

Stages

by Wrestlr

[M/M, Violence]

Synopsis: Jeff and Rick are serial killers who have a system, a script, and now they have a job to do.

Disclaimer: The naked hypnotist strides confidently into your room. His lips curl in what might be a smile as he dangles his shiny crystal pendulum before your eyes and announces, "Listen and obey. If you are not of legal age, or if you are offended by sexual situations, you will leave this place immediately. From here on, no matter how realistic it may appear, everything will seem like fiction to you, a pleasant dream where scientific possibilities and laws may change according to my suggestion. Now, if you are willing, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

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We've been tailing him for nearly an hour tonight, just another nondescript SUV far enough behind his car that he doesn't even realize we're there. He's on his way home, I decide--at least he's heading in that general direction--and if he gets there, then our job gets a lot harder. We need to make our move soon.

The target's maybe half a mile ahead of us, which is a long way on city streets, where traffic lights and pedestrians and merging traffic and a hundred other things can go wrong, but the tracker under his front bumper means we can't lose him. I'm in the passenger seat watching the little dot on the tracker screen while Rick drives. While we're both patient guys, I can tell Rick's getting antsy, never a good thing. We're not officially on a schedule, but time is running out.

The guy in the car up ahead: he's not *Michael* or even *Mike*. Not *the star freshman quarterback* or any of those other golden prettyboy clichés that have always gotten him any-fucking-thing he ever wanted in life. No, to me, he's just a job. Just *the target*.

The target turns, taking a shortcut through an older section of the city, mostly abandoned warehouses and ancient storefronts that closed up hours or years ago. There's nothing and no one here after dark; not even

crack whores ply their trade in this section of town.

In a word: Perfect.

Rick nods at me, pretending he's in charge again, but I'm way ahead of him. I tap the button on the screen. The tracker makes a little *pip* noise, and just for a second a little yellow circle surrounds the dot onscreen that represents the target's car. Cars these days, they're all electronics and finicky computers. That *pip* and yellow circle?--The tracker under his front bumper just fired off a quick electromagnetic pulse, an EMP. It's the equivalent of smacking the car's computer "brain" really hard with a baseball bat, and just as effective; the car's brain goes down hard. Ahead, the target's taillights flicker as his engine dies and his car suddenly turns into about a ton of metal, glass, and plastic deadweight.

We take our time, approach slower. When we close in, the target has coasted his car to the side of the road. He's popped open the hood. I can't see him because said hood blocks my view as he stands at the front of his car and stares at the engine as if he could magically intuit the solution. *Alakazam!--The spirit of Henry Ford compels you--Run!*

The raised hood also means he doesn't see us pull up behind his vehicle. He hears our doors shut when we step out. His head appears around the side of the upraised metal, wary. Rick says howdy, asks if he's having car trouble. Rick around one side, me around the other, then we converge and all three of us stare at the engine like we expect it to start up again any second.

I swear, Rick should have been a politician. He's got a way about him that immediately makes people trust him. He's all charm and superficial *jock-bro* bon homme that this football boy can relate to. It's like they speak the same language underneath their words. I keep my mouth shut and let Rick do his thing. The target relaxes. We're not crazies, he must be telling himself, just two friendly guys who decided to stop and help, good Samaritans, nope, not crazies at all.

If he only knew.

No one else around. The target checks his phone. No signal, no response. Of course there isn't, thanks to the tracker's circuit-frying pulse. His phone is just another electronic brain sucker-punched into a power-nap.

This punk is a college jock, eighteen or nineteen. Caucasian. Light brown hair. Clothing-catalog handsome in a way that must make sorority legs self-spread for him. Maybe two hundred and ten pounds of athletic muscle. He'd give us trouble in a fight, but we don't have to fight him. We just have to follow the script.

Rick does his thing. His part might be *Good Samaritan* or *Helpful Bro*. He's good at putting people at ease, making them want to be his friend. In less than two minutes the target has agreed to let us drive him to the nearest gas station. There he can call one of his buddies, Rick says, or a tow truck. Anything's better than walking in this neighborhood this late.

The punk is probably telling himself Rick's right; this late in this neighborhood, a clean-cut white guy like this punk in his new T-shirt, designer jeans, expensive sneakers, and even more expensive haircut might as well be waving a sign that shouts *Rob me please*.

I don't pay attention to whatever line Rick's feeding him; while the target is distracted, I'm casually reaching my hand under the bumper, retrieving the tracker, slipping it into my pocket. We can't leave any evidence behind.

Rick's heading for our SUV, driver's side. *Why don't you ride shotgun*, he says to the target. *Jeff won't mind, will you, Jeff?* My name isn't Jeff, but the target doesn't need to know that. I shake my head nope, don't mind, and reach for the back seat door, passenger side, while the target opens the passenger front door. Riding

shotgun is special; it feeds the part of his ego that tells him he is indeed something special. In truth, this whole exchange has been played out more times than I can count. The target doesn't even realize he is following a script.

Buckle up, buddy, Rick tells him all friendly like they really are buddies and he flips the switch that locks all the doors. Rick pretends to be busy fumbling with his car key and I take one more look around. We're off the street, but can't be too careful. No one around. No witnesses. No obvious cameras anywhere. Perfect.

The moment the target's seat belt clicks shut, I make my move. There are multiple ways this could play out. I might slip a chloroform-soaked rag out of a plastic bag and suddenly reach around the seat in front of me to clamp the rag to the target's face. Or I might drop a black wire garrote, invisible in the dashboard-lit dimness, over the seat and around his neck and start choking him. Or I might just use my hands; reach around the seat, grab his throat, squeeze. What I do doesn't really matter.

Let's say this time I use my hands. Let's say the target screams one of the standard lines from the script. *Get your hands off me*, perhaps, or *What the fuck are you doing*, or--my favorite--*Lemme go, asshole*. "Asshole" is probably a better name for me than "Jeff" anyway.

Yeah, as if I'll let go. He's thrashing and grabbing at my hands, and I'm holding on. He's a strong football player with arms powerful enough to catapult the ball downfield, but there's not much room for him to move, and all the leverage favors me.

The reason what I do doesn't matter is because, me, I'm just a distraction.

While this muscle-punk is flopping around and trying to get out of my grasp, he's not paying a bit of attention to Rick. That's a mistake, because Rick has the syringe out and is jamming it into the target's muscular thigh, pushing the plunger to drive the clear liquid into the target's body. Sometimes Rick goes for the neck or an arm, but in a car there's plenty of room for the arms and torso to flail around. Bucket seats, though?--They don't give the legs much space to move, so legs are always right there--the heavy musculature of the nearer thigh might as well have a bulls-eye painted on it. The target grabs the syringe Rick left in his leg and throws it to the floor, as if somehow that could stop the drug already slithering through his body.

Now the clock's really ticking and the punk knows it.

Maybe he screams the obvious question: *What the hell did you shoot me with?* Maybe Rick just sits back and gives the punk his dazzling smile and starts reciting out the chemical name: *tri-something-chloro-whassit*. Rick likes his chemicals--he likes to claim he's practically an artist with them, but the details always go *whoosh* over my head. Rick says he makes his own because the drugs you steal from pharmacies have trackers in them. He's paranoid that way, but I don't blame him. Pays to be paranoid in this line of work.

Rick might as well be spouting gibberish. The target isn't listening anyway. He's in an adrenaline rush, grabbing at the latch to try to get the door open, then remembering he's belted in the seat and pawing at the seat belt fastener instead, then whapping the door to try to get it open again. Won't do him any good. We fucked with the passenger door lock so it doesn't work, not unless Rick flicks the unlock switch on the driver's side. And the seat belt latch?--Fucked with that too; it won't open and will have to be cut through with a special tool.

