accept oneself and so on, Shauna scoffed at the idea that this person who more or less destroyed her life had anything positive to contribute to society. It *relieved* migraines, not *cured* them. *Ease*. *Manage*. None of these words promised a cure, so then, why would people supposedly buy these recordings? There was no way that the person who came up with the titles for these recordings was the same one she spoke to that one evening. This was nothing more than a sick and twisted marketing tactic. She scrolled past the *Self-Help* section and into the list labeled: *For Couples*. A recording titled *You Are Still In Love* caught her eye, and before she could consider what she was doing she had already clicked the *play* button to hear a free thirty-second preview. Mistress Gabriella spoke:

“I Love You—do you remember how those words used to lift you up, how excited you felt upon hearing them? How exciting it was to say them, knowing that the person you love so much would feel the same ease in their chest, flushness in their face, tingle . . . run through their body as you would upon hearing it. You still love them, so, so dearly, and they love you just the same. Your love is still pure. Your love is still strong. Love is never lost—merely tucked away into a corner of your mind. It’s tragic that love can be unlearned, but it cannot be forgotten completely. Let me help you remember.

“In this two-hour long recording I want you and your partner to listen together and learn to say the words that you

both know still mean so much. I want you to *remember* what they mean, and that they still—”

Shauna felt an uncontrollable tug of the muscles at the sides of her lips and decided that she was done listening. She vowed not to cry, reminding herself of what she really thought of Thomas at the funeral, hell—during the entirety of their relationship, as far as she was concerned.

She rummaged through her desk drawer, upturning any useless item she could grab in a frenzy and tossing it in any which direction. She went through the bookshelf. The stack of magazines. Her wallet, her purse and her jacket pockets. She looked everywhere she could, but found no photo, nothing that would remind her of the man she called her husband.

I love you?

She tried to picture him in her head, but couldn't even be sure of what side of his face he had that mole on, or maybe that was just a large pimple he kept picking. She didn't know. She couldn't remember the last time she even looked at his penis, whenever it was that they actually had sex. She thought of that time in the shower and wondered if he was embarrassed or relieved when she discovered his secret habit. Those beautiful, wonderful little secrets. She formed a fragment of an image in her head of Thomas from behind the shower curtain, anxiously tugging at himself. The look of a startled animal on his face. Those harmless little secrets—a reminder that there was always a *him* in the world of *them*. An uncomfortable realization that she couldn't figure out what she meant when she said to Thomas earlier: *You're quitting this shit, right now!* She wondered how he had interpreted them. She could have been wiser in her choice of words.

It felt easier to deal with her grief in trying to convince herself that she never knew anything in the first place. And now Shauna would never know what she would feel if she were to look into his eyes again and say the words *I love you*.

All she knew now was this disembodied voice from behind the screen telling her how she could feel or be happy or be beautiful or have all the adventures in her life she could ever want. This voice that seemed to bring satisfaction and relief and fulfillment to all but Shauna. This voice that took Thomas from her.

Part Three:

**The Committee Presents
an Opinion**

Superstar

“It’s always about the dick, isn’t it? I’m not trying to sound like one of those *bad feminists* here or anything, but I do at times think that the balance is off, know what I mean? It’s hard to criticize the dick without giving it power, because acknowledging it gives it power, taking it away from us, the ladies, who need all the power, *via acknowledgment* of our existence, as equals, that we can get. It infects the narrative. I don’t know how to feel power in myself as a woman without comparing to something else, that *always* being the dick. Because if I compare myself to another woman it just feels like I’m living in some fantasy world. You can’t ignore the whole picture. There’s nothing we can do about the dick. It’s just there. And the mere idea of bringing it to light sidetracks the conversation. Yeah . . .” Her bong bubbled. She felt a sharp tickle in the back of her throat, preparing herself to keep the cough down as she unwrapped her lips from the glass and took a deep inhale. “It’s nice that we can still have these talks, you know. I—” she cut her sentence short to swallow what she expected to be an array of fast-firing hiccups. “I was afraid that with you being my manager and all that our friendship might’ve . . . you know.”

“Jenna . . .” Jenko exhaled the smoke from his cigarette and reached for the bong, “I was your manager *before* we

were friends.”

“Oh,” her head bobbed around aimlessly, thinking so hard about *how* to think about what Jenko said, that she forgot to think about *what* he said. “I guess, whatever.” She crawled up onto the hammock installed in her backyard, one leg hanging out, and pushed herself off from the sturdy table beside it. “Do you think guys would ever want to see porn where the girl *actually* orgasms? I mean, I get putting yourself in the shoes of a buff dude with a ten-inch dick and slapping a girl’s face with it . . . But . . . I mean—there’s gotta be guys out there, nice—no, *good* guys—who genuinely want to see a girl get off, properly.” She tucked the hanging leg in with the rest of herself and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Or are people too skeptical? I mean—would most people just assume that she would be faking it? All it takes is one, you know? One stupid, insecure idiot somewhere in a comments section projecting his insecurities, planting that seed in everyone’s heads with his skepticism, mouthing off about said orgasm being fake. How the hell do you prove to the audience that the orgasm was real? *Damn*, why do you even need to prove anything? The guy’s gonna get off regardless, let him have it, sure, but sometimes we take days to shoot a scene and *still* can’t find time for *me*?” She closed her eyes and kept silent as the rocking of the hammock came to a halt. “Anyway, it’s always about the dick.”

Jenko, now stressed about spending extra time and resources on extending his film shoots to accommodate an orgasm for Jenna, which might not even sell, felt his high diminish. He took a sloppy rip from the bong, and between a few raspy coughs said, “it’s all about the dick,” then passed the bong back to Jenna, “cheers.”

“What!?” She backhanded the bong away and snapped at Jenko, “what *cheers*? What the hell are you on about? This is a serious issue I’m bringing up. How the hell did . . . what’s her name, Rosa . . . something do it. How did she get

all those people to rise up and do the thing that she wanted?”

“Rosa Parks?”

“Yeah!”

“I think that was the bus lady.”

“Oh.”

“The black one.”

“Right,” Jenna stared at the sky, lost in deep thought, “well, she was probably a feminist, *too*.”

“Jenna . . .” Jenko sunk into the couch cushion and raised his hands in front of his face defensively, “. . . you’re sounding like a feminist.”

“Get fuuuuuucked.” She chuckled.

“Besides, if guys wanna watch girls orgasm, there’s always the girl on girl scenes.”

“Oh what is this now, the early 2000s? Lesbian scenes haven’t been a thing since dial-up internet. Come on now, Mr. Marketing—you don’t ask the consumer what they want—you create a cool new product and you tell them that it’s something they’ve always wanted. I mean—who in the hell came up with the idea that having a girl finish you off with her hands . . . or . . . or finishing *yourself* off while she watches was something anyone would want to do? Literally nobody does that in real life, but *somebody* in the industry set that trend. *Disruptive*—something, I hear that’s a new approach to things nowadays. Creampies *just* recently became a thing and that’s about as realistic as sex gets. That’s what creates life! Imagine all the guys that actually want the girl to have a good time. Does that not exist?”

“I—yeah, you could be right—there’s that pride thing. Like . . . unlocking the secrets to the vagina or what not. Solving a puzzle,” he finished his cigarette, “each girl a unique puzzle?”

“Right?” She said.

“Right.” He said.

“Right then.” She rolled through a series of scrambled

thoughts in her brain, finally finding something sounded like a real sentence, “it can *still* be about domination, the orgasm, I mean. A guy thinks: *hey, if I can do that . . . if I can make a girl literally lose her fucking mind for a few seconds with my dick or my hands or my mouth, that makes me pretty powerful, doesn't it.* Like, that's a thing guys would think, no?”

“Uh. Yup . . .”

“Can you imagine . . .” she trailed off; her eyes lost focus as she played with her hair.

“Yeah, man.”

“All the guys that have thought, no, dreamt, of getting me off? *Me*—Jenna Moone?”

“I'm sure they have . . .”

“Let's do it—let's shoot some scenes. We'll get a whole bunch done, then release them around, *uhh*—is there a women's month?” Jenna pulled out her phone and flicked her fingers across the screen.

“August?—I dunno.”

“No there's gotta be something, some special day—when did women get to vote?”

“Like . . . where's my phone, man . . .” Jenko, with the bong resting on his belly, realizing he didn't care enough about getting an accurate answer enough to bother with getting up to find his phone answered, “like the 1970's or something—I think we're too late.”

“I meant the date, dummy.”

“Oh, shit. I don't know—honestly I don't think anybody knows. There's mother's day.”

“Ewww. Who wants to think about their mothers while fantasizing about orgasms . . .”

“Hey—is there a men's day?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“We should tell the feminists,” Jenko chuckled.

“What is it with you. I find that offensive and I don't know why—stop confusing me.” She sneered. “OH! There is a women's day!”

“When?”

“Soon...ish. March 8th.”

“Oh.” Jenko sunk into his seat.

“SO. March it is?”

Jenko lifted the bong from his belly and set it down on the ground. “Uhh. Jenna, this is cool and all, but do you realize . . . the resources we’ll need?”

“It’s fine. We have the time. One scene every . . . I don’t know . . . five days? We got about a month—you’ll get maybe two days to edit for a total of . . .”

“Edit . . . market . . . social—”

“Yeah, do all that.”

“Jenna . . .”

“What now?!”

“Nothing.”

“Well, let’s get fucking!”

Neither Jenna, nor Jenko, wanted to admit that they were scraping the bottom of the barrel for their male performers, but the fact of the matter was that most of their go-to guys were already booked, on the wrong side of the country, or simply didn’t fit into their budget. It was two-and-a-half weeks before the first shoot date and they still had over thirty interviews to get through before they could even begin thinking of scripts, let alone securing the crew, locations, and equipment needed to stay on schedule. In a closed-off hotel room, sitting behind a desk littered with resumes, headshots, and recent HIV test results they briefly discussed the pros and cons of each performer, whose face they would feature should they make the cut, who had attributes they couldn’t turn down, who creeped them out, or who looked like they would ask for too much money. With a performer budget of \$100 per shoot, on a two-day shooting schedule, the contract allowed for a third day to finish the shoot for an additional \$50, which they would be contractually obligated to finish. The stack reserved for the

approved performers had risen to a disappointing four submissions; the trash can held almost triple the amount. With every rejection Jenko would take a cigarette break on the balcony, staying in Jenna's line of sight, where she would watch his head dip below his shoulders, reading his mind, hearing the words: *this is a waste of my fucking time, Jenna. Our time. Our money. Focus on what works!* float above his head. Sometimes he would come back to the desk with Jenna's phone in his face, listing an article or some poll found on social media displaying some anecdotal evidence to disproving her theory about men caring about pleasuring a woman to completion.

After their twenty-first interview, more than seven hours into the ordeal, Jenko returned from his smoke break to a compilation of audio recordings of women orgasming. She confronted him, inquiring if those sounds did not invoke any sort of feelings below the belt. When he told her they hadn't she got upset and questioned his sexuality while pulling the bottom of her shirt up to her chin to taunt him. They had a chuckle and made up. Number twenty-two was up in a few minutes and they quickly got themselves together, putting the tension behind them.

With a stage name like *Driller Dan*, the man came through the front door exuding the sort of confidence to match name. Standing at six-foot-three, he sported an army-style buzz cut, in a neon-pink tank top that insisted people ask him for directions to the beach, and stylish sweatpants with pearlescent stripes that did little to hide a bulge that rocked side to side with his exaggerated stride.

"Daniel?" asked Jenko, looking up from the resume.

"Sir." He stopped in his tracks. Feet planted six inches apart and shoulders square. Pelvis stretched out forward.

"Why the stage name?" Jenko asked, sarcastically. "There's no hiding from it these days. Are you ashamed of your profession?"

"No, sir." He clenched his jaw and kept his eyes

forward. Waiting for Jenna to speak first, as if it were the gentleman-like thing to do. "It's a nod to the good old days . . ."

"Oh yeah, and what was so great about them?"

"Jenko!" Jenna said under her breath, pinching Jenko's thigh, "ease up. I thought we were cool!"

"We're cool, baby," Jenko flashed a cocky grin. "Are you unhappy with the current state of the industry?" He turned to Jenna and shook his head, only to be met with another strong pinch.

"Enough!" She said between her teeth, then turned to the performer and opened up her arms to him, "you're cute."

"Thank you, ma'am." His eyes met with Jenna's.

"Nothing wrong with a little nostalgia," she turned back to Jenko and raised an eyebrow, "Jenko here drives a gas-guzzling shitbox from the sixties, claiming it *has character*. I honestly don't see the difference . . . let's get on with the show."

Jenko swallowed his words, on the verge of going off on a rant refuting Jenna's criticism of his beloved 1967 Pontiac GTO. He was hurt to realize that after countless walk-arounds of his baby, talking about the notoriety of the shop that rebuild his engine, the work the painters claimed it took to put a fresh coat of pearlescent black on it, the phone calls he had to make to find a reputable upholsterer to patch up the original vinyl seats, the custom exhaust system tuned to a specific frequency that supposedly gets panties wet, and the weekly wax job, were never really appreciated as much as she made him feel they were.

Jenna put her hand on Jenko, who now looked disheveled, asking "are you alri—"

"Alright then, Mr. Driller. Let's see what you're working with."

"Now?"

"Hold on, hun," Jenna waved to Driller Dan, instructing

him to hold off on letting his sweatpants drop. “What’s the rush, Jenko? I’ve got some questions . . .”

“No time,” he turned to her, “you said he was cute, right—well let’s get on with it.”

“We *have* time, I want to do this right.”

Driller Dan tucked his thumbs into the waistband of his pants and held his head high “I have no objections to on-site HIV screening, if that was one of your—”

“That’s great then!” Jenko flashed a grin at Jenna, then turned to Driller Dan, “drop them. You have thirty seconds . . .”

“Wait—” Jenna intervened.

“Starting . . . now!” Jenko shot an imaginary starter pistol into the ceiling, “POP!”

“It’s supposed to be a minute!” Driller Dan immediately got to work. In one smooth motion, with a slight bend in the knees, he pulled his pants down with his thumbs. On the way up one hand cupped his testicles while the other worked the bottom of the shaft in a milking motion.

“This is the *real* test, kiddo. Amateurs get a minute. You wouldn’t be an amateur, with a stage name like *Driller Dan*, now would you?”

Jenna punched Jenko in the shoulder and crossed her arms, “dick.”

“No, sir!” Driller Dan answered, carefully rolling around the contents of his scrotum in a cupped hand, now working the tip of his shaft around to the back of the head, in even, calculated motions, so as not to lose sensation or focus. As his member unfolded he worked the middle, squeezing at the sides from the first third up to the head, his other hand now working a rolling motion with his finger up along the taint, applying just the right amount of pressure.

“Ten seconds, kid. I’m barely seeing a seven there. I hope you didn’t lie on your resume. I want to see that eight-and-a-half!”

“I didn’t lie!” The pressure failed to break his

concentration. With the interview being as fast paced as it was, Driller Dan didn't get a moment to mention the lengths he's gone to with his erection practice. He had to go beyond watching pornographic films, as the interviewers, especially at his level of employment, hardly ever provided fluffers, let alone the actresses being in the same room as him. He had to train for every situation, in any environment. Hands-free meditation, learning to get hard by the sheer will of his mind. Bathroom breaks at the local burger joint where he worked. Various levels of inebriation. Pot, mushrooms, ecstasy, and of course, the killer of all erections—cocaine. He practiced at family gatherings, weddings, and even his own mother's funeral. At the peak of his form he even dared to practice getting hard while watching gay porn, as nothing to him was more scary and less stimulating as imagining where his career would end up should he not get this first part right. With two seconds to spare his hands let off and took a rest by his sides. His pelvic floor muscles tensed, driving his erection at a slight upward bend toward the desk in front of him.

"Not bad," Jenko nodded in agreement.

"Not bad?!" Jenna exclaimed, "that was pretty fucking impressive, I'd say!"

"Thank you, Jenna," impressed by his own performance, Driller Dan felt comfortable that a flirtatious wink at his future co-star would not be taken ill-heartedly.

"Eight and a half?" Jenko asked, "turn sideways, I have to make sure."

Driller Dan did so, giving them a profile view of his equipment.

"Is that measured from the thighs, or from the—"

"Who cares!? It's more than enough . . ." Jenna argued.

"From the stomach, sir. As is the standard."

"How long can you keep that up?"

"As long as I need to." He tensed and relaxed the pelvic three times in succession to display his fortitude.

“Good, keep it there—we gotta have a chat here,” Jenko, with an apprehensive look of approval, faced Jenna and waved his head waywardly. “Okay, fine, you go.”

Jenna smiled and waved to Driller Dan, grabbing his attention. “Daniel, have you had a good read through the listing?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So you feel comfortable . . . sorry—confident, that you can do what you’re asked of?”

“Yes. I can go for as long as it takes. I can come before, after, or at the same time as you. Anywhere you need me to. Just tell me what you need. I practiced plenty, and have great control over my—”

“Okay, I got it—you can get yourself off. This is different, this is teamwork, you’ll have to work with me to get *me* there, you know?”

“Right, of course—I’ll give you all the time you need to . . . to . . .” Driller Dan made a fist in front of him and pulled out his index and middle finger into an upside-down V shape. He ran a finger from his other hand up along the sides of the shape. Up down. Up down, then in a slow circular motion where the fingers met. Confidently, he nodded his head and said, “. . . to get yourself there.”

Jenko, now grinning as he witnessed the enthusiasm vanish Jenna’s face, waited for her to turn to face him before mouthing the words: *What. Did. You. Ex-pect?*

“Dan?” Jenna expressed a defeated sigh.

“Ma’am?”

“We’ll be calling you . . .”

“Jenna,” Jenko rehearsed the words over and over while sitting in his car, “I’m a genius. I. Am. A. *Geniiiiius.*”

After several minutes of incessant knocking Jenna finally opened up the door to her house. She wore a pink, daffodil-patterned robe, from beneath which peeked out a pair of

plush elephant slippers. Her hair was tied in a lazy bun. The look in her eyes was unwelcoming. A half-smoked joint hung from her mouth when she begrudgingly greeted Jenko. “What,” she took the joint from her mouth to moisten her lips before saying, “Jenko, the editing session isn’t for another five hours. I could’ve driven myself, you know.” She dug into the deep pocket of her robe to check her phone, “it’s only . . . ten AM. Shit, man.”

“It’s important,” Jenko contained his excitement behind a grin that looked ready to burst into a high-pitched shriek, “it’s so, so very important.”

“Uhuh . . .”

“Did you at least bring coffee?”

“I brought a crate of it.”

“Well then, where the hell is it?”

“It’s in my car.”

“Why didn’t you bring it up?”

“I wanted you to ask for it.” He raised up two middle fingers to his face, using them to stretch the corners of his mouth up to his cheekbones.

“Ughhh. You’re a piece of shit, Jenko,” Jenna escaped back into the dark house, leaving the door open, “get that coffee in here, *now*, or get the hell out of my face.”

Jenna worked tirelessly on the second mug of black coffee, seemingly unaware of Jenko’s presence while she drank it. He stared in silence at the jug of milk he brought along, just in case, as he felt that Jenna could never make up her mind about how she took her coffee. There must be a pattern, he considered past events, then ultimately decided to let the mystery go unresolved. He decided, in the end, that she was simply a person of pure chaos.

“Okay!” Jenna set her cup down on the glass table. With her hands on her knees she turned to Jenko, who sat a few feet away on the same couch, and finally acknowledged his existence. “Your timeout is done—what did you come here

for?”

Jenko sat up attentively, almost as if he had forgotten what he came to Jenna's house for in the first place. It was best that he kept his mind off it, as Jenna warned him that any mention of business during his timeout punishment would result in a five-minute extension for each incident. His eyes were filled with childish excitement. A simultaneous yelp and giggle escaped his mouth; Jenna stared at him as if a stranger had broken into her house.

“Jenna,” he finally spoke, “I’m a genius.”

“Uh, Okay.”

“You do know that, right?”

“I dunno—you’ve had your ups, you’ve had your downs,”

“Tell me I’m the smartest boy in the world!”

Jenna stared at him apprehensively, squinted her eyes, then said, “I don’t wanna . . .” she laughed.

“Come on, *pleasssssee*.”

“*Oh fine!*” Jenna took his hands into hers. She looked at him, rolled her eyes, then let her head fall between her arms, expelling a deep, exasperated groan. She waited a few moments before finally tilting her head up until until their eyes met, then said in a high-pitched voice, “you are just the smartest boy in the world!”

“Goddamn right!” Jenko whipped his hands up, shoving Jenna back into her seat, then reached into his canvas messenger bag and pulled out his MacBook. “You’re gonna shit yourself.”

“Okay,” she laughed.

“You’re not gonna believe this!” He launched a web browser and pulled up Jenna’s twitter account.

“Alright, *alright*.”

“You, my dear, are gonna fucking die!”

“Okay!” She punched him in the arm, “enough already, Jesus!”

“Check it out,” Jenko pushed the laptop into Jenna’s lap.

On her homepage there was a new tweet posted a few days ago, one she definitely didn't remember writing, or approving.

"Uhhh," she looked at Jenko suspiciously.

"Oh just read it already!"

"*My dearest fans:*" She began reading, then clicked on the attached posting to enlarge it. A simple white card with a paragraph of black text, definitely exceeding the allowed word count for a simple tweet. She continued, "*The world has been a crazy place lately, it's a shame that in this day and age the suffering of women is still an enormous part of that craziness. The recent events that have come to light in media has inspired me to examine situations which I have found myself to be in as of late, and it's difficult, saddening, and overwhelmingly embarrassing to admit that I, too, have been abused, degraded, and let's not get our words twisted here—raped . . .* Jenko, what the fuck is this. What did you do?"

"Keep reading!"

"*Oh Jesus, oh God . . . Today I am laying everything out on the line and joining my fellow sisters, God bless you all, and telling the world that is behavior towards women stops today! This cannot go on. Women of all races, ages, and professions need to unite. We need to finally say that enough is enough!*

"*Today, I stay strong and I stay proud and I say that I will no longer keep this to myself and suffer alone. Today I say that I, too, am a victim, and I will not be silenced.*

"*My abuser's name was Vincent Poole . . . Oh Jenko. Oh you stupid, big dummy . . . and I say—he will NOT get away with this!*"

"There's the video, too," Jenko jabbed his finger at the short-text link at the tail end of the tweet.

"Jenko . . ." Jenna deflated into the couch, pulling down on her hair with one hand, while her other one hovered over the trackpad, ". . . is this what I think it is?"

"Click it," said Jenko.

"Jenko, I . . ."

“Just click it already!” He pulled up next to Jenna, swatted her hand away, then clicked the link himself. The video played. A shy young man appeared on screen, twiddling his thumbs in the back of a limousine. The shot zoomed in on his face, then a voice spoke that immediately sent shivers down Jenna’s spine: *my name is Vincent Poole . . .*

“OVER ONE MILLION FOLLOWERS, JENNA!” Jenko paced in front of the bathroom door, yelling at Jenna, who hid herself on the other side of it. “One million—you’re a goddamn millionaire now!”

“FIVE MONTHS, JENKO!” Jenna kicked at the door with the back of her heel, gasping with tears in front of the mirror. “I had four sessions left of my therapy. They said I was doing great. I was making progress! You’ve gone and fucked with it—with everything!”

“What do you mean—followers aside—this could help, couldn’t it?” he pleaded. “Facing the issue head on?”

“What the hell do you know?”

“Nothing . . .” he scoffed, “apparently.”

“OH, I’m sorry, dick! I’m sorry that my not talking constantly about a traumatizing event, that happened just half a year ago, which you bore eye-witness to, which I’ve been working tirelessly through, led you to believe that I was over it. Like nothing ever happened. How self-centered of me. Will you please, please accept my humble apology?!”

“You had no courage!”

“The fuck you say?!”

“All I’m saying is that you’re wasting your time with this female empowerment . . . orgasm crap, when you have a golden ticket to join the elites right in front of you, sitting, waiting on several hard drives for a massive cash in! The endgame’s all the same, but you wanna waste your time doing it the hard way—”

“I’m expanding people’s knowledge of—”

“—for your goddamn ego!”

“Fuck you, Jenko!”

“Oh quit your self-righteous bullshit already. Don’t tell me you can stand by and watch these celebrities getting raped left and right and not see the potential you had. What happened with Vincent was a godsend!”

“I. Was. Raped!”

“Yes! And I agree that it was bad, but Jenna, when you calm down and let me explain you’ll see the genius of it all!”

“When I calm down I’m gonna tear your fucking head off—because that’s my new baseline for calm! Jesus, I’m loosing my mind here!” Jenna swung open the pill cabinet and rummaged through several bottles until she came upon a small orange container that kept her prescription Ativan, “where’s my goddamn phone!”

“You can’t delete the tweet now, it’s too late.”

“I cant give two shits about the tweet right now,” she shook the bottle of pills, “grab your phone and check on something for me.”

“What do you need?”

“Search: how many Ativans I can take before overdosing.”

“Oh don’t tell me you’re gonna kill yourself over this!”

“No, fuckface, I said *before* overdosing. I’m having a panic attack!”

Jenko searched in his phone and came up with an answer, “you can’t overdose, it says here—just get brain damage.”

“Goddamn it, how many does it say I can take before that happens?”

“I don’t know!”

“Look some more then!” She placed two into her mouth as a start.

“I can’t find anything—just a bunch of articles about suicide prevention! How many do you usually take?”

“Two or three.”

“Uh, okay then, just take four then.”

“Fine.”

Jenko put his ear up to the door, “you doing alright in there?”

“The hell does it sound like?”

“I’ll give you some space.”

“Good answer.”

Jenko sat on his ass by the bathroom door, his laptop on his thighs, monitoring Jenna’s Twitter page, watching the number of followers rise before his eyes. The responses were still rolling in by the hundreds, everything ranging from undying support and love and prayers to *#itwasstaged*.

#nicemarketingbro

#shewasaskingforit

No splashing from the bathtub was heard for over ten minutes now. Jenko began to worry. Perhaps she took too many. Perhaps she might never be the same again. Perhaps the fruits of his labor were about to go to total waste. “*Jeennnnaa?*” he called out, gently tapping his knuckles on the bathroom door. He knocked several more times, now with his ear up against the door. He heard an extended sigh. A faint splash of water.

“I’m done for,” said Jenna.

“Babe . . .” Jenko pleaded, “. . . you’re a superstar.”

“Uhuh . . . what a blessing, now that nobody will ever work with me again.”

Mud and Dirt

Airplane mode was a philosophy Vincent applied to his everyday thinking to help him cope through the semester. Listening to *Handsfree* several times a week now, still unable to push himself to that point where he would consider purchasing any of Mistress Gabriella's premium content, was the reset switch he needed whenever intrusive thoughts and images invaded his psyche. The little gremlins shoving sticks into the cogs of the gears in his head. The ninja assassins infiltrating in the middle of the night when he is at his most vulnerable, asleep and in bed. This recording was the meditation people who never actually meditated told him would fix everything. The routine any healthy, organized person needed in their life. From the dozens of times he has listened to the recording, Vincent broke down, divided, and compartmentalized specific sections of the recording in his mind, using the memorized sound bytes to help ease his mind when a warm bed and his noise-canceling headphones were out of reach.

Without *airplane mode* there was no easing his mind. No relaxation. It began, for the first week, with cutting off all connection a few hours prior to listening to the recording, as the idea of receiving another text message from his unhelpful friends or his mother might throw him off. By the

time the semester was ending he couldn't be bothered to turn the signal back on for more than a few hours a week. When he did it was always the same old: friends who weren't taking a hint and a mother who wanted to plan a time to see her son.

The semester was over and, as per tradition, Vincent's family would insist that he visit them for dinner at least a few times before the next one began. Mainly because he wouldn't call his mother nearly as often as he should, but just as importantly so that they could interrogate him about his grades, as if to justify fronting all of their hard-earned money to put him through college. Perhaps this time, unlike the last dozens of times he's been over, try to get an idea of exactly what it was that he planned on doing once he grew up.

Construction on the I5 going north was endless. During each stop, every slowdown, and nearly every straightaway he thought to have memorized, Vincent couldn't help but to play with his phone, his thumb hovering over Mistress Gabriella's recording. He played a bit of *Handsfree.mp3*, scrolling past the boring bits, hoping to catch a sound clip where she would whisper words such as *arouse*, *throbbing*, *lips*, *wet or cock*, basking in the jolt of pleasure it would create.

The traffic had merged into a single lane now. Creeping past the construction crew at a little over ten miles per hour, Vincent determined it safe to get by with just the occasional glance at the car ahead.

Throbbing

Release

Submit to me

He backtracked, over and over again, tempted to scroll to the twenty-five minute mark where he would hear that one word she had programmed into his head, *waterfall*. Simply being reminded of what finally hearing that word made him feel sent droplets of precum to into his underwear. The word was right there—but he knew she

wouldn't want him to hear it. Not like this. Not without her permission, at least.

He went on, down to three miles an hour now, finding himself pumping on his brakes a little too often.

... waterpump

waterslide

water...

"Shit," Vincent yelled. Between fumbling the phone in one hand, and his erection in the other, he lost track of the road and jumped in fear when he heard a loud thud on the hood of his car. He looked up, eyes filled with terror, at the cop shaking his head at Vincent. With one arm still resting on the hood, he pointed with his other for Vincent pull off to the side of the road for a chat.

"Licence and registration, please."

"Yes-yeah," Vincent whimpered. His phone had fallen into the footwell, still playing Mistress Gabriella's recording through its small speakers. He kicked the phone around trying to somehow mute it, shove it underneath the the floormat, but was unsuccessful. He covered the phone with both feet and hoped that it would do. "I'm sorry, officer," he spoke loud enough to cover Mistress Gabriella's voice.

"I know you are, son." The officer's hand hovered over the open window, "if you're sorry. Then you know why I pulled you over then, don't you?"

"Yes," Vincent fumbled with his wallet for his license. "Yes, sir," he leaned across to the passenger side to retrieve the registration from the glove compartment, then handed both documents to the police officer.

"Thank you," he snatched them up. "You stay right there."

Vincent watched from his side mirror as the officer walked back to his cruiser and began typing something up in his laptop. Reaching down into the footwell, with his cheek

pressed up against the hot steering wheel, Vincent was able to retrieve his phone. In a brief moment of clarity, Vincent found the sense to tuck his erection up into his waistband before it could be seen protruding out the side of his shorts. The officer appeared in his mirror again, getting out of his cruiser and making his way back to Vincent. In one hand were the two documents he had handed the officer earlier; in the other, a blue slip. Vincent's head fell. He slapped himself on the face and kept his hand glued to his cheek as he shook his head side to side. Vincent made sure the officer was watching when he deliberately tossed the phone into the passenger side footwell.

A hand reached through his open window, handing Vincent's documents back to him. He reluctantly took them. His eyes kept fixated on the blue slip of paper.

"Vincent?" The officer asked.

"Yes, sir." He looked ashamed, despite knowing that it was too late to do him any good. "I *am* sorry."

"Are you aware of the seriousness with which the state of Oregon treats distracted driving?"

"No . . ." Vincent whispered, "I mean . . ." he looked up at the officer, only to see his guilty reflection stare back at him from the dark pair of aviators of the officer's face, "yes?"

"It's a very . . ." the officer lowered his sunglasses, revealing a piercing gaze, ". . . very serious offense." Noticing that Vincent was trying to catch a peek of his blue slip, he pressed it up against his uniform, pushed the sunglasses back into the bridge of his nose, and went on, "a first time citation," he paused, observing Vincent's reaction, "can cost you *up to* one-thousand dollars."

Vincent stared into the distance through his windshield. "Sir," he rubbed his trembling knees, "officer . . . I don't usually—"

"—usually?"

"I mean, I never—"

"I hope not," the officer straightened himself up, tucked his thumbs into his belt, and *tsked* his lips, "because a *second offense* can run you a hefty *two-thousand* dollars." He bent down to get a closer look at Vincent, waiting for him to reciprocate eye contact, then spoke, "can you guess what the *third offense* will cost *ya?*"

Vincent swallowed his saliva, "ten . . . thousand?"

"Ha!" The officer slapped the roof of the car, handing Vincent the blue slip of paper. "Let's just hope you don't have to find out then, huh?"

"No. No, sir," Vincent took the paper and turned it over, it was a \$220 citation. He gasped a sigh of relief, trying to form a smile, "Oh God." He ran his finger along the digits, double-checking that the decimal was in the right place, "thank you, officer. I'll never—"

"Oh," he chuckled, "I know you won't, son." He slapped the roof of the car again and watched Vincent straighten himself up. "And don't thank me. Just don't . . ." he said, leaning in.

Vincent nodded, then realized what was being asked of him. "Right. Don't ever do it again, I promise!"

"I'm gonna hold you to that," the officer flashed a grin and shot his index finger at Vincent, thumb up to the air. "Okay," he holstered his index finger into his belt and took his hand off the car, "alright now. That'll be all. Be good, alright?"

"Okay, sir." Vincent stuck his key into the ignition.

"Oh!" the officer, having made no more than a step back to his cruiser, spun around and took a long, hard look at Vincent. "What was that again, Vincent . . . your name?"

"Poole."

"Vincent *Poole?*"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh geez, *ooophhh*," the officer shook his head, "not a good time to be a *Vincent Poole* these days, I tell ya." Then before Vincent could respond, he officer escaped from his

line of sight.

“What do you mean?” Vincent leaned his head out of the window. “What happened?”

“Nevermind now,” the officer waved his hand back as he walked off, “be on your way now.” Standing in front of his cruiser, he waited for the dust to settle before opening his door and getting inside. Vincent, not knowing what to do with this new information, watched from his rear-view mirror as the officer fiddled with what looked like his phone in front of his face. Vincent watched for another minute as the officer poked at the screen several times, then slid his seat back, then readjusted his posture, leaning back. When the officer looked up to scan for his surroundings he noticed Vincent was still sitting in his car only twenty feet away. He put his phone away and waved haphazardly out of the window, indicating for Vincent to drive off. “Go,” he shouted, “and stay off that damn phone!”

Vincent looked over at his phone laying face down in the passenger seat, then reached over and pressed down on the little button on the side of the bezel, holding it until it buzzed and played the quick *power off* jingle. He pondered how common a name such as *Vincent Poole* must be before starting the car and merging back into traffic.

“Man . . .” Vincent said longingly while breaking apart his meatloaf into progressively smaller pieces, “you guys had it easy.” He tossed the fork into the mess of food he made and with both elbows up against the table rested his chin in his open hand.

“Uhuh,” his mother said from across the dinner table, “have we something to complain about, again?” She flashed a sincere smile at her son. The comforting look on her face made Vincent close up even more. “Don’t you kids complain about us boomers enough behind our backs?”

“We don’t . . .” Vincent said defensively, “. . . complain. We *discuss*. And it would be nice if for once we can talk

about something without treating me like a child who doesn't know what he's talking about."

"That's a complaint right there," his father intervened, then processed the food in his mouth before continuing, "any time we talk you just get worked up and upset, claiming that we're *condensating* you."

"It's *condescending*, Dad," Vincent scoffed, straightened himself up, then flashed a cocky grin at his father, as if he'd just won a small victory. "And you're not even using the word right," he added.

"Alright. *Fine*, smartass. One-nothing for the family genius," he said.

"What does *condensating* mean?" Asked Elias, his eight-year old brother.

"You mean *condescending*?!" Vincent corrected.

"Whichever," Elias shrugged his shoulders.

"Ughh," Vincent groaned.

His mother patted Elias on the head, then rubbed his soft blond hair into a mess, apologizing to her son and husband on the child's behalf with a bright, motherly smile. "Okay, hon, what did you want to *talk* about."

"I was saying," Vincent gathered the words in his head, "it's just not fair that—"

"*Not fair?*" the father interrupted, "sounds an awful lot like a complaint to me."

"Richard . . ." the mother said, carefully picking out the precise tone from her internal soundboard that the husband instantly recognize.

"Okay. Okay—here it is: it's the phone thing. Back in *your* day, you could talk on the phone in your car all you want and no one would bat an eye. Now you get caught even *checking*, *looking* at your screen for some new notification that pops up and you get slapped with a ten-thousand dollar fine. It's absurd."

"Son . . ." Richard stepped in, "what does this have to do with, back in *our* days. Back in our days we had no

cellphones in the car. I mean, the 80's came, some flagship sedans came with with built-in phone systems, but no one I knew could afford a car like that. Back in *our* days, hah!"

"No," Vincent pleaded, "like, later. I don't know—ten years ago? You would always talk while driving and nothing ever happened and now it's a worse offense than drunk driving!"

"Vincent, if you hadn't waited until your mid-twenties to get your driving license, then you too could've lived out these," Richard snickered, "*glory days*, of talking on your phone while driving. Hell, I could say the same thing for driving drunk . . ."

"Richard!" the mother shook her head disapprovingly.

"No, listen, I can't say there weren't nights when the boys and I wished that we didn't have to stress over getting caught driving ourselves home after a bender. I mean—the stress wasn't helping to focus when—"

"Richard!"

"What your father is saying . . ." the mother collected her thoughts, "is that there is always something to miss from a time you didn't exist—"

"Oh, come on," Vincent whined, "they *always* say that. You can't just end an argument because *that's just how things are!*"

"But they are," Richard said, "all it takes is a few to ruin it for everyone. I'm sure I blamed someone for drinking and driving becoming illegal. Somebody my dad's age, probably. You blame me for not being able to talk on your phone. Someone will blame *your generation* for . . . I don't know—making . . . *Fun* . . . illegal!"

"Oh *whatever*," Vincent scoffed, then added, "*boomer!* Why don't you go screw up the housing market some more!"

"Hey, you complain now . . ." the father scanned the room, looking at his wife apologetically, as if aware of the reaction he'd get from saying the words, "you wait us out

long enough and you'll inherit this house without having to lift a finger."

"Dad . . ."

"Yeah, yeah . . ." he went on, "just go for your masters . . . then the doctorate . . . give it another ten, twenty years of being a professional student and then you'll have all your dreams come true. A house to live in—perhaps even, dare I say, a job?"

"What do *I* get?" Elias asked.

"You *both* get the house," the mother added.

"But I don't wanna live with Vincent—grown-ups don't live with their brothers!"

"Then the both of you can sell the house buy your own."

"Uhuh," Vincent said suspiciously, "by that time, the prices will—"

"Hey!" the father interrupted, smiled and said sarcastically, "not our problem," he turned to his wife, "right, Mar, Hon?"

"Mhhmmm."

Elias started down at his plate, pouting. He looked up at Vincent and said, "Vincent's going to be able to buy all the houses he wants. Vincent is famous!"

"Huh?" Everyone said.

"Vincent is all over the internet, mum."

"What are you talking about?" Richard asked, looking at Elias, then at Vincent.

"I have no idea," Vincent said. He processed everything he's done in the past little while, trying to come up with anything that would fit the accusation. "I . . . don't know." He looked around the room some more, hoping to satiate everyone's curiosity, especially his own. "Must be my class project for the finals last year. They record all of our presentations for the school archives. Machine learning with Python. Scraped data from across the internet, social media platforms and the sort, using most commonly used phrases,

topics, people, outputting a play-by-play outline of a story script most relevant to the day, month, year, based on popularity.”

“That sounds neat, hon!” Mar said proudly.

“Must’ve come up with something interesting then, no?” Asked the father.

“I don’t know . . .” Vincent hesitated.

“Well, what’d you get, son?”

“It was . . .”

“Come on, Vincent,” his mother pleaded, “you know how proud of you we are.”

“It was . . . porn. It just made porn out of everything.”

“Booger!” Vincent shouted, breaking into a full sprint down the gravel path, leaving his little brother in the trail of dust. The dog had at least eighty feet on Vincent before he made chase. Trampling past a pair of joggers, Booger took a hard right into a thick brush of Oregon Boxwood before disappearing into the forest, occasionally revealing his excited tail, sticking out like a periscope, as it maneuvered the sea of fallen trees covered in moss. Vincent took no time before jumping into the bush after the dog, then swore between breaths as he brushed a swarm of insects and spiderwebs off his hair and shoulders. His feet caught the muddy stream of water, then slipped as he vaulted over the grassy ascent on the way to the forest.

“Booger!” He shouted again, stopping atop a fallen tree. While regaining his breath, Vincent scanned the horizon for any signs of the runaway.

“Booger, booger!” His little brother’s voice echoed the words back to Vincent. “I’m coming, Vincent!” Elias shouted from the safe side of the brush.

“Just stay there!” Vincent said from his vantage point, trying to keep focus on what he thought was rustling in the bushes about a hundred feet up ahead. He signaled for his brother to remain where he was. After plotting out a safe

path, Vincent jumped back down onto the broken twig and mud-covered dirt and navigated the sea of logs on his path to retrieve Booger. “Booger!”

“Vincent!”

“Eli?!”

With his shoes covered in mud and his shins pink with scrapes, Eli now rode on Vincent’s shoulders as they trekked through the forest, looking for anything resembling a trail. While supposed to be on the lookout, Eli continuously became distracted by the tree branches just out of his reach and would lunge upwards in hopes of swatting them, messing up Vincent’s balance and nearly toppling the two of them over. After what felt like the hundredth time of hearing Vincent call out for Booger, Eli asked, “why do you think he ran away from us?”

“He didn’t *run* away,” said Vincent, grabbing a firm hold of his brother’s ankle before straddling another log as he went over it, “must’ve spotted a squirrel and chased after it.”

“Why do dogs chase squirrels?”

“Because it’s a lot of fun . . .” Vincent stopped to think, “and dogs love fun.”

“What’s Booger gonna do once he catches the squirrel?”

“Oh, don’t worry—he won’t,” Vincent reached a thumbs up over his head toward Elias.

“But what if it was another dog?”

“Not that dog either.”

“So dogs never catch the squirrel?”

“Never.”

“Never ever?”

“Never never-evernever-never.” Vincent laughed.

“Neverly-everly never never ever ever . . . ?”

The forested area opened up to a grassy clearing. Elias had done no good as tower watchman, it was clear to Vincent, as for the last ten minutes all he could get from his little

brother was gentle drumming atop his head that played in sync with his footsteps and some noise about how his eyelids must be dysfunctional because he could still see light despite them being closed.

“Hey, Vincent?” Eli asked, with his eyes open now, staring at the top of Vincent’s head, “is it weird that my penis is touching the back of your head?”

“It wasn’t . . .” Vincent sighed.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Vincent squeezed Elias’ ankles and trudged onward, trekking along the forest line, hoping to catch a glimpse of any sort of activity. “It’s not weird, Eli, it’s fine.”

“Okay.” Elias continued his drumming for another minute, then stopped again, looked down at his shorts, and asked, “hey, Vincent?”

“Yup?”

“Do you think I’m gay?”

“Eli?” Vincent stopped to think of an answer that wasn’t the first thing that came to his mind, “why do you think you’re gay?”

“Nooo, Vincent,” Elias whined, “I *already* think I might be gay—I want to know if you think it, too!”

“Well, Eli—to be honest, I never thought about it. How about this . . .” Vincent knelt down and signaled for Elias to dismount, “you alright to use your own feet for a little while?”

“Fine,” Elias picked up pace as Vincent went on.

“Okay,” Vincent continued, “how about this—you tell me why you think you’re gay, then I tell you what I think of *that*, alright?”

“Fine,” Elias worked up his courage, then said, “so I was playing on a porn website on my iPad—”

“You what?” Vincent stopped.

“Please don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad, Eli. Just confused—how do you know about porn?”

"Oh, some older kids were talking about it at school."

"*How* old?" Vincent asked, suspiciously.

"Oh, *much* older," Elias assured him, "they were eleven year-olds."

"Oh, man," Vincent shook his head, then fell into a brief daze, trying to remember if it was before, or after when he got his first erection, that he began to find an interest in porn. Even at his age it already began to blur into an incomprehensible mess of random flashes of memories with no clear ends, beginnings, or their places in the timeline he was attempting to reconstruct. His own parents, he thought, must be deluding themselves into thinking they didn't see porn until they were old enough to rent VHS tapes from the local sex stores. "Just be careful with the internet. Okay, Eli?"

"Okay."

"So why do you think you're gay then?"

"I clicked on a video of two men doing it."