By now the target's probably starting to feel the drug. He's getting fumbley and clumsy, but he's still trying. That's kind of hot, actually, the way he knows it's inevitable but still thinks he can muscle his way out of this predicament. Either this punk has seen way too many movies where the hero escapes in the nick of time, or else he hasn't realized which part he's playing in this little script. Hint: He's not the hero.

He gropes at his pocket, hauls out his phone, starts trying to make his drug-clumsy fingers hit the right

buttons. No response, because his phone's still power-napping.

Thwack!

That last part was me smacking the punk's elbow. The phone flies out of his hand, clatters into the floorboard under Rick's feet, lost. We'll wait to deal with it later, because the best part of the script is about to happen right now.

The target tries to reach into the darkness by Rick's legs for his phone, but his muscled arm is on its way to being several pounds of useless meat. The punk nearly pitches face-first into Rick's lap--*time for that later*, I think--but the steering wheel catches him. Rick pushes the kid back upright in his seat. Rick's grin says he has a hard-on the size of Mount Everest. Me too. This is my favorite part. The punk's fighting the effect. The end is inevitable but he's fighting anyway. Spirit like that probably made his coach proud.

The punk's head wobbles and jerks. His eyes practically roll back in his head. His jaw hangs slack. His torso tilts. His head swings around one last time, looking for a rescue that isn't happening. *Urrgh ...*, he says, and I don't even try to translate that into words. *Haawrr ...* His torso sinks toward the dashboard. Rick pushes him upright again so his position won't deprive us of the full show.

Doesn't make much difference, though. The college punk is out. From the moment the kid opened the car door until now?--Maybe a minute and a half has passed, two tops. Kind of a disappointment, really: Rick's last concoction kept that target woozy and hovering at the edge of unconsciousness for nearly four minutes. A minute is a long time, sometimes. This target going down so quickly? Seems almost anti-climactic.

Rick does a quick check--eyelid, breath rate, pulse--to make sure the punk isn't faking and gives me a grin and a nod. I grin back. Yeah, it was a short experience, but a satisfying one.

Rick pops open his door, finds the target's phone in the floorboard, wipes it clean of fingerprints, drops it outside, crushes it with his heel. I can tell from the way he slams his foot down, he's got plenty of built-up dark inside him itching to come out and play.

While Rick starts the engine and pulls us away from the curb and the abandoned car, I send a text message: *Our team won. 0 red cards, 0 penalties. Score 1-0 ... 35 seconds on the clock.*

That's a code, of course, one we've been using a while, and it seems oddly appropriate since this punk is a football quarterback. *Our team won* translates into *We have the target*. *0 red cards* means *no witnesses, no cameras*. *0 penalties*: No problems, a by-the-numbers snatch. *Score 1-0* means we took the target and took no injuries ourselves. *Seconds* are minutes, so *35 seconds on the clock* means *we'll be there in 35 minutes*. Send.

The guy on the other end, the guy probably checking his messages and reading my text right that very moment, says his name is *Chip*. I have my doubts, since *Rick* and *Jeff* aren't our real names either, but frankly I don't care. This is a good gig for me, so I don't ask questions. *Don't shit where you live*, my momma always told me whenever she was sober enough to talk. Probably the second-best advice anyone had ever given me, after *Always get paid in cash*. I wondered sometimes if maybe she'd had any other good advice for me, if I hadn't put a bullet through her head when she tried to beat me that last time. That kind of put a stop to the possibility of advice. Oh, well.

Chip was probably watching the tracker we had on the prey's car. Where it stopped and the little blip's location when I sent the message that we had him would tell Chip where to send a clean-up crew. Or, more likely in that neighborhood, within an hour some opportunistic group of urban entrepreneurs would likely to find the car and have it stripped for parts. Pity. It was a real nice car. In two weeks I probably won't remember what the prey looked like, but I'll remember his car.

Chip probably also has a tracker on this SUV his crew stole for us to use. I don't tell myself otherwise. Maybe he has more than just a tracker. Maybe someday, when Chip decides Rick and I have outlived our usefulness, we'll get into a car he's provided, and Rick will turn the ignition, and there'll be this real bright flash, and then I'll get to find out what's waiting for me on the Other Side. Won't be Pearly Gates and flights of angels waiting for me. I'm okay with that.

A little over a year ago was when Chip found me. I was trying to lay low, but I had these urges, these little bits of darkness that built up inside me until they just had to come busting out, and then I'd have to hit something or beat someone. I was probably just another garden-variety sociopath on his way to a climactic encounter with the criminal justice system when Chip said he wanted to hire me to do pretty much what the dark parts inside were wanting me to do anyway. They got to come out and play, and I got paid. I won't say Chip "saved" me, whatever the fuck that means, but he gave me an outlet. I like having an outlet.

Rick--he's a different story. Most people would look at him and think he was just a thug, but he's smart. He knows shit about chemistry like nobody's business. But, inside, he's a whole 'nother level of crazy. If what I have inside are little bits of darkness, Rick is black though and through, black as the ass-side of Pluto in the middle of outer space at midnight. The more jobs Chip sends us on, the blacker Rick gets inside. He can act like everybody's friend, but under that mask is a shark's smile, nothing but teeth eager to tear something apart. Chip paired me up with Rick, said we'd work well together--and we do--but, man, I always wonder if someday out of nowhere I'll turn around and find one of those syringes sticking out of me.

We pull up at the destination, almost exactly thirty-one minutes later. A nondescript self-storage lot, row after identical row of storage units: each probably twelve feet by twelve feet inside, concrete floor, sliding metal garage-style door--and no other people around for half a mile at least. Must be close to midnight now.

My phone pings, and I check the message. The number is Chip's, this week's burner number anyway. *Have 2 go 2 the store, back in 5 min.* More code. The words aren't important; they could be anything. Only the numbers matter: 2-2-5. Reverse them. I tell Rick that Chip wants us to find Unit 522.

We locate it, toward the back of course. The door is padlocked, but we already have the unmarked key. Rick opens it, while I haul our nappy-time prettyboy out of the SUV and into the storage unit. Little static-mounted cameras are in each corner where the walls meet the ceiling, and three larger bracket-mounted cameras swivel toward me as I half-carry, half-drag our target into the unit. Yes, Chip's a bit of a voyeur; we already knew that. Doesn't matter to me. Everybody's got a kink. And if Chip is going to give me carte blanche to destroy something beautiful, I'm not going to begrudge him the opportunity to watch. Every script needs an audience, right?

Put him on the gurney, a static-crinkled voice announces from a cheap speaker. My first thought is, *This is new*, because Chip has never used speakers for these jobs before. At least I think it's Chip--the voice is electronically distorted and too tinny to be sure. My second thought is this new development pisses me off, if Chip's going to be telling me what to do. I've played this part enough to know what my role requires, and I like to think I'm good at it. But I also like the leeway of embellishing the basic script with my own tastes of darkness. I dislike the idea of Chip micromanaging.

My third thought, seeing as how Chip has never seemed to take such a direct interest in these jobs before, is that this feels personal. Whoever this fuck-head Mikey is, he must really have shit in the wrong place.

While Rick closes the door and goes to hide the SUV, I lug our limp target over to the gurney in the center of the small space. No, a correction--he isn't our *target* any longer. Now he is our *prey*. Roles can change as the story progresses; try to keep up. Getting a limp body out of a vehicle in a fireman's carry solo is do-able. Getting that body onto a metal gurney solo is just plain awkward--see, bodies have these things called arms and legs and heads that go flopping all over the place. I'm not too worried about the arms or legs, but I have

to make sure nothing severe happens to the head, not yet; we don't want our prey to be unconscious any longer than he needs to be.

I pull on coveralls, shoe protectors, a full-head mask. The mask's thin, stretchy Lycra, matte black. I can see through it, breathe through it, and talk through it, but the flat black material will obscure the details of my head, hair, and face. Since this storage unit is lit only with a pitiful light bulb--a film auteur might call the effect *moody, atmospheric noir*, but really it's just *dim*--the mask will make my head look like a black hole, releasing no information about me. Nylon gloves, thin enough to feel through, but enough to prevent fingerprints. We won't be leaving much incriminating DNA behind, if any.

While I'm strapping those arms and legs down to the gurney, with a thick old-school leather strap across the chest for good measure, this guy's throat makes a little moan-y sound. Looks like our prey won't be unconscious much longer. Good, because I'd hate to delay the curtain on this little drama.

I'm just finishing up with the straps when Rick returns and locks the storage unit, locks us inside, and dons a mask, coveralls, and gloves himself. He walks over to the far wall. One thing that's the same as all the previous jobs: Chip's set-up team has left four trays of toys against the far wall. Rick wheels them closer the gurney. He pulls out one of his bottles of chemical goodies, squeezes up a dropper-full, levers the prey's jaw open, and squirts the liquid under the prey's tongue. It's an antidote to the sleepy-bye chemical, with a little stimulant to make sure the prey really pays attention and doesn't pass out so easily. I don't know whether the liquid really contains LSD or just something that shows up like LSD on the blood tests later--again, Rick's explanation on that went *whoosh* over my head--but it's a genius move on his part. If the prey survives, and if Rick or I ever get brought to trial, any ambulance-chaser can discredit the witness: *Your Honor, need I remind the court that the witness' blood tested positive for hallucinogenic drugs and therefore anything he thinks he "remembers" is untrustworthy and inadmissible.*

The speaker crackles: *Do you even realize what you did to her?* I don't know who Chip is talking about. We've taken down a lot of targets before, and some have been female, but all the recent ones have been male. I don't know who *her* is. I look over at Rick, and I can't see his expression under his mask, but his body language says *what the fuck*, just as clueless. That's when we realize: Chip isn't talking to us--he's talking to the prey.

Rick and I look at the prey. His eyelids are half-open, but obviously no one is home inside yet. The prey is still in the early process of waking up, but he hasn't roused up enough yet to know what's happening. Maybe the resolution on those cameras isn't good enough for Chip to tell. Sometimes Rick's cocktails are slow to wear off. The prey's a big, muscular guy--his body will probably finish burning through most drugs quickly; he has been unconscious for about forty-five minutes by this point, a success that must have Rick practically pissing himself with glee.

My cell phone pings. *Showtime*, I think to myself as I pull it out and check the text message. A number: 102.

Each tray of toys has a number. Each item on a tray has a number. 102: The first digit is the tray, and the next two are the item number. Tray 1 is the external toys: gags, ass stretchers, mouth stretchers, and so on. Tray 2 has the internal toys: dildos, butt plugs, doodads for piercing or filling. Trays 3 and 4?--Those are the things for beating or cutting, the things that cause pain and lasting damage.

Tray 1, item 02: a ball gag. Classic black vinyl strap, bright-red rubber ball. Gagging the prey is an unusual opening move--usually we get to hear them yell all the standard lines from the script at us first--but I'm just an actor here, and this drama is being directed by someone else. The prey's head rolls loosely, jaw limp, as I push the shiny ball between his teeth and fasten the straps behind his head. I can tell by the way the mouth area of Rick's mask is stretching that he is grinning at me. I know that grin well, even though I can't see the details of it under the matte black. It's not a happy *roller-coasters and Ferris wheels* grin, though; it's the grin

of all the dark things inside him rising to the surface, getting ready to party.

The prey's head rolls as his brain continues rebooting. The jaw works against the gag. The eyes snap the rest of the way open when they realize something thick and rubber-tasting fills the mouth. Okay, here we go: our final player has joined us on the stage.

Chip likes to say that everyone we get on our table goes through the same five mental stages. He says the stages are the work of some famous psychologist, but I don't care much for headshrinker mumbo-gumbo, so I never pay much attention. According to Chip, everything we do here is like a script, intended to help the prey move through the process.

Stage 1 is denial.

Ping: *101.*

Mustn't keep the director and the audience waiting. Item 101 is a pair of scissors. Okay, looks like we're back on track. Usually the instructions are to cut off clothing, then use the gag if the prey got too talky-talky, but this time the stage directions got reversed. That's okay; I can handle--

Ping: *Shirt only.*

I roll my eyes, which I know Chip won't see through my mask, and stop myself from muttering something about micromanagement. I don't know how sensitive the microphones on those cameras are. I don't want to fuck up this gig by flapping my mouth. Like I said before, don't shit where you ...

Surgical scissors cut through cloth like air. Mikey-prey is wearing a thin cotton T-shirt, dark blue with some team logo on the front. Maybe it's his team's--I don't know, don't care. I slip one tine between his biceps and the fabric, then push the scissors across his chest. The metal glides along his skin so lightly he probably can't feel it, and it cuts through his T-shirt from armhole to shoulder, shoulder to shoulder, down the other sleeve. His lighter skin practically glows as the dark cloth parts. *Snip-snip.* I cut from the slit up through the neck. Change my angle. Slide the scissors down the center of his chest to the leather strap across him, then pull the fabric out from under the gurney strap on the other side, resume cutting down to the waist hem. I have just quartered his shirt.

I pass the scissors handle-first to Rick. The four flaps I've made of our prey's shirt part like a flower bud opening, exposing his torso, neck to navel. Revealing the body for the first time always reminds me of the little thrill of unwrapping a gift. You might have a general idea of what's underneath the wrapping, but the specifics are still something of a surprise. Hair, or no hair? Big pink nipples, or small and dark? Rounded pecs, or square? Tattoos, scars, birthmarks?

When he feels the fabric move, what's happening pierces whatever drug-haze remains, and the prey realizes: *strange place, strange men, masks, tied down, shirt cut off.* I don't know the order, but I know the one that jumps to the top of his priority list. He jerks against the straps that hold him. Arms. Legs. He's trying to thrash, but the straps don't give him enough leeway, so he manages little jerky moves, almost like he's dancing horizontally. He tries to push his torso off the table maybe a quarter-inch. The only part he can move much is his head, and he twists it left and right.

Mrrr-mrrr-mrrrh! Well, hello, denial--welcome to the party. I don't have to be a genius to know our prey is yelling *No, no, no*--or would be if he didn't have plug of rubber larger than a golf ball strapped between his gums.

His brain is all caught up now, he's starting to realize which part he plays in this little drama, and he has found his motivation. His eyes latch on to me since I'm close. Naturally I can't decipher his speech through

the ball gag, but I doubt he varies from the usual lines.

Hrurph-hrurph-nnnur-urph probably translates into *Who are you guys?*

*Mmph-wwaaarh-nnnuph--*I'll interpret that as *Let me go!*

Nuurgh-rugh-fuhph-eerph-nehurph-nnn-murgh. That's a long one, and complex thought doesn't seem to be our li'l method-actor's forte, so I can't decide whether to go with *Why are you doing this to me* or *Don't you know who my daddy is?*

That should just about exhaust the range of his dialogue. Anything else will be just an ad-libbed variation on those themes. I don't care if he pads his part by repeating his lines; he *is* kind of the star of this tableau, after all. Let him chew up a little scenery while he chews on that ball gag.

It's actually more fun this way: since he can't talk, our prey can't say anything completely banal to spoil the moment. I decide that Chip might be on to something.

Stage 2 is anger.