"Accidentally?"

"I forget." Elias shrugged.

"Did you watch it?"

"Some of it. I thought they looked cool because of their muscles and I liked the kissing parts because I like how kissing looks but when they started putting each other's penises in their mouths I thought it was kinda weird so I stopped watching."

"That's good that you stopped watching, Eli, but you shouldn't be watching anything on those kinds of websites just yet, okay?"

"Okay," Elias brushed him off, "but then after watching that video I showed it to Billy who also likes kissing but he also thought that the parts with the penises were weird. But then we wanted to know what it felt like, so—"

"You kissed Billy?"

"Ew!" Elias scrunched his face, "no! We like kissing girls, Vincent!"

“Okay!” Vincent retreated, “sorry, Eli.”

“We just played with each other’s penises at his house once, you know—to see what it felt like. Flicked them around a bunch and stuff.”

“Uh, and?”

“I dunno. It was like mine, but different.”

“Right.”

“So am I gay?”

“Eli,” Vincent knelt down in front of his little brother, grabbed him by the shoulders, and looked into his eyes, “you’ll figure it out, okay?”

“Okie.”

“Let’s keep walking, huh?”

“Yuppers.”

“You’re smarter than mom and dad,” Elias broke the silence as they came around the corner of the patch of forest. The exit to the hiking trail was in their sights now. “They might be telepathetic, but you know more.”

“*Telepathic*,” Vincent said, “and why do you say that?”

“Because they always talk just by looking at each other from across the room, which is super cool, but you have the answers to everything. I wish . . .” Elias looked up at Vincent, his lips fought a frown, “. . . I wish you’d come by more often.” He preemptively wiped a tear from his cheek.

Vincent grabbed Elias by the head and pushed it into his chest. “Eli, I’m sorry. I wish I would, too. Mom and dad *are* smart. And they’re not telepathic—they just learned to talk and interact with one another without using words—because they know each other so well. It’s just love.”

“But they don’t talk to me without words,” Elias grabbed his brother’s hand; Vincent squeezed back, “do they love *me*?”

“Eli! Of course they love you,” Vincent paused, “they’re just waiting for your telepathy to develop!”

“I thought you said they weren’t telepathetic!”

Vincent peeled Elias' face away from his chest and looked at him mischievously, before pulling his hand out from behind his back, revealing his index finger crossed over his middle, "I lied!"

"Vincent!"

"Sorry, Eli," Vincent smirked, "you should've caught it."

"Not fair!" Elias whined.

"Yes, it was," Vincent grabbed his brother's little hand and led him onto the trail, "come on, Booger's gotta be around here somewhere . . ."

"OR . . ." Elias stated, ". . . he's already home!"

"Or that."

"Vincent?"

"Eli?"

"Did *you* love that girl in that video?"

"What . . . video, Eli?"

"The one on the website on my iPad?"

Waterfalls

Dear Jenna Moone,

This is Vincent Poole.

I guess you would've gotten that from seeing my e-mail address, or from the signature at the end of this letter but I guess I wanted to put that front and center in case you would miss it and leave it in the unread pile. I guess all of your inboxes must be pretty full at this point. I don't want to take any chances and want to send this letter in every format I can think of. I guess I'm over-thinking this thing, huh? Maybe under-thinking it. I don't know what to say or what words to use. The idea that it's too late to apologize haunts me. Now more than ever. But I guess this isn't supposed to be about how I feel, is it? Damn it, it's as if I have to begin this thing in the middle of a sentence. Hit the ground running. I can take a guess as to how you feel. How I made you feel. It's like navigating a minefield. Everything I want to say feels wrong and I know it'll never be enough. And again, it circles back to me. Even starting this letter with something simple as 'I'm sorry' feels like self-serving procrastination. I just need to jump into it and get it over with . . . but for your sake, of course. How DO you feel? You've been silent on social media since the reveal, I have nothing to work with

Vincent finished the last half of his beer in one long gulp

while his eyes remained glued to the computer screen. His phone remained shut off since the first few minutes of making the drive back from his parent's home. The noises it made were unbearable to hear. He could imagine the messages his friends were sending, cringing at the incomprehensible mess of reluctant disappointment and backwards congratulations that he really, really did it. He didn't care to hear that his friends were glad he didn't lie to them about his adventures in Florida. When he looked at his phone he imagined a string of voice messages from his mother, her confused tone as she dictated her train of thought regarding the situation with each progressive call.

He wasn't just apologizing to Jenna Moone now, it seemed, as his eyes stared at each letter of every word written on the screen, unable to focus on any single one at a time. He was now apologizing to everyone he knew. Apparently, everyone was hurt, and for a reason he couldn't completely comprehend. The only thing he understood, though, was that he had no right to disagree, let alone give in to the faintest idea that maybe it was just a little unfair that everyone had to somehow gotten themselves involved in *his* big mistake.

Vincent had been living on his couch in his underwear for the last three days, afraid to open the window. Afraid to take a shower, as he was sure he was on the brink of collapsing from stress and was bound to hurt himself somehow. He had been ordering take out under a pseudonym, making sure to not order from a place he's ordered from before, should someone recognize him. Paying cash only to hide his name from a potential attacker. The internet had claimed *#justiceforjenna*, but it also called for *#poolesclosed*. The implication was vague and, for the most part, the world would decide for itself what it meant. What a big world it was. Occasionally, peeking through the blinds of his fourth-story apartment, he would spot a mob of people he couldn't recognize. It was a matter of time before

all of his personal information went public for anyone to decide to do with it what they felt was an appropriate punishment.

Something was imminent. So many thoughts as to what could come next, Vincent had worked himself up to a point where no thought could even be put into words, let alone pictures. His reality was an abstraction. The words on his screen resembled that jumbled mess in his head. They were shapes or images or ideas or nothing, and the closer that he approached to the idea that they had to mean everything, the further his consciousness seemed to distance itself.

It was without a second thought, or a third or a fourth, that his index finger struck the backspace key, holding it there while the written message to Jenna completely disappeared. With every word that vanished from his screen Vincent felt as if the boulder on his back was slowly being chipped off piece by piece; with every shot of vodka he would recall a random sound byte of Mistress Gabriella's recording.

Vincent would take frequent breaks from checking on every form of social media and his emails to learn more about this voice guiding his hand to Mistress Gabriella's website. He was particularly fixated on the *self-help* category. Trying his best to be cautious in such trying times, he would occasionally do a few searches online to verify that there was not anything shady or mischievous about the operation this woman was running. Combining her name along with words such as *scam*, *fake*, *money* and *real*, brought up no results that would have him believe there was anything to worry about. He then added more words: *good*, *works*, *satisfaction*, *results*. Things were looking more optimistic. Although unverifiable, tens, hundreds, maybe even thousands of strangers online praised her work. Showed immense gratitude. They were real. They had to be. It took less than an hour of reading reviews before he caved in and began punching the numbers of his credit card into the purchase form. He would start

with the highest-rated recordings, and depending on how well that would go, he would work his way down.

On day three he spotted his mother outside of his building, yelling at his window from across the street, claiming that the manager would not let her in. He did not want to answer her. In last few minutes of *The Perfect You*, Mistress Gabriella had insisted that if Vincent were to remain in the blissful state he found himself he would need to learn how to shut the bad energy out.

Later that day Vincent would get his hard-earned reward via an immersive, interactive session titled *Private Dancer*.

On day four he received the first passive-aggressive note from his manager insisting that Vincent take better care when arranging for guests to come over, as the neighbors were complaining about an older woman and a group of young men calling out for him in all hours of the day.

Again, in the *self-help* section, Vincent was curious about the title *It's Okay to Make Mistakes*. When he went to pay for it he received a notification informing him of a limited time deal—any three recordings for a discounted price of \$99.99. The other two he picked were called *Penis Motivation* and *Girls Are Nice, But a Mistress is Better*.

On day five Vincent received another complaint from his building manager: something about his mailbox being too full and the fees associated with dealing with it.

Vincent had begun drinking more water, as Mistress Gabriella was running him dry. He exercised for the first time since he can remember—an unimpressive twenty-nine push-ups, fifty-four sit-ups, and however many lunges it took to walk from the bathroom to the kitchen and back several times before the afternoon. The night before, during the third or fourth masturbation session, Vincent had found it difficult to maintain a strong erection, despite Mistress Gabriella's insistence, so he attributed it too a lack of good blood flow due to the immobility his situation had condemned him to.

On day six Vincent woke up feeling well and refreshed, which he then expressed in words that morning to himself in the mirror. The news were the same headlines. The same opinion pieces from ad-driven independent publications. The same clickbait. The same hashtags. A handful of new recordings were added to his playlist. He began to organize them into folders on his phone. *You Matter. Bimbo Slut Party*, parts 1, 2, and 3. *In a Woman's Shoes*, for a little bit of his due diligence.

On day seven the media attention was diverted to discussing and dissecting a tweet from the President of the United States of America. It read: *bright young man with a big future. Life ruined with such accusations. SHAME*. Vincent felt a peculiar sense of pride when he witnessed the news, as if somebody had just complimented him on what a nice, clean carpet he had after that same person had just shat on it right in front of him a moment ago.

That day Vincent learned that his thesis project had also been making the rounds. Some people were using the information to fight his fight for him. Others used it as fuel for their fire, claiming that his obsession with porn, as shown by the results of his program, was an indication of his character. Some articles sprinkled broad statements that elevated Vincent's situation into the bigger picture of something that was wrong with society that made sense as long as it wasn't thought about too hard.

On day eight or nine or ten Vincent's ex-girlfriend was interviewed by several local news agencies, independent journalists, and social media influencers. She spoke of Vincent as being a nice guy who would never cheat on or abuse her, sexually or otherwise. Although she did allude to the idea that he may have been repressed sexually. She didn't exactly speak clearly or concisely when the questions pertained to the more intimate parts of their relationship.

Vincent finally opened the front door to his manager's incessant knocking and was met with a pile of mail that

couldn't fit it into his mailbox. Among them were a few larger packages of varying sizes. Vincent asked if the manager had the bomb squad first look through them before bringing them up. The manager was not amused and left shortly.

One package contained a Tupperware container filled to the brim with about three pounds of human feces. Taped to the lid was a receipt from the night before for a dinner of six at a Mexican restaurant.

The second had a plastic bag stuffed with used tampons. Double bagged. It came along with a note that had a single word scribbled on it: *SCUMBAG*.

With the collar of his t-shirt pulled over his nose, Vincent reluctantly opened the third package. It confused him much more than the other two. In it was a plastic crown, spray painted in gold, with a large plastic purple stone embedded into the crest. On the inside of the crown there were about half a dozen signatures scribbled in black marker. Vincent further searched the box and found a note taped to the inner flap. It read:

Come downstairs. We need you.

—CWC

ps. Bring the crown.

By that point Vincent had forgotten when the last time he looked outside his window had been. He carefully opened a slit in his blinds, first checking for snipers, before creating a bigger opening where he saw that the street below was mostly empty aside from a pair of twenty-somethings sitting on a park bench. When he caught sight of their gaze Vincent panicked and retreated into his room. There were more recordings to listen to.

By the second week the couch had become his permanent living space. The bedroom was where he would keep all the trash as he was too afraid to walk down to the dumpster. Mistress Gabriella had him working overtime, and he was now drinking over a gallon a day of water just to

keep up.

At that point he was almost completely done with the self-help genre; the fantasy-themed recordings kept him busy for a while, but Mistress Gabriella was willing to offer much, much more.

Prostate Massage was next on the list. After that there was *Like Your Own Taste?* Then came *Love Your Own Taste*. Vincent learned that keeping his shirt off and having a silicone spatula nearby helped. *Sissy Boy*. *Slut Training*. *Tranny Therapist*. *Tranny Nurse*. *Tranny Mommy*. He didn't care at that point to go for the three-for-\$99.00 deal, as he was buying the *collection* packages for an even better deal.

Soon another package arrived. It was a box about the size of a dishwasher. Almost completely weightless. In it was nothing but a letter-sized note. The top half of the page had a drawing on it of an arrangement of eight lines shooting outward from a cross in the center. Underneath the drawing a message read:

(it means ally)

—CWC

Vincent checked the blinds again; the two young men were found in the same spot as always. Sometime that month Vincent had decided to finally come down.

Group Therapy

"A Godsend, Vincent. That's what you are." The voice sounded strange to Vincent, as if the owner of it was attempting to mimic an American accent, but couldn't decide on a specific region of where it came from. They were nearly seven hours into what was estimated to be a nineteen-hour-long journey to Boulder, Colorado. While crossing the state border into Idaho via the 84 Vincent had awoken from what felt like the third nap of the evening, feeling both relief from the warm, welcoming demeanor from the two young men sitting up front, and a sneaking suspicion that the next time he would wake up from a nap he would find himself hanging from a large cross with his hands and feet nailed to the posts. "A Godsend. Goddamn!" Tam spoke again, more excitedly now as he watched Vincent rise up and show his face in the rear-view mirror. "I don't mean that literally, obviously, since God is a superstition."

"He was being ironic," the other young man, Jeremy, said from the passenger seat. "Since religion is a joke—so that when he makes a claim that you were sent here by God himself it's supposed to be a play on the, the . . . I don't know, it's irony."

"No, no," Vincent said as he yawned, pressing the palms of his hands up against the roof of the car, arching his back

towards the front, "I get it, guys."

"It's kind of like how in the ancient times," Tam went on, his drowsy eyes watching the road, "when the people would believe in whatever kinds of mythologies. Like when some king of an empire would claim that the one who sits on the throne was chosen by the Gods, and should someone question them they would face fury and what not of a scale the minions could not imagine?"

"People don't know these sorts of things anymore these days," Jeremy added.

"Right," Vincent passably agreed.

"There *is* no God, Vincent."

"Okay . . ." Vincent said.

"But, it seems that someone, something out there was gracious enough to send us a king."

They stopped in a motel near Caldwell for the night. Tam and Jeremy, having driven over fifteen-hundred miles in the last three days, were eager to get to bed. Vincent had taken one of the two twin beds. Tam, having been the driver for the day, took the other one. Jeremy found a folded-up cot in the closet and wheeled it in between the two beds.

Earlier in the night, the boys had treated Vincent to the finest egg salad sandwiches the gas stations on the side of the highway carried, along with however many Red Bulls he wished to drink. Two would do it, he figured. One to help digest the sandwich. The other to help stay awake the longest, as he was still waiting for some sense of rationality to awake inside of him and convince him of what a terrible idea this whole thing was. He would then perhaps consider an escape attempt and find his own way back home.

They all went to bed with little conversation. Hours passed and Vincent was still watching the patterns in the ceiling made by years of cigarette smoke, listening to the endless barrage of trailer trucks fly past the motel. The Red

Bulls gurgled in his belly. Tam snored; Jeremy didn't do a good job hiding the fact that he was watching Vincent from the corner of his eyes. There was a look of admiration on his face, and when he saw that Vincent caught him looking at him he couldn't help it and finally spoke, "what was it like?" He turned over to check that Tam hadn't heard him, then looked back again at Vincent.

"Was what *like*?" asked Vincent.

"Aw shit. No-no—don't tell me. It wouldn't be fair. Good night, Vincent."

"Good night."

"Still can't sleep?" It must've been about four in the morning when Jeremy spoke out to Vincent again.

"Yeah," Vincent draped his hands over his eyes, then his mouth, then spoke through the cracks between his fingers, "all those Red Bulls—my stomach's going crazy."

"I've got something that can help."

"I'd rather not take drugs," said Vincent, suspiciously, should he still change his mind about this new adventure.

"Okay."

"Okay," Vincent said, "good night."

Vincent spent another hour watching Jeremy until he was sure that he was finally asleep. Making as little noise as possible, Vincent took his headphones from the bedside table and slipped them over his head. He lowered himself deeper into the bedsheets and swatted the long cord off his skin, then searched through various folders on his phone before finding what he was looking for. With the flick of a button all sounds of traffic and snoring and random chatter of the night owls disappeared. Vincent took a final glance around the room to make sure that he would remain undisturbed. He hit *play* on a file named *Strong Boy, Sleepy Boy* and finally relaxed into Mistress Gabriella's soothing lullaby.

They arrived at half past midnight to a darkly lit single-story

home. Their Chevrolet Express Van fit snugly between a 90s Plymouth minivan and a rickety Ford Bronco. Vincent was reaching for the door handle to get out when Tam signaled for him to sit tight, then typed something into his phone and waited for it to make a noise. Jeremy anxiously scratched at the tops of his kneecaps, looking over at Tam for an update. A few minutes passed before all the lights in the house went dark. One by one, a series of soft, fluttering lights emerged from behind the window shades. Tam's phone made that sound everyone was waiting for. The time had come.

The two young men led Vincent to the front door of the house, walking behind him as they took turns dictating redundant instructions such as *down the walkway, up the steps, door handle—there.*

"Now go inside, to the right there."

Vincent thought he had exhausted all of his ideas as to how this, whatever it was, might go down. He added *human sacrifice* to the list when he witnessed an arrangement of dining chairs surrounding a computer chair rotating eerily in the center. It wasn't until when the chair opened up to face him that Vincent realized that the chair was empty. A slowly rotating chair was always menacing, he felt. Along the windowsill to his right, the chimney directly behind all the chairs, on the kitchen countertop to the left, sat arrays of tea lights. In their soft, unsteady flicker Vincent could barely make out the faces of the other five men sitting in the chairs. Their varied shapes and sizes filled in all the seats except for the two around the circle and the vacant computer chair. Their hands rested atop their thighs. Knees together. The man sitting closest to the chimney stood up and offered Vincent the seat in the center. As he looked around the room, signaling for the other guests to welcome Vincent inside, he spotted that one of the men had a dollar-store bought golden mask covering his face, then said to him under his breath, "Chris!"

“What, man?” Chris said, avoiding looking in the direction of the accusatory tone.

“The goddamn mask, we decided to scrap that!” someone said.

“I didn’t want to throw mine out, I like it.” Chris said.

“I didn’t say you had to throw it out!”

“But I want to wear it anyways.”

“Chris!”

“What if he doesn’t like us, I don’t want him to know who I was.”

“Literally nobody knows who you are . . .”

Vincent had stayed in the hallway leading up to the living room while the situation sorted itself out, looking back at Tam and Jeremy for guidance, only to be met with an unhelpful shrug. When the argument died down Tam and Jeremy squeezed past Vincent and entered the room, where they received a quick thanks from the man standing and found their seats. Vincent observed the man in the mask, the sinister-looking lighting on what he assumed was the cult leader’s face, the half-dozen other desperate faces watching him with their heavy breathing, and that one weird skinny kid who kept reaching over to the swiveling chair in the center, pushing at the arm rest to keep it spinning. “Uh-uh. Nope . . .” Vincent said to himself while shaking his head side to side, backing out through the hallway, then through the front door, down the steps, across the walkway, before picking up pace in the direction he thought to be downtown of Boulder.

“Vincent!” He heard a voice call out for him.

“I said . . .” Vincent yelled back at the window from across the street as he ran, “*NUH-UH!*”

Vincent made it about about seven blocks through the unfamiliar suburbs before coming to realize that his wallet was still in the van they drove in on. He considered every possible irrational option of getting himself home, ranging

from hitchhiking back to Portland, to more desperate solutions like robbing a corner store of its liquor, drinking until he was blackout drunk, and hoping that by the time he would awaken that he would somehow find himself in the comfort of his own couch. Hell, even his parents' couch would suffice. When his anxiety subsided and he regained whatever composure he thought he could scrape from the bottom of his fragile psyche, he deemed it safe to simply walk over to the van, possibly deal with a few minutes of awkwardness should he run into any of the men back at the house, explain to them what happened and be happily on his way again.

On his way back to the van he made it no further than a few blocks before he noticed a pair of headlights approach from ahead. He was spotted. He panicked. He looked for a street sign indicating a speed limit to assess whether this van was speeding toward him or simply inducing a sense of futility that amplified his stress to the point where it may have just been time to give in and die. Vincent wasn't sure if the van was slowing down or simply taking its aim when he took a last-minute dive off the side of the road, taking no notice of the wooden fence right beside him and slamming head-first into it. He fell to the grass, massaging the side of his head as the lights slowed down.

The van stopped right beside him. The passenger side window opened, from it a hand reached out and presented Vincent's wallet. A voice which sounded similar to that of the man by the chimney spoke, "was it the mask?"

Vincent stared up at the van, glossy eyed, feeling for wounds on his head. Unable to find his words, he threw his hands up in a manner that expressed *what do you want from me?*

"Chris is a moron. He's autistic—and I mean that in the derogatory sense. I should've kept a better eye on him." He waved the wallet at Vincent, who after a few moments of hesitation stood up and took it.

“How . . . weird are you guys?” Vincent asked.

“Honestly?” The man spoke through his teeth. “We’re a bunch of fucking degenerates.”

“Oh, good.” Vincent scoffed.

“But we’re harmless—we’re all just trying to get better.”

Vincent checked through his wallet; everything was where it belonged. “Okay. But you need to tone it down. No creepy candlelights.”

“Copy that.”

“And no masks,” Vincent said sternly.

“No masks.”

“Colton, by the way,” he reached his hand out to Vincent while peeking around the corner of the entry hallway into the living room, ensuring everything was back to normal before granting Vincent safe passage into the house.

“Nice to meet you.” Vincent shook Colton’s bony hand and awaited patiently.

“Hey, Chris!” Colton shouted toward the living room.

“Yeah! Yeah—it’s gone.” Chris shouted back.

“Guys, can you check on him?” Colton asked the group.

“It’s still under his seat,” a stale voice answered.

“Goddamn it,” Chris complained, “here . . .”

“Okay, I got it!” The stale voice said.

“Vincent,” said Colton, turning to Vincent, “come inside. You can take a seat—I’m sure you can guess which one.”

“Sure,” Vincent made his way through, “yeah.” Upon entering the living room Vincent breathed a sigh of relief at being able to see everyone’s faces in clear detail. The looks on the young men’s faces were much more reserved now, most of them avoiding any sort of eye contact with Vincent as he squeezed between the other chairs, making his way to the center of the circle. He set himself down in the rotating computer chair, using his foot to propel himself into a slow spin as he observed every person in the room, checking

their hands for any syringes or chloroform-soaked rags. The coast was clear. The bearings in the chair let out a dull squeak as the rotating came to a halt.

Everybody was in their seats now. Unable to take the awkward tension himself, Colton stood up and pulled out a small stack of presentation cards out from his back pocket and sifted through them. “Vincent Poole,” he began, “on behalf of the CWC, I formally invite you to join us in—*guys!*” Colton checked through the stack of cards again, seemingly unable to find what he was looking for. “This is the invitation speech, he’s already here, who’s got the welcome speech?” He looked around the room for an answer but received only an exchange of looks that blamed everyone else in the room. “Vincent, I’m sorry. You already heard this one.”

“What do you mean?” Asked Vincent.

“Didn’t you watch the video we sent you?”

Vincent shook his head.

“In your e-mail?” Asked Colton. One of the young men approached Colton from the side, tapped him on the shoulder discretely, and handed him another stack of cards. “Thanks, Mason.”

“Oh, I wasn’t really checking my—” Vincent spoke.

“Told you!” Jeremy said from across the room.

“Alright, alright—it was worth a shot.” Colton tossed the old stack of cards aside and sifted through the new ones. He cleared his throat. “Vincent Poole,” he began, “on behalf of the CWC, I want to formally welcome you into our ever-expanding community. We, the CWC, have been around many years now, a scattered online community of like-minded gentlemen looking to discuss important issues and pursue interests which are generally frowned-upon by society. For years now, I think we can all collectively agree, we have strived to find meaning, a real purpose to our endless stream of chatter. It wasn’t until you came along and made such an impact on the community that we came to

realize that despite all of our talking nonsense we were voiceless. That as long as we remained behind our computer screens we were faceless. That without a clear leadership, we were powerless. That despite all of our calls to action we had no end goal, nothing to achieve.

“Vincent, before you appeared we never would’ve even thought to meet each other in person. Now, after less than two weeks of meet-ups, we can almost call each other friends. Vincent, we need your help and we need your guidance. When we saw how you stood so strong against the rabid witch-hunt out for your head we were truly inspired. Your silence spoke in volumes to people like us. People who have been cast out to the fringes of society for wanting to live their lives in a manner they feel is right!

“Vincent, will you help us?”

“Uh, with what, exactly?”

“With helping us heal.” The men took turns speaking, as if it were recited.

“With helping us cope.”

“With helping us accept that we did nothing wrong.”

“With helping us to stop feeling guilty about the things we think and talk about.”

“Vincent, we know you did nothing wrong!”

“You mean with—” Vincent said.

“Jenna Moone, yes!”

“But I—”

“Think carefully now.” Colton interrupted, “had you been another one of those mindless sheep you would’ve released an apology letter, a public statement, writing things you probably didn’t mean. And when that wasn’t enough, they would’ve demanded a video of you spilling your guts out admitting more of the same. And when that wasn’t enough . . . more videos . . . more letters . . . more of these heartless animals profiting off your pain . . . repeat, rinse . . . and so on. Think, Vincent, think really hard, because I know—and we saw—that you *know* what you did, and aren’t

ashamed of any bit of it.”

“You did good, Vincent.”

“You’re the man, Vincent.”

“You were just doing what was being asked of you. That bitch can’t change her mind about what happened after the fact.”

“I mean, I wasn’t trying to do it . . . like that.” Vincent explained, “the guy with the camera kept yelling at me like: *SHOW HER THE BEAST*, and shit like that. Something just snapped, I don’t know.”

“Right—so you were just doing what you were told.”

“I guess so, but . . .”

“You’re saying this person who fucks guys for a living didn’t know what can come of this? Like It hasn’t happened before? Like usually they wouldn’t take precautions for that exact sort of situation? Why do you think they chose you, Vincent? Why do you think that it’s *always* guys like us? Something feels off, no?”

“Something, I guess. I don’t know what, though. This feels like a bit much, though. Everyone was really nice there, you know? It wasn’t just—”

“How many more videos like that are out there, you think? *Imagine* how much more money that bitch has been making from her interviews. From her premium content—you’re gonna tell me that *wasn’t* planned? You think you’re the only *beast*?”

“I don’t know, guys.”

“Just know this, Vincent—not all beasts are monsters.”

“Alright.” Vincent said, sinking into his chair.

“Alright?” Colton walked up to Vincent and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Vincent said under his breath.

“Vincent, we welcome you to the Cunt Worship Committee.”

“Cunt *Worship* Committee?” Vincent asked no one in

particular.

"It's meant to be ironic, Vincent," Tam shoved himself into the conversation. "We don't actually worship cunts, if anything, with all the trouble and hardships it causes us, you can almost say that we avoid them at all costs. But it's always about the cunt, Vincent. Even abstaining from it has the connotation that the cunt is still a part of the conversation, thus, abstaining from it leaves a void that must forever be filled. There's no way around it, and that's a drag, so we just roll with it, you know?" Tam took a second to catch his breath, "it's ironic because, in one way or another, women have completely ruined our lives. This is why you belong here."

"Tam's a wannabe writer," Colton rotated the chair away from Tam towards himself. "He *insisted* on coming up with the name.

"*Whore. Bitch. Slut . . .*" Tam continued, walking around the chair, pressing himself up to Colton's shoulder, ". . . *Pussy Worship Committee*—all sounded like half-measures. Irony is hard to pick up on. If you don't go *all* the way people might misinterpret it and it'll just sound misogynistic. *This* gets their attention."

"Whose?" Vincent asked.

"Whoever will listen," Colton added.

"Whenever . . ." Tam said, "but throwing *cunts* around will help get attention, at least."

"And in the meantime?" Vincent asked. "Excuse me," Vincent attempted to get up from the chair as the two men hovering over him was feeling suffocating. "I'm just gonna . . ." he pushed his chair back, sliding into the chimney, then stood up and took a deep breath. Observing his environment, one by one, Vincent began to pick up on the various looks of desperation on all the boys' faces. All eyes on him, looking up now. Some mouth-breathers. Some with nervous ticks, scratching at their knees or picking at their acne. Some scrawny, with defined cheekbones, but not in

the attractive sense. Some dead-faced with not a hint of life in their eyes. Colton, the only one seemingly in control of his desperation, nodded at Vincent, as if sending a secret message. Vincent understood it. "Is this . . ." he spoke abruptly, "... am I supposed to be a messiah-sort-of-thing?"

"What?" Tam broke out, "no. Have I not made it clear that God does not exist?"

"Yeah . . . yeah," Vincent said, "you did." Vincent couldn't find the right words. "I don't know what you expect me to do . . ."

"You'll figure it out," said Colton. "All we know is that we need you, now more than ever. *And* not just us—there are thousands more. Thousands who will need something from you. You are a king . . . *Tam—where's the thing?* . . . a leader. A leader must suffer, and you've suffered more than anybody here. You'll figure it out, I promise. Was Hitler not a simple infantryman, blinded by a British gas shell in the first World War, before becoming . . . well—"

"Hey now, hold on," Vincent raised his hands and backed away, "what *exactly* are you guys into?"

"Oh, don't worry," Colton said. "I didn't mean it *like that*. All I meant was he suffered before becoming as *big* as he was. And besides—Hitler *did* get a lot of things right—they're just hard to talk about in a public setting without some reactionary blue-haired cunts shutting you down. He *had* good points, and we're sure that *you*, with everything you've gone through, will be able to find perspective that anyone here lacks the experience to discover on their own."

"Alright," Vincent sighed, "but you gotta drop the Hitler analogies from now on."

"You got it," said Colton.

"*Here*," Tam came up to Colton, passing something from behind.

"Vincent," Colton pulled the plastic crown out from behind him and raised it over Vincent's head, "will you be our . . . ?"

"Fine," Vincent said as the crown was set down on his head.

With everyone in their seats now, Vincent spun around in his chair while attempting to read the room. The expressions on everyone's faces remained unsure; the endless slow nods from Colton were the only assurance that everything was going to be alright. "Sooo," Vincent dragged his words out, then spoke to the ceiling, ". . . what have you guys been up to for the last . . . *two* weeks?"

"We talk, mostly." Jeremy, with the itchy face, spoke.

"Right." Vincent spun around some more.

"It's like what we talk about online," Tam spoke, "except it's a little more awkward to call somebody an *autistic faggot* to their face. It's weird like that. We're definitely learned some things about real life."

"It's *uncomfortable* . . ." Chris added. "We shed it pretty quickly. Being called an autistic faggot to your face feels like . . . an accusation."

"And before that . . . ?" Vincent watched Chris closely.

"Oh, it's just something we'd throw around," Chris continued. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and attempted to mask the look of discomfort on his face from suddenly being put on the spot. "There's a . . . system to it. Like, for example: if someone were to come out as being gay, but refer to themselves as a *faggot* before anyone else could, he would be *autistic*, in the *retarded* sense, for not realizing the backlash of being gay on the internet. *But!*—he would also be *autistic* in the *genius* sense for calling himself out before anyone else could—a sign of thinking ahead—it almost becomes like a coat of armor against further criticism. This does not make him an *autistic faggot*, though—those two labels are separate in that instant. You could be simply a *faggot* for calling trannies women, and excusing jerking off to them, but you would be an *autist*, a *genius*, for tricking the rest of us into jerking off to photos of your ass,

only to reveal *to be* a tranny yourself. But you would never be a *faggot*. A tranny is never a faggot, despite everything about them being so obviously gay, they themselves are actually not.”

“Okay,” Vincent threw up a hand to stop him there, “alright, I got it.”

“*The ultimate* badge of honor is . . .” Chris kept going, “being called an *autistic faggot*. Mind you, not a *faggot who is autistic*—that’s different—I had the example for that earlier.”

“Are these rules written down somewhere?” Vincent asked. “Who keeps track? What makes someone a,” he sighed before saying the words, “*autistic faggot*?”

“The *highest* honor,” Chris answered, “actually fucking a girl.”

“Right.” Said Vincent.

“. . . but nobody actually keeps track . . . of that, or . . . we kind of just add to the list. Once in a while, somebody compiles it. We never know who—anonymous and what not . . .”

“And you remember all this?”

“He’s too retarded to recognize his own autism,” Brian spoke.

“A compliment? . . . Right.” Vincent spun around to face Brian.

“Also, everything is about trannies with him.” Brian added.

“What *is* up with that?” Vincent turned back to Chris.

“The idea,” Chris spoke, his voice became deeper, “is that we’re all a little gay. My theory is that obsessing over a dick that comes paired with tits makes that fact easier to swallow. It’s all about dick worship. One way or another, ours or someone else’s, a dick will be worshiped.”

“Okay.” Vincent sighed. With his face resting in his hands he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. His exasperation hit an all-time high and the fact that he didn’t get a proper hour of rest since leaving Portland was

catching up with him. He missed his bed. He missed his computer. More than anything, he missed Mistress Gabriella and dozed off for a moment at the thought of her voice putting him to sleep again. Judging by the mostly empty flat of energy drinks on the kitchen counter, the group was not planning on heading home at any time soon.

“Alright,” Vincent groaned, then rewound the conversation in his head, trying to figure out what the hell it was they were supposed to be talking about. “So, you guys want to get better. Tell me how you’re getting better . . .”

The room was silent while everyone rubbed their chins contemplatively and looked up at the ceiling. “Porn,” Jeremy spoke, “Porn has given me a new perspective. I don’t know if it’s from seeing more people out in the real world, but I’ve had this nagging idea in the back of my head that I might be able to put into words for once: I used to hate Sikhs. I mean, *absolutely* fucking hate them. Their smell. The way their language sounded. Seeing them in groups on the street infuriated me beyond belief.” He stopped to check that people were listening. He spoke more enthusiastically, “now, without realizing it, I’ve been really into this super hot Indian porn star. *Super hot*. I mean, really, *really* fucking hot. Her face. Body. Even voice. Now that I think about it, for the past few weeks I hadn’t any strong feelings regarding the Sikhs when I see them in real life now.”

“That’s . . . something,” said Vincent, “is she Sikh too?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jeremy said, “they all look the same to me.”

“Asians . . .” Brian said as he yawned. Unenthusiastically, he continued, “same thing but with Asians. I find them less annoying. This one girl—cleanest . . .” he cleared his throat, “. . . -looking pussy I’ve ever seen. Now I associate Asians with clean vaginas and that’s nice, I guess.”

Tam jumped in, almost as if he’d been waiting to say this his entire life. “Stretch marks! You watch these chiseled gods with ten-inch dicks obsess over these big asses, stretch

marks and whatever other little imperfection, and you gotta think—*maybe I was wrong*. Maybe they're not disgusting . . .”

“Chris?” Vincent asked.

“*Ummm*,” Chris delayed the inevitable, “I’m more accepting of trans people now, I guess.”

“Of course,” said Jeremy.

There was a pause before all eyes fell on Colton, who remained quiet the entire time. One minute passed. Then another. The tension was building and with each passing moment it seemed as if he was drifting further away. His guard was up and Vincent couldn’t find it in himself to give Colton a push. “I hadn’t thought of anything,” Colton finally spoke.

“That’s alright,” Vincent assured him. “No rush.”

“What about you then?” Colton asked. “What have you learned from porn?”

“I learned that . . .” Vincent scanned the room. With heavy eyebrows he fell into a deep thought, fabricating contrived connections between various past events in his life that somehow pertained to the present narrative, emerging with a vague, yet self-assured response, “I learned that all buttholes stink.”

“Glory to the king!” Tam shouted and raised his fist to the air.

“Glory to the king!” The rest did the same.

The Purge

“You can stay here a while.” Colton watched Vincent peel his face away from the couch cushion as he awoke the next morning. With a cigarette in one hand and a coffee in the other he rolled over toward Vincent in the computer chair and handed him the cup. Vincent took it. The smell of fresh, burnt coffee helped to get him upright. He took a sip and nodded his head, contemplating Colton’s offer, then asked for a smoke. Colton gave him his. With the cigarette between his lips Vincent considered how nice it felt to finally have something to contribute to his own demise. A blissful reminder that he too, could ruin his own life and wasn’t completely a victim of circumstance. He took a shallow drag, coughing all the smoke out before it could circulate through his lungs. He harked and wheezed until the last little puff of smoke evacuated his system. He looked away to hide the shame on his face before passing the cigarette back to Colton, who took it and said, “you *can* come back from this.”

“No,” Vincent’s body shook as he fought the head-rush from the nicotine, undecided if keeping his eyes closed made it better or worse. “Maybe if I apologized. Shit, even before that. If I didn’t just run.”

“Run?”

"Yeah . . . after it happened," Vincent scoffed, "I just ran, man. I freaked out. When the camera guy pushed me off, on the ground there, seeing what I did, I just ran. I ran and kept running and soon I was at my grandparents' house packing all my shit and then I ran for the cab to take me to the airport and that was it. I never said sorry or reached out or—"

"You were doing what you were told. I'm not convinced that what happened to you wasn't scripted."

"It wasn't. If you were there. If you saw how she reacted—"

"I *did* see. Everyone's seen it by now. But Vincent, man—she's an actress, remember?"

"I know, but—"

"Give it some time, alright? Any day now someone out there's gonna have the same idea Jenna had and they're gonna get their time to shine. Everyone will forget about Jenna and you and all this nonsense. Don't let those jackals out there dictate how you should feel. Your life might be over but you're not to blame." Colton tossed his cigarette into the kitchen sink and immediately started up another one.

"It *is* over, isn't it?" Vincent asked.

"Depends on what you want to do with it."

"I'll never have another relationship, probably."

"Do you really want one, though? Look at how one woman has ruined your life. All it took was for her to ask you to fuck her. Now you're here. We don't need them, Vincent. There's nothing that we need from them. But think of all the things they can take away from us."

"I don't know . . ."

"Do you want to keep living in some fantasy world, Vincent, where you spend your entire life with someone pretending to be happy while suppressing all your needs and desires until you forget who you are? Call us weirdos or losers or lowlifes, but *we* dictate our lives now. *We* have all

the control. Jesus—just think about how much time we waste trying to get someone to like us. To be with us. To accept us as we are, only to have it all taken away in the blink of an eye when they change their minds for no reason and want something different, leaving us in the dust. Because that's exactly what happened to you, but on a scale so extraordinary that really put things into perspective for us. No more half-measures now, Vincent. We *are* real people. We are everywhere, and we are not going to hide, or waste our lives trying to adapt to this unfair world, any longer."

"So what's the first step then?"

"Oh, we've got something planned."

Thirty-five miles and two hours up a forest service road, the convoy slowed down to a flat clearing overlooking a valley with a cluster of small lakes down below. On the slope to their left an acre of old stumps stretched over past the peak. Hints of new growth sprouted up between the mounds of dry twigs and displaced dirt and piles of rocks. On the road where the cars parked, all the way to the top of the hill, the ground was littered with thousands of red and green shotgun shells and cheap brass from rifle cartridges. Beer cans and fast food wrappers that didn't make it into the scattered bonfires sat around waiting for nature to take care of itself. On the downslope, bright neon-orange fragments of clay disks stood out against the lime-green backdrop of the new sprouts. The few couches dumped in the ditches were now home to nothing and nobody was interested in watching the old CRT TVs scattered about, especially not after being torn to shreds by buckshot. A fridge with its doors blown open and its insides painted in thick black soot marked the spot where they stopped; the boys hurried out of their cars and gathered near it. They lined up alongside the road and took a minute to admire the view, making gestures of breathing deeply, as if it was instructed to appreciate the taste of this fresh air.

Vincent had given up on interrogating Colton about what the surprise was on the drive over. His confusion and curiosity peaked when he watched the boys look up at the hill to their left and decide something amongst themselves. Colton gave Vincent an assuring thumbs up and rubbed his hands as if a plan was coming together.

“No, seriously,” Vincent said, “what the hell is going on.”

Colton ignored him, then shouted to the group, “everyone got their stumps?”

A collective *yes* from everyone but Vincent.

“It’s one of those . . . things . . .” Colton instructed Vincent to follow him to the back of the Bronco where he opened the tailgate to reveal two large plastic cases laying in the back. “It’s like one of those: *there’s only so much we can do with talking things*. I don’t know—applying actions to words. Something we’ve been planning before you came along.” Colton popped open the clasps on one case to give Vincent a quick peek at a polymer-clad SKS rifle laying inside of it. “We’ll see how it goes, right?”

“Right.” Vincent inspected the rifle with a blank stare. The absurdity of the situation made it difficult to react appropriately to seeing a gun for the first time. A real gun that shoots real bullets, overwhelming in its power and potential, yet, at the same time, a let-down upon realizing, first hand, that somebody as simple as Colton could get his hands on one.

“Come on,” Colton pulled the case up to the edge of the trunk and took the rifle in his hands. The combination on the trigger lock was three zeros and he made no effort to hide it. With the muzzle pointed at the sky he emerged from behind the Bronco to reveal himself to the group. Turning back to Vincent he said, “come on—I gotta practice my public speaking.”

Vincent reluctantly followed. Once he could finally take his eyes off the rifle he realized that the rest of the boys had

gathered around him and Colton. Four pairs of eyes excitedly scanned every inch of the rifle in Colton's hands. "So?" Vincent asked.

Colton ignored Vincent and instead took in the fresh mountain air while scanning the hill, looking past the crowd. Finally, when his eyes set down on something off in the distance, he nodded and cleared his throat. "Men!" Colton exchanged eye contact with every member. "For those who don't know . . ." he nudged Vincent's arm with the butt of the rifle, "this is the second part of the first stage of healing. The Purge—a tradition started before any of us had even met. Before it even had the name. Before we were even aware that we were doing it. It began with us as boys, taking our rage out onto our keyboard, shouting into the void. Letting out whatever was on our minds without rhyme or reason, never knowing if anybody would listen. Not realizing that without a present set of eyes and ears that none of our *purging* would stick. Without a real life audience present there is no real obligation to improve in our situation. There is no real accountability. To progress. Today, as we watch each other destroy an item—a symbol representing a member's suffering—we remind ourselves that although our pain is unique, the end goal is the same. Together we will help each other see our journey through. Together we can make ourselves stronger."

"Nice." Tam said.

"Thanks, Tam." He took a step back. A surprised expression on his face when his knees seemed to stop working. His head swayed gently. His sweaty palms slipped against the slippery stock of the rifle. "Who here," he pulled himself together, "knows the first rule of gun safety?"

"Oooh!" Chris jumped in and reached for the rifle with his chubby fingers, "don't shoot friends!"

Colton pulled the rifle back. "No, idiot. Next?"

"Don't be an idiot?" Jeremy asked.

"That's *closer*," said Colton, still shaking his head.

“*Always assume . . .*” he checked to make sure that all ears were on him, “. . . that the gun is loaded. That means: the muzzle . . .” a shared look of confusion appeared on everyone’s faces. “*This,*” he poked at the tip of the barrel with his index finger, “this is the muzzle. It *always* points *away* from people and things you don’t mean to shoot. Point it up, whenever possible. Keep your finger *away* from the trigger, and even the trigger guard until you’re ready to fire. If I see anyone fucking around you’re done for the day, got it?”

A collective *yes*.

“Vincent?” said Colton.

“Yup?”

“You’ve said the least amount of dumb shit so far. Hang on to this.” Colton handed the rifle to Vincent and left to get something from the car. He pulled out a wooden crate held together with rusted metal banding from the back seat. With some huffing and puffing he carried the crate between his legs and set it down in front of Vincent, enveloping himself in a plume of dust when the crate hit the dry dirt. In a swift motion he swiped a multi-tool from his belt and used the pliers to tear apart the soft galvanized steel straps, then used the knife to pry open the wooden lid. Inside the box were dozens of individual packets, about the size of cigarette packs, wrapped in oily green paper.

Colton picked a packet out and tore it open at one end, then pulled out a single 7.62x39mm cartridge and tossed the packet back into the case. “This *here,*” Colton presented the cartridge to the group, “this round here has liberated, enslaved, terrorized and brought peace on almost every continent on this planet. Today . . .” he paused. A visible anxiety surfaced to his face in the shape of tense eyebrows and tight lips. “Today!” he swallowed and spoke faster, “we use this round to fight the war with oursel—fuck!” He dipped his head down and spoke into the palm of his hand. “Sorry . . . so fucking stupid. Even in my head it

sounded . . . forget it.”

“Whatever, man,” Tam said. “No big deal.”