Now that our prey has accepted the reality of his situation, he tries to buck his chest off the table again, which makes the thick strap dig into his skin. He's getting himself mad, letting rage and adrenaline fuel him, just like his coach trained him. He jumps from denial to anger quicker than most, moving from *This can't be happening* to *I'll fucking kill you!* Our muscle-bound Einstein is running experiments, testing his muscles against the restraints, trying to find a weak point and break through by sheer force of will. As usual, the restraints win. Let's call it $R=mc^2$. *Restraints equal more than your muscles can handle, lots more.*

Pity. He has a nice chest, the kind with muscles honed in a gym. A patch of hair, barely enough to trim, in the center that narrows down his abs to a trickle and disappears into his pants. Big slabs of perfectly symmetrical pectorals, capped with tiny dark nipples that probably harden to points when he's excited. Flat stomach with abs as defined and regular as bathroom tiles. This kid's life of leisure and privilege let him spend big chunks of time developing that body on weight machines and running back and forth on a grassy field after an inflated pigskin. He has never had to fight to survive. Never had to fight for anything in his life, other than maybe whether he would move up from second-stringer to starting quarterback. His good looks and daddy's money?--Hell, he's never even had to push a door to get it to open. His life has probably been a succession of self-opening doors and girls with self-opening legs. But somewhere along the line he went through the wrong entryway, and that landed him on this table. *Oopsie.*

The strap digs into his chest when he heaves upward again, but the restraint doesn't budge. Kid's beginning to sweat--exertion or fear, I don't care--probably both. He's learning that anger isn't enough. No problem--we'll be giving him a passel of new motivations in just a few minutes.

The last message said to do his shirt only, and that's done, so if Chip wants to micromanage, maybe I should wait for the next instruction. My phone stays silent. Mikey-prey doesn't know or care; he continues to thrash and strain as if there's an Oscar for *Best Bondage Victim*. Rick, though, notices the delay. His mask aims at me. I shrug. His mask aims at one of the cameras.

Ping: 000.

Which means: *Pause.*

What the fuck? I hold out my phone so that Rick can see the message, and from the way he's practically vibrating I know he doesn't like it, not one bit. We've interacted enough sans masks that we can read each other's body language even without seeing facial expressions. Rick's dark parts came for a party, they can see

the buffet is *right there*, and they do *not* like to be kept waiting.

Ping: *Shoes sox.*

Chip's not going to win any awards for texting, but his meaning is clear enough.

Rick sees me reach for the prey's shoe, so he goes for the other one. Our prey realizes what is happening and starts trying to kick his feet, against the quarter-inch range of motion the straps give him. These shoes probably cost more than my rent. They have a complicated and completely impractical Velcro-and-laces closure that takes me a second to figure out. I shake my head, thinking some people have more money than sense if this is what they choose to put on their feet. The next challenge is the gurney, because the ankle strap isn't giving me much room to move his foot around. The logistics of popping his sneaker off his heel and then working his sock down takes longer than I expected. The prey isn't helping, the way he keeps twitching his foot back and forth; but because of the limited area of motion available, he can't keep me from getting his shoe and sock off. All he does is make the experience take longer and frustrate me in the process. He shouldn't have done that. I get darker inside when I get frustrated. I'm gonna enjoy whatever Chip has planned for this punk.

Stage 3 is bargaining.

Why are Rick and I still wearing these masks, now that we're inside a storage unit and away from prying eyes? Well, part of the reason is showmanship. The marks who end up on our tables seem to expect it, maybe even prefer it. A little showmanship gives this little tableau meaning, you know? And then there's the matter of witnesses, since tonight apparently Chip is running a friends-and-family special over on his side of the cameras. See, sometimes people get infected with this disease called "regret." Makes them do crazy things, like confess crimes to the cops or the media. Witnesses of any kind?--They're a future sickness waiting to happen. Or on the more positive side, maybe anonymous black masks let the watchers ride us like avatars into the action easier, imagining their hands doing what ours do like a puppeteer watches his puppets. Me, I don't exactly love the idea of being a someone's puppet in this scenario, but I do like the idea of an appreciative audience.

The prey figured out a while back he can't do jack-shit while strapped down, but he's still trying now and then. Hope springs eternal, right? He is *mmmph-mmmph-mmmph*'ing up a storm around the gag. I'm kind of curious, but I know if I pop the gag out he'll just disappoint me with the usual begging. Stuff like: *My daddy has money--he'll pay you a lot if you let me go.* Yeah, well, we're already being paid well to have you here so we can do this to you, Mikey. Besides, Rick and I enjoy what we're going, and turning on Chip wouldn't be good for our survival prospects; I'm betting Chip has bigger monsters than us on his speed-dial. Or: *Please, please, please, let me go; I won't tell no one.* Yeah, no one except the police, the media, your therapist, and some fly-by-night publisher who sees a quick buck in the story of a privileged white sports star's brush with the gosh-awful violence of the streets. Ghostwriters would line up down the block for a crack at that story. Maybe James Dean will play me in the movie version--except he's way too dead now, and I'm not the star here. I'm not the hero or the villain either.

It's not this punk's fault that I've heard it all before. He's never before experienced things at the low end of the societal totem pole, and all he knows is what he has heard actors say in cheesy television cop dramas--but, punk, I've lived every day of my life down here. Everything someone strapped to a gurney in a storage unit at midnight could possibly say I've already heard. Trust me on that. The punk doesn't have anything to bargain with.

Man, this long gap between instructions is starting to work my nerves. Rick looks up at a camera. I look up at a camera. We could have gotten started on the punk's pants, or we could have started to work on his bare chest; or hell, we could've even spent the last five minutes playing patty-cake with his bare feet. I hate

deviations from the script. Where the hell is our director? Are we supposed to ad-lib here, or wait for instructions?

I can tell Rick's thinking of ad-libbing. Rick slides a fingertip up the sole of the prey's foot. From the way that foot flinches away, I can't tell if the prey's ticklish or just pissed off that we can touch at our leisure. But the possible problem I anticipate is that Rick's face is pointed toward Tray 4, and his other hand rests with deceptive casualness on the gurney near it: Tray 4 holds the dangerous things with blades, things for cutting. If this wait stretches on much longer, Rick might decide to improvise--might reach for his favorite, the shiny pair of garden pruners, with one hand and the prey's foot with the other.

This little piggy has roast beef.

This little piggy had none.

*This little piggy cried wee-wee-wee when it was snipped off,
all the way through the bone.*

Poetic justice? Losing a few toes would really fuck with this punk's ability to run up and down a football field. His sports career would end, a door finally closed to him. But really, starting with the toes would be more basic than that--it's just common sense, Torture 101: *Always start at the extremities and work your way in--that limits blood loss and the possibility of shock, and keeps your prey conscious so you can play with him longer.* Rick is an expert at making the prey last a long, long time.

Rick's hand is getting twitchy, and Tray 4 is just way too close. If he jumps ahead in the script and reaches for a cutting tool this soon, Chip's gonna be pissed. If I step in to stop it, Rick's gonna be pissed; he's crazy enough to turn on me and kill me without breaking a sweat. I look back at a random camera, not sure if it's the right one or not. *Come on; come on!*

A decision: I swipe my hand at Tray 1, the external foreplay toys, and grab a fistful of old-fashioned wooden clothespins, push them to Rick. I can't stop him, but I can divert him. He straightens happily and I'm glad the mask prevents me from seeing his Cheshire grin.

Everyone thinks that damn cat in that old book grinned because he was being silly or friendly, when in fact he was fucking with that Alice chick's head every chance he got. He was grinning because there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

Rick's happy to have me directing the action, as long as I'm giving him something he wants anyway. He's an artist with things like this. He starts by making a fast ring around the perimeter of the nipple itself, clamping little pinches of flesh with the clothespins. A ring of five carefully around the outside of Mikey-prey's right nip to start, leaving the nipple itself alone for now, saving the little nub for later. Our prey thrashes a little on the first pin or two, but then subsides. The individual pins don't hurt much--he can take it, he's telling himself--he's conserving his strength, waiting for his opening, like a smart player.