Colton took a moment to shake himself off and inspect the group. Wasting no more time, he took a knee beside the case of ammunition and tore apart the rest of the ten-pack. He cupped the ten rounds in his hand and gave them a brief shake; the clinking together of brass and copper seemed to calm him. “Vincent!” Colton waved over his shoulder, eyes still fixed on the ammo, “give me the . . . *the thing. Here.*”

“Uh, yeah.” Vincent walked over, paying careful attention to the direction of the muzzle on the way over, then handed the rifle to Colton.

“Thanks.” Colton set the rifle down on his thighs. With a practiced motion he removed the fifteen-round magazine with one hand, then set the rifle on top of the wooden box. “Alright everyone,” one by one he began loading cartridges into the empty magazine, “to your stumps!” The group took off up the hill. Vincent stayed behind.

“Hey,” Vincent asked, “what’s with the stumps?”

“You’ll see,” Colton paused, then suddenly remembered something. “Hey! Check the glove . . . something for you there.”

“What?”

“Go see—you’ll know it when you see it.” Another round slid into the magazine.

Vincent navigated around Colton, then walked over to the passenger side door of the Bronco. He stuck his head inside and opened the glove compartment. Inside were mostly empty cigarette packs and gas receipts. Some parking tickets. A notebook he was sure he wasn’t supposed to be looking through. On top of it a photo. Vincent couldn’t make out what it was until he took it out from the dark space and brought it out into the light. “Hey!” Vincent shouted. Jenna Moore smiled at him from the photo. “What the hell is this?”

“The purge, Vincent!” Colton shouted back.

“Ughh,” Vincent set the photo down on the seat and walked back to Colton. “This is getting weird again . . .”

“Relax, man,” Colton stood up, his rifle in one hand and the full magazine in the other. “It’s just a photo—no harm done. What she did to *you* was way worse.”

“Yeah, no. I know, but—”

“It’s only symbolic,” Colton half-assuringly nodded his head. “It will only work if you let it . . . so let it. We’re out here destroying things that hurt us. That *continue* to hurt us to this day. This is a way of letting go, by facing the problems head on. We’re telling the world that we’re not scared any longer.”

“There’s gotta be a healthier way to do these things.” Vincent leaned against the car and shook his head.

“Maybe, but I’ve got nothing . . . we’re tried talking. Talking lead nowhere. We just keep going in circles, repeating the same things over and over again, in our heads or aloud to each other, shooting our loads into an echo chamber. We need something bigger. We need to see the pain disappear. We need to exterminate it and regain our manhood, in the manliest way possible.” Colton set the rifle on the ground and leaned it against the tire. “Did you find a nice stump yet?”

“Is that what they’re doing?” Vincent sighed, then straightened up. He evaluated Colton’s supposed charisma, wondering what it was that made these boys listen to him, then looked up at the hill, at those boys, and was suddenly reminded of the baseline. How close he stood to that line he couldn’t tell exactly, it would depend on how laboured his breathing would be hiking up that rough terrain or how good his aim was or how difficult it was to keep a clear head with the recent onset absence of Mistress Gabriella or how much he bought into the supposed strength these boys attributed to him in dealing with the supposed rape of Jenna Moone attributing to the developing hubris he was struggling to keep in check. He was hated, belittled,

destroyed, humiliated and shunned as a superstar. Maybe he would be better loved as a king.

“Give it about fifty yards,” Colton said. “You want to have a good sight of it when you do it.”

Vincent snatched Jenna’s photo from the seat and glanced over at the hill. A suitable stump in sight. He took off towards it. The incline was steeper than it looked and Vincent paid close attention to his breathing, trying his best to make the hike look effortless. The rest of the boys were already on their way down when Vincent neared his destination, cheering him on as they passed. With his knees in the dirt Vincent held the photo in place with a loose sliver of bark that he pulled back on, then carefully assessed his current feelings about the act, trying to form a clear idea of the symbolism behind these actions so that he would have something to compare to once it was done. He stood up and stepped away from Jenna, feeling that first tinge of hatred he was supposed to be feeling. He assessed how much his life meant to her and came to the conclusion that it was absolutely nil. Somewhere out there she was getting thousands of dollars for appearing on talk shows and getting gift baskets by the truckloads and looking down at everyone from a new penthouse apartment. Somewhere out there publishers were lining up outside her door offering millions for a book deal. Somewhere out there the representative at her bank was telling her she won’t ever again have to give a blowjob she didn’t want to. Back here where Vincent stood was the sacrifice she made to make all of her wishes come true.

Vincent shrugged and hiked back down the hill, passing Colton, who was clutching a folded-up photo in his hand.

Tam was the first to go. He took a kneeling position to steady the rifle. The target danced around between the front and rear sights while he figured out his breathing. Up along his chosen stump sat his target—the keyboard he used to

type the words *I love you* to his internet girlfriend from Canada whom he's never met in real life, who ceased all contact with him after receiving photos of his penis, inviting her to do the same, then calling her a prudish cunt for not reciprocating. The first three shots missed and covered the entire keyboard in a mess of dirt and shattered rocks. The fourth shot hit right on target. The keyboard exploded into a mess of flying keys and shards of plastic. Whatever was left of the frame tumbled down the hill and Tam tried to follow up with a few more shots just to be sure. "Okay!" he shouted and stood up. The group cheered him on. "Should we like, say a thing, to commemorate this?"

"How about: *fuck that bitch!*" Jeremy said.

"Alright, that'll do." Shooting from the waist, Tam popped off another shot into his targets general direction. "Fuck that bitch!" he shouted.

Jeremy's target was a black t-shirt, about two sizes too small for him, decorated with intricate patterns lined with rhinestones. It cost him over \$150. According to another online group he used to be a member of, it was supposed to have women flock to him based on the notion that women would respect him, and be interested in somebody who was brave and confident enough to wear something so stupid-looking. When the bullet struck it the shirt lamely puffed up at the point of impact. No matter how many more times he went the shirt remained in place. After a few minutes of staring at it, waiting for the shirt to catch fire or do anything interesting at all, Jeremy finally let it go. With droopy shoulders he passed the rifle to the next guy.

Chris' sweaty, chubby fingers struggled to keep the rifle steady as he concentrated on the head of the muscular man on the cover of a fitness magazine. For years he struggled with keeping his weight down. Whenever a week spent at the gym didn't have women immediately getting wet at the sight of him he would spend weeks going on rage-fueled tirades on social media circles encouraging body positivity

for women. He would state that it wasn't fair that plus-sized men don't get the same privilege and support, then, when the rage would subside, he would find himself back in the gym again, ready for the cycle to start over. He took six shots. By the time the dust settled it was agreed upon that one of them must have hit the magazine, as something for sure knocked it down.

Despite Colton's instructions, Brian insisted it was better to support the rifle with an elbow tucked to the chest. Something he read online before the trip started. He set his sights on a Valentine's Day card he received from his mother this year. One shot split it in two pieces. Without saying a word he handed the rifle onto Mason.

Only twenty feet ahead of him sat Mason's driver's license, sitting on top of a stump, propped up by a pile of pebbles. The group watched anxiously as Brian contemplated the target. His indecisive index finger followed the curves and sharp edges of the trigger guard. It was, after all, his old self that believed in the dire need of love and affection to feel complete. The only person he thought he could blame. A tough concept to explain to a group of people who expect a narrative in which the source of all their problems was always a lack of pussy. But friends were hard to come by. The plastic card vanished with a pull of the trigger. He passed the rifle back to its owner, then walked away with a look of uncertainty look on his face.

One hundred yards down range, stapled through the center, was a candid photo of a young, bright-eyed barista, looking down at something behind the cash register. Colton got down on one knee, steadied his breaths and took careful aim, checking the target on a full breath, then letting himself relax on the exhales. It was over a year ago now that Colton had finally built up the courage to say the words: *we should do something sometime*, after a brief exchange of money for a black coffee. When she smiled and answered: *yeah, sure!* Colton couldn't stop thinking about her for weeks,

meanwhile going elsewhere for coffee while he thought of where to take her on their first date. By the end of the second week, searching extensively through Facebook, he had figured out her name. He looked through all her photos on all her social media accounts. Read every one of her tweets. Told his aunt that maybe there was a girl in his life but he wouldn't disclose any details just yet. When he finally stopped by her shop to invite her out for a cup of coffee he was met with a: *oh, I—*. . . and all the sounds that followed he did not want to hear. One shot tore the photo to shreds. He handed the rifle to Vincent.

Dear Jenna Moone . . .

I'm sorry.

Sorry that I was a pawn in your scheme. Sorry that I was stupid and naive and allowed myself to be used. Sorry that you're too stupid to have a real job. Sorry that you're so hungry for attention. Sorry that you're making so much money off of my pain. Sorry that I gave you EXACTLY what you asked for . . .

Dear Jenna, I'm tired of being sorry about this.

Part Four:

Full(y) Control(led)

The Great Mountain

“Yes, hello?”

“ . . . ”

“*Hello?!?*”

“What was his name?”

“ . . . Is this—”

“Yes, it’s Mistress Gabriella.”

“It’s almost three in the morning. I’m trying to sleep. What the hell are . . . *Thomas*. Thomas was his name . . . *Roberts*.”

“Thomas . . . Thomas *Roberts* . . . hmmm, doesn’t ring a bell.”

“What the hell do you want?”

“And what would *your* name be?”

“What. Do. You. Want?”

“I’d like to know who I’m speaking with.”

“Shauna!”

“Thank you, Shauna.”

“Again, I ask: what the hell do you want?”

“I just want to talk . . . won’t even charge you for this one. Something I’m doing on my own time.”

“How gracious of you.”

“Tell me about Thomas.”

“Are you going to apologize?”

"Maybe if I had more—"

"Are you going to apologize?!"

"Shauna, you know I can't do that."

"Then we're done talking."

"..."

"Do you hear me?"

"..."

"Okay, I'm hanging up now!"

"Was he lonely?"

"He was married!"

"That doesn't answer my question. Shauna, honey—I'm a good listener, you know? I can help you if you just talk to me."

"Oh, Jesus Christ. I don't know, we didn't talk much about . . . anything."

"That's a shame. I figured communication would be key to a healthy relationship. Would you say you had a healthy relationship?"

"I would say we had some things to work on."

"Like what?"

"..."

"Shauna?"

"Stuff . . . things. Lots of things."

"Sounds rough."

"*Insurmountable* . . ."

"Well, like with anything *insurmountable* in life, it becomes easier to deal with if you just break it down into tiny little pieces. Take it step-by-step. No one has the capacity, mental or otherwise, to deal with everything at once. Life itself is insurmountable. You add to the mix everything nowadays necessary to simply upkeep life and things start to get heavy real fast. This weight on everyone's shoulders—"

"If you're talking about *Atlas*—"

"*That's right*. Smart girl."

"—don't patronize me. I was going to call you a hack."

"Call me what you please, but it gets the message across."

Not everyone is as clever as you. People *need* to be spoon fed, and I've found the tools most efficient for every task. You, my girl, seem like you're too stubborn to give your tense shoulders a little shrug."

"*I'm not* a narcissist who thinks of herself as a God, I'll tell you that. *Obeys your Goddess*, was it? in your recordings?"

"I believe that we are our own Gods."

"Then why ask people to obey you? . . . why am I talking to you? I have to work in the morning. Why did you call again?"

"People obey because they want to obey. They like to obey. They need to shut their brains off once in a while, forget about that weight on their shoulders. By obeying me they can do that. Not everybody can manage the facade of being an infallible God for the entirety of their existence."

"And you can?"

"I get by."

". . . sounds insurmountable."

"I get by, like I said. So what do you say then? Care for a little pick-me-up? If Greek mythology doesn't do it for you. Perhaps something else then to ease you into it . . . some Bill Withers, perhaps?"

". . ."

"Shauna?"

"Fine."

"Good girl."

"But cut it with the . . . the—"

"You like it a bit more direct then?"

"Fine. Yeah."

"Was *Thomas* direct with you? I'm talking physically, of course."

"He wasn't *smooth*, I'll say that. Like I said, we had some things to work on."

"Like what?"

". . ."

"Like more *touching*?"

"Maybe."

"And where did you like to be touched?"

"I don't know, okay! We haven't been too close in the last while . . ."

"Where *do* you like to be touched?"

"I don't know, it's been—"

"Think hard now, hun, where do you *wish* he touched you."

"My back, I don't know, lady—where are you going with this?"

"*Mhmmm*, your back—care to be a little more specific? Think *hard*, for me."

"Upper . . . higher, near the neck."

"Yes, did you like it when he rubbed it? Squeezed it?"

"No, there's a spot, near the top. The hair line *here*. He used to shove—"

"*Shove*, Shauna?"

". . . *nudge*, his finger there. Rub circles into it."

"How would that make you feel, sweetie?"

"Good."

"Just good? Not lovely or sensuous or arousing . . . ?"

"*What?*"

"Language is important. The words you choose can make a world of difference."

"Fine."

"Why don't you take your soft, warm little finger, and *nudge* it right there in that spot you like."

"I don't think I'm—"

"Oh trust me, sweetie, I just want to help you feel good. I want to help you take some stress off."

"Fine . . . okay, my finger's on my neck."

"Now close your eyes."

"Okay."

"Now breathe with me . . . *slow* inhale through the nose. Now, when I exhale, I want you to exhale with me . . . out through your mouth."

“...”

“Good. Now let’s do that again. I want you to exhale with a slow, deep moan. Deep down from the bottom of your throat. Do it like I do. Breathe in . . . now slowly let it out . . . good. *Very, very nice*. Is that feeling better now, my sweetness?”

“Fine, yes.”

“Are you still keeping pressure there in that spot you like? Can you feel the warmth? I bet you’re running circles around that little bump there, just like he used to do. Can you feel the tingles?”

“Mhm.”

“Breathe with me—again, a nice, *deeeeeeep* moan as you exhale. Keep your eyes closed. Feel how that moan resonates from the back of your throat down through your entire body . . . I want you to be aware of your body’s vibrations. Every little vibration.”

“Yeah . . .”

“Keep breathing, sweetie. Feel how nice that is? This is how *I* make people feel. I can hear you’re getting quite relaxed now. From the sounds of it your hair is catching between your lips and your phone. Have you even noticed? Don’t worry, I catch onto these things. I understand people, my sweet Shauna . . . I bet your arm is becoming quite sore from holding the phone up to your head for so long. Why don’t you shake it off, give yourself a minute to have a little stretch. When you’re done I’d like for you to set your phone down somewhere nearby and leave it on speakerphone.”

“Okay . . . done”

“Did you have a good stretch?”

“Yes.”

“Good, now relax and let your body melt into your seat.”

“Okay . . .”

“Now just sit there for a bit. Keep breathing. Keep

moaning, *deeeep* from your throat, feel the vibrations, deeper and deeper—I'll moan with you. Try to match my rhythm. You're so relaxed, so stress-free. You feel so warm and comfortable in your seat. Keep drawing those sweet, sensuous circles on your neck. Feel the rush of tingles—not too much, not too little—*juuuuuust right.*"

"Okay . . ."

"Oh, *Shaun-aaa.*"

"Yes?"

"How are you doing there, sweetie?"

"I'm—"

"Nice, isn't it? Had a few minutes to yourself now, *mbmmm?*"

"How long—"

"Oh you've been in it for about seven minutes now. I've just been sitting here, listening to your breathing. You sound like you're having a delightful time, wouldn't you say?"

"Ohhh, I'm . . ."

"I know, baby—it feels so, so good to relax once in a while, doesn't it?"

" . . ."

"Oh poor Shauna, you forgot, didn't you?"

"What?"

"Well, *how to relax?* Oh, it's okay to admit it, sweetie. The hardest thing for most people to do is simply relax; the second hardest is to admit to themselves that it's alright to do so. You deserve it, sweetie. *Mbmmm*, you've been so, so stressed lately and nobody will listen. Sometimes it feels like the world just doesn't care. We'll *I'm* listening. *I'm* here for you . . . *oh, Shauna?*"

"Yes?"

"Tell me, my sweet, sweet delicate baby: are you feeling . . . *nice and warm?*"

"Yes"

"Are you feeling . . . ?"

“Yes. Relaxed.”

“*Just* relaxed?”

“Look—this is nice and all, but I think you’re pushing it here.”

“*Pushing it, Shauna?*”

“Yes.”

“And what am I pushing, exactly?”

“*Something*. Something’s off about all of this . . .”

“*Obbbb . . .*”

“What?”

“I see now.”

“What is it, what are you talking about? What do you see?”

“Oh, Shauna—*so much now*. I see so much. I thought I had you pinned down, but . . . can’t *you* see it? Your wall, Shauna. Your greatest fear. You’ve just let me in. *Push, push, push*—is that what you’re *really* telling me? You’re sending me signals. No, your subconscious mind is sending me signals and you’re not even aware of it. You’re saying the words: *PUSH. PUSH. PUSH*, but you don’t know why. Your deepest desires are asking, begging you to say the words aloud, but then your rational brain, the fear residing within it, twists and taints and turns it into something else entirely. Something that needs to sound like it makes sense. You want to be *pushed*.”

“I don’t know about—”

“Get out of your head, Shauna. Listen to your body. What does it want? *Language*. What does it feel? What words come to mind?”

“I don’t know, I can’t think of—”

“Stop thinking!”

“Uhhh . . .”

“You said it yourself: *relaxed*. Now keep going. Are you *warm*?”

“Yes.”

"Are you comfortable? Keep them coming. Close your eyes."

"Yes. Umm . . . cozy. Nice. Calm . . . *easy*."

"*Good*."

"... *serene*."

"*Very good*. Now try to put into words how you feel deeper down. Imagine being outside of your body, you're watching yourself now. Imagine these words floating above various parts of your own body. Imagine the words, then take your two little fingers and pluck those words, one by one, tell me what you see."

"Uhhh . . ."

"Look down at your legs now. What words can you see? What words does your body feel down there?"

"*Soft. Strong. Moving. Busy*."

"*Let's move up a little bit . . . look no higher than your belly button; no lower than your thighs . . .*"

"*Engaged. Wow . . . Stirred. Sensual*."

"Are you feeling . . . *aroused*? *Mhmmm*. Exhale for me with a long, deep moan . . ."

"..."

"What about it, honey? My sensual, cozy Shauna. I bet you feel a little more tingles than you expected?"

"..."

"*Mhmmm*—your silence speaks too, you know? Your breathing tells me everything I need to hear. You wouldn't want me to stop now, would you?"

"..."

"Sweetie, you're playing hard to please—it's getting me going a bit. Now tell me—say it—say you don't want me to stop now . . ."

"Okay."

"*Okay what*, hun?"

"Keep going."

"Good girl. I was just going to make you feel good, but I guess we'll have to settle for *amazing*. *Mhmmm*, now tell me,

sweet baby . . .”

“Yes?”

“ . . .”

“Tell you what?”

“ . . .”

“Hello?”

“Oh, sweetie. Just teasing, *tee-bee*. I wanted to make sure I had your full attention. I need your *full* commitment if you want this to work.”

“Okay.”

“Are you ready to let me make you feel real good? Are you ready to let go? Are you ready to allow me to take you on a journey of pleasure, complete satisfaction. Body. Mind. Your soul?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, *tsk-tsk-tsk*. I’m afraid I’ll need more than that out of you. I want you to *want it*, dear. Tell me you *want it*.”

“I want it.”

“Gooooood. Now, honey—who’s gonna give it to you?”

“You . . . Are.”

“Nuh-uh-uh. Do better.”

“ . . .”

“Shauna, my dear, sweet girl. *Who* is going to make your night one to remember.”

“ . . .”

“*Mhmmm*, I know you want it. I *know* you want to say it.”

“Mistress . . . Gabriella.”

“Good girl. Good, *good girl*, Shauna. Now tell me—are your pretty little eyes still closed?”

“They are closed.”

“Excellent. *Shauna*, keep breathing, follow my rhythm. We’re going to expel all the negative energy out of you. Keep breathing as I count down from ten. When I get to *one* you’re going to feel a rush of warmth spread through your body and find your mind in a state of pleasure in the likes you could only dream of . . . *now breathe in*.”

“...”

“Ten . . .”

“Shauna.”

“...”

“Shauna, *sweetie*? You’re not . . . *touching* yourself already, are you?”

“I—”

“It’s alright, you know. There’s nothing to be to be ashamed of here. You’re in a safe space with me. Let my voice keep you warm, comfortable. Everything is alright. Everything is perfect and beautiful. Can I let you in on a little secret, sweetie?”

“Yes.”

“*I’m* touching myself. I’m here with you completely. Let me guide you to a treasure you forgot you sought for, *hmmm?*”

“... I was—yes.”

“Now, let’s not get ahead of ourselves—what do you say?”

“Okay.”

“Now, Shauna, tell me—when was the last time you masturbated? When was the last time you took the time to explore your body, figure out your wants and needs and desires, and went after them?”

“I don’t . . . know.”

“Oh what a darn shame. A sweet, perfect girl such as yourself, with so much stress, so many worries, with no relief in sight. What a tragedy. I am truly sorry, sweetie. What do you say we help you find that sweet spot?”

“I’d like that, yeah.”

“Like?”

“I’d want that.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Shauna, I want you to continue to breathe at the same pace and concentrate on the sensual, comfortable warmth emanating through your body.

I want you to take a minute and pinpoint every little tingle, every little tick, every possible source of pleasure and I'm going to teach you how to control it, embrace it. Breathe with me, sweetie, then focus on your little toe on your left foot. Focus *all* of your feelings on that little toe. Breathe deep now. Take a moment . . .”

“Okay, I got it.”

“Do you feel the warmth, the tingle?”

“Yes, I feel them.”

“*Goood*. Now imagine my warm, delicate fingers wrapping themselves around that little toe, taking that warmth, that tingle, and massaging all of those feelings, concentrating them into a teeny tiny little ball. A ball of pure, concentrated pleasure. With the tips of my fingers I massage the bottom of your toe. Can you feel that?”

“Yes!”

“I massage the *top* now, little by little, working my way around to the sides of it, tenderly squeezing it. Forming that little ball. You can feel your little toe wanting to explode with pleasure. Your foot is having a hard time staying still—it just wants to break loose from the pleasure. It wants to *explode*. *Keep concentrating*. Keep your mind on that little ball in that sweet, little toe, as I pull my hand back and hover over your foot, controlling this little ball as I guide it up into your ankle. You might feel your knees pull themselves together and that's alright, just keep thinking about your ankle. And do try to keep your knees still—I *know* you're excited about where this little ball might be heading, but let's not get ahead of ourselves now.

“I *push* the ball further up as it drifts through the center of your shin, filling your leg with warmth and pleasure. Seeping into your upper thigh . . . you probably can't stop your legs from shaking now—and that's okay—you're excited. You've felt nothing like this before. *PUSH*. *This is the little push you've been asking for*. You're doing an amazing job, sweetie. You're amazing and strong and beautiful.

“The feelings spread through your pelvis. The warmth, the tingles are flowing into the rest of your lower body. They spread to the undersides of your legs. You flex your bum cheeks—up, down. *Up, down*—pumping the pleasure all the way up to your—”

“Uhuh . . . ?”

“*Mhmmm, pushing this pleasure up. To. Your*—but we’re not going to go *there* just yet. You can feel my hands hover over your bare skin now, so close that you can feel the static electricity raise the peach fuzz on your tummy. Your hands are *my* hands now, Shauna—I want you to place them on your stomach and and imagine it’s me guiding them up your body now. I have full control now. Your tight, beautiful tummy does a little twitch as my warm hands hover past it up into your chest. Your lungs fill with the most pleasurable breath of air you’ve ever tasted as my hands spread outward to your perfect breasts. You want me to touch them. The closer my hands move the more you can feel the pleasure radiate from the palms of my hands to your breasts. You want me to caress them. You want me to squeeze them. You want me to *lick-lick-lick them. Mhmmm, baby*. If my body here is any indication of what’s *coming*, I’d say you must be feeling quite *slippery, mhmmm?*”

“ . . . ”

“Would you . . . *care to check* for me, sweetie?”

“ . . . ”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, my sweet baby. It’s a wonderful, beautiful thing to experience. I want you to be proud of how good you can feel. I want you to revel in the joys and pleasures your body can experience. Your body is a beautiful, perfect thing, worthy of admiration. Worthy of *your* love . . .

“What a tragedy it is, that *our* bodies, those which give life, which have been universal symbols of beauty for centuries, those which have to endure so much, have had to become a source of shame for us, yet always a place of

pleasure for men

"Men, Shauna: do you ever find it how, in one manner or another, a woman's life is somehow *always* shaped by a man's, be it that *one* man in your life or the world which they so took it upon themselves to make their playground? *Oh, Shauna* . . . once and for all, take control of your own life. Let me help you get there.

"After all—*us girls gotta stick together.*

"Let me help you find what gives pleasure to *you*.

"Listen to me: you *can* be wet. You *should* be wet. I want you to be perfectly honest with yourself."

"I'm . . . Yeah, I am."

"How about we use our pretty little fingers to get a closer look. What do you think?"

"Okay."

"*Goood* girl, Shauna. I want you to visualize me taking your hand in mine and guide it back down your chest, down, further past your tummy. *Down, down, down*, all the way to that special spot between your legs. I want you to *push* your hand down there. I want you to feel your legs wanting to spread further apart as I place your hand over your vagina. Keep your eyes closed. Can you feel the warmth? I want you to feel everything. Can you feel it tingle? Can you feel it pulsate—just aching to be touched, for its wetness to be appreciated? *Mhmmm*—I bet it's pulsating, Shauna, isn't it?"

". . . yes."

"I know, sweetie, because mine is, too. See all the things you can feel if only you would pay a bit of attention to yourself? Oh, you're such a good girl. I want you to do what I'm doing: I want you to start moving your middle finger inwards, just a little—just until it breaks the surface, then I want you to slowly, gently curve it upwards. Imagine trying to touch the tip of your finger to the palm of your hand now. *Oh yes*—just like that. In and out. Going through the full range of motion of that pretty little finger. Slow, gentle circles. *Yesss*, keep doing it like that. Keep the rest of your

fingers where they are, keep slipping in and out. In and out, round and round. Feel the base of your finger, think about how close it is to your clitoris—but we're not there *just yet*. *A preview . . . of things to . . . come*. Nice and slow. *Yess*. You might start to feel your other fingers wanting to break free, but I want you to keep them right where they are. Just take in the warmth emanating from your sweet, warm lips. *Mmmmm*, Shauna?"

"Yes?"

"Mhmmm, sweetie, I don't know if I can take it. I just might accidentally slip another finger in. *Oh whoops*—there I go, *mbmmmm*. Don't worry, sweetheart, I won't tell anyone if you don't. Go ahead now, slip another one in, work it in the same motion. *Yesss . . .* we sure got something special here, don't we? Oh baby, *obbb*! I need to go faster. *Oh my*—all that sloppy, delicious wetness down there, don't mind if I take a few drops and just place it right on top of mine . . . *OH! . . .* and run it in circles. *OH*—just rub it in . . . *right there! YES!* Work that sweet, sweet wetness into your clitoris now. *Oh! If only I could taste you*, Shauna! *Mhmmm*—imagine my sweet, sweet tongue working circles around your clitoris. *Oh, how you'd love that!* And *you* know that I know how you like it, don't you, sweetie?"

"YES."

"*Oh, baby*—can you imagine my tongue just *licking and flicking and biting* that sweet warm pussy of yours? Oh, Shauna, I don't know if I can take this any longer. *Oh, Shauna!*"

"YES!"

"OH Shauna! Tell me! Faster now, I'm getting so close!"

"YES!"

"Tell me, baby. How did he do it?"

"*Hub?*"

"Tell me everything. How did he feel when he listened to me? Mmmm-yess! Was Thomas a bad, bad ninja?"

"What the fuck."

“Oh Shauna, *mmmm*—but such a good boy. Such a good, obedient—”

“You can’t be seri—”

“*Oh, please tell me—I’m so close*—do you think he begged for me to be there—with that great, big sword in his belly—do you think he was hard, thinking of *me*?”

“You’re a fucking psycho, lady. I can’t believe I—”

“You best believe it, sweetheart. You want to go around messing with *my* life? Calling my manager, telling him off about me, wasting his time? Me having to hear about it? Leaving nasty reviews about my business. How much longer did you plan to keep this up?”

“...”

“Goodbye now. Have a *great* life, Shauna.”

“Shauna?”

“You fucking bitch!” Shauna shouted upon waking up, throwing her hands up in the air as her face unglued itself from her desk.

The cautious voice spoke again from the doorway to her office, “I’m sorry, Shauna. But it’s nine in the morning an —”

“What?!” Shauna spun around in her chair to check the room for any sort of time-telling device to verify the accusation. Before any bodily function had kicked into gear, Shauna almost immediately felt a cold rush of air blanket her body. She hugged herself, then looked away from the person in the doorway in embarrassment when she noticed her jeans were still wrapped around her shins. She spun back around to find her phone dead, sitting atop her desk. She quickly realized that a faint smell of last night’s antics remained on the tips of her fingers, when she rubbed her eyes. Another cold rush of air found its way into her office. She tensed up, then said, “Kyle, damn it, I told you to keep that door closed!”

“I’m sorry, Shauna.”

“So close the damn door!”

“Okay, sorry.” Kyle, the helpless twenty-two-year-old intern backed out through the doorway, then added, “it’s just that we find a lot of dogs go to the toilet here at night and in the mornings, when we first open up, it gets a little—”

“Go!” Shauna half-turned to him, “and then clean the cages! It’s what you’re here for.”

“Right. Going now.” Kyle took off. The sound of his screeching sneakers faded as he raced for the front door.

The freezing cold brought to attention the halted-sneeze feeling in her pelvis. The feeling worsened and spread down to her thighs when she pulled her jeans up to her hips. She smacked the tops of her thighs and kicked her knees up to her chest to get the blood flowing. With her eyes shut tight she rotated her neck from side to side until the cartilage in her spine had no more crunch left in it.

She was now ready to begin work. A new day. There was a schedule and people to manage, but all she could focus on was fighting the urge to shout at the top of her lungs. There was legitimate anger to express. What words to shout, though, eluded her. With no one to shout at Shauna found it difficult to hang on to the anger. The volunteers were bound to show up at any minute now. Kyle would for sure tell them of everything he saw that morning the first chance he would get. Throwing a fit and embarrassing herself further would only make everything worse. Ever since Thomas died, and everyone had gotten word of it, the baseline had been lowered. She was now permitted to sulk and not even pretend to smile. She was permitted to lock herself in the office and not provide anyone with a reason for doing so. It would be pretty obvious what was happening, even to the least intelligent crew member. One-word answers would do in response to just about any question.

Reduce the chatter—that would be her only goal. Keep the noise to a minimum. The animals she could deal with; the gossip, not so much. One body to their own station.

Keep them apart. Kyle would stick with her to keep the virus from spreading. One volunteer on clean-up and maintenance. Another on inventory. The last on cleaning, feeding, disinfection of the place. Each one to their own corner. Keep the place nice and quiet. Delegating always brought an ease to Shauna's crowded mind. This would help.

Within the next hour the rest of the crew began rolling in. One by one they would leave the goddamn door open. The one that giggles. The one that clears her throat after every sentence, no matter how short. The one who interrogates every animal about how much they pooped the night before. A specific task for every noisemaker. She called from her office, loud enough for the entire building to hear, for Kyle to check on the finicky lock for the outside gate. He shouted back to indicate that he was on it. Moments later the screeching emanated through the space again and Shauna was hit with another rush of cold air. "And close the goddamn door!"

Her first order of business sat in a cage from across the hallway. Phoebe, with her pink nose and her happy eyes and her excited nails scratched the stainless steel cage, awaiting breakfast. "We're not gonna have the greatest day ever today," Shauna spun around in her chair to face the cage, "are we?"

"I'd want to give it a try this time," Kyle held back the last vial of sodium pentobarbital from Shauna, holding a fresh syringe in her hand.

"You *want* to do it?"

"I want to give it a *try*. I mean: it's probably time I took a shot at this." Kyle placed his hand on Phoebe's head, who now lay atop a small stainless steel table in the treatment room. He took her front paw into the palm of his hand and massaged it. "Shauna, I know there's no *right* way of saying this. I know how it sounds. But I plan on taking this job seriously and this is an important part of it and all I'm

saying is that I'm ready."

Phoebe snapped her head to the side and stretched it out further into Kyle's hand. He pet her a few more times before pulling his hand away. With her tail tucked beneath her leg and her ears pinned back Phoebe set her chin on the edge of the table and began panting. She fought Kyle for control of her paw. He kept it in a firm hold.

Shauna reached for the vial again. Kyle retreated. With more aggravation in her voice this time, she said, "give me it." She patted Phoebe on the butt, then snapped at Kyle, "now!"

"Maybe next time?" Kyle handed her the vial.

"Maybe." Shauna took it, then immediately popped the cap off the syringe and handed it to Kyle to discard. "I got this. You're on freezer duty, we're making a dump run tomorrow. You don't need to be here." She impaled the metal cap of the vial with the syringe needle, then watched the liquid rise to the 4mL mark, meanwhile *shooing* Kyle away with a sway of her head.

"Fine." He left the station, occasionally turning back to look at Shauna. When he noticed Phoebe's panting intensify he stopped and hid around the corner, watching them. He watched as Phoebe's paws closed in around her pink nose when Shauna reached for the damaged limb. Shauna gave it another attempt, pulling at the paw with more force now, but Phoebe pulled away and let out a high-pitched whimper. Kyle emerged from around the corner, and in a hushed voice said, "are you sure you don't want my help?"

"Why are you still here?" Shauna looked back at him.

"Shauna, I think you could use a hand. Phoebe looks like she might have PTS—"

"Kyle! I don't need your damn diagnosis!"

"Shauna, that's her *bad* paw. If you just . . ."

"Don't tell me how to do my job."

"Okay! Look—I'm sorry I saw you in that state this morning, but this has nothing to do with—"

“Go! Now!”

“Fine!” Kyle took off, his sneakers squeaking away as he escaped into the hallway.

“Goddamn it!” Shauna shouted, then immediately hushed herself upon noticing Phoebe’s eyes shift more rapidly. Her rear legs tensed up. She tucked them beneath her belly. Another rush of cold air from the outside filled the room and broke her concentration. She swore at Kyle under her breath as she aimed the needle. Her thumb sat steadily on the plunger. When the point of the needle approached, Shauna grabbed Phoebe’s paw, getting as far as breaking the skin before a violent swipe across the table nearly knocked the syringe out of her hand. Shauna grabbed another paw, keeping a tighter grip now up from the wrist, using her thumb to feel for the location of a blood vessel. The first poke sent a sharp yelp that resonated through the entire building. The other workers shouted, offering help. Shauna refused them and took hold of the paw again, this time pinning it down against the stainless steel surface. She leaned into the paw, using her body to break Phoebe’s line of sight, and took aim. With the syringe in her right hand Shauna readjusted her position, holding onto Phoebe’s wrist downward from her limb, while resting her elbow on top of Phoebe’s back to keep her stable. The whining intensified. Shauna double-checked the entry point and closed in on her target.

When the second poke broke skin Phoebe’s hind legs kicked upwards and caused Shauna’s elbow to slip from the dog’s smooth back. She struggled to contain the thrashing. By the time she had Phoebe pinned down again she realized that the syringe was nowhere to be seen. She checked every inch of the floor, stretching out as far as her hold on Phoebe would allow. “*HEYYYYY!*” she shouted for anybody in the building to hear.

Another howl. A series of high-pitched yelps pierced Shauna’s eardrums. The building filled with the screeching

and barking of neighboring dogs as they joined in on the chorus. Shauna shouted for everyone to be quiet, but also for anybody to help her. She set her eyes on the box of new syringes only eight feet away, set on the edge of the counter by the sink. As she readied to make a leap for it, her train of thought diverted, and she suddenly recalled the vial of sodium pentobarbital she left sitting on the edge of the operating table. It didn't take long to notice the remains of the vial had already spilled to the floor below.

"What is it?!" Kyle's sneakers came to a screeching halt as he rounded the corner to see Shauna wrestle Phoebe. His sudden appearance distracted Shauna and gave Phoebe that final spook, causing her to explode from Shauna's grip and kick away with all fours. Her nails scratched and slipped on the stainless steel surface, running in place, while Shauna struggled to grab hold of just about any part of Phoebe's body. One of her paws caught the edge of the table and she was launched forward. Her other leg buckled. She plummeted head first to the vinyl floor, then immediately regained her footing and sped off towards the front door.

Shauna shouted for Kyle to catch up to her with a snare pole as she sped away after the escapee.

Bad girl, bad.

The five-foot tall fence proved to be no obstacle for Phoebe to leap over. Shauna broke through the gate in a full sprint, still working on wrapping a towel around her forearm, something for Phoebe to bite down on. Kyle was on the verge of collapsing by the time he caught up. He passed her the snare pole and jogged back to the shelter. Shauna's eyes stayed fixed on Phoebe as she crossed a muddy field, on her way to a scattered patch of trees. The crisp morning had her heaving. Trudging through the mud sent dull aches through her knees.

Phoebe kept at full speed ahead, only becoming slowed down by piles of dry branches. Shauna remained close,

keeping the snare tucked in her armpit.

A long ditch with knee-high water cut through the path up ahead. Shauna took a chance and diverted to the left to preemptively close the gap. Even at her young age, the pit-bull wouldn't be able to outrun her for much longer. Running only thirty feet behind the dog now, parallel to the ditch, Shauna readied the snare. Another pile of branches lay ahead. Shauna took all she had in her and picked up pace, keeping the towel-wrapped arm pressed against her side to keep it from unraveling.

Just as she expected, the branches slowed the dog down significantly. Shauna pushed on. She cocked the snare over her head for a forward downswing. She took a shot. It barely nicked Phoebe's tail, but sent the handle of the snare into Shauna's stomach with all her momentum when it plunged into the dirt and stopped her in her tracks. She gasped as the air escaped her lungs and she collapsed to her knees. Phoebe cleared the obstacle and picked up speed again.

Shauna fought to break the snare free of the mound of branches. The gap between her and the dog widened. Not willing to lose any more time, she ditched it and, forgetting about the pain in her stomach, continued the chase. The joints in her hands were becoming stiffer. She kept on, gradually losing the feeling in her fingertips with every minute of being exposed to the cold air. Her cheeks were numb. Throat tight. She was dead set on her target and wasn't about to be bothered by discomforts. She was right on Phoebe's tail now, close enough to hear that the dog was gasping for air.

With Shauna no more than two steps behind the dog now, while sprinting alongside the ditch, Phoebe's right paw buckled and sent her tumbling down the steep dropoff. Shauna jumped in after it, sliding through a decline of leaves and twigs until she was shin-deep in water. While Phoebe regained her footing Shauna leapt over top of her, trapping

the dog between her thighs while it thrashed about, soaking everything around them in the freezing water.

Phoebe wasn't making it easy. Shauna tried to stuff her towel-wrapped arm in Phoebe's mouth, but it was futile. She squeezed her knees tighter together. The thrashing intensified, nearly knocking Shauna off into the water. She managed to keep herself upright by digging her free hand into the ground. Another attempt and stuffing the towel into her mouth sent Phoebe to kick off with her back legs with full force, knocking Shauna off balance and into the water. She immediately recovered and gasped for air as her head emerged from the surface. Before Shauna could get a clear look to see what was happening she attempted to grab hold of any part of the dog. With a firm grip on Phoebe's front paw Shauna pulled herself upright, then quickly felt the power of a pitbull's jaw as the dog's teeth sunk into her bare forearm. Giving Shauna no time to express her pain, Phoebe trudged through the water, dragging Shauna along on her knees. Shauna punched her repeatedly. The clamp around her arm tightened.

Shauna began to formulate a new strategy, but it all went to hell when she realized that there was no longer a towel wrapped around her other arm. She watched it flow downstream behind her. Shauna expelled a war cry and lunged at Phoebe, using her foot to propel herself forward, and grabbed a handful of skin from between Phoebe's shoulders to pull herself in. With another push she got herself up far enough to straddle Phoebe. Her knees crept closer to the dog's neck. She grabbed the wrist of the trapped hand and pulled it up toward her chest, deeper into the dogs jaws, where the clamping force weakened. There was a moment of relief when Shauna could feel the coldness of the water surround the edges of the holes in her arm. She held control over Phoebe's head. The growl slowed to a deep rumble. She pulled the dog's head in closer until it almost met with Shauna's stomach. The dog's green

eyes stared up at Shauna with an innocent look, shifting side to side, as if waiting for her to say something. Shauna took a moment to gather herself. As the thrashing came to a halt the dull ache in her forearm came to life. The pain seeped into her bones, up into her shoulder and through the spine. Her neck went stiff. She shouted to the sky to relieve the tightness in her chest.

She could feel blood seeping from her arm and watched as droplets of it collected at the tip of her elbow and fell into the water below Phoebe's jaw. She tried to concentrate, devise an exit strategy while fighting the intense shivering. The snare couldn't have been more than two hundred feet downstream, somewhere up a small hill. That would have to do. After carefully spinning herself and Phoebe around she trudged down the stream on her knees. Phoebe's paws reluctantly followed where Shauna dragged them.

They didn't make it over thirty feet before Shauna's near-frozen body gave up. There had to be another way. She stopped, looked down at Phoebe, who was still staring up at her, and took a deep breath while loosening the grip on her forearm, allowing Phoebe to lower her neck, hoping that the animal would reciprocate and provide a little give.

It gave nothing. But it wasn't taking any more, either. The pain wasn't subsiding, but she felt better knowing that it would not worsen in the immediate future. If only she could say the same for the cold. It wasn't helping that the intense bouts of shivering caused her hurt arm to spasm, which made Phoebe nervous, causing the grip to tighten. Lowering the dog's paws onto the floor of the stream showed Shauna no signs of attempts at escape. She sighed a breath of relief and allowed her elbows to loosen up; the jaws then did, too. She leaned her head over top of Phoebe's and whispered words of assurance in as gentle a tone as she could manage. Finally, letting her own wrist go, she used the free arm to rub the top of Phoebe's head. Maybe, she thought, with one hand cradling the dog's belly, she could carry it up the hill.

At least far enough to grab the snare.

She wrapped her arm around the dog and attempted to lift it up off the ground. The low rumble of the dog's growl intensified. She tugged again and the movement of the teeth in her flesh sent another violent burst of pain through her body.

She grazed her hand along the floor of the stream, hoping to come up with a stick or anything to jam into the dog's jaws. Nothing. The banks and inclines were bare, too. Shauna was a moment away from making a foolish decision when she ran her hands down her body and was relieved to find a bulge in her front jeans pocket. It was her phone. She struggled to retrieve it without aggravating the dog further. She brought the phone up to the base of the dog's jaws and got to work.

She worked the phone into the base of the dog's jaws while simultaneously pulling her forearm outward. Soon enough, the right side of the dog's jaw clamped down on the phone, relieving some pressure from her arm. She kept going; more blood trickled out of the teeth-sized holes in her forearm. Little by little, she hammered the phone further into Phoebe's jaws with the base of her fist. Shauna pushed and pulled, in a prying motion, at the remaining two inches left of the phone, hoping that the slab of glass and aluminum in the animal's mouth would cause enough discomfort to let the rest of her arm go. The dog harked and huffed while readjusting the grip of its front and back teeth as it figured out what to bite down on. She pushed down even harder. The manic intensity in her eyes grew. The jaws suddenly blew wide open. She yanked her left arm out. The phone slipped and fell into the water. Phoebe yelped and howled and in an instant shut it's jaws on Shauna's right hand before she could have time to move it out of the way.

Shauna instinctively raised her left fist over her head and sent it flying down onto Phoebe's head. It was to no effect. She pounded on it several more times while the dog was too

busy gnawing on her hand. Shauna sent her elbow down into its spine, but it only slid down its muscular back. She sent another fist swinging, missing the head and catching the front paw, sending the dog's body to collapse into the water. The dog found its footing and emerged. Shauna hit it again and again and each time Phoebe's head plunged into the water Shauna was beginning to realize that there was only one way to end this.