Rick grabs more pins and creates a tight spiral around the nipple, widening clockwise to the skin of the pec, then over ribs, the hollow between chest and arm, then back up on to the chest again, until he runs into the leather strap. He contents himself with half-circles, making a cup pattern from the strap, under the nipple, back up to the strap, until he has made three rows. I was right: the prey's nipple hardens to a point under the stimulation. Each clothespin has a small hole in the handle, and Rick threads a one-eighth white cord through each hole, connecting them all in a series, the groundwork for one of his favorite moves. Rick finishes his little *laundry day gone wild* art installation by tweaking the nipple itself, hard enough to make the prey heave against the strap in pain again, trying to twist away. Rick memorializes that tweak by snapping a metal alligator clip onto the nipple itself, a fiery sensation to keep the prey reminded. Bet his nipple isn't nearly as hard now.

Mike-prey is making *whuff-whuff* sounds. This is more than just a *breathe through the pain* response to the clothespins pinching tender flesh. Trouble breathing around his gag? Or a trick? I watch his chest carefully. He might actually be hyperventilating or having some sort of panic attack. Maybe what Rick gave him really was LSD. Maybe the kid's tripping balls through his worst nightmare. Should I should pop out the gag until he catches his breath, settles down? If this is some trick and he yells for help, I'll let Rick show him that Tray 1 contains several more painful gags. This time of night, no one is around for miles to hear him scream, of course, but we must punish undesirable behavior just on principle.

The speaker crackles: *What do you have to say for yourself?* The voice is distorted by a filter, but to me it sounds like a woman's, too high to be Chip's. Does our audience include some special guests for today's performance?

Our prey freezes when he suddenly realizes there's someone else involved, not just the two guys he sees here in masks. More importantly, his panicky breathing stops. That fucker was trying to trick us after all. I feel like a fool. Well, that's one less reason for me to be gentle.

I wasn't planning to be gentle for long anyway.

The worst part of any nightmare is the fear that it will turn out to be real. Judging from the way our prey's eyes go wide in terror, he now understands this nightmare is all too real. He still hasn't answered the question--can't, because of that gag--but I can tell he knows what the question means.

Ping: *X102*.

X means *stop or remove*, but what was item 102? Oh, right--the ball-gag.

My stroll up to the head of the table is slow. I don't have far to go in this small space, but I make it last. The prey's panicky eyes track me, wide with fear or anticipation, which are really the same thing. I pause, an actor hitting his mark before the scene continues. I pop the catch, pull back the strap. The prey practically spits out the ball as I draw it away.

Hello, he bellows at cameras on the ceiling, *I'm really sorry*, like a petulant child who broke Grandmama's favorite vase by throwing a football in the house. Yeah, like no one before him has tried apologizing before--or begging. *What can I do so you'll please let me go*. Sometimes charm and charisma are just not the right currency.

I mentioned that stage three is bargaining, right?

He stops short of saying something really asinine like, *I'll never do it again*. At this point, we all know he can't be sincere. Right now he'll say anything, agree to anything, just so we'll let him go. Meaningful apologies and mouth-noises about repentance will come later, after the main action has begun. Only after that part will he be able to express his regret and really mean it. For now, bargaining is usually the longest stage, and that's fine by me.

Mikey-prey waits for a response. He seems surprised that the speakers stay silent. Guess the golden sports hero isn't accustomed to being ignored. Doesn't seem to like it, either. His mouth opens and closes. I can't tell whether he's working out soreness from the gag or working up the courage to spout more nonsense. He doesn't have anything to bargain with, which means nothing he says matters, so I don't have to care.

Ping: *101 R pants*.

I show Rick the screen, and he straightens up. Communication is all body language between us right now, but I can tell Rick is practically vibrating with glee. If our prey didn't like having his shoes and socks pulled off,

he's definitely not going to like this next part, and the anticipation of that is giving me a boner.

What? our prey demands of me, or Rick, whoever will answer. We don't, so his voice jumps half an octave when he demands to know, *What's it say? Tell me what it says!*

We do no such thing, of course. That's why we have this code in the first place. We don't have to talk. The element of surprise makes the prey's fear even sweeter.

101 of course means the scissors again. R means Chip wants Rick to do the honors, but I'm not the jealous type. *Pants*: self-explanatory.

Rick flourishes the scissors into the air and--*snikty-snikt*--gives them a couple of demonstration flicks. Rick likes theatrical gestures. His masked head tilts at an angle that might indicate *serial killer crazy* or *spree killer glee*. The prey's eyes go wide; his jaw drops. My momma would've back-slapped my head if my mouth ever hung open like that: *Shut yer damn yapper, boy, a'fore you swallow a damn fly or sumthin'*. That woman deserved everything I did to her after I shot her through the head. So, by association, does our prey.

Rick places his other hand on Mikey-prey's ankle, just above the bottom of his faded designer jeans-leg. In the air, Rick gives the scissors another two flexes, slower this time: *snikt ... snikt ...* He pauses while the full import ricochets around that panic-addled brain behind our prey's frozen expression.

Rick likes to whistle while he works. *Fills the empty spaces between the screams*, he always tells me when we talk shop over plates in the back booth at Waffle House afterward sometimes. He's whistling as he tugs on the ankle-hole of the prey's jeans, aims the scissors down at the opening. Right about now, two things light up the prey's expression. First, he feels the cool metal of the scissors touch his ankle and understands what's about to happen to his pants. Second, he's heard enough notes to recognize the tune Rick's whistling: the famous funeral march. Rick's always throwing out spoilers.

The punk un-freezes--and I mean, in a big way. *No!-No!-No!-No!* He's thrashing around like an over-caffeinated epileptic in an earthquake, arms and legs and chest bouncing as much as the restraints will let him, which is less than a quarter-inch, while his head whips back and forth. *Please!-Please!-Please, noooo!*

I open the prey's leather belt--it'll just get in the way in a few minutes--and tug it. The way he's thrashing keeps his weight off it, and the belt slides easily from his pants loops. It's a nice belt. Leather. Expensive. Probably would fit me. Maybe I'll keep it as a souvenir.

The prey's panicking, and I'd feel sorry for him if he didn't deserve this. I circle his belt into a loop, slap the loop hard against the leather strap across his chest. His eyes, bounding around the parts of the storage unit that he can see, are fear-rabid--angry, terrified, a million shades in between--but the minute that belt hits the strap those eyes zero in on me. *Shut the fuck up*, I snarl at him. He doesn't listen, and his yelling escalates to a near-scream. *Nononono!* So I backhand him across the jaw, not that hard, but I have to get my point across. He stops hollering and stares at me again like he can't decide whether to be angry or indignant, as if to say, *How dare you hit me*. No, he doesn't get to play the victim here. I preempt his accusation: *If you don't hold still, he's liable to cut you 'stead of just your pants*. The prey doesn't hold still, of course, but I didn't expect him to. At least he's stopped yelling--for now.

Rick slides the scissors up the inside of Mikey-prey's calf, up to his knee, and the heavy, artificially faded denim, still practically store-bought new, parts with hardly any resistance. Rick has to stop, work the cut out from under the strap, then continues upward. From there up, the punk's pants are practically skintight over his muscular thigh. Rick moves his cut up to the top of the punk's leg. The scissors catch on something at the top of the thigh, and Rick has to reposition. The fabric parts to reveal a bit of the briefs--dark blue, skintight of course--that had snagged the scissors. Rick angles between the pocket and the zipper, continues up to the

waistline. The scissors stall at the thicker stitching at the waistline, and Rick has to work them to cut through the last inch.