It was on the fifth time she submerged the dog that its head remained underwater until the bubbles stopped coming up. Still straddling the dog, with both hands free now, Shauna couldn't decide which of her limbs needed to be caressed first. The snare was where she had left it and tomorrow Kyle was scheduled to make a run to the city dump. There was more sodium pentobarbital to order and the list of its recipients grew larger by the day. She would put a notice on the door to keep it closed at all times. She would make sure each worker kept to their stations. At some point she would have to do something about the wounds on her arms and the aching itch deep inside her pelvis.

Girl Talk

Being a curious creature and a sucker for passion, Gaby always kept a notebook handy at her desk to take notes about her more *animated* clients. These were return customers who booked their long sessions ahead ahead of time with wanted Mistress Gabriella. If there was one thing in their life that these men were sure of, it's what got them off. And it was through Gaby's efforts in research, attention to detail, and really *caring* about her clients' satisfaction, including remembering everyone's names, that led to her being the most requested phone-sex operator at *Pleasure Emporium*, leaving the rest of the girls to deal with the leftover callers. It was in her research of trying to figure of whatever the hell *My Little Pony* had to do with helping a client get past the mental barrier of trying to shove his entire hand into his rectum that she came upon an anonymous image board, where she went down the rabbit hole leading her to find the inspiration for her first recording.

Endless galleries of illustrations, ranging from crayon drawings to people who put brush to canvas, of sexualized renditions of their favorite live-action or cartoon characters. Among them were, mostly poorly written, fan fictions depicting the same characters in obscenely sexual situations.

She couldn't believe that such communities would exist. She especially couldn't believe that it seemed like these people existed in the tens of thousands. That although, as far as she assumed, these people would never meet in real life, they still seemed to have no reservations about describing, in passionate detail, the feelings these other artists' creations made them feel, how they would masturbate to them. Keep printouts of these stories in their wallets or school bags. Paste large-format printouts to the ceilings over top of their beds.

Gaby had just her voice and a feeling that there was more to life than being an overenthusiastic, but underpaid, phone-sex operator. The rabid fanaticism she witnessed on that image board, the intoxicating passion, the crazed sexual energy exploding violently out into all directions all felt like untapped potential. Everything she saw inspired her. Kept her up at night. Left her with a manic thought process that had her fantasizing about *how* she could make people feel, followed by an empty pit of discomfort in her stomach upon not knowing what to actually do to get them there. But there was a calling. There was a work ethic making her worthy of being a poster child for capitalism. There was a gnawing, self-assured line of thinking that led Gaby to believe that she was *actually* meant to do something great with her life, unlike everyone else around her .

Having spent a few evenings on that image board, Gaby was beginning to make some sense of the chaos. She would compartmentalize content and ideas that could lead to something at a later time. Learn what to filter, how to distinguish between that which had potential and that which was undeserving of any critical thought. She categorized people. Potential future clients. She better understood desires, quirks, particulars of people of all walks of life. No matter what she learned, though, there was no easy answer regarding what mental illnesses could be attributed to wanting a cartoon horse to rupture one's colon.

One particular story she came upon was growing increasingly popular. Gaby had tracked it for a few days, gaging reactions, gaining more perspective on what made it great. It had all the makings of the usual: one or two or three well-known characters from a popular TV series, a short-lived, placeholder plot of a simple adventure together that naturally lead to a cum-guzzling, anal gaping, tear-inducing deepthroat explosion of sexual climax. But the ending was not what caught the thousands of readers' attention. It was not what most readers raved about. It was the build-up to it all. It was the relatability of the characters. The attention to detail in their interactions that stayed true to canon. It was almost as if these people knew that a large part of what made sex so gratifying was everything that came before the clothes came off, the first wet kiss, or the reveal of a throbbing furry penis that got everyone worked up.

The excitement of this new venture clouded her head with fantasies of desperate men throwing themselves at her feet, begging for more. *More of what?* was the gnawing question that kept her awake at nights. She had the desire and the motivation, but no matter how much she read or all useless information she sifted through, she could not come up with any new ideas of her own. The lore of these characters was so deeply loved and treasured, and Gaby had witnessed, frequently, how a story that failed to respect the source material would get annihilated, torn apart, and cast off into that abyss, never to be seen or mentioned again. Its author or illustrator excommunicated via threats of violence or simply extreme discouragement.

She had just her voice and an increasingly vague idea of what men wanted. She was realizing that perhaps men *did* value the more emotional aspects of sex. The connections that could be made during the build-up. That they, too, wanted to use their imaginations. After all, she figured now after evaluating her current state of success, no one had ever

seen what she actually looked like. Her voice was the only thing she knew to be of value; her attempts at stories not so much. Although the content of that one particular story was not exactly to her taste, she still found it enjoyable, and intriguing enough to keep dissecting to the point where one night she read it aloud to herself in the privacy of her apartment. She then read it many more times, recording it, being reminded of the things her voice was capable of. She was at it all evening, playing with her voice, tuning it as if it were a fine musical instrument. Studying her inclinations. Pausing for sexual suspense. Building tension to that erotic climax. Teasing where she could. Before the night was over, she found hard to resist wanting to masturbate to her own voice reading aloud a story of cartoon animals and friendship.

Yet she did. Over and over again.

Before the night was over she had made her own account on that website. She uploaded her own recording in response to the original post where the popular story was published. Before she went to bed she eased her insecurities about nobody liking her work by figuring it would get lost in a sea of a thousand other responses anyway, like things do for everybody else in life.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when she awoke to find dozens of messages in her inbox. Hundreds of responses to her posting. Over a thousand listens of her recordings. The other members praised her. Thanked her. Loved her, even. She made their day, and they were already hungry for more.

By six in the evening she was getting ready for work, still reading and attempting to respond to all the attention she was receiving. Listening again to her own recording several times as she went, already looking for ways to improve. That night was the first time she arrived late for work. It was the beginning of a worsened relationship with her boss. She wasn't bothered by it, though, because earlier, when one of

the forum users asked her publicly who she was, in a sea of text and images, her response made it to the top of the list: *I am your queen.*

And so the stories kept coming.

And so her voice kept working.

It was a quiet night at Pleasure Emporium. Mistress Gabriella found herself, as she did more often than not, dozing off, rearranging mental notes about her next recording. There was a new pizza place that opened up across the road and Mary was in a bad mood for some reason. Paul, her boss, was being more pissy than usual. The news of 'Thomas' passing occasionally strolled through her mind. It was difficult for her to conceptualize, or be unemotional about it, as a few moments of simply feeling *bad* for what happened quickly transitioned to guilt, which left her with a weight on her shoulders, a burden of responsibility for which she was sure was undeserved. She considered what it was about *Revenge of the Ninja* that was so especially effective. She would have to listen to it again. There was always room for improvement. It was important to learn from one's successes.

She was on her fourth Sprite for the evening. When she left her booth for the break room to grab another drink, Mistress Gabriella spotted the group of other performers taking a break together. They ceased what they were talking about and took turns apologizing for not inviting her to their gathering. They thought she was on a call. They thought she was in one of her *creative* moods and wanted to be left alone. They confirmed Mistress Gabriella's suspicion, for the hundredth time, that they simply did not enjoy her company.

She took another sprite out of the fridge, shutting the door extra gently, as if to send a signal indicating she was not upset. With a brief, fake smile, some of the tension in the room lifted. She popped the tab on the aluminum can,

raised it up in their direction, and cheered, “all good, ladies, brain is working overtime this week.” She faked another smile, “don’t worry about me.”

Erica, the stressed out, single mother of two who worked evenings for a rate of \$0.30 a minute—about the same as what she paid the babysitter to watch her kids while she was away, pulled a chair out from the table and signaled to Mistress Gabriella to have a seat, “come on, hun, won’t you join us?”

Mistress Gabriella stopped in her tracks and cracked an affectionate smile. She set a hand on the spine of the chair to take some weight off as she leaned over to set her drink down on the table. “Oh, you girls,” she stretched back over the chair to straighten herself up, then added, “always so sweet.”

“Anything for our Gaby!” Grace, a red-haired, twenty-four-year-old engineering student, said, “come! These ladies are teaching me about boys—because obviously,” she said, “*I don’t know shit*. Maybe you have something you wanna add?” She winked at Gaby.

“Oh, honey . . .” Erica reached out to Grace and grabbed her hand, looked her straight in the eyes and nodded her head back towards Mistress Gabriella.

“Huh?” Erica glanced up at Mistress Gabriella, who wasn’t looking too happy. “Oh!” it hit her, “sorry. I meant . . . anything for our *Mistress Gabriella*!” An awkward smile stretched the freckles on her face, remaining frozen there until Mistress Gabriella reciprocated.

“Oh, *Gracie* . . . that’s alright,” Mistress Gabriella said in a low tone, exhaling slowly as she spun around to reach for the fridge handle, “just a seniority thing.” With her right arm resting on top of the fridge door, keeping her body from collapsing forward, she expelled a tired groan while reaching for the top shelf of the fridge. After swatting several unlabeled bags and cans and food containers out of the way with her palm she found what she was looking for, at the

very back of the shelf. She groaned again, with a deep tone emanating from the back of her throat that indicated annoyance. “Who the . . .” she said under her breath, then stretched out further, inching her toes toward the fridge as she closed in on her target. The girls sitting at the table behind her shared a mischievous smirk. Mistress Gabriella flicked her sweaty fingertips against the rim of the cardboard carton until it was close enough to get a firm hold, then yanked it out of the fridge. In one smooth motion the takeout container was in her hands and she was upright again, trying to catch her breath. “I’d prefer it . . .” Mistress Gabriella turned to the girls, “. . . if my food wasn’t stuffed to the back of the fridge.” She scanned the room, “there’s plenty enough space for the lot of us.” She held out the Chinese takeout container, displaying for everyone to see the words *Mistress Gabriella* marked in thick felt over the top lid. She popped open the top, threw the box into the microwave for three minutes on *high*, and spun around to face the girls, resting her backside on the kitchenette counter top. Her attention turned to Grace. “What was I talking about?”

“Seniority?” Grace answered.

“That’s right—seniority. Imagine me . . .” she looked to the crowd before continuing, “. . . us, as the *Madames*. And you, young thing, as the—”

“Hun . . .” Tonia, the single mother of *three*, always finding herself having to buy a new Playstation, interrupted, “. . . this ain’t a whorehouse here.” She shook her head at Mistress Gabriella, chuckling, “and if *anybody here* were the *Madam* . . . *Hah!*” She burst into laughter, “it would be that *Paul* . . .” she lowered her voice before adding, “. . . *Sunofabitch* . . . thinking he runs this here gig.”

“Yeah!” Mistress Gabriella jumped in, “him and that no-good *Mary*.”

“Oh, leave Paul alone,” Erika said. “Paul takes care of us.”

"Paul takes care of *Mary*, I'll tell you that!" Said Tonia.

"Right. Yeah, what's up with that girl?" Grace asked.

"All I know is she makes the bank here *hourly*." Tonia said, "while we gotta sit and wait around until some schmuck calls *us* until we can start adding our pennies up. Yeah—that Mary—she no good."

"But *why*?" Grace asked, again.

"Not one bit," Mistress Gabriella said, watching the timer on the microwave count down from eleven, hoping to catch it before it beeps and causes a ruckus.

"They think she's a spy," Erika intervened.

"She *is* a spy!" Mistress Gabriella said, putting her foot down. She leaned her head towards the hallway of booths where the girls work, pointing her finger to the end where there were two doors. The first door had the words, in thick black letters glued to the translucent glass window, *Paul, Manager of Operations*. The door beside it just said *Mary*. "Think about it," she continued, "how much work you think she actually does—take a credit card here and there. Make coffee or take out the trash. Whatever it is that she does—you think that's a full-time job?"

"Like a . . . secretary?" Grace asked.

"Don't look like no secretary to *me*!" Tonia said, "locked up in her office the way she does all day? Don't be a damn fool!"

"Okay . . . alright then." Grace sunk into her seat.

"She listens in on us," Mistress Gabriella, now sitting beside Erika, readied herself to dig into a mound of sweet and sour beef. "She listens. She takes notes. She learns from us. All of our conversations, everything we say here."

"You mean like . . . *here*?" Erika looked side to side, "now?"

"You Goddamn better hope not!" Tonia crossed her arms and shook her head.

"No. She listens to us when we're with our clients," Mistress Gabriella continued. "He has her learn everything

there is about what we do. Everything we say to our clients and how we say it. How we deal with fetishes and cater to various preferences. How we *get it done*. How—”

“She’s learning how to rid us of our jobs!” Tonia slammed her fist down.

“Oh, she must be a software developer or something . . .” Grace said.

A collective “*huh?*”

“All this data collection—sounds like she might be working with machine learning. I bet she’s recording everything you say. Feeding all this data into an *AI*, must be a pretty large scale project. There’s no way this is the only center where—”

“Hun, hun,” Tonia smiled and turned to Grace, “slow down, we know you’re a smarty-pants.” She leaned in close and whispered, “*India*.”

Grace looked at Erika with a perplexed look on her face. Erika took the words out of her mouth and said them herself, “don’t listen to this ridiculousness. In fact—if there was ever a conspiracy theory around here—Grace here would be on the right track. Everyone’s suddenly worried about robots taking their jobs. Why shouldn’t we? Tonia—what you’re saying makes no sense.”

“It does too!” Mistress Gabriella said.

“Outsourcing tech support to India is one thing,” Erika said, “playing-pretend as a fourteen-year-old school girl with a thick Indian accent to a horny old man is another!” She took a moment to gather her thoughts and read the room, then continued, “no guy’s gonna wanna get off thinking that the person instructing him to jerk off might have a solution to his jammed printer, hah!” she threw her hand up for a high five to Grace, who returned it immediately.

“Erika, honey, I think that’s offensive?” Tonia asked.

“Look,” Erika went on, “I’m sure it works in India, but back here, as far as I know, that doesn’t do it for them. That’s why Paul keeps going on about getting a French girl

on board with us. That's why *you*, Tonia, are here."

"Uhuh . . ." Tonia didn't look amused, making no effort to hide the fact from Erika.

"Yeah, I knew you were going to do that face, but I have a point. We're stuck trying to find variety as it is now. There's no way Paul will outsource our work. And he's struggling, I can see it. You'll hear him rant constantly about every skinny French bitch wanting to model. How the Swedish ones have no creativity, despite having that perfect accent. How all the Eastern European girls are immediately pulled out into the streets . . . and so on!"

"He sounds like a . . ." Grace said, masking the discomfort on her face behind a long sip of coffee, ". . . he didn't give me the impression that . . . is that how he talks about women? What he thinks of—"

"No . . ." Erika said in a long, drawn-out manner. "He can be quite sweet, caring. I imagine it's difficult to separate business from reality when the casting call comes, because after all," she pointed at Tonia, "*you are here* because you have that generic *black lady* thing going on, and it works on a lot of levels. You, Tonia, by now have probably learned how many . . . morally misguided white boys want a big, sassy black lady to sit on their face in secret. You might not be fully aware of your power, influence." Erika kept her eyes fixed on Tonia for a moment, then turned to Grace, "*you* have that *valley girl* sound, despite your intelligence. *I'm* good at the mommy talk. Gaby here . . ."

Mistress Gabriella lowered the large spoon-full of chicken chow-mein away from her mouth and looked disapprovingly at Erika.

"*Mistress Gabriella* here is just . . . *ob—the greatest!*" Erika smirked.

"Hey!" Mistress Gabriella said just after swallowing, "I don't need that from you."

"I'm only teasing." Erika said.

"Well, go tease elsewhere," Mistress Gabriella said. She

wiped her mouth of hoisin sauce and continued, “I’m here to work, and as long as I’m here, I’d like to stay in character. It helps me at my job and retains some semblance of professionalism. Grace—you want to learn about boys, how to do your job here? Understand that men call because there’s something they need. Whatever it is they need, despite what these two here were probably telling you, is more nuanced than just getting them to come. For that they have porn, and of porn there is aplenty. There’s a reason they call. It’s your job to figure out what that reason may be. *It’s a job*—simple as that. You all can benefit from *caring about your jobs* a little. Maybe then we wouldn’t all have to worry about being outsourced to India.”

“Well, hun,” Tonia said, “maybe we’d all care more about our jobs if we were making who knows how many thousands off of everyone else’s here hard work?”

“What I do in my free time has nothing to do with you.” Mistress Gabriella aimed her fork at the sweet and sour chicken but suddenly stopped, then closed the lid of the takeout box and stood up. “And what do you mean, hard work? *I* do all the work. *I* do all the recording for my business. *I* do all the writing. *I* miss days of sleep to release my content on schedule—how exactly am I making *thousands* of off *your* work?”

“Come on, *Gabs*.” Erica looked up at Mistress Gabriella, “We’ve all seen your website. We’ve seen your *original* recordings. The *mermaid* thing—Tonia had that guy with the mermaid fetish. She talked about him for weeks. She also had the pretend therapist thing. I had the—”

“Those weren’t *your* ideas! They were the clients’!”

“But we were the ones to—”

“You all had nothing.” Mistress Gabriella stormed past the table, cradling the remains of her lunch in both hands, “or you *did*, but none of you had the sense to do anything with it but giggle and gossip in your corner like a bunch of little girls, snickering about how weird or dumb or funny or

gross all of this is. I made something off it, and I'll be damned if any of you are going to take credit for the work *I* put in!"

"But I have kids."

"And *I* have a family."

"And I have college."

"And *I*," Mistress Gabriella turned to the group, "have a God-damned empire!"

On especially slow nights the girls were given permission to leave work early. After the ordeal in the lunchroom Mistress Gabriella constantly found her phone laying off the hook and Paul had had enough of her attitude for the night.

She arrived home at about three in the morning. With the lights off and her shoes still on, she slid her bag into a stainless-steel wire mesh cradle sitting on the far end of her 8-foot wide workbench. Three large monitors were arranged at the center of her desk, the corners of their bezels touching. Underneath the middle monitor sat a sturdy volume control knob. From it, a coiled audio cable ran behind the monitors, to the edge of the desk, where a pair of professional-grade headphones hung. The rest of the cable was strung around the polished aluminum hook. Peeking out from beneath the bezel of right monitor lay a sound board with several wires stringing down below the back of the table, connected to her computer under the desk. A fourth cable ran from the back of the sound mixer, down the left side of her desk, where it stretched along an articulating arm to her microphone. Mistress Gabriella reached into her bag and took out a pouch and laid it down in front of her. She undid the zipper from the center and pulled out four identical sound recorders, then the corresponding receiver for each one. Each one labeled: *Tonia, Erika, Grace, Mary*. She tossed aside the smaller bag to make space for the recorders and turned them on their sides. One by one, she removed the SD cards from their

trays and popped them into a card reader. She stared blankly at the screen, watching the green progress bar of the file transfer. When the transfer was done, she did the next one. Then the other two. Each SD card for its corresponding hard drive sat in an array beneath the left-hand monitor. One for Tonia. One for Erika. One for Grace. One for Mary. She wiped each card before placing them back into the recorders, then stuffed everything back into her work bag.

She grabbed a can of Sprite and got comfortable in her computer chair, slipped on her headphones, and got to work.

Was it her idea or a clients'? Mistress Gabriella wondered while listening to a conversation between Erika and a middle-aged man, who would, every few minutes, stop and ask things like: *am I okay to say that? Is it alright if I thought of you as . . . ? Can you really do that for me?*

It was difficult to concentrate. Erika was never particularly interesting to listen to. At her best she was too sympathetic. At worst—too rational. An awkward blend that always resulted in an uninspired finale that always ended in the same manner: *faster! Faster! Faster!*

Tonia had killer resonance in the voice and played the bossy lady character to perfection, but always stuttered when a client would make a request that reminded her of that pigeonhole act she gets shoved into on the daily.

Grace did three stints as a cool surfer girlfriend who had an unmatched appetite for anal and never pressured a boy into calling her back. There was an hour-long personal call with who Mistress Gabriella could only assume was her boyfriend: some argument about having to study so late into the evenings all the time and vague suspicions. Towards the end of her shift, a man who referred to himself only as *Humbert Humbert* begged Grace to assure him that he did no wrong. After almost twenty minutes of Grace struggling to

play along the man broke character and told her to read a fucking book before hanging up.

Humbert Humbert, who did no wrong . . . Mistress Gabriella felt inspiration strike. She jotted down on a sticky pad:

Humbert Humbert, big and strong.

Misunderstood, despite his tongue so slick.

These nymphets craving Humbert's dick.

She tossed the little note into her jar of ideas.

Mary's evening was as uneventful as any. The business wasn't yet completely on the verge of collapse and Paul went on with another tirade about how he wasn't a pimp, despite what people might think, because the girls working for him have a choice and can quit whenever they want and it wasn't his fault that he wasn't paying a living wage because that was just the industry rate.

She set her headphones down and leaned back in her chair, stretching out towards the ceiling. Another can of Sprite went down quick and ,wasting no more time, she plucked the latest note from her barren idea jar and stretched it out in front of her keyboard.

Humbert Humbert . . .

Mistress Gabriella wouldn't allow herself to create a recording based on a classic of modern literature without some due diligence on her part. Some extensive research was in order. It wouldn't take more than a single fan who was an avid reader to discover inconsistencies in Mistress Gabriella's recordings and point it out to everyone else on the internet, planting that thought in everyone's head, that virus, that seed of doubt that would soon have everybody asking themselves: *what if she doesn't care and only does it for the money?* There would be nothing more immersion-breaking.

She spent the next two hours reading literary essays on *Lolita*. Taking extensive notes on themes and setting and characters. All the nicknames given to the object of lust over the years in the journey. She made notes of Nabokov's breakdown of what makes a nymphet a nymphet and

circumstances under which one would no longer be desirable. She created yearning and motivation. A want and way to obtain what was needed. The objective: to absolve the pedophiles, an audience she hadn't captured yet, of their sins.

In all her research, a nagging stream of consciousness, running parallel to the new recording, repeatedly derailed her train of thought. *Revenge of the Ninja*—there was a power in there she was not yet aware of. An artistic instinct, like that of an artist who finds additional layers of meaning in their work after the piece is complete and could say, with a straight face, that they meant to do that all along.

She listened to the entire series until it was almost six in the morning, taking notes, hoping that breaking down her inspirations would reveal a secret. The words *revenge* and *ninja* were synonymous, and nobody was going to make her feel like an unoriginal hack for creating a story based on the criteria. The village where her hero was from, *Hayabusa*—a popular Japanese motorcycle. Better to pick a word that already exists rather than try to come up with something new and embarrass herself. All the creatures and landmarks came from hundreds of other books or movies as any other fantasy story came from. This was fine, she thought. Those details didn't matter—it's how she told the story, how she presented it, compiled it, how she *performed it*. That's what her thousands of customers really wanted. The plot, ultimately, came second. But there was another word in that recording that came to mind, *Mise Akune*, she couldn't remember what it meant, then wondered if she had any idea of what she was writing in the first place. She typed the words into a reverse Japanese-English translator but the results were illegible.

Mise Akune—a hint of her artistic intuition. That nagging feeling in the back of her mind that she was doing something right all along.

No matter. She was sure she would figure it out later.

She was a queen and they were her servants. Thomas, as far as she was concerned, served his duty, and she couldn't help but to think: *who else would?*

It was nine in the morning and the sun was showing its first hints of color in the dark gray sky. She checked the weather report, and was relieved to discover that visibility that morning was a mere 35%. The sunrise wasn't due for another forty minutes. Good news.

Mistress Gabriella stood facing herself in the bathroom mirror, arranged around the perimeter of which twelve-hundred watts' worth of vanity bulbs lit up the white walls to a brightness her eyes could never adjust to. Propped up against the mirror, atop her sink basin, sat her phone. The screen black except for the text: *The Perfect You*, hovering over the white *play* button in her media player.

She clipped on a set of wireless earbuds and, as if for some reason it wasn't going to work this time, waited for the: *bluetooth connected, Mistress Gabriella's iPhone* ring through her ears with the utmost attention. She reached for the play button on her phone, but when she caught her gaze in the mirror, her hand retreated. The hand shook and she grasped the surrounding air into a fist to make it stop. Looking straight ahead, nearly blinded by the light, she could almost make out the remains of a smear of Hoisin sauce in the corner of her mouth, camouflaged beneath the cherry-red lipstick. She undid the bun on the top of her head, releasing a flattened mop of thin, black hair that barely reached the tips of her shoulders. The intense light filled the deepest craters in her skin that even the foundation couldn't. The shadows cast by the wrinkles in her forehead disappeared, as did the folds in the sagging skin below her chin that stretched toward her collar bone. She felt compelled to reach for the *play* button again, but thought herself to be stronger. Her eyes widened as she reached with both hands toward the ceiling, feeling how the build-up of sweat came

unstuck from between the flaps around her stomach. She reached for her breasts, feeling the same stickiness of sweat as she pulled them up to let some air underneath them. Working further down, she rubbed her hands between her legs and brought them up to her nose, taking in a sweet scent of molasses she was so used to by now.

It was when she turned sideways to the mirror that she decided it was time to play her recording. Within seconds of hitting *play* she was back in position, eyes to the mirror and hands at the sides. With a predictable amount of effort she was able to make her mouth form a smile as a brief intro piano jingle played. “Hello, beautiful,” her own voice spoke into her head, she reacted to it as if she didn’t know what to expect. That voice which, to this day, could still send shivers down her spine. Those *oohs* and those *ahhs*. *Buttery*. *Honey-glazed*. She straightened up her back and planted her feet firmly into the heated tiles and as her voice continued to speak it gradually became easier to deal with the intense light.

Her bloodshot eyes fought the weight of her eyebrows. The recording came to an end, leaving her with a simple instruction: *to have the most wonderful day of her life*. Fingertip by fingertip. Joint by joint, her body awoke in a tired, yet lightweight state. Each breath became deeper as her heartbeat rose back to normal. She watched the smile on her face as the light switch was flicked into the *off* position. The room went all black except for a faint hint of muddy orange spreading from the diffused blinds of the bathroom window. She looked at the faint outline in the mirror and said to it, “goodnight, beautiful,” before finally going to bed.

Eddie

The engraving on the nameplate read: *Roger Edmonds, P.I.* and the longer she stared at it, the more it became apparent of how little she knew about private investigators. She observed the man's office for anything that would add a personal touch to the dialogue, anything to get on his good side. Judging by the scar across his throat, bringing up the medals hanging on the back wall seemed like a poor idea. The furniture was minimal, well-maintained. Nothing looked out of place. The shelves were free of dust, as far as she could tell, and the laminate flooring still had that aroma of wet floor wipes. Besides the many dozens of organized file-folder boxes, the only other items found on the shelves were collections of pulp sci-fi and fantasy novels. The covers wild with fantastic colors and abstract imagery from a time when it was still appropriate to be optimistic about the future. Fantasy, Shauna figured, that would be her in. By the time she quit her stalling and finally looked back at the man, it was clear he was onto her.

"Mrs. Roberts, the insistence in your tone indicates that you're still not getting it. I'm sure you did your research and found some reviews praising my work and want to put me in this hot seat so see if I'm up to the task, but I have to make this clear to you: I am interviewing *you* just as much as

you are me. That needs to be clear and understood”

Shauna kept scanning the office for objects of interest, as if unphased by Roger’s tone, while her fidgeting fingernails begged her for a good chewing. “Right,” Shauna said, “loud and clear.”

“Your money is no good to me if it means that I am somehow indirectly involved with the harm caused to the party being investigated. I *am* sorry for your loss, but how will you convince me that you plan on resolving this conflict amicably? What are your intentions, precisely?”

“*Comeuppance*”

“Throw synonyms around all you want, the intentions are very clearly written on your face.”

“What do you want from me . . . she’s an *evil* fucking woman.”

“Evil is a strong word. I wouldn’t throw it around so loosely without considering its ramifications. You’re still a young lady, but I hope, for your sake, that you won’t have to learn what that word *truly* means.”

Shauna straightened up in her chair and squared her shoulders. Through her teeth she said, “do I look like somebody who doesn’t think before they speak? I’m a grown-ass woman, Roger. Let *me* be clear—I mean it. If you so badly want to maintain a clear conscience I’d suggest helping me out here, because I can assure you that my husband wasn’t the first. He won’t be the last. Would you want that weight on your shoulders, knowing now what you know? Think of all the people you can save.”

“Well, if this *Mistress Gabriella* is as hopeless at manipulation as you are then I don’t think there’s much to worry about.”

“Hey! I’m not selling snake oil. There’s opportunity to do something good here. Excuse me for making my point clear!” The meeting was falling apart. Shauna reverted to thinking about work to keep level-headed. She wondered how Kyle was handling managing the volunteers and if the

shelter had caught fire anywhere yet. The meeting was taking longer than expected and the drive alone took up twenty minutes of her lunch break. A gas station sandwich would have to suffice as her meal.

“So what would your plan of action be?” Roger said, scanning on his computer through Mistress Gabriella’s website. He angled the monitor for Shauna to see as he scrolled through various subsections. “I don’t see what this woman is doing that’s wrong. It’s porn. Fetish, it appears, for the most part. I’ll keep my opinions to myself regarding the subject. Bondage, role-play, some hypnosis—I don’t see the crime here. I don’t want to make assumptions about your sexual history, but I can assure you that there is nothing malicious about Mistress Gabriella. Some people enjoy losing control and giving in to a powerful figure. You don’t strike me as someone who indulges in such activities, but I ask that you keep an open mind. Perhaps your husband was different. Couple that with an undiagnosed mental illness and—”

“Thomas *wasn’t sick*. Sexually frustrated, at worst. But don’t take my word for it. Listen to the recording and see for yourself. She instructs the listener to stab themselves *while* in a state of hypnosis.”

“Does she, *really*?” Roger navigated to the *Roleplay* subsection and scanned through the list. “Which one of these?”

“*Revenge of the Ninja!*”

“I see . . . and she asks the listener to *stab themselves*?”

Shauna crossed her arms and leaned back, not saying a word.

“I see then.” Roger said, then closed the browser on his computer and leaned towards Shauna.

“It was close enough, alright?”

“And the police report?”

“Suicide.”

“Mrs. Roberts, if she were a licensed hypnotherapist,

performing these . . . scenarios in a controlled environment, instructing her patient to stab themselves . . . well, that would be an entirely different story. I can assure you that if that were the case the authorities would have already been more involved. There's a reason they aren't. A rational person such as yourself should understand this."

"What do you know about *me*?" Shauna sulked.

"I have only my opinions, and they are fluctuating."

"No shit?" Shauna scoffed. "I have some of my own as well." She stood up and tucked her chair back under the desk. "How about this: when you're not too busy tracking down child-support evaders and enabling the delusions of paranoid spouses, maybe you can take on a real job instead of chasing easy five-star reviews for your Google listing. You know, *actually* do some work."

"Mrs. Roberts," Roger stood up from his chair, towering over Shauna, and looked down at her while crossing his arms. "If you think your matters are so important, your duty to exact punishment so pure and binding that you think it's worth for me to uncover and disclose sensitive, personal information about another individual which would aid your quest to exact revenge, which would result result in, should you succeed, my license becoming revoked, then you, Mrs. Roberts, are not as intelligent as I'd hoped you would be. I have no obligation to indulge *your* delusions. I think we're done here."

Roger Edmonds: Investigations & Process Service

4.5 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 56 Google Reviews

Private investigator in Boulder, Colorado

Google Reviews

Shauna Roberts

2 reviews

★ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ today

Roger was rude and unhelpful. Not in tune with how the modern world works. Will refuse work if any challenge is presented. Definitely going with somebody else for my case. Somebody should hire an investigator to determine the legitimacy of these five-star reviews.

Karen C.

Local Guide 45 reviews

★★★★★ 4 weeks ago

Not only did Roger find my ex-husband (who happened to run off to Denver), he provided me with more information than I had asked for, including the name and location of his new business which got a 1-star from me because that piece of shit can't do anything right.

Susan Avila

3 reviews

★★★★★ 8 weeks ago

In a messy divorce you can't find a better ally than Mr. Edmonds! Until the next one I guess

Bob R.

12 reviews

★★★★☆ 9 weeks ago

Told me everything I needed, and then SOME! Not too happy with confrontational tone at times. Took over 4 hours to respond to my inquiry

Phillip Stone

1 Review

★★★★★ 12 weeks ago

What a professional! With Roger's help I won back custody of my son when I was finally able to prove to the courts that my wife was a junkie. Got to keep all my money too. Will definitely employ his services again when it comes

time for a restraining order.

Ryan Collins

1 review

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 13 weeks ago

Eddie's an old coot who can't tell a fart from an AK round if it went off near his head . Just kidding love ya Eddie . Tommy's gone belly up let's catch up soon . Ryan

...

“Well hello there, sexy.”

“Hi, hello.”

“What is your name babe?”

“I’m Roger.”

“Roger?”

“Yes?”

“Please relax, honey. Talk to me. Tell me: what is the most intimate thing you’ve ever wanted to tell anybody?”

“Well, uhhh—I was sort of hoping you could help me figure it out?”

“Mhmm, make me work? I like a challenge. You’d like to do a bit of . . . *self-discovery*?”

“Yes. Yes please. I would love it if you could.”

“Good, good. I can do that. Hey, sexy, before we start, I just need you to provide us with a credit card number before we continue. Can you do that for me, baby?”

“Yes, of course. Do I give you the—”

“Just hold on one moment, sweetie. I’ll transfer you to our very sexy financial service representative. She’ll take excellent care of you. Transferring you now, hold on, honey, it’ll only take a minute . . .”

“Mmmmm, hi again, sexy.”

“Hi, Gabriella.”

“Nu-uh-uh. It’s *Mistress Gabriella*.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Hi, *Mistress Gabriella*.”

“Look at that. We’re already discovering some things out about you. You like to behave, don’t you, Roger? Don’t feel bad about it—I think it’s a great thing. I think it’s super very sexy. Oh how good you make *me* feel when I know you want to listen to everything I have to say. And when *I* feel good, you’ll feel even better. Oh how I’m gonna love talking with you; how *you’re* gonna love to listen.”

“Okay.”

“*Okay*, Roger? You’ll have to do better than that for me, baby.”

“Yes, mistress. Yes, Mistress Gabriella.”

“Oh, who’s a good boy now? Tell me, Roger, how old are you?”

“I’m . . . I’m uh-hh sixty-five.”

“Oh my—a *mature man*. I like older men, they know exactly how to talk to a lady. I’m sure all the girls love you for it, don’t they?”

“I think so. Yes.”

“Oh, Roger baby—I *know* it. Now tell me, are you going to let me take control of you? Because you know . . . the more in control *I* am, the better I can make you feel. And I can make you feel absolutely incredible. What do you say, Roger baby—be a good boy and let Mistress Gabriella take

control of you? Of . . . *all* of you?”

“Umm, yes?”

“I don’t believe you meant that. Convince me you’re ready to give yourself up to me. Tell me what I need to hear. Mistress Gabriella commands you to!”

“I’m all yours Mistress Gabriella! I’ll do anything you ask . . . please?”

“Oh that’s right. Good boy. Beg. Beg for me!”

“I’m yours! Please, have me!”

“That’s right you’re mine! But I’m gonna need a little more than that, you sexy thing. Tell me, Roger—tell me that your body is mine.”

“My body is yours.”

“Mmmm. Good. Now tell me that your heart is mine.”

“My heart is all for you.”

“Oh, baby. You’re making me feel so good already. Now tell me, Roger . . . say that your . . . dick, is mine.”

“My—“

“Say it, Roger!”

“My . . . penis, is yours.”

“Good. Good boy. And it is hard, isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes it is! How did you know?”

“Oh, I know more than you think, hun. I know that you have your hand wrapped around it as I speak. I know you’re imagining what it’s like to have these lips wrapped around *it*. To have this *voice* wrapped around your . . . *mbmm*, I know you can feel tingles in all the right places right now. I know you’re throbbing. Throb for me baby! Now Roger?”

“Yes?”

“Take your hand off of your cock.”

“Why?”

“Because, you only get to touch yourself when I tell you to. And I know you’ll be a good boy and listen. I can have a lot of fun with you. Because you love to be submissive. You *love* receiving instruction. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Mistress Isabella.”

“Good, now I just want you to sit back and relax. Follow my voice. I want you to feel completely safe and relaxed now that you’re in the hands of this *goddess*. This horny, sexy goddess.”

“But I don’t even know what you look like.”

“Roger, baby. Use a little imagination. If my voice is any sign of just how sexy the girl you’re talking to is . . . *Mmmm*, I know you love my voice. I know you’d fuck this voice if you could. Tell me baby, would you fuck this voice, is this not the sexiest voice you’ve ever heard in your entire life?”

“Yes. Yes it is! God, you must be beautiful!”

“Oh Roger, you wouldn’t believe it. Hmm, fine—you’ve been a good boy for a few minutes now, why don’t you go ahead and stroke it for me.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“Stroke it fast.”

“I’m—“

“Stroke that cock for me!”

“I’m stroking!”

“Now stop! Stop stroking right now, get your hand off your cock. Did you do it?”

“I did.”

“Good boy. Good Roger. You liked that, didn’t you?”

“Amazing.”

“Oh, I know it was. Now, I bet there’s a hot stud on the other end of the line. I bet girls are lining up outside of your door just waiting to fuck you endlessly. But”

“Yes?”

“You seem just a tad shy, Roger. It’s only a minor problem. But I think I have the perfect solution. I know how to make you let go of all of your minor problems. Are you willing to try new things with me, baby?”

“Yes. I mean, I guess I am. Depends on what it is?”

“Roger, sweetie. Do you want my help or not? That wasn’t a question. I’m in control of you—remember? I was only asking you as a test. You need to listen to me. You need

to let go, baby. Let it all go. Breathe deep. Let's try some things. Are you mine, Roger?"

"I'm yours, Mistress Gabriella."

"Now honey, I need you to do something for me. I want you to walk over to your kitchen, and I want you to grab the biggest knife you can find."

"Uh, what? Really? What's it for?"

"Roger, what did we just talk about. You have to learn to trust me if you want me to make you feel good. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes I do—sorry."

"Take the knife and bring it over to the phone with you. I want you to be sitting down for this. I want you to be completely relaxed."

"..."

"Come on, sexy."

"..."

"Roger . . . are you still with me, baby?"

"OK. Yes. I'm getting up. One minute."

"Good boy, Roger."

"Mistress Gabriella?"

"Yes, sexy?"

"I got the knife. I'm sitting down now."

"Oh what a good boy you are. I bet the girls must love having you around. So obedient. You know what, baby? For being so, so very good to me, I'm going to be good to you. I want you to start stroking again."

"Oh! Thank you!"

"Yes, Roger! Keep stroking. Stroke that hard cock for me, baby. Oh, my God! What's this—"

"What? What is it?"

"Roger, baby, I think . . . oh my, can you believe it—this whole time I've been touching myself and I wasn't even aware of it. You're really getting me going . . . *mbmmmm*, you sure know how to please a woman."

“Oh really? Wow!”

“You sure know how to make me feel sexy, Roger. Okay—stop stroking now.”

“Yes, Mistress Gabriella.”

“Mmmm, yeah—I think I might even come soon. Just dripping wet over here. Roger—you’re amazing.”

“God . . . thanks! Thank you!”

“No . . . thank *you*, Roger. Now, baby, I want you to relax and take a deep breath. Exhale . . . slowly. Are you ready to take this relationship to the next level, baby?”

“I am . . . Mistress Gabriella.”

“Good, good. I want you to pick up that knife, and I want you to place that cold blade flat up against your stomach. You’re gonna love this.”

“Uh. Ummm, one second, Mistress Gabriella, I need to take my shirt off.”

“*Mhmmm*, do whatever you need to.”

“Almost there, one sec!”

“Roger?”

“Yes.”

“Slowly.”

“Shit.”

“What is it, Roger?”

“Dropped my phone—let me put it on speaker. One second. One second. Please.”

“ . . . ”

“Okay. I’m done. Hello?”

“ . . . ”

“HELLO? Mistress Gabriella—are you still there?”

“ . . . Hi again. Are you holding the knife in your hand now?”

“Yes. Yes I am.”

“Excellent. Amazing. I’m so fucking wet for you, baby. Now, run the side of the knife up against your chest, slowly, smoothly. Feel the blade catch and release every hair it grazes over. Feel the coldness. Feel the edge. The danger. I

want you to close your eyes now as you do this and simply follow the sound of my voice. Let it guide you. Your hand. I have full control of you now. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Say it again, Roger. This part is really important and I want to be sure that you will obey my every command."

"I understand, Mistress Gabriella. It's cold. It's nice. Keep talking, please—just keep saying things!"

"Good boy, Roger. That's what I want to hear from you. *Mmm*, my own personal Roger—doing whatever I ask of him. Just so you know—I am completely dripping right now. *Mmm*, I have two fingers inside of me and they're both for you. *Mmmm*—how good they taste when I stick them into my mouth. How I wish you could taste them. Oh how I wish these were your fingers. I know you'd love to smell them. Lick them. Now, keep the knife right there against your stomach. I want you to keep the tip in contact with your skin while you lift the handle up and point the tip towards your skin. I want you to feel how sharp it is. It's going to feel so good. Oh—three fingers in—I feel so fucking good, baby!"

"I'm doing it! I'm doing it!"

"Feel the tip, Roger. Feels great, doesn't it? Oh I bet it feels fucking incredible! Roger, how would you like to go deeper, baby?"

"What—even deeper?"

"Roger, I want you to keep your eyes closed and think about how that knife would feel sliding further in. Imagine that cold blade parting your skin. Oh it's just all so exciting . . . will I let you go further? Hmm. *Yess* . . . keep that tip right there. *Poke poke poke*. Twist that handle. Feel that sting."

"I feel it. It hurts."

"*Good* . . . a little pain is good sometimes. It helps to put things in perspective. We all need a bit of pain once in a while to remind us of how good we have it. How does it

feel, Roger, knowing that with a snap of my finger that blade will sink deep into your stomach and there will be nothing you can do to stop me?”

“... ”

“Come on, baby. Tell me.”

“It feels . . .”

“Yessss?”

“Will you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Depends on how naughty I’m feeling. Depends on if you’re being a good boy . . .”

“*I am* being good?”

“Yes, baby. You’re being a *very* good boy. And good boys get to stroke their cocks for me. I want you to concentrate on the tip of that blade while you use your free hand to stroke it for me—give me everything you’ve got!”

“Okay. I’m stroking.”

“Stroke it harder, faster. Push on that blade and get ready to come for me!”

“I’m pushing!”

“Good. Now bring the blade up to your throat—stroke it harder—you’re just going to push the edge up against the side of your neck. Press it up against your skin!”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, Roger—do it for me, baby—feel how exciting it is to put everything in the hands of Mistress Gabriella. Do it—feel the edge against your throat. Think of the danger. You’ve never felt anything like it! Do it!”

“No, I don’t think I’ll do that.”

“Roger, you will do as I say!”

“Good night now.”

If it weren’t for the upfront flat rate, Roger thought, he might have been broke by now. A simple search on the *WhoIs* database for *gabriellasrecordings.com* revealed a name: *Gaby Dewar*, an address in Sacramento, California, and a phone number different from the one on her website. He

wasted no time and called it.

One ring. Two rings. Three. *Beep*. A familiar voice spoke: “Hi there, you reached Gaby, can’t talk right now but leave a —”

He hung up. The infamous Mistress Gabriella: human after all. He would start a coalition in educating unsuspecting citizens about the importances of paying the extra \$9.99 a year for private domain registration if it weren’t making his job so easy at times.

Roger got to work on the number directing the customers to her phone sex line. The online Yellow Pages. Most cases involved the simplest of searches, if only people knew where to look, but then again, did he really want them to?

The number revealed a landline registered to a business named *Pleasure Emporium, Inc.*, located south of city center. The address on a satellite map showed a long-running warehouse with several closed-off units. A deeper search revealed several listings for units for rent at the same location. He scanned through the photos until a good angle displayed the unit he was looking for in the background. The doors were closed and there were no signs except for a two-foot long whiteboard with the words *NAIL SALON* printed on them. Not out of the ordinary for a business of this nature. The cars parked out front displayed signs of activity. He thanked God for the underpaid Indian children on the other side of the planet working tirelessly to keep these websites running up to date.

Mrs. Roberts, Roger began to write an e-mail, after a further bit of research I have decided to write to you. I'm thinking of reconsidering my decision to revoke my services. There may have been some misjudgment on my part. For my flat rate I'm willing to aid you in resolving your conflict, under the condition that you allow me to supervise, ensuring that all matters are handled—

And then a new message popped up in his mailbox. He

stopped writing to inspect it. The message was from Shauna:

June 14th, 2017 23:34

Thanks for nothing, Roger. I'll have you know that a crippled monkey can do your job.

Bored and Angry

June 15th, 2017 07:00

Subject: Re. Mistress Gabriella

Mrs. Roberts, I don't know what sort of information you've obtained, but I recommend you come see me to discuss any further actions you plan on taking.

Kyle was annoying and nosy and the only option she had. Being the only paid employee, he was obligated to come to work in a timely manner. He had keys to the shelter. He knew what places to call and what orders to make and, more or less, the way this place should be run. The idea that she was eligible for time off had been lost on Shauna for years now, as she could never find a valid enough reason to make use of it. Even now, under these circumstances, she found it difficult to allow herself some free time for extracurricular activities. The shelter would fall apart without her, she was sure of it. Yet now she found herself fighting the idea that she was the type of person who chose to put this burden on their shoulders, in thinking that the world wouldn't work without their presence, as a way to validate their existence.

A short face-to-face with the woman on the other end of the line was all she needed. Perhaps, if Mistress Gabriella were to see Shauna in person she would recognize the pain

she had inflicted and find it in herself to apologize. For many weeks now Shauna rolled over the script she had in her head of how their live interaction would turn out. No matter how hard she tried, though, the scenarios seemed to always turn chaotic. There was always a moment where Shauna would snap and lose control, sparking off a chain reaction of incoherent images of violence in her imagination. The mind always wanders. If the imaginary arguments she had in her head with Thomas were of any indication, actually having the talk, instead of obsessing over it, always led to some amicable conclusion, regardless if everything that was needed to be said got out into the open. A compromise, and a fleeting feeling hoping that the other party had compromised an equal amount, so that things were fair.

Just a simple chat. Mistress Gabriella was good with words, sure, but Shauna could always get her point across without resorting to losing her head and saying something she didn't mean to. Whether it be due of her fear of losing face or the fragility of her ego she would always find a way of ending confrontations on her terms, and if there was anything more to say she would suggest that the conversation should be put off to a later time, so that the other party could take some time to gather their thoughts.

Her flight to Sacramento was booked. She had decided to stick strictly to carry-on luggage. Should she feel the last-minute compulsion to pack something she really shouldn't, she wouldn't. Not even the small vial of sodium pentobarbital and syringe she had laid out on her desk would be coming with her. Too much risk for a carry-on, despite the liquid being in the passable range.

Shauna arrived at the airport at half-past seven for her 9 AM flight. The self-checkout machine spat out her ticket and she was off for the security gate. The airport employee scanning tickets asked for her to wait off to the side for just a

moment. She sat patiently by the gate, awaiting further instruction. An hour passed and the lines for security check were filling up. An hour and a half didn't leave her much time and the employee who stopped her wasn't willing to disclose any information. She kept it together. With only half an hour to go before boarding she hovered over the employee, waiting for any sort of answer. It wasn't until a few minutes after her flight began to board that she was approached by a pair of Homeland Security officers who asked her to come along for a quick chat.

"A terrorist!?"

"We have a difficult time believing it as well, Mrs. Roberts, but every threat, every anonymous tip, has to be treated with utmost seriousness. We do have your name *down here* correct?"

"Yes. That is my name." Shauna did her best to remain calm, despite the looks on the two agents' faces. Despite the windowless room they had been keeping her in for what felt like an hour now and the thought that someone was rummaging through her bag in the other room and finding nothing to worry about, yet persisting and tearing it apart by the seams to find something, anything. "This *is* a misunderstanding. Alright?"

"Leave that for us to decide. When was the last time you were out of the country?"

"Never."

"Have you made contact with any known terrorist organizations, or any individuals, possibly involved in such organizations, despite your better knowledge?"

"No. Who made the call? Am I gonna get a refund for my flight ticket?"

"That's not up to us ma'am."

"Of course not."

"Have you made threats of violence that would pose a risk to our national security?" The agent asked.

“Wouldn’t you know of these risks? Isn’t that why you would bring someone here in the first place?” Shauna struggled to keep the sarcasm to a minimum.

“Please answer the question.”

“No.”

“Not online, in person, or otherwise?”

“No. Look, is it possible that you have the *wrong* Shauna Roberts?”

“It’s entirely possible, ma’am. But we can’t take any risks. Please, just cooperate and this will be over shortly.”

“I *am* cooperating. Can you at least tell me when the next flight to Sacramento is? I would like for my plans to not go to waste.”

“I’m afraid that your plans will have to wait.”

“What the hell do you mean?”

“Until this investigation is over, we have to put you on the no-fly list as a precaution.”

“I’m sorry I had to go there, but you left me with no choice.” Roger spoke, leaning against the outer side of the fence at the animal shelter. Shauna paced back and forth in the yard.

“What choice would that be?”

“It was either that or I would go to the police and report a pre-meditated murder—”

“Murder?! What the hell makes you think that—”

“I couldn’t take any chances. With the e-mails, with the log of our appointment, this would somehow come back to me. I could still be held liable for—”

“What the hell makes you think I was going to commit murder. I just wanted to talk—” Shauna stopped and faced Roger, grabbing him by an imaginary collar from a distance to shake some sense into him. “You’re *insane!*”

“You sure gave me the impression of somebody who’s already thought about it. Nobody speaks so calmly about

something so sensitive to them without having already a plan in mind. You've already spoken to the police of this Mistress Gabriella. You had intent. They would've taken you in and, I assure you, things would have been much more complicated. The HSI will run their investigations, find nothing on you to worry about, I'm sure, and leave you alone."

"And the no-fly list?"

"You can fight that later." Roger extended his palm out to Shauna, then shook his head assuringly, "you're a white woman with no prior convictions—I wouldn't worry about it too much."

"Great—as long as *you* say so."

"Mrs. Roberts—I've gotten into trouble over people like you before. This was nothing personal, but I *am* willing to help."

"Okay then—call the HSI and tell them your anonymous tip was fake."

"You know I can't do that."

"*Won't*." Shauna snapped at him.

"Fine. Yes."

"Then we're done here."

"Mrs. Roberts . . . I spoke to Mistress Gabriella."

"Good for you. What of it?"

"I think, that maybe, I should've taken your case a little more seriously. Obviously, I don't condone the route you planned on taking, but maybe I can help with assisting you . . . an amicable closure."

"What changed your mind?"

"Well . . . I spoke to her on the phone—at her job. And during our conversation she asked me to hurt myself." Roger looked away and massaged the scar across his throat.

"And you think you were the first? I told you—she's evil." Shauna shook her finger at Roger.

"Evil is a strong word. I think misguided is more like it. I think she may have gotten overexcited, but that doesn't

deter from that fact of what happened.”

“I think you’re being a bit too lenient.”

“I air on the side of caution. What was your plan? Confront her at her home? Then what?”

“Then . . . we talk.”

“About what?”

“A proper apology.”

“And if she doesn’t apologize?”

“Then I would persuade her.”

“With?”

“Stronger words . . . I don’t know. You can plan for these kinds of things all you want, but I doubt it ever works out how you expect—I kind of just stopped worrying about it.”

“That’s exactly the sort of attitude that bothers me. You give up formulating a plan because in the back of your mind you already know what outcome you prefer, so you don’t bother with the preliminaries. You would have inflicted violence, and who knows how far that would go. Quit thinking that just because you’ve withheld emotion from your words when you speak to me that you are being unemotional. It’s transparent and unproductive.”

“Fine—as long as you quit speaking to me as if you’re reading off a script you’ve been rehearsing for days ahead of time.”

“Decades ahead of time, Mrs. Roberts, decades. And don’t take offense if I don’t treat the particulars of your case with the care you think they’re deserving of. The simple fact is that they don’t matter and help us none. If you have any more criticisms about how I do my job, I suggest you keep them to yourself as nothing productive comes from them. There’s nothing I haven’t heard at this point.”

“Fine. What’s the plan then? We come over, slap her on the wrist? Then you stand between us when we start swinging? Maybe you’ll want to jump in and take a good swing yourself?”

"No. We visit her place of work, *The Pleasure Emporium*. We first ask to see who's in charge."

"Complain to the manager? Are you kidding me?"

"Yes. We explain what happened to you—which will be difficult, since her personal business—with the recordings—looks to be a separate entity, but I'm sure we can find a way to work that in. Then we explain what she did to me, *during* business hours. Regardless of the business type, there will surely be some sort of disciplinary action taken. Then we ask to see Mistress Gabriella, and with her job on the line, demand an apology."

"And if she doesn't give it then?"

"Then we demand that she is fired."

"And if she's not?"

"Then we threaten with legal action."

"For what happened to *you*, I'm guessing? What about my case? I have no legal ground to stand on against her. I have no case—how do I get *mine*, Roger?"

"You will, I promise. Although I do have some stipulations."

"Like?"

"That nasty review you left. I want it gone. I understand your frustration, but it wasn't fair."

"Fair?" Shauna nearly exploded, "I'm a terrorist because of you . . . talk about fair. You want your review gone? Well I want my name off that damn no-fly list."

"I'm sure I can do something about that."

"Is that just something all you guys say? As if a local P.I. suddenly has insider connections to Homeland Security—what kind of fantasy world do you think I live in? *You're sure you can do something*—what can you actually do? What do you have besides banking on peoples' general lack of knowledge of the internal workings of the various departments of law enforcement?"

"I'll have to think about it."

"That's what I thought. While you think about it how

about you drop that *flat rate* and call it a deal?”

“Fine. But we do this my way. You listen to me and we’ll sort this out. I promise. Your anger has to take a back seat.”

“I don’t know what sounds more productive—your promises or my supposedly untapped rage.”

“Rage subsides. Actions made based on poorly made decisions, on the other hand . . .”

“You sure talk with an awful calm demeanor for someone who’s not angry.”

“You cost me a plane ticket and a week from work,” Shauna said while falling asleep in Roger’s car, resting her forehead against the passenger side window, “I’m not paying for a drop of gas.”

“Well,” Roger said, “I don’t think that’s entirely fair. Had you gone through with your plan, had it gone the way I think it would have—you would have done much more damage to my life than I to yours.”

“Uhuh,” Shauna grumbled, “mark it down as a preemptive strike to make yourself feel better, smarter. But the fact of the matter is you cost me what you cost me and I haven’t cost you a goddamn thing yet. What’s owed is owed.”

“We’ll talk about costs when we return.”

“You talk like somebody who doesn’t want to disclose the fine print. I know you said that this isn’t gonna cost me your *rate*—but who knows what kind of expenses you’ll add on top of all this—”

“I don’t intend to—”

“I don’t know, Roger,” Shauna sighed, readjusting her seating to take the stress out of her neck. Finding the crevice of the pillar to be most comfortable, she pulled the top part of the seatbelt off her face and tucked it behind her back, sliding further down in the leather seat. “You choose your words too carefully—makes it hard to trust you.”

“Why wouldn’t you trust me?”

“I meant not trust you in a general sense, as if you wouldn’t expect a car salesman to tell you about all the deals going on in the dealership from the get go, he’ll want to work them in as interest in the purchase grows.” Shauna felt her sleepiness escape her; she kept her voice husky and low to keep the appearance that she wasn’t completely conscious while saying what she needed to say. “Yup,” she faked a loud, wide-mouthed yawn, “lots of fine print. You can’t even admit that you’re using me to vicariously live out some revenge fantasy of your own.”

“I’m doing no such thing.”

“Then why else would you hijack mine?”

“I told you! It’s because my career could’ve been compromised!”

“That may be—but I’m convinced that’s just a convenient, valid excuse used to mask the real reason behind your actions. Just because an excuse is valid doesn’t mean that there isn’t another, irrational explanation for it. It’s like already having an answer to a math question, and finding whatever means possible to get there. There’s gotta be a term for that.”

“That’s absurd, Mrs. Roberts.”

“Enough with that *Mrs. Roberts* nonsense, too. I’m not buying that, either.”

“What do you want from me?” Roger, now frustrated, kept a tight grip with both hands on top of the steering wheel. Knuckles white. His jaw stiff. Staring past the windshield, past the horizon.

“I want you to cut the act already. You’re not doing this for your career and you’re not doing this out of some moral righteousness.” Shauna quit the act of pretending to fall asleep and sat upright, watching Roger’s thousand-yard stare until he finally turned to look her in the eyes. “She got to you, too, didn’t she?”

“I only called her out of curiosity.”

“So you believed me then? Despite your so-called assessment of me being another crazy bitch?”

“You seemed . . . put together, despite the outburst. And like I said, afterwards, when I called this Mistress Gabriella—”

“So I seemed put together. Still you refused to help. What the hell is your criteria for a worthwhile case to pursue? I don’t understand. How do you make money?”

“Dishing out punishment yourself is hardly ever a good idea. For many reasons. I’ve completely stopped taking on any cases where an individual has the potential to carry out what they think in their compromised state of mind to be justice.”

“Stopped?”

“Like I said—it’s gotten me into trouble before.”

“Care to share a story?”

“Not much to share, Mrs. Roberts.”

“*Shauna.*”

“Shauna.”

“Roger?”

“Yes?”

“Have you ever considered the idea that you might be more bored than you are angry?”

“I think that’s a shallow assessment of what you’re going through, Shauna.”

“Did I say *I, Roger?*”

“I heard what you said,” Roger watched the blood return to his knuckles. His shoulders loosened up. “I believe they call that *projecting*.” A faint smirk emerged on the side of his lips that lasted not a moment too long.

“Uhuh . . .”

“What?” Roger grumbled.

“And what do you think you’ve been doing this entire time? There’s picking your words, Roger. And there’s taking longer to speak than necessary to give people the illusion you’re actually thinking about what you’re saying.”

“Let me dispel an *illusion*, Mrs. Roberts. If not for me, you would have been on your way to make the greatest mistake of your life!”

“And if not for *me*, Roger, you would’ve spent the rest of yours wondering late at nights if your *objective* assessments of people were merely shallow opinions based on whatever complexes you got going on up there. Hah!” Shauna laughed, then tucked herself back into her seat and crossed her arms, assessing the source of this laugh. “Roger?” she said, with her voice more mellow now, “this . . . is kind of fun.”

Roger groaned, then waved the palm of his hand toward her agreeably. It took him almost a minute to finally speak again.

Choosing his words carefully, he said, “call me Eddie.”

“Bored and angry!” Shauna playfully slapped the hood of Roger’s car after arriving at a roadside motel in Salt Lake City. Roger watched her from behind the windshield, maintaining composure. “Bored and angry!” She slapped the hood again with a childish pout on her face. Roger shook his head disapprovingly. On the third time she raised her hand to slap the car Roger pressed down on the horn. Shauna jumped up and let out a brief shriek and called Eddie an asshole.

“Okay . . .” Roger got out of the car and spoke to Shauna as if she were a child, “let’s take it easy now. I know you’re excited.”

“Hah. Excited?” Shauna said sarcastically, “your choice of words finally fails you.” She ran around to the back of the car to grab her things from the trunk. Noticing Roger’s bag laying beside hers, she looked at it suspiciously, then at Roger who was now walking over to the Motel office to check in. She resisted the urge to rummage through it, but kept the idea of what might be inside of it while she sat down on the rim of the open trunk, watching Roger go

about business. The excitement on her face was being slowly replaced with that of dreadful anticipation. A slow realization of the reality of where she was and what they were doing.

Oh his way back Roger signaled to Shauna that they were good to go. She remained sitting on the open trunk, watching him get closer. As he reached for his bag, she asked, “Roger, do you have a gun?”

“What?” he stepped back and glared at her. “What right did you have to go through my things?”

“I *didn't*.” She dipped her head down. “But I got my answer, given your reaction . . .”

“I’m a P.I., Shauna.” He pulled his bag out and held it in the arm furthest away from her. “Concealed carry—I have a permit.”

“For when you’re on the job, maybe. I thought this was different?”

“Call it a habit.” He bit down on his lower lip and grunted, “just forget about it.” Roger stared Shauna down in silence until she finally looked away, then handed her the keys to her room and walked off toward his own.

Shauna sat there for a few minutes longer, breathing steady breaths, trying to realign her thoughts into something resembling logic and order. In the midst of all the thoughts and feelings and images in her head she found herself thinking about Thomas and where he fit into all of this. Upon finally admitting to herself that he was not, in fact, front and center of this collage, Shauna felt an immense sense of guilt. Her lips fought a frown.

Thomas Roberts—the love of her life. Thomas Roberts—the soul-sucking leech who contributed nothing to society, let alone to the life they shared. Who always had just enough of the right things to say to keep Shauna around. Who, with his complete and utter helplessness, gave Shauna something to do. A purpose. A meaning, perhaps. Thomas Roberts, who made her feel smart with his stupidity. Loved

with his neediness. Respected with his obedience. Who, with his simplicity and transparency, paved a way for Shauna to learn self-reflection and recognize the consequences of her words and actions towards not just the man living with her, but other people as well. His fragility taught her kindness.

Still, his encouragement for Shauna to pursue bigger things left her scared of what would happen should he not be able to catch up. His stagnation and complicity were toxic. Or perhaps, she figured, she feared that her advancement in life would leave him feeling bitter—another thing for her to deal with. But that important first step never came. Whatever it was that Shauna had dreamed of pursuing wasn't arriving on her doorstep. That first step. That first big plunge. The leap of faith that would give meaning to her life was never taken, and so, her arsenal of criticisms of Thomas dwindled. Her ground to stand on, with every negative thought toward Thomas feeling less justified with every year, had gradually shrunk. She would watch Thomas stand idly by on his own little island in the middle of nothingness, minding his own business; she would watch from across the abyss, struggling to maintain her footing.

Thomas had won a game against Shauna he did not realize he was playing while she made up the rules of it in her favor as they went. There were static people and there were active ones, and each had their own strengths and weaknesses. Each had something to contribute to each other in the way they best knew how.

Habits . . . It wasn't about what the gun could be used for. It was the fact that it was there in the first place and she didn't know about it. It was about the passenger seat and maybe even about not having a say about the logistics of her own revenge plot. She thought about Thomas and his struggle to quit smoking, which took almost five years to finally catch. After the first few weeks he would do just fine. With or without aids, it made no difference. He would even

allow himself, with Shauna's permission, to buy a pack of cigarettes for nights out drinking with his friends and be fine the next day. That was, unless he would accidentally bring the pack back home with him and not realize it until the next morning. No matter how bad of a hangover the next morning, if there were cigarettes in front of him, he would smoke them. Then the cycle would repeat.

Almost a year ago now, Shauna recalled, he had quit for good. It was almost a year ago, Shauna realized, her face filling up with dread, that Thomas began listening to Mistress Gabriella's recordings.

"Roger?" Shauna whispered at the wall to Roger's room. The clock on her bedside table read 03:32 and her mind racing for the last four hours assured her that what she had to say was important enough that it couldn't wait until morning. She tapped on the wall with her palm, then said again in a whiny tone, "hey, Roger?" The wall was dead quiet when she pressed her ear up against it.

Shauna persisted, gently bumping the side of her head against the wall, calling out for Roger repeatedly. She hit her head harder and harder. She heard a groan and stopped making noise to listen for signs of Roger waking up. One minute. Two minutes passed and the groaning had stopped. "Roger!" She said, louder now, cupping her hands around her lips to amplify the sound. "ROGER!" she'd had enough and called for him using her outside voice.

Footsteps, finally. She kept her ear pressed to the wall. Despite hearing the door open from the other side, she was still spooked when a knocking came from hers. She ran over and opened it to see a disgruntled Roger standing on the other side wearing a white tank top and striped boxer shorts.

"WHAT?" he asked.

"Roger. *Eddie*—I want to drive the car tomorrow."

"Shauna. If this is what you called me over for then I have to warn you—we're not going to have a pleasant drive

tomorrow.”

Shauna crossed her arms and raised her chin. “I want to drive and that’s that.”

“You’re not driving my car. Go to sleep,” Roger walked off, “leave me alone.”

“You owe me!”

“No, I don’t.” Roger stopped, turned back, and stood in the doorway with his hand resting on the door frame. “I don’t owe you a thing. I’m *helping* you. Arghh . . .” Roger wiped the crusts from his eyes, “. . . haven’t even gotten a single *thank you*, even.”

Shauna tucked back into her room and sat on the edge of the bed, staring into the wall. “I want to drive.”

“Stop saying that!”

“I want to drive.” She refused to look at him.

“Shauna, I pegged you all wrong. Had I known you would turn into a petulant child the second things stopped going your way I wouldn’t have taken you with me.”

“You mean you would’ve gone on your own? Find your own thing, pal. This was *mine!*” Shauna extended her hand towards him, “can I hold the gun at least?”

“Absolutely not!” Roger stared at Shauna with a look of disbelief. “What the hell’s gotten into you? Forget about the gun—it has no place in what we’re doing.”

“Then I want to drive.”

“Shauna. If you don’t quit this behavior right now I’m calling this whole thing off and we’re driving back to Boulder *tomorrow!* Go back to sleep. Get some rest, for God’s sake. This is stressful enough as it is—”

“Oh yeah?” Shauna stood up, getting into Roger’s face. “What’s so stressful about if for *you*? What the hell did you lose? What did she take from you? What have you suffered? Who are you to have any say in how I decide to go about dealing with something that happened to *me*?”

“We’ve been over this already.”

“NO!”

“Shauna!”

“We’ve been over your version of it. You want to make me walk into the lion’s den with a blindfold on and both hands tied behind my back, naked and bleeding, hoping that the lion turns out to be a vegetarian.”

“What *lion’s den*, Shauna? Mistress Gabriella?”

“Yes!”

“She’s a phone sex operator, for Christ’s sake. *Lion’s den*—what a mess you’ve thought yourself into. What’s your plan: go guns blazing into what will essentially escalate into nothing more than a shouting match and still hope to come out of the situation a victim? What a show you’ve put on for me, acting as if you had yourself in order. You don’t need a private investigator—you need a therapist, Shauna.”

“*You* need to stay the hell out of my life.”

“I was only trying to help, Mrs. Roberts.”

“Oh, enough with the bullshit already. I can think of a million different reasons why someone like you would do what you did. And you know what?”

“...” he stared blankly at her.

“None of them matter. None of them have anything to do with me. Whatever you’ve gone through, whatever you’ve done or didn’t do, whatever you lost, whatever you’re trying to find, whatever it is that in some infinitesimal amount pertains to my situation, in your mind, that you’re using me to piggy-back off of to jump start whatever *you* want to do, how *you* want this to play out, is *your own* thing. Leave *me* to my thing. Whatever you think might happen to your career is a nonsense excuse, and if something does, well—that’s what you guys have insurance for, isn’t it?”

“Mrs. Roberts . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“Uhuh?”

“No, really, I think that our business is—”

“Say I’m right.”

“Pardon?”

“Tell me I’m right. Just say it, Roger. Enough bullshit—

say it.”

“No, Shauna, I don’t think I will.”

“Then get the fuck out of my room.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Roberts.”

This World on Fire

He met her with a disapproving stare as she walked from her room to the car, where he stood leaning against the back with the trunk lid open. Shauna approached, head held high, keeping eye contact with Roger as she threw her bag into the back and closed the lid. Signaling for the two to get going.

Roger stuck the key into the ignition and started the car without saying a word. With his hand hovering over the gear lever, he turned to Shauna, trying to interpret the look on her face. The look was dead and unchanging. More than a minute had passed before Shauna exhaled a deep sigh and turned to Roger. “Oh, me?” she said sarcastically.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, no—I meant what I said. Apologize? What for?”

“Shauna, what are you—?”

“Of course we should get going—got a long drive ahead of us.”

“You understand that this venture is over? Or do I need to explain to you why—”

“Yeah, Roger—no shit it’s over. Let’s get the hell home. You’ve wasted enough of my time already.”

“What will you do then?”

“Obviously, it’s none of your goddamn business.”

“Alright then.” Wasting no more time, Roger put the car into gear and followed the road signs guiding them back east on the I-80.

“Where do you suppose you’re going?” Roger called out to Shauna as she hopped out of the car when they arrived at a gas station.

“I gotta pee!” Shauna said as she walked away, leaving no room for dispute, still getting her thoughts together from this morning and suffering from a lack of sleep. A strong whiff of gasoline fumes on her way to the store perked her right up.

“Bathroom key?” she asked the store clerk.

“Customers only . . .” the store clerk answered from her seat, barely acknowledging Shauna’s presence.

Shauna sarcastically presented an open palm to the absolute nothingness surrounding the gas station. “Does it look like I could’ve walked here?” She then pointed at the gray sedan, where a tired Roger leaned up against the gas nozzle as it filled up his tank. “The sedan, right there. I’m with that guy.”

“I didn’t see you come from there.”

“Maybe if you weren’t spending your entire morning sitting in that chair you would’ve seen me get out of the car and come inside.”

“*Mmmhmmmm.*”

“So?”

“Customers only.”

“Jesus Christ, lady.” Shauna spun around to look at the shelves of the usual gas station assortment of items and chose a random aisle to stroll through.

“If you present the receipt for that gas I’ll let ya use the bathroom.”

“Yeah . . . yeah,” Shauna waved her off. Strolling through the snack aisle, she picked up a handful of chocolate bars and chips and cradled them in her armpit.

Coming around the corner, the face of the aisle was packed with condoms, toiletries, and a variety of low-strength pain medication. Curiously, she peeked around the corner to the other side of the aisle, where the variety of pills expanded to rival a small pharmacy.

She crouched down in front of the aisle and lay her snacks down on the floor. Her eyes followed the tip of her index finger as it hovered over every bottle. Past the Tylenol and Advil and their no-name equivalents came two strengths of sleeping pills. She picked up the more potent ones. Scanning further down, she found a bottle of anti-nausea medication and stuffed that into her armpit pouch. And last, of course, she thought, extra-strength antihistamines, the drowsy kind. She took inventory of her armpit pouch and looked through the pill shelves one last time. Caffeine pills, of course.

She watched through the window as Roger struck the gas nozzle against the tank to get the last few drips out. Shauna kept her stock out of his sight as she brought it up to the counter.

“Anything else?” the clerk asked.

“Uhhh . . .” Shauna paused to think, then spun around to consider the contents of the fridge. Then over the rows of shelving. Nothing came just yet.

“Coffee?” the clerk offered.

“Yes!” Shauna said, “two, please.”

“Alright,” the clerk scanned the items on the counter, “it’s self-serve. You want medium, large, or extra large?”

“Extra.”

“Alright.” She punched in the total, “that’s gonna come to \$26.45. Is that cash or—”

“Cash!” Roger had finished his walk-around of the car. All the tires seemed fine. Shauna felt a rush of anxiety when she watched him make his way into the store. She threw two twenties on the counter. Her anxiety subsided when Roger’s attention was diverted to a windshield squeegie. He stopped

to look at it, as all men do. Upon picking up the squeegee, Roger spun it around in his hand, getting a spray of soapy water all over his shirt, then swearing something under his breath. The clerk slipped Shauna the change from her purchase, then slid the bathroom key along the glass counter toward her. “Thanks!” Shauna said, monitoring Roger as he grabbed a handful of paper towels to wipe his shirt down, then went on to squeegee his windshield. Walking backward toward the coffee station, Shauna grabbed two medium cups and filled them with whatever strength of drip coffee was closest, pushed the plastic lids over them, and rushed to the bathroom.

“Ma’am!” the clerk called from behind the counter. “You can leave your things with me here if you don’t want to take them to the bathroom with you.”

“Oh!” Shauna stopped, looking around nervously, “that’s alright. Thanks!”

“There’s really no need to—”

“That’s fine!” Shauna pushed the door open with her back, then kicked it closed with her foot while placing the coffee cups atop the sink.

“It’s filthy as all hell in there is all—whatever!” The clerk shooed Shauna off as she disappeared behind the door.

Back in the bathroom, Shauna spilled the contents of her pocket out into the sink. She sorted through it, found the caffeine pills, then stuffed those back into her pocket. One by one she opened the other bottles. The antihistamines. The anti-nausea medication. The sleeping pills—all carefully laid out in front of her. She grabbed a handful of what she assumed to be the safe dosage for from each bottle and frantically looked around the cramped bathroom for a clean surface. Nothing. Everything smelled like piss and, presumably, was covered in it. She snatched a paper towel from the dispenser and lay it on top of the toiled bowl basin. Her hands hovered over the mound of pills, hectic and perplexed, figuring out the next step. She

cupped the paper towel and wrapped it into a bunch and set it back down on the basin.

Some noise—people talking—was coming from the store—it was Roger. It had to be. They were the only ones at the gas station. Her hands played an invisible keyboard, thinking, looking for that thing she needed to find, but didn't know exactly what that thing was just yet. Hard. Noises. Metal. Crush. Paper. Toilet paper! She lifted the roll from the dispenser and slid the paper off the metal tube that was inside it. A hard surface and a round surface. Perfect. She rolled the paper pouch of pills inside two more layers of paper, in case it would tear. The metal tube worked well enough as a rolling pin. She pushed harder and harder, working the paper pouch into the hard ceramic surface, but heard no crushing sounds. Opening up the pouch confirmed her suspicions. The talking from behind the door persisted. The end of the metal tube. Solid. Metal. Crush. Crush. Noises. She flushed the toilet, and using the loud sound to mask the one she was about to make, struck the paper pouch with the blunt end of the metal tube. One strike. Two strikes. Adding random coughs to her arsenal of sounds to hide what she was doing. She opened up the paper pouch to find that most of the pills had broke down into a mess of white chunks with sharp edges of various shades of white and blue.

She rolled up the pouch again, lay it on the toilet basin, and rolled over it with the round edge of the metal tube for a solid minute before being sure of it achieving the desired result. Roger called from behind the door for Shauna to get going. She apologized and asked for a few minutes. He insisted. She shooed him away. He didn't understand women, she claimed. The pouch came open to reveal a small mound of white powder. Some chunks remained. She picked them out and tossed them in the toilet. The powder made it into the coffee cup and the rest of the pills into the trashcan. She swirled the powder into the coffee with her

finger. Some of it dissolving. Some floating back up to the surface. She swore under her breath and caught sight of herself in the mirror. The bloodshot eyes. The messy hair. The look of a rabid animal on her face ready to claw at anything standing in her way.

She heard the bell of the front door ring again. It must've been Roger leaving. She called for him. No response. The area was clear and she emerged from the bathroom, coffee in each hand. The white powder—she could see it swirling around through the slit in the black lid. She stumbled back to the coffee station. Cream. She grabbed the jug, opened the lid to the spiked coffee and poured some in. A few more swirls with the wooden mixing stick. The contrast was softer, but small chunks still emerged in the light brown liquid. Fuck. Roger yelled for her. Powdered creamer. She sprinkled some on top, leaving it unmixed. That will do. She ran for the door. The clerk asked for the bathroom key. It was left on the sink. Coffee hot—must get it to the car. Fingers burn. *Omw.*

She skipped back to the car, nearly tripping over her own feet as Roger waved from inside for her to hurry. She placed the coffee on the roof, freeing a hand to open the door, then snatched it up before slipping into the passenger seat. Roger stared at her, annoyed. She stared back, then spotted a cup of fresh coffee sitting in the center console cup holder.

“Had I known . . .” Roger said, smiling at the cup of coffee being presented to him, “. . . I wasn’t expecting such generosity from you, given the circumstances. You can leave it there beside mine. I’ll see how tired I get.”

Shauna’s heart sank. She placed the spiked coffee beside Roger’s cup and held hers in her hands, taking in the burn from the cup to distract her from wanting to explode right there and then.

“I hope you understand,” Roger said as they drove off, “I thought you could use the sleep, I didn’t think you’d want

—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Shauna stared dead ahead. “Don’t worry about it.”

Shauna found it impossible to concentrate on what Roger was talking about. She forgot how the story had started and now wasn’t sure if Roger was telling a story about a job he did or was talking about a movie he once saw. She found it hard to stay awake. The spiked coffee was getting colder with each minute; the rate at which Roger was sipping on the one he bought for himself would leave it at an undesirable temperature by the time he was done. At this rate, she thought, they will have stopped at another gas station where he would opt for a fresh, hot coffee, instead of the one waiting for him.

The road past Rock Springs was littered with dust and bugs, rapidly undoing Roger’s earlier efforts of squeegeeing his windshield. He made a disgruntled noise and an audible note of every insect that fell victim to his car. He cringed at every small pebble that nearly put a crack in the glass, then went on about something to do with insurance covering windshields and how making a claim, then paying a deductible and waiting for appointments and appraisals is a waste of time and it’s always easier to just get some local shop fix it on the day for a few hundred bucks.

The talking kept his mouth away from the coffee. Shauna gulped hers down just to give herself a chance to stay awake through it all. Every trailer truck that zoomed by sent a jolt through her body, nearly causing her to spill whatever was left of her drink onto herself. Roger went on about all the coffee stains his car had suffered from late-night stakeouts. His mouth was on auto-pilot.

Roger was going on about some marital case revolving around a lost dog. Shauna was ready to kill this man. The road debris kept her anxious and the continuous splatter of bugs’ dull thuds annoyed her to no end. Watching Roger

from the passenger seat go on about whatever he was going on about, Shauna watched his coffee go untouched and couldn't take it anymore. With a high-pitched yelp, she threw her hands to the side, strategically knocking the coffee out of Roger's hand, sending it spilling onto his lap.

"What the hell, woman!" Roger shouted.

"I'm sorry! Oh my God," Shauna looked around frantically, blinking, looking in all directions. "Are you okay?!"

"Goddamn it," Roger swiped the small pool of coffee accumulating in his crotch onto the floor. "Shit!"

"I'm so sorry!"

"The hell you are! What got into you?"

"I don't know!"

"I'm *driving!* We could've crashed. Jesus!"

"I'm sorry. I'm a little dizzy from last night, I think. I don't know what I was thinking—I thought I saw a bug or a pebble fly towards you and I tried to stop it!"

"That's what windshields are for!"

"I know. I know! I wasn't thinking. It must've been like a . . . like a—!"

"*Arrghh*—get some sleep already."

"I'll try. Sorry! You know like how when you don't sleep for a while, when you look at the sky or something bright, you can see those little . . . squiggles?"

"The what now?"

"The *squiggles*—the little worm-looking things in your eyes. I can see them when I'm really tired."

"I thought you said you saw a rock. Damn it," having gotten all the wetness under control, Roger took the coffee Shauna had bought for him and took his first sip. "Dry creamer? Really?"

"Sorry."

"Whatever."

"Sorry—I hope it'll do."

"Yeah, yeah—it'll do." Roger took a large gulp and

spoke under his breath, “people these days so . . . *something, something, something* . . .”

“What?”

“Nothing. Get some sleep already.”

“Okay.”

Roger had been yawning for half an hour straight. His eyes glossed over from a dry burn and discomfort. As far as his navigation software told him, there was no gas station in sight. No cheap motels. Shauna pretended to be sleeping quietly in hopes that it would leave Roger with nobody to talk to. The first rest stop would have to do. He pulled up and shut his eyes. He complained that the light of the sun burned his face and lit up the insides of his eyelids. He could only take a few minutes of the discomfort before finally getting out of the front seat and slipping into the rear bench. Within four minute he was snoring; Shauna gave him a few more before climbing over the center console into the driver's seat, starting the car, and taking off to the west.

Her phone's navigation approximated the travel time to Sacramento to be a little over ten hours, a direct route down the I-80. Arrival time at about 11 PM. Mistress Gabriella would be at work by that hour. It would have to do. She drove on, her mind racing with thoughts about what she would do and what she would say once she arrived. Constantly reminding herself that it was to be just a talk, then fighting the idea that there was a minuscule chance that she may have been lying to herself. Her eyes were tired and watery. The caffeine pills sat by her side in the center console cup holder. Tempting, but she would give it a few hours before popping a few. She wanted to wait for that first crash to hit her and then adjust her medication accordingly. A ten-hour drive couldn't be the worst thing. She's done more difficult days for weeks in a row. There was something about continuously riding on, and enduring, endless waves

of second winds that gave her a deep sense of purpose. A validation so genuine that no amount of pats on the back or compliments could match.

“What’s happening?” Roger asked with his mouth pressed into the seat cushion. Speech slurred. “Why is the car moving?”

Shauna spun her head around to see that Roger hadn’t even opened his eyes to see what was going on. It didn’t worry her. There’s a certain amount of deniability one revels in when under the influence of sleep deprivation and sleeping aids. The extreme fatigue. The lethargy felt in every limb. The effort required to speak or move helps to believe that nothing so bad can happen that it could be worth waking up for. Shauna recalled the times, after her long stints at the animal shelter, when she would take a few of these pills to help her forget everything and pass out for twelve to sixteen hours at a time. Some of those times, she would find Thomas laying in bed next to her, his hot breath itching the side of her shoulder. His erection jabbing her in the back of the leg. The discomfort of a stream of precum turning cold as it rolled down her skin. This deniability, she justified, which would make it acceptable to sleep through the apocalypse, erased any guilt associated with rejecting her husband’s advances for morning sex.

“Lots of trucks passing by,” Shauna answered, “rocking the car.”

“Okay,” Roger said while a stream of drool trickled from his mouth.

Five hours had passed now and the tank was running low. Shauna stopped at the closest gas station to fill up and take that pee she forgot to earlier that morning. Another coffee—something to keep her hands busy while she drove. A couple of coconut waters to keep her hydrated. The electrolytes should help, despite not being completely sure

what it was that they did. A few chocolate bars because the ones she had bought earlier melted. At the till, hanging above a display of cheap sunglasses, Shauna spotted black sleeping masks and novelty earmuffs. She took a pair of each. Before finally paying for everything, she snatched up another bottle of sleeping pills, just in case.

As discretely as she could, Shauna slipped the mask over Roger's eyes and the earmuffs over his head, then removed her sweater and tucked it underneath his head. His body jerked a little, then calmed down again after a series of rapid snorts. She wasn't taking any chances now. She kept busy, pretending to clean the windshield while waiting for the last car in the gas station to leave the lot, pulled out a few sleeping pills from the bottle and tossed them on the ground. Unable to find anything to crush them with, she stepped on them, then rolled her foot back and forth to grind them against the rough asphalt until they turned to powder. She licked the tip of her index finger and pressed it into the white pile until it was almost completely covered, checked the perimeter again, and brought the finger to Roger's mouth, then rubbed the white powder into his gums. She shut the back door just far enough to for the latch to engage, then pushed against the door from the outside until the secondary mechanism closed it completely.

Shauna wasted no time getting back into the car and driving off. Then a thought stopped her: she *had* to know. Before merging back onto the highway, she backed out through the gas station and parked behind the convenience store, out of everyone's sight. She popped the trunk and got out, checking on Roger through the window as she passed it, and swung the trunk lid open. A deep breath. Affirmations of rational thought. Roger's bag in front of her eyes. She unzipped it and there it was, front and center, laying on top of everything else, a handgun resting snugly inside a hard leather-enclosed belt holster. *Front and center*—what were *his* priorities? Something always means something

to somebody. There's no such thing as something coming from nothing and she was sure that Thomas would *always* know, no matter how drunk he was, that he was bringing that pack of cigarettes home with him. He's been planning on having that hangover cigarette for days, weeks ahead, when he first got word of whatever outing he was to attend. Thomas *hated* going out, especially when the groups of people were to exceed his acceptable, manageable party of three. The sacrifices he made for that one lousy cigarette. Had the particulars of such a sacrifice been replaced with something more noble, even sensible, it would almost be commendable. Hell, worth any sort of recognition, at least. Did Thomas expect recognition?

Did she ever give any?

Shauna ran the tips of her fingers along the cold, hard edges of the black pistol, fingering the muzzle with the pinkie, then lay her hand down on the softer leather and flicked her fingers up against the button latch, swinging it open. Using two fingers, she pulled the pistol out by the notch in the magazine, just far enough to reveal the trigger, then promptly pushed it back in and shut the trunk lid. Wasting no more time now, she pulled out of the parking lot and continued onward.

Night had fallen by the time Shauna passed the state border into California. She had to make one final stop for gas, a bathroom break, stretch her stiff limbs out, make sure the pistol was where she left it, and shove another dose of white paste into Roger's droopy mouth. It's been more than half an hour since she'd swallowed the last bit of her last chocolate bar; her mouth kept chewing, unconsciously, as if stuck in a loop. Her left hand gripped the top of the steering wheel, continuously squeezing and letting go, keeping the blood flowing. Her right hand repeatedly slammed the butt end of the pistol into the top of her thigh. She was sure that she was being vigilant about

keeping her finger away from the trigger. She was sure it wasn't loaded. Not that she checked, only assumed that Roger was a responsible gun owner. Her ears were hot and rung incessantly. The insides of her mouth were chewed up, her tongue poking at the grooves and torn skin, almost as if looking for a hole, trying to break free to the outside through her cheek. There was a burning sensation building up in the center of her chest, at times, spreading up into her esophagus, at others, her lower gut, as if her body couldn't decide from which end it wanted to expel the contents of the days' meal.

Navigating the winding roads through the Rockies helped to keep her lucid and attentive. The scenery opened up again as she passed Colfax. The navigation system insisted that Shauna stay awake for another forty minutes. It was a straight shot from there. On the screen, the thin blue line dividing the beige backdrop grew shorter with each minute. A brief flash of self-reflection. A thought in her head that actually resembled something that could be put into words assured her that there was nothing was wrong with not knowing what she would say, do. Somewhere, deep down, she *already* knew. There was no glory in over-thinking things, as it was merely a way for cowards to talk themselves out of doing what they always knew to be the right thing.

At that thought her mind drew a period and went blank. Her hands gripped the wheel tighter. She cracked a big smile and focused on her breathing, inhaling through the nose, exhaling through her teeth. She had focus and clarity and purpose. She had a clear sight on her target and nothing else mattered. She had control.

She arrived at the industrial park right on time. Under the inadequate illumination of moonlight and flickering street lamps, Shauna had to drive down the main road several times before finding the correct row of buildings. She pulled up to a lot of various car repair shops, some local

construction companies, industrial fabrics, all with their front office lights shut off. Toward the end of the lot Shauna spotted an office window with black fabric draped over it. Counting down from the unit numbers she could see that was the right one. Only a hundred feet away from her. There she would be—Mistress Gabriella.

She sat in the parking lot fifty feet away from Pleasure Emporium, playing with the pistol. Her thumb naturally fell on the magazine release button. She pressed it, keeping the pistol in one hand on her lap, and the clip partially slipped out from the grip with a satisfying metal-on-metal *swish*. She pulled it out completely and was surprised to see a stacked array of cartridges, then set it aside on the passenger seat. White or Red, she wondered, her thumb grazing on the safety lever, considering which of the two colored circles would grant her permission to pull that trigger. She gave the trigger a half-squeeze, just until the meat in her finger compressed far enough to give it a push, then a little more. She stopped, realizing that the muzzle was pointing directly at her left knee. Her finger pulled away and she shook herself awake upon realizing that the pistol may have been loaded. With the side of the pistol just inches away from her face, she found where the slide met the body, grabbed it from both ends and opened it up, revealing the chamber. It was empty, but it didn't help Shauna from feeling stupid. Her frustration was heightened when the slide wouldn't go back into its closed position. She tugged at it in both directions. It didn't help. She pushed down on everything that looked like it could be a button, yet the slide remained cocked back. Finally, her thumb found another lever up above the trigger. Observing it intensely, she remembered the force it took to pull the action back and held the slide with her left hand while pushing down on the lever with her thumb. It gave way and Shauna sighed a breath of relief.

The trigger refused to budge with the white circle exposed below the safety mechanism; when the red circle

showed, the trigger gave way and sent the cocked hammer flying back to its resting place. The loud click sent a jolt through Shauna's body. She turned stiff. Her heart nearly sunk when she was reminded of Roger. She turned back with a panicked look on her face to find that he was unaffected by the sound and returned to the task at hand. Enough, she thought. Swiping the clip from the seat, she jumped out of the car and shut the door.