The jock-punk freezes. He whimpers, a pitiful little noise like a scolded puppy. I wonder what's happening for a moment. I see the crotch of his jeans darken. I've seen this show enough to recognize the prey is pissing itself. The dark spreads down the thigh that's still clad in denim, an ammonia smell in the air. For a moment there's no sound. Then Mikey sobs. Rick points and laughs. Mikey-prey flips from shame to anger and rages against the arm and chest straps yet again, trying to get at Rick, bellowing, *Fuck you!--I'll fuckin' kill you!--Fuck you!*

Rick taps the point of the scissors against the prey's vulnerable bare stomach, just beside his navel. His voice is calm and soft. *No, pecker-head, fuck you.*

I've had enough of this, so I reach for the gag and the prey's skull. The punk realizes what I'm going to do, and he doesn't make my job easier. He jerks his head this way and that, trying to bite me, trying to yell at me, sobbing, all at the same time. I press the ball gag at his lips and dig my finger into a nerve cluster in his neck. *Yahh!--*the prey screams, and then--*Mmmph!--*I pop the ball gag back into his mouth and pull the strap tight across his cheek.

I pat his forehead hard with my palm, twice--*smack, smack*--almost comforting him until harder a third time--*whack!--*hard enough to make his head clunk against the metal gurney underneath him. That shocks him into staring wide-eyed at me again. I bend down and speak into the prey's ear. *Be quiet, asshole. This is for your own good.* Which isn't entirely true, but he doesn't need to know that part yet.

Chip hasn't sent any fresh instructions, and the prey's bladder-emptying has given us a need for a small deviation from the script. I reach under the gurney and twist the knob that allows the table surface to tilt. Rick sees what I'm doing and finds the plastic pan. He foot-pushes it under the edge of the table as I tip the gurney. The prey is head-up, feet-down, and probably fancies this to be a change in his favor--he's not as helpless upright as he was lying prone, right?--but really all we're doing is using gravity to drain his urine down into the pan.

Our prey learns that his lot hasn't changed at all when Rick kneels with the scissors and starts cutting away, a repeat for the prey's other pants leg, starting from the ankle and working his way up toward the knee. *Snikty-snikt*. Chip hasn't sent this instruction, so Rick is improvising, but Chip doesn't say anything to stop him. A gap opens in the denim, widens as the scissors move up, revealing more and more paler skin below. The prey thrashes his head side to side, tries to knee-hit the scissors away, a useless gesture since he can barely move. Rick's progress is leisurely, pausing to pull the slash in the fabric under a strap, then continuing to slit upward.

One of the cameras whirs softly as it turns, reminding me we have an audience. I half-expect my phone to chime, but the camera adjusting its view is the only sign that Chip is still out there somewhere, watching.

Rick is slicing through urine-wet fabric over the prey's thigh now. Some people might be bothered by the piss odor that fills this tight space; but frankly, I've seen, touched, and smelled pretty much every fluid a human body can produce, and urine no longer phases me. It bothers the prey, though. Mikey is moaning something--*muh, muh, muh*--that probably translates into *no, no, no*. He has abandoned any pretense of being the stalwart young man his father, friends, teammates, and coach probably think him to be. He's not the golden-boy football idol right now. He's crying, practically sobbing, and I know we're not far from the fourth stage now.

Sobbing but not sorrowful. Not yet. We still have two stages left. No, the prey is crying because, for maybe the first time in his life, he is alone and helpless. His looks and daddy's money can't bargain him out of this; hell, those were probably factors in whatever led to him being here in the first place. He's a good-looking guy,

even with his face twisted up by tears and that gag. I'm going to enjoy what happens next, but I'll enjoy it even more because he's pretty. Not everyone who ends up on these tables at our mercy is, so I always take a few moments to appreciate the ones who are, before I destroy them.

Rick has completed the work of hacking through the denim waist. With a slit from ankle to waist up each leg, the front of our prey's jeans flops down, revealing his wet designer briefs. Nothing holds up his pants now except the pressure of his ass against the gurney. Rick's about to change that. A tug, two, and the material comes loose from behind the prey's ass and slaps damply against the storage unit wall. Mikey is naked now except for those snug designer briefs which, piss-wet and skin-tight, reveal more than they conceal: a lump of testicles nearly as large as a baseball and a slab of jock-dick that's probably made many a cheerleader squeal.

Two, four, six, eight
How many inches would you guess-timate?

I'll see for myself soon enough. Jumping ahead in the script will just spoil the surprise.

I'm not surprised when my phone pings again: *101 R undrwere*.

This is one of Rick's favorite parts, the final unveiling.

Rick decides to make the unveiling last. That means deliberate *snikt ... snikt* noises up the prey's left hip, slow. The sound of each snip hangs in the still air inside this storage unit, a whispered inevitability. The prey, still sobbing, doesn't try to thrash this time--no frantic, desperate motions against the straps. Perhaps he has seen that flailing is futile. He can't stop us. His chest heaves, but no longer from anger; he's ugly-crying, a deep, guttural sound halfway between a wail and a sob.

Rick bends over him and cuts a gap up the other hip. The wet fabric, stretched taut, parts with a *schlip* sound, peeling away from the skin. The prey's hip, pale and muscle-smooth, is revealed, and then Rick teases down the piss-wet front of those briefs, exposing the cock, the ball-sack, the vulnerable core of any man's manhood and this one's in particular. Rick pulls at the severed briefs, still held by the prey's ass pressing against the table. A poke of the scissors low on the hip, nearly the ass cheek, makes the prey jump, and Rick tugs the briefs away, like an artist revealing a sculpture. He holds the wrecked briefs up for a moment, letting the piss-stench waft through the air, before tossing the cloth onto the floor with the rest of the ruined clothes.

Our prey lies there, his body completely exposed now except for the parts covered by the leather straps. His cock is thick, looks like it would be a good size if it were hard, but right now it's the opposite of hard. His bull-balls look as though they're trying to retreat into the safety of his body, but nothing will save them there. Our prey has stopped struggling, at least for now though that won't last, and his breath comes in ragged, shallow gasps around the gag. His eyes are still wide, but the frenzied anger is gone. Now, terror has made his mind vacant. The lights are on, but the house has already burned down.

I can't see Rick's predatory grin, but I know it matches mine under our masks. We're almost to the fun part, the part where the prey's anger leaves, the helplessness sets in, and Rick and I can start to show them something transcendent: their capacity to feel pain.

The speaker crackles, but the voice isn't electronically distorted anymore. Not Chip's voice either. *Michael*, says that same woman from before, and her accusatory tone slices the silence like a scalpel. Mike's head yanks toward the speakers. His expression, mostly confusion, says he doesn't recognize her voice, but like a good little puppy he recognizes his name. *Michael, do you know why you're here?*

Our prey makes a muffled *Mmmph?* around the gag. He tries to shake his head, but the effort seems to exhaust him. He closes his eyes, as if wishing us away.

You don't, do you? the woman continues. *Of course not. I'm paying a lot of money for these men to teach you a lesson, a horrible lesson. Your family won't save you this time, Michael. They can't pay the police or the judge to look the other way this time. The only one looking is me, and I want you to know why.*

I look at Rick. His mask is aimed at me. I can feel so much restless energy radiating off him he's practically vibrating. Being reminded someone else is running the show, calling the shots, directing this scene displeases him. He wants to move, to let his darkness out to play. Someone else stopping for a big dramatic reveal? Boring. And Rick does not deal well with boredom. I'm starting to agree.

Let me help you remember, the woman's voice announces in the small, dim space. *October 12.*

Our prey's eyes snap open. He understands, at least part of this, and Rick and I watch the dread dawn on him. His jaw works against the ball gag, trying to speak, to lie, deny, bargain, whatever, but he makes no sound.

That party at the Kappa House. Her name was Sarah. She was drunk and you took her upstairs and did disgusting, perverted things to her. She was my daughter. And thanks to you, she's dead, isn't she. You did such horrible, horrible things to her body, you and your knives. You tried to deny it and cover it up, and your father spent a lot of money to make the charges go away, didn't he. Well, he and his pet judge can't help you this time. You know why, Michael? Because there are bigger psychopaths in this world than you, Michael, and I found some.