The clip was back in and the chamber loaded. The door to the place locked and she couldn't hear a peep from the other side. There was a buzzer and she considered pressing it, but became anxious at the thought of nicely being asked to leave the premises. She tried pulling on the handle again, gently, until the deadbolt thumped against the aluminum door frame. She thought that maybe she should wait someone out. Perhaps someone would need a smoke break. But what if they're allowed to smoke inside? A place like this? Surely. She took a few steps back and watched the door, collecting her thoughts, when below the awning she spotted, fastened to the wall, a translucent black dome. A security camera.

"Fuuuuuuuck!" She growled. Her heart raced. She lunged for the door and shattered the glass with the butt of the gun. Reaching a hand through the metal grate, past the black drape, she found the twist handle and unlocked the deadbolt and swung the door open. Inside was a dark room filled with nail salon chairs arranged against the walls to her left and right, illuminated with nothing but a red *EXIT* sign above a door straight ahead. She rushed through the room. A brief glance in both directions confirmed it was clear. Her sweaty hand struggled to keep the pistol steady and upright.

She opened the second door to an empty common room with a table and an empty kitchenette leading to an empty hallway with two doors on each side and two at the end. Sounds of commotion and prayers and instructions to

remain in their rooms reverberated through the space. Shauna closed in, passing through the hallway. Doors with frosted windows. No markings or names or a clue as to whose is what except the two doors at the end.

She tried the first one to her left, barging in with her shoulder. Gun first. A woman crouched in the corner, whimpering. Her hands pressed against the back of her head. Fingers locked. "Mistress Gabriella?!" Shauna shouted, pressing the gun into the woman's skull. "Answer me!"

"No! I'm n-n-n-not!" Mistress Gabriella pleaded. "Please don't!"

"Damn it!" Shauna ran out of the room, immediately kicking down the door across the hall.

"Mistress Gabriella?!" She said to a pair of trembling skinny hands raised up from beneath the desk, waving frantically.

"Erika!" the hands came together, as if praying. Shauna moved on.

"MISTRESS. FUCKING. GABRIELLA! Come out!" Shauna shouted, kicking down the second door down the corridor on the left to find Tonia, eyes wide and frightened. Arms wrapped around her chest, palms pressing into her shoulders. An increasingly disturbed hum erupted from the base of her throat. The veins in her neck bulged while her head shook in every direction. "Answer me!" Shauna demanded, closing in on Tonia with the gun fixed at her head. She tried to speak but the words came out as delirious gasps. Hyperventilating. Her eyes led Shauna to look at her left hand; her left hand tucked in every finger but the index, pointing to the first room Shauna inspected.

Shauna ran out of the room, neglecting to see that the door to the office at the end of the hallway was now open. "You goddamn bitch!" She shouted, not making it a step further before the sound of two gunshots tore through her eardrums and made her body go stiff. Her knees buckled and slammed into the ground. The muscles in her arms

jerked in a wild frenzy in front of her eyes, almost as if trying to tear themselves out of their sockets. She bounced and jittered, winding down with irregular hiccups when she fell to the floor. She gulped. She gurgled. She gasped and begged for one more breath as her eyes fought to stay open for just a moment longer.

And then there was nothing. Not even Thomas.

Part Five:

The Inspired and
the Damned

Regroup

“It’s incredible to think that at some point any one of us has fantasized about fucking a fourteen-year-old. Then a fifteen-year-old, then a sixteen—and so on . . .” Colton, kneeling down in front of the open door of his car, looked up at Vincent, who sat in the passenger seat. He struggled with the pull of the magnet on the speaker as it stuck to the metal on the door. After some wrestling with it he broke it free, then unhooked the electrical connector and lay the speaker assembly on the driver seat of the Bronco. “What I’m saying, Vincent, is that time can forgive us all.”

“Yeah, but is *that* time forgiving . . .” Vincent pondered, fingering around the edges of a new speaker in his hands, “or is that just us growing up?”

“Pass me that phillips,” Colton reached his arm out over the seat towards Vincent. Then rested his chin on the edge of the seat and looked up. “With time we can learn to forgive ourselves. With *a lot* more time we learn to forgive others. *Genghis Khan*, for example. The dude killed or raped just about everyone. Now he’s a complete joke. You can go to a Halloween party dressed as one of the most brutal mass murderers in history and everyone will have a laugh. Time has been kind to the guy.”

“You mean the—” Vincent kept the phillips-head

screwdriver back and handed to Colton the new speaker.

“Oh yeah, that first, thanks.” Colton grabbed the speaker and stuffed it into the hole in the door, again struggling with the magnet on the way in. With the speaker in place and the wire connected, he grabbed a handful of phillips-head screws and started one in each hole by hand. “Time will *always* forgive. At some point in time slave owners will be considered savvy businessmen. Hitler will be praised for his ambition and tactical brilliance. When the dust has settled it won’t matter the extent of damage done because being affected by it emotionally will simply become seen as *unreasonable*. The details of their wrongdoings studied clinically and objectively. They will fall into the same category of simply *The Greats* who are universally admired for their unwavering conviction and resolve. Pass that now.”

Vincent handed Colton the screwdriver.

“Thanks,” Colton took it and tightened the screws.

“Is that what the guys see in me then?” Vincent asked.

Colton held a stare at Vincent without saying a word. He disappeared out of sight for a moment, then emerged with the inner door panel in his hands and immediately held it out in front of him, comparing the location of the clips holding it to the corresponding holes in the exposed door. “I want to be great, too, you know?” Colton hung the door panel, starting with the upper hooks, then hammered the clips in with the butt of his hand, working them in around the perimeter of the panel. “I keep having this dream . . .” Colton moved out of the way to shut the door and looked at Vincent through the open window, resting his forearms on the window frame. “A recurring dream: I travel back in time, given the opportunity to prevent 9/11, but I’m given a choice between being there on the plane—on both planes, at the same time, somehow, performing some heroic task that would prevent a tragedy, or instead getting an amazing blowjob from a really hot girl on a beach somewhere, all the while a thought running through my head: *there’s no way I’d*

ever get to bang anyone that hot. The dream always ends when I make a choice.”

“What choice is that?” Vincent asked.

“I don’t know . . .” Colton ran his hands through the back of his head down to the neck, “it’s like I *do* know, because I’m making the choice . . . but I can never remember what it was when I wake up.” Colton pushed himself away from the car and signaled for Vincent to move over. “Come on, let’s do the other side now.”

Vincent shifted over to the driver seat, watching as Colton walked around the front of the car. A sullen look on his face. Vincent pretended to look away when he saw it and buried his face in an unopened box to another speaker.

“I don’t know, man,” Colton spoke from the open passenger-side door. “You could be the hero that prevented 9/11 and there’d be a plaque somewhere with your name on it that nobody would ever look at. Some Oscar-bait bullshit movie about you, at best. End of discussion.” Colton drove a flathead screwdriver into the seam of the door panel far enough to jam his fingers inside, then pulled it open to expose the insides of the door. “And it’s great. It’s *awesome* that we can have heroes of that sort, but there isn’t much to discuss. The choice they had to make was an easy one, essentially. The *correct* choice, I mean, was clear as day. It’s an open and shut case.” Colton crouched down near the bottom of the door and removed the screws holding the old speakers. With a quick yank the speaker came loose with no struggle. He threw it into the footwell beside him. Staring into the new hole, he said, “then there’s *you*.”

“What about me?” Vincent asked while pulling the new speaker from the box and tearing it out of its plastic wrapping.

“The story of how a series of difficult choices led to where you are now. There’s nuance in it. There’s discussion. There are people willing to speak out with such passion from either side of the argument. Some wrong, of course,

but the dialogue is there, an endless back-and-forth that leads to revolution, change. I *want* to do that. I want to do something, Vincent, *anything*, and whatever it is, I know that time will forgive.”

Vincent was suddenly reminded of that little airplane in the top corner of the screen on his phone and Mistress Gabriella and scooping his cum from his stomach with a spatula and suddenly it was becoming difficult to take in the words coming from Colton. “I don’t know what to tell you,” he spoke into the speaker sitting in his lap. From the corner of his eye he saw that Colton was reaching across the seat for it. He turned his head back to look at the twelve-inch sub-woofer they hooked up and considered asking Colton if he was planning on mending that persistent oil drip making puddles in his driveway, “hey, do you *need* a new sound system?” was the best he could come up with.

“You ever heard of *Ludovico*?” Colton asked, grabbing the speaker from Vincent’s lap.

“Huh?”

“*Eunadi*,” Colton said with a sarcastic Italian accent.

“...”

“A classical composer, not that I listen to that shit.” Colton popped the speaker into the hole and worked on getting the new screws in. “Theres a song . . . *composition*? . . . whatever you wanna call it called *Nuvole Bianche*—something like that.”

“Okay.” said Vincent.

“Anyways. There’s a remix, or . . . or I don’t know what you wanna call it—a *rendition*? of it where some guy basically just cranks the bass to eleven and there was this video I saw years ago of a guy blaring this song in his car, the rendition, I mean, he had a crazy sound system. Subwoofers . . . I don’t know how many of them or what kind but his shit was *blasting*.” Colton reinstalled the door panel, swiped his tools off the passenger seat onto the floor and sat down in it. “But that’s not the part that got me. There was this girl in

the car with him, *twenty-something, smoking hot*, brunette with frizzy hair, those sorts of eyes, you know? that let you know that she just wants to get fucked all the time? So she's in the car with him and he plays this song. It starts off all nice and mellow, a low, melancholic piano piece and she's sitting there waiting for something to happen, she has no idea what to expect, then out of nowhere—*BRRRRRRRR-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum-BRRRRRRRR*—the bass drops and her hair goes wild, her eyes go wide as hell, her mouth agape as if God himself appeared right in front of her. The bass bangs louder and she has her hands by her head as if to keep her brains from exploding and her eyes are rolling up and she's gasping for air and her tongue is pushing into her teeth and she finally says, as the bass dies down and the piano comes back and she catches her breath, she says to the camera: *I think I just came in my panties.*" Colton caught his breath, then tapped the back of his hand against the door. "A sound system, Vincent. *A song!* Can you imagine having that sort of power?"

"But what for, if you're abstaining from—"

"Abstaining? Abstinence? No one ever said anything about abstinence, Vincent."

"But I thought with the whole *CWC* thing with the irony and the *women ruining our lives* thing?"

"Call it saving face. Call it being in that place where you don't want to be, but have to endure to get to where you want to go. There's power in denial, and every one of these retards knows what's really happening . . . besides, teamwork makes the dream work." Colton stuck the key into the ignition and started the car. With an open-handed gesture he invited Vincent to take it for a spin while he hooked up his phone to the sound system and found that song he wanted to play. The piano began as Vincent pulled out of the driveway. Colton turned the volume dial all the way up. As they took off down the street Vincent could barely make out Colton's words when he spoke through the trembling

bass. *"After all,"* he said, staring blankly through the windshield, *"we all have that special someone, don't we? Who doesn't love to chase unicorns"*

Mmmm, you love being mommy's little bitch, don't you

Vincent woke up to a residual image in his mind of looking up at Mistress Gabriella, laying with his hands and feet tied to the bedposts while she straddled him. She giggled and moaned. She teased and insisted that he keep his mouth wide open indefinitely. With one hand she was squeezing milk from her huge breasts into his mouth, with the other she drew figure-eights on his stomach using the cum oozing from her twelve-inch cock. When the crusts in his eyes broke free the image had all but faded and the painful emptiness residing in him rose to the surface.

The cathartic feeling of symbolically eliminating the source of Vincent's troubles was short-lived. Within a week of the purge his depression had returned, leaving him to spend the majority of his time glued to Colton's couch, letting the days pass by while he occasionally checked up on what the internet had to say about him. The war raged on; troops on either side of it kept busy. He had finally found the courage to e-mail his mother and tell her that he was doing fine, laying low at a friend's house. That he was sorry she found out like this, and that, as he's told her a hundred times before, she should not believe everything she reads on the internet. There was not much in terms of long-term goals promised by the CWC. Soon the idea began to dawn on Vincent that at some point he would have to return to his old life and face whatever there was to face. But then there was always Mistress Gabriella's voice that would come visit him whenever he pleased, helping to ease his worrying thoughts and help offset the stress for later.

Understanding the needs of his peers, Colton permitted Vincent to use his laptop while he was at work. He hoped that his good will would not go to waste and that Vincent

would do a decent job of eliminating all traces of his business before returning the laptop. Colton could see the look on Vincent's face turn a shade more bored with each morning. He would assure him that this was all a part of growing and healing. He would tell him the same words he would recite to the CWC on their online chat groups when they complained that they more or less felt the same, and found new ways to talk about the things they supposedly purged from their lives.

Despite Colton being extremely clear about the time he would return from work, and promising Vincent at least a half hours heads up before doing so, Vincent still found it difficult to relax and ease his body and mind before letting Mistress Gabriella do what she did best. Vincent would want to explain that this was not something he could just shut off at the drop of a hat should someone make a sound. This required true peace of mind. The more relaxed he allowed himself to become, the more pleasurable the experience. It's what Mistress Gabriella promised and it's what Vincent found to be the truth after many sessions.

It took him over a week of being on his own, observing Colton's patterns, seeing if he stuck to the heads-up text message, before being completely comfortable. The couch had to do, as he couldn't bring himself to use Colton's bedroom. He would make sure that the blinds were completely closed. The drapes blocking every sliver of light from seeping into the living room. The doors were locked, even the deadbolt. Worst case, Vincent figured, Colton would bang on the door loud enough for Vincent to hear through the headphones. The explanation of why would be somewhat embarrassing. Being caught in the act, on the other hand, much worse.

Soon enough Vincent was able to squeeze in two to three sessions with Mistress Gabriella a day. He would once again find his mind empty of dark thoughts and anxiety. At least until Colton returned home and began complaining

about one of two things: having to go out of his way to buy coffee and in a roundabout way telling Vincent that he feared that the CWC may not have been as effective as he imagined it to be.

“I might have an idea.” Vincent, now growing mildly irritated with Colton killing his good vibes, decided to pitch him some suggestions. No longer fearing that the CWC’s idea of Vincent, being of one that was able to overcome the might of national media and come out unscathed and doing it all alone, might come crumbling down. “This might come off as weird, but given how . . . you guys are.”

“Uhuh.” Colton said, laying down on the ground in the living room, facing the ceiling with his hand covering his eyes. A cigarette hanging from his mouth, “yeah, whatever. I’ll take any suggestions right now. Lay it one me.”

“Not exactly sure how to put this—but I wasn’t *completely* alone back when this whole Jenna Moone thing started.”

“Whatchu mean?”

“I had *some* help.” Even without seeing Colton’s face, Vincent could imagine the judgment in his eyes.

“Yeah, okay . . .”

Vincent stood up from the couch and paced the living room, scratching at the back of his head, trying to let it out but stopping his words midway through. Every now and then he would watch Colton to get a gauge of what he felt was tension building in the room. “Hey, maybe a drink?”

“Ughh,” Colton stood up, “yeah, what the hell.” He walked to the kitchen with a lazy stride and dragged a bottle of vodka across the counter, pulled two glasses from the cupboard and free-poured a few ounces into each one. “Ughh,” he sighed, leaning over the drinks, staring at them with an empty look on his face, “I don’t know . . . not feeling very creative right now—will this do?”

Vincent walked over to grab his drink. He swirled it

around in his hand a few times, then asked, “ice?”

“Yeah,” Colton moaned, “shit, man—couldn’t even think of ice. I’m a mess . . .” He spun around and opened the top cabinet of his fridge and pulled out a plastic ice tray. He flipped it upside down and slammed it down on the counter, releasing a few cubes, littering the counter with a sprinkle of residual frost that melted almost immediately.

Vincent grabbed two cubes and tossed them into his Vodka. He was about to speak, then stopped himself and took a large gulp of his drink. Nodded in a way that insisted Colton to do the same, then finally spoke, “Mistress Gabriella.”

“Who that?” Colton asked suspiciously.

“It’s not what you think—she’s a . . . performer, uhh—”

“What does this have to do with—”

“Okay . . . okay. Shit—keep drinking.” Vincent took another long sip. “Fuck it—give me a smoke.”

“Alright.” Colton removed his pack out from his breast pocket, pulled one out and confirmed, via a questioning head nod, if Vincent was sure he wanted this.

“Yeah—yeah,” Vincent took a cigarette and put it between his lips, asking with an open hand for a lighter. Without hesitating he lit it. Being aware of his virgin lungs, Vincent stopped the initial puff from entering his chest completely, then took a deep, careful drag, following the feeling of the smoke as it smoothly filled the walls of his lungs, as if thinking about it would keep him from coughing it all out almost immediately. Almost did. “As far as anyone knows, she doesn’t *have* to be a real person. Where am I . . . okay—she does these recordings. Porn-like recordings. Hey?” Vincent stopped himself.

“Yeah?” Colton watched with a growing frustration on his face while Vincent found his words.

“Like, porn is still fine, right?”

“Well, yeah. There’s only so much shooting guns and having barbecues will accomplish.”

“Good. Alright—well this is sort of like porn—but it’s . . . fulfilling.”

“Fulfilling?” Colton asked sarcastically.

“Okay, there’s no good way to describe it—all I can say is that it helps. And it helped me. You guys think I powered through all that drama on my own but I can honestly say that this helped.” Vincent took another long drag of his cigarette, discovering another train of thought and hopping onto it. “Mistress Gabriella *really* helped.”

“Uhuh.”

“She *could* help us!” Vincent ran to the couch and snatched up the laptop. A child-like enthusiasm wiped the shame from his face. He shoved the bottle of vodka aside and made space for the laptop, flipping the screen open for Colton to see. Using the track pad, Vincent navigated through the *Windows(C:)* directory to a folder named *Program Files*.

Colton watched him suspiciously. “What the hell have you been installing on my computer, man?”

“Just wait.” Vincent kept going, now in a directory named *Windows System*, which contained several more folders with similar names. *Windows Office*. *Windows Files*. *Windows Audio*. *Windows 3D*. *Windows AT*. *Windows Mis* was the folder he opened up next, leading to another set of folders: *Vis*, *Skins*, *Icons*, *Media*, *en-GB* . . . Colton looked as if he finally caught on, and with a large grin on his face took a long sip of his drink. Vincent opened up another folder called *Mis* to reveal a collection of seventy-six unique audio files, ranging in sizes and lengths. All the titles Vincent had come to know and love by now. He scrolled through the folder until he came upon *handsfree.mp3* and shoved the computer toward Colton, so excited now that he had almost forgotten how embarrassing this was supposed to be in the first place. “I’m gonna go for a walk and I will return in *no less* than one hour. I will send you a text message—make sure your phone’s on silent—I’ll send a message with *at least* fifteen

minutes heads-up. Close your blinds and lock all the doors. Wear headphones.”

“What the hell is this?”

“Listen to it.” Vincent smirked. Then left Colton with the computer, taking off toward the hallway where he slipped into his shoes and put on a jacket. “There’s nothing to it,” Vincent yelled across the hall as he walked through the front door, “just do exactly as you’re told!”

There was a time, before young boys developed and figured out their tastes and preferences, that it felt completely normal to watch porn in a group setting. Before some unknown force in social conditioning taught young men that that was an awkward thing to do. Vincent felt a deep sense of nostalgia for the days of him and his friends and *Limewire* or *Kaazaa*, be it during sleepovers or for that hour before anyone’s parents would come home from work, fighting hand over fist for the keyboard, each one claiming they *knew exactly* what do download and watch together. *Was it weird?*, taking turns going to the bathroom, knowing exactly what would be happening behind the closed door? At what point did shame come into play? He struggled to pinpoint the exact age when it stopped being funny to chase his friends around with a pitched tent in his loose-fitting sweatpants. At some point the tables turned, now boys couldn’t admit to having a penis while girls advertised doing anal in their online dating profiles. Between then and now something had changed, and Vincent felt as if he hadn’t been paying attention, unable to pinpoint what triggered this new sense of shame that appeared so suddenly, yet felt so natural to feel, as if it had been laying dormant within him since the beginning of time.

Shame—one of life’s great motivators. A great mass of energy, forever great in its power, that could only be moved from one place or another, never destroyed. An eternal back-and-forth game of tennis.

He thought about where this shame was when people went to the movie theaters late at nights in trench coats to watch pornography. Where it shifted to when VHS tapes were readily available for rent to be enjoyed in smaller groups on the living room couch when the kids were away or asleep. Was it hovering over him and his friends' heads while they downloaded thirty-second clips on the family computer, ready to pounce at any moment?

Did Mistress Gabriella's tennis racket deliver the game-winning blow when he let her into his bedroom?

On his introspective walk through the neighborhood Vincent could feel the weight of his shame leave his shoulders as he straightened up and forced his chin up high. Awkwardness was a hole only other people could put you in, only if you let them. The moment of truth would come soon when Colton opens that door to see Vincent, who would be sure to greet him with open arms and bombard him with affirmations, hoping to offset any doubts Colton might have.

Perhaps it was the vodka on the empty stomach. Perhaps it was the head rush from the cigarette, but Vincent couldn't fight the image in his head of Colton laying face up in his bed, naked, struggling to play with his erection while Mistress Gabriella teased him relentlessly. Her sensual, melodic voice guiding him to fantastical ecstasy. Vincent found no reason to abstain from the imagery in his head. There was nothing wrong with pleasure or letting things go or feeling like you're loved and cared for. After all—it was what everyone deserved, whose right was it to say *how* one should obtain these feelings? All of those feelings, he wondered, all thanks to Mistress Gabriella. All those feelings which, in the world he used to live in had to be earned with sweat and blood and tears and even then provided no guarantee. It left a bitter taste in his mouth to think about all the times he needed to be loved and supported and was left hanging out to dry after being vulnerable with another

person. How do you talk about your feelings? There was no universal language for it. There was not one way of presenting a personal affliction to someone and expecting them to say anything worthwhile in return. Getting help, he figured, was futile. It was enough a challenge to express his own feelings in a concise manner; it was nearly impossible to present the information to another person while trying to navigate their own emotional minefield, trying to strike a balance between being relateable enough to get feedback and saying something so general that the other party would project the issue onto themselves and no longer be engaged in the issue at hand. Pain and struggle can make the best of people become self-centered.

Mistress Gabriella. Oh Mistress Gabriella. There was no expectations to perform. To play dress-up or do the old sing-and-dance. There was no saying the wrong thing, because there would be nothing to say. Yet, there was always a feeling that she understood. Maybe that's what she understood that everyone else didn't—that the language of emotions could not be expressed literally. That a dialogue only presented more complexity to an issue. There was a beautiful simplicity in just listening, a sense of humility upon realizing that perhaps somebody had already gone through a particular issue, and if Mistress Gabriella's recordings helped some, it could help him. Despite Vincent's programming talents there were always problems even he couldn't solve, yet there was always a solution from supposedly less talented programmers on the internet. There really was a strength in letting go. How much more proof did he need? No matter what he thought, felt, wanted, needed, whatever bothered him, whatever he wanted to say but couldn't put into words would always result in Mistress Gabriella knowing just the right thing to say in return. She was a genie that could read his mind and make his subconscious wishes come true. She was an alchemist who could take all the negative energy from his

mind and body and transform it into pleasure. She was a gracious queen whose servants, should they choose to submit to her reign, would live out a life free of all pain and suffering. She was a goddess, omnipresent and perfect and growing stronger with the collective faith of her loyal followers.

For every second Colton didn't answer the front door Vincent felt a greater sense of accomplishment. He had been outside for almost two hours, occasionally running a lap around the block to keep himself warm.

Sitting with his back against the door now, Vincent's knocking slowed down, only occasionally he would strike the door with the knuckle on his index finger to let Colton know there was an outside world. In his head he was working up a treatment plan for the individual members of the group. *Handsfree.mp3* would be the first—an introductory lesson for everyone, followed by *The Perfect You* and perhaps a *You Are Never Alone* to start day two off on.

And then what? What was his criteria picking out which recordings would most help out specific individuals? He couldn't determine their mental states or needs or desires. Maybe make copies of all the recordings he's collected so far and hand them off to each person, let them decide? No—he couldn't just give them away. Mistress Gabriella wouldn't want that. They would *have to* pay for their own. When asked about certain recordings, Vincent decided, he would simply give them his opinion. If it was one he hadn't heard he would tell them to try it out and see what happens. Couldn't hurt. There hasn't been one he's listened to so far that couldn't satisfied him. At the next meeting, Vincent decided, he would—

"You still there?" Colton said from behind the front door, startling Vincent, nearly falling asleep at that point.

"Yeah." Vincent pulled himself up, stretching his neck and back out. "Are you done?"

The door came open. Colton emerged in a bath towel, his wet black hair draped over his forehead. A childish grin on his face. He welcomed Vincent back into the house, led him to the couch and asked him to sit down. Vincent watched with anticipation as Colton found his words before speaking. Nervously, he said, “look—I thought it was a bit weird at first, too. But give it a few days, I promise—”

“Vincent . . .”

“Uhuh?”

“I just had to clean my own cum out of my hair.”

“Yep.”

“And now I’m telling you this?”

“Yes. Yes you are.”

“And that’s okay?”

“What do *you* think?”

“I’m not sure I know anymore. Vincent?”

“Yep?”

“I think you’ve got something here.”

The Taste of Us

“Alright, guys, this got weird now.” Mason sat on the edge of a seat closest to the exit. With Vincent’s encouragement and Colton’s blessing, the CWC was assigned to spend the next week exploring, healing, empowering themselves with the aid of Mistress Gabriella’s work. Figuring that the path to sexual self-discovery could not exactly be guided, he left his suggestions to the first three from the self-help category and simply encouraged that the guys take a chance at the first thing that grabs their attention. No matter what they choose, he assured, they wouldn’t be disappointed. “I was under the impression this was a group for us guys to be guys again, not a fan club for some phone sex operator teaching me to jerk off better.”

“*Mason . . .*” Vincent, sitting beside Colton behind a small coffee table, grabbed a cigarette from Colton’s pack and lit it, barely catching the displeased look on Colton’s face. “Mason—women are inevitable. *Cunt Worship Committee*—that *was* meant to be ironic, but just as there is truth to every joke . . . you know? If there was ever a cunt to worship, would this not be it? There will always be something to give up, and if we don’t—it would be taken from us one way or another. Why not take control of your life and give up something willingly, and in return receive

pleasure of whatever sort you want. Don't even think of it as giving anything up—think of it as letting something go.”

“It's just porn, Vincent.” Mason twisted in his seat, the eyes of CWC were all on him. “I mean, you guys do whatever you want. It's just not doing it for me. I couldn't even get through the first—”

“Mason,” Colton spoke, “you have to—”

“You gotta give it another chance.” Vincent cut him off. Colton glanced at Vincent with a look of frustration, then took back his cigarettes and lit one for himself, leaning back in his chair. “This is an exercise in control. As much as we like to think we have ourselves in control, every once in a while we will lose it—trust me—I've been there—and spiral down into self-loathing and self-destruction, because we don't know how to handle it.” Vincent found the words leaving his mouth without even having to think about them. This would've been another one of those times where, despite never wanting to say much, especially in group setting, he would find himself babbling on to no end. He wasn't sure of what to make of it, of himself in those kinds of times. A conflict of sorts where he would question if he was really an introvert with not much to add to a conversation, or that he could simply temporarily transcend his usual reservedness when a topic he was passionate about would come up. This was true for anything relating to programming, the antics of high-school life, and now, Mistress Gabriella. “Mason,” he continued, “this is a practice in giving up control. And there is no safer environment to practice that in than in the comfort of your own home.”

“But it's not real!” Mason pleaded.

“It's no less real than the illusions you have of yourself and who you are.” Tam, Brian, and Jeremy watched with blank stares on their faces as Vincent spoke, his chin up high, shoulders back, the pot light from the kitchen illuminating the back of his head. “Let yourself go, Mason.”

“No,” Mason stood up from his chair, “I don’t think I will.” He gave nod to each member, a sarcastic salute to Vincent, then walked out of the circle toward the hallway.

“Where are you going?” Colton asked.

“Umm,” Mason avoided eye contact while slipping into his shoes, “I think I’ll kill myself now.”

“Bullshit!” Colton shouted, “that was *my* thing!”

“Mine too!” Chris added, “I was going to do it last week.”

“Yeah, guys,” Mason said, “Good luck with yours. I’m actually going for it this time.” With his shoes now on, he leaned on a wall in the hallway, took a deep breath, and looked back at the group. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot now. And, well—I think this was my calling. This life was an accident. I never wanted to do anything with it, and the world never asked me of anything. I was a random mutation that did nothing to progress humanities’ evolution, never aspired to, either. Death is my destiny, and if there’s anything admirable I can do it would be to fulfill my destiny. I won’t make a show of it, I’ll just disappear.”

Vincent watched the group, sitting back with a dumbfounded look on his face. Everyone else seemed to know exactly what Brian was talking about. Unable to connect Mistress Gabriella to Mason’s speech, he retreated, hoping somebody would say something productive.

“You’re full of shit,” Colton said.

“Eh,” Mason waved him off, “I don’t know. Guess I’ll have to see. Good luck?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Colton waved back as the door shut.

The group went quiet, in wait of just about anything to be said to ease the tension in the room. Vincent, having his train of thought derailed, took another one of Colton’s cigarettes, again not recognizing Colton’s clear look of frustration, lit it and sat in silence with his thoughts. “Was he serious?” he finally spoke.

“It’s just a thing we all say,” Tam said. His voice lacked

any assurance.

Vincent mentally sorted through his library of Mistress Gabriella's recordings, attempting to figure out one that may have helped Mason change his mind, his way of thinking. He began to resent himself a little, thinking, *knowing* that this was preventable. That he was the one to prevent it. "Alright, group," he straightened himself up and spoke directly, "you called me here, did you not?" He waited for a nod from everyone, then stood up and spoke louder. "You want *my* advice. *My* guidance? Did you not put this crown here on my head? Did you come here to waste my time or did you come here to become better men? What I'm trying to do here *works*. You believed that when the time came I would know what to do, well now's the time and I don't want to hear any doubts because clearly nobody here has any better ideas. From now on, I need to know that you're with me, or get out, right now." Vincent looked each one of them in the eyes. "I'm serious. *Get the fuck out, right now!*" He sat down, arms crossed. "Anyone?"

Everyone remained glued to their seats.

"Good," Vincent said.

Colton woke up to the scream of his coffee grinder. The stench of cigarette smoke seeped into his bedroom. Outside was still mostly dark; the deep blue hue of the sky just began to illuminate the scenery in his window. With one eye open he checked his phone to see that it was barely five in the morning. One reluctant foot after the other on the floor, he got out of bed and left his room to find the kitchen light spilling over into the living room. Around the corner he saw Vincent hunched over the kitchen counter, reading something on his laptop. Cigarette in hand. The kettle on the oven whisted, begging for somebody to remove it from the burner.

"Vincent?" Colton said while picking the crumbs from his eyes.

Vincent kept his eyes fixed on the screen, taking a deep drag from his cigarette. "No purpose." He said, "this group has no purpose."

"Vincent," Colton walked up to Vincent, leaning up against the kitchen counter. He looked over at the computer screen to find a web browser with over a dozen tabs' worth of reading material open. "Vincent, I didn't get much sleep last night, gotta work soon."

"Mason had no purpose"

"Mason's an idiot." Colton grabbed his cigarettes off the counter and reached inside the pack. It was empty.

"Oh yeah," Vincent said, "we're out."

"We?"

"Here," Vincent pulled out his wallet and handed Colton a twenty-dollar bill, "could you? I have work to do."

Colton begrudgingly took the bill and crumpled it into his fist. "What are you—"

"This isn't going to work if there isn't a purpose." Vincent shut his eyes and tugged on his hair with both hands, breathing deeply, "something's gotta be done."

"We *are* doing things, aren't we?" Colton leaned on the kitchen counter, trying to get into Vincent's line of sight.

"It's not enough."

"What do you mean? We've got shooting guns, barbeque, now Mistress Gabriella?"

"The shooting thing didn't work, I have to drop that."

"What!? But the guys—"

"It's just venting—you can't just vent all the time."

"But some people *like* shooting guns!"

"What if some don't. We can't leave anyone out. Goddamn it," Vincent sighed, dropping his forehead onto the keyboard. "Do you think I'm losing them?"

"I think we could stand to be more organized."

"I gotta think . . . I gotta think," Vincent looked over at the empty pack of cigarettes in Colton's hand, then up at Colton. "I gave you that twenty, right?"

* * *

“Raise your hands,” Vincent said, standing in the center of a circle of yoga mattresses laid out on the floor, “if you think your life could be better.” The couch was shoved into the hallway to make room, chairs tucked away into the kitchen. It was night time. The box of decorations Vincent asked Colton to pack away from their first night of meeting was now sitting in front of the chimney. Blinds closed. Room lit up by candles arranged around the yoga mattresses, the kitchen counter, the windowsill. On each mattress sat a member of the CWC, beside each mattress lay a bottle of personal lubricant, an empty bowl, and a rubber spatula. Vincent stood over top of a plastic gold chalice in the center. The crown sat on top of his head. One by one, as if they had no choice, the hands went up in the air. Vincent nodded and allowed them to rest back down. Vincent checked the laptop screen, moving himself out of the way to ensure that the webcam recording would catch everyone.

“How can your life get better,” Vincent continued, “if you don’t allow yourself to recognize what is wrong in the first place? Sure, we guys can vent. We know how to vent and our outlets are aplenty, but when it comes to actually talking about what bothers us, where do we go? We don’t *have* each other. How do you develop *true* friendship? How do you build trust? I mean *real* trust. I mean sharing your internet history kind of trust? I mean vulnerability.

“How do we get stronger as a group? We learn how to trust one another. We learn that it’s okay to be vulnerable around one another. We learn how to let fear go. We learn that fear doesn’t matter and that it doesn’t control us. We learn all of this together.

“Then, and only then, can we start to heal. We can start to be true with ourselves and with each other. We can learn to talk about how we really feel. What we really want. We can drop the act. We can stop living this lie thinking that we know ourselves and have it all figured out. Because we don’t.

We don't know anything."

Vincent circled the room, then placed himself in the center again. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and dropped his underwear. "*Look at it.* Pretty ordinary-looking, right?" He glanced briefly at the five sets of eyes taking their time with getting comfortable with the sight. "Yet, this is the dick that fucked Jenna Moone—a pretty extraordinary feat. But . . . this is *also* the dick that helped to fight the battle against everything that was thrown at me. *This dick*, here with me all along, guided by *Mistress Gabriella*. I *trusted* her with myself and she elevated me to become the man you all admire. If you trust *me*, then trust *her*. Because *I* do. Because the Cunt Worship Committee *needs* a cunt to worship. Because behind every self-deprecating joke there is a cry for help. A need that begs to be fulfilled. If you believe me to be the king, then let her be the queen.

"This is a huge deal, I understand that." Vincent was finding inspiration from a place he didn't want to revisit. Parts of the *Aladdin* soundtrack invaded his brain, playing a few lines in an endless loop. He struggled to maintain composure. "How often do you find that you're just *not* allowing yourself to let great things happen? You already took the first big step, you got into that ca—decided to form this group. Took the first big plunge, *actually* met each other face to face. How many of you are simply afraid that this *will* work? That's the scary thing, isn't it? That when this works, when you all get better, then how you feel now—this doubt, this self-loathing—won't make sense anymore and you'll have to deal with being happy, functional men?

"Have the future you dreamed of. For once, get out of your own way and let somebody take the reigns, at least for a little bit, somebody who knows what they're doing. I *believe* that she will have a solution. *I'm* taking a risk here just as much as anyone.

"*I* could've been another *Mason*. Mistress Gabriella saved me . . . all you have to do is *submit* . . .

“Gentlemen, who here trusts me? Raise your hands . . . good. Who here wants to finally admit that they’re full of shit? . . . good. Take this plunge with me. Who is ready to recognize that fear is the only thing stopping us from being the men we want to be?”

“I am!”

“Aye!”

“Yup.”

“Same here.”

“Alright then, drop them and find your positions. Get nice and comfortable and let Mistress Gabriella lead the way. You’ve had a taste of how good it felt to let go—let’s take it a step further now. No risk, no reward. We’re paying tribute to our goddess here, show her what you’re made of.”

“What are you doing now?” Colton woke up to find Vincent working in the kitchen the next morning.

“I’m writing to Mistress Gabriella. Oh!” Vincent peeled his face away from the screen and looked at Colton, who immediately broke eye contact, “can you arrange for the guys to come over tonight again? I want to talk about tributes.”

“But I thought that *was* the tribute.”

“Yeah, no—that was more symbolic—to show dedication. But we need to show her we’re really serious about getting help from her. I’ll put everything in a big package labeled from us, put the jar in there too. I’m thinking stuff she can use, maybe a high tech microphone or sound mixer, headphones—I’ll have to think about it. Something to show love, too—”

“Is the jar not—”

“That’s different. We need to show that we appreciate *every* aspect of her. I’m thinking lingerie. Something we all would find sexy, you know those one piece sort of lace things—it’s classy and leaves some to the imagination—let’s get that.”

“What size? We don’t know what she looks like.”

“Oh, I don’t know women’s sizes. A small? What else could she be?”

“Fine. Who’s paying for this.”

“Just get them to pitch in.”

“And you?”

“Yeah, I’ll throw something in too. Putting all of this together—that’s gotta count for something too.” Vincent turned back to the screen, his fingers began to think.

“Right.”

“What’s gotten into *you*?” Vincent asked, annoyed that his writing was interrupted when Colton barged into the house, slammed the door shut, and with his shoes still on, stomped over to the fridge for a beer. He opened it, hands still shaking with anger, and swallowed several long gulps. Not waiting for Colton to answer, Vincent resumed writing his letter.

“Vincent?”

“Yup?”

“I think you were right. My thing didn’t work.”

“Okay.” Vincent looked across the counter, watching Colton chug his beer.

“I thought that, maybe after all of *this*, I could move on.”

“Uhuh.”

“This morning, I went back to that coffee shop, after who knows how long now. That bitch didn’t even recognize me. I’ve thought about it all day. Goddamn it, man, could not let it go. Can’t, still.”

“Try, uhh, *You Matter*—I’ve got it here on my drive. Hmm,” Vincent sifted through his mental inventory, “*Tranny Therapist*—there’s a good bit about picturing your bad day and putting it into perspective, something like that, try that too, maybe.”

“I don’t really feel like jerking off, Vincent.”

“Oh, I could go work at a cafe somewhere if you want the place to yourself.”

“No—I meant maybe you’d wanna go grab a drink with me . . . someplace other than here. Just hang out. Go for a drive?”

“Oh, sorry, man—got lots of work to do here. Maybe another time.”

“Alright,” Colton took with him another beer and stormed off to his bedroom.

“Oh, Colton!” Vincent called out as Colton disappeared around the corner, “make sure to talk to the guys!”

The Show Will Go On

To all my fans,

It has been a crazy, crazy year. A wild ride. I don't know how to properly express my gratitude to all of my fans. You are all absolutely amazing, fantastic people. Seeing all of the love and support from listeners like you makes it a pleasure to wake up in the morning and work my butt off the way I do.

You are my inspiration.

Some very big, exciting changes are coming and I have some very special announcements to make.

First up, due to call volume, and out of respect for everyone's time, I have refitted my website to have a scheduling system for phone sex sessions. Now you can see when I'm available and book a time window of whatever is most convenient to you. The best part? You can pay ahead of time now, so no more interruptions. The line will connect you directly with me so that we can get to business right away.

My second announcement, something I have been considering for a while, weighting the pros and cons, is that my recordings will now only be available on a monthly subscription basis. Not only does this save you money in the long run, but having access to my entire library gives you the chance to explore some interesting topics you might not have given a chance later.

Starting September 1st, 2017, the subscription plans will go as

follows:

\$8.99 for the Basic Plan. This provides access to all recordings with a runtime of less than 45 minutes, in standard-quality stereo sound.

\$13.99 for the Standard Plan. This includes access to the ENTIRE library of recordings in ultra high-quality surround sound.

\$17.99 for the Premium Plan. This includes everything in the Standard Plan. Priority booking for phone sex, as well as a \$5 voucher for each new month.

A very exciting future awaits, I can't wait to share it with all of you.

There was always something endearing about receiving a physical copy of photos of her fans' erect penises. Some were autographed. Some had a love letter or a short sonnet written on the backs of them. All of them footnoted with a sentiment of love or eternal dedication. She kept all such photos or letters in a special pink organizer in the drawer of her bedside table.

Every Thursday Mistress Gabriella would make the trip to check up on the post office box she rented exclusively for gifts sent by her fans. Pledges—usually at the footnote of her more submissive-themed recordings she would demand that her listeners litter her with gifts, money, embarrassing photos of themselves in exchange for the pleasure she bestowed upon them. It was all a part of the trust, love, dedication she preached, sent her way, that would amplify the listener's experience next time around. Of course she wasn't going to expose her fans' secrets to the public or their coworkers or their wives, but it was that insecurity, that minuscule idea in the backs of their minds convincing them of the contrary that made the experience, whether the headphones were on or off, that much more exciting. It was their fear of humiliation and loss of respect that paved way for trust and commitment. All Mistress Gabriella had to do to keep the fans coming was make empty threats. Easy

work.

Aside from BDSM, self-help was her best-selling category. The transition was simple. Everything had a formula. From financial to fitness to acceptance of oneself—any issue one would have in life desperate to fix followed the same pattern: create a fantasy world in which this one issue was the driving force behind one's unhappiness, a brick wall between them and satisfaction, then inflate the listener's ego with affirmations to the point where they feel like a giant who could step over the wall with ease, never to look back. A temporary sense of satisfaction that would last long enough for the listener to be curious enough to purchase another recording. To Mistress Gabriella self-help was as much a fantasy as fighting dragons or rescuing horny princesses or participating in an hour-long orgy with Victoria's Secret models.

There was never a real shortage of ideas, but her fans would always demand more content and she had a reputation to live up to. There was some pressure now that a significant source of her ideas had been taken from her. There were always more movies to watch. Her bookshelves were overflowing. Inspiration was aplenty but after time most of her usual sources began to feel stale. She did, however, every now and then, come up with an idea or two of her own, but originality was not something she was concerned with. Originality was overrated and over-celebrated. *Original* was a word wannabe artists used to describe their masterpiece which would never see the light of day. *Original* was always the perfect idea that would lose its romance once brought to fruition. She had no drive to make anything perfectly original as it only ever led her down a deep rabbit hole of frustration and lack of product. There had to be a line drawn on originality, because no matter how out-of-world one could create a setting, story, or character it would never capture the listener's attention unless there was a familiar texture to feel or sight to witness, a relatable

conflict to project oneself into, or a recognizable sexual organ to lick, fondle, suck, fuck, or to bend over for.

This week's mail was more or less of the same. More photos and letters. The same best-selling fantasy and science-fiction novels with written notes in-between the pages specifying which characters her fans would want to sodomize, or be sodomized by, during which parts of the book, whether it be during a climactic event or simply a memorable scene. The same went for DVDs and comic books. She would throw those in on pile for later sorting, should there be one she missed. Some fans would draw illustrations of what they thought Mistress Gabriella looked like. Some sent her skimpy outfits or lingerie, none of which would usually make it back home.

One of the larger boxes sent that week contained several gifts. On the lid was a note that read: *With Love, CWC*. She waited until she got home to unpack it.

There were things Paul was willing to let slide when Mistress Gabriella worked for him. Her customers calling back to complain when she got a little carried away was one of them. Not fulfilling her end of the bargain, that is, giving Paul at least twenty-five hours a week of phone time in exchange for allowing her to advertise her personal services to the customers, was another he could tolerate. A customer's wife barging into his place of business with a pistol threatening violence was where he had to draw the line.

She was sent home that night and asked to never return. Not exactly missing much from that job, she figured. Although once the shock of almost dying had subsided, she wasn't exactly thrilled about not being able to call it quits on her own terms.

The box she brought home would lift her spirits. She wasn't too happy when her unpacking ceremony was interrupted by a phone call.

"Hi, Gaby."

"*Tonia!* How nice of you to call. How ya doing, hun?"

"Oh, I'm alright. Sorry for calling so late, I figured you'd be on *our* schedule still."

"You guessed right! Still a night owl. You on a break or what?"

"Paul's . . . giving us a week off to sort things out."

"Right."

"Clean the mess up, you know. Plus, we're all a little shaky. Paul's being alright though. Paying us for the week while we get ourselves together."

"Oh that Paul. I mean, Erika *was* right, he *really does* take care of us girls. Sure took care of that crazy lady, huh?"

"Goddamn, *Gabs*. You got that right. Hey, how *you* doing by the way—you don't sound too . . ."

"Just fine. Keeping a close eye on any disgruntled wives I see on the streets—hah! Ah, don't worry about me, keeping my head down with work. You know how I like to stay busy."

" . . ."

" . . ."

"Gaby?"

"*Tonia?*"

"We *are* going to miss you, you know?"

"*Ohhhh, sweetie.*"

"I know we talk all sorts of shit, but that's just how we do. We all know you're good people. Call it jealousy. Hell, *I* admire you, Gaby."

"*Honnnnnneyyy . . .*"

"I mean it now."

"Oh, I know you do. Ugh, you're making me cry, you know that? *Tonia*, I *admire you*. I can't imagine how difficult it must be raising kids all on your own."

"Raising a bunch of *dumbasses* is more like it. *Speaking of which . . . HEY!*"

"What's wrong?"

"The kids are being dumbasses. *Hey, CARLTON, get those goddamn gummy worms out your nose.*"

"Oh, I'll let you—"

"Sorry, Gabs. *Hey quit being a dumbass. COME HERE!* Oh, Gabs—I'm so sorry. I gotta run."

"Alright, Tonia. *Hey, so nice of you to call.*"

"Oh of course, hey—if you need anything, you should —"

"Oh *thank you . . . oh hey, Tonia.*"

"Yes?"

"Before you go. I . . . I don't really know how to say this, but I didn't know who to tell. I'm sorry to lay this on you in such troubling times."

"Nah, honey. What's up?"

"So . . . when I was cleaning out my booth, packing all my things up, I came across this weird thing. It was in my desk, taped to the top of the inside of the drawer. It was really strange . . . I didn't even want to touch it."

"What do you mean? What was it?"

"Oh, it was like a . . . it's like a weird little plastic thing, about the size of your hand—some wires or antennas sticking out from it. I don't know if it's just me or—"

"Gaby! This is *exactly* what we were talking about!"

"*Oh no*, you don't think . . ."

"OH I KNOW!"

"Tonia . . ."

"That no-good Mary! I knew it. I'm gonna check my desk! We knew it!"

"Well that is . . . *frightening!*"

"Oh I'm gonna raise some hell about this. *You know I'm gonna raise some hell! Damn!*"

"Don't hold back now."

"Okay, really I gotta run now. *Munabbbb!* Love ya, Gabs."

"Take care, Tonia."

Cunt Worship Committee—the name amused Mistress

Gabriella. She sorted through the box, removing the individual packages and laid them out in front of her computer monitors. The first box contained a volleyball with a large *W* printed on the face, attached to it, separated by six hours on the clock, was a pair of binaural headphones, one left and one right. Although the headphones were of the mid-range tier—something she'd already outgrown in her ever-increasing knowledge of sound production—she was happy with the gift. That big old *W* on the volleyball—another idea for a recording, at least.

Could a starving, delirious plane-wreck survivor be desperate enough to fuck his volleyball?

The manila envelope containing black lace lingerie found itself in the trash before it could be fully inspected. Mistress Gabriella's enthusiasm had dropped to its baseline of being mildly interested in anything, barely enough to engage. She went for the next box, about ten inches in all dimensions. Written over the plastic tape, on the seam, were the words *READ LETTER BEFORE OPENING*. She found no letter in the larger box, nor in the one with the volleyball. She reluctantly fished out the manila envelope from her trash bin, removed the lingerie with the pinch of two fingers, and pulled out a smaller white envelope. Inside was a handwritten letter and several hundred dollars in cash. She tossed the lingerie back in the bin, leaned back in her chair, and unfolded the letter.

Dear Mistress Gabriella,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Vincent Poole and I want to begin by thanking you for making me a better person. Not too long ago I had fallen victim to a devious plot that just about ruined my life. It was your recordings that helped me accept what happened and led me through the healing process of a truly traumatizing time in my life. I was able to move on. I'm not exactly sure why it worked, but it

did, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn that I wasn't the first. I won't get into semantics but all I'll say is that I wasn't doing too great. I was a boy then. A boy who knew nothing about sex. No idea how repressed I was. No outlet—and that, what happened in that video, was the result of it. I feel free now. With you talking into my ear I feel liberated, sexually. I know that's a thing girls in college say but honestly it feels unfair that only they get to say that. I feel liberated and I have you to thank for that. I knew nothing about sex. Nothing about what women really wanted. Damn, I knew nothing about pleasure and just how deep we have to dig to really get the most out of our minds and bodies.

I have something to confess. I was a shallow, stupid, little boy before you came into my life. You want to hear about it? OK, here goes:

So, I had this girlfriend a while back. Been together for a little over a year. God, I feel so stupid even thinking about it. We broke up. She was the one to end it, but I was completely responsible in getting her there. You know what happened? I saw what her poop looked like. Yes, her POOP! One morning after she slept over she left one floating in the toilet and forgot to flush and I walked in to witness it. There it was. Shit. I could smell it. It looked weird. I mean, I've seen shit before, obviously, but this was the shit that came from the girl I've been so intimate with. My face had been there, inches away from where it comes out! I couldn't get it out of my head. It got worse when I had trouble keeping it up for her. Whenever I had sex with her from behind I would look into her crack and imagine an endless length of poop emerging from her butthole. She was cute, no doubt, but my attraction to her was completely gone within weeks. I grew distant. Yadda-yadda-yadda, arguments and what not. Eventually she got fed up and called it quits.

Pathetic, right? Well, I can tell you that I'm not that guy any longer. You, Mistress Gabriella, have opened my eyes and mind so something so deep, so beautiful, that I really do feel like a new man. I'm not that shallow little boy. Sex, love, romance—none of that is about a person's looks or tits or buttholes. It's about how a person can make you feel. And the way YOU make me feel, Mistress Gabriella, both inside and out, is something I can only wish every person could

experience. I mean, really, if every man had a chance to listen to your voice I can say with almost complete certainty there would be no wars or famine.

But enough about me. In my search to heal and get better I made friends with a group of young men who have also suffered, and together, as a team, and with your help we are all getting better. The Cunt Worship Committee (I hope the word 'cunt' doesn't offend you, I know you use it all the time in your recordings, but I just want to let you know that it is your cunt that we worship) got together these gifts as a pledge to offer our eternal gratitude and attention. As a show of our trust and dedication, you may now open the box. You don't have to open the jar inside if you don't want to, I'm sure you will understand what's in it just by looking. The video on the USB stick is proof of our trust in you. There you will also find a text file with my contact information.

I hope this gets your attention. I hope that you recognize us and that we can keep in touch. There is something important we could use your help with. I think we can work together.

*With Love,
Vincent Poole*

Vincent Poole—the name rang a bell. Mistress Gabriella wasn't one to keep a close eye on current events, but the girls at the office talked. They talked a lot and oftentimes it would be near impossible to shut their noises out. *Mr. Poole*—the same man responsible for all the: *they should this* and *they should thats?* The *he did thats* and the *he should this*.

All the my boys would never . . .

Mine neither, not in a million years.

And the I wouldn't even let a guy like that near me.

Vincent Poole, the misunderstood rapist. A two-hour search revealed everything Mistress Gabriella would ever need to learn about Vincent Poole. Every opinion piece. A deconstruction of his every action. Play-by-plays of the famous video that had been posted hundreds of times

across every porn website. His motivations. An analysis from every perspective. Rumors of his suicide or that he's moved to a cabin in the Rockies somewhere. Articles with titles such as: *Can You Really Rape a Porn Star?* and *Are You Serious? Of Course You Can Rape a Porn Star* and *What Black C**ks Matter Really Says About Jenna Moone*.

Vincent Poole, the boy genius. She read through detailed breakdowns of his programming project. Some praising his work; some creating rudimentary copies based on the concept to prove that what he created wasn't *that* extraordinary. Forum boards littered with ridiculous spec scripts others had made based on the copies. Philosophical discussions regarding creativity and content creation and what that means for the future of media. The potential dangers of being *too* relevant with fiction and storytelling in a world of influencers and the constantly-influenced. An open letter from a popular media streaming platform, acknowledging Vincent's wrongdoings and wishing that he had learned from his mistakes, and if he had, that they would love for him to come work for them. Another open letter, a response from a competitor media streaming platform condemning the letter of the original. A porn streaming company joining sides against the first, claiming violence against women has no place in people's homes, only to have both media companies turn on *it*, based on the accusation that they refused to remove the video of Jenna Moone's rape because of all the money it made them.

Vincent Poole, unaware of his awesome power. The harbinger of discourse, the revealer of a truth that the only constant in life is ambiguity. The shining example of great potential going to waste, never given a chance to grow and bloom, due to meaningless discussions pertaining to politics and character having nothing to do about his work. Vincent Poole, a superstar, yearning for his power to be harnessed before he fades from existence, as so many others have before him. Before he is forgotten and joins the graveyard

of great ideas that never were. The ideas never fully explored. The ideas never given a chance.

Dear Vincent Poole . . . Mistress Gabriella began to compose a response.

A Good Bad Boy

“You’re cool to take over for now, right?” Vincent had already bought his plane ticket back to Portland. A meeting with *the* Mistress Gabriella was nothing to take lightly. Preparations were in order, both mental and physical. By now, he figured, whatever mobs have been roaming around his block had given up and moved on to more recent issues, as he was sure there would have been. He would maybe finally give his mother a call. His friends. *Those friends*, he wasn’t sure what to call them. A part of him had hoped that they moved on. Had given up on him. It was an easier thought to deal with than having to explain that he had found a new group of men who shared his interests and engaged in the same passions, however recent they were. Maybe if he were to simply explain to them, now having spent a significant time away, what it was that he needed of them in the first place, he would be able to calm their storm of judgment and accusations before it came down on him in full force. He wondered if he would tell them of Mistress Gabriella, and that they, too, could benefit from a little healing. Through e-mail correspondents with his landlord Vincent was able to avoid getting evicted from his old apartment. The biggest issue the landlord brought up, besides not informing him of his long-term departure, was

the smell emanating from outside his door, spreading throughout the entire floor. They came to an agreement that he would pay a fine, and allow the landlord to enter the premises to remove the waste.

A family member had died, Vincent claimed. He had to leave immediately and his mind was not completely there. He was sorry and promised to never do it again.

"You can't be serious!" Colton said, staring at Vincent's computer screen. A flight itinerary. He was set to take off the next morning. It was a one-way ticket. "After everything you just put us through? Hey!" He shouted for Vincent who was pacing up and down the living room scratching the back of his head, demanding attention. "I think the video may have been too much. I think the guys are worried."

"So calm them down!" Vincent said. Stopping to think, he glared at Colton, "or is it just *you* that's worried? Who else has been saying this?"

"I don't know—everyone's been pretty quiet."

"So get them talking. You know I have to do this."

"You have to talk to them. Vincent, what if the video leaks?"

"That's the point! The *what if*. That's our push. It's a chance we all had to take!" Vincent's mind was so busy making a million calculations a minute that he was unable to make sense of what he was calculating in the first place. "We're all going to come out of this on top. This right here, where we are, this is the most important step of the process. This is why you brought me here. It's a leap of faith, and so far I'm the only one you know who's come out from the other side. You all just have to trust me. Just call the guys over and talk—that's all you have to do. We all jerked off in the same room together. How much more embarrassing can any subject to talk about be? Remind them of that."

"Vincent, I gotta be honest, man—I'm not really in the mood to be talking."

"Then go jerk off—clear your head, then try again."

“We can’t just fix everything by jerking off!”

“It’s not just jerking off—don’t let your insecurity discredit this. I’m going to talk to her and we’re going to make a plan and then everything will be alright.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes!” Vincent stopped pacing to rest his heart. Steady his hand. He collected himself and said, “one more thing—I need you all to go to her website and write testimonials, make sure to proofread them. Get as many as you can. Sign them all as is from the *CWC*. Make dummy accounts to inflate our presence. Mistress Gabriella needs to know we’re not just some group of losers hanging out in a basement.”

Returning to his home filled Vincent with a sense of dread he was not ready to face. The air still reeked of the stench from before he left it. The landlord must have missed some items. The windows should have been left open. The kitchen counter could not be seen underneath the pile of letters and boxes of various sizes.

The trip, he rationalized, was simply business related. Emotional business, but business nevertheless. There was a deal to be made. A transaction to process. Small talk to engage in. Lives were at stake, after all, and a king looks after his own. Like in a game of chess, Vincent was the center of attention, yet still at the mercy of the piece that held all the moves, free to do as she pleased, the queen. No matter how he put it, there was nothing about Mistress Gabriella that wasn’t intimidating. He was at her mercy more times than he could count. There was only so much she could do from inside his own head, and despite fighting the urge, he couldn’t help but to think what she was capable of outside of it.

Certain preparations were to be made, regardless of the intended purpose of their meeting.

Flowers were absolutely necessary. He was a gentleman and

she was a mistress and certain standards were in place. A box of brandy-infused chocolates as a small gift. According to the *About Me* page they were her absolute favorite. It was the small things that mattered. In hindsight, Vincent couldn't pinpoint any single person he'd met who would be more deserving of love and attention than Mistress Gabriella.

A single knock. Count to one, two, three. Then another. Footsteps—he imagined what shoes she would be wearing. The four-inch stilettos she would love to jam into his crotch when he was being a bad boy? Perhaps barefoot—those sweet, soft, manicured toes she would insist he lick every surface of while kneeling in front of her. Her scent, lilac or lavender? No, he insisted, it would be the natural smell of her skin, like a bouquet of fresh roses. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose, imagining her scent. Blood rushed out of his head on the exhale.

“Hellooooo!” The sound of her voice, despite muffled by the door between separating them, sent a jolt of excitement through Vincent's stiff body. That infatuating pitch. That soothing tone. Her voice oozed with sexuality despite the playful manner in which she greeted him. The voice that brought him back to life. The voice that caressed his soul and soothed his conscience on many sleepless nights. The voice that sucked his cock when he needed it most, all on the other side of that door now.

“I'm coooming!” As he's heard her say so many times before.

He pictured the smooth, silky skin of her legs. Their shape—toned and curvaceous. From her hips to her chest, a perfect hourglass figure. Her tummy taut, with skin exposed from just beneath the belly button. She would love to tease. She would love to make him wonder what she was hiding. What else could be underneath that nearly-transparent white blouse but a pair of the most wonderful breasts a man could imagine? Perky and firm but soft and plump to the touch,

fitting perfectly into Vincent's hands. Her pink, erect nipples slipping around between his fingers as he fondled them. Her smile killed him, playful and mischievous until she would flip the switch and have him on his knees in seconds when she bites her luscious, lower lip and pierces his heart with a provocative gaze from her enchanting green eyes.

"It's m-me!" Vincent stuttered. He couldn't take it any longer. The head of his erect penis rubbed against the inside of his jeans as he flexed his butt cheeks back and forth, exciting himself even further. He was terrified, but unsure of what exactly. He recalled every word he loved to hear her speak and prayed to whoever there was to pray to that she would not say *that* word—waterfalls. The word that melted him. The trigger she programmed into his fractured psyche that would have his body erupt in an endless convulsions of pleasure. Uncontrollable, liberating pleasure. A sick part of him hoped that she would bring her lips up to the door, breathe deeply and ask him to come closer, and say that word.

Waterfalls

Please, just to ease his raging build-up of tension. Just to get it over with and let him continue this meeting without feeling like he would explode in his pants at any moment. Just say the word, he begged, and let him use the bathroom before the meeting begins.

"It's Vincent," he said.

What was that thing he said in his letter to Mistress Gabriella? *Love was not about ass or tits or something like that?* Love transcended everything he was taught to pursue and admire before she taught him that there were about a million more important things. Besides, he was getting ahead of himself. Her looks shouldn't matter, he was here, after all, to talk about matters regarding the betterment of men.

Vincent had little to say when she opened the door and

finally greeted him. His queen. His goddess, whom he believed to be the most desirable woman there ever could be . . . he wasn't sure how to put it—fat. That was it? She didn't *exactly* lie, or explicitly state otherwise. She did use words like *imagine* when describing herself as a sexy princess or a busty stripper or the shy, skinny girl next door. *Fat* wasn't a big deal, he thought, she could change if she needed to. Not that he needed her to be anything she wasn't already. She *was perfect*. When he first laid eyes on her he immediately stared straight ahead, almost as if he saw nothing below her collarbone, in case she could tell what he was thinking. She flashed him a loving smile and called him in for a hug. He stepped through the doorway and gave it. Before laying hands on her, he thought hard about which parts of her body she would be least self-conscious of him touching. The upper back, closest to the spine. His palms spread wide across the fabric of her flower-print dress with just enough pressure to constitute a hug; just light enough for him to convince her that he wasn't aware of her weight by squishing too hard.

"Hi, honey." Mistress Gabriella tucked her chin into Vincent's shoulder and pulled him in tighter. "Well, this is exciting, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mis . . . ummm," Vincent pulled himself away. Looking into her green eyes, he noticed from up close that the thick layer of black mascara had already begun to flake. "Sorry, I'm not sure what to call you."

"Silly boy," she giggled, "what do you think you should call me? After all times you've called out for me?"

"Mistress . . ." Vincent said reluctantly.

"*Mhmmm*," she egged him on.

"Mistress Gabriella," he finally said. He scanned the curvature of her physique when his mind suddenly went blank. He immediately straightened himself up upon realizing it and looked back into her eyes.

"That's right, sweetie," she winked, "not like anything

has changed now that we're here." She nodded and raised an eyebrow. "Am I right?"

"Yes," Vincent said, "of course."

"Mhmmm," Mistress Gabriella spun around and indicated with her index finger for Vincent to follow her further into her home, "*come come now.*"

Having broken her gaze now, Vincent was free to observe her figure in greater detail. He couldn't help but focus on every curve that apparently shouldn't have been there, every jiggle in places that should have been tight, every fold in her neck and arms and the mass around her ankles. With every observation he felt worse and scolded himself for even thinking of being so shallow.

With every ounce of disappointment that stained his excitement he could hear Mistress Gabriella's voice whisper in his ear: *bad boy. Bad, bad naughty boy, Vincent.* She was just overweight and there was nothing more to it. He wasn't sure of what to make of her face. The make-up was heavy and any blemish that could be there would not be seen. Her lips were dark red and the upper eyelids were painted in some shade of purple. Her large gold hoop earrings danced from front to back as she waddled over to the couch in the living room, reflecting brief glimpses of sunlight from the open windows ahead. Her face—he wasn't sure if he could call it pretty. It was hard to tell when it was so . . . round, he was sure that if he could make out the natural shape of her jaw and cheekbones and neck then he could make a fair assessment of her beauty.

But he wasn't supposed to be thinking about her like that.

Bad boy—you know that I know exactly what you're thinking. I know everything about you . . .

"What's wrong, hun?" Mistress Gabriella asked, "being awful quiet there. Hmmm?" She smiled and relaxed into her red leather couch. Vincent stood by the glass table between

them, motionless. He stared down, watching the reflection of the bottom of her arms reach for the champagne bottle on the table. She leaned back and popped the cork, “*ooob!*” she cheered and jumped in her seat, “that always gets me!” Mistress Gabriella pulled the two gold-rimmed champagne flutes closer to her and filled each to about a third full, then watched the bubbles build up and rise to the rim, nearly spilling over. “You had so, so much to say in that lovely letter of yours. Figured you for quite the talker,” she delicately pinched the stem of the flute with her fingers and brought it up to Vincent. He took it and held it above the table. She brought her glass up to his and clinked it, flashed him a playful wink, and took a sip, smacking her tongue against the roof of her mouth as the drink fizzled. Vincent drank his. With the glass to his face, he saw the distorted Mistress Gabriella signal for him to join her on the couch. He followed her instruction and shortly after required a refill.

“Not what you were expecting?” Mistress Gabriella said, interrupting Vincent’s drawn-out sip of champagne. She crossed one leg over the other, pulling the dress further up her leg. The skin on her exposed thigh was pitted. Thin purple capillaries were nearly breaking through the surface, spreading out to as far as Vincent’s eyes could see. “Don’t be shy now, I know what’s going through that head of yours.”

“Do you?” Vincent felt relieved now that he could quit keeping the guilt to himself and allowed his face to express it fully. He finished his drink and signaled for more.

“Of course, dummy,” she giggled, “*this*,” she caressed her exposed thigh, “. . . not what you were expecting. Your face is too honest-looking for your own good, you know?”

“I wasn’t—”

“Oh, it’s okay, hun.” She topped up Vincent’s glass, then her own. “But we’re so, so past that sort of thing—wouldn’t

you say?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Mhmmm,” she smacked her lips and licked the corner of her mouth. “That is what I figured. You’ve grown so, so much, right?”

“Yes, I have . . . so far past that,” Vincent assured her.

“Besides—we’re here to discuss matters of . . .” she whipped her hair back, “. . . *utmost* importance.”

“Of course,” Vincent nodded. “So this group of—” Vincent began, already tripping over his own words.

“Hey,” she assured him with a slow nod, “*eeeeasssy*.”

“Right.”

“Finish your drink first, *relax*.”

Listen to the sound of my voice

Now with Mistress Gabriella within arm’s reach, Vincent felt reluctant to bring up the video he had sent her of the group paying tribute. He knew that she knew. He knew she figured it would embarrass him to bring it up. That, perhaps, the method he chose to approach her was not completely thought through all the way and something to do with seeing her in person somehow filled his head with regret. He knew that she knew everything he had to say. “My idea was,” he began, “sort of like a fresh start. I had some friends back home—they were impossible to talk to. Everyone’s always got something stupid to say to sidetrack the conversation, or afraid to speak their mind in case it would sound too . . .”

“Sensitive?”

“I guess, yeah. You can feel so vulnerable talking about something that bothers you, but we never really think about how vulnerable a guy can feel just being there, listening. Wondering not if what they have to add to the conversation is important or helpful, but if they’ll sound stupid or pathetic saying anything at all. And so I thought of you. I thought about how much trust I could put in you, my mind

and all. How comforting it was to be so vulnerable in a safe space.”

“Oh, sweetie. So what was it you wanted me to do?”

“Well, I was thinking. These guys have lost all sense of agency, masculinity. They’ve no direction in life. There’s not much to push them, encourage them. I was hoping you could do a series of, I don’t know—male *encouragement* recordings. Something to help them deal with specific fears, with their emotions.”

“Like male empowerment?”

“Yeah! Because the sexual stuff is great, the self-help gets you through the day, but I’m thinking something that will be long-lasting. Something that could *really* change people for the better. I have so much material, so much *insider* information I could relay to you . . . we just need . . . *more*. You *know*? With my . . . clout, and your expertise, skills. This could be huge.”

“Oh, you want *more*? *Mhmmm*, I’m sure some things can be done.”

“And I can help—we can collaborate. I recently went through something that—”

“Oh yeah,” Mistress Gabriella smirked, “I *saw*.”

“You mean the—”

“Yes. That.”

“It’s not what you think, they were telling me to—”

“Oh, Vincent—I thought it was great. Quite a performance.”

“Oh.” Vincent’s glass begged for a refill but the bottle was empty. Mistress Gabriella noticed and left for the kitchen to retrieve a second bottle. She returned with a big smile on her face and popped the cork with ease then filled up their glasses. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“But it’s not what it looked like. Not what people made it out to be, you know?”

“Oh, I’m sure. Big bad media makes up all sorts of

nasty things about stand-up guys such as yourself . . .”

“Right . . . but it’s what came after that’s what led me to this. I’m sure I wasn’t the first guy to experience what I had to go through. That’s the kind of stuff I’m talking about, the recordings I mean, to help guys like me get over the trauma of having our lives torn apart. To help us realize that we did nothing wrong and help us move on.”

“Because you *did* nothing wrong!” Gabriella led him on and clinked her glass with his.

“I mean—if you really think about it . . . I can’t expect to change how the world sees us. But maybe we can change how we see ourselves, despite what everyone else says.”

“Oh yeah, perfect—I can work with that.”

“To *really* believe it. To *really* live like that. Something permanent. To live with conviction, the belief in self.”

“My my, that’s quite the ask, but I’m sure if we butt our heads together, something could be done.”

“You think?”

“Mhmmm.”

“That’s amazing, Mistress Gabriella! I really think this could be something big, the world needs this—now more than ever.”

“I’m sure it does, sweetie.” Mistress Gabriella stood up while finishing her drink and walked over to her workstation. Holding her gaze at Vincent as she ran her finger along her various recording tools. “Now, Vincent, there’s something I’m going to need from you.”

Vincent spun around on the couch, his left arm hanging over the headrest, and gave Mistress Gabriella his undivided attention. “Of course,” he said, “anything.”

“There was *another* video I came across of you that grabbed even more of my attention—your school project—tell me it does what you claimed it did.”

“Oh *that!*” Vincent laughed, “people gave me too much credit for that. I basically duct-taped together a bunch of libraries and machine learning protocols others have created

before me into something resembling a finished project. Anyone with moderate Python experience and a strong enough drive to not fail school can put it together in to time.”

“Can you put it together, for *me*? How difficult would that be? Can it be customized?”

“Not at all—all my files are still in a cloud drive—it would take a bit of time to build up a UI to make it somewhat usable by another party but it’s just a matter of how much time you’re willing to waste on it. Why—what do you need it for?”

“Ideas, Vincent.”

“But what about my thing?”

“Oh, you’ll get yours. Everything you wish for”

“So, Vincent, got a place to stay tonight?” Mistress Gabriella watched Vincent struggle to put on his shoes. For some reason Vincent decided it was time to be leaving when the strap of Mistress Gabriella’s dress accidentally slipped down her shoulder.

“Yeah, no, I think I’ll rent a car, drive down.”

“All the way back to Portland?”

“For now, yeah.”

“But Vincent,” she pleaded, “honey—you’ve been drinking. It’s a long, long drive. At least five-hundred miles.”

“I know, but—”

“Just ask, Vincent.”

“I don’t think I shou—”

“Oh,” she interrupted him, then smiled her mischievous smile, “right—you like to be told what to do, don’t you?” she teased. “Vincent!” She said in a stern tone. A tone she’s used on him dozens of times before, but there was something about hearing his own name in that tone that sent chills down his spine and stopped him in his tracks. “You will spend the night here, won’t you?”

Vincent couldn’t find the strength to answer.

"You're not . . . *scared* of Mistress Gabriella, are you?"

"No, of course not." Vincent set his foot down.

"Hmm—not even a little bit?" She pouted and wiped a pretend teardrop from her eye. "What's the matter—are you afraid this fat girl will try to play with you weenie?"

"What!? No—I don't think you're—"

"I'm only teasing, Vincent," she grabbed hold of Vincent's cheeks and squeezed them. "You know how I tease." She let go and gave him a comforting look. In a drawn-out manner, she soothingly said, "*relllaax*."

"Yeah," Vincent let down his guard and kicked his shoe off, "sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

"It's alright, honey. *I'm* sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I just want you to be safe—no sense in driving all the way home right now if you don't need to."

"You're right. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You were just a little flustered, it's alright." She took off and headed for the kitchen, "come. Let's have another drink. Then you can take my bed."

"Yeah," he followed her, "alright."

"*No-no-no-no-no*—I changed my mind! I don't want to do this!"

By the time they cleared the bedroom doorway Mistress Gabriella's mouth was already on Vincent's. Pulling away was futile, and with each attempt she pressed her face against his even harder, squeezing the skin on the back of his neck. Her red lipstick spread over his cheeks and his chin and his neck while he moaned in protest. His hand pushed into her stomach. She took it and used it to pull down the side of her dress, revealing her breast.

"I can't," Vincent pulled his mouth away. "Gabriella!"

"It's *Mistress* Gabriella," she pushed him onto the bed and slapped him across the head. "Get it right, you bad, naughty boy!"

"I'm sorry, alright?" he crawled backwards until his head

struck the headboard.

“What?” Mistress Gabriella walked up to him, reached down and yanked on his ankles, spreading his legs and positioning herself between them at the edge of the bed, “am I not your queen?” she grabbed his hands and set them on her hips. “Am I not your goddess?”

“This is diffe—”

“Is it?” She took a deep breath, leaned over Vincent, and brought her mouth up to the side of his head. With her lips nearly brushing against the white hairs on his ear, she whispered, “do I not arouse you?” She moved to the other ear, “do I not . . . *titillate* you? Mhmmm, Vincent, do I not excite you?” bringing her face up to his, she indicated for him to look down at his crotch, then said, “do I not stimulate you?”

“I—”

“Watch your words, sweetie. Because I think I already see the answer.” Starting with his shoulders, Mistress Gabriella ran her hands down his body, kneeling down as she went, stopping atop his thighs. “If you don’t wanna talk—I know *somebody* who will. *Hi there.*”

“Gab—”

“Mistress!”

“Mistress . . .”

“Mhmmm?” She bit her lower lip. While holding a gaze with Vincent’s eyes she moved her head down his body, all the way down past his stomach, then rested an ear on his crotch. “What’s that?” she said to his erection as it pushed through his jeans, pulsating against Mistress Gabriella’s cheek. “I’m soooo sorry, Vincent—but I think there may be a disagreement here on our hands. It would be a shame if we were to leave it unsettled.”

“I need to go.”

“Why go when you can come?” She drew shrinking circles in his pants with the tip of her finger. “I thought you *loved* your Mistress Gabriella. *Boo-boo.* All those times I made

you feel so good and you still don't trust me. Vincent?"

"Yes?"

"You're a bad, bad boy."

"I have to—" he attempted to stand up. She pulled him back down.

"You're a naughty little boy. *Mhmm*, such a tease. Do you not trust me?"

"..."

"Do you not like it when I make you feel sooooo good? Don't you *love* to *throb* for me?"

". . ." Vincent gripped the bedsheets. His thighs tightened.

"Mhmm, you know I want it and you're just playing hard to get. I know you love it when I touch it. I know you love it when I *lick-lick-lick* it. Tell me how much you love it, Vincent. Sweetie, it's alright—you can close your eyes. Mhmm, your juicy, tasty co—"

"Uhuh . . ."

"Ooh," she pulled her face away, "he's itching to break free. You want me to say that word, don't you? Your *throbbing*, delicious . . . mhmmm."

"Can we . . ." his breathing was sporadic now, the sound of all those words he loved hearing bouncing around in his head relentlessly.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Can we just talk?"

"Oh, honey—we're way past that. Vincent," she said, massaging his crotch, "lie down."

He refused to move.

"Obey your mistress! Or there will be consequences. You're being a very naughty boy. Lay down!" She stood up and pushed him down on the bed by his forehead. "Hmm?" she crawled on top of him and pinned his arms down.

"Let me go!"

"You don't tell Mistress Gabriella what to do."

"I want to go home!" he cried. He fought her weight,

but it was futile.

"Now imagine me, Vincent," she spoke in her soothing, comforting voice again, "a beautiful goddess. ~~Yess~~, you can close your eyes, you silly little boy," She crawled further up onto his belly and reached behind her, unbuckling his belt. His arm couldn't get around to stop her hand. "Nuh-uh-uh. Bad boy!" She slapped his hand away. "You're under my control. You don't want to disobey me."

"Get off!"

"Why, of course!" She giggled. "Oh, Vincent!" She chuckled, "don't tell me this isn't what you've always dreamed of! How many times have I made you come! How many times have you screamed my name out in ecstasy! Hey, Vincent!" She unzipped his pants and slid her hand inside, cupping his balls, "say it! Say that you belong to me!"

"No!"

"Say that your body belongs to me!" She massaged the head of his penis through the underwear, rubbing his precum into the fabric, "say it! Say your cock belongs to me! You belong to me and you'll do as I say!"

"Arrghh!"

"Oh, Vincent! Throb for me. Yes—empty your mind—let my voice guide you, let it guide your throbbing cock! Guide it deep inside my wet pussy! Yes—fuck me, Vincent—fuck me like you fucked that stupid little whore! You love being such a bad boy! Show me what you're made of!" She pulled his dick out and squeezed it repeatedly, suffocating the blood flow. "Mmmm—yess! This dirty, nasty cock. Mmmm—I wanna see how bad you can get!"

"Go fuck yourself!" He shouted, punching her in the knee.

"Nu-uh-uh!" Mistress Gabriella reached under her dress and slipped two fingers into her pussy, then immediately shoved them deep into Vincent's throat, gagging him. "That is NOT how a slave treats his mistress!" Vincent's eyes watered as he choked on her fingers. His upper body

attempted to fight off her advances while his lower fought to keep still and not thrust in rhythm with Mistress Gabriella's stroking. "Oh, honey . . ." she pulled her fingers out, squeezed his cheeks together, and pulled her face into his, stretching his cock out further, "are you crying?"

"No! I was—"

"Aww, little sissy boy—did I hurt you? Did you want to go home to your mommy?"

"No!" Vincent pleaded, "please just stop this."

She wiped a tear from his cheek with her soiled fingers. "But you like this, come on, *sweetie-poo*—it's not like this is our first time. I'd hate to just stop all this and let you leave, all sad and unsatisfied."

"I'll be fine, I just want to leave. *Now*."

"But Vincent, my sweet baby. What will I do tonight— all alone and horny? Just me and my wild thoughts. Who knows what sort of nasty, impulsive things I'd wanna get up to. Huh? What a shame it would be, Vincent . . ." she leaned back again, checking Vincent's stiffness, then reached underneath her dress and pulled her panties to one side. "A real shame," she worked her hips along Vincent's body until she was right over top of him, ". . . if another nasty video of yours were to leak out onto the internet. Mhmmm," she ran a finger through her pussy, then worked it around the head of Vincent's cock before guiding it in. "Oh, Vincent . . ." she had him inside now, gyrating her hips against his while she massaged her clitoris with her free hand. "Oh Vincent . . . what would you do then? All those poor friends of yours you so badly want to help . . ."

Between the panic and the pleasure a moment of clarity suddenly took hold of him. A string of words that have been floating around in the back of his mind, barely held together by a bond that had deteriorated due to negligence. Words that brought him shame and anger. Self-doubt and depression. Words that controlled him, with the promise of a clear conscience, should he have the courage to speak

them, if only he would trust that they would do what they promised. These words were easy to write but difficult to sell. Simple in their composition but open to an infinite number of interpretations, depending on an infinite amount of factors no human being can account for. There was a clear beginning, a complicated middle, which would become easier as he went, and an ending providing not a resolution, but an open, honest dialog.

Dear Jenna Moone, Vincent imagined a white-board emerging from the depth of his mind, magnifying in size and becoming more clear while the words were projected onto its blank canvas, *I'm sorry*

Your Sexy Manifesto

“Mistress Gabriella here for you.”

“Hello. Hi.”

“Hi, sweetie. What’s your name?”

“I’m Colton.”

“Colton, what a strong, powerful name. I see on my website here that you reserved my services for an entire two hours—how exciting. What can I do for you tonight, my dear Colton?”

“I’m with the CWC—I don’t know if you heard of us”

“Oh wow—a *true* fan—what a pleasure. So what are you into this evening?”

“Umm, just wanted to talk I guess.”

“You sound upset, honey, is everything alright?”

“Eh, I . . . I don’t know—been going through a rough patch lately.”

“Oh, baby, what’s wrong? You can tell Mistress Gabriella anything.”

“A lot of things to be upset about lately . . . you know? Made some friends, finally, but it didn’t really work out. Did you ever hear from Vincent? He was supposed to talk to you, to help us, but I think he just took off.”

“Oh that Vincent, what a bad boy. No, sweetie, I can’t

say I heard back from him. He left us both out to dry, huh?”

“That asshole.”

“I’m sure he’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“I hope so”

“So, what else is bugging you? I can help relieve *all* of your stress. You do know that, right?”

“Yes, of course. Shit.”

“What’s the matter, hun?”

“I don’t know how to talk about this.”

“Colton, sweetie, you can tell me anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Ughh—okay, here goes: I wasn’t feeling well the other night. Thought I might hurt myself, it was a long time coming, I guess, in hindsight. You know it’s one thing to talk about it, make jokes even. But then it came on so suddenly and it was terrifying honestly. Never thought it would actually feel so scary.”

“Oh, poor baby.”

“It’s no big—”

“Oh, of course it’s a big deal! Go on, now.”

“I called the suicide hotline to talk about it. See if they could help. Things didn’t go well.”

“What happened?”

“That fucking bitch on the line apparently thought I was unstable. Kept me on the phone until the cops showed up and dragged my ass to the hospital. Kept me there for almost a day putting who knows what into my system to calm me down.”

“That sounds rough!”

“Cost me several thousand dollars!”

“Oh, Colton, sweetie, those people don’t know what they’re doing. You can’t trust them.”

“Yeah, I know that *now*! Never again!”

“But you know you can trust Mistress Gabriella, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

"Tell me more about yourself, Colton."

"Okay, also, there's this girl at the coffee shop. I asked her out. She said yes. Then she changed her mind—just like *that!*"

"That's so unfair."

"I know!"

"Hun, it sounds like you need the full treatment tonight."

"I think I do."

"How about we do something special, something *just* for you?"

"That would be nice. I—"

"It seems like you're finding it more difficult to find people you can trust . . . you know you can trust me, right?"

"Yes."

"Good, the more you trust me, the more you'll enjoy this wonderful journey I can take you on. I know you know this, honey. Are you ready to relax and let me guide you to a place where you can have anything you want?"

"Yes."

"Hmm, not quite convinced you're ready."

"Yes, please, Mistress Gabriella."

"That's a good boy. Now, find a comfortable place to sit or lie down, and I'm sure you know where this is going to go, it's best you lose the pants now."

"Yes, of course."

"Now, Colton, sweetie put me on speaker phone, right beside your head if you can—you're gonna want two hands for this, if you know what I mean. I'm going to keep you really, really busy. Have some water too, just in case."

"I have some right here!"

"Oh, Colton, you know what a girl wants. Now, relax and breathe with me. Close your eyes and let my voice guide you. I'm going to do a little countdown now. *Inhale*, deep through your nose—ten—*out* through your mouth. Nice and easy. Everything will be alright. *Breathe in*—nine—*aaaand*

out, falling deeper and deeper into my trance. *In*—your eyelids are becoming even heavier now—you couldn't open them even if you tried—and *breathe out*. Good. Very good. *Breathe in*—I want you to think about all the nice things in life—*breathe out*. As you fall deeper into a trance you find yourself walking down a candle-lit corridor. *Deep breath in*—six—as you walk through this corridor you see paintings on either side—things you like. Things you are interested in. *Exhale*. Things that make you happy. Think of them while you breathe with me. Make a mental note. *Breathe in*—five. We're close now. This corridor can be as long or as short as you want it to be. *Breathe out now*. It's a place of safety and comfort. *Breathe in*. And at the end of the corridor is a door leading to grand adventures beyond your wildest dreams, full of danger and mystique, a place where you can battle demons, both inner and imagined. *Breathe out*. You can walk through this door at any moment, you can head back to this corridor at any time you please, knowing full well that safety is a snap of my little finger away. *Breathe in*—two. Keep those paintings in mind, clear your head of any intrusive thoughts. *And out now Breathe in*—you're letting me guide you on this journey. Everything will be alright if you let Mistress Gabriella take full control.

"Breathe in.

"ONE.

"Now exhale.

"How do you feel, sweetie?"

"Ohhh, I feel nice."

"Are you comfortable?"

"So very. Yeah, very comfortable."

"Now, hun, tell me—what did you see in your paintings?"

"I see you."

"Colton! Sweetie, you're making me blush. I'm always here for you, but let's expand your mind a littl, what to you say?"

“Yes.”

“Do you see another painting? What’s on it?”

“My Bronco, it has a new sound system. Mountains, in my painting there’s a mountain all to myself where I can do anything I want.”

“That’s nice, Colton, but let’s think of something . . . oh, I don’t know, *sexier*.”

“Guns. I like guns.”

“Ooh—that’s more like it. Now, Colton, sweetheart, when you walk through that door at the end of the corridor, what will you see?”

The Norinco SKS semi-automatic rifle, a reliable Chinese knockoff, ran him only \$340 at the monthly gun show. Two drum magazines, although illegal in Colorado, cost \$70 and an 8 hour round-trip drive to Utah. Seventy-five rounds of uninterrupted disruption. Helps to have two. A crate of a thousand rounds of military surplus 7.62x39mm ammunition was a bargain for \$140. The military-style polymer stock cost only \$66.95 on Amazon with Prime delivery and took half an hour to swap out, the folding butt allowed for easy entry through the doorway to Colton’s favorite coffee shop.

Cock-cock-cock that gun, baby—let ‘er rip!

If the trenchcoat and the rifle and the imposing posture wasn’t enough to catch everyone’s attention, the two shots to the ceiling, sending a mist of white dust raining down, does. Screams from men, women, and children reverberate through the space. The excitement. The rush of adrenaline—it’s almost too much to process all at once. Within moments the metal legs of tables and chairs screech along the floor as they turn over and seemingly reposition themselves. From behind them he hears pleadings and pathetic whimpering. Wallets and watches and anything shiny is thrown at his feet. He steps over them or kicks them aside as he closes in.

You hear their screams. Oh their screams! Hooting and hollering. They want their life. They'll give you anything for it. But they can't buy you, can they? You take another step, each one more determined than the last

*Finger on the trigger. Their shouting is music to your ears
You fire from the hip*

One by one the glass partitions explode. Shards of crystal glimmer in early-morning sunlight. Remains of stale breakfast sandwiches and day-old pastries and overpriced cakes litter the floor. Drip coffee flows out the holes made in the stainless steel containers. The staff behind the counters cry in pain as the hot coffee scorches them. He catches a glimpse of her face—Stacy, right there behind that counter. He'll save her for last.

To his left Colton catches a young man cowering in a corner. His hair is nice. Clear skin. If not for the sobbing and the snot bubbling from his nose he looks handsome enough to get any girl he would want. He's probably had enough pussy to last him several lifetimes. Save some for everyone else. A round to the center of his chest sends him into shock. A dumb, confused takes over his face. The second round wipes out all expression, leaving an indent with a little round hole between his eyes and a mess of brain matter on the wall behind him. He had to go first, Colton figures. With that look in his eyes he would have been the hero type. That pretty face and those pretty eyes on the cover of every news article.

They always feature the prettiest ones.

The fat bitch beside him can't seem figure out what to do with her hands. Her jaw trembles violently. Colton lines her up in his sights and takes aim at her mouth. He can't make his thoughts up about her. Must have something to do with double standards. She opens wide and screams at the top of her lungs as he feeds her a last meal.

Behind a pile of chairs Colton finds a man staring deeply back at him, almost as if attempting to form a

human connection. Colton wants to say something along the lines of *too late*, but says nothing in the off chance that he read the man wrong and it becomes embarrassing. These are trying times, cheap sympathy won't cut it. *We need action*, now more than ever, and so he let loose ten rounds into the pile of chairs in case it had something interruptive to say. *A life of thinking everything through only led to a life of compromise.*

Click, click, boom! Death to everyone in the room!

You bathe in a mist of tears and blood. The horror. The agony—you've never felt more alive. You're never felt more in control. It's making you hard. Your award awaits. We're not there quite yet

There is still work to be done, sweet Colton

The room fills with the scent of burnt gunpowder. That charcoal. That sulfur. That familiar scent of ammonia. Eye-watering, yet appealing in the right context. There's more to be done. A few patrons take Colton's contemplative pause a sign that he's done and make a break for it. He sprays an array of bullets in a half-circle. Some get hit. Some duck just in time. Everyone quickly understands that he's not done just yet as they retreat back into their holes.

He kicks over an upturned table to see a neighbor of his. This older cunt with her cunt child. Colton remembers the time she looked at him funny from across the street. He thinks about all the stories she probably told the neighbors about him. All made up. He didn't deserve it. He never hurt anybody. She knows nothing. With the muzzle five inches from her head he fires several times. Fragments of her head slide down into her child's lap, who in his shock seems unaware of what just happened. He won't grow to find out. What's a child without their mother, anyways?

It's better this way.

Beautiful, Colton! Look at it—look at everything you've done. This is your masterpiece—this is a picture to hang up in your corridor. This is one to remember. Keep going, baby. Keep the show rolling.

Show them what you're made of!