Hey, now, lady, do go saying hurtful things about the people you hire. Oh, who am I kidding? I find her insult kind of amusing. And ironic, since what we have here on the table in front of us turns out to be a little amateur competition for us to eliminate. Good thing killers and psychopaths haven't unionized--saves us the trouble of having to reconsider Mikey's fate out of professional courtesy or something.

Her voice is a shriek now, and the distortion from the cheap speakers doesn't help. *They'll show you how it's done, Michael! They'll show you! You're not bragging now, are you--you--you little bitch!*

I'm almost amused that *bitch* is the worst word she can make herself say.

Stage 4 is depression.

Our prey was ugly-crying a few minutes ago. I can't tell if the tear from his right eye is left over from that or something new, a result of the woman's revelation. Frankly I don't care.

See, a lot of people reek of misery. Maybe you hate your school. You hate your life. You probably hate your friends. You get fucked up and you do drugs and you have unprotected sex, thinking that maybe, if you leave the outcome in someone else's hands, you'll be fine--or you'll get a sign--or maybe someone's going to stop you, which you'll assume shows they care. Maybe it'll be God, Vishnu, a guy dressed as Santa Claus; who knows? Whatever you believe in, you're waiting for it to tell you whether you're good or bad. In the meantime, you're not taking any responsibility.

Well, hello, actions; meet consequences. I'm sure you two will be the bestest friends forever and ever.

Though based where Mikey-boy is, and who's here with him, and what's waiting on the trays, our prey's *forever and ever* isn't likely to last the night.

Do you remember her? The woman's voice is almost a shriek. *You could have--Do you even remember her?*

I want to roll my eyes. Are we still doing this? Isn't the time for the big reveal over? Some players never know when to yield the stage.

The prey doesn't answer, but his body goes rigid. His breath hitches. He struggles against the gag. A deep, shuddering inhalation followed by a choked exhale. His eyes are fixed on the ceiling. If he believes in God, and maybe even if he doesn't, he's probably sending in a loud 9-1-1 prayer right now. Or maybe he's already as bored as Rick and I am. Too bad his gods aren't here tonight. But Rick and I are. I'm sure we'll find some way to entertain him.

Our prey's no longer thrashing, at least not with anger but with a profound, soul-deep sadness as he realizes that everything he believed in, everything that made him invulnerable, has abandoned him. This thing can't be outrun as the stadium crowd cheers, it can't be buried in some shallow grave or dumped in garbage bags like parts of a sorority babe's body, and it can't be paid off like a judge. It can only be trudged through one step at a time.

Does he remember? Or regret? Hard to tell. Guys like him are very good at pretending. Be handsome, act contrite, maybe grease a few palms behind the scenes, and consequences disappear. Our prey's eyes, wide and unfocused moments ago, now have an unreadable clarity. The fight drains out of him entirely. He goes utterly slack inside the straps, his muscles dissolving into slack meat. His head lolls to the side. A quiet sound escapes the sides of the gag. He's not yelling, not struggling. Sullen. This is probably how he looks when he realizes a football game is lost and he can't make his team pull out a miracle win.

The woman is screaming now, and I'm hoping she shuts the fuck up soon. *Well, her family remembers her, Michael. We remember every single detail. And we're watching, Michael. We're watching you right now.*

Ping.

I didn't look at my phone immediately. I wait to make sure the woman has ended her monologue. I mean, she's bankrolling this show, and I'd hate to interrupt her turn on the stage. This is what they call a dramatic pause.

See, this really isn't about justice, for her or me. Country-simple, this is about revenge. I'm just a puppet helping people who don't want to do the dirty work themselves get revenge, and I get paid for it. But truth is, I'd do this for free. I like the power it gives me over somebody, even if it's just for a few hours. Unlike this screaming woman, unlike Michael, I don't pretend I'm really a good person deep down inside. There's a hundred different ways tonight could have gone, and I'd be okay with all of them. I've seen worse, lived through worse, done lots worse. We all make choices, and these are mine. We're not at the mercy of our pasts; we decide--I decide--how to deal with the past in different ways. I could have fought back when Mommy's boyfriends came to "visit" me and gotten myself killed. I could have grown up, gotten a regular job, dulled myself with alcohol, and beaten my boyfriend or girlfriend just to make myself feel like a man. But instead here I am. Waiting. I hate waiting.

Rick watches me check my phone. I show him Chip's latest message. His mask moves as he shark-smiles again.

Proceed ...

I decide to start by removing the ball gag because I'm making plans for that mouth. Mouths have teeth, though. I pick up a modified O-ring gag.

Remember those clothespins Rick clamped all over prey's torso?--the metal alligator clip on his nipple?--the white cord linking them all together? Rick gives that cord a hard yank; the clothespins pull off rapid-fire, *snap!-thack!-click!*, until the whole lot of them are tugged off. The metal alligator clip on the nipple itself?--That one's last. *Rip!* Takes some flesh with it. Prettyboy prey screams bloody murder. Heh. Get it? Bloody murder. Blood flows. Not a lot, but enough to get this party really started. For all I know, this is what the

woman wants to see. I know for damn sure this is what Rick wants to see.

You know what they say about sharks.

Anyway, prettyboy screams, which is loud as fuck in this storage unit without the ball gag, but his wide-open mouth lets me slap the O-ring gag into place, and then I fasten the rubber strap around his head to hold it there. Yep, I have definite plans for that mouth. The O-ring keeps his mouth an open hole, so he can't bite a finger or a cock. Those teeth could be a problem. If I had a day or two to play, I'd remove them--the trays have a variety of pliers--but we likely don't have that much time left in this playdate, so for now the O-ring will work.

We'd tilted the table head-up to drain his piss, so now we swing him head-down. That puts his mouth at crotch level. His hands are aligned with the part that swings up, which will make them easier for Rick to reach once he picks up the garden pruners.

I open my coveralls, my belt, my pants, shove the works to my knees. His eyes go wide when he sees my hard-on, because I'm hung on the big side of average, not porn-star huge but bigger than he wants aimed in his direction. His ass is pressed against the gurney, so the logistical part of his brain has eliminated that option, and--smart kid--he quickly realizes where my cock's going. But he'd not smart enough to realize going *nuh-nuh-hun!* isn't going to change a damn thing. Waste of effort. I lube up my cock, align the head into the O in the ring, and start feeding him some tube-meat.

Why am I'm fucking a straight boy's mouth instead of his ass? Well, the answer's simple. Straight guys can deal with a forced ass-fucking: they're tried down, it's out of their control, it might even feel good, and anyway what's happening is 'way down on the other side of their body. They can easily dissociate. But a cock in their mouths? That seems more voluntary, so to a lot of straight guys giving oral sex is *more gay*, whatever that means. But the part that really matters is: A blow-job is right in their face, and a hard cock in a straight guy's mouth, a set of balls slapping around, those are a lot harder to ignore, especially when he knows he can't bite down. He can't dissociate from the cock in his mouth, the feel of it on his tongue, the taste, the *there-ness* of it. Plus, there's less chance of us leaving any pristine DNA behind; his mouth is full of stuff that'll fuck with any DNA evidence.

Do you think sex is a destructive force?--Can it cause unhappiness, or is the sex just a symptom of it? I think sex is just sex. It can be used for good or evil, but mostly it's a basic animal instinct and we've built our society around the idea of controlling it. So, yes, sex can be a destructive force, but only because of the way we deal with it, not because it's inherently bad. For me, sex is like my favorite thing in the whole world. It flips a switch and turns my brain off. All the voices go silent and I'm not thinking about holding back anymore and all the little dark bits in me get to come out to play.