From the corner of his eye Colton spots a woman

crawling beneath the service counter, her forearms impregnated with shards of glass, painting the concrete floor with streaks of dark red. He takes a closer look. Close enough—she looks like the wife of the mechanic who charged too much to fix the exhaust on his Bronco. Maybe someone will make the connection when his manifesto is studied in history classes. He leaves her face intact. Her eyes remain fixed on him while his bullets dig a crater in her chest all the way through to the concrete beneath.

Somebody screams from a darker corner of the coffee shop, asking Colton why he's doing all of this. Asking him who he is. Forgetting to ask if he plans on stopping this, apparently.

Colton turns around to catch the glimmer of something. He runs over to see that it's the lens of a phone camera staring back at him, its operator ducked behind a table, keeping his face down. He asks the series of questions again, this time adds something about live-streaming. Colton snatches the phone from the kid's hand. The idea that he can't live out his wildest dream without some jerk making it all about him and his stupid live-stream enrages him further. He kicks the kid onto the ground, points the camera at him, then tells him to smile before turning the place where his head used to be into the first steps of a beef stroganoff recipe.

Colton, honey, are you as excited as I am? My-my-my—you have me dripping over here! Tell me more!

I just want them to die. Everyone. I just . . . oh, man . . .

Oh, Colton?

I . . .

Sweetie?

I'm sorry, Mistress—

Baaaby—it's okay to cry. It's okay to be sad. That's why I'm here. I want you to let it all out for me

Is it alright if I? Really? I just need a sec

It's alright. Take your time. Imagine me as a shoulder to cry

on . . .

. . .

. . .

. . . *thank you*

. . . *You're a strong boy, you know that?*

Thank you. I want to be. I try to be—I've been so strong for so long and nobody's ever noticed. I just want . . . everyone dead now. I want them all dead, Mistress Gabriella. I wish they would all just die, please, why can't everyone just—

Oh, they don't deserve you. Anything is possible, my dear. Now tell me, get creative here—think of your canvas—what's a fun way you'd want to dispose of somebody with?

I want to . . .

Come on!

I want to lay them flat down on the floor. Shoot out each knee. Then the elbows. Then work in a circle from there to the center. See how long they live for

I love it—so creative!

Colton now stands over the man with no knees or elbows. He's quickly disappointed to find that he barely stays alive long enough for the second bullet through the chest as he goes in a circle.

Give me another one!

I want to see how many bullets it would take to rip someone in two

Wow. I would love to see that. I can work that in

He imagines a line across the belly of the woman in the business suit and gets to work. The remainder of the first drum magazine leaves a trail of intestines and muscle tissue on either side of her. He gets through the better third of the second magazine before giving up and realizing that it's just not going to happen as he tries separating the two parts with a few kicks.

Stacy, that bitch

Oh, that nasty, nasty girl. What right does she have, playing with your heart like that?

She should have known

Yes, Colton, she should have

He shouts for the staff behind the counter to stand up. There she is—Stacy. Beside her stands her coworker, a young hipster with blue eyes—she probably fucked him. She probably fucked everyone but Colton. The boy is disposed of immediately. Three shots to the chest send him flying into the busted coffee dispensers. Stacy stands there motionless. Her screams are inaudible.

Colton jumps up on the counter and takes aim. Their eyes meet despite the rifle sights blocking out most of her face. The gentle piano melody of *Nuvole Bianche* fades in as he imagines the beautiful life they could have shared together, a collage of memories that could have been had she not been the dumbest fucking cunt in the whole wide world. Tension rises to the back of his throat; he can't swallow enough times to keep it down. He imagines his corridor of memories and in it he attempts to hang a picture of him and Stacy together, a happy couple, but each time he does her face quickly deforms and loses all detail and before he has a chance to figure out what it means he finds himself reset to the entrance to the corridor, holding the same picture frame in his hands, unsure of what to do except to try again.

He recalls a lifetime of being manipulated and pushed to chase after things he never needed only to distract him from the things he could never have.

That Stacy—you don't need her. She doesn't deserve you. I've got something much, much better for you, my sweet Colton

"I don't need you," he says through his teeth. She shouts something: an apology or a threat. It doesn't matter anymore. He pulls the trigger. She collapses. Colton jumps down behind the counter and straddles her, raised up on his knees now, and shoves the scolding muzzle into her lifeless face. There's a quiet sizzle when her skin burns and Colton wishes she was alive to feel it. Small regrets. Life goes on.

He counts each round as he unleashes the rest of the drum magazine into her. Piece by piece parts of her head fly off. A fragment of her skull dangles near her ear, hanging on by thin sliver of scalp. The shock from each blast shreds her skin into fine strands that burst out from of her face like confetti. Her pretty sharp nose disappears. Those rosy cheeks lay somewhere in a puddle of lukewarm coffee. Slowly she turns into a paste of flesh and blood and bone fragments, thickening as it mixes with the concrete dust from the hole being punched in the floor beneath her.

He's already forgotten the color of her eyes.

Her cocksucking mouth won't ever again speak words that could break his heart.

Good boy. Are you ready for your reward?

I am

Now, my sweet Colton. Find your door. Picture it inside your head. Your door to safety is right there in front of you. Something is about to happen. You can't contain your excitement. The door finally opens. My goodness, who could it be?

Who!?

Why, it's your most favorite girl in the whole wide world. It's me—Mistress Gabriella. I step through the door wearing my favorite pair of stilettos. Click-clack. Click-clack—the sound of them excites you as I approach. My long, slender legs are wrapped in tight leather. They glisten in the bright light, every curve so pronounced. My hips sway gently—you love to watch them—so hungry, itching to wrap themselves around your strong body. My breasts are dying to break free from this tight top.

Oh Colton—will you free them, my hero?

Yes. Of course I will!

Mmmmm . . . I can't wait to feel your hands all over me. I come even closer. My mysterious, seductive green eyes are focused on one thing and one thing only. Do you know what that thing might be, Colton?

Yes

Do you?

Yes!

Then say it: what are my eyes looking at? What do I want right now more than anything?

My cock!

That's right. Your hard, delicious . . . mmmm . . . throbbing cock. I want it. I want your cock. I want to suck it so badly. Pull it out, Colton. Pull it out for me. Do it now

I'm doing it

Stroke it. Stroke that juicy cock for me, Colton. Any second now, I'm almost here—get ready for me—I'm going to kneel down in front of you and wrap my luscious, red lips around your tasty cock. Mmmmm. I work my tongue around every groove. I slurp-slurp-slurp and lick up all your precum as it drips down your shaft. It tastes so good, baby. I don't let a drop go to waste—I want more! Round and around my tongue goes, slipping and sliding. My lips are wrapped around the head of your cock as it grows larger. I suck harder. Your cock makes me so fucking horny. I squeeze tighter. I love how it feels in my hand, the way it pulsates. Oh—I can't take it, Colton. Oh—you taste so fucking good. Mmmm, you're so big. So hard. I want you to come in my mouth

I want to squeeze your balls as you do it

Stroke that cock for me!

Fill my mouth with your warm cum. Give your goddess what she craves

I want it all! I demand it!

Yes!

Stroke it harder!

"Yes!"

Stroke it faster. Faster, baby—do it for your mistress. Do it for your goddess—stroke that fucking cock and don't stop until I tell you to. Are you ready, baby?

"Yes!"

Now, Colton—do it! I want your cum. Come for me! Fill my mouth with it—I want to feel it go down my throat. Pump me full of your juicy goodness. I want all of it now!

"I'm coming!" Colton shouts from behind the cash register, his free hand pushing against the counter. There's

some commotion outside now. A few black metal cans fly in through the windows and before he could get a closer look a bright flash blinds him. A rapid array of loud *bangs* follow and leave his ears ringing. His violent stroking reaches its climax as he watches a formation of blurry figures barge through the entrance to the coffee shop.

He closes his eyes and pictures all the corridors where his picture will hang.

“Open fire!” one of the figures shouts.

Human After All

One by one she plucked the thorns off the rose stem with the side of her thumb, arranging them into a neat little pile by a glass of untouched water. It's been over five minutes now. She wouldn't call it restlessness, but more of a need to keep her mind on something other than the thought of him not returning. A pestering uncertainty. The idea that this could happen to anyone. This idea that she might be left stranded all alone in this fancy restaurant.

She set the last thorn on top of the pile with its sharp end to the ceiling. Her fingertips climbed up the now bare stem, pinched it between the thumb and forefinger before pulling the flower closer in to her face. Her nose met it halfway, then plunged into the silky smooth petal, basking in its rich fragrance.

Finally, her eyes met his from across the restaurant. From behind the petals she watched him approach, his broad shoulders square and confident, gently rocking to the rhythm of his rigid footsteps. He caught a glimpse of her smile hiding behind the rose and reciprocated. She took another strong whiff and set the rose down. He took his seat and draped the white napkin across his thighs, pulling his chair in closer. Upon seeing the pile of thorns he asked if her little fingers hurt from that. *Almost*, she assured him,

then slid the rose back into the thin-necked crystal vase in the center of the table.

"You'll have to forgive me for the interruptions," he said with his chin up high, "when you get to my age, well—that bladder just ain't what it used to be."

"Oh," she smiled assuringly, "that's quite alright, we all get there one day, don't we? Happens to the best of us."

"From what I can see, you're a long ways away."

"Oh you," she blushed, "if I knew you were going to shower me with compliments like that, I would've tried a little harder."

"Can't say I get what you mean. I think you look exquisite, Gabriella."

"*Exquisite*," she placed a hand on her chest, "my, my—you keep using words like that and I just—"

"Yes?" He leaned in.

"Well, I might just have to keep you." An enormous smile stretched across her face. She bit down on her lower lip. Her cheeks bunched together and pushed up on her lower eyelids. "My goodness," she covered her smile with the back of her hand and batted her eyes, "I'm blushing."

"Oh, don't try to hide it," he smiled from the corner of his mouth, "your chest is flush. Can't hide that."

"And what are you doing looking at my chest," she giggled, "I thought you were a gentleman."

"I just noticed was all."

"You notice a lot of things, don't ya, Eddie?"

"Oh, yes ma'am I do."

"Active member for three years. How has nobody snatched you up yet?"

"Oh, Eddie—you wouldn't believe what it's like for a woman out there in the online dating world. You get just about any and every sort of creep you can imagine—the most absurd messages every day."

"Wow," he said, "I must've gotten very lucky to slip

through the cracks and actually get through to you? I imagine you must discard hundreds of messages every day.”

“Something like that,” Mistress Gabriella said, then raised her glass of red wine up to him. “I guess you can say that you pushed all the right buttons.” She took a sip. He raised his glass and took one as well. “It’s slim pickings out there.”

“How so?”

“Oh just men these days—*boys*—nobody wants to work for it anymore, you know? They think there are so many options out there that they don’t even bother putting in any effort when something great comes their way. One tiny little thing goes wrong and they’ll just drop everything and move on, as if there’s always something better, more suited towards them just over the horizon. I like to make them work for it—see if they’re worth my time. You can say I’m hard to please, but—”

“Oh, I wouldn’t put it that way,” he interrupted, “you shouldn’t have to reassess your standards just because the world has.”

“*Thank you!*” she said, stretching out her words.

“*Peter Pan Syndrome*, that’s what they call it: men who refuse to grow up.”

“Ooh, that’s good!” Mistress Gabriella was suddenly overcome with excitement. Another idea. She wondered if her fans would understand the irony of having Peter Pan fly up to their window and take them on an adventure where they meet a sexy accountant. A scenario worth exploring. She would save it for later. “Love it!” She took a moment to admire him, making sure he noticed her shoulders inching closer, then asked, “so, Eddie, what do you do for work?”

“Well, retired *non*,” he said. Seeing that Mistress Gabriella was asking for more, he gave it, “used to work with people, research—if you want to call it that.”

“I see, what would *you* call it?” She smirked.

“Hah—I guess that would be about it.”

“So, anthropology then? Sociology? Were you a professor?”

“Oh, God no—I think I would go crazy trying to teach anybody anything these days.”

“Right?! Everybody thinks they already know everything these days, with the internet right at their fingertips and all.”

“Tell me about it,” he laughed. “No, it was more like independent research. Studying patterns. Motivations—that sort of thing.”

“Oh Eddie—quit being so mysterious,” she leaned in, “what was your favorite topic?”

“I would have to say,” he paused, “psychopaths.”

“Oooh—like serial killers and all? What have you learned? Discover anything interesting?”

“Serial killers are a very small, very sensationalized part of it. It’s difficult to say—one of those things, I guess, where the more you learn about something, the more you realize you don’t really know anything.”

“Sounds like just about anything with this world.”

“Just about . . .”

“Yes! That’s right—superhero movies and serial killer documentaries—the two most popular kinds of shows these days, all satisfying the same craving—an obsession with psychopaths. The lack of fear, the grandiose displays of one’s abilities, not abiding by society’s norms—all things people crave to experience, whether they fantasize about going on a killing spree or saving the world from extinction, it’s just two sides of the same coin.” he spoke enthusiastically, as if he’d made a new discovery, then abruptly cut himself off before continuing further.

“Two apples from the same tree!” Mistress Gabriella added, struggling to develop an elegant manner in which to consume her escargots. She wished she’d just gotten the steak and fries like her date had.

“Right.” He agreed, digging into his steak. “Do you like

fantasies, *Gabriella*?”

“Oh,” she sighed, “I dabble. I mean—yeah—I was a little girl once, you can say.”

“What’s your favorite fantasy?”

“Oh boy,” she giggled, then scoffed, then took a deep breath and said, “this is going to sound so silly . . .” she smiled coyly. “Not very elaborate, really.”

“Well go on.”

“I always imagined,” she said, as if daydreaming, looking into his eyes, “that a brave, silver-haired knight would rescue me from a burning, crumbling castle . . . ughh—so silly.”

“Oh well, I don’t think it’s silly.”

“I sound like a little girl,” she blushed.

“No, not at all,” he assured her. “Go on.”

“He would have . . .” she continued, “. . . big, broad shoulders. Arms that could fight off a dragon bare-fisted, so strong that I would feel light as a feather when he carried me off. His eyes . . .” she looked into his, “. . . chestnut-brown, like the trunks of thousand-year old trees that could tell a thousand tales just by looking into them. And . . .”

“Yes?”

“Well,” she smiled bashfully and looked away, “. . . now that I’m not *just* a little girl. There would be . . . *additional* requirements. Oh my,” Mistress Gabriella hid her face behind her hands.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You’ll have to excuse me, I’m usually a tad more creative than this. I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

“Nothing to be ashamed about,” he reached across the table and took her hand into his. When she finally looked up at him he said, “tell me, Gabriella, what do *you* do?”

“Oh,” she straightened up and flashed a flirtatious smile, “how about I just show you?”

“You’ll have to excuse me?” Mistress Gabriella stopped him at the steps to her house, pulling her hand out of his. He

looked concerned; she assured him with a wink and a playful wag of her finger that everything was going according to expectations. "I wasn't expecting company tonight. Would you give a girl a few moments to get her place in order? Forgive me, Eddie."

"Nothing to be sorry about," he said, "please, take your time."

"You're a sweetheart." Mistress Gabriella brushed the side of his arm with her fingertip. She pushed her key in while looking back at him, then squeezed her body through an opening in the door just large enough to fit herself in, then shut it.

"Wow," Roger said upon walking inside, admiring the sight of her pristinely-kept living space. To his right stood a coat rack stacked with expensive, stylish jackets and overcoats arranged by season. Below it was a shoe rack littered with designer heels and boots and those expensive leather sandals he'd seen the kids wearing these days. Several bookshelves filled the space along the walls, in them the paperbacks were neatly organized by genre. Fantasy, contemporary, classics, science fiction, graphic novels, mystery, horror, romance, self-help, biographies, even. "You don't mind if I . . . ?" He reached for a novel in the fantasy section. With his finger hooked into the spine he waited for her permission.

"No, not at all. Be my guest."

Roger tilted the book toward him with a pull of his finger and took it into his hand. He took a moment to admire the artwork on the cover, then scanned through it, noticing a number sticky notes poking out the side of some pages. He put it back into its home, ensuring to align the spine with the rest, the way he found it, and took out another novel. Then another. Mistress Gabriella watched him with amusement as he scanned the fifth novel now, reading whatever tidbit of information she'd highlighted for herself. "You've read all of these?" He asked.

“Every single one,” she shot a finger at every corner of the living room where a bookshelf stood. From the center of the living room she watched Roger walk about as he admired every inch of her home. “You, Eddie, a big reader?”

“Oh yes,” he answered while comparing her science fiction collection with his. He stopped in front of her desk and glanced briefly at her computer setup of monitors and microphones and audio equipment, then, with a finger pointed at the wall above it all, asked her about the display shelf in front of him.

“Oh—trophies—you could call them.” She walked over to Roger, facing the wall, and wrapped her hand around his shoulder. “Achievements, perhaps.”

“Of what?”

“My . . . work,” she smirked and hinted toward the microphone, injecting a taste of her *working voice* into her tone now for Roger to hear. She reached out past her workstation for the first trophy on the shelf. Cupped in the palm of her hand was a small bronze statue in the shape of a mountain. Set into the peak of it was a common brass house key. She admired it, running her finger along the ridges of the key. Roger watched her closely while she collected her thoughts. “This little thing,” she spoke softly, “a gift from a customer. With my help, he said, he was able to break free from his bad habits and start making changes to his not-so-fruitless life. With my guidance, he said, he began to take care of himself, both mentally and physically, get out there in the world and pursue his career. He did. Then he met the woman of his dreams and moved out. This was the key to his mother’s place. He’s been sending me letters yearly—little updates on his life...”

“And?”

“He’s living the dream,” she laughed, then handed the statue to Roger. He took it. “You ever read *The Alchemist*? About how everything that that lost little boy was looking

for was right there, inside of him all along?”

“Yes, of course.” Roger said.

“Simple novel. Simple message. Though still wouldn’t resonate with some people. Some just don’t want to read books. My format of storytelling...” she pointed to the audio recording station, “better suited for some. All I did was put my own little spin on it. A little touch of Mistress Gabriella. For some people it’s just what works best.”

“*Mistress Gabriella?*”

She smiled confidently, “demands attention, doesn’t it?”

“You could say that. So what is this *touch* of Mistress Gabriella entail?”

“Well...” she took the statue from Roger’s hands and delicately placed it back on the shelf. With a sultry look on her face she turned to face Roger and teased a smile. Her fingernail ran down his chest when she said, “you could say that I *incentivize* my listeners by offering a little reward at the end. This reward which they will receive if they really, really listen. Then with a little nudge here and there I help guide them, encourage them to make it to the end. You can say I get a little naughty sometimes.”

“Sometimes?”

She giggled, “*only* sometimes. Okay,” she gathered her thoughts, “*most times*. But not always. I like to capture a broad audience—a little bit of something for everyone. Even the naughty bits—it’s all in good fun.”

“Fun, huh?” Roger’s voice sunk.

“Oh, it’s harmless,” she slapped his shoulder playfully.

“Right,” Roger forced his lips to make a smile-like shape. “So all of this here,” his fingers walked along the edge of her workstation, “you make all of your recordings here, right here in your home?”

“That’s right!” She said proudly.

“Wow,” he looked around her home, carefully considering the proximity of the houses in her neighborhood. He pointed to her walls, “you must have

some serious soundproofing in these here walls then?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe! I had to get all of these walls torn down—took weeks to finish—to install proper soundproofing." She spread her hands to the ceiling, "the ceiling too! What a nightmare arranging everything back in order. But the sound quality now . . . you wouldn't believe it!"

"I bet."

"Here," she grabbed Roger's hand and led him to another part of the living room where a shelf made up of eight cubes displayed her memorabilia. She paused and briefly glanced at the closet door to her left, then shook herself loose and continued. "This here," she pulled out an old microphone, no wider than a thumb and as long as a baby carrot, held upright by a flexible arm fixed to a solid base. Its color was a faded yellow, what used to be white plastic over a decade ago. "This was my first microphone," she held the tip up to Roger's face, bending the arm up and down several times, "*eeee-oooo. Eeee—oooo*," she added the sound effect. "Had no idea what I was doing back then . . ." she turned the microphone toward her and disappeared into a deep thought.

"Humble beginnings," Roger said, struggling to keep the smile on his face.

"Indeed," Mistress Gabriella sighed while sliding the microphone back into its compartment. One loop over the other, she coiled up the cord hanging off of it. Her face filled with excitement when she noticed the plug at the end of the cord, "wow!" She observed its shape—a round, thin-walled cylinder with five pins taking up the lower half—and presented it to Roger. "Look!" she exclaimed. "A PS/2 input!"

"Excuse me?"

"This plug!" she smiled happily, "my new computer doesn't even have a port like this—it's ancient!" she waved the plug in front of her face. "Oh, Eddie," she shoved the

cord back into the compartment and looked up at Roger, “forgive me—I must sound like such a little girl.”

“That’s quite alright,” he assured her, then with a wink added, “*Mistress Gabriella*.”

She blushed and looked away. Roger placed his hand on her shoulder and turned her body toward his. With a deep, restless exhale, he said, “it’s going to be alright.”

“Eddie . . . ” she pushed herself away; the look in her eyes pulled him in closer. “My God!” she straightened herself up, “where are my manners. Eddie, hun, let me get us a drink!”

“Oh, that won’t be—”

“You could stand to loosen up,” she said, “I know *I* can.” She headed for the kitchen, “wine okay?”

“Wine will be alright.” Roger waited for her to disappear into the kitchen before finally dropping the act. Relief at last. His face muscles were sore from smiling and grinning. He took the opportunity to massage them. Keeping his shoulders square for so long left his back stiff. For a brief moment his eyebrows dropped, leaving an impression on his face that better represented the feelings he was holding back from expressing for most of the night. He clenched his fists and dug his nails into the palms of his hands. A rush of blood. He looked around the room but it didn’t help to clear his head. Everything he saw failed to reinforce everything he felt or wanted, *needed* to feel to do what was necessary and justified. Nothing lined up right. He could barely get his eyebrows back in shape by the time *Mistress Gabriella* walked out with a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other, asking for him to join her on the red leather couch. He followed her, trying to get a better look at the bottle. Had it been open? Why was she covering the cork with her hand like that? The glasses were set down on the table. She held the bottle by the neck in one hand, presenting it for Roger to see. Why was she in there so long? *Malbec*? She asked. “Yes, that will be great.” He needed to

see the cork. The bottle was set down on the table now and her hand remained on the top. She twisted her hand and wrapped it around the top. She didn't have a corkscrew. Roger couldn't hear the squeak of a cork coming loose. She twisted further. The faint sound of a crack. Then another. The seals of a twist-cap breaking. Roger sighed and smiled, then set a finger on the base of each glass to keep them steady as she poured.

"Cheers, Eddie," she brought her glass to his.

"Cheers," he met it. They sipped in unison.

"This is turning into quite an evening," Mistress Gabriella shuffled closer to him. Their thighs touched.

"I'd say so," Roger buried his face in his glass, fighting the urge to take it all down in one go.

"Mhmmm," Mistress Gabriella moaned. She watched Roger drink from his glass, unaware that her hand was inching toward his thigh. He gave little acknowledgment when she first touched him; he took a long gulp when it moved up to his knee.

"Goddamn it!" Roger shouted when her hand reached his inner thigh. He finished his wine and set the glass on the table. He faced her, in his moment of rage forgetting that her hand was still on him.

"What's the matter, hun?" she slid her hand out and reached for the bottle, offering a refill. Roger refused it. She gave him an assuring smile then poured it anyway.

"There's no sense to any of this," he exhaled, collecting his thoughts, "no sense at all, is there?"

"What do you mean?" she offered him the glass. He took it, drinking it immediately.

"You!"

"Me? Oh, did I come on too strong?" she looked perplexed.

"This!" he raised his hands to everything around him, "all of this. All of these things that you do."

Mistress Gabriella shuffled back on the couch, leaning

back and turning her entire body toward Roger. A puzzled look on her face.

“How can you take so much pride in helping these people, yet still find it in you to do such nasty, hurtful things?”

“Hmm,” Mistress Gabriella said, amusingly, “let me guess—a *disgruntled* fan?” She leaned back into the couch cushion and looked off into the distance, almost as if Roger wasn’t there.

“Not exactly,” Roger said.

“Eddie, who exactly have I hurt? I provide a service. I let people live out their fantasies from the comfort of their own homes. I give them pleasure. I provide relief. Who do I hurt? I’m just a voice in their heads—they can shut me off at any moment. Like you can turn off a movie you don’t enjoy or close a book you don’t want to read. Who do I hurt?”

“But you know they won’t!”

“*Who. Do. I. Hurt?*” she repeated.

“*Your Sexy Manifesto!*” he shouted.

“Oh, yes!” she said, “some of my best work, honestly. What can I say, inspiration strikes at odd times.”

“Have you not read the news?”

“Of course.”

“And you still had the gall to publish that vile recording after what happened in Colorado?”

“Eddie, honey—have you any idea how many fans of mine have raved about *that* recording in the past few weeks? Hundreds—just in the written reviews. The sales—*thousands*. *Tens of thousands*, in fact. You know how many thanked me? Oh, the praise! You have any idea how many tortured souls needed this kind of stress relief. I’m sorry if it wasn’t to *your* particular taste. . . there is something for everyone, as I say, this is something for so many more than you can imagine. Heck, Eddie, not something I ever imagined.”

“But your name was in the kid’s manifesto. He did it in

your honor. How do you not feel responsible?"

"Was I arrested?"

"No, but—"

"Was Salinger blamed for JFK getting his head blown off?"

"That's differe—"

"Eddie, I'm not going to hold myself accountable for every misguided child out there with undiagnosed mental illnesses or whatever issues they may have—because there are thousands of them. I don't *make* people buy my recordings. I don't *make* them go out and hurt themselves. I *do* have a disclaimer on the bottom of my webpage stating, explicitly, that I am not a licensed hypnotherapist and cannot be held liable for any damages caused by listening to my content. I do what I do. People enjoy it. *A lot* of people enjoy it. I'm really good at it. Sometimes I have a little more fun with it."

"*Fun!?*" Roger stood up, fuming over her. "How about *telling* people to stab themselves?"

"*Stab themselves?*" She looked at him suspiciously. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together. "Hah." She shook her head, "*tsk-tsk-tsk.*"

"What?"

"Roger?" she asked.

"..."

"*Roooooogger,*" a wide grin emerged on her face. "It's you, isn't it? I thought that sexy deep rumble in your voice sounded familiar. Ooooh—I got to ya, didn't I?"

"How many others, Gabriella, have you manipulated like this?"

"Oh Roger," she spoke, as if to a toddler, "*stab yourself?* Poor baby—never heard of a little BDSM? A little knife and blood play? I asked you to *cut* yourself, silly goose." She giggled, "some people need a little encouragement sometimes—you know—to find themselves. To find their likes, kinks, their deep, depraved desires. I like to think I

help. Can't say I get it right *every* time—but it takes practice to learn people. The more honest they are with me, the more I can help. By the way *Roger*, have you considered, when your mind was going wild and I was telling you to *stab* yourself . . . have you considered, I don't know, just telling me to stop? To do something else? Were *you* being honest with me, Roger?" She crossed her arms and looked up at him. "Will that be all?" She uncrossed her arms and topped up her drink, leaned back in the couch, and took a sip while watching Roger try to contain his rage. It wasn't until she noticed him unconsciously rub at the scar around his neck that the puzzle was finally complete. "*Oh, honey.*"

"What?"

"Oh, Roger, sweetie?"

"What the hell is it?"

"Oh, you poor baby. I can see it so clearly—knife and blood play—not really your thing, is it now?"

". . ."

"Oh, fess up already—you can play tough all you want but your little compulsion there just betrayed you." Mistress Gabriella waited for a response but he gave nothing. She cleared her throat, then softly massaged her neck, staring up at him with inquisitive eyes until the look on his face finally changed and he yanked his hand away from his neck.

"It's nothing."

"Roger, it's clearly not nothing. It's alright to admit, healthy, in fact—nothing to be embarrassed about, you were just a bit *triggered* is all—it happens occasionally. Think of it like a bad drug trip where you can't control everything your imagination is doing. Like I say: you'll never be aware of the control you have over yourself until you can learn to give it up. Most will never learn this about themselves. It's unfortunate—the associations our subconscious minds make, even worse at unexpected times, especially when it comes to those hurtful things, memories we don't want to bring up to the surface, but it's *unfair* to blame others for not

being aware of them in the first place. The only person to blame is yourself for not taking the appropriate steps to work through these issues in a timely manner.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I think I have a pretty good idea, you have to admit. I’m sorry to say, but the closure you seek is in another castle. Sucks that you had to come all this way from . . . wherever, but such is life, you may go now. Hopefully you’ll come out of this a better person.”

“...”

“Or stay a bit, have a little drink. Process things. I understand this must be an unexpected turn of events for you,” she pushed his glass along the table to his knees, “relax, honey. Look at you—that brain working so hard. Those gears grinding. *Chip-chip-chip. Whirr-whirrr-whirr.* You need some stress relief—how about I light a few candles, we go to the bedroom—I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve to help you. You know I do . . .”

Roger paced from across the table, struggling to rearrange whatever plan he had in mind into something, anything, that would ease his struggle.

“Poor honey, don’t tire yourself out now. *What is on his mind*—I wonder? Tik-tock. Tik-tock. Hmmm, so mysterious. He wonders—did I come here for revenge, because somebody couldn’t handle losing a little bit of control, or did I come here to be a hero and rid the world of evil Mistress Gabriella, leading young men to commit heinous acts of terrorism. The *first option*, he thinks, is a typical fantasy, satisfying for as long as it remains in the realm of imagination. The *second*—well, an illusion, like a dream—open to interpretation.”

“You talk too much.”

“Oh Roger. Talking is how we solve our problems. Sit down, please. Let me tell you a story.” Roger stood, unmoving. “Fine, standing works, too. Do you remember, there was a car chase somewhere in California, about three

years ago?”

“There are plenty,” he said begrudgingly.

“Well, sure, but this one was special. I’m sure you’ll recall the headlines as the story goes. So you have this car chase, right? Five police cruisers in hot pursuit of this ordinary-looking sedan. It picks up speed, going through busy intersections, neighborhoods. No signs of slowing, I mean for *anything*. The ordeal lasted about fifteen minutes and it seemed as if there was a new disaster every other mile. Two of the cruisers ended up crashing, causing massive damage, casualties. So this guy, this *perp* they were chasing, eventually runs his car into a ditch on the side of the freeway. He survives. Gets arrested. Turns out the issue was his car, he wasn’t really running from the cops, just trying to get out somewhere safe to stop, hoping it wouldn’t kill him or anyone around him. He *just* couldn’t stop. There was a huge deal about it, the car manufacturer ended up having to recall millions of cars because suddenly their brake pedals were malfunctioning. Interesting, huh?”

“I don’t care to decipher your parables, Gabriella.”

“Well, alright, Roger. But listen up, there’s more. After years of investigations, people were starting to realize that it may have not been the car manufacturer’s fault. The brake pedals were just fine. Many argued, and published convincing research that the cause of the malfunction was most likely caused by, and listen to this: *cosmic rays*. Cosmic rays, from this up here infinite *cosmos*, Roger, causing a malfunction in the cars’ computers, how wild is that? If that didn’t satisfy the public, there were also explanations for the skeptics, and to this day the public is still divided on what really transpired. The *other* reason, they stated, was very super simple: in a state of panic, for whatever reason the panic occurred, the driver simply accidentally pressed the gas pedal when they meant to press the brake, and in their state of panic, now panicking even more, thinking their brake pedal is causing them to accelerate, *continued* pushing

down on what *they thought* were the brakes even harder, exacerbating the situation, until the only way out was disaster.

"This was all discovered, of course, after the car manufacturer paid out *billions* in lawsuits.

"So I ask you this, Roger: are you so special as to be so cursed, somehow placed at the epicenter of a grand, rare cosmic event, or are you a panicked little teeny-tiny insignificant human, unable to work out the difference between the brake and gas pedal?"

"Enough of this . . ."

"*It depends*, Roger. It depends. Are *you* a prisoner of your own ego? Lets find out." She finished her glass. "Alright then," she laughed, "so you gonna get it over with or stand there brooding a while longer?"

"Don't you care?"

"About dying—I'm having serious having doubts about your follow-through, but cnce it's done, it's done—not like I'll be around to worry about it. Vincent, on the other hand."

"Huh?"

"Oh Vincent!" Mistress Gabriella shouted across the room. Roger braced himself and took a defensive stance, listening for any sounds. They both remained silent, not breaking eye contact. She mocked his concerned look with inaudible *oooohs* every time he looked back. The silence was broken by the sound of a metal object hitting the wood floor. Roger swiftly spun around. The sound came from the closet near Mistress Gabriella's shelf of memories. The floor was struck again, much louder now. From the crack in the door a small puddle of water emerged, expanding out into the living room floor. "Ughh, Vincent," she groaned.

"Who?" Roger asked.

"Oh, don't worry," Mistress Gabriella giggled, "go!" she pointed at the closet door, "see for yourself—he's harmless. Or maybe he's not. *Ooooooh—scary suspense*," she shoosed

Roger away.

With one hand out in front Roger crept toward the closet door. Finding no sharp objects nearby, he readied his fist to strike. His fingers trembled while reaching for the little brass knob. He finally grabbed it and yanked the door open, jumping back to safety. There was Vincent, all naked but the chastity belt wrapped around his pelvis. Sitting on all fours, his wrists and ankles shackled, twelve inches apart. His skin was pale and his ribs showed through. On his head sat a pair of fluffy dog ears. In his mouth a ball gag. A butt plug with a fluffy black tail at the end of it stuck out from his ass. “Awooo!” he said, pawing at a spilled stainless steel bowl of water.

“Jesus Christ,” Roger stood back, unable to look away from the sight of Vincent.

“Come here, Vincent, sweetie,” Mistress Gabriella called.

Roger moved out of the way as Vincent crawled across the living room, dragging the chains as he went. Ignoring Roger, he moved up to the glass table in front of Mistress Gabriella and set his chin on the edge. She patted him on the head, “good boy,” she said while looking up at Roger.

“Who the hell is that?” Roger asked.

“This here little guy is Vincent Poole. He works for me now—programming boy genius. Also . . .” she put her hand up to her mouth, as if diverting the words away from Vincent, whispering, “. . . world-famous rapist—but he doesn’t like to talk about that much. Don’t worry—this is much better than the life waiting for him out there. See, he had a little head-*whoopsie* when he discovered that a *certain someone suddenly* became unable to receive his e-mails indefinitely. Mistress Gabriella was right here for him. Helped him get back on all fours.”

“This is disgusting, what have you done to him?”

“*Done to him?* He likes it here.” She patted him on the head. “Vincent, sweetie, raise a paw if you’re here by your

own free will.”

Vincent raised a paw.

“*Awww*, my little ray of sunshine. Good boy. See?” She patted Vincent on the head again, “This here is Roger, sweetie. We talked a few months ago, his credit card and personal information is listen in the call logs at my old work place.” She smirked at Roger. “Roger, honey—you wouldn’t want to have to hurt little Vincent here? Innocent, misguided little Vincent.”

Roger looked down, his shoulders dropped. His knees went weak, “can’t you at least—” his fists shook.

“At least what, hun?”

“Apologize?”

“Apologize for what? Apologize for what happened in Colorado? Why would I apologize to *you* for that, or are you doing the hero thing—taking on the weight of the world on your shoulders? You want me to apologize for—wait a second—*did* you cut yourself? Can I see?” she leaned in closer to get a better look at Roger’s neck, “I wanna see, pull down that collar.”

“Just apologize, for Christ’s sake.”

“Mmmmm,” she whipped her head back, rocking it side to side while massaging Vincent’s head with both hands, “I don’t think so.”

Roger watched her hands, using every bit of his strength to not run up to Mistress Gabriella and strangle her. “You know,” suddenly, an idea came to his mind, “I listened to *most* of your recordings.”

“Ooooh—were you *researching* me?”

“What was that . . .” he walked toward her, “. . . you said in your *ninja* story? *Take his weapons?*” He reached across the table and grabbed Mistress Gabriella by the wrists, dragging her across the couch until she cleared the table, then pulled her down to the floor.

“*Omniiee*,” she said playfully, looking up at Roger, “so *that’s* your thing? Vincent, sweetie, mind if we borrow your

handcuffs for a little while?”

“But *these*,” Roger pulled her wrists closer, “aren’t your weapons, now are they?” Mistress Gabriella went quiet. “Got nothing to say?” she struggled to break free as Roger dragged her along the floor to the bathroom. “Hang out here a minute,” he tossed her against the toilet and shut the door.

“Roger!”

“Half-measures will have to do then. Ten years, max!” Roger shouted back while running to the kitchen. He rummaged through several drawers. “Maybe I’ll be a good boy and only stay for two!” A fillet knife would do. He ran back to the sight of Mistress Gabriella opening the bathroom door. Vincent saw Roger and crawled to block in his way. “Stay, idiot!” Roger shoved Vincent down to the floor. Mistress Gabriella peeked through a crack; Roger kicked the door, shoving her back down. “*Let’s take her weapons then, huh?*” He stood over her with a knife, keeping it pointed it at her face while looking through the cabinet under the sink. Hair straightener—that gets hot enough. He plugged it into the wall and left it in the sink to warm up. Mistress Gabriella called for help; Roger asked her to remind him of how good the soundproofing was. *It’ll do.* With her back to the toilet seat and her ass on the bathroom floor he kept her pinned down as he positioned himself behind her on the seat, then wrapped his legs around her torso to keep her still. “You know what to do,” he said, running the blade against her cheek, “just a little knife and blood play.” He reached under her jaw and squeezed her chin, pulling down on it to open her jaw. It remained sealed shut. She moaned in protest. *Uhuh.* He pinched her esophagus until her breathing was reduced to labored wheezing, taking the opportunity to shove the blade into her mouth when she finally gave in and gasped for a full breath of air. The blade was set upright between her teeth. The corners of her mouth touched down on the sharp edge the

moment she relaxed her mouth. She spread as wide as she could. Roger asked her to remain still while he checked the temperature on the hair straightener. It burned the tip of his finger immediately. Sufficient. He then brought it up to her mouth to let her feel the heat. She yelped in protest, and in an attempt to close her mouth cut the back of her lip on the blade. "Now," Roger said, "aaaaaa," while taking the knife into his hand, persuading her tongue to come out with the tip of the knife hooked into the textured flesh. "Aaaaa. More now." He poked again from the base. The tongue jumped out. He caught it between the fingers of the hair straightener.

"AAAAAHHH!" The smell of searched flesh filled his nostrils. Roger squeezed tighter, stretching out her tongue as far as it could go, then drew an invisible line with the knife right across it. He aimed the knife at an angle, placing the end of the cut into the jaws of the hair straightener. On the first slice her flesh peeled away from the knife like sashimi, sizzling as the fresh wound seared shut. Streams of blood bubbled and charred on contact with the heat. He slowed down the sawing on the last quarter inch that remained, stretching out the small patch of flesh that held her tongue together out towards him to get a better look, then effortlessly slashed through it. Mistress Gabriella cried and thrashed and threw the back of her head into Roger's chest repeatedly. He tossed the knife into the sink, closed the drain, filled it with hand soap, then ran the hot water.

"Hey!" He grabbed her by the hair, pulling on it to rotate her head until he could see her face. She was chewing on air, trying to drive the sore stump out past her lips. Blood still trickled from her mouth. "Open!" he saw that the wound hadn't completely cauterized, "shit." He grabbed the straightener with both hands and struggled to break it open, but the thin fillets of charred flesh that remained from the operation kept it glued shut. He pulled the wet knife from the sink and scraped the hardest chunks off onto Mistress

Gabriella's dress, then jammed the tip into the jaws to pry at it, twisting the handle. The hot fingers snapped open. "Right into the side there," Roger pointed at hot parts, placing the hair straightener into her hands "stick it in there—you're bleeding too much, I think." He unclasped his legs and stepped over Mistress Gabriella. Taking a knee in front of her now he watched closely as she cringed, sticking her tongue into the heater, then immediately yanking it away when it made contact. "Just like that. Good girl." She stopped.

She looked up, right past his head at the wall behind him, and threw the hair straightener off to the side, paying no attention to when the hot iron landed into the fuzzy mat beneath Roger's feet and began to melt through it, filling the room with the stench of burnt plastic. Streams of blood collected beneath her chin, dripping down to her chest, soaking into her dress from underneath. There was a tremble in her wrist that revealed more about her pain than the entirety of the screams and thrashing combined, "would you look at that," Roger said when he noticed it, "human after all."

He watched her for a minute longer, ensuring she wasn't going to bleed to death, wondering what was going through her head. What that empty look in her eyes was trying to say. It said, Roger figured, whatever he wanted to hear. As he stood up he gave her one last look before pulling out a small audio player and a set of tangled earbuds from his pocket. "Have a listen," he tossed it into her lap, "perhaps something to help you get through it?" He washed his hands and the handle of the knife in the sink.

"What's your favorite fantasy?" he said to no one in particular as he walked out.

Epilogue: YourTortureToy.mp3

She crawls past the door frame and peeks out from around the corner, checking for any unwanted guests. The coast is clear. The mess around her mouth is dry now. Small droplets of blood continue to trickle from the stump of her tongue. She spits them out with a few dull *blehs*. *BAH!* She trudges on.

Sitting idly by near the coffee table, he watches her from across the room. The chain from his handcuffs clanks against the wooden floor as he taps his hands back and forth in place. He turns his head to the side. The sight confuses him. She disappears behind the couch. He stretches his neck out to get a better look and sees her rummage for something under her desk. She crawls out from the other side of the couch, dragging with her his messenger bag.

“Vhenbon . . .” she says as she nears, stopping just a few feet in front of him. She pulls out his laptop and discards the bag off to the side. “Ahoo,” she moans. A few droplets of blood land on the laptop lid. She pulls a corner of her dress to her mouth and dabs the remains of her tongue into it. “Awww.” The laptop lid flies open. Her face lights up with a blue hue. She dips her head down and spins the laptop to face him.

“Paawooh!” she says.

“Awooo?” he asks.

“PAAHH-WOOHH!” she grabs his hand and sets it down on the keyboard. He thinks for a moment, then types something in. The blue hue turns green and he spins the laptop back around to her, then gives her a thumbs up and a head nod.

She sits back and crosses her legs, pulls the laptop up to her knees, then lays the tip of her finger on the touchpad. She pauses to think. It comes to her. The start menu. Notepad. She opens a new window and begins typing. When she finishes she spins the laptop back around.

He reads the words:

vincent. this here. Machine . . . something. AI. programming. your thing. can do?

He types: *machine learning?*

He spins the laptop back to her.

She types: *yes. that. and voice*

He types: *you ok*

She types: *will live. owww*

He types: *voice what?*

“TSHHH!” She says, now dangling Roger’s audio playing in front of his face. He looks up. Confusion on his face at first. It fades quickly.

“Mhmmm?” she asks.

“Awooooo!” he says.

She types: *good boy*

This part sucks

No matter what anybody tells you, unless they're writing a personal journal, people write to be recognized for their writing. I would know this because I am allowed to speak on behalf of all writers. There's a special sort of validation an author receives in knowing that a friend, or even better, a stranger, has forfeited their time to them, even better yet -- their money, in any amount. It really is the thought that counts (until the money part, that is). Well, now you're here, you have my work in your hands, and whether or not you paid for it, I thank you for getting this far.

But this is the part I hate so much.

The thing I'm going to ask you to do.

I need you to review this book. I need you to maybe even tell your friends about it. Yes, I'm talking to you, the one reading this. You, with the two eyes and the ears and the face, perhaps wondering if there really is a way, a minuscule chance, via a divine power or black magic or nanotechnology or quantum physics, that I can tell if *YOU* are the only person in the world who has read this and decided not to write a review for this book on Amazon.

It might haunt you, should you decide to do nothing, knowing that your (honest) review is what helped this struggling author's career take off.

On the other hand, you can just go ahead and do it out of your own volition, knowing that, should this struggling author's career take off, that you had a hand in it (and were possibly the primary cause for it), and you can brag to your friends about it later, taking all the credit.

If you were a victim of my marketing strategy you probably got this book for free. That should definitely inspire some guilt.