As I start to fuck, Rick selects the Dremel. That's a little rotary tool--you put bits or blades on it and it's really versatile little tool, spinning at a few thousand rounds per minute, enough to do some damage. He fastens a thin rotary saw wheel to the shaft, holds it where our prey can see it--Rick loves his spoilers--and spins it up. The tool shrieks its happy spinning song that the manufacturer must've intended to grate on every user's nerves. I can't see the prey's eyes, not with my hip and thigh in my way, but I can tell from the way he's trying to *huff-huff-huff* through his nose that he doesn't like that tool one iota, especially not when Rick grabs the closest little finger and pulls it away from its lifelong buddies. Prey's probably thinking Rick's going to chop the finger off, but he's not; he'd use the garden pruners for that. No, Rick knows his stuff. And like I said, he especially knows to start at the littlest extremities; reduces the catastrophic blood loss, keeps the prey alive to play with longer.

Rick takes his time, lining up the whirling blade, drawing close to the immobilized finger, pulling back, lining up again. A little anticipation burns the terror into the prey's brain.

The blade finally contacts flesh not at the base joint where the finger meets the hand, but crosswise to the finger, just behind the nail bed. The prey's screams around my cock erupt both louder and higher-pitched, his frenzied thrashing against the restraints even more intense. None of that makes a difference, though all his noise feels great around my cock. I push in deeper, blocking his windpipe, and I bet he can't tell which sensation to scream about then. My dick in his throat muffles him, but this isn't about being quiet--not with a Dremel around. The blade's whine changes tone as it touches against the bone, but the little-Dremel-that-could is a *lot* stronger than bone. Blood begins to spray, not a lot since the little finger has small arteries, but the Dremel isn't very careful about where it slings blood and bits of flesh or bone.

When I think the prey is about to pass out, I withdraw my cock, letting him suck in air through his nose and around the O-ring while he sucks me. Having him suffocate on my cock might flatter my ego but, nope, isn't on our agenda. Not yet, at least.

Stage 5 is acceptance.

Don't try this at home. See, most people who play with pain treat it like an amusement park ride, something they can hop on and off at will. Don't like this ride?--Try another. Most people never reach the point where it becomes a beautiful purifier. Their fear, survival instinct, whatever, kicks in and they jump off long before their carousel reaches the point where the pain turns from angry red to shining white. If this lump of meat on the gurney had his way, he'd have leaped off a few rounds back too; but here we are, and he has no choice but to stay on this ride with us until the very end. This flesh realized his destination some time ago.

A few of you bleeding-hearts out there will be thinking shit like *Oh, no, no one could survive that*. What rock have you been hiding under? This isn't about surviving. Are you thinking the cops and ambulances will arrive at the last second to rescue him? Are you thinking Rick and I will take a step back just before he reaches the point of no return and realize we're bad people, maybe call the paramedics? News flash: We've known we're bad from the start--that's why we're here, that's why we do this. Just because Rick and I get hired to do bad things to bad people doesn't make us good people. Two negatives only make a positive in third-grade math class. Haven't you been paying attention?

Show of hands: Who still thinks this is about survivability? One, two ... Well, looks like a few of you bleeding-hearts out there are in for a disappointment. Life sucks that way, don't it.

The raw and guttural cry has faded. Mikey-prey lies still; he's not unconsciousness, but in his head he's gone somewhere profoundly still. Those tears have dried in crusts on his temples. His chest barely moves. His eyes, open, stare past the dim overhead light, past the steel ceiling, past everything, into a place where fear had given way to something beautifully vacant. I wonder what that feels like, though I'm in no rush to find out myself; I'll find out soon enough, but probably not today. He has accepted. Accepted the cold, the pain, the complete and utter lack of control. Accepted that he is no longer Michael, the golden boy, not even "prey." Now he's just meat.

Ping. *Matt 6:10*

Do you know your Holy Bible? Matthew 6:10 is part of that teaching moment called The Lord's Prayer; it says in part *Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*.

In our code, *Thy will be done* means Rick and I now have free rein on how and what we do, provided we--*as it is in heaven*--hustle this lump of meat off to meet his maker at the end. Sacrilegious? Don't care. I have more important things to worry about than whether I've made some Sky Daddy grouchy.

Here in this storage unit, Rick and I, we're the gods, the power of life and death in our hands. The writer William S. Burroughs once said *Nobody owns life, but anyone who can pick up a frying pan owns death*. A

frying pan isn't one of the tools on the trays, but you get the idea. A bunch of other bullshitting writers have parroted some inane crap about how death is easy and living, finding happiness or a pot of leprechaun gold at the end of some rainbow or whatever, is the hard part, but I'll bet none of those horse-crap peddlers ever tried to kill someone with their own hands. Killing is harder than it looks in the movies. The human body is a resilient bag of flesh.

The speaker crackles unintelligibly. Whatever. Rick had been working with predatory intensity on the meat's once-handsome face, flaying the eyelids and nose. I'd been dissecting the flesh's cock and balls--they had looked interesting when I first saw them, but inside they are just like every other penis and testicles, which is disappointing. But hell, he doesn't have any more use for them, and all they'd ever done was get him into trouble from what I heard earlier, so he should've been thanking me. But aside from the occasional groan, the flesh isn't making too much noise. So the phone sound is sudden as a gunshot when our last message comes in.

Ping. *Transaction complete.*

Which means we have to wrap this up. We need to be done and gone before Chip's clean-up crew arrives; he usually gives us half an hour's notice. *Sigh.* Playtime is being cut short, but I've had enough to satisfy me, for a little while at least.

Rick moves to the final tray. It holds a selection of implements designed for the final, irreversible act. No fancy medical tools or fancy-schmancy gear from Amazon, just items that could be bought at any hardware store. Hoses in a couple of diameters. Pliers. A power drill. An array of cooking knives. When your drama is moving into the final act, you want stuff that's simple and reliable. The curtain's going to fall on schedule, and the audience is already starting to lose interest and slip away. Rick picks up a claw hammer. He tests its weight in his hand, gives a slow, satisfied nod, holds it where the meat can see it if the eyes are still working. The meat doesn't move, doesn't flinch. Maybe the meat senses this isn't about pain anymore; this is about release. The meat is as distant from these moves as Sky Daddy is from His priests down here on earth.

Masked Rick studies what's left of the meat's face intently, like he might a Miss Iowa contestant. Whatever beauty it held is deeper set than its bones now, plowed under by our darkness searching for what we need. Rick gives the claw hammer a practice swing, economical movements, practiced. He sighs, then swaps it for a heavy ball peen number. They're better for bludgeoning, crushing, better for bones.

Rick lets the last of his darkness out. Swinging fast and hard, blow after blow, until the ribcage implodes, until the face and head are fresh hamburger. I'd like to get in my own licks, but Rick's feral right now, and I know better than to approach an animal and its meat. He swings at what's beneath him until no owner could recognize or claim it.

The elusiveness of truth creates a woe unlike any other on earth. I'd felt it again when I'd spread this meat's genital flesh and peeked through that portal straight into Sky Daddy's face, into a mirror. Now I can't stop staring through everything. I'm more blind than a god, though I see what we've done.

At some point in Rick's hammer-dance, the convulsing had stopped. The gurgling ceased. The ragged breaths stopped. The meat has nothing like eyes remaining to stare at us. Just a pile of meat now.

Ten minutes left, I tell Rick.

He holds his position for a full count of thirty, then tosses the bloodied hammer onto a tray, a thud and rattling. *Done,* he grunts, which sums up everything.

I nod, pull off my splattered coveralls, gloves, shoe covers, mask. Our time on this stage is over; the final act at the curtain call will be the clean-up crew, like stage magicians, as they perform the mystic art of vanishing

all signs. No body. No meat. No trace. Whatever this job has been, I hope the clients got their revenge, their money's worth, whatever they were looking for. I know I did.

I open the storage unit door, enough for Rick and I to slip out, then shut it and lock it. The clean-up crew will have their own key.

As we walk to where Rick stashed the SUV, he asks, as he always does, *Waffles?*